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MUNDUS ARTIUM

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5
A REVOLUTIONARY WRITING

Emir Rodríguez Monegal

In a short span of ten years, Latin American narrative has become one of the most widely read and discussed of this century. The sudden international emergence of this narrative—issuing from an almost unknown literature, one which was practically unread outside the field of Iberian studies—is obviously connected with political events of the last decade: the increasing presence of the Third World countries, the impact of the Cuban revolution, the ominous activities of the urban guerrillas. But to believe that we are facing only the cultural consequences of a political revolution is to believe that literature is determined exclusively by changes in society. What we now call the emergence of Latin American narrative (or the Boom of the New Novel, in journalese) is a process which has been long and painful. It has already covered some four decades and it has helped to establish what Octavio Paz has called “a tradition of tradition breaking,” a continuity that is periodically broken and restored by new experiments. To fully understand this process it is necessary to look back to the first recognition of Latin American narrative outside the continent.

In the late twenties and early thirties the best Latin American narrative was discovered, published and critically praised in Spain. Some of the most important writers of the period, like the Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga, the Mexicans Mariano Azuela and Martín Luis Guzmán, the Colombian José Eustasio Rivera, the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos and the Argentine Ricardo Güiraldes, to name only a few, had their books published in Spain. Something similar happened in Portugal to the best writers of the Northeast Brazilian narrative, like Jorge Amada, José Lins do Rêgo and Graciliano Ramos. At the time, both Iberian countries had very few novelists who could compare with these Latin Americans in skill, passion and commitment. Although the narrative of the Latin American writers was mainly an exploration
of the external world or an exalted blueprint for a future, more human society, the best work they produced (Quiroga's *The Exiles*, Martín Luis Guzmán's *The Eagle and the Serpent*, Graciliano Ramos' *Barren Lives*) also contained mythopoetic visions of some hidden realities of the New World. In a sense, their work established an invisible link with the narratives of early exploration and discoveries that introduced America to the Western world.

The main weakness of this type of narrative was in the presentation of the inner conflicts of its characters. In the work of the established novelists of the twenties and thirties, Latin American landscape and nature so dominated man, so crushed and moulded him, that the human individual almost disappeared, or was reduced (like Doña Bárbara, Don Segundo Sombra, Demetrio Macías) to an archetype, a symbol of a sort, not a real character. The rendering of human conflicts was generalized; man's passions became anonymous. Abstract economic and social forces—in particular, the political power and aspirations of the ruling class—were pitted, say, against the disinherited and oppressed of the Andes, the Amazonian forest, the Argentine pampas. The human individual was reduced to a cipher in a hostile universe. Geography was everything, man nothing.

For the new novelists Latin America has been producing in the last two decades, the centre of gravity has shifted radically—from a landscape created by God to an urban landscape created by man and inhabited by men. The pampas and the cordilleras have yielded to the great city. Whereas, for the older novelists, the city was no more than a remote presence, arbitrary and mysterious, for these new writers the city is the axis, the place to which the protagonist of the new novel is drawn, inevitably. The somewhat depersonalized vision of the novelist of the twenties and thirties has reacquired flesh and blood. Suddenly, powerful, complex, fictional beings are emerging from the anonymous masses of the great cities.

This dramatic change—it corresponds sociologically to the growth of the conurbations, but it also reflects the spreading influence of psychoanalysis and existentialism—has not spared the novelists who stick by and large to rural themes. Even if superficially they still record the traditional struggle of man against nature, the characters they are now presenting are no longer abstractions, ciphers to justify some political or sociological approach. They are complex and ambiguous characters who resemble real human beings.

We are finished with all those epics of campesinos and gauchos— with their two-dimensional characterization, their "documentary," all-
too-mechanical structure. It is the cities which monopolize the attention of the younger novelists. And when they turn their attention to the landscape it is to reveal the mythical side of Latin American man. The new novelists combine an acute social and political awareness with a remarkable subtlety, personal engagement with a sensitivity to other transcendental dimensions or reality. A new conception of man is emerging from the chaos and revolutions, the coups d’état and the underdevelopment, the “revolutions” and the urban guerrillas, and the Latin American novelists are (willingly or not) the prophets of this new man.

The first emergence of Latin American narrative in the Europe of the thirties was too brief. The Spanish Civil War almost completely stopped the diffusion of that narrative after 1936; the Second World War gave the final blow to that process. For more than two decades, the normal flow of books and writers between Spain and Spanish America was altered as a consequence of Franco’s victory. Some books (those acceptable to the régime’s censors) were still being published in Spain and Portugal, and circulated thus in the New World. Some Latin American books were also allowed to be distributed in the peninsula. But only in the last decade has censorship (in Spain at least) relented to the point of allowing most of the new Latin American narrative to be published or distributed there. Some glaring exceptions (like the banishment of Carlos Fuentes’ *A Change of Skin*) put to test the general permissiveness.

Perhaps the decisive moment in the emergence of Latin American narrative is that day in 1961 when some of the European and North American avant-garde publishers, gathered together on the island of Formentor, divided the recently-created International Prize of Publishers between the Franco-Irish writer Samuel Beckett and the almost unknown Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Because of that prize and the immediate translation of an anthology of the latter’s fiction, published under the title *Labyrinths*, Borges was to be accepted everywhere as one of the most unique writers of today. Soon his name was linked by critics to those of Joyce, Kafka and Nabokov. The new French novelists (like Robbe-Grillet) based some of their experiments on his fictions. Structuralist critics (like Gerard Genette and Jean Ricardou) dissected his critical theories to discover a new key to the art of narrative, while in the United States young writers (like Donald Barthelme) would develop their stories under the visible influence of Borges.

But even though Borges’ case is outstanding, it is not unique. To a greater or lesser degree, some of the most important Latin American
writers are now being read and translated, commented upon and imitated by younger people. In the United States the latest poets claim César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz among their masters. Nicanor Parra and João Cabral de Melo Neto have also awakened a very specialized kind of interest. In Europe, Latin American poetry is read and translated; anthologies and critical studies are being published. With the new novel the diffusion is still greater. The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Miguel Angel Asturias in 1967 only increased the European interest for a narrative that encompasses a whole continent. While in Italy, Ernesto Sabato’s On Heroes and Tombs became a best-seller and provoked imaginative discussions; in Germany, João Guimarães Rosa’s The Devil to Pay in the Backlands was the subject of the most exacting literary analysis. In the United States, the success of Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude in 1969 repeated and even went beyond that of Jorge Amado’s Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon in 1962. Now not only the readers placed Márquez’ novel on the best-seller list but the critics unanimously praised its clever fusion of myth and humour, political commitment and irony.

Other unexpected results of the curiosity which Latin American literature awakens today could also be mentioned. While Julio Cortázar’s short stories inspire Michelangelo Antonioni in Blow-up and Jean-Luc Godard in Week-end (partially based on “La autopista del Sur”), Borges is transcribed into film by Mario Belloccchio (The Spider’s Web is based on “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”) or serve Mick Jagger for some allegorical imagery in Performance. Carlos Fuentes is adapted to the Italian cinema (a version of Aura, by Damiano Damiani), and to the stage in Vienna and Avignon (a play titled The One-Eyed Man is King). An extensive anthology of the new Latin-American literature, edited by José Donoso for TriQuarterly, was sold out in a few months and is already circulating in paperback. In France, Betrayed by Rita Hayworth, Manuel Puig’s first novel, heads the list of the best translations of 1969 compiled by Le Monde.

In Portugal, the new Brazilian literature has no rival. In Spain the presence of the new Latin American novel is overwhelming. The Biblioteca Breve Prize, given by Seix-Barral in Barcelona, has been awarded almost every year to Latin Americans. The Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa won it in 1962 with The Time of the Hero; in 1963 it went to the Mexican Vicente Leñero for the The Bricklayers; in 1964 the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante won it with Three Trapped Tigers; in 1967 the Mexican Carlos Fuentes with A Change of Skin;
in 1968 the Venezuelan Adriano González León with *Portable Country*; in 1969 the Chilean José Donoso with *The Obscene Bird of Night*. Some of the most important new Spanish writers, such as the novelist Juan Goytisolo, the poet Félix Grande or the critic José María Castellet, do not hesitate to point out the revolutionary quality of Spanish American letters. It is understandable then that some of the new writers have found in Barcelona a congenial atmosphere for their work. Today, Gabriel García Márquez, José Donoso and Mario Vargas Llosa are living and working there.

The emergence of Latin American letters in the last decade has served, above all, to prove the vitality of a continent marred from its beginning by destruction and genocide, by the plunder of its riches, by colonial or neocolonial exploitation. But it has also shown that it is a continent marked since its birth by dreams of the most fabulous utopias and impossible feats, by its permanent revolutionary spirit, by the splendor of two languages, Spanish and Portuguese, which have always aspired to a universal destiny. The vitality of Latin America is the vitality of a people of multiple origins, of a place which is a crucible of races and bloods, languages and cultures.

In a historical moment in which the major powers are being more and more enclosed by the human wave of the periphery, Latin America has two languages which have reached maturity. Through these languages the men of this continent are creating a literature that makes use of the literary traditions of the West and which transforms them by means of a process of hybridization and ceaseless creative freedom, to achieve the only permanent revolution: that of language.

By language I do not mean exclusively the use of certain forms of speech. In literary terms, language is not a synonym for the general system of speech in a given tongue, but rather a synonym for the tongue a certain genre or a certain writer uses. The language of the new Latin American novel is basically formed by a deep vision of its surrounding reality, a vision which owes a great deal to the work of poets and essayists. It is perhaps due to this common fund, which is the work of the great Latin American writers, that the new novel is not only the most complete poetic object for the exploration of reality, but also the richest instrument to transmit that other parallel reality: the reality of language.

Having also a basis in French and Italian, contaminating everything with Anglicisms and Americanisms, corrupting the rules of the Academias and the schools of European rhetoric, the new Latin Ameri-
can literature comes to plunder the traditional Spanish and Portuguese tongues, to twist, retwist and transform them, to write them as they have never before been written, to create new dimensions of language. While Mário de Andrade, in the fabulous Macunaima, turns to account all of Brazilian folklore, Borges, with the help of Adolfo Bioy Casares, reinvents and parodies the Buenos Aires slang in the stories signed by “H. Bustos Domecq” and his disciple, “B. Suárez Lynch.” Neruda lets loose the verse of his Residencias just as Vallejo did in his Trilce and Huidobro in his Altazor. The experiments of João Cabral de Melo Neto in Death and Life Severina or those of César Fernández Moreno in The Airports, correspond on different levels of diction to Octavio Paz’ new conception of poetry in such a masterpiece as Blanco, and Nicanor Parra’s recent Artifacts. In Brazil, the work of the poets of the Noigan­dres group are linked to the international movement of Concrete Poetry. With Cortázar’s Hopscotch, an experimental trend begins that will be immediately developed by Cabrera Infante in his Tigers, José Lezama Lima in his baroque masterpiece Paradiso and Severo Sarduy in the brilliant exercise called Where Are the Singers From? More recently, Reinaldo Arenas in The Hallucinating World rewrites the Memoirs of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier and gives a contemporary context to this epic of theological polemics and revolutionary adventures, while in Argentina, Manuel Puig in Those Little Painted Lips rescues the sentimental serials by an imaginative act of parody. In Brazilian literature, the linguistic and stylistic experiments of Guimarães Rosa find a curious development in the more austere mythopoetic works of Clarice Lispector and Nélida Piñon.

Seldom has a given literature produced so many truly revolutionary writers in such a short span of time. In their hands, language ceases to be what it was for some centuries: a luxury of some, jealously guarded by old nations which believed themselves to be its owners; and changes into the legitimate expression of a whole continent: a babble of voices which ceaselessly form and reform the single dual voice of the Spanish and Portuguese of the New World.

In some thirty years, that is: in the period that runs from the publication of Doña Bárbara in Spain (1929) to the Formentor Prize awarded Borges in 1961, Latin American narrative has made this tremendous leap, abandoning the marginal position in which it seemed placed in a helpless situation by political and economical forces, to take its place in the central area of today’s letters. What seemed impossible fifty, forty, even thirty years ago, is today a recognized fact. To underline it is also a way of celebrating the emergence of a new literature.
Fancy your coming out and asking me, of all people, about the late Francisco Real. Sure, I knew him, even though he wasn’t from around here. He was a big shot on the Northside—that whole stretch from the Guadalupe pond to the old Artillery Barracks. I never laid eyes on the guy above three times and these three times were all the same night. But nights like that you don’t forget. It was when La Lujanera got it in her head to come around to my shack and bed down with me, and Rosendo Juárez took off from the Maldonado for good. Of course, you’re not the kind that name would mean much to. But around Villa Santa Rita, Rosendo Juárez—the Slasher we called him—had a reputation for being pretty tough. He was one of Don Nicolás Paredes’ boys, the same as Paredes was one of Morel’s gang, and he’d earned respect for the way he handled a knife. Sharp dresser too. Always rode up to the whorehouse on a dark horse, his riding gear decked out with silver. There wasn’t a man or dog around didn’t hold him in regard—and that goes for the women as well. Everybody knew he had at least a couple of killings to his name. He’d have on one of those soft hats with a narrow brim and tall crown, and it would sit there kind of cocky on his long thick hair he wore slicked straight back. Lady luck smiled on him, like they say, and around Villa all us younger guys used to ape him even to the way he spit. But then one night we got a good look at what this Rosendo was made of.

All this might seem made-up, but the story of what happened that particular night starts when this flashy red-wheeled buggy—jamful of
men—comes barreling its way down those hard-packed dirt roads out between the brick kilns and the empty lots. Two guys in black were making a big racket twanging away on guitars, and the driver kept cracking his whip at the stray dogs snapping at the legs of the horse. Sitting all quiet in the middle was one guy wrapped in a poncho. This was the famous Butcher—he’d picked that name up working in the stockyards—and he was out for a good fight and maybe a killing. The night was cool and welcome. A couple of them sat up on the folded hood just like they were parading along some downtown avenue in Carnival. A lot more things happened that night, but it was only later on we got wind of this first part. Our gang was there at Julia’s pretty early. This dance hall of hers, between the Gauna road and the river, was really just a big shed made out of sheets of corrugated iron. You could spot the place from two or three blocks off either by the red lamp hanging out front or by the rumpus. Julia, even though she was a darkie, took trouble to run things right—there was always plenty of fiddlers and good booze and dancing partners ready to go all night. But La Lujanera—she was Rosendo’s woman—had the others all beat by a mile. She’s dead now, and I can tell you years go by when I don’t give her a thought anymore. But in her day you ought to have seen her—what eyes she had! One look at her was enough to make a man lose sleep.

The rum, the music, the women, Rosendo with that rough talk pouring out of his mouth and a slap on the back for each of us that I tried to take for a sign of real friendship—the thing is, I was happy as they come. I was lucky too. I had me a partner who could follow my steps just like she knew ahead of time which way I was going to turn. The tango took hold of us, driving us along and then splitting us up and then bringing us back together again. There we were in the middle of all this fun, like in some kind of dream, when all of a sudden I feel the music kind of getting louder. Turns out it was those two guitar pickers riding in the buggy, coming closer and closer, their music getting mixed up with ours. Then the breeze shifted, you couldn’t hear them anymore, and my mind went back to my own steps and my partner’s, and to the ins and outs of the dance. A good half hour later there was this pounding on the door and a big voice calling out like it could have been the cops. Everything went silent. Then somebody out there starts shouldering the door and the next thing we know a guy busts in. Funny thing is he looked exactly like his voice.

To us he wasn’t Francisco Real—not yet—but just some big hefty guy. He was all in black from head to toe, except for this reddish-brown
scarf draped over one shoulder. I remember his face. There was something Indian and kind of angular about it.

When the door come flying in, it smacked right into me. Before I even knew what I was doing I was on top of the guy, throwing him a left square in the teeth while my right goes inside my vest for my knife. But I never got a chance. Steadying himself, he puts his arms out and shoves me aside like he's brushing something out of the way. There I was down on my ass—back of him now—my hand still inside the jacket grabbing for the knife. And him wading forward like nothing happened. Just wading forward, a whole head taller than all these guys he's pushing his way through—and acting like he never even saw them. The first of our guys—bunch of gaping wops—just back out of his way, scared as hell. But only the first. In the next bunch the Redhead was waiting for him, and before the newcomer could lay a hand on his shoulder, Red's knife was out and he let him have one across the face with the flat of the blade. Soon as they saw that they all jumped the guy. The hall was pretty long, maybe more than nine or ten yards, and they drove him from one end almost to the other—like Christ in one of the Stations—rouging him up, hooting at him, spitting all over him. First they let him have it with their fists, then, seeing he didn’t bother shielding the blows, they started slapping him openhanded and flicking the fringes of their scarves at him, mocking him. At the same time they were saving him for Rosendo, who all this time was standing with his back against the far wall and not moving a muscle, not saying a word. All he did was puff on his cigarette, a little worried-looking, like he already knew what came clear to the rest of us only later on. The Butcher, who was hanging on but was beginning to bleed here and there—that whole hooting pack behind him—got pushed closer and closer to Rosendo. Laughed at, lashed at, spit on, he only started talking when the two of them came face to face. Then he looked at Rosendo and, wiping his face on his sleeve, said something like this:

"I'm Francisco Real and I come from the Northside. People call me the Butcher. I let all these punks lay their hands on me just now because what I'm looking for is a man. Word’s going around there's someone out in these lousy mudflats supposed to be pretty good with a knife. They call him the Slasher and they say he's pretty tough. I'd like to meet up with the guy. Maybe he can teach a nobody like me how a man with guts handles himself."

He had his say looking straight at Rosendo, and all at once this big knife he must have had up his sleeve was flashing in his hand.
Instead of pressing in, now everyone starts opening up space for a fight—at the same time staring at the two of them in dead silence. Even the thick lips of the blind nigger playing the fiddle were turned that way.

Right then I hear this commotion behind me and in the frame of the door I get me a glimpse of six or seven men who must have been the Butcher's gang. The oldest, a leathery-faced guy with a big gray moustache, who looked like a hick, comes in a few steps and going all goggle-eyed at the women and the lights takes off his hat, respectful. The rest of them kept their eyes peeled, ready to swing into action if anything underhanded went on.

What was the matter with Rosendo all this time, not bouncing that loudmouth the hell out? He was still keeping quiet, not even raising his eyes, I don't know if he spit his cigarette out or if it fell from his mouth. Finally he manages to come up with a couple of words, but so low the rest of us at the other end of the dance floor didn't get what he said. Francisco Real challenged him again, and again Rosendo refused. At this point, the youngest of the newcomers lets out a whistle. La Lujanera gave the guy a look that went right through him. Then, her hair swinging down over her shoulders, she wedged her way through the crowd and, going up to her man, slips his knife out and hands it to him.

"Rosendo," she says to him, "I think you're going to need this."

Way up under the roof was this kind of long window that opened out over the river. Rosendo took the knife in his two hands and turned it over like he never laid eyes on it before. Then all of a sudden he raises his arms up over his head and flips the knife behind him out the window into the Maldonado. I felt a chill go through me.

"The only reason I don't carve you up is cause you sicken me," the Butcher says then, making to let Rosendo have it. That split second La Lujanera threw her arms around the Butcher's neck, giving him one of those looks of hers, and says to him, mad as hell, "Let the bastard alone—making us think he was a man."

For a minute Francisco Real couldn't figure it out. Then wrapping his arms around her like it was forever, he calls to the musicians to play loud and strong and orders the rest of us to dance. The music went like wildfire from one end of the hall to the other. Real danced sort of stiff but held his partner up tight, and in nothing flat he had her charmed. When they got near the door he shouted, "Make way, boys, she's all mine now!" and out they went, cheek to cheek, like the tango was floating them off.
I must have turned a little red with shame. I took a couple of turns with some woman, then dropped her cold. On account of the heat and the jam, I told her, then edged my way around the room toward the door. It was a nice night out—but for who? There was their buggy at the corner of the alley with two guitars standing straight up on the seat like men. Boy, it galled me seeing that—it was as much as saying we weren’t even good enough to clip a lousy guitar. The thought that we were a bunch of nobodys really had me burned up, and I snatched the carnation from behind my ear and threw it in a puddle. I stood there a while staring at it, trying to take my mind off things. I wished it was already tomorrow—I wished that night were over. Then the next thing I knew there’s this elbow shoving me aside and it almost came like a relief. It was Rosendo—all by himself, slinking off.

“You’re always getting in the way, kid,” he says to me half snarling. I couldn’t tell if he was just getting something off his chest or what. He disappeared in the dark toward the Maldonado. I never laid eyes on him again.

I stood there looking at the things I’d seen all my life—the big wide sky, the river going on down there in its own blind way, a horse drowsing, the dirt roads, the kilns—and it came to me that in the middle of this ragweed and all these dump heaps and this whole stinking place, I’d grown up just another weed myself. What else was going to come out of this crap but us—lots of lip but soft inside, all talk but no standing up to anyone? Then I thought no, the worse the neighborhood the tougher it had to be. Crap? Back toward the dance hall the music was still going strong, and on the breeze came a smell of honeysuckle. Nice night, but so what? There were so many stars, some right on top of others, it made you dizzy just looking at them. I tried hard to tell myself that what happened meant nothing to me, but I just couldn’t get over Rosendo’s yellow streak and the newcomer’s plain guts. Real even managed to get hold of a woman for the night—for that night and a lot of nights and maybe forever, I thought, because La Lujanera was really something. God knows which way they headed. They couldn’t have wandered very far. By then the two of them were probably going at it in some ditch.

When I got back, the dance was in full swing. I slipped into the crowd, quiet as I could, noticing that some of our boys had taken off and that the Northside bunch were dancing along with everyone else. There was no shoving, no rough stuff. Everybody was watching out and on good behavior. The music sounded sleepy, and the girls tangoing away with the outsiders didn’t have much to say.

I was on the lookout for something, but not for what happened.
Outside there were sounds of a woman crying and then that voice we all knew by then—but real low, almost too low, like somehow it didn’t belong to anyone anymore.

“Go on in, you slut,” it was telling her—then more tears. After that the voice sounded desperate.

“Open the door, you understand me? Open it, you lousy tramp. Open it, bitch.”

At that point the shaky door opens and in comes La Lujanera, all alone. Just like someone’s herding her.

“Must be a ghost out there behind her,” said the Redhead.

“A dead man, friend.” It was the Butcher, and he staggers in, his face like a drunk’s, and in the space we opened up for him he takes a couple of reeling steps—tall, hardly seeing—then all at once goes down like a log. One of his friends rolled him over and fixed him a pillow with his scarf, but all this fussing only got him smeared with blood. We could see there was a big gash in his chest. The blood was welling up and blackening a bright red neckerchief I hadn’t noticed before because his scarf covered it. For first aid one of the women brought rum and some scorched rags. The man was in no shape to explain. La Lujanera looked at him in a daze, her arms hanging by her sides. There was one question on everyone’s face and finally she got out an answer. She said after leaving with the Butcher they went to a little field and at that point someone she didn’t know turned up and challenged him to fight and then gave him this stab. She swore she didn’t know who it was, but that it wasn’t Rosendo. Was anyone going to believe that?

The man at our feet was dying. It looked to me like the hand that done the job done it well. Just the same, the man hung on. When he knocked that second time Julia was brewing some mate’s. The cup went clear around the circle and back to me before he died. When the end came, he said in a low voice, “Cover my face.” All he had left was pride and he didn’t want us gaping at him while his face went through its agony. Someone put his hat over him and that’s how he died—without a sound—under that high black crown. It was only when his chest stopped heaving they dared uncover him. He had that worn-out look dead men have. In his day, from the Artillery Barracks all the way to the Southside, he was one of the scrappiest men around. When I knew he was dead and couldn’t talk, I stopped hating him.

“All it takes to die is being alive,” says one of the girls in the crowd. And in the same way another one says, “A man’s so full of pride and now look—all he’s good for is gathering flies.”
Right then the Northside gang starts talking to each other in low voices. Then two of them come out together saying, “The woman killed him.” After that, in a real loud voice, one of them threw the accusation in her face, and they all swarmed in around her. Forgetting I had to be careful, I was on them like a light. I don’t know what kept me from reaching for my knife. There were a lot of eyes watching—maybe everybody’s—and I said, putting them down, “Look at this woman’s hands. How could she get the strength or the nerve to knife a man?”

Then, kind of offhand, I added, “Whoever would have dreamed the deceased, who—like they say—was a pretty tough guy in his own neck of the woods, would end up this way? And in a place sleepy as this, where nothing ever happens till some outsider comes around trying to show us a little fun and for all his pains only gets himself spit on?”

Nobody offered his hide for a whipping.

Right then, in the dead silence, you could make out the approach of riders. It was the law. Everybody—some more, some less—had his own good reason for staying clear of the police. The best thing was to dump the body in the Maldonado. You remember that long window the knife went flying out of? Well, that’s where the man in black went. A bunch of guys lifted him up. There were hands stripping him of every cent and trinket he had, and someone even hacked off one of his fingers to steal his ring. They helped themselves, all right—real daring bunch with a poor defenseless stiff once a better guy already straightened him out. One good heave and the current did the rest. To keep him from floating, they maybe even tore out his guts. I don’t know—I didn’t want to look. The old-timer with the gray moustache never took his eyes off me. Making the best of all the commotion, La Lujanera slipped away.

When the lawmen came in for a look, the dance was going good again. That blind fiddler could really scrape some lively numbers on that violin of his—the kind of thing you never hear anymore. It was beginning to get light outside. The fence posts on a nearby slope seemed to stand alone, the strands of wire still invisible in the early dawn.

Nice and easy, I walked the two or three blocks back to my shack. A candle was burning in the window, then all at once went out. Let me tell you, I hurried when I saw that. Then, Borges, I put my hand inside my vest—here by the left armpit where I always carry it—and took my knife out again. I turned the blade over, real slow. It was as good as new, innocent-looking, and you couldn’t see the slightest trace of blood on it.
It was about eleven o'clock at night; I had entered the old grocery store-bar (which today is just a plain bar) at the corner of Bolívar and Venezuela. From off on one side a man signaled me with a "psst." There must have been something forceful in his manner because I heeded him at once. He was seated at one of the small tables in front of an empty glass, and I somehow felt he had been sitting there for a long time. Neither short nor tall, he had the appearance of a common workingman or maybe an old farmhand. His thin moustache was graying. Fearful of his health, like most people in Buenos Aires, he had not taken off the scarf that draped his shoulders. He asked me to have a drink with him. I sat down and we chatted. All this took place sometime back in the early thirties. This is what the man told me.

You don't know me except maybe by reputation, but I know who you are. I'm Rosendo Juárez. The late Paredes must have told you about me. The old man could pull the wool over people's eyes and liked to stretch a point—not to cheat anybody, mind you, but just in fun. Well, seeing you and I have nothing better to do, I'm going to tell you exactly what happened that night. The night the Butcher got killed. You put all that down in a storybook, which I'm not equipped to pass judgment on, but I want you to know the truth about all that trumped-up stuff.

Things happen to you and it's only years later you begin understanding them. What happened to me that night really had its start a long time back. I grew up in the neighborhood of the Maldonado, way
out past Floresta. The Maldonado was just a ditch then, a kind of sewer, and it's a good thing they've covered it over now. I've always been of the opinion that the march of progress can't be held back—not by anybody. Anyway, a man's born where he's born. It never entered my head to find out who my father was. Clementina Juárez—that was my mother—was a decent woman who earned a living doing laundry. As far as I know, she was from Entre Ríos or Uruguay; anyhow, she always talked about her relatives from Concepción del Uruguay. I grew up like a weed. I first learned to handle a knife the way everyone else did, fencing with a charred stick. If you jabbed your man, it left a mark. Soccer hadn't taken us over yet—it was still in the hands of the English.

One night at the corner bar a young guy named Garmendia began taunting me, trying to pick a fight. I played deaf, but this other guy, who'd had a few, kept it up. We stepped out. Then from the sidewalk he swung open the door and said back inside to the people, "Don't anybody worry, I'll be right back."

I somehow got hold of a knife. We went off toward the brook, slow, our eyes on each other. He had a few years on me. We'd played at that fencing game a number of times together, and I had the feeling he was going to cut me up in ribbons. I went down the right-hand side of the road and he went down the left. He stumbled on some dry clods of mud. That moment was all I needed. I got the jump on him, almost without thinking, and opened a slice in his face. We got locked in a clinch, there was a minute when anything might have happened, and in the end I got my knife in and it was all over. Only later on did I find out I'd been cut up too. But only a few scratches. That night I saw how easy it was to kill a man or to get killed. The water in the brook was pretty low; stalling for time, I half hid him behind one of the brick kilns. Fool that I was, I went and slipped off that fancy ring of his that he always wore with the nice stone in it. I put it on, I straightened my hat, and I went back to the bar. I walked in nonchalant, saying to them, "Looks like the one who came back was me."

I asked for a shot of rum and, to tell the truth, I needed it bad. It was then somebody noticed the blood on my sleeve.

I spent that whole night tossing and turning on my cot, and it was almost light outside before I dropped off and slept. Late the next day two cops came looking for me. My mother (may she rest in peace) began shrieking. They herded me along just like I was some kind of criminal. Two nights and two days I had to wait there in the cooler. Nobody came to see me, either, outside of Luis Irala—a real friend—
only they wouldn’t let him in. Then the third morning the police captain sent for me. He sat there in his chair, not even looking at me, and said, “So you’re the one who took care of Garmendia, are you?”

“If that’s what you say,” I answered.

“You call me sir. And don’t get funny or try beating around the bush. Here are the sworn statements of witnesses and the ring that was found in your house. Just sign this confession and get it over with.”

He dipped the pen in the inkwell and handed it to me.

“Let me do some thinking, captain sir,” I came out with.

“I’ll give you twenty-four hours where you can do some hard thinking—in the cooler. I’m not going to rush you. If you don’t care to see reason, you can get used to the idea of a little vacation up on Las Heras—the penitentiary.”

As you can probably imagine, I didn’t understand.

“Look,” he said, “if you come around, you’ll only get a few days. Then I’ll let you out, and Don Nicolás Paredes has already given me his word he’ll straighten things up for you.”

Actually, it was ten days. Then at last they remembered me. I signed what they wanted and one of the two cops took me around to Paredes’ house on Cabrera Street.

Horses were tied to the hitching post, and in the entranceway and inside the place there were more people than around a whorehouse. It looked to me like the party headquarters. Don Nicolás, who was sipping his mate, finally got around to me. Taking his good time, he told me he was sending me out to Morón, where they were getting ready for the elections. He was putting me in touch with Mr. Laferrer, who would try me out. He had the letter written by some kid all dressed in black, who, from what I heard, made up poems about tenements and filth—stuff that no refined public would dream of reading. I thanked Paredes for the favor and left. When I got to the corner, the cop wasn’t tailing me any more.

Providence knows what it’s up to; everything had turned out for the best. Garmendia’s death, which at first had caused me a lot of worry, now opened things up for me. Of course, the law had me in the palm of their hands. If I was no use to the party, they’d clap me back inside, but I felt pretty good and was counting on myself.

Mr. Laferrer warned me I was going to have to walk the straight and narrow with him, and said if I did I might even become his bodyguard. I came through with what was expected of me. In Morón, and later on in my part of town, I earned the trust of my bosses. The cops and the party kept on building up my reputation as a tough guy. I
turned out to be pretty good at organizing the vote around the polls here in the capital and out in the province. I won’t take up your time going into details about brawls and bloodletting, but let me tell you, in those days elections were lively affairs. I could never stand the Radicals, who down to this day are still hanging onto the beard of their chief Alem. There wasn’t a soul around who didn’t hold me in respect. I got hold of a woman, La Lujanera, and a fine-looking sorrel. For years I tried to live up to the part of the outlaw Moreira, who, in his time—the way I figure it—was probably trying to play the part of some other gaucho outlaw. I took to cards and absinthe.

An old man has a way of rambling on and on, but now I’m coming to the part I want you to hear. I wonder if I’ve already mentioned Luis Irala. The kind of friend you don’t find every day. Irala was a man already well along in years. He never was afraid of work, and he took a liking to me. In his whole life he never had anything to do with politics. He was a carpenter by trade. He never caused anyone trouble and never allowed anyone to cause him trouble. One morning he came to see me and he said, “Of course, you’ve heard by now that Casilda’s left me. Rufino Aguilera took her away from me.”

I’d known that customer around Morón. I answered, “Yes, I know all about him. Of all the Aguileras, he’s the least rotten.”

“Rotten or not, now he’ll have to reckon with me.”

I thought that over for a while and told him, “Nobody takes anything away from anybody. If Casilda left you, it’s because she cares for Rufino and you mean nothing to her.”

“And what are people going to say? That I’m a coward?”

“My advice is don’t get yourself mixed up in gossip about what people might say or about a woman who has no use for you.”

“It’s not her I’m worried about. A man who thinks five minutes straight about a woman is no man, he’s a queer. Casilda has no heart. The last night we spent together she told me I wasn’t as young as I used to be.”

“Maybe she was telling you the truth.”

“That’s what hurts. What matters to me now is Rufino.”

“Be careful there. I’ve seen Rufino in action around the polls in Merlo. He’s a flash with a knife.”

“You think I’m afraid of him?”

“I know you’re not afraid of him, but think it over. One of two things—if you kill him, you get put away; if he kills you, you go six feet under.”

“Maybe so. What would you do in my shoes?”
"I don't know, but my own life isn't exactly a model. I'm only a guy who became a party strong-arm man trying to cheat a jail sentence."

"I'm not going to be the strong-arm guy for any party, I'm only out to settle a debt."

"So you're going to risk your peace and quiet for a man you don't know and a woman you don't love any more?"

He wouldn't hear me out. He just left. The next day the news came that he challenged Rufino in a saloon in Morón and Rufino killed him. He was out to kill and he got killed—but a fair fight, man to man. I'd given him my honest advice as a friend, but somehow I felt guilty just the same.

A few days after the wake, I went to a cockfight. I'd never been very big on cockfights, and that Sunday, to tell the truth, I had all I could do to stomach the thing. What is it in these animals, I kept thinking, that makes them gouge each other's eyes like that?

The night of my story, the night of the end of my story, I had told the boys I'd show up at Blackie's for the dance. So many years ago now and that dress with the flowers my woman was wearing still comes back to me. The party was out in the backyard. Of course, there was the usual drunk or two trying to raise hell, but I took good care to see that things went off the way they ought to. It wasn't twelve yet when these strangers put in an appearance. One of them—the one they called the Butcher and who got himself stabbed in the back that same night—stood us all to a round of drinks. The odd thing was that the two of us looked a lot alike. Something was in the air; he drew up to me and began praising me up and down. He said he was from the Northside, where he'd heard a thing or two about me. I let him go on, but I was already sizing him up. He wasn't letting the gin alone, either, maybe to work up his courage, and finally he came out and asked me to fight. Then something happened that nobody ever understood. In that big loudmouth I saw myself, the same as in a mirror, and it made me feel ashamed. I wasn't scared; maybe if I'd been scared I'd have fought with him. I just stood there as if nothing happened. This other guy, with his face just inches away from mine now, shouted so everyone could hear, "The trouble is you're nothing but a coward."

"Maybe so," I said. "I'm not afraid of being taken for a coward. If it makes you feel good, why don't you say you've called me a son of a bitch, too, and that I've let you spit all over me. Now—are you any happier?"

La Lujanera took out the knife I always carried in my vest lining
and, burning up inside, she shoved it into my hand. To clinch it, she said, “Rosendo, I think you’re going to need this.”

I let it drop and walked out, but not hurrying. The boys made way for me. They were stunned. What did it matter to me what they thought.

To make a clean break with that life, I took off for Uruguay, where I found myself work as a teamster. Since coming back to Buenos Aires I’ve settled around here. San Telmo always was a respectable neighborhood.
DEED

CARLOS FUENTES

tr. GEORGE McWHIRTER

_Macbeth:_ How now, you secret, black and midnight hags! What is't you do?

_The Weird Women:_ A deed without a name.

_(Act IV. Scene I.)_

The story goes:

Since the previous evening the huntsmarshal had set up all the equipment at the sierra gate. Beaters and hounds, carts, luggage, arquebuses and lances, canvas screens and horns gave the inn a holiday air. The knight rose early, and, to allow himself a better opportunity to revel in the glorious sunshine of this July morning, he opened his bedchamber window. A small oak grove circled the village, extending into a cool, green glen which died out at the foot of the sierra. The valley still slumbered in shadows, but the sun was already glinting between the ridges.

We’re told that Guzman came in and informed the knight that the hunt had been convened. Bloodhounds had set out for the sierra. The signs and tracks indicated that frightened deer were to be found in the foothills, the kind that have been run on previous occasions. The knight attempted a smile. He looked hard at the chief beater and the latter bent his head. The knight hooked a finger through his belt, satisfied. At other times when the officer-secretary came to report,
precisely and respectfully, that there was game in the bush, its whereabouts and over what areas it was to be run, the knight had no need to affect an aloofness which was part of his nature, although he did in fact use it to hide the mixture of indifference and disgust this sport aroused in the pit of his soul; but once the deputy conveyed that they were to hunt deer on the run, he made no secret of his rising sense of calm and security. He was able to look Guzman in the eye, smile, as well as sigh with faint nostalgia. He remembered his boyhood in these same parts. The heat would drive hunters and game up there, into the loveliest reaches of the sierra, where the water and shadows gave some relief from the harshness of the plateau sun.

He issued orders for more dogs to be coupled, since summer days are long and the animals get tired more quickly; he also said they should carry water on the pack mules, go gentle with the dogs, and run them over the cooler, well-watered land. The chief beater bowed and went out without turning away from the knight, and approaching the window once more, the latter heard the call to assemble.

The storm will subside by daybreak. At low ebb the tide licks the coast. A torn pennant puffs out, spreading between two rocks. For a long, long time the prow of a brigantine stays nailed to the shallow basin where an arroyo pours out into the ocean. A stationary mist blankets the sea and blots out the horizon. During the storm the only lighthouse on the coast went out. Its keeper, they say, wrapped his arms around the dog that usually keeps him company, and they huddled together over the fire roaring in the chimney.

When the horn sounded to move into the sierra, the knight went to join the hunters. He arrived on horseback, at a light canter, dressed entirely in green, with a fair-sized cowl, moorish by the cut and style. The company followed him on foot and on horseback, servants hauling spades, bill hooks, pickaxes and the pavilion, in case it was necessary to set up camp in the field. They could take it at their leisure, the knight said to himself; the brilliant day ahead promised a quick, uncomplicated hunt, a homecoming to the sierra gate by last light; finally, a well-deserved celebration that evening at the inn where the marshal had already laid out several kegs of red wine. The servants carried flint and tinder in their saddlebags, water, thread, a variety of cures. . . In keeping with his custom the knight recited a prayer and glanced affectionately at his lead dog, Blackjaw, the white mastiff, who was moving ahead of the ten beaters. Each of these clutched a lance in one hand, and with the other curbed the rush of the dogs which were
fastened by chains to their broad collars where the badge of their pedigree sparkled.

The knight paused momentarily at the foot of the mountain and gazed sadly at the basalt hills and parched vineyards in the locality. He remembered his daydream that morning where he'd imagined a walk through the summer orchards of his boyhood. It's true: every sierra possesses a Janus face; you can grow to know it from one end, and not know it at all from the other. Even the best chieftains are fooled by it, the saying goes, but the knight didn't dare object on behalf of his nostalgia or reverse the orders because of the deceptiveness: the chief beater was one of those who didn't make mistakes. The first remembered dream was overwhelmed by another: a long, exposed tramp through the banks and twists in the sierra with the hope of reaching, weather and strength permitting, some high place, and from there to admire the third prospect: the windswept vision of the ocean.

Almost no one visits these spots along the coast. Sun and storm compete for mastery over them, and both are equally cruel. During the hot spells the sea sputters where it hits the shore, a foot can't bear to light on this shimmering, white sand that sifts through even the toughest chaps, scorching them. The arroyo dries up like the skin of a sick falcon, and the remains of shipwrecks appear in its meanders. Trapped inside an oven without a breath of air or shade, the body must pit itself against the static load of a solar landscape in order to move forward. Any escape from there means only to press on, rise over the boiling dunes and then cling to the possibility of crossing the desert which separates the shore from the mountain on foot.

But the desert is smooth as the directionless hands of a corpse. Stories are known about castaways (for only disaster can lure a man to this remote region) who have perished here, turning in hopeless circles, fighting their shadow, cursing at it because it won't get up off the ground, pleading with it (cool phantom) to float over its master's head; down on bended knees, finally, throttling it. Here the unfortunate's brain melts. And whenever this sun of blazing hot lard isn't holding sway over the coast, the storm reigns in its place and perfects its chore.

A whole world of relics waits for the unlucky soul, another, who thinks he'll find that salvation here which the raging sea was on the brink of plucking from him. Empty chests, demagnitized compasses, ribs of ships and figureheads shaped and reshaped by sun and wind until they resemble a quivering phalanx of petrified shield bearers: a desolate field of statues dedicated to intemperance. Cape of Disasters
it was called on the old maps; the chronicles abound in records of
galleons that went down transporting treasures from Cathay and Japan;
barks vanishing with their entire Cadiz crew aboard, and their cargo
of prisoners from the wars against the infidel; master and serf levelled
by the same cataclysmic fate. But, to compensate, they also tell of
sloops being smashed against the rocks because pairs of lovers were
escaping in them. If not the chronicles, then superstitions (almost
always the former's mainstay) relate how, on stormy nights, a fleet
of caravels, more ghostly than the mist that surrounds it, drifts by
here, ablaze with St. Elmo's fire which crackles on the mainmasts and
lights up the livid faces of the caliphs being delivered into captivity.

Four men on horseback and eight on foot had come back with the
tired bloodhounds, confirming the news: the startled deer were harboring.
Stroking his long mustache which drooped in two lengths down to
his adam's apple, Guzman raised himself in the stirrups and issued orders
in quick succession: they were to couple more dogs than for other types
of game, and four dogs were to be used in each chase, no more; because
the deer could hear, the beaters were to maintain a close silence and
rate their dogs to keep them from growling.

In the saddle the knight mulled over this paradox about timorous
game which requires even greater precautions to hunt than if it were
courageous, though unsuspecting. Fear is a good defense, he said to
himself while pressing forward in the open sunlight, sheltered by the
hood which hid his face.

A dozen lead dogs leaped to take to the mountain after the haunt
of the deer, and at the master's side Guzman told him that the deer
were searching out new feeding; but being summer, the new feeding
happened to be found near the old haunt of the summer previous:
water. It's simple to trace the only culvert in this barren sierra, he
added, and find out what swamp the water drains into. Without think-
ing the knight agreed, and he became aware that the sun and lack of
concern could vanquish him, but Guzman was waiting for an answer,
not the practical reply that his post demanded, but another, intangible
one. He responded, instructing the chief beater to get a score of dogs
ready as a replacement for when the first relay dashed back, foaming
over their lower lips, after the first run. Guzman bowed his head and
raised it immediately to pass on the order, adding a detail which the
knight had overlooked: a group of beaters could climb the slope and
from there they'd have the advantage of scrutinizing the whole opera-
tion in silence.

He pointed at this one, the next, another until he'd counted off
ten men. A dumb murmur of protest broke out among the beaters chosen to make up the party which was to walk and climb still farther. Guzman smirked and lifted his hand to his belt. Flushing, the knight stayed the motion of his deputy who was already fondling the sword hilt; he turned his cold gaze on the group that felt itself slighted. Already fatigue, scarcely masked by bitterness, showed on the faces of those in this expedition bound for the high and rugged stretches of the mountain, also desperation at being powerless to kill the prey which they'd be first to sight, but last to get their hands on.

Angrily the knight urged his horse forward to the group which made no attempt to hide its unwillingness; the gesture sufficed to make them drop their heads and quit grumbling. They looked the other way, and, unperturbed, Guzman picked out three reliable beaters who immediately formed the reconnaissance party into a column. They themselves falling in, one at the head, the other in the middle, and the last behind, like guards marching a chain gang off to the penitentiary.

"Nobody's to carry crossbows," Guzman ordered in conclusion. "I see lots of itchy fingers. Remember this is deer. No shouting. I don't want to hear any shots. Only flame and smoke."

The knight no longer heard; he continued to forge deeper into the scorched mountain, noble still in his bearing, although admittedly apathetic. The attempted insurrection, nipped in the bud by Guzman's intervention and the knight's presence, had drained all his strength. He began to admire the monumental outline of the sierra, and, while toying with the reins, to repeat inwardly that indeed he was here specifically to give his judgment a rest, not to prime it. How many times either kneeling before the altar or strolling around the cloister had he cut his deepest meditations short to remind himself of these duties he was acquitting right now? Doubtless, he let more time than necessary elapse, but he'd always brought himself to bear on his natural inclinations in time, giving the order to deploy prickers before Guzman was compelled to remind him or his wife's boredom gave to dumb resentment. And to the knight's practical common sense she added something which was a pure conceit:

"One day you could find yourself in danger with some animal."

More cautious now, he played up the noble gesture and gallant attitude; he gave up asking for water and stayed for long stretches in the saddle, out in the open, in order to command respect, so his vassals would sense his nearness and turn a deaf ear to the stories about murky deeds and awful disappearances which spread from mouth to mouth as soon as his retreat ran over time.
He peered up at the heights, knitting his brows. Denied the use of the horns, the reconnaissance party signalled by smoke.

Behind the knight the bloodhounds, which now must go sniffing after the sighted game, were uncoupled. They swept past him, eager but rated by the beaters so they wouldn’t bark: perfect for picking up the old scent, daring... As they passed, the knight felt the pulsating side blow of their bodies.

The bloodhounds raised a light cloud of loose earth and soon they were swallowed up in the accesses to the mountain. The knight felt deserted with no one for company but a faithful body of men and Blackjaw, who followed him with its small, sad eyes, and like the hounds and ordinary beaters in the first relay, they itched to take an active part, although duty obliged them to remain at the knight’s rear along with the packsacks filled with heather and mistletoe.

Then, unexpectedly, the sky began to grow overcast and the knight smiled, as much because it refreshed him from the terrible heat without his having to ask for a break as for the fact that the chief beater’s meticulous preparations—precise, authoritative as the voice he used to arrange them—would be wiped out by the accidental change in the weather, by a lordly quirk of the elements.

Thus, the storm finishes the sun’s work, and the sun that of the storm; to the sea one returns charred bodies, powerless to advance a hundred meters farther beyond the dunes; the other proffers shipwrecked ruins to the sun. The fair-haired and beatified young man could always remain there always, unconscious, abandoned.

One side of his face buries itself in the muddy sand and his legs are lapped at by the inanimate waves. The seaweed tangles in the mane of yellow hair. The dune dust coats the eyebrows, lashes and the lips. In shreds and sodden, the white stockings and light colored clothing stick to his skin. Crabs circle the body, and if someone caught sight of him from the dunes, they’d say he’s a lost traveler, and like so many travelers before and after him, he’s plunged face downwards on the sand, kissing it, to give thanks.

What country is this? If he has left it, the voyager will kiss the strange land he never hoped to find across an interminable, storm-tossed ocean, which, at its end, must tumble into the universal cataract. If he has come back, he’ll kiss the prodigal land, and in a whisper, tell her (for exploits like these there’s no better listener) about adventures linked to the standard which brought about the discoveries; and the armies and armadas of men just like himself... about their fortunes,
exiled, set free by an enterprise which the commonest subjects fought and died to secure in the name of the most exalted princes.

But he dreams on that he’s battling the sea, fully aware that his struggle is useless. Guts of wind blind him, spray silences his cries, waves shatter across his head, and he tells himself at last that he’s a dead man, sucked down to a watery cathedral; a corpse embalmed with fire and salt. The sea has delivered the castaway’s body, but secreted his name. He spreadeagles, his hands laid open on the sand, and from the top of the dunes a pair of eyes keep watch, and on the naked body they make out the sign they wish to see: a cross of scarlet flesh between the shoulder blades.

The rain drummed on the flaps of the pavilion. Inside, seated on a campchair, the knight stroked Blackjaw’s head with his open hand, and the dog watched him with those sad eyes of his, whiteless almost, what whites there were, streaked with blood, as if in its look the mastiff were demonstrating its keenness for the chase which faithfulness to its master deprived it of. Nevertheless, body armor glittered on Blackjaw, and an iron collar armed with spikes circled his neck... The knight smoothed his lead dog’s coat, the hair... somewhere between tow and satin, imagining that this sadness would vanish as soon as the dog, accustomed to seeing the other mastiffs pounding ahead while it remained at its master’s side, was unleashed according to predetermined orders for another quarry: the knight could overrun the fields sometime, get lost, be attacked.

Then Blackjaw would come into his hour of glory. Perennially couched at its master’s feet, this time it would track the scent of the boots and body as far as the final bend in the mountain, and with a savage howl it would rush to its master’s defense. Once, the knight’s father had been attacked by a gored pig; his life was saved thanks only to the fine and ferocious instincts of his lead dog which harried it and dug its sharpened canine teeth and collar spikes into the boar’s neck and eyes; the boar obviously having come along after being wounded by its rivals in the rut.

Sometimes, like now for example, the knight repeated the story close to the mastiff’s cocked ears as if wishing to console it with prospects of a similar adventure. Not this time. No. Guzman knew his job well. He’d ordered the pavilion to be pitched at this gateway where the deer would rush out, forcibly, from their haunt in the marsh. All evening the servants in his guard used hatchets to cut arbutus and brush so that, if it cleared up, the knight could take cover higher up and watch the outcome of the hunt on horseback; others, using mallets, pegged
down the ends of the doorflap in case the knight found himself obliged to spend the night on the mountain.

It rained. The water soaked the nets which, at Guzman's command, had been strung out near the pavilion. The cord and canvas screens blocked off the narrow glen through which the deer would enter, to be penned up, and meet death at the knight's feet. Guzman had put the greyhounds into position. Guzman had positioned the horses which had to wait for the startled flight of the deer. Guzman had stationed the men on foot. Attempting to dart away on one side, the animal would collide with the cord and canvas screens, and fleeing from the waving cloths, they would fall into the hunters' hands.

Guzman knew his job well.

The knight squeezed the dog's head, and turning it Blackjaw grazed one of the knight's fingers with the spikes in its collar. The knight put his hand up to his mouth and sucked his own blood. There was no reason for this morning's events to continue preying on his mind. Guzman had simply shown that he knew his job well; a job in the knight's service. It was natural for him to pick beaters from among the lower orders; no one else would lend themselves to the completion of such a thankless chore. The intolerable thing was, unexplainably, that the lowliest people also showed signs of being the most rebellious. But he could hold neither the chief beater nor himself responsible for this; besides the insurrection was swiftly quashed.

However, one question remained which defied an answer: why, when put in a position which meant a definite improvement, did these people, recruited from the slums surrounding the palace, persist in muttering through clenched teeth and in evading a responsibility which they knew perfectly well they had been singled out for in the first place. The knight had no desire to plumb the depth of this mystery; meanwhile, the reconnaissance party could suffer it out in the rain under that outcrop of rocks; the mist would blind their eyes, and like the order making them shut up, the moaning wind would silence their cries; the wind—powerful enough not only to snuff out the brutal cries of these highlanders, but the most strident blast of the hunting horn.

Perhaps, perched up there on the sierra, they were remembering the knight who, for one moment, had condescended to flash a glance at them without having to say a word. Perhaps they imagined him at his post, a hidden one so he could experience the supreme pleasure of the hunt better than anyone else: watching the onset of the chase, how the game breaks from cover, deciding what mistakes are made and how to correct them; presiding over the event from the outset to its culmina-
tion. If those poor beaters scrambled reluctantly up the sierra, believing the knight was any less cut off from the center of the hunt, surely it was all a figment of their imagination; for like themselves he had to put up with his thwarted hopes, not knowing how the pursuit on horseback went. The knight bound the scratch on his finger in a linen handkerchief. Probably, if they saw him tucked away in the tent with the dog, the coarse beaters would start grumbling all over: the knight’s stock has lost its taste for hunting on horseback . . . after all it’s just a game—only a rehearsal for war; perhaps the priests with their incense and sloppy prayers have knocked the backbone out of him; and when the master dies, who’s to follow after? What son is there?

Suddenly, Blackjaw, the mastiff, rose on its short stocky haunches. The armor plating and spiked collar gleamed in the faint light of the tent and the dog raced off, scrambled under the flap and disappeared, barking. The knight had no wish to attribute the dog’s disgraceful behavior to any particular cause; better to shut one’s eyes behind the hand bound in the handkerchief and remain alone, all sense of reason, mortified. He said a prayer asking God if it wasn’t enough that both He and his vassal knew that (although he might not feel it) should there be any pleasure in the stalking and killing of deer, the vassal would sacrifice it for the greater glory of God.

“It’s him,” the man who believes he recognizes the castaway reports to the group surrounding him.

All dig in their spurs and swoop down shrouded in the dark dust of the dunes. Approaching the prostrate body, the horses whinney; the riders dismount, move forward and surround it. The boots crack like whiplashes as they step into puddles of tepid water. The horses snort nervously near the unexpected smell and they seem to sense the fear which fortifies this deep and mysterious sleep. Unhurried, unanswered, the sea continues to lap—taut and hot after the storm.

The leader of the group crouches beside the body, he runs his fingers over the scarlet cross on the back, then he clutches it under the armpit and turns it face up.

The young castaway’s lips part and one side of his face is blackened by the sand. The man with the drooping mustache motions with his hand and the others heave the young man into the air; they carry him to one of the horses and sling him across the animal’s hindquarters like a catch; they fit his arms through the straps and the dangling head rests against the sweating flank. The chief issues new orders and they all ascend the dune until they reach the rocky flatland which stretches as endlessly as the distant sierra.
Then, from the heart of the mist, a jangling develops, like that of
dragging spurs or some other metal hitting the rough stones; behind
the jangling—a litter of burnished ebony; four negroes bent beneath
its weight and approaching the party which bears the castaway.

The naked bodies of the negroes stream with sweat; they wear
only coarse pigskin chaps fastened by straps whose buckles trail across
the stony ground. Other black leather thongs ending in metal tips
dangle from the four lacquered posts of the litter; they reinforce the
pervading rhythm of the caravan . . . from the slightly convex roof
hang drapes of black brocade. The group on horseback draws up and
the party on foot advances toward it, smothered at times by the mist,
but always represented by the metallic rhythm of the buckles and tips
of the thongs.

A bell rings inside the litter and the four negroes carrying it come
to a halt. The bell peals once more. Grunting in unison, they hoist the
palankeen with their powerful shoulders and set it softly on the desert
earth. Overcome by the effort and dank heat in the hours after the
storm, the four naked men sink to the ground and rub down their
trunk and thighs with their own sweat.

"Get up, you rogues!" the man with the drooping mustache
shouts at them, infusing his rage into the horse which bucks, while the
rider hauls back the whip lashing one of the porters across the shoulders
with it; and he rides in a jittering circle around the litter. The four
negroes get to their feet, roaring; in their yellow eyes . . . a glazed
uncertainty which lasts until a woman's voice speaks from behind the
closed curtains.

"Leave them alone, Guzman. It's been a hard journey."

And without ceasing to run circles, without laying off the flogging
of the negroes, he shouts above the snorts of the animal:

"The lady does wrong to venture out of doors with no other com-
pany than brutes like these. The times are too dangerous.

A gloved hand emerges through the drapes.

"If times were better, I wouldn't need my men's protection at all" . . . and she pulls them to.

The castaway believed he had been embalmed by the sea. He
opened his eyes a fraction; the blood pounded in his forehead: and
perhaps this desert vision of torn mists . . . perhaps it wasn't all that
different from what he could have touched at the sea bottom; a sea,
he imagined, of fire: for the only thing he saw, plummeting from the
forecastle into the sea, wasn't the waves rushing to meet him, but the
blazing specter which he was plunging away from, St. Elmo's fire
burning on the tips of the mainmast. And after being washed up unconscious on the beach, a blind mist surrounded him. But the instant he opened his eyes, the black curtains of the litter parted, and instead of sea, or desert, or fire, or mist, he met the gaze of something else.

"Is it him?" asked the woman who looked at the young man as he looked into the woman’s dark eyes, sunk deep into the high cheekbones, brilliant by contrast to the silvery paleness of the face which watched him, not knowing that through his sand-clotted lashes, he too was watching her.

"No doubt about it," answered the horseman who approached the body and traced an imaginary cross on the young man’s back with the butt of the whip, and pointed at the head and the shock of blonde hair which partially concealed his face.

"Let me see the face," said the woman. The young man could make out the haughty and assured movement of the body draped in black which rested on the litter just as the nervous, but motionless bird rested on the woman’s gloved fist. The man with the drooping mustache grabbed the castaway’s hair in his fist and jerked up the head: the young man’s gloomy stare caught the impatient toss of the woman’s head indented by the high white wings of the throat.

"Again you’re mistaken," said the woman in a thick, menacing voice, at the same time she raised the welling sleeves of one arm and with her index finger ordered the negro guard:

"Take him."

A boundless panting comes racing across the desert; a breathing which gives the mist a body; a swift, throbbing body: the speed of a white dog which brays finally and hurls itself against the leader’s horse. Momentarily caught off guard, he tugs the short sword from his belt, while the dog springs, attempting to bite the horseman’s leg... It succeeds in digging a spike into the stomach of the horse which rears up on its hind legs whinnying. By hauling on the reins, the rider quells it, and he delivers a tearing blow to the head of the dog, which only manages to graze one of the man’s fists. It whines and falls to the ground, gazing woefully into the eyes of the forgotten traveler.

At nightfall the tired knight entered the pavilion, sank down on the chair and threw a cover across his shoulders. It had stopped raining, and for several hours the servants searched for Blackjaw, but, instead of drawing on the scent, the bloodhounds had stupidly circled the tent, and finally, with a great weariness, he resigned himself to the loss of the dog.
He picked up the breviary and began to read, when Guzman, all the marks of the prolonged hunt on his sweating face and stained clothing, pulled back the entrance flap and announced that the deer had just been brought into camp. He asked to be excused: the rain had altered the tracks, and the game was trapped and slaughtered quite a distance from the gateway set aside for the knight's satisfaction.

The knight trembled slightly, and the breviary fell to the ground. He had the impulse to retrieve it himself, and even bent forward a little, but Guzman hurried; and, kneeling before his master, picked up the book and offered it to its owner. Looking up from his stooped position, Guzman must have arched his brows in some way that offended the knight; however, the latter couldn't reproach his servant for his celerity in showing respect and obedience; the outward act was that of the worthiest vassal, although the overt meaning in the look might have lent itself—vaguely, at the most—to interpretations which the knight wished to acknowledge, and, at the same time, reject.

The wound on the servant's hand brushed across the wound on the master's; the kerchiefs which covered them were of widely differing quality.

The knight stood up, and, without waiting to see if he would express his wishes—whether he would continue reading, or go out into the camp—Guzman already had the Biscay gaberdine between his hands, was already opening it, already offering it to the master's shoulders.

"I did well to bring some protection," the knight commented.

"A good beater never trusts the weather," said Guzman.

The knight didn't move while the deputy draped the cloak over his back. Immediately, he pulled aside the flap again and waited until the knight would go out, his face concealed beneath the cowl, into the camp where the night fires were burning. He made a deferential gesture, and the knight passed through, stopping to look at the carcass of the deer which had been dumped on the ground.

Knife in hand, one of the beaters advanced toward the animal. The knight looked at Guzman; Guzman raised a hand; the beater flicked the dagger and the chief beater caught it in the air. He squatted in front of the deer, and with one precise cut, disembowelled it.

Then, he cut out the horns with the hunting knife, and directly after that, the skin from the hind quarters, separating the joints to bare the nerves.

He stood up and ordered the deer to be strung from the stake by the nerves.
He returned the knife and remained in front of the stake; the
deer's carcass hung between Guzman and the knight.

The beaters began to split open the animal's hide from the hocks
to the breastbone, and from there through the entire belly. Finishing
that, they broke it open in front and pulled out the bladder, stomach
and guts, tossing them into a bucket where the blood oozed out.

The knight was thankful for the double mask of the night and
the cowl, but, aided by the wavering light of the bonfires, Guzman was
watching him. The beaters cracked open the deer's chest right up to
the gullet, pulling out the chitterlings, liver and heart. Guzman reached
out his hand and the heart was passed over; the other gut-parts fell
into the bucket of blood with a sound identical to the beating of the
knight's heart, who, without being aware of it, clasped his hands in a
pious gesture, while Guzman fondled the hilt of his short sword.

The head was hacked off through the nape, and although the task
of quartering the animal continued, the knight could see only the head
stripped of the antlers, open-mouthed, ridiculous but exceedingly
touching: the half open, glassy, brown eyes possessed a counterfeit
life, but behind them lurked the bewilderment of death, triumphant.

Now, several beaters chopped the animal's inards into small
pieces, broiled them over the fire, and finally rolled and mixed them
with bread and blood. And if, when the deer was hung, gutted and
quartered, its carcass alone separated the knight from his deputy, now
the body of an eager mob divided and alienated them. The blood, bread
and intestines were laid beside the bonfire while the beaters placed
themselves around it along with the bloodhounds which had taken part
in the hunt. With one hand they fed the dogs; with the other they
clasped the hunting horn. The frantic melee had ousted the knight from
his place of honor which he had occupied up until that moment: the
pack of overwrought and panting dogs, the beater's application to the
dual task of curbing them and handling the bugles had allowed the
knight to slip back to his tent and begin reading without anyone notic-
ing. But he knew that the next act would require his command: any
brisk, formal gesture and the beaters would sound the mort in unison.
Thus, from the darkness he was forced into, he prepared to raise his
arm, but before he could do so, the beaters blew. The powerful horns
made the darkness vibrate. They came together in one hoarse bellow
which, rather than flying, seemed to gallop across the drumskin of the
earth, returning, shod with metal hooves, where it had been hurled
back from the mountains.

But the knight had given no sign. And yet everything took place
as if he had. And when he finally made it, his arm hung in the air, astounded. He was thankful that Guzman was some distance off, engrossed in the business which drew them all together at that moment; far from the bewildered face, the half gaping mouth whose ceremonial orders were promptly enforced, although the words necessary to point them out were absent.

At the sound the bloodhounds had set to; the glow of the bonfires lit up their ravenous mouths and vividly sketched over the rippling of their backs. Surrounded by the voracious pack, Guzman raised the intestines aloft on the tip of a javelin. The dogs sprang up to reach them. Intoxicated by the deafening concord of the horns and their natural ferociousness, the dogs were a river of glittering flesh, their tongues sparks which set Guzman’s upright body ablaze; and sweating and happy, he teased the dogs so they would still keep their relish for the dish and keenness for the hunt. Overcome by the cold sweat of an infinite circular thought, the knight turned his back on the spectacle. Then, while the dogs smeared their snouts with blood and charcoal, Guzman carved a cross on top of the stag’s heart with his knife; immediately he sliced it in such a way that it split into four. He guffawed dryly and cast a segment of the heart to each cardinal point, while the beaters laughed with him, satisfied with the day’s developments; and at each of the chief beater’s sweeping gestures, designed to cast off the evil eye, they roared: for The Lord’s Prayer, The Hail Mary and God Save the Queen.

“Sire,” Guzman said when he approached finally. “Giving out the rewards and punishments for the day falls to your honor.”

And smiling, sore and weary, soiled, he added: “Do it now because the folk are worn out and they want to head back right away for the sierra gate.”

“Who made the first hit?” asked the knight.

“I, sire,” answered the chief beater.

“You came back just in time,” said the knight, resting his chin on his fist.

“I don’t understand, sire...”

The knight toyed with his index finger on his thick lower lip. Hidden by the cowl, no one could know that the master’s eyes studied the chief beater’s boots, studied the black sand from the coast on them, so different from the dry, brown soil on the mountains. For the first time Guzman saw the match of his wound on his master’s hand; humiliated and unsure, he hid his own.

Wiping the damp black sand from his face, the woman’s caressing
hand disturbs his sleep. The young man wakes from a second sleep, enters the next, lulled by the swaying of the bed on which he travels, recumbent, held captive between silk cushions and ermine covers, curtains of brocade and an intense perfume whose deep and undisguised femininity he sees breathing, sees in color: black, with a texture: taffeta.

We're told he moves, reclining inside a moving bed . . . springy, soft. One of the woman's hands never ceases to caress him; but his position obliges him to look at its partner, and this wears a wrinkled, blood-hungry glove, where a goshawk perches bolt upright. The bird never takes its deep-set eyes off the castaway, but if he blinks between waking and sleeping, the hawk's gaze is unchanging, as if a craftsman had inserted two copper coins, worn and blackened with age, in the bird's head. The antagonized bird stays motionless, chest flared, legs wide apart to get a better perch on its master's glove. Such is the union of the bird's talons with the woman's hand that the bird's black claws appear a continuation of the greasy fingers of the glove. So steady, that one would say it was a maltese figurine; only the bells attached to the talons give any hint of life or movement in the predator; its jangling merges with the other persistent noises of buckles and metal tips being dragged along the road.

The young man shifts his head to look into the face of the woman who caresses him, certain that once again he'll be able to see the silvery pallor of the face which appeared through the mist this morning, from behind the drapes of the litter, inquiring if he was he, looking at him, not knowing that she was being looked at by him. But this time, the black veils hid the woman's features in whose lap the young man slumbers, falls asleep, wakes. The lady (or so she was called by the brute who hitched the castaway to the horse's saddle) is a statue of black cloth, taffeta, brocade, silk: the veils and drapes cover her from head to foot.

Only her hands give any sign that she's alive and present; with one she caresses and clears the sand from the young man's face; with the other she props the bird of prey, motionless throughout. The young man dreads the question she will pose: Who are you?

He's afraid of it because he wouldn't know how to answer. Lulled inside the deep, perfumed litter, he realizes that he alone is the most vulnerable person on earth; he couldn't answer this question; he must wait until someone says: You are, and reveals the identity which he must accept, however menacing, disagreeable or fictitious it might be for fear of remaining nameless. He's at the mercy of the first person who donates a name: lulled, he thinks, knows only this. But in spite of
the thick mists which clot his senses—sleep, perfume, the swaying, the hypnotic gaze of the hawk—the brush of those feminine fingers across his forehead and cheeks keeps him awake, allows him to cling to a floating raft of lucidity, just as the hawk hooks itself to the lady’s gloved hand. The castaway’s leaking argument, supported because no other’s at hand, is that if someone recognizes and names him, he will, at the same time, be able to name and recognize whoever identifies him, and, in that event, discover who he is: who we are.

So, he runs his fingers over the woman’s skirts with great delicacy, he distracts himself a long time that way; and sensing that the rocking, the perfume and tiredness are going to overwhelm him once more, he raises both hands and moves them toward the veils covering the woman’s face. She screams, or he believes she screams; he doesn’t see her mouth behind the veils, yet he knows a wail has shattered the heady atmosphere; he knows she screams once he puts his hand near the woman’s face and everything happens at once: the litter halts; thick voices roar; the woman guides the hoodless head at the young man, and the bird stirs from its heraldic lethargy; the rattles shake furiously while the lady’s hand—previously, caressing, now vicious—shuts off the castaway’s eyes. The latter scarcely has time to see; a mouth opens behind the split veils, baring sharpened teeth like spikes in a hound’s collar, and then the hawk falls upon his neck, scorched by the sun and salt of burning seas, and he feels in his flesh the frozen humor which flows from the vents of the thick, wide open beak; he hears the words of this cry suspended in space, buried in the suffocating luxury of the litter; this cry demanding and screeching for the right each creature has to carry a secret to the grave.

That night Blackjaw came into the inn, lamed, his head bloody. His appearance ruined the beater’s revelry. They stopped drinking and singing; the high-flown speeches were hushed; the squabbling broken off; everyone looked with fear and trepidation at the splendid mastiff, white, crushed, grubby, the black, desert sand on its paws and the open wound in its head.

It was brought to the knight’s lodging, and then and there he ordered it to be treated. In the candlelight the servants could at last open their saddlebags. The knight knelt on the prayer bench and left the breviary open, but he turned his back on the black crucifix which accompanied him on his journeys; he looked across at the servants, who, first of all, wanted to take the dog outside and cure it in the kennels; it wasn’t at all proper to do it in the knight’s chamber. The knight said no. They would have to fix it up right there; the servants bent un-
willingly beneath his superior will. The knight’s presence would stop
them from discussing what had happened, and from forwarding their
outlandish versions of the probable events.

Mute and kneeling once more the knight wondered if the servants
were rebelling in silence, and exacting from their lowly position some­
thing more than their master’s approval and the sense of fulfillment at
completing a task which gave them a freer rein than all the other
servants in the kingdom. But the business in hand soon made some for­
get their tactless dissatisfaction and others their discreet suspicions.

One of the servants ripped out the hair from an area two fingers
wide around the festering sore, cleaned the wound, then sewed it up,
taking a good grip on the skin and a fair chunk of the meat with a
square, ugly needle which was none too fine. Another steamed com­
presses on a kettle, and a third heated wine. The thick thread sewed up
the wound with plenty of stitches which were neither too slack nor too
tight. Immediately, the third servant took oak leaves, palm clippings,
dragon tree sap, burnt parings from cloven feet, and persimmon
leaves and scattered them over the wound. The second servant dipped
the hot swabs in wine, squeezed them out well, and set them on top
of the powders, while the third put dry swabs on top of the others,
finally they bound it all up with a strip of cloth.

The unfortunate Blackjaw whimpered, squirming on the floor;
the servants went out in silence and the knight was left asleep, kneel­
ing on the prayer bench with his head resting on the velvet
arm, nauseated by the stench of powders, the steam from the kettles, and an
old metallic taste which left (in the air) the dog’s blood, (on the floor)
the trace of dark dust from the coast, where, having returned, you lie
stretched out, identical to yourself, your footprint in your footprint,
your body set once more in the silhouette trenchcd in the sand which
you abandoned this morning when the sea abandoned you; you stretch
out on the same beach, your arms spread in a cross, a cross between
your shoulder blades, your old and your new memories blotted out by
storm and the desert, one half of your face buried in the muddy sand,
your hair, your eyebrows, lashes and lips coated with dune dust; on
your neck: two fresh bloodstains.
That day he gave them a more than usually difficult assignment; he scolded them for talking in class; he made sarcastic remarks about a teacher they admired. Any one of these things or all of them ("it was a long time ago," Nelly says), the fact is that their usual get-together to do their homework was dedicated to planning revenge. They could stick nails in his tires, but they would have to get permission to leave the school yard during recess and then they themselves (even supposing no one saw them while they were doing it) would become the first suspects. They could go break windows in his house, "I know where he lives," Aurora said, "let's go right now," but Cecilia and Nelly confessed that that idea frightened them also, and they didn't know how to throw anyhow. Aurora said something contemptuous, so the three of them turned to solving equations. The record ended, Presley naturally ("We were crazy about him"), and Cecilia went to change it. Then she left the room; when she came back she was carrying a little book from her father's library.

"Look."
They looked: the title, Witchcraft, and hands pushing some very long pins into a rag doll.

"Does it say how you do it?" Aurora asked with interest. They had found the revenge that Suarez Esponda would suffer.

Suarez Esponda was their literature master. A man of medium stature, fiftyish, robust but pale, he always wore slacks and a jacket, a bow tie, and enormous shoes. He had been educated in Germany, and
“all he needed was to make us march the Goose Step.” That was his nickname, of course, because of his Teutonic training and his big feet. It was natural for him to say: “Next week read Faust and bring me a report on it, ten pages minimum” and things like that. He grew indignant if they asked him to repeat, to explain in more detail, or to translate a quotation, or if a boy dared to put his feet on the desk, or if a whisper broke the absolute silence he demanded as background to his dry, precise voice. His weapon was humiliation, wielded with professionalism.

“You don’t know who wrote Mary Stuart, Mr. Villalobos? But man, only a perfect imbecile wouldn’t know who wrote that. Or don’t you think so? Answer me! Yes, isn’t that true? Only a perfect imbecile. That’s you, then? Louder, so all your classmates can hear. That’s it. And so you won’t forget it, you will bring me one hundred sentences: I am a perfect imbecile. It’s my fate, to be in a land of imbeciles trying to educate imbeciles.”

In spite of his ridiculous qualities, Esponda was imposing and frightening: a great hostile force against which the girls had now found the perfect opposition.

The booklet on witchcraft is still sold in the cheap bookstalls, along with advice to the lovelorn and joke books. It is nothing but a hasty review of systems and formulas from throughout the ages, but on page thirty-eight Aurora, Cecilia and Nelly must have discovered a key paragraph: “Upon a small wax model, modeled as carefully as possible so as to recall the person whom one wishes to harm, one affixes hair, a tooth from the victim, or parings from his nails, then each day at a determined hour one transfixes the effigy with a pin in the location of the heart, pronouncing words to intensify the intent to do evil, even unto determining death.”

Nelly promised to look for more information: her old nurse said she was from a town of witches and the girl made her tell one of her stories about an unpopular mayor who died six months after taking office of a debilitating illness no doctor could diagnose.

“And what was the matter with him, Nana?”
“What do you think? The little spell they cast on him.”
“And how did they do it, huh?”
“Well, like they do, child.”
“How?”
“Oh, there are several ways.”
“Do you know any?”
"I know how, but it's better not to meddle with those things. The payment comes later. The spirits help you but they collect for it."

"Mmmmm. They do things with dolls, don't they?"

"Yes. Dolls, or pictures."

"Nails or hair...?"

"Um hummm. Or anything that belongs to the person. Unwashed clothes, something in their handwriting..."

"And pins?"

"Pins where you want the pain to be."

"And what else?"

"Water cooled in the night air. And earth. You bury it all to fix the spell. But why do you want to know?"

"Oh, no reason."

Cecilia found The Medieval Roots of German Romanticism by Suarez Esponda among her father's books with the author's photograph as frontispiece, and Aurora no longer had to continue struggling with the piece of wax she had obtained. Permission to use a sample of handwriting instead of nails, teeth or hair also made things easier. After class, the girls approached the Master to ask him to autograph his book...

"Do you girls intend to read this?" Esponda smiled. "I don't think you'll understand much of it."

"Whatever's possible, Maestro."

"You should say im-possible, if the possibilities are those you demonstrate in class." Esponda put on his glasses and tested his fountain pen. "Is the dedication for all three of you?"

"Yes, Maestro."

In thick, upright letters, Esponda wrote: "To my esteemed students (and the three names, complete, without asking any of them), hoping that the road to knowledge will be for them a path of roses." Following that a quotation in Latin and then his elaborately baroque signature. They thanked him, struggling with the reaction provoked by the trite phrase. ("I felt I don't know what: it was ugly to think about what we were going to do with his book.") But Esponda relieved their conflict, neutralized their sentimental impulse, converting the inscription once again into an instrument for revenge:

"Don't think that because you buy my book I'm going to promote you. If you did it with that in mind, consider it a lost investment."

Near Aurora's home there was a sparsely-populated area: empty lots, construction sites, and an abandoned house which was to be their chosen place. Although midnight would have been the ideal hour,
Rafael Coronel, *Viejita con Bonete*, 1964. Mexico. 60 x 70 cms.
they made a concession on that point. Each one, backed up by the
others, told her parents there was going to be a play at school (it was
true, although the girls weren’t in it) and that the rehearsals were
at night. The first meeting was held about nine o’clock under a full
moon. Nelly brought a gardening trowel and Cecilia a plastic flask
of the specially prepared water; on the way they bought a pennys­
worth of pins. With much trembling, in the light of the moon, they
searched the abandoned structure to make sure no beggar was in­
stalled for the night. It smelled of excrement—the next night Cecilia
brought a pine-scented deodorant. They cleared a section in the area
of what would have been a large hall. They dug a small grave in
which to bury the picture and its inscription. Cecilia played with the
pins, laughing nervously.

“Where shall we stick them?”

“In his legs,” Aurora said, “and may it give him rheumatism.”

They lacked an incantation. Rather than admit she hadn’t been
able to obtain one, Nelly decided to improvise. The important things
were the intent and the intensity: she had never felt as close to God
saying Our Fathers as she did when speaking directly to him in a
prayer combining respectful formulas and repeated entreaties: All­
Powerful God, please let me pass my algebra test. You who can ac­
complish anything, please let me, please let me, please let me pass the
algebra test, the algebra test, Merciful God. Now it was something like:
Do him harm, do him harm, do him harm, oh great and powerful
spirit, over and over again, the three girls chanting the three-syllable
singsong, building in intensity until some kind of dark trinity seemed
about to emerge. Nelly opened her eyes suddenly when she realized
(“I swear”) that something, a vast shape formed of moonlight, a face­
less giant, was there among them, with one foot on each side of the
grave. And her glance met Aurora’s, frozen at the same point. Nelly
lowered her head and opened her arms wide and raised her voice and
the others imitated her—three young girls kneeling around a grave
where their schoolmaster Esponda, in a library with a fireplace, gazed
serenely towards the stars. Now there was no need for consultation,
for reaching an agreement: they were of one mind, they were fulfill­
ing a well-learned ritual. Cecilia took a few pins and passed around
the rest. They pierced the calves of the portrait. Nelly sprinkled the
magic water. Aurora began to fill in the grave. When the picture was
covered, Nelly said Amen. Amen, said Aurora and Cecilia, and then
silence, perhaps the chirping of crickets. The three remained on their
knees around a little pile of dirt. They tramped it down a little, they

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placed a large stone over it. They left the trowel and the flask behind some bushes next to the brick wall and left, in silence.

"Tomorrow we'll have to bring a light," Cecilia said.

They nodded gravely. Only when they were back in the street with the streetlights and the cars did the spirit of play return.

“That'll give him rheumatism,” Aurora said, and they burst out laughing.

Several days passed without Esponda's showing the least ill effect: the nocturnal ritual was repeated with slightly desperate insistence, with the rage of possible ineffectiveness, with sordid desire ejaculated in panting rapture. One of the last nights they rubbed earth on their faces; on their breasts, tearing open their blouses; on their legs, chanting, chanting, as if attempting to empty themselves completely, to surrender their vital energies to the spirits so as to contribute to the threatened revenge. The following morning Nelly wept when she saw where she had scratched herself pinning her blouse—she wept without knowing why, a lament that was not remorse although it might have seemed to be. As if it were no longer a game, she says, “it was—I don’t know, like masturbating. I don’t know if you understand what I’m saying.”

I think I do. To draw shameful forces from within ourselves, to allow ourselves to be possessed by them... and when the possession ends, the faceless monster we have evoked is there still, he takes a long time returning to the dark center where he dwells and one looks at him and says: Is this I? But more than that, it was masturbating in public, in a group, in front of mirrors.

Cecilia was the first to yield to the tension: she missed one night. Her companions waited for her a while, then returned to their homes without planning to meet the next day. The Holy Week holidays came shortly after that; they all went out of town with their families. And when they returned to school: there was a new literature master: Suarez Esponda was ill. Ulcerated legs. They made no comment among themselves, they pretended not to notice. As a matter of fact, they practically never spoke to one another anymore; when school was over each went her way and met with other girlfriends to do her homework.

One night, after one of these sessions, Nelly passed by the house that Aurora had once identified as Esponda's: large, old and gray, only the garden was not neglected. She looked for a while at the lighted windows before crossing the street and ringing. A blond, heavy woman appeared, the German wife of the schoolmaster.

“Ah, you come see Professor, he will be glad. Come, please.”
Esponda was in the library, behind his desk. He greeted her by her proper name, invited her to sit down. He made a sign to his wife who then pushed his wheelchair over to the fireplace of the buried picture. Esponda looked at Nelly and raised his eyebrows slightly as if they were in class and he had just asked her a question.

“I came to see how you were getting along, Maestro.”

“I thank you very much, although you might have come at a better hour.”

“It’s just... I was just passing by...”

“Yes, yes, and I appreciate it. How is school?”

“Well... the same as always. Will you be back soon?”

“I don’t think so. This won’t heal.”

Esponda pointed disdainfully at the plaid robe covering his legs and sighed resignedly. Then he looked at Nelly with scorn.

“That must please all of you very much, does it not?”

“No, Maestro,” she protested weakly: suddenly it seemed to her that he knew everything, “how could you think...?”

“How? Easy: I’m aware of what goes on. I imagine all of you students are happy: Old Goose Step is out of combat.”

Nelly blushed. Standing next to her husband, the German woman listened with an affable smile, looking from one to the other.

“That is what they call me, isn’t it?”

“Some... but...”

“You will have to look for a more fitting nickname. That shouldn’t be difficult. Lame... The Lame Duck. The... but you have more imagination for these things than I.”

“Maestro, it isn’t true...”

“What? What isn’t true?”

Esponda struck the arms of his chair and leaned forward abruptly as if to rise. He grimaced with pain and fell back, a moan dying deep in his throat. His wife cried: “Willie!” and leaned over him speaking rapidly in German. He answered something, pushing her away. His face gleamed with sweat.

“Look, my girl, I know how things are,” he said in a tired voice. “But never mind. You are either a popular teacher or you are a good teacher. I am, I believe I am, a good teacher. Not in vain...”

He made an incomplete gesture and allowed his wife to dry his forehead with a cloth. Nelly looked at the diplomas over the fireplace, the bookcases filled with books, the bust of Goethe on the desk, and then once again at Esponda and his wife.

“Oh, well,” he said, “there’s no point in talking about it. You
came by to say hello to me and I appreciate it very much. Truly. And forgive me if I say good evening now, but it is late and I have work to do.”

Nelly left in a daze, with an undefined urgency that little by little became more clear, then completely clear, when she found herself standing in front of the abandoned house. Everything was in its place. Nelly moved the stone and began to dig rapidly. The water-faded inscription, the portrait blotched with black stains—Esponda, standing in his library, looking straight before him with a pin piercing his heart. Nelly looked at him in incredulous fear, then cautiously she removed the pin, as one does a splinter embedded in live flesh. She pulled the pins from his legs. She picked up the photograph and raised it towards heaven, her eyes closed. God, make him get well; God, make him get well. It was not God who responded, but the form with no face, and the picture felt like a chunk of amputated flesh in Nelly’s hands. She dropped it and fled.

Esponda died a few days later: heart failure. Nelly’s attempt to save him did no good—or perhaps it was that Aurora or Cecilia, whichever one had stuck the pin in his heart, came back to continue the ritual. “Or maybe it was all just coincidence. I mean, if some of it’s true it all has to be true, doesn’t it? And there wasn’t any punishment; as far as I know, nothing happened to any of us. Last year I saw Aurora and Cecilia at a class reunion; they’re married, too, and well, and happy. Surely in the future, God won’t want... Really, I still don’t know what I think about it all.”

Nor I, but I think I know how to end this account: with the image of a girl alone beside the ritual grave in the center of that unfinished, dilapidated building reeking of excrement; in the dark place of temptation to which something in her has yielded—a single voice murmuring ominous supplications, a single demonic possession enacting alone the frenetic gestures, the intense surrender to a solitary shame. It is almost unimportant how she arrived there. Was she pursued by the anticipation of the exercise of power? By a sense of violent abandon? Or was she inspired by the idea of atoning for previous descents into the temptation that awaited her, the temptation that enslaved her through its contact with those instruments of power and surrender? I don’t know why when I imagine this scene I always see Nelly with her short hair and her sweet face looking at the photograph of the schoolmaster, slowly drawing a rusted pin from the legs and then suddenly burying it in the left side of his breast. I don’t know why I see her. Doubtless because I do not know the other two.
There's a man in the habit of striking me on the head with an umbrella. It is exactly five years to the day since he began striking me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I've grown accustomed to it.

I don't know his name. I know he's an ordinary man, with a plain suit, graying at the temples, and a vague face. I met him one sultry morning five years ago. I was sitting peacefully on a bench in Palermo Park, reading the newspaper in the shade of a tree. All of a sudden I felt something touch my head. It was this same man who now, as I write, automatically and impassively keeps striking me blows with his umbrella.

That first time I turned around full of indignation (I become terribly annoyed when I'm bothered while reading the paper); he went right on, calmly hitting me. I asked him if he were mad. He seemed not to hear me. I then threatened to call a policeman. Completely unruffled, he went on with what he was doing. After a few moments of hesitation—and seeing he was not about to back down—I stood up and gave him a terrific punch in the face. No doubt he is a weak man; I know that despite the force generated by my rage I do not hit all that hard. Still, breathing a tiny moan, the man fell
to the ground. At once, making what seemed to be a great effort, he got up and again began hitting me over the head with the umbrella. His nose was bleeding, and I don’t know why but at that moment I felt sorry for him, and my conscience troubled me for having struck him that way. Because, after all, the man was not hitting me very hard; he was really striking me quite soft and completely painless blows. Of course, such blows are terribly annoying. Everyone knows that when a fly settles on a person’s forehead a person feels no pain; he feels annoyed. Well, that umbrella was a huge fly which, at regular intervals, kept settling on my head. Or, to be more precise, a fly the size of a bat.

At any rate, I could not stand that bat. Convinced that I was in the presence of a lunatic, I tried to get away. But the man followed me, in silence, without once letting up his blows. At this juncture, I began running (I may as well point out right here that there are few people as fast as I am). He set out after me, trying without luck to get in a whack or two. The man was gasping, gasping, gasping, and panting so hard I thought if I kept him running like that my tormentor might sink dead on the spot.

For that reason I slowed to a walk. I looked at him. His face displayed neither gratitude nor reproach. He just kept hitting me over the head with his umbrella. I thought of making my way to the police station and saying, “Officer, this man is hitting me over the head with an umbrella.” It would be a case without precedent. The policeman would stare at me suspiciously; he would ask for my papers, he would begin questioning me with embarrassing questions, he would probably end up placing me under arrest.

I thought it better to go home. I got onto the Number 67 bus. Not once letting up with his umbrella, the man got on behind me. I took the first seat. He stationed himself beside me, holding on to the strap with his left hand while with his right he kept swinging at me with his umbrella, implacable. The passengers began to exchange shy smiles. The driver was watching us in his mirror. Little by little, a fit of laughter, a growing convulsion, seized all the other riders. I was on fire with shame. My persecutor, completely unaffected by the uproar, went on striking me.

I got off—we got off—at the Puente Pacífico. We continued on down Santa Fe Avenue. Everyone foolishly turned around to stare at us. I felt like saying to them, “What are you staring at, you idiots? Haven’t you ever seen anyone whacking a man on the head with an umbrella before?” But it also occurred to me that they probably hadn’t.
Five or six kids began to follow us, shouting like a pack of wild Indians.

But I had a plan. Arriving home, I tried slamming the door in his face. I didn’t manage it. With a firm hand—anticipating me—he grabbed the handle, there was a momentary struggle, and he entered with me.

From that time on, he has continued striking me on the head with the umbrella. As far as I know, he has never slept or had a bite to eat. All he does is hit me. He accompanies me in all my acts—even the most intimate ones. I remember, in the beginning, that the blows kept me from sleeping; I now believe it would be impossible to sleep without them.

Nevertheless, our relations have not always been good. Countless times, in all possible tones, I have asked him for an explanation. It’s never been any use; in his quiet way he has gone on whacking me over the head with the umbrella. On several occasions, I have dealt him punches, kicks, and—God help me!—even umbrella blows. He took these things meekly, as though they were all in a day’s work. And this is exactly what is scariest about him: his quiet determination, his absence of hatred. In short, his inner conviction of carrying out a secret and superior mission.

Despite his apparent lack of physiological needs, I know when I strike him he feels the pain, I know he’s weak, I know he’s mortal. I also know a single shot would free me of him. What I don’t know is whether when we’re both dead he will go on striking me on the head with his umbrella. Neither do I know whether the shot ought to be aimed at him or at me. In any case, this reasoning is pointless. I know full well I wouldn’t dare kill either him or myself.

On the other hand, it has recently occurred to me that I could not live without his blows. More and more frequently now I have a horrible premonition. I am distressed—deeply distressed—to think that perhaps when I most need him, this man will go away and I will no longer feel those soft blows of his umbrella which help me sleep so soundly.
He would write a letter because to see his best friend and tell him face to face was impossible. He had often thought about speaking to him but never quite could; he imagined Enrique's face, the way his expression would change, his look of astonishment, his interruptions (“But it can't be—are you sure?”), which would force him to explain or perhaps excuse himself or at worst confess that it had only been a joke.

Up to now it had never occurred to him that friendship and love are, in certain cases, proofs of a helpless solitude. He could not face Enrique because Enrique would not understand. Someone not so close to him would have been better. He thought, if I had such a friend I'd tell him everything. But Enrique was so loyal, so good, that it was impossible to utter a word to him. Writing him might keep up the illusion of an understanding between them and at the same time give Enrique a chance to think over his reply, to weigh carefully each reason he would use to convince him he had been dreaming.

He didn't think the letter would be enough, but as an introduction it would at least spare him Enrique's looks of expectancy and bewilderment. He hesitated, and while hesitating—out of an impulse that ran contrary to his will—he was writing: “It's about my wife.” He filled the letter with labored sentences, with excuses, with evasions, and with justifications. Suddenly he stopped and looked around. He was alone. He was peacefully surrounded by everyday things, as if nothing had really happened. He read: “It's about my wife. It's about Elisa. She's
not ill, nor is there another man mixed up in this....” Denying, he could go on forever. Enrique would never find out the truth. Still roundabout in his approach, he gave one last trite explanation before getting down to the facts: “It’s very hard to make certain things clear to outsiders, because to a married couple that’s what others are—outsiders. How idiotic to think love unites. How sentimental. Two people living together stand as if on different planes, most of which are secret. I won’t try explaining anything to you because I don’t know myself what’s happened, but here are the facts....”

He stopped again. He had heard a noise behind him, the shuffle of slippers on the rug. Quickly he covered the letter with the first thing he could lay his hands on—a map of greater Buenos Aires—and began studying it: Adrogue, Lomas de Zamora, familiar routes. ... He pronounced these names to himself, trying to escape Elisa and the silence, which was so obvious it was almost like another person in the room. But also, though he did not lift his eyes from the map, he listened hard for the faint sound of Elisa’s approaching steps. Then, unable to bear it any longer, he called without turning around. “Elisa?”

“Yes?” Her voice was neutral, with the sweetness of utter indifference.

“Nothing—except that I’m going out.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want anything from town?” he asked, obedient to his old habit of adding a word or two when he felt guilty.

“No.”

He got up hurriedly, relieved by her answer, which excused him from having to come back right away. He gathered up his papers, the letter among them, put everything into a leather briefcase, and, feeling both stupid and afraid, left for his office.

Of course, he did not mail the letter. He kept it in a pocket for several days, transferring it from one suit to another, but he never mailed it. At last Enrique rang him up, wondering why they had not been getting together for drinks. Elisa had spoken to him; she was surprised too. She said he was too old to break his habit of meeting Enrique either on Wednesday nights or Thursdays before seven. Elisa always teased him about his way of organizing his habits with the same thoroughness he applied to his work at the office. This time her remark sounded to him like mockery. The atmosphere of the house, the forced secrecy of horror, shattered Elisa’s innocent words.

Up to that moment he had fought against all sorts of troubles and out of these battles he had emerged victorious; this had led him to be-
lieve that one of his rock bottom virtues was strength. Yes, he con-
sidered himself strong, able to face anything, even the worst situations, but how could he understand this madness which surrounded him now—in spite of the sensibleness of all his past acts and the smooth way his days had run—without any apparent cause?

A man like him does not become disturbed overnight; he waits to see what will happen and then takes the plunge into analysis. This had been his first impulse. At the very moment Elisa changed, he had thought, I must see an analyst.

He would call Enrique to find out if he knew a good one—not one of those clowns who organize LSD sessions, of course, but a sensible doctor, an understanding listener. As a listener, Enrique would have done well, but, preferring the impersonality of science, he never once spoke to him. He waited. And while postponing the moment of coming to grips with his problem, he tried to imagine a dialogue which might begin in this way:

"It's about my wife."

The analyst would not risk any conclusions, he would let him talk.

"I never noticed anything strange about her. She's a silent, quiet woman. But her character—Elisa herself—has nothing to do with what's happening to me. She's outside all this."

That was exactly why he could not talk to her. He stopped himself to ask if it had been always this way—Elisa distant from him, he trapped in his own silence, both of them avoiding the mention of anything unpleasant or dangerous. They'd had such a peaceful life.

"Elisa and I never had a quarrel—well, maybe once. Yes, now I remember, years ago we once had a fight, but I don't know what about. Yesterday, while we were having breakfast, I noticed that Elisa had no hands. Or maybe she did, maybe I just couldn't see them. No hands. She was sitting there as usual, but without hands."

He would stop to watch the doctor's reaction, but the doctor would display an impassive face so as not to lose his fee for subsequent visits. He would ask, very politely, "And what else?"

"I behaved as though nothing had happened. I tried to think—I still believe in this possibility—that it was only an hallucination, fatigue, overwork, my eyes."

That first day had been more uncomfortable than anything else. He denied the change in her with all his strength and with less courage than would have been required to take it lightly, at the same time piling explanation on explanation—his fatigue, his vision.

This visit to the doctor was so real that he decided not to see him.
He told himself that what he wanted was an answer, not theories. Elisa without hands was a terrifying sight but still bearable, since she had not lost them in an accident (there were no traces of blood or of torn flesh). It was like the lingering remnants of a nightmare, and one easily grows used to nightmares, so long as they don’t make much sense. At some point later on, weakened by fear and sorrow, he wondered why he had not immediately run out of the house instead of trying to grow gradually accustomed to the horror.

This attitude of well-mannered acceptance lasted till the moment Elisa’s eyes disappeared. She had lifted her empty face to him for its morning kiss, and he stepped back instinctively for the door. Moving clumsily in his fear, he got into his car, the keys clinking together in his trembling hand, and started the motor. Then a neighbor, a face he did not bother to identify, was approaching him, wanting to be helped with his car, which had gone dead or had sunk into a soft shoulder or something of the kind. As at the outer limits of a nightmare, he was held back by this series of efforts he was forced to make against his will and by his neighbor’s small talk, all the while feeling Elisa’s empty stare at the back of his head. But he did not see a doctor, nor did he mail the letter to Enrique. He only thought about escaping. It might have been a sensible decision not to return home. But he could not leave. That would have meant confronting Elisa and explaining why he was leaving her. And where would he go? He put forward these and other excuses so as not to have to admit the inexplicable feeling tying him to his home and his wife. All he did was shut himself up in his work. There was no detail into which he did not enter, no meeting he did not attend. His colleagues seemed not to mind, but were somewhat taken aback when he began meddling in the affairs of others. Now he was coming home very late; he would stay on at the office or at a bar, hoping on his return to find Elisa asleep.

Not wanting to wake her, he avoided turning on the lights. He would then grope for the bed and lie with his back to her, in one corner, like an angry child.

For a long time, for nearly a month, he let himself go on living in his nightmare, leaving home early each morning and coming back late at night. Not so late as to arouse Elisa’s suspicions, however, but late enough to find her already asleep. With a glance at her side of the bed he could vaguely make out her head, a large spot of golden hair on the pillow. He would then be tempted to put his arms around her, not out of love but out of desperation, driven by a need to do
Rafael Coronel, *Roland and His Wife*, 1965. Mexico. Oleo sobre tela. 120 x 100 cms.
something—anything. But he huddled in fear on his side of the bed and pulled the sheets over his head.

During the day, in a rush of endless tasks, he tried to forget his wife’s gradual disappearance; but Elisa, handless, eyeless, like a broken doll, often broke into the conversation when he was lunching with other people, and made his blood run cold. He began to take little notice of his behavior. He was no longer able to cover up his fear before others and would stop a moment before any door and pray not to have Elisa open it for him.

He endured his nights stoically, sure there was no way of avoiding them, and, out of desperation, always managed to sleep. He had not had a single sleepless night, but in his dreams he found himself with Elisa. Once, he had cried out in his sleep and she stirred. He held his breath, rigid on his side of the bed. He heard her softly saying, “Are you all right? What is it?”

Close to tears in his fright, he begged her to go on sleeping, assuring her that he was perfectly all right. She turned her back to him without another word. They never talked again.

Now it was no more a matter of seeing an analyst or waiting for Enrique’s advice. He had passed the limits of one nightmare and was entering into another, as if a last door had been closed on him. Motionless at the edge of the bed, knowing that if he stirred or got up she would come after him, he imagined the color of her hair in the dark. It was the only thing about her he still remembered.

He began to weep silently, while striking up an imaginary dialogue with his wife.

“Elisa, what’s happening to us?”

He saw himself and Elisa in a trap, two figures drawn by the same hand, making up part of who knew what bewildering picture.

He began to regret the long-past time when they were both open and things were clear and they loved each other. With the certainty that nothing could now save him from his present horror, admitting for the first time that no tomorrow would come, all at once he understood everything. Violently, desperately frightened, he turned toward Elisa’s incomplete body to take her in his arms, to try to hold together what little was left of her, feeling that this is what he should have done that first time. But there on the pillow lay nothing but a lock of golden hair, and in a matter of moments it too disappeared.

“These are the facts, Enrique,” he wrote. “Elisa’s gone. I can hear her. If I were to touch her, I could feel her skin; sometimes, when I brush against her, I can hear her breath. If she didn’t exist, if she
were really dead, I don't think it would matter to me. But living with her this way is unbearable and living without her is impossible. I have not gone back to work. I'm telling you all this without pain or fear because I have no other fate than to remain here. I care for nothing in this world but Elisa."

"Raúl."

It was his wife's voice calling him after such a long time. He got up from the desk, turned, and saw her. Elisa once again, Elisa tall, whole, beautiful, watching him with a grave look in her eyes, while he dared not speak for fear of breaking the spell of this new dream. He was trembling and had to support himself against the desk.

It took him an eternity to come back to life. It meant just that—to be living again in this small, simple world of manageable troubles, troubles shared with others. He would never be alone again.

When he came to his senses, to the almost unbearable happiness of being himself again, he heard Elisa explaining to him, perhaps for the fifth time, "I'm sorry, Raúl, but I'm leaving. I'm in love with another man."
Lying on her back in bed, staring into the darkness, with her hands folded over her breast, she mimicked the corpse in the parlor. The afternoon had passed quickly; it was a novelty to have a dead man in the house. That night Yvette would not have to listen to his eternal argument with her mother: he was convinced that Yvette was not his child. She could hear her mother scratch herself as she sat beside the dead man: the anxious scraping of fingernails over a silk stocking. She recalled the face of the caller who had come to pay his respects to the deceased, how he had afterward slapped at the cuff of his trousers. He had not wanted his clothing to absorb the dead man’s cloying mustiness: every corpse is a bloom of a different perfume.

The night breeze rustled the window curtain and gave her arms gooseflesh, but she did not pull up the blanket from the foot of the bed. She could smell the sweetish odor of the wilted flowers and of the tapers at the four corners of the casket. As the wick sputtered, it made the shadows leap against her bedroom door. The man’s particular fragrance hovered beneath the mingled odors of the house. There in his casket, his chin caught up with a white handkerchief knotted at the top of his head, he was beginning to stink.

She heard her mother dragging her house slippers over the floor as a different scent, momentarily overpowering the others, reached her dilated nostrils. Her mother was burning incense. At that moment it would have been easier to die than to elude the corpse. The burial had been set for the following morning, and until then the man’s odor
would furtively spread through the house, seep into the fabric of the curtains, take root under Yvette’s fingernails. The caller had slapped uselessly against the cuff of his trousers. He would be obliged to send them to the dry cleaner’s.

The dead man had decided to take leave of his home with consummate lack of grace. The burned-out ash of his last cigarette lay undisturbed in his ash tray; his coat hanging on the back of his chair still reeked of his sweat. How could they hide his hat hanging there on the hatrack, his hat whose brim had so often been turned back by hands now lifeless and folded across his chest. If the girl raised her head, she would be able to see his pajamas outside the window, hanging on the clothesline. His striped pajamas with stains that no water could wash clean. If she looked in the mirror, it was his ashen face that she would see.

It was not her mother’s slippers dragging across the parlor floor: it was his as he leaned against the door to listen to Yvette and her fiancé whispering in the hallway. Suddenly his rocking chair would begin to move again, at the slightest recollection of him. His rocking chair with the cane bottom distended from the weight of him. No matter how frantically she swept the floor, she still found his broken toothpicks in every corner: he had always had a toothpick hanging from his mouth. After digging at his rotten teeth, he would slowly draw a whitish line with his toothpick across his puffy nose. He would roll his bread into little balls and flick them with his fingertips. Yvette had found them in the folds of his napkin, among the lacy fingers of the potted fern, lodged in the frame of the Last Supper.

He had taken his own good time in dying. For months on end he had rocked back and forth in his chair with his pajama top open because of the heat, revealing a mass of chest hair so long that it coiled into wiry gray ringlets.

“That girl has no feelings,” he railed at his wife. “She looks at me like she wanted me to hurry up and die and be done with it.”

He had spent his life as a traveling salesman and had wasted little time with his family, and one fine day he simply came home to die. He sniveled from room to room in his striped pajamas, which he never changed. She could hear his felt slippers as he came near and leaned against the door to listen to the little sounds Yvette and her sweetheart made in the hallway. As he eavesdropped he would chew his toothpick behind the closed door. The girl would cough to let him know that she was aware of his spying, and when she came in again she inevitably found that he had dragged himself back to his rocking chair. She took
small vengeance in polishing his shoes, always his shoes. Why polish them if she knew he would never wear them again? She left them resplendent, never waiting for his gratitude, and every week his unused shoes reappeared as smudged as before. There they were now, lined up straight, on top of his wardrobe. If her mother offered them to the milkman or to the baker, the dead man would climb the steps again to reclaim them and the girl would recognize his footfall on the stairs.

It began the afternoon Yvette was dusting the furniture. She was wearing slacks rolled up to her knees, and she noticed that he was looking at her legs. She could imagine his thoughts: "That girl with her birdlegs..." From behind his paper he spied on her out of the corner of his eye. The page trembled so violently that it was impossible for him to read. He dropped the page and screamed that she should go change her clothes and not run around the house half naked: "Cover up your legs. Even if they were pretty, which they're not!"

She was thirteen years old, and since the salesman had returned for good, she never left the house except to go to school, and only then in that dreadful blue uniform. She and her mother were the man's prisoners, he in his woolen socks (even in summer), with the little balls of bread on the tablecloth, and his broken toothpicks in every corner.

"He's just upset because he's sick," her mother implored. "Please be patient with him!"

Yvette did her homework in the parlor. He dozed or read the paper; her mother drudged in the kitchen. Bent over her notebook she suddenly felt the hair on her arm stand erect: he was staring at her. He wasn't asleep; nobody could sleep when his eyelids were moving. He wasn't reading the paper; who could read a paper with his hands shaking like that! The girl went to her bedroom to finish her lessons. From there she could keep an eye on the rocking chair in the parlor. She lifted her eyes from the book and listened hard like a hunted animal...

She smoked on the sly in her bedroom. The chair creaked when he rocked and annoyed her so she could not study, but the man who could barely drag himself along by holding on to the furniture knocked at her bedroom. He knocked so hard that it frightened her and she opened the door. He immediately saw the cigarette, still burning where she had thrown it on the floor. With the live ash he burned Yvette's arm, and he made such a hideous face that she did not dare to call out for her mother.

"Don't scream, you tramp. If you do I'll kill you!"

She began to wear only long sleeves so she could hide the red welts
on her arms. At mealtime he never took his eyes off her and, if she wanted a second portion, she got up and went around the table for it so she would not have to address him directly. Between them, her mother ate without lifting her eyes from her plate.

When he could not bear it any longer (he rocked in his chair so furiously, why in the name of God didn’t he just go flying out the window?), he scratched on her door. He held a cigarette in his hand. It was the only time he ever smoked. He slowly lifted her sleeve, and the girl bit her lip with all her might to keep from crying out. She bore the burn of the cigarette until it crumbled to shreds between the man’s fingers.

She always woke up at night when she heard them arguing in the next room. He had been on the road for years and insisted that, in his absence, his wife had enjoyed numberless affairs. Bellowing, he demanded to know what the girl was doing under his roof, since he was not her father. The poor woman sobbed and swore that she had been faithful. In the morning, Yvette looked at herself in the mirror to see whether she could find any family resemblance. It was strange. She was the very image of her father: the same dark hair, just like his before he fell ill, the same large mouth and full lips.

Her mother asked her to take the patient his tea in his room. The doctors had given him up and he could not possibly last much longer, a few days at most. She begged the girl to treat the dying man with kindness. Why not take his tea to him in his room. Yvette’s heart softened and she took the tray from her mother. She stopped short at his door: he was only a pitiful old man who was afraid of dying.

Before he died, he begged her to forgive him and kiss him on his forehead as a token of her pardon. He spoke with his eyes closed; his eyelids fluttered. As she leaned down, he suddenly grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth. It was worse than being burned by his cigarette. She ran to the bathroom and rinsed out her mouth and brushed her teeth with such frenzy that her gums bled.

He could now barely stand the pain of his wracked body and got out of bed only by leaning on his wife’s shoulder, in order to reach his chair. He was too weak to rock it. The eyes in his helpless body followed the girl. She never again returned to his room. Her mother never asked why. When he saw that she was beyond his reach, he roared:

“Who’s your old man? Which one of your mother’s lovers was your old man? Tell me his name. Come in here, you tramp!”

In revenge the girl took to wearing too much make-up. When her fiancé whistled at the front entrance, the chair fell silent. The salesman
returned from the transports of his crazed mind. From the dark hall-
way Yvette could see him in her imagination, craning his neck, trying
in vain to sort out the voices. She laughed a little too loudly so the spy
could hear through the door. Her boy friend thought she was crazy.
When she came back in, her lips were stripped of the lipstick the boy
had kissed away. She deliberately crossed through the parlor so the
man could lean from his chair and see for himself the dark circles un-
der her eyes and her disheveled dress.

At dawn Yvette was awakened by their shouting. Clinging to his
chair he was in such acute pain that he could not sleep. His wife rocked
the chair for him while he demanded to know the names of her lovers.
Sleepless with his pain the dying man idly observed the spectacle of
his waning life. In her bedroom the girl lit her lamp; lately she could
not get back to sleep without a light. Waiting for sleep to come, she
fervently prayed that he would die.

Her fiancé had whistled from the hallway and Yvette went to
meet him. The man in the striped pajamas had reached his final agony.
They kissed so long that her mother had to come to the hallway to get
her: she could feel the scratch of his beard with every kiss. Lying in
bed with her hands folded over her breast, playing dead, her heart
pounded with delight, she fell asleep. Then the man climbed from his
casket and came into her bedroom:

“What are you doing, tramp?”
“I’m sleeping.”
“Don’t you have a mathematics examination in the morning?”
“Yes.”
“Why aren’t you studying then?”
“You’re dead, father. I don’t have to take the examination.”

When Yvette awoke, she could still hear their voices. She opened
her eyes: one corner of the mirror shone in the half light. She could
hear her mother in the parlor, scratching herself. She had caught the
dead man’s fleas, for sure.

She sat on the edge of the bed and outside the window she caught
a glimpse of the pajamas, covered with stains, flapping in the breeze.
He was dead. She heard her mother dragging her slippers along the
corridor toward the kitchen.

Standing beside the casket, Yvette rubbed her lips against the back
of her hand. His kiss burned her tongue. She waited a long moment; it
was not an easy matter to escape the dead man. She lit a cigarette and
gazed at the old man through the gray smoke. She saw the handker-
chief tied about his chin, the handkerchief which kept the drool from
oozing from his mouth. Was he staring at her with his half-open eyes, through his long lashes? No. This time his eyelids did not flutter. Yvette swallowed the smoke; she was mad with pleasure. He was really dead. In the kitchen, her mother made coffee in preparation for the wake.

The girl leaned over and examined the man: his eyelids, his beard, his mouth. She raised his sleeve and, pushing aside the black beads of the rosary he held between his fingers, she pressed the red glow of the cigarette against her father’s flesh. Very slowly she burned a hole in his hand.
The Mother:

My husband doesn’t like my company, or this house either, and he hasn’t run off with Perla García for good because he thinks that in ten years he’ll be over sixty-five and she’ll already have run off for good with his best bet, she’ll have taken his last cent, then we’ll be alone. I’m sure that moment will come and I’m going to destroy his every word, break every silence he tries to make. He sold half the ranch to buy her that house she lives in, and of the ten thousand head of cattle his grandfather left when he died, all that’s left, at best, is a thousand skinny cows, because nobody is capable of looking after them well; and there’s still this old house that’s going to collapse in the first big blow, this house the pioneers of Formosa built, and now it’s full of leaks and falling apart. I’m tired of paying certain debts of his, but now I think my earnings as piano teacher can’t go that far and I’m going to leave it completely up to him to repair—alone. I’m going to save my money for the day I get even with him.

Vicente said Formosa is the hot center of thunder, the only place in the world where the moon that sometimes floats on the river can be broken. My loneliness gave way to curses the night the life drained from his body. That very hour I lost my desire to turn my face toward the sun. This morning my husband refused to visit his grave. At least my daughter excused herself because she had to teach. She’s at the age when her only hope is Alberto, especially in this city, where there are few bachelors but plenty of pretty girls. She’s almost certain that if she
doesn’t marry him, she’s going to be a virgin all her life. But my daughter has no need to worry—Alberto’s not going to marry anyone else here, but he’s not going to marry her either. This morning at the cemetery, he told me he’s going back to Buenos Aires to work in his brother’s clinic. Only he and I know that three years ago, on a day just like this, Vicente was killed by his own father—on a day like this, blood gushed out of his mouth and cut off the sound of his voice.

My daughter thrives on blaming Vicente for all her failures. She knows that the night my husband ran over Vicente’s body, he had been quarreling heatedly with Alberto. A neighbor told me that it was a terrible argument, judging by the shouts and crying she managed to hear. I always thought Alberto had a lot to do with my son’s death. Or why was he always so crushed and nearly crazy? And why didn’t he ever mention marriage again after that? Vicente came out crying, running as if someone were chasing him with the intention of killing him that night. I’m not forgetting that Doctor Alberto Irala came to Formosa to visit my son for a week and never went back to Buenos Aires. My daughter keeps slandering Vicente, but at times we get together and try to break down the barriers between us.

It was no secret from me that Vicente visited Perla García pretty regularly. I knew that my son had her as often as he liked and that she loved him to distraction. That’s why when Vicente died she cried as much as I did, or more. I should have thrown her out of my house then and there, but in my despair I couldn’t recognize her very well when she bent over my son’s body and kissed him several times. It was one of her unforgettable indecencies.

Here, they accuse me of a lot of things, but really I’m the one who ought to set them straight, because it was my husband who ran over my son’s body. I always thought he didn’t hold back, that night, on purpose, because by doing it he eliminated a rival who was too young and good-looking. He could have avoided killing Vicente but he didn’t do it because he knew that Perla García sucked the passion out of the younger, and was satisfied with the juice he smeared over her body. I was beside him in the car and we both saw clearly what Vicente was doing, I shouted Stop, but my husband chose to kill him.

The Father:

I knew Vicente better than anyone, but never enough to know why he seemed so horribly tired, pale, and consumed at times. It was as if he had an incurable disease, one that threatened death from time to time. The curious thing was that he insisted on hiding it all, but I
knew that when he wore dark glasses it was because he had bloodshot, watery eyes, like a drunk's. When he persisted in winning Isabel Peña's love, his enthusiasm caught us all in the flood; but he began to paint with more violence and to write mad sentences: that sadness strikes us like dead birds; that things come from the country of insupportable tensions; that there is a palpitating solitary, transcendent monster who will masticate his heart and swallow his skeleton. . . . The fact is his idyll lasted less than three months; then no one even mentioned Isabel Peña's name in this house, no one knew why they had stopped speaking.

Vicente was proud, but his mother dominated him, overshadowing him, blinding him, making him tongue-tied, and he finally chose hell because that was the only way to free himself from her prison. If it hadn't been my car, it would have been the next one he met. He had chosen hell and wanted to be blind, brainless, his mouth crushed.

Perla Garcia looks a lot like him. She too is marvelously young, enthusiastic, and a little impetuous. I knew Vicente visited her as one of the ways of rebelling against his mother's impositions, but I'm also sure my son was always correct with her. They accuse me of rushing the end of that night because I was jealous, but here we know that's one of my wife's great inventions. The mass they are going to pray today for Vicente's soul satisfies her desire to appear the perfect saint. The blessing of the Church is no longer important to my son because he had the privilege of not being afraid of blood or hell. He chose the form of his own eternity.

The Sister:

Vicente didn't even respect my desperation. Never could I stand his compassion or his tenderness or his violence. He was never afraid. I'd tell our father he slept with Perla García here in this house, using our beds and filling the rooms with cries and interminable whisperings. He wanted to frighten me with his bestial vitality, his wild pig's ferocity. Alberto could not free himself from Vicente—that was the great humiliation of my life. My brother insisted on showing me that the object of my love was the dirtiest and unworthiest, but nobody was capable of telling Vicente himself what he was: a lump of shit, a degenerate, a destroyer with no character. If it had not been because one night it occurred to him, simply to be more original, to throw himself in front of our father's car, I might have married Alberto three years ago; we had even ordered from the printer the two hundred invitations we were going to send out, but Vicente wanted to kill himself, and he did. He made father run over his head. We knew that Vicente
killed himself, and if I managed to talk, to tell the truth, today we wouldn’t have a mass for the dead prayed over by the bishop, because suicides are condemned, and Vicente is a suicide who doesn’t deserve mass said by the bishop! He doesn’t deserve anybody’s prayer! But “the accident” happened three years ago and today we’re going to observe it solemnly.

Alberto lived for my brother. Often I came to think he courted me to see Vicente more often, but Vicente treated him badly at times, which calmed me and then I’d admit again that he preferred me. At last I realized that my brother did what he wanted with Alberto, and still does. I too argued with him that night. I begged him to leave Alberto in peace, I shouted it was his fault we couldn’t get married, and he answered frenetically that an impotent man can’t marry a frigid woman—he even shook me and knocked me down. It was the only time I could prove that his body was red-hot and his arms capable of clutching even a bitch in heat. I thanked God for all I felt during those moments and I wouldn’t look away from the dark flesh of his face when he began the actual motion—before the final thrust, I ran my hands madly over every inch of his body, and after the great convulsion came, he got up and ran out to meet our father’s car and I lay there stretched out on the floor, marked by the fire of his violence or his tenderness. When I found out he was dead, my hope flared up again and I went on desiring his death.
At noon the alarm went off, but it is four o’clock and she is still sleeping. He put a pound of potatoes in a pan and is waiting, seated on the kitchen stool, until the meal is ready—boiled potatoes with a little oil and salt, and, besides, her favorite dish, dandelion salad.

While the water is boiling, he brews some mate, adding a bit of dry orange peelings to the tea. The bread, three days old, softens in the oven. He opens a book of poetry and reads

Ah, to what shall I compare the pure
architecture
of your body?

She resembles a rapt doll, a child dressed for its first communion, he thinks.

At times, surprisingly, she appears in the kitchen, looks for a bottle of beer, and goes out, her hair messed, her eyes swollen, to buy groceries at the store. When she comes back, she doesn’t say a word to him; she drinks, with great swallows, half the cold beer, she pants, she eats black olives. Then she throws herself onto the bed and goes back to sleep.

That’s what happened last Tuesday, but often he leaves the house without having seen her get up. Now that he has found a good job, he trusts that everything will change. At the end of the month he will get his first pay, and he intends to buy some indispensable things—
first of all, an electric shower. The former tenants carried off what was there, and he has to heat water to wash himself in the same pan they boil potatoes in. He is alone, it is cold, and she is sleeping. Who wants to live in such a sad house?

From the window he sees the patio tiles stained by the dampness. A puddle covers the manhole. It must have rained all night, he thinks. I forgot to take the shirts from the line. And he also thinks it would be nice to listen to the sound of the rain on the plants, if they had plants, as in the patio of the pension he lived in before he knew her, with its pots filled with fern and that palm so noisy with sparrows.

But the house they have occupied is still empty despite the plans they made the first day. And it was pure luck that they found in the broom closet some boards and broomsticks with which they made the kitchen stool and a shelf where she could arrange her beauty creams. What's more, the walls in the hall are decorated with sketches of men and women she draws, who have her own face and her own dead eyes. Everything she sketches looks like her. Even the puppets have her harsh, hopeless expression.

He looks at his wrinkled pants—he sleeps dressed, with gloves, since the first frost came, and he asks himself, When will this chaos end?

His clothes hang from some nails, the cockroaches come out of his shoes, slugs crawl at night over the kitchen walls and leave their silver traces on the tile. When he was a boy, somebody told him slugs were edible. "They're clean, humidity makes them," they argued, but he never dared try them.

He goes back to his book of poetry and reads:

Oh glance, oh whiteness and oh that bed
where radiant was the whiteness.

He wants to feel the enchantment of those lines. He recites them aloud. But the house smells of dirty clothes and she is sleeping in the next room. He thinks: When I comb my hair, the dandruff falls onto my shoulders as if it were a miniature snowfall. He feels depressed. He needs to talk with someone, to shout. With a good bath, order will begin, he tells himself. Only three days more till the end of the month. I won't let it bother me, everything will turn out okay.

Then he tears a sheet out of the notebook; he makes some calculations, adds, multiplies. He is satisfied with the result. According to the figures, he'll be able to buy, besides the electric shower, that house
begonia they saw one afternoon, downtown, when the doll still had enough energy and walked. She asked him to go into the store and ask the price of the plant, and he, who had scarcely enough money for cigarettes and was furious, weak from hunger, told her to stop playing the artist, it would be more sensible to decorate the house with a tomato plant, for example, or a cabbage plant. Now—he doesn’t know why—he feels a slight remorse. He goes toward the closed room where the woman is sleeping. He opens the door slightly and says, “It’s four-twenty. Can I bring you some tea?”

She breathes deeply, grumbles, then covers her head with the pillow.

When he met her, she was a girl who went from one place to the other with her puppet theater on her back, her folio of sketches, and her pink pearl necklaces. They were lovers, rather they played at it—because once, when they were giving performances in towns in the interior, they shared the same hotel room, which turned out to be comfortable for them. But it wasn’t long before he regretted it. He can still see the scene: they were alone in a park, and she, as usual, had lost one of her jewels, the ceramic earrings which were a keepsake from someone and brought her luck, when he desired her with tenderness, as he had never desired her until that moment. She did not refuse him, but made him realize that she could say no, that it was enough for her to say simply “I don’t want to” to make him suffer. He detected in her look that mixture of scorn and indulgence with which, at times, certain women are accustomed to yield themselves, like saying, “Again? All right, I give in. Seeing you like this hurts me.” He felt trapped and he hated her, although he was aware that it was he—because of his nervousness, his fleeting tenderness—he who had tricked her, he who would never dutifully learn the game.

He never touched her again after that night. They went on together as if nothing had happened, giving puppet shows in neighborhood libraries and vacation hotels, places where she easily found the people necessary to the game. There were young men, and also old ones, with whom she practiced impersonal gymnastics, but the young ended by falling in love with her, and paternal sentiments were aroused in the old men—that is, they did what she hated most, and they were fatally insulted, abandoned. For that reason, when they rented the house, she decided to sleep in a room apart, although it was to his advantage to sleep with her, since she occupied the only bed (he had an uncomfortable army cot) and, besides, it was cold at night.
It's better that way, each to his own, he thinks as he leaves the house to wait for the bus that takes him to work.

Last night, while he was getting ready for bed, he heard the sound of steps in the hall. Not long after she thrust her white somnambulist's face out and asked him for a cigarette. "I'm going out," she said. "I feel like walking." Then she asked him when he would buy the electric shower. "Saturday," he said, "at the very latest, we'll have the resurrection water." "What resurrection? I don't get it, but this can't go on," she exclaimed. "We've got to do something," she added. "Something," she repeated, "something urgent," and yawned.

She went to change clothes and to put on her costume jewelry, kept in an empty candy box. He smiled, satisfied—the chrysalis finally broke the shell of her lethargy. He put out the light in his room and went to sleep.

He was accustomed to those periods of prostration into which she sank after a time elapsed without practicing the game, but that unhealthy torpor had never gone so far as plunging her into bed for entire weeks. Certainly he also knew a variation of her prostration, a contrary aspect apparently, but equally harmful. There were nights when he found her in the kitchen, possessed by a furious activity for domestic order, long-winded as a madwoman, cleaning the only aluminum frying pan in the house or lost in the job of putting the white clothes in bleach. "Tomorrow, if it's sunny, I'll hang them out," she'd say. And invariably the clothes remained in the sink, in a gelatinous state, until her next waking. At other times she surprised him at five in the morning, dressed in her tailored suit and her knit cap. "I hope it's seven. I'm going to collect some money downtown," money which she never got because, even knowing what would happen to her ("Only a few minutes while the eyewash takes effect"), she stretched out on the bed and sleep overcame her. He observed her sleeping; he looked carefully at the curious expression of her mouth—repugnant, satisfied, somewhat guilty.

When he woke up, he seemed to see in the windows of her door a reflection of clarity which came from the next room. He thought she had forgotten to put out the light when she left. He wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and went into the hall. Was she alone? He stopped beside the door. He seemed to hear the snoring of a man. He hesitated a moment, then went in.

Wrapped in her dress coat with the astrakhan collar and cuffs (the fur was from a moth-eaten jacket of her mother's and the pieces
also served as the hair of the Negress Timothea, one of the puppets), she was sleeping soundly. Her hands, crossed over her breasts, clutched an address book. On tiptoe he approached the bed. “It’s so cold,” she murmured without opening her eyes. “Put the light out, please.”

He returned to his room, shivering. The chrysalis, he thought, had gone to sleep before consummating her wedding. But she tried—that’s something.

Yesterday, Friday, he got his first pay, and this morning he bought the shower in a downtown store. He is fascinated with the name written on the box; the red letters form a zigzag line—Cosmos Electric Heater. Installing the shower was easy. To make it work, you only have to turn a handle while the water is running; minutes later the mirror on the medicine cabinet is steamed over. The salesman told him that if the heater didn’t work well, he could return it. “What happens when it doesn’t work well?” he asked. “It gives a slight charge, but don’t worry about it, almost nothing, like a shower of needles in your flesh.”

He prefers her to take the first shower. He had to jerk her out of bed, where she was glued. “The water of the resurrection,” he said, and for a half hour now he’s heard the water running and her voice singing. A quarter hour more goes by. What’s she doing? he asks himself. He knocks on the frosted glass door. “Is something wrong?” She doesn’t answer. Intrigued, he presses his face against the glass—together with the sound of the shower he thinks he hears broken sighs, moans. He straightens up, suffering. Something like rancor weighs on his chest, while he thinks, “I’m a fool. The only thing I need now is to begin to cry.” Suddenly she opens the bathroom door and comes out, wrapped in mist, perfumed. He looks at the tranquil expression on her face, the voluptuous fatigue which her eyes reveal. “How was the water?” he asks. She smiles gently, then enters her room as if followed by a golden cloud.
Anna Bella Geiger, *Embryo*, 1967
Etching, sheet size $28\frac{7}{8} \times 21\frac{1}{8}$ in.
Photograph by Charles Uht.
This, of course, has nothing to do with swatting flies in Rome. That crime, whose roots go back to Buenos Aires, falls so far beneath José Barcalayo that it would never even have occurred to him. He was always a lot more ambitious, which is to say, a lot more complicated and original. At any rate, complication and originality were the outstanding features of his initial venture into crime.

The act took place a short time after José Barcalayo’s twelfth birthday, when other kids in the neighborhood were wasting their time in the sad and contradictory exploration of their bodies. It was a beautiful autumn morning. In the yard, colors wound their way in and out among the shrubbery, the sun felt soft and warm on his eyelids, and all at once José Barcalayo—under the spell of a certain drowsiness, of a sort of lightness (or heaviness) that stirred sensually through his body, as though he were floating on air or about to soar into flight, a drowsiness which from that time on would become the single object of his life—surprised everyone by lopping the head, with a single sure blow, off a beautiful golden six-foot-long snake. And so overpowering was the sensuality that took hold of José Barcalayo in that unforeseen moment of illumination, that he immediately lay aside all his childish ways in order to begin tracing in selected rare volumes of his father’s library the cause of this sudden happiness. This was how his education began.

All the words of his teachers, who for years had failed to make him grasp the simplest and most basic truths, had somehow just slipped past his brain without the slightest trace of wisdom rubbing off, while the...
world he began to discover little by little in the yellowed and worm-ridden pages of those books hidden mysteriously in a corner of unvarying darkness impressed itself in his mind with hardly any effort, instinctively, everlastingly.

During the months of this burning, teeming thirst for knowledge, José Barcalayo found out, for example, that time could be measured by projecting a beam of light onto a system of nine concave mirrors, and that the shortest and quickest way between two points was by the most roundabout possible route, owing to the fact that speed and minimum distances were simple illusions of the human species. He learned that man’s fate is subject to the influence of certain stones and certain herbs, and he learned to tell apart forty-two kinds of magic. And as if all this were not enough, thanks to a knowledge of the exact location of a secret number of weak points in the human brain, he stumbled onto the possibility of killing his best friend only by thinking about him. It was not his good fortune, however, to find what he had set out looking for.

Years went by, but José Barcalayo’s thirst for knowledge did not wane. In his wanderings through the stalls of booksellers over the far-flung cities of the world, he began to collect those eleven thousand one hundred and four volumes which today may be consulted—by permission which only the Pope can grant—in a special room of the Vatican Library. Meanwhile, along with the unstinting fondness for books, it must be pointed out that José Barcalayo developed a truly passionate and obsessive mania for trying out new things. The success of his first crime surely acted as a stimulus on his imagination, and that was why—turning away from the Persian erotica a friend tried to lend him, the treatises of a certain Chinese dynasty he came across himself in his father’s library, and the Spanish-Arabic poems a girl in his class, face contorted, recited in his ear when the teacher turned her back—he decided to repeat the experience.

In reality, that was a period of intense activity. He began by offering to help his grandmother in the kitchen, and in no time at all he acquired an unmatchable skill in holding a chicken, duck, or pheasant in one hand—as though figuring its weight—and in an instant, with his other hand, wringing its neck. The brilliance with which José Barcalayo performed this task became quickly known throughout the neighborhood, and a rain of invitations fell upon his house. He was able to accept only a few of these opportunities, however; soon bored with repeating himself, while never once recovering that first indescribable pleasure, he decided to broaden his field of operations. On less well-lighted street
corners, female Angora cats began to appear with their teats amputated, Alsatian dogs with empty eyesockets, and even a goat with its leg tendons cut. Rumors circulated, someone mentioned having seen José Barcalayo playing around some garbage cans with a dachshund which was found the next morning down by the river, slit up the middle from head to tail. His family, fearful of a bothersome investigation, emigrated to other lands.

This journey proved to be a turning point. Somehow, José Barcalayo saw that to advance significantly along his freely chosen path it was necessary to take time out to complete his theoretical training. That was the first sign of his great will power and—as may readily be seen—of all his decisions was the one which proved most rewarding. For the next eight years, from the time he was fifteen to the time he was twenty-three, he did not shed a single drop of blood. In this period of his life he was, perhaps, regular to a fault. Once he got drunk, another time he paid a visit to a brothel, a third time he combined the two experiences, and eventually he was able to lose himself, with much greater peace of mind and enthusiasm now, in the thick dusty volumes that by stages were filling his room.

Every morning he got up with the sun, breakfasted on a cup of coffee without sugar, then buried himself in the study of the various ways of attaining that stage of drowsiness he had experienced only once, at the age of twelve, over the affair of the golden snake. At midday, he would limit his meal to a plate of greens, a second of salad, a slice of black bread, and a fruit or two. He went back to his studies more certain each afternoon that in the end his efforts would bring him that almost forgotten delight of feeling light (or heavy), of floating on a foamy cloud, of plowing slowly and sensually through space. When the sun went down, he showered, ate four ounces of white fish, salad, another slice of black bread, fruit, and a second cup of coffee without sugar. He then took a half hour walk, not straying far from the house and keeping close to nearby buildings, learning to lose himself in the shadows and to see the world, without being seen, from out of darkness. After that he would return secretively to his room, although now he no longer studied but instead wrote down the results of his meditations in a set of notebooks that his mother bought him in a department store whose name everyone invoked with sappy admiration. Four hours before sunrise, he would go to sleep.

Out of such rigorous working habits, it is easy to see why José Barcalayo reached the age of twenty-three as slender as the trunk of his favorite evergreen oak, as white as moonlight, with a pair of enor-
mous, bulging, and somewhat reddened eyes—absolute lord and master of himself. On the other hand, the outcome of this overwhelming mastery of his will was a fitting reward. At the end of these eight years of strict training, José Barcalayo knew that that delight, whose memory had made itself the one thing he lived for, lay not in the death of any particular being but rather in the careful choice of his victim. His growing frustration over those paltry crimes in the back kitchen or out on the more dimly lighted streets was owing to the quite simple fact that all his victims were animals, not pests like the snake. This was the key to that sensuality now so far in the past. And this was why one day, shortly before celebrating his twenty-fourth birthday, José Barcalayo slipped stealthily across the city till he came to the zoo and, after making sure there was no one watching, sank the pointed blade of his knife into the neck of a hyena. The pest did not even have time to laugh, and José Barcalayo was forced to struggle not to collapse beside his victim’s still warm body, his vision clouded by that wave of intense delight that all at once surrounded him and that made him relive in an instant several centuries of history. Nevertheless, he did not at the time feel himself under the spell of that light (or heavy) drowsiness.

Years went by, but José Barcalayo never lost his enviable capacity for betterment. Once the possible source of his pleasures was discovered, he was ready to satisfy all his desires. Shipping for a number of years on an oil tanker, whose dark hull was streaked with the slime and algae of the seven seas, gave him the chance to experience the most delicate variety of pleasures. South American jungles, African plains, the forests of south China, Siberia, the arctic steppe—these were the settings in which José Barcalayo went about right and left, tirelessly, and with utter determination, beheading and slaughtering pests of every kind and description. But still, the long ocean crossings, the days (and sometimes the weeks) without sighting land or without being able to unleash his deadly blows upon some creature overtaken by surprise, robbed him of sleep, seemed to sip the blood from his veins, and ended up plunging him into dangerous states of depression. The boundlessness of the sea took hold of his imagination and, upon setting foot on dry land again, he was barely able to overcome the pressing, desperate necessity to exterminate the first animal or pest (in times like this the distinction lost its importance) that stirred. No sooner had a Chinaman with a face eroded by the years spoken to him in a Malayan port about unicorns and mongooses, when José Barcalayo told himself that these were the supreme pests, that their capture and death would transport him at
last to regions scarcely imaginable even in dreams. He went back aboard, said goodbye to the captain, and for three years followed the secret routes which—in exchange for a small plastic bag filled with mistletoe—the Chinaman had revealed to him. José Barcalayo did not turn up a single unicorn or mongoose, but on reaching Pakistan, sunburnt, bearded, thinner than a stick, he discovered a world whose existence he had never before suspected—the circus.

Years went by, but José Barcalayo kept on without ever finding that peace and that sensuality he went searching for everywhere, benefitting from the constant shifting of the circus which traced in his mind dozens of lines that in time stood for many other journeys around the world. Now he no longer suffered the anguish of those endless days at sea; his experience—and that inexhaustible source of pests which the circus turned out to be—allowed him to satisfy even his slightest whims, yet a mysterious voice in his breast ruffled his certainty about whether he could ever exceed his own desires, his own delights. He went on dreaming the possibility of finding himself face to face with a unicorn, with a mongoose, though this might prove a hopeless dream. At last, on raising his head one day, his eyes met the eyes of the man on the trapeze. The man's body was slowly going through its routine morning workout and the sweat that dampened his shoulders seemed to project a soft shining wake which followed and almost, but never quite, reached him. José Barcalayo felt a deep shudder that sent through his whole body a lightness (or heaviness) he thought he had forgotten, a kind of drowsiness that was about to fling him to the ground. Trembling like a leaf, he knew that that body—turned to bronze by many suns, rhythmically swinging back and forth, unaware of this devastating sensation that was pressing at his throat and cutting off his breath and asphyxiating him—was the victim José Barcalayo sought since that day long ago when with a single perfect blow he had lopped off the golden snake's head. Making an effort comprehensible only in one who, like José Barcalayo, had put his will to a thousand tests, he began to draw close to the undulating figure. He shuddered and felt the rippling of the air just inches from his fingers. One step more and he could sink his nails into the bronzed and shining back of the man on the trapeze. Only then did José Barcalayo realize that the pityful body plunging headlong toward the sawdust of the center ring was his own.
Darel Valença Lins, Untitled, 1967
Etching, sheet size 18\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 23\(\frac{1}{2}\) in.
Inscribed on the back, "Elii".
This is the story of a great slaughter. When the hunters of horses came out of the east in whooping bands, when the handsome men arrived from over the plains and the mountains, bringing death and annihilation to the last of the earth’s ancient men.

This is the story of a great slaughter. Of how that great bloodshed spread its black wing over the whole of Europe, and awakened with its death cry even the least cleft of the rock.

Of how the silent beings who squatted about their fires, the shambling Neanderthal men, woke up one morning and their hearts were filled with wonder before the blossoms of the wild apple. Because spring, at that moment, had taken possession of the land.

A light mist slowly stretching itself rose from the ends of the earth, and vast herds of bearded ponies grazed in peace on the neighboring plain. And the horse had no fear of the stooped head of the cave dwellers.

This is the story of a great slaughter. When the bearded ponies suddenly snuffed the air and smelled fear. And this fear, twitching through their muscles, started them running in terror toward the west.

And the men asked themselves to what such frenzied galloping was owed, such a shaking and tossing of manes. For they had not yet heard the war cry of the hunters from the east.

But the cry materialized. On the crown of a hill, an immense circle of dancers and a great display of colors and feathers. And also of spears and arrows. And again the hearts of the hairy Neanderthal men were
filled with wonder, as when they beheld the wild apple tree in flower.

And the singing and the feathers and the rhythmic movements of
the dancers drew them with an irresistible force. In wary groups they
moved closer and closer, and they felt ashamed of their own thickset
hairy bodies. Wanting to approach the beautiful newcomers to make
them gifts of mushrooms and fleshy roots.

But the dancers ignored their dark beseeching gaze. The newcomers
went on in their play until the sun stood directly overhead in
the sky.

This is the story of a great slaughter. When the graceful Cro-
Magnons ended their singing and the rhythmic swaying of their bodies
painted in three colors and loosed themselves upon the hairy onlookers.

And the spear whistled in the air. And the ax struck out at the
squat heads. And death came suddenly, unbidden, decked in feathers,
howling, and daubed as for an orgy.

And only those who fled to the mountain saved their lives. For the
rest remained behind, their blood soaked up by the earth that the tide
of spring had kissed.

And this was the beginning of the great slaughter. One after an­
other came the conquering hordes, all skilled warriors and agile dancers.
And all of them hunters of the wild horse and the reindeer. And hunt­
ers also, all of them, of the stolid inhabitants of cliff and rock.

And the cave dwellers could not grasp how those beautiful heads
harbored so much hate. Those graceful bodies such fierceness.

And that great slaughter lasted many hundreds of years. For the
Neanderthal men lived over a great extent of the land. Their eyes, for
century upon century, the only eyes to have lifted, questioning the
stars.

And that great slaughter lasted many hundreds of years. And the
rock dwellers became skillful in the handling of the new weapons. And
in place after place the smoke of rebellion often rose up over the land.

But the Cro-Magnon men were bent upon death and annihilation
because the presence of the shambling hairy creatures was loathsome to
their hearts.

And because the sheltering caves were coveted by them. More even
than the flesh of wild horses or the secret sources of red pigment with
which they beautified their dead.

And it came to pass that after many centuries none of the race
of ancient dwellers were left on the face of the earth. All of them had
perished at the hands of the lordly hunters from the east.

The race of hunters multiplied and increased over the whole ex-
tent of Europe. And on the rock walls in the caves their beautiful animal drawings looked down in splendor.

This is the story of the last Neanderthal man. One who lived in the region of the French Dordogne.

This is the story of the last Neanderthal man, and his name was called Grug.

And Grug's age was thirty-six years. Thirty-six were the years of his life when the men from the east became complete masters of the land. And when by blade and by blow they finished off all the old dwellers.

This is the story of the last ancient man on earth. When he abandoned his squatting place and fled to the mountain with the rest of his family group.

And the group was small. Five only were those who followed his steps. All the others had perished. Their blood-tattered corpses strewn over the ground.

And before this, for five years' time, Grug had reigned among his people. His voice was heard on both banks of the river.

Because Grug knew the language of the winds. He knew what dangers lurked in each rustling of the leaves.

And because upon the death of the Old Man, he, the eldest, had led his tribe far from the hunters of the east into the valley of the Garonne, where the land was favorable.

And for five years the tribe had remained there. Little more than a few bright points of light disturbing the night.

The water's gladness flowing between the stones. Lichens, snails, and small reptiles in abundance.

Circles of men and women squatting around fires. Their whelps tumbling in play at the river's edge. An appearance of peace.

Until death suddenly caught up with them in the valley of the Garonne.

The untiring hunters sought the river valley. They raised their song in the region of the last Neanderthal men.

They appeared from the end of the valley. Feathers, arrows, and shouts, spreading fear over the land.

Like fire which in its passage destroys all the trees of the forest. Such was their appetite for death.

The tribe wailed under their shafts. The women growled with grief for their brood struck down by the arrows.

The men scattered. Their clumsy bodies scurrying. Fleet arrows
tumbled them in the middle of their flight. The arrows caught them at the mouths of their caves.

Death came to and fro through the valley of the Garonne. It strode the air. It quickened the legs of the rangy hunters of horses.

They killed in the valley and under the rock ledges. They killed alongside the river and in the deep shadow of the caves.

And Grug howled in the midst of his people. By his shouts he attempted to lead the escape. Claiming of the mountain its distant refuge.

But fear turned the men deaf to Grug. Mad scurrying in the valley cut off by death's agile steps.

This is the story of the last ancient man on earth. When he uttered loud cries among his people and he signaled the way to the distant cliffs.

And when five of his family group heeded his call and bound their lives to him. They gathered their fears around the eldest, who was leading them to the mountain.

Two of his women with their whelps. All the others had perished. Their blood-tattered corpses strewn over the ground.

And first it was a creeping of bodies through thickets. The thorns pained in the flesh.

They questioned the rock. In each movement of their bellies they sought its response.

And then a great silence. A concealment of life among the lower life that droned on the mountainside.

And then they called on the night. They gathered it round them for the protection of their bodies.

And with the night they started out on their march. The moon showed their shadows shambling across a clearing among the thickets.

They crept up the slope. They hushed the fear of the whelps.

They wrested shelter from the mountain. A place to hide their weariness. To conceal their bodies from the hunters.

A spot for their thirst beside the soft patter of water flowing between the stones.

And then again they called on silence. Days and nights squatting in a crevice of the mountain.

Days and nights the voice of the slaughter howling in their ears. Expecting death in each rustling of leaves.

Three days and three nights awaiting some sign in the wheeling of birds. Cowering at the faroff rumble of hooves. Heeding the earth's hidden voice.
Until on the fourth day the war cry of the hunters of the east reached their mountain cranny. (The women clutched the whelps and their flesh shook as with cold.)

And they were able to make out the great display of colors. The circle of dancers, a shifting flower down in the valley.

And then the five increased the silence. They sank their heartbeats in the rock. A nameless waiting beside the trickle of water.

Night after night the wind brought the smell of death. A smell that grated the teeth and made the hair of the flesh stand up.

And endlessly the trickle of water questioned the heavens. Slipping silently over a glimmer of mosses.

But then hunger came to keep them company. Torsos daubed with color prowled about. A sudden startling noise over the stones.

This is the story of Grug and of the five who fled with him to the mountain. And they were the only survivors of the old Neanderthal race.

Of how all at once at the beginning of the sixth day Grug shattered the mountain silence.

And how all at once beside the trickle of water a thin line of red appeared. Over the glimmering mosses, the glimmer of blood.

Because at the beginning of the sixth day, Grug raised his slow hairy frame.

And the women wondered at seeing him stand there. And the whelps did not grasp it because he no longer concealed his hulking frame from the hunters.

The stone ax obeyed Grug’s bidding. With blind fury it obeyed the command of his hands.

Five well-aimed blows and little more than a few whimpers. Little more than some eyes questioning Grug’s wet black eyes.

Little more than a thin line of red beside the trickle of water. A new glimmer of blood over the glimmering mosses.

But the hunters responded to the muffled call of the blows. Packs of rangy Cro-Magnons leaping over the stones.

While a hefty male stood over them, higher up the ledge, observing. A magnificent specimen for their hunter’s appetite.

But as they reached him their free and easy bearing was blunted. Standing on the rock a terrible stare awaited them. The bloody ax between his hands.

And all of them saw—because this was what they had always
heard—that the inferior race was not a race of warriors. All these loathsome hairy beings were tame and cowardly.

And then Grug let out his fighting cry. A howl that seemed to come out of the mountain itself.

And a first corpse fell in blood under his hand. And another’s neck went down in the path of Grug’s demolishing stone.

Like a bison that turns enraged upon its pursuers, so Grug flailed out in the midst of his earthly enemies.

But the clash did not last long. Two more Cro-Magnons fell under the blows of Grug’s ax.

(Five were the blows that awakened the mountain cranny. Little more than a thin line of red beside the trickle of water.)

But the clash did not last long. For the hunters came in great numbers to vanquish that enraged Neanderthal specimen.

A bone point in his back. But the stone kept obeying his hand.

A bone point in the hip and the groin. But in each of its blows his hand was still a bearer of death.

An arrow-riddled bison whose last onslaught implants fear and makes the hunters cower in fright.

A bone point piercing his belly. And then the edge of a huge stone bringing him the night.

And the night was a heavy sleep that enclosed him. A memory of faraway bonfires in the valley of the Garonne.

And sweetly the earth called him back.

This is the story of the last Neanderthal man. When he went out to his meeting with death next to a trickle of water.

This is the story of the last of the earth’s ancient men. Of those whom the bearded ponies did not fear. Hundreds of centuries asking the only questions of the stars.

This is the story of Grug. How he died at the hands of the tall hunters from the east. The plumed dancers who embellished the walls of the caves.

And who asked new questions of the stars,
BIG-BELLIED COW

NÉLIDA PIÑON

tr. GREGORY RABASSA

It was not really a burial, it was more of a simple ceremony. The family had been reluctant, but when he demanded their appearance he was imposing an authority that had been obeyed ever so many times. There ran through him now that effort that unlocks life as everything drains off in grief.

It had been difficult carrying the animal. And that place had been chosen because it was precisely there that he had come to know the nature of its species.

Even though his wife resisted, you’re out of your mind, what will the neighbors say—with the help of his oldest son he opened the great pit, even though the animal had grown thin in its illness. Even so, a great deal of earth was needed to cover those horns. The meanness of a space which his arms could still measure.

“Leave me now.” After dismissing the temptations of the world, he looked at the soft earth piled up as a protection. How could he abandon Dapple to animals who would come to eat the remains, and that flesh would soon be divided among beaks and on its way to strange insides after having fallen outside there, and it only brought grief to his heart when he thought of it. Linked to Dapple by so many mysteries, those homey patches that did away with meaning and which only he could understand. It had to be that way, in any other way the transfer would not have taken place, and he would never murder out of love and habit a companion in life, which is the way of eternal possession; it was death by capitulation.
He had not even seen Dapple born. He had bought that foolish appearance when it was still young, for unknown reasons in a marketplace far from home. He had chosen her absent-mindedly, as one who had grown tired of evaluating living things, tying the cord about her neck; the stumps of something soon to be born were piercing her head. When he reached home, a great excitement announced the birth of his grandchild.

"It's a boy, Father," that huge man who considered himself the owner of the father who had conceived him came to announce. Even though the new fatherhood had softened his usual crudeness, the son lamented, but he calmed down with the idea of a grandson. His path was growing shorter, that much the world was making clear. The dialogue died out like an act of accommodation, and he forgot about the animal in need of care, and the grandson who was already upsetting the rhythm of the household. His wisdom excluded pleasant feelings.

There she was in the pasture. As she ate grass, her frailness was not aware of to whom she had come to belong. He smoked his pipe, thinking that things are acquired so that they may start growing. And they were like that for a long time, one close to the other, the man entering into the growth of the animal.

When he needed his neighbor's bull to breed Dapple, he became confused, not knowing how to proceed. Which was not proper. After all, such an innocent request for men of the land who had acquired the habit of yielding to anything that brings on growth. He led her along with the shame of one bringing a daughter to receive the son of some stranger, to lend that beloved flesh to the unknown lust of a procreator. Dapple was innocent, and he masked his embarrassment.

He hid those notions in front of the owner of the bull who was to make a calf in Dapple. But he examined the bull imprisoned in his pen with rage. Still covering up, he asked his neighbor for help. "Get a farmhand, I've got a cramp and I have to go take care of it." He took care of it more than was necessary, calculating the time minutely. When he came back, docilely, like one who had condoned the use, Dapple was through. On the road the man whistled, pretending to ignore the animal. The fear of perceiving something that was visibly changed. What would he have done had he perceived the wound—not what one thinks of as mutilated and requiring care, but something which is done for such a fate and which is resented for precisely that reason. He wanted to say: look, Dapple, you don't know that I'm your owner and that's why this thing bothers me, if you knew it would be easy to explain why I let it be done, but the fact is that we're never
aware that someone owns us. And he made an effort, but he never reached that clarity once and for all which would release him and let him live with the earth and its sacred fruit.

Until the calf was born, he ignored her pregnancy, her quivering belly. The whole blame was on him for having allowed the rape. He felt sorry for the animal, something justified only by friendship. The awareness that he used, in its measure and clearness, to judge people of the house, he began to use on Dapple, and more intensely. She had become the release of his secrets. In spite of his affliction, many were the times that he confessed before the animal.

When the cow’s body had grown large, bulging out on both sides, he finally responded to the vitality of that growth and came to accept things in their proper places. He became adjusted to the pain that Dapple would suffer. For there was in things a spot of light proportionate to their acceptance. He watched over the brevity of that opulence, and she was silent as she slowly browsed, her eyes so sad, an acute melancholy drawing off whatever blame there was. Like any animal that is relieved, the prosperous belly was being fed.

Interrupting his peace, the oldest grandson asked: “Cows are nice, aren’t they, grandfather?”

“Nice, yes.”

“So nice you’d like to eat them.”

“Eat what, boy?” Annoyed, he looked at his grandson’s face, at that avidity which was corrupting his old age.

“Just any old piece. But I feel sorry, that’s why I wouldn’t. Grandfather, Dapple is a big-bellied cow, isn’t she?”

“A what?”

“A big-bellied cow. A cow that’s grown so much that all of a sudden she’s going to change into something else.”

“Oh, you mean that pretty soon she’s going to give off something else.”

“Something like that. Big-bellied cow, big-bellied woman, big-bellied dog, isn’t it all the same thing? They get so big you think they’re never going to stop, but I like it. Everything that grows should be respected.”

“Who taught you that?”

“I learned it all by myself. I only said it so nice because it came out together.”

“Came out together?”

“What I was thinking and what I imagined.”

“Oh, I see.”

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“Like, what would you think if Dapple had baby chicks?”
“Baby chicks?”
“If everything that came out of her came out chicks. How many chicks would Dapple have?”
“That’s foolish. Where did you hear of a cow having chicks?”
“Did you ask Dapple if she’d rather have chicks?”
“No.”
“Then try to find out before you get mad at me.”

The boy’s appearance grew calmer as he went away. The man did not lose heart, he tried to forget his grandson with the same harshness of a person who forgets other things which still mattered.

When it was time for the birth of the calf, the patient work was taking place in Dapple. The drivel was flooding out of her mouth just as the blood would flow when the heavy weight had finished deforming her. His wife and son helped him until the gelatinous thing appeared, filthy, raising itself on indecisive legs now in a leap of life, as if inside the big-bellied cow—that grandson could make expressions useless in the same way that he deformed the appearance of branches with his jack-knife—it had been standing for a long time, strolling over the pastures of the world.

With time, Dapple grew used to those uncomfortable maternal duties, the small creature beside her emptying her udder, the exact abundance of that white liquid which would even produce butter, a splendid nature that aimed at fullness and avoided any loss. The strength of the animal had been passed on to the calf, but even so it could benefit man.

One afternoon, in that same pasture, he went over to Dapple. He looked her over with complete audacity, as a person who is shortly going to be lost and stops to find out up to what point he has been saved, how much he understood something that let itself be possessed. More and more tired, he became aware of a briefness in life, so brief that the time of a man was measured according to the action of that same man. Demanding the dignity of analysis in order to understand the world, his life, which rested on a daily sharing of life with an animal. Forced into that mutual contemplation, they would perceive in the end which of them would let himself be more easily exploited.

“Here, Dapple.”

The cow approached, her balance softening the nerves that might have cropped out as she walked. And the man and the cow looked at each other. In spite of the meanness of things, any effort at all would clarify what not even the vitality of a friendship had managed to alter.
The man owed himself a painful exhaustion in order to understand a friend. A pause invigorated them. He examined that animal who had brought him prosperity, never in revolt against her species, and who belonged to him without such a possession appearing as sores on her body. He did not know whether the animal had given in or whether he had bowed before that animal’s necessary habits. “Now, Dapple, we’re going to find out what this feeling is like.”

The purchase of an animal was a kind of slavery, once its benefit was found, there should be a peaceful clarification of what there is between a cow and a man. But as he accepted the small animal and it grew, the man softened too, as a person stretches out on his bed with fatigue, free of the aberrations that certain kinds of work always instill, free of the life that distinguishes him without the least selection. Could the complete alliance between the man and that cow have been mutual contemplation and time passed? He was feeling more and more isolated under the eyes of the cow, in search of gentle solutions. His mouth wide-open and the tight pregnancy of the animal. She was ugly, a cow was, and he tacitly recognized it. The deformation of her loins, the sharp horns that did not even make use of the ferocity of their natural form. The man said: ‘Is a cow a coward too?’ The animal next to her owner, given over to the analysis that was being made of her.

“So cowardly that she accepts my animosity, was that how I understood her?” Then the shortness of the day, and the man was content with what forgiveness had eliminated.

The man spoke, what joins us together is your age. And tranquilly he wanted rest. But even that was not enough for someone who wanted so much. More than age, the living together assured the security of the animal, who accepted all and any land to feed upon. The gentleness that he was analyzing was precisely what had become settled in his flesh, in his time as a man. The resemblance between the man and that cow was the misshapen companionship of those who are equal in the difficult struggle. He patted the animal’s head, which she lowered softly in obedience.

“I never want your obedience again.”

As one who settles into her comfort, the animal did not move at all. The same sad look lost behind the mountains. Irritated, he rejected that head. Rebelling not against the animal who was enjoying the satisfaction of suffering in her body, but against the life that linked him to things, to that cow, affording him the skill of hesitation. Under the aggrieved eyes of the cow, he had the bitter joy of discovering
himself being the only thing looked at. The cow's complete look, along with its intensity, did not leave him, he was the universal cause of an animal. A sob tightened his world, and he knew that he was joined to the sad beast whose solitude embodied his. Having come together in time, identical old age made them obstinate. The cow's wrinkled hide, the forewarning of an illness that would bring her down, and the man's easily irritated skin, not that any wound could be seen, for that was the destruction shown by the cow, but rather a texture without moral uplift, a perplexity in the face of such full powers. The grandchildren were spread over the land, the cow had also spread so many things, even her manure had been a splendid performance, her duty to man.

It bothered him to know that he was the owner of one who, not sensing possession, let herself be dominated by a look, the only virtue of the surrender. Later, things grew calm. The abandonment of old people who can barely resist. Everything in him was tumbling down, his sex too, he would never make another child. She too, the cow, could not give shelter to new flesh.

With time they ceased their examination. They were invaded by the desire of one who does not move. It was understanding. And the cow had to fall ill. The man recognized that servitude and he played the game with death. He pretended not to see the illness that was invading that carcass, the protruding bones were the illness that was establishing itself inside. Severe, the man struggled so that she would die in peace, so that the cow's freedom would not extinguish his.

When his son suggested that the animal be put to death, he sternly hid his face. At dinner, despite his hunger, his eating was different. He abandoned the noise of chunks being chewed and ate elegantly, not letting greed interfere with the operation. His wife looked at their sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren. A look that communicated the arrogance she had seen in the father. But he did not notice, he had been able to forget the aggressiveness and strength of the meat of the usual meal. After that he returned to the barn, where the cow had discreetly begun to die.

Until she died. Then, energetically, the father notified the family: “Everybody will come to Dapple's burial.” Ignoring the reaction provoked, he contented himself with the furtive look of that obedience.

Quite early in the morning they began the work of removal. She was so thin that her bones were showing, but it was not for that reason that Dapple was ugly, ugly, yes, because her appearance was fatal, but the kind of beauty that goes with suffering was there, expressed so well by her horns as they pointed up and cleaned the sky. They
dragged the body along the ground over to the wooden cart drawn by other powerful cows who were indifferent to him. The dust cloud filled his heart, and he was made contrite by that scar on the earth, that last piece of skillful work done by Dapple, the cow, his friend. Then she was borne to the pasture, where lost in their reflections, they could recognize things in that legitimate obscurantism that comes with lighting a candle in the darkness: in the beginning the darkness and the shadows are the limiting outline of what is revealed and learned.

Sliding into the pit, the animal remained there. The man went about covering her, and since everything was made of earth, there was not even any need to choose. Veiling forever the softness of those horns that had been reserved for peace.

The family left him as he had requested. He was going to stay there until he was drained dry. From that instant on he would go with other animals, his task would stay the same, except for his heart, for his tranquility of a man who can also die.
Before I knocked I looked at my nails: all of them were embel-lished with a black crescent of grime. I went back down the steps for the second time. The first time was because I’d seen that my shoes were caked with mud and I’d gone down to clean them in the street. It had been a bad idea after all. The heel of the left shoe had almost come off and I’d had to mend it by banging it on the sidewalk like a maniac. The two parts refused to stay together and of course an old woman walking her dog had to stop and watch me from across the street. “I am Cuba’s answer to Fred Astaire,” I yelled, but she acted as if she hadn’t heard me: it was her dog that answered, barking like one more lunatic in that quiet street. Now I was hunting on the ground for a twig and when I’d found one I carefully cleaned my nails with it. I went back slowly up the marble steps, studying the sedulous symmetry of the garden and gaping at the white stone facade of the building. On reaching the top, I thought it might be better to return another day, but my hand was already on the knocker and, in any case, would I be able to return? Even today I hardly had the strength for it.

I knocked once, meaning to give the knocker a discreet tap, but it slipped from my hand and sounded like a gunshot: it was a heavy chunk of bronze. Nobody came. Thinking it would be better if I went away, I knocked again, twice this time and more softly. I heard a sound like footsteps but it was some time before anyone came to the door. A man in uniform opened it.
—What’s the matter—he asked as though letting me know that I had already knocked three times too often. He used the familiar form of the pronoun but his tone was certainly more contemptuous than loving—tú?

I began rummaging in my pockets for the piece of paper I had brought with me. I couldn’t find it. I pulled out a bus ticket and the address of Edelmiro Sanjuán, professor of diction and phonetics and the last letter my mother had sent me, all crumpled up and without its envelope. Where could I have put that damned paper? The man was waiting and he looked more capable of slamming the door in my face than of being patient. Finally I found it and gave it to him. He took it with an antiseptic gesture. He thought this would be the end of it. I told him whom it was for and that I expected an answer.

—Wait here—he said and closed the door. I examined the knocker carefully. It was the amputated paw of a bronze lion which grasped a bronze ball in its huge bronze claws. I heard some children playing in another part of the building, shouting names at each other. A bird was whistling and cackling tia tira tia tira to itself in the trees of the park. It wasn’t hot, but it looked as though it would rain in the evening. The door opened again.

—Come in—the man said reluctantly.

The first thing I noticed when I went in was a delicious smell of cooking. Perhaps they will invite me to lunch, I thought. For more than three days I had had nothing but coffee with milk and an occasional piece of bread dipped in oil. I saw a young man opposite me (he was to one side of me as I entered, but I turned around), tired-looking with ruffled hair and hollow eyes. He was badly dressed, his shirt was filthy and his loosely-knotted tie hung free of his collar which had no button or clasp. He needed a shave and a limp unkempt moustache drooped round the corners of his mouth. I raised my hand to shake his, bowing slightly at the same time, and he followed suit. I saw he was smiling and sensed that I was smiling too: we both got the message at the same time: it was a mirror.

The fellow (whoever he was: butler, secretary, bodyguard?) was still waiting for me at the end of the corridor. He seemed impatient or perhaps bored.

—He says you can sit down—he said pointing to a door on the left, the only way out of the dark hallway where I could just make out the vases of artificial flowers, comfortable armchairs, a table with magazines. The open door gave a glimpse of another room which was brightly lit and welcoming. (From the dark hallway it gave the im-
pression of being luminous). I went in. I saw the light was streaming from the windows: two wide open bay windows. There was a hooded buff wicker chair, an easy chair in dark brown leather, a Viennese rocking chair, and also a desk of inlaid wood and a spinet I think or Baroque piano. There were a number of pictures in heavy frames on the walls. I couldn’t see what they were portraying or what colors they were because too much light shone from the varnish and concealed them. I think there were other pieces of furniture and before I sat down with the distinct impression I had entered the house of an antique-collector three things happened simultaneously or one on top of the other. I heard a sharp vibrating sound followed by a very loud slap, I heard a shot and I saw something like the hand and arm of a man in uniform closing the door.

I sat down thinking that there was someone calling from outside and when I was settled in my chair (I noticed that I was utterly exhausted, to the point of nausea) I saw the angel. It was a statue of baccarat or biscuit or any other unglazed porcelain, on a pedestal of the same material—or of plaster. It was a mighty angel wrapped in a cloud with a rainbow over his head. He had a little book open in his hand, his right foot was set on the sea, and his left foot on the earth, and he lifted up his right hand towards heaven. What attracted my attention particularly was the little almond-colored book which looked like marzipan, almost edible. I felt so hungry (I only had one small cup of coffee on the street that morning) that I would have eaten the book if the angel had offered it to me. I decided to forget it.

I would have forgotten it anyway, because the door opened and a girl appeared, a very young woman who looked at me without any surprise. She was drenched from head to foot: water poured from her black hair and over her face, her arms and her legs. Her cheekbones were high and wide and her square chin was dimpled at the tip. With her large fleshy mouth, her broad high-bridged nose and great black eyes with still darker lashes and brows she would have been beautiful. But her forehead was too high, convex and masculine: perhaps because her wet hair clung to her skull. She stuck out her tongue to sip the water or in her effort to fasten the upper part of her yellow bikini. One of the straps had slipped and she supported the bra with her armpit only, holding her left hand behind her. Medium height, with full-fleshted thighs arching in front, she was very suntanned, although her skin could never have been pale. She looked at me again, her mouth almost touching her chest, as if trying to hold onto an imaginary elusive towel with her chin.
—You seen Gay Breel?—she asked and without waiting for an answer she turned around and went away, leaving the door open. I saw she had finally unstrapped the top half of her bikini. Her long tanned shoulders glowed alongside a fluid furrow of flesh which glided down her waist to disappear into her sudden monokini. I got up and closed the door. As I was closing it I heard another loud knock, another shot.

The door opened again before I sat down. I half thought that it was another unexpected visitor, but, no, I decided finally: it was him. In his hand he was holding my note. He looked at me or, rather, because I was standing between the open windows, he tried to look at me. He lifted the piece of paper instead of greeting me.

—Th-this is y-yours—. It was neither a statement nor a question, but it wasn’t the monotonous voice that disturbed me, nor his stutter (unexpected: I had expected a different voice, maybe more virile or authoritative: so many stories had been told about him and they all sounded like legends or tall tales) nor the fact that he walked towards me raising the paper like a questioning finger, nor that he didn’t use the familiar tú when he spoke to me (everyone else did in this house) nor that his manner was insolent: the thing that made my blood run cold was that in his left hand he was holding a large black pistol. He walked towards me and I thought of stretching out my hand to shake his, but which one should I shake? Then he went to the window and closed it, shutting out the voices of the children, the cackling song of the bird and the amber light: he was banning the evening. Then he sat down opposite me. He noticed that I was too fascinated by the weapon in his hand to look at him.

—T-T-Target practice—he said, without bothering to elaborate. He wasn’t either young or old: he was aged. I had never seen him in the flesh: only a passing glimpse of him on television, eating hot dogs one after another to advertise a brand of sausages. That had been a long time ago and now he was a celebrity, a tycoon, a political leader. He really must have eaten the hot dogs because he was fat, indecently so, in his white flannel pullover, sky-blue trunks and fashionable dark blue espadrilles. His horn-rimmed eyeglasses hung loosely between bushy eyebrows and untidy moustache (an “English” moustache, the papers called it), and his hair was more curly and less black than on television. He looked like Groucho Marx but it was obvious that he had some Negro blood in him. “Un ruso,” someone had told me, “A Russian mulatto.” His eyes became small and greedy as he looked at me, craftily.

—So you’re Maria’s son—he said abruptly.
—So they tell me—I answered smiling. He didn’t smile back.
—You want something.
—Yes—I said—. I want some advice.
—What?—it was his first question. Instead of an answer a torrent of music gushed out of my mouth: violent, rhythmic, non-stop. It was rock ’n roll being played in some part of the house. Under my chair, perhaps? He didn’t stop to discover the source of the sound: he knew better. He leapt up and rushed towards the door, opening it with his right hand (I wondered what he could have done with the piece of paper), waving the pistol in his other hand and yelling above the music that poured through the door and drove all the air up against the far end of the room:
—Maga!
The music continued, undulating and barbaric.
—Maga!
Between the hot electric guitars, the moans of the saxophones in heat and the screams of some Spanish version of Elvis Presley, I thought I could make out a human voice.
—Magalena, you cunt!
The music was turned down and remained only as a discreet backing to that sweet innocent voice.
—What did you say, Peepo?
As soon as she said Peepo I knew he wasn’t her father.
—That noise—he said.
—What noise?
—The music.
—What about the music? Don’t you like it?
—Sure, honey, but not so loud, ti prego.
—I just turned it down—she said, no more than a voice in some part of the house.
—Good—he said and closed the door.
He went back to his seat and stared at me again. This time I saw that there was something odd about the way he looked at me. Not so much odd as furtive. I tried to bring him back to the point where the subject had changed from biographical notes to music criticism.
—Well, that’s how it is! I need some advice.
—What kind of advice—he said, lowering his voice again and speaking monotonously.
—I don’t know. Frankly, I don’t know what to do. With my life. I can’t carry on any longer in my home town. There’s no future for anyone there.
—So what are you going to do?
—That’s what I want to find out. I hoped you’d be able to help me. I’d like to study.

He didn’t reflect long on the idea.
—Where? There are schools everywhere. What do you want to study?
—Theater.
—You want to be an actor?
—No, I want to write for the theater, for T.V.

T.V.—that’s how I said it. I swung like a pendulum between hunger and the ridiculous.

—But you know what it involves, this kind of life. It’s rotten through and through. It wouldn’t do for a country boy like you.

—You might not think so but I’ve seen a lot. I’ve written a lot too.

I should have told him that the lots I had seen were those which passed by my window on the bus from my home town to Havana and that Havana was as far as I could go. Also that I had written a book of sonnets and some stories, so far unpublished. But I couldn’t go on: my hunger wouldn’t let me. I had borne with it well until now, had forgotten it in the heat of the day which became more stifling every minute in that closed room. I looked at the angel again and my hunger increased. If only the book of marzipan had really been edible, if it had been made of millefeuilles, layers instead of leaves. I stared my angel in the face. He seemed to be offering me his open book. Then I turned to my interviewer and I thought I saw the aura of a smile about him. Does hunger radiate saintliness?

—Of course—he said and I was surprised that he stammered over the two words. He had talked all this time without doing so. He was speaking to me in the familiar form. He had used the tú before, but I only noticed it now because the tone of his voice had changed.

—Yes. Didn’t you see my note? It was written in blank verse.

In actual fact he hadn’t seen or heard anything.

—What do you think?—he was asking me a direct question at last.

—What of?—I thought vaguely that he must have been talking about the poem.

He smiled for the first time.
—Of her.
—Who?
He was asking me about the girl who had been blasting off rocks n' rolls from upstairs, the one who had been bathing in the swimming pool in the patio and who had been looking for someone called Gabriel, probably the man in uniform. I was on the point of asking him if she was his daughter, out of malice, but he didn't give me time.

—Not bad, is she?
I didn't know what to say and answered as simply as possible.
—No.
—You like her?
—Me?
Who else could he have meant? But I had to say something. That was what I said, I'm ashamed to admit.
—You, of course. As for me, I like her very much, naturally.
—I don't know. I didn't see her very well, hardly at all.
—But she was here talking to you.
—No, she opened the door, looked in, asked for someone called Gabriel and went out again without closing the door—and I added something, to die laughing, which is better than dying of hunger:—she was drenched in water—but he took it seriously:
Yes, and she left water all over the room and the staircase and upstairs as well.
He seemed to sink into a meditation on hydraulics but suddenly surfaced to his favorite subject.
—Well, do you or don't you like her.
—Perhaps, yes—I said timidly. I'm from the country. He got up. Something was bothering him.
—O.K., let's get on with it. What is it you w-wanted?
—Someone to give me a start in life—. Was I dramatizing?—I feel cooped up. I can't go on any longer, in the town I mean. I haven't any money left now, here, in the city, whole days spent with nothing more than a cup of coffee. If nobody helps me there's nothing left for me but to kill myself. I can't go home again.
—Your name is Antonio.
I thought it was a question.
—No, Arsenio.
—No, I'm saying that your real name is Anthony, that you are Saint Anthony.
—I don't understand. Why?
—You'll soon understand. You want a start in life.
—Yes—I said.
—Good, I'm going to give you one—he said, raising his pistol and leveling it at me. He fired from a distance of less than two yards. I felt a blow in my chest, a violent jolt in my shoulder and a savage kick in the pit of my stomach. Then I heard the three shots which sounded like someone banging on the door. My body went limp and I fell forward, already blinded, my head hitting hard the hard-shoulder, the mouth of a well instantly dug in the floor. I fell into it.
The line “I’m gonna cure you, Boss, ’cause I ain’t baptized” was uniquely hers, and the most famous and desired from the negress, Asuncion, who was the quack (conqueress, primarily) in that lost, almost forgotten, little settlement. When her prediction was fulfilled, the negress accepted no gift or payment whatever, she simply passed on or issued the reminder for an order which no one failed to respect: the convalescent had to go, on foot, to the neighbouring village, hear mass and take communion. When—as seldom happened—her science misfired and the sick person died, the negress shut herself up in her shack and didn’t reappear until long after the burial. From the chimney of the hovel—a center hole in the reed roof—a thick, black column of smoke emerged on those occasions. The smoke’s distinctive and pungent odor spread the news to inhabitants in neighboring fields, to the hunters, renegades and badmen in the bush, that one of Asuncion’s patients had died in the settlement.

The settlement craned up over the ridge and rolled downwards, scattering out as far as the river and the mountain. There, just about in the shadow of the first uncultivated trees, was Asuncion’s shack. Bamboos and creepers hid it; strange plants, medicinal herbs and vegetables grew beside its blind walls of cane and mud; its door—a low, narrow opening blocked off by a hide. Frankly, it was more a mud hut than a shack, as if the negress, who had built it by herself, wished to commemorate the dwellings of her African forbears along with the color of her skin. The patches and the years went by, giving it all the while an even greater resemblance to the huge, circular huts of the jungle.

Asuncion was neither young nor old; she was of indeterminate
age: marginal, static . . . although, no doubt, the river had swollen
with the passage of many winters since the day when, aided by no
one, a runaway slave gave birth to her on that very bank. She was
tall and lean, strong boned, with a man's body, which, however, neither
possessed nor showed a trace of anything masculine or virile. Her feet
and hands—large, almost too large, with pink, even fingernails; a
small, oval skull. Skin, extremely dark; the nose, short and flat; immense
eyes glittering as though with nocturnal light . . . the facial features,
smooth, sinuous. . . She had been young and beautiful, mistress of a
pair of large, slippery hips, which were very neatly repressed by a
short, cylindrical belt, and of high-peaked, belligerent breasts of black
metal.

She had had men, both black and white, who arrived at the hut
of cane and mud—surreptitiously, alone, intent—sometimes from a long
way off, and with a certain lunar periodicalness like animals drawn
secretly by the smell of a female in heat. Men who arrived on foot and
departed without being seen by anyone, and others whose horses, tied
out there in the vastness of the bush, whinneyed with hunger, im­
patience and thirst.

There was always someone around the settlement who would
maintain that quite a few times there had been knife fights in the
proximity of the hut; furthermore, it was rumoured that the occasional
body—its insides ripped out so that it wouldn't float—had been tossed
into the river.

Asuncion never had children; it's well known that she interned
herself in the bush, and there—alone, of her own free will—she aban­
doned a blood stained foetus, and after bathing in the river, returned
to the hut with the same prolix and rhythmic walk as before—steps
which her fine, spindley thighs imprinted so neatly on her rough cotton
skirt.

Around the settlement it was said that the negress had plundered
about during the civil war battles; she had drunk human blood, they
said, and on those bloody grazing grounds, satisfied the last erotic
desires of the mortally wounded. Also it was said, in a whisper, that
on moonlit nights she visited the graveyard.

The years tightened about Asuncion's bones, stripping away the
flesh and sexuality without bringing her any nearer the opposite sex.
Around the time when, in reality, our story begins, she was a human
being, self-absorbed, changeless. She lived alone in her hut where no
men came any more, and at times, if no patient had need of her, she
would lose herself for days and nights in the depth of the bush.
steps were rhythmic as ever, but now her walk was a sheathed glide, almost shadow-like. Her black impenetrable face changed only harboring a certain moving thing—still more inscrutable at the moment when confronted with the sick person, she didn’t deliver that line of hers which all were waiting for; then she would turn on her heel and leave without a glance at anyone—and everyone knew that the time had come to bury all hope. . . One evening (an evening like many others when she returned from the bush loaded down with herbs and firewood), Asuncion, the negress, found a two or three day old kitten—a sorry looking tabby which the mother—a mangy, domestic cat—had lost or deserted during siesta time. The negress dropped her bundle, squatted down and stared at it with an absorbed and continuous interest in her huge eyes; then she picked it up and continued on her way. The few people who saw her couldn’t hold back their astonishment because she had always lived as if animals didn’t exist.

From that evening the rearing of that kitten was the strange mission which channelled her life. With it in her arms, she set out at night for the fields. Damp with dew, huge wild cows watched her approach; she talked to them and the cows mooed fearfully, but didn’t run away; the negress milked them, the milk fell on the pasture and the kitten drank. In the early morning Asuncion made her way to the slaughterhouse; in a hushed voice she asked for blood, the slaughterers allowed her to go ahead; she pushed an earthenware jar over the trough, spilled the steaming blood on the ground and the cat drank, and at times rolled in it.

In the bush and throughout the countryside, Asuncion hunted for mice, adders, armadillos, she dug owls out of their holes, she climbed trees after fledgling doves.

The cat grew, a cat like any other; only perhaps somewhat larger and fatter—a little fiercer in its look. It was a sad and ponderous animal, with watery green eyes in which metallic gleams shook like tangles. Always it padded behind the negress taking no notice of females in heat. Asuncion continued to feed it with great care, and in a manner which grew progressively more strange. Although she no longer raided the huge wild cows in the night, she attended the slaughterhouse more often; now she not only asked for blood, but she waited as well until the beasts were disembowelled in order to extract a piece of meat, some secret intestine, an innard which she hid from the slaughterers’ eyes. She also brewed mysterious concoctions in her hut, and the smoke which emerged from the chimney smelt of unknown odors.
The cat went on growling; growling and contorting, as if a monstrosity were struggling inside it. Little by little its coat grew tiger-like; the entire body at times resembled that of a dwarfed and deformed tiger.

Uneasily, the inhabitants of the settlement followed the transformation which her science had wrought on the animal. Absorbed in her work, she became day by day more evasive, more savage. She used to lose herself for days on end in the heart of the bush, just like before, but now she returned, weary, the huge cat exhausted in her arms. During that time her clothes consisted only of rags which covered her dry, doubly darkened skin; she had taken to adorning herself with the teeth and bones of small animals. When she talked (when she found herself obliged to talk), her voice had the dumb ring of alien metal like a counterfeit coin. Making her put in an appearance at the sick bed was increasingly difficult. Each time, the cat showed itself to be more encumbered by something powerful—as if closer to exploding. A kind of fever took possession of it at times, generally at high noon. At times it thrashed about meowing, tumbling over and biting itself as if its skin were oppressing it. On other occasions it fell into a prolonged fit from which it would start, suddenly, with a convulsive shudder and two or three hoarse screeches, which appeared to be in answer to calls that it alone could hear. During the night and evening its howls reached a very high pitch, and they wavered there, dragging themselves out in rasping, spluttering roars. Often it made pointless leaps, and sniffed and bit at the wind which came from the North, clawing at the air, taking to its heels in flights, which it would immediately break off to return slowly, and with a subdued air, pleading, submissive to the negress's side. Each time it was less of a cat and more a small tiger; ferociousness and sadness fused in its eye.

The disappearance of the negress had lasted a long time, too long. No one had seen her in the bush, the shack's chimney wasn't emitting its usual column of smoke, the cat's meaulling no longer rent the air. One noon several men approached the hut of cane and mud. They shouted: silence; only the whispering of the wind among the bamboos. Two of them went forward; an unmistakable smell made them look from one to the other. They pulled back the hide which blocked off the entrance that was the door. An axe blade of light cut straight down from the center hole in the reed roof. The man saw dry blood, a scrap of meat, scattered bones. In the shadow of a corner, almost phosphorescent: the enormous cat; more precisely, the dwarfed, monstrous tiger—the killer—innocently gnawing on the black witch's skull.
Convenient excuses and a lack of confidence had prevented Morris from making a trip to his old house. But one day nothing could stop him. That day coincided with a date of great importance for him: ten years ago his wife Agatha had died and her body had mysteriously disappeared. From that day Morris had abandoned the house. All this recalled for him a period of intense suffering: the disappearance of Agatha's body had aroused certain suspicions concerning her seemingly impeccable life. Some investigations pointed to an old friend of Morris who maintained an immoderate interest in preserving her after her death. Nevertheless, nothing could be proved and the professor tried to forget all the memories of their enjoyable life together. Ten years are an indispensable panacea for pain, which Morris consistently took as prescribed. The result was satisfactory. That day he felt strong, even capable of smiling, if necessary, before his old illusions.

When he stepped out of the car that took him to the door of his house, he felt a pleasant sensation. There, enlarged, were the photos he had taken before leaving the house; it was far from being the ruins he had expected to find. Evidently someone was caring for the place. He pulled the cord that rang the bell. A friend came walking along the familiar garden path; Gaston, his valet. The professor almost greeted him, but hesitated for a moment. It was simply absurd to believe that this man could be Gaston who had died four years ago in his own arms apologizing for leaving his service. The professor could assert that in all seriousness. Besides, he had proof. The one
standing before him was a rejuvenated Gaston quite unlike the former Gaston. It was a mere coincidence.

"Could you tell me who owns this house?" asked the professor.
"It belongs to P. S. Morris," he answered.
"I am he," said Morris.
"That is possible," answered the servant displaying his characteristic manner of never contradicting, "but at this moment Professor Morris happens to be upstairs in his study with his wife."

Morris did not understand. Glancing toward the window where he expected to see the hypothetical man, he scratched his head and asked:

"Did you say the professor was home?"
"That is what I said, sir."
"Of course, since I just arrived . . . " said Morris laughing as if he had solved the puzzle. But the servant was not satisfied with either the answer or Morris' laughter.
"I told you he is upstairs."

That immediately suppressed the Morris' hilarity who decided to speak with greater care.

"And what is your name, if I may ask?"
"I am Gaston, the master's valet."

Morris appeared so startled that the servant felt obliged to study the tips of his shoes as a sign of reproach.

Everything was becoming more and more complex, Morris did not know what to do, but he did not want to be trapped in a moment of confusion which might embarrass him for the rest of his life.

"Could I see him?" he asked strategically.
"Whom shall I say is calling?"
"P. S. Morris, Professor Morris," he added.

On his return the servant asked a rather odd question.

"The master wishes to know which you prefer, a carnation or a rose."

Morris was amazed. What kind of people were these? He grasped his chin as if to extract an idea.

"I do not understand," he answered naively after a slight pause.
"I have related our conversation to the master and it seems he has doubts about the logic of your reasoning. Excuse me . . . "

Morris looked at him questioningly.

"Does he think I'm crazy?" Morris was disturbed at this prospect. However, he returned to his earlier strategy. "But doesn't he understand that if he were correct, I would be climbing the vines right now?"
The argument was definitive.

"Follow me," he said, "I will announce you."

A short time later a singular conversation followed:

"I am Professor P. S. Morris of the Royal Academy of Zoology."

"I too am Professor P. S. Morris of the Royal Academy of Zoology," the master of the house answered cordially. Unfortunately for the visitor the other professor looked like him only much younger. Morris felt sure he had solved the puzzle. "It’s a case of substitution." He has assumed my name and is posing as the master of my house by taking advantage of the great physical resemblance. He was faced with an imposter and he, the honorable professor, would treat him as such. "Yes, an imposter in an old-fashioned suit and several years out of time."

"Are you the owner of this house?" he asked in order to initiate the dispute.

"Yes sir, it is my property."

Morris now had another charge to use against him when the time was right. "Besides, he’s a cynic. I will have to take precautions." He tried to think of a phrase to convey his feelings for the man: "I am the owner of this house and you are the usurper."

However, he was interrupted by the voice of a woman who called: "Professor Morris, I am going out riding."

Both men turned around to look at her and for the third time Morris’ spirit weakened. It was Agatha who called: his beloved Agatha, alive even in death. She paused as if she had just committed an indiscretion. "Excuse me."

It was the master of the house who answered.

"On the contrary Agatha, come in. You should be interested in this case too. This man assures me that he bears my name and is the owner of my house. The only thing he needs to add is that he too is your husband, which I find very difficult to believe."

"I am," answered Morris bluntly.

The owners of the house eyed him aggressively.

"I mean, I have been." The couple looked at each other confused.

"I have been," Morris continued obstinately, "because she died."

Agatha appeared shocked: "In other words, I am dead."

Afraid of being caught in such an obvious lie or going against his principles, Morris remained silent. But the younger Morris questioned him further in an ironic tone:

"With respect to me, do you have any serious objections to my existence?"
"With respect to you," Morris answered spitefully, "it seems to me that you are alive, but perhaps too much so. . . ."

The other one smiled, taking the matter as a joke.

"Would you be so kind as to tell us about the death of your wife, or our wife as you say."

This time Morris was determined not to appear naive. He understood the joke that his double was playing on him and he accepted the challenge. He began his story:

"She died exactly ten years ago on a Monday, like today, at 4:15 in the afternoon. She was riding a horse with a friend of mine and had a fall. Her death was instantaneous. I did not want her to go out that afternoon."

"We agree on one point: my wife is going horseback riding, but she is accustomed to riding alone."

"She used to tell me that too."

It was an imprudent remark by Morris and Agatha blushed. The master of the house glanced at her suspiciously, and she decided to retire as an acknowledgement of the insulting implications of Morris' remark:

"If you will excuse me..."

Morris pronounced some useless apologies, but no one heard him.

"Dear," the husband begged, "you shouldn't go out this afternoon."

Almost immediately he regretted saying it. Unwittingly he found himself in agreement with his improper guest, repeating the very scene that he had related earlier. He tried to make Agatha understand, but she left barely suppressing a smile. Afterwards both men observed a brief silence.

"Things are becoming more tangled every minute," the owner of the house murmured. The professor pretended not to hear.

"At what time did you say your wife died?"

"At 4:15."

"Just twenty minutes from now," he answered in a strange tone of voice looking at the clock.

"Fifteen minutes," the professor corrected looking at the same clock.

There was no answer but the look of his interrogator was one of intense preoccupation. The initial smile was definitely gone from his face.

"We had been married for three years. We were happy. At least I always thought I was happy," said the professor, with the incon-
gruous sentimentality that all the disappointments in his life had caused.

“We have been married for the same period of time and like you I consider myself happy.” He looked as if he were almost surrounded by impending tragedy.

“What an extravagant coincidence,” Morris exclaimed without pity when he noticed that the roles had been reversed. His double accepted the challenge: “Nevertheless my wife is riding alone,” he remarked.

War was declared, the enemy had been profoundly and effectively attacked. The insinuation was very painful for the professor.

“For my own consolation, you look very much like me and you could not be more fortunate than I.”

Instinctively, they both looked at themselves in the large mirror of the room. They were reflected in such a way that is was impossible for either one to point to himself and declare: “That is I.” Under such circumstances a dispute between them was ridiculous, and they continued speaking without facing each other.

“Could you tell me the exact date of your wife’s death?”

“Monday, February 11, 1920.”

“I am asking you for the date that she died.”

“Monday, the 11th of February, 1920,” he repeated with the same intonation. The other one smiled incredulously.

“Don’t you believe me?” asked the professor angrily. To be doubted was the only thing that made him angry.

“Ten years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Are you trying to deceive me or frighten me? That is the date today.”

It was true. At least the calendar hanging on the wall confirmed that it was Monday, February 11, 1920.

“Damn,” thought Morris, “this is too much. For more than an hour I have been making mistakes.” He searched through his notebook and found that his calendar was ten years ahead of time. He couldn’t help thinking that if the real date were the one the other man swore it was (and he was supported by a false calendar exactly like the one in his own notebook), then no one would publish calendars dated ten years ahead of time such as the one he had just found in his notebook. Why would they? It would be absurd to waste time and paper printing calendars that no one would need. Therefore, the calendar on the wall
and in his notebook was an old one: as old and backward as the clothing of the man before him.

"That is the question," he concluded satisfied.

Gaston appeared behind them. He cleared his throat to get their attention. He tried to control the great emotion in his voice.

"If you will pardon me . . . Mr. Leo Smith brought the lady in his arms . . . she has suffered a fall from her horse. He was with her."

"Dead?" asked the owner of the house.

Gaston looked at the floor and nodded affirmatively.

The husband walked out of the room leaving his cigarette burning on the polished desk. For several minutes noises and steps could be heard inside the house. Morris looked at the clock. It was 4:20.

"Lord, what a day!" He walked toward the calendar, tore off the page, and threw it into the burning fireplace. He tried to reason carefully. Was there no other way out? He relaxed in a chair and closed his eyes for better concentration. Some time must have passed, and he opened his eyes when he heard the chiming of the clock. However, the clock had stopped at 4:20 and he remembered the words of his double: "Twenty minutes from now." There was absolute silence. The fire had gone out. It seemed that it had not been used for many years. He continued to examine the room with his eyes. The abrupt change that he noticed in the room did not impress him. It was simply the sight he expected to find when he entered the room an hour before: a room full of old-fashioned furniture, cobwebs and dust. A room undoubtedly abandoned for ten years. On the desk was the partially-burned cigarette that his double had left after hearing the news. He looked at it . . . Now he remembered: It was the same cigarette he had left burning there ten years before when he learned of the death of his Agatha.
MARIO ARREGUI is a Uruguayan short story writer who was born in 1917. In more than twenty years of literary activity he has published only three small volumes comprising a total of sixteen stories. The books are: Noche de San Juan (1956), Hombres y caballos (1960), and La sed y la agua (1964). Arregui has also edited a book on his friend, the poet Líber Falco. Many critics have discussed the strong influence of Borges on the work of Arregui. Almost every one of his stories deals in some way with the themes of solitude and death, symbolically represented by the night.


HUMBERTO COSTANTINI is an Argentinian writer who was born in 1924. In addition to a volume of monologues, Tres monólogos (1964), and a book of poetry, Cuestiones con la vida (1966), Costantini has published four collections of short stories: De por aquí nomás (1958), Un señor alto, rubio, de bigotes (1963), Una vieja historia de caminantes (1967), and Háblenne de Funes (1970). The short story in this issue of Mundus Artium marks the first appearance of Costantini in English translation. He is currently at work on a novel.

ARMANDO DURÁN is a Venezuelan writer who was born in Havana in 1938. He attended high school in the United States and received his doctorate from the University of Barcelona. He is the author of Contracorriente (1969), a short novel and four stories, and is presently completing work on another novel, Triángulos. He is currently teaching in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Michigan.
H. E. FRANCIS is a short story writer and translator. His stories have appeared in the United States, Europe, and South America and his work was included in the anthology *The Best American Short Stories of 1967*. He teaches in the English Department of the University of Alabama in Huntsville and is the editor of *Poem*.

CARLOS FUENTES is a Mexican novelist and short story writer whose first publication, a volume of short stories entitled *The Masked Days*, appeared in 1954. Although his international reputation is based on his novels, Fuentes is also an essayist and has founded and directed several important Mexican literary journals. His most recently translated novel, *A Change of Skin*, was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 1968. This book was awarded the distinguished "Premio Biblioteca Breve" in Spain in 1967. Previous novels that have appeared in English translation include: *Aura, The Death of Artemio Cruz, The Good Conscience,* and *Where the Air is Clear*. Very recently Fuentes published a new book of essays dealing with the theory of the novel, modern drama, and contemporary Mexican visual arts. The book is called *Casa con dos puertas* and was published by Joaquin Mortiz in Mexico City in 1970.

DONALD GARDNER is a young English poet. He has translated Octavio Paz and he did the basic translation of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s novel *Tres Tristes Tigres*. The translation was then reworked with the collaboration of the author and Suzanne Jill Levine.

NORMAN THOMAS di GIOVANNI is an American who lives in Buenos Aires, where he is collaborating with Jorge Luis Borges on the English translations of eleven of Borges’ books. The first volume in this series, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, appeared last year. Mr. di Giovanni is also the editor of Jorge Guillian’s *Cántico: A Selection* published by Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1965.

JUAN JOSÉ HERNÁNDEZ is a poet, journalist, and fiction writer living in Buenos Aires. He has published several volumes of poetry and fiction and his contributions appear regularly in major newspapers and literary journals in South America. His volume of poetry, *Claridad vencido*, was named among the best books of 1957 by the Argentine Writers’ Society. The story included in this issue of *Mundus Artium* is taken from *El inocente*, which was awarded the national fiction prize for 1966 in Argentina. His stories in English translation have appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar, Texas Quarterly, TriQuarterly, Massachusetts Review,* and *Malahat Review*.

GUILLERMO CABRERA INFANTE is a Cuban novelist and short story writer born in 1929. After the revolution he directed the literary newspaper *Lunes de Revolución* until it folded in 1961. In 1960 he published a collection of short stories entitled *Así en la paz como en la guerra*. The text included in this issue of *Mundus Artium* is taken from his novel *Tres Tristes Tigres* (Three Trapped Tigers) which will soon be published in English.
VLADY KOCIANCICH is a young Argentinian writer who was born in Buenos Aires in 1942. She is the author of a single collection of excellent short stories, *Coraje*, which was published in 1970. She has studied at the University of Buenos Aires and is now at work on her next book.

ARTURO LAGUADO is a Colombian writer, dramatist, and editor who was born on Cúcuta in 1919. In addition to a play, *El gran Guiñol* (1950), Laguado has published two collections of short stories: *La rapsodia de Morris* (1948), and *Danza para ratas* (1954).

SUZANNE JILL LEVINE is a young American translator. She has just completed the translation of Manuel Puig's *La traición de Rita Hayworth* to be published by E. P. Dutton under the title *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*. She will also translate books by José Donoso, Carlos Fuentes and Severo Sarduy.

GEORGE McWHIRTER is an instructor in the creative writing department at the University of British Columbia. He has published poetry and prose in *Prism international*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Trace*, *Canadian Forum*, *The Far Point*, *Talen*, and others. His recent interview with John Logan was presented on the "Critics on Air" series over the CBC. He is currently working on a translation of Marco Denevi's *Falsificaciones*.

EMIR RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL was born in Uruguay in 1921. He has taught in Latin America and Europe and is now the Chairman of Latin American Studies and Associate Chairman for Spanish and Portuguese in the Department of Romance Languages at Yale University. He has published twelve books; the latest one on Borges appeared in 1970 in Paris. His study, *Pablo Neruda: An Introduction to Pablo Neruda*, was published in 1966. The first volume of the new edition of *Narradores de esta América* was published in 1970 and the second volume is scheduled for 1971. He is now writing a literary biography of Borges to be published by E. P. Dutton.

RUBÉN ALONSO ORTIZ is a young Argentinian writer whose first poems and stories recently appeared under the imprint of the art editor, Burnichón, in Argentina. His story in this issue of *Mundus Artium* is his first publication in English translation. Ortiz received his degree from the National University of Córdoba, Argentina last year.

MARGARET SAYERS PEDEN is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Missouri, Columbia. She has published articles on Spanish-American theater and novels in *Hispania*, *Modern Drama*, *Latin American Theater Review*, and other journals. She has published two volumes of translations of plays by the Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido: *The Norther*, University of Texas Press, 1968, and *The Golden Thread and Other Plays*, just published by the University of Texas Press. In the Spring of 1971 the University of Missouri Press will publish her translation of *Flores de papel* by the Chilean Egon Wolff.
NÉLIDA PIÑON is the author of Season of Fruits, a book of short stories and Fundador, a novel for which she won the Walmapi Award. She is currently writing a play, The Devotees of Disgust and is also directing the Creative Writing Workshop at the Rio de Janeiro University.

GREGORY RABASSA is a translator who won the National Book Award in translation in 1967 for Hopscotch by Julio Cortázar. Among his other translations of major novelists are Mulata and Strong Wind by Miguel Angel Asturias and One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez. His current translation projects include Paradiso by José Lezama Lima and a volume of short stories by Dalton Trevisan. Mr. Rabassa teaches in the Department of Romance Languages at Queens College.

M. A. SERNA-MAYTORENA is a Mexican poet and professor of Spanish-American Literature at Ohio University. He is the author of a book of poetry, Silencio desnudo, which was published by the University of Guadalajara in 1968. He has also edited and introduced La múltiple, a play by Castillo Jiménez. He has published critical studies and essays on poetry and prose in various Mexican journals.

FERNANDO SORRENTINO is a young writer, born in 1942, who resides and teaches in Buenos Aires. He is the author of a book of stories, La regresión zoológica. His story included in this issue is his first appearance in English translation.

DALTON TREVISAN is a Brazilian short story writer. He was born in 1925 and has published several volumes of short stories: Novelas Nada Exemplares (1959), Morte na Praca (1962), Cemiterio de Elefantes (1964), and O Vampiro de Curitiba (1965).

JACK E. TOMLINS is Associate Professor of Modern Languages at the University of New Mexico. In 1968 he published Hallucinated City (Vanderbilt University Press), a bilingual edition of Mario de Andrade’s Paulicéia Desvairada. He is currently translating Wilson Martin’s history of Brazilian modernism.

JUAN TOVAR is a Mexican writer who was born in 1941. Among his published work are two collections of short stories, Hombre en la oscuridad (1965), and Los misterios del reino (1966). The latter volume received the University of Veracruz award for short fiction in 1966. Tovar has also published two novels. His latest novel, La muchacha en el balcón o la presencia del coronel (Joaquín Mortiz, 1970), was awarded first prize in a competition sponsored by the Mexican Department of Education. Tovar has also written drama and screen plays. Several of his plays have been published in journals and literary supplements. He is currently an editor for “El Heraldo de México.”
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