Enrique Anderson Imbert

THE GRIMOIRE
(El Grimorio)

(If you are looking for a particular story in this book, you can find it by using Control f, and then filling in the title of the story.)

Part IV

ON THE SLOPES OF ACONQUIJA
(En los Cerros del Aconquija)

The boy who must have been around sixteen years old tugged on the reins of the mules and stopped the cart while he waited for the creole woman who was coming down the steep slope toward the side of he road.

"Hello, Dona Amalia! Can I do something for you?"

The woman saw the boy with the precipice behind him while, on the other hand, the boy saw the woman just like another part of the mountain side.

"When you come back, could you bring me two bags of sugar?"

"All right. Don't you have anything you want me to take to town?"

"I wish I had known you were going today. Just yesterday I had the cakes and pastries taken to town."

"That's to bad! Today I'm going with an empty cart. Okay, some other time then. I'll see you later, Dona Amalia."

"Okay, take care. And thanks."

The cart started down the winding road again.

It was a warm August morning. On the right, the slope blocked the view, but on the left there was only clear, open sky, and the green hillside slanted down to the bottom.

Happiness filled the boy's heart (but he didn't realize he was so happy), and in order to relieve his emotions he shouted at the mules. That wasn't necessary, because the descent was so gentle that the mules moved all by themselves. From some of the curves he could make out the valley far below, with the treetops looking like green velvet, the river like a thread, and the town like a sewing box. The valley was beautiful, but then the mountain? Yes, the mountain was part of him, just as much as his legs!; and that little white cloud there between the hills was like a joyous extension of his body. What a beautiful day! And he began to sing. It was a sad song, because he only knew vidalas, but he sang it with happiness:

I have come sadly,
I leave the same way.
You are ungrateful,
but I am not.
Better not look at me,
since I am resentful.
Better not look at me,
since I am resentful.

Suddenly, he saw a large gap in the ground. It opened the side of the hill, it tore through the road, and began to slide toward the valley below. What happened? On the ground there were branches and some pieces of metal. He stopped. Then he heard a cry from the the precipice. The cry continued, and he got out of the cart and looked down into the opening. He saw an automobile that had smashed into some rocks. Carefully placing his feet on any outcrops he could find, he started climbing down the slope. As he got closer to the bushes where the man must be, he felt not just fear and pity and some curiosity about the victim, but also happiness; happiness, because he was able to see the disaster, and because it hadn't happened to him. Then he saw the body. It was a small man with a red beard. A foreigner. His eyes were open and they were blue, an incredible blue that seemed to have survived death and everything else, like a flag that was still flying after a battle. But there was some blood. He thought of calling for help, but who? The small farm of Dona Amalia, which was the closest, was now far behind. An hour's trip and, besides, there was no one there who could help him. To the town? That would take two hours, without counting the time to come back. So he would just have to take the foreigner with him. He bent over and said:

"I am going to carry you up to the road."

The man spoke, but for him the words were like death rattle, like a language from another country.

"It's useless. Don't touch me. I am broken. No, no. Don't touch me. Please, just leave me here. No, no. Leave me here."

The boy didn't understand anything he said, and he picked him up by his armpits in order to drag him. With each effort to move him, the man cried with pain. One leg was caught under the other leg. When he raised the foot, he saw with horror that the knee was bent the wrong way, like a broken hinge. Like a leg without bones, like a cloth bone. Feeling sick, he closed his eyes (the morning colors grew pail and began to shift into each other.) When he opened them again, he felt a strong desire to escape, to climb up the side of the mountain, get in his cart, and ride away. Let someone else pick up the broken man. But he couldn't do that. He had a feeling of vertigo, as though he had been invaded by Sthe emptiness of that broken body. But he knew his duty (the duty of a Christian man) was to stay there and help him. This time he took the victim by his arms, and again the man began to cry with pain.

"Leave me here, just leave me here."

What to do? If at least the foreigner would pass out or something, it would be easier. But his eyes were wide open. He felt like slugging him in the face so he would pass out. And, as if the man had understood him, he said:

"Have courage and kill me. I just want to die. Ow, ow. Don't touch me. It's useless, I want to die."

He made a decision.

No, he wouldn't knock him out. But he wouldn't leave him there for the flies either. He cast his worries aside and, like an automaton, he began to drag him. And the cries of pain! The whole mountain must be able to feel those cries. But the boy wouldn't stop. Up and up… And the man never passed out.

He finally was able to get him into the cart. But then the cart, filled with complaints, began to roll down toward the town by itself. Standing in the road, the boy watched it go. He couldn't take any more. He threw himself into the shrubs, and hid his face.

THE QUEEN OF THE FOREST

Classes had begun several weeks before this (in the National School of La Plata) when a new student entered the classroom. He came in with the movements of a girl and, while he spoke confidentially with the professor, he gave us a fine performance, there in the front of the classroom. His laughter—like the nervous hand of a puppeteer—began to move from above, as though with invisible strings, an undulating dance of shoulders, arms, and hips; and in those gestures we all recognized the movements of our girlfriends. He was so effeminate that even his glasses without rims gave the softness of his skin the luster of a damsel.

During recess we found out that his name was Noulet, and that he was the grandson of the president of France. Nobody asked how or why he had come to stay in Argentina. The way it was, nobody asked about anything.

"He's a faggot," the boys said, and one of them copied the way he walked and smiled, like a merengue dancer, without worrying whether Noulet might be watching.

"He's a faggot," everyone repeated.

After that we left him alone, while we watched him.

But, after all, I had a distinguished French grandfather; and perhaps because of my name, or my interest in literature, when Noulet tried to be friendly with me, I didn't have the courage to turn him away. I took him with me during my walks through the green grounds of the College, and one morning we both cut class and, after we climbed over the fence, we triumphantly went into the forest.

The morning light came through the trees and humbled us. One tree, different from the others, was hardly a tree. Another tree was next to it without touching it, and the air, encircling them in a white embrace, had removed our awareness of the forest. How small the woodland was when you raised your eyes! Even I felt larger than the forest because inside of me was the mystery of my vision, something that was also made clearer by the bright morning light.

"This is where the Queen of the Forest lives," I told Noulet.

He laughed like someone was tickling him, and after that he was quiet. I understood that he was taking my words as an ironic description of that poor place.

"No," I insisted. "This really is where the Queen of the Forest lives. I have seen her. Last year I came here with Zaro… Oh, that's right, you don't know him. He was a brute, but now he's studying law. And what a brute!" I muttered to myself, thinking about what I had seen him do. Then, speaking more loudly, I continued:

"Anyone can see the Queen of the Forest, if they come here at night."

"At night? Why at night?"

"I don't know. During the day she is never here, you see. But every night you can see her."

"Really?" he said, with an ironic smile.

"Yes, really," I insisted seriously.

At that moment a stone bounced off a tree in front of us and, when we looked back we saw there was a group of boys who had been following us and were trying to throw stones at us. I picked up a stone and threw it back at them.

"Watch out, Noulet! If they want a fight, we will have to give them one."

A barrage of stones came flying toward us. Noulet ran to take refuge behind a tree. I hunched down, turning my back toward them—I certainly wasn't going to let them put one of my eyes out—and I started to pick up stones. When I had enough, I stood up and started to hurl them back, one after another.

"Help me, Noulet," I shouted at him. But when I turned to look at him, I saw him still in the same place, frightened, hunched down, and not moving. I muttered a curse for having been stuck with such a cowardly companion, and I kept on waging the battle by myself. While the stones were coming and going, I realized why they must have attacked us; after they had seen Noulet looking so effeminate, they thought we were two faggots who had gone into the woods in search of a hiding place. That had to be it! The shame of it gave me the strength to throw the stones at a homicidal pace. Suddenly I heard a cry, and when I turned around I saw Noulet come out from behind the tree with his hands pressed over his face.

"My eye, my eye!" he moaned, and I saw blood leaking through his fingers.

I dropped the stones and approached him (the boys must have left, because I couldn't see them any longer).

"What happened to you?"

He was weeping.

"Oh my God! They broke my glasses and a piece of glass got caught in my eye."

"Okay let's go back to the School," I said worriedly, and I quickly led him toward the school. He was still crying, and he was blinded by the blood.

When we reached the School, Dr. D'Onofrio took him to his lab, and they sent me to the Principal's office.

They suspended me for a week for having gone somewhere during the time for a class. During that time I never saw Noulet. I didn't even know where he lived. All I knew was that the accident had been important.

One evening after supper Noulet came to see me, with his eye bandaged, but smiling.

"Ah, so you are all right," I said.

"Yes. And how have you been doing during this forced vacation?

"Oh, good enough. The only thing I'm worried about is that if I skip class again, they'll kick me out of school. So, what about you? Did they suspend you for a week?"

"No. I told them that skipping class was your idea, that it wasn't my fault. My mother went to see the principal."

"Well just great! You mean you put all the blame on me?"

It wasn't that I was disgusted by his lack of loyalty, but that this moral accusation was another weakness of the weaker sex. It kept bothering me more and more to be seen with him. But I couldn't tell him that, so I decided not to say anything. But he misunderstood my silence, and he continued:

"So, do you want to go and see the Queen of the Forest tonight?"

"What queen?" I asked him grudgingly.

"The Queen of the Forest. You were telling me about her that time when we began our walk."

I started laughing.

"Why are you laughing? Does this queen exist, or not?"

"Of course she exists! But why do you want to see her? She is not what you think."

"I know; that's why I want to see her. Don't tell me about her. I want to see her."

"She is pretty far away. I don't feel like walking that much."

I didn't like the idea of walking again, especially not at night! And especially not with a companion as faint-hearted as Noulet, so I tried to dissuade him. He insisted, so I agreed. "Wait a moment;" I said, "I'm going to get my hat," and after that we left.

About that same time some girls were roller-skating on 53rd Street. They were gliding through the darkness like noisy angels (with the noise of wheels, and laughter.) And each time they traveled under a street light they sparkled with red, yellow, and green colors before disappearing into the night, as agile as their long floating hair. It seemed very hot (but that heat wasn't from the weather; it was what those roller-skaters made me feel.) What a crazy desire there was to undress. Linden trees wanted to undress. Balconies wanted to undress. Wires wanted to undress. Hallways wanted to undress. Street lights wanted to undress. I felt the pleasure of nakedness under my clothes as well as the desire to undress the silent women that looked at us. Noulet was silent and only now, after so many years, I realized that I never really thought about what he must be thinking. I was full of myself and, in my mind, he was nothing more than a shadow, so flat that he showed no indication of something interesting. I carried him by my side, like a man made of bugs and worms, and full of bat meat. We continued in silence—eighth street, seventh street, sixth street, ah, sixth street, the street of Beatriz!—and after first street, we left the houses behind, and the sky looked like a prison with no possibility of escape, a weak sky like madness, and the sad certainty of death. As we entered the forest, I noticed that my footsteps sounded louder, as if I were wearing some enormous boots of stone.

"Is it much farther?" Noulet asked.

Now he really was a shadow, tall and slender, between the shadows of the trees. In the darkness the sign of his effeminate movements disappeared, but it was still evident in the vibrant curves of his voice as he asked a question. I imagined the little lady must be afraid. How annoying! Thank goodness, I said to myself, there is no sign of that group of boys with stones in their hands!

"Is it much farther?"

"No, we're almost there. Just a little farther."

We walked slowly in the darkness, lifting our arms forward, and to the side. I only looked at the sky once. But I never saw the sky or the stars, only a cloud of foliage. The treetops that looked so sparse in the daylight, now seemed to have pressed together in an undulating, nocturnal cluster that moved with us, always in front, and causing us to walk more slowly. Although I remembered very well the clear outline of that little forest in the daylight, I thought—smiling at the absurdness of my supposition—that there was some bewitchment, and that the shadows of the treetops waving in the night were laughing at me as they took me somewhere from which there would be no return. And although my ears usually corresponded with my eyes, now when my eyes saw nothing, they seemed to be frightened by the threatening sound of insects trying to flee. There was only fog, a sinister fog, that from time to time caused the bark of the trees to shake. I felt myself so full of sensations that I had the impression this forest must be infinite or, at least, that it was growing as time flowed inside me, like a slowly moving river that was about to stop and become eternal.

"What is that?" Noulet asked when we saw the light of a campfire in the distance, and I told him:

"That's where the Queen of the Forest is. Let's go."

Now it was easier to travel. The trees seemed to move apart as we approached them. Everything became clearer, as though we were traveling down a wide road. We saw the fire, and I saw his new glasses once again covered with blood, the blood of the campfire. And even though I was familiar with all this, I felt the nervousness of a new adventure. Because, I saw the way the forest was moving in the trembling light of the flames. And the solitude of the hour, plus the mystery of the cajolery we were about to see, excited my imagination like a story about witchcraft.

The Queen of the Forest had her back turned to us, seated on a mound surrounded by tin cans.

"There you have the Queen of the Forest."

We entered the circle of light from the fire, and walked around and stopped in front of the old woman. She raised her eyes and looked at us.

The light dripped out of the wrinkles of her face and was like dirty water in the hollow of her eyes. We saw her greenish mop of hair, her scowling mouth, her sharp nose; and the grime gave her skin and her rags the smoothness of a unique substance.

"Good evening," Noulet said to her, courteously.

The old woman did not respond. She looked at us fixedly, first one and then the other, with the charm of a hungry dog; with no hands or words to beg, but still begging with the eyes of a hungry dog.

I remembered Zaro. I tossed a coin on her skirt, and I told her:

"Sing something for us, Queen of the Forest,"

Through her mouth without teeth, using a voice that was shaky, husky, and mellow, the old woman sang the words of a milonga:

I am the dark-skinned woman,
the most charming,
and the most renowned,
in this entire village.

I dropped another coin and said to her:

"Dance for us, Queen of the Forest."

The old woman wrapped a rag around the coins and, using the support of a cane, she rose to her feet with great effort, and danced a milonga, grotesquely.

Then, I took out a third coin, and as I gave it to her, I said:

"Take off your clothes, Queen of the Forest."

She crossed her arms and bent over so she could reach the bottom of her skirt and her petticoat, and pulled them up over her head. In the light of the campfire we saw her earthy legs and her tuft of hair, like vegetation in middle of a barren field grows next to an isolated pool of water. She continued removing her clothes. Her entire head was wrapped in a huge mound of clothing. By now her breasts hung down. The blinded old woman raised them with her bony hands and stretched them out toward us, making them tremble. In the light of the fire her skin was pink.

"Okay, now you have seen the Queen of the Forest; let's go," I said to Noulet. When I looked at him, I saw that he was staring with open eyes; his wounded eye, especially, was mentally blinded like someone who was intoxicated.

"Let's go!" I insisted.

But under his breath, Noulet said:

"I want to touch them."

"Don't be an animal. Let's go."

"I want to touch them," he repeated.

He stood there, motionless, with his eyes pinned on the old woman's nakedness.

"I said, let's go. I am going. If you want to come, come; if not, then stay here."

I started leaving, walking away a few steps. Since I didn't hear him following me, I turned around and looked back. I was surrounded by darkness, but in the distance, in the middle of the scene illuminated by the campfire, I could see one in front of the other: the old woman, her body shaking, and Noulet still obsessed.

I left.

The next day in school we didn't talk about it.

A SHRUNKEN HEAD

Julian Orias was a professor in the National College of Buenos Aires; a professor of History, since that was the only position available, but his real interest was ethnography. During his summer vacation he went to live with the Indians in Patagonia, in Chaco, or in Humahuaca. Sometimes he even left Argentina and spent several months in a nearby country. After his excursions he always came back with things like funeral urns, military weapons, dishes, ornaments, and musical instruments. He also brought tape recordings, movies, and photographs of the Indians. And he even brought a plump, lively, little Indian girl. He would have liked to adopt her as a daughter, but his wife decided to make her a house servant. Julian had dreamed of becoming the Director of an Institute of Ethnography. In the meantime, he was turning his house into an Ethnological museum. He was in his forties and was stout, peaceable, and good-natured. He did not seem to be intelligent, nor was he. During conversations, he was always a little slow. He was just leaving, when the others were already returning. He had a way of looking at things, that made agile minds feel impatient. It was an empty look. His large head stuck out and dropped down as if the nape of his neck was in a yoke, and his tired eyes had the sadness of an ox. He looked like he might moo at any moment. And in fact there was a bit of a moo in the nasal "eh?" that he said, each time someone asked him something that he was preparing to answer. It wasn't that he was distracted, no. Not at all, he was curious and attentive. It's just that it took him a moment to understand. When everyone broke out in laughter after hearing a funny joke, Julian smiled as he tried to guess what it was about. And then, after a moment he laughed too, at the wrong time. "What's wrong with him?" his friends asked themselves, after they had already forgotten what had been said. It was because it took him much longer, so that he enjoyed the joke all by himself. Thanks to his woolen nerves, he was able to put up with the copper nerves of his wife. Maruja was a hysterical woman. Their married life could not possibly have been more unequal. Julian was more than ten years older the she was. To the naked eye, the difference was huge. Maruja's face tried everything possible to be ugly, but without success. It was a provocative face. Her skin was milky, and her eyes full of black flames. That face, from wherever it was seen, was unexpected: it tightened, it tilted, it dissolved, it moved off. A

provocative face. It made one feel like correcting it with the fingers of a sculptor, or do something A pinch. A kiss. A bite. A slap. Maruja and her copper nerves. Indeed. She was electrogenic, electrifying. For that reason her bust, which was quite opulent, made one think of two delightful globes the color of milk, soft and gentle, that one could touch with no danger of being electrocuted. She belonged to one of those typical families of Buenos Aires that feel they are special because have been educated by reading North American newspapers. (Their library was full of detective novels that were also North American.) Maruja, who scorned all of South America except Buenos Aires, was driven off the wall by the fact that her husband had so many indigenous objects.

"Dear, it's not that I want to turn you against the country, but we don't have Indians. We are a progressive, white country. And there you have to go on collecting all this junk. It's embarrassing and shameful. Look, just look at it"

And she pointed with disgust at the walls, the display cabinets, the shelves; bows made out of wood from palm trees, bamboo arrows, tissues with flashy colors, blowpipes, baskets, necklaces made from shells, gadgets and little guitars.

"I'm telling you, it's shameful. First your desk was completely covered with junk. So okay, it was your desk. But now? Now you have filled the whole house: the living room, the vestibule, the dining room. The whole house. It's an inundation. Pretty soon we will have to sleep in hammocks surrounded by mummies. But look, just look at that my God! Where did you find that mask?"

"Eh? Which one?"

"Which one? That one, that one there, right in front of your eyes."

"That mask? That mask… Dear, that mask is a mask that people from Peru use in their dances."

"Disgusting, disgusting. What bad taste! Looking at the walls now just makes me feel sick. The trouble is you don't have any imagination. Sure, none of this does anything to you. Oh yes, you know a lot of things, a lot of things… But you don't really know them. You look at all that as if you were reading a book. For you, these pieces of junk are like the words in a book. But not for me. What I look at is alive, I see it move. I smell it. It disgusts me to think that all this has been used by people who are filthy, ragged, and sick. I feel like this house is a pigsty. When we least expect it, some infectious disease is going to come out of this. Remember what I said. This house is full of those people. So, if this stuff is worth so much, why don't you give it to a museum? One of these days I am going to pile it all up and burn it.

Julian looked at her with wide open eyes without being able to understand. But Maruja would not have dared to carry out her threat. She knew that she could get just about anything from her husband. Anything, but getting him to dispose of even one of those treasures. Maruja had already tried everything: kisses, tears, threats, leaving the house, locking herself in her room and not speaking to him for weeks… But to no avail. Julian, the idiot, was willing to give up anything, anything except his ethnology.

"Whenever anyone comes to visit us," Maruja went on, "I tremble. Didn't you notice the expression that Mister Wilson had when he came last Friday? He had just arrived from Detroit, an engineer from General Motors, and what did you want to show him? A film of Mataco Indians eating insects, one after another. Of course, you never saw his face. It doesn't matter to you! But that Yankee could not get over his astonishment; he must have thought, 'What on earth! This is Argentina? And I thought there weren't any

Indians here!' Do you see what you're doing? People will have a mistaken idea about our country. You ought to stick to History. That's what they pay you for. A library would be all right, but a museum! And this museum that looks like a house of horrors…"

Maruja was correct about one thing at least. And it was that their friends were just as disgusted as she was about all those rooms full of barbarity and ugliness. Because the friends of the Orias family didn't care about ethnography, or history. Or we could put it another way: the ethnographers and historians didn't want to be associated with the Orias. Orias had no prestige as a professor of history. In his classes he quoted a few books, and that was it. His colleagues didn't think much of him, and they laughed at his foolish mannerisms. Neither did he get any respect from experts as an Ethnologist. But then, there are no two ethnologists who hold each other with esteem. That's what happens with disciplines that try to be scientific, without being able to. For one reason or another, Julian had nothing to do with his colleagues. Any friends he had were friends of Maruja. That included friends from the neighborhood or the club, as well as professionals and public servants… They went to play bridge, to drink martinis, or meet after the movies, and Julian knew that none of them were interested in the things he had collected. There were nights when, in spite of that, he would show them some of the rare pieces from his museum. Their friends concealed their boredom. There was only one of them who accompanied Julian when he went to his desk while the others played bridge, drank martinis, or talked about the movie they had seen. He was a man from Jujuy whose name was Alvarado. Perhaps it was because he was an inhabitant of one of the most remote provinces that he had some interest in indigenous traditions. He was indigenous himself. His mestizo face sparkled with so much energy from his eyes, and especially from his mouth, that when he smiled, it made you think about the bite of those teeth that were so white, regular, and strong. He was a doctor. Actually, he had met the Orias as a doctor. At thirty five years of age he was not yet a specialist in anything, but he was very interested in anesthetics and had published several articles about American drugs. In addition to medicine, he was also interested in folklore. The records that Julian played for him made him recall the music he had heard when he was a child: the monotonous themes of the music perked up with the sounds of an Indian flute, a drum, and a guitar. He used to dance to that music, and he also taught Julian how to do it; or he would sing a folksong, accompanying himself with a guitar. Julian was enchanted with him. Was all that why Maruja treated Alvarado with such coldness? She hardly ever talked to him, and she probably would have treated him even worse if it hadn't been for the fact that, after all, he was the family doctor and she often needed his services.

One night Alvarado told Julian that they had invited him to the University of Quito. Yes, of course he would go. It was a conference of specialists in local pathology. He was going to talk about the details of a study of narcotics. When? In January. What would Julian be doing in January? He would be on vacation, isn't that right? It would really be nice if they could go together. And why not? So let's do it. The conference would last for a week. After that they would have time to travel a bit. From Quito, they could go to Guayaquil. They could explore the mountain, the plateau, the savannah, and the jungle.

They made the plans for their journey. They left in January. In March Julian came back by himself. As usual, he brought large boxes full of objects that he had gathered during the journey; but this time he was not happy when he returned.

"What's wrong?" Maruja asked when she saw him looking so depressed.

"And… Why would anything be wrong with me? Nothing… The poor fellow."

"Who? What do you mean?"

"Alvarado, the poor fellow."

Maruja sat down by his side. She clasped her hands together, she fixed her eyes on him, and she asked him:"

"Are you going to tell me what happened, or not? So what happened?"

Julian looked at her with surprise.

"But why? Don't you know?"

"Don't I know what?"

"But don't you already know that he died?"

Maruja became pale, as white as if the milk of her skin had been skimmed. She was silent for a moment. Then, with a more restrained voice she said:

"You're saying that Alvarado died? But how?"

"Then, didn't you receive my letter…?"

"No, only a telegram saying that you were returning."

"Didn't you read about it in the newspaper?"

"No, no. So how was it?"

"Horrible," and Julian put his face in his hands. "I'll tell you."

"Tell me about it now."

"It was horrible. After the Conference ended… The poor guy! After the Conference ended, we went to explore Ecuador. From Quito we went down to the east. We had to pass through some swamps. A quagmire. I heard him cry, and I saw him in the mire. He had tried to cross a log, and he slipped off it. It was shifting mud, do you understand? He shouted and shouted, but the mud was swallowing him. I tried and tried to help him with a long branch, but that didn't help. It was horrible. I saw him sink until he finally disappeared."

Maruja listened without saying a word. She rose up, saying she had to leave. When she returned, she said she was feeling bad and went to her room without eating supper. When Julian approached her bed and touched her, she seemed to be in a deep sleep and did not wake up.

The following night some friends happened to come by: the Sandrini, and the Cané. They had evidently eaten supper together, and they came unannounced, after drinking a bottle of wine. They evidently didn't know that Julian had returned. When they saw him they greeted him with surprise, still feeling the effect of the wine. Maruja disguised her feelings, and greeted then kindheartedly. Julian, who was unpacking his bags, also didn't show his feelings. When Mrs. Cané—plump, coquettish, pretty, and frivolous—proposed that they watch television, because there was a great program with Andalusian dances, Maruja sadly told them about Alvarado's death. "So you didn't know about it either?" No, there was nothing about it in the papers, at least nothing that they had seen. Julian told them how it happened. What a pity. He was such a nice fellow. A good friend.

It was the women that regretted it most. Alvarado was not well liked by the husbands. He had a certain way of looking at women, and smiling at them… Cané sometimes had felt a twinge of jealousy.

"The poor fellow," Cané said now. "He had a great future."

Somewhere in there Cané was hiding something, as if some great weight had suddenly disappeared; he wasn't conscious of this relief, but he felt like making jokes. He resisted,

however, and the conversation began to languish. The visitors looked at each other as if they were saying, "we ought to leave now, this is going to be a drag." Out of courtesy, Cané asked Julian what he had brought back this time from his journey.

"Do you want to take a look?" Julian asked them, pointing to the door of his study. "When you arrived I was just unpacking things. There probably isn't anything that would interest you."

"No, no," the wife of Cané, exclaimed nervously, "it's getting late. Some other time. We have to leave now."

"Only for just a moment," Cané said, in order to counteract any appearance of brusqueness the words of his wife might have displayed.

They entered the study. At one side of the room was an empty crate, with piles of straw, pieces of twine, and some cartons. Some of the objects were already on the desk. Suddenly the wife of Sandrini pointed at a hairy object and cried out with an expression of disgust, said:

"My God, what is that, what is that?"

Everyone looked where she was pointing, and all their faces had the same expression.

"Ah!" said Julian, smiling. "That's a human head."

"A what?"

"A human head."

"A human head? So tiny?"

"A real phenomenon!" Cané said and felt like laughing. "It must be from a pygmy. It's about the size of an orange."

Maruja moved over and looked at the head that was hard, dry, and quiet, as if it were sleeping; she felt her legs buckling as if she was going to fall, and she had to sit down.

"No, it's not the head of any pygmy," Julian said, and he looked at it contemplatively. His large pink face with the eyes of an ox smiled smugly, looking at the small dark head, with its eyes closed, and its lips pressed together.

Julian was always rather hesitant when he was speaking. His words were timid, and usually missed the boat. His words were always the last to be heard when others started a conversation. But instead of getting lost in the discussion while others were speaking, when he was speaking about ethnography his words never hesitated, and they confidently followed one after another, as if they were unraveling. That was how he spoke now:

"This is a normal human head. It has just been reduced. Haven't you heard about the Jivaros of Ecuador? They cut off a head, and they reduce it to one quarter of its size. It's a very delicate process. One misstep while pealing the skin from the cranium, and the whole thing is ruined."

"Ah, so they remove the skull," said Cané's wife.

"Of course, dummy," her husband said. "The bone can't be reduced, isn't that right Julian?"

"But how do they do that?" the wife of Sandrini asked, her nose still wrinkled with disgust.

"And *why* do they do it?, is what I want to know," Sandrini added; saying "why" with so much emphasis, as though he were trying to reveal the theoretical superiority of a man compared to the merely practical curiosity of of a woman.

Julian continued speaking: "The Jivaro Indians… You must know, that the Jivaro Indians live in the virgin jungles surrounding the rivers between Ecuador and Peru…

The Jivaros are very warlike. There are many different tribes, and it is quite common for one tribe to exterminate another. Killing an enemy is almost a ritual. From that, a Jivaro expects not only fame, but also material benefits. When he kills an enemy, he cuts off the head, and carries it like a trophy so that he can convert it into a fetish with supernatural powers. He first performs some mysterious ceremonies. Then, with a very sharp knife, he makes a cut from here to here," and he quickly moved his finger from the top of Sandrini's head, to the nape of his neck. Sandrini, who was leaning over, felt a shiver and gave a start before rising up and pretending that he did not hear Cané's chuckle. "After that, little my little, he peals off the skin."

"Ah, like you cut off the hide from an animal in order to embalm it," Cané said.

"The skin of a human head is more delicate, and one has to proceed slowly, and with great caution. The skin doesn't come off, just by pulling it. It is necessary to separate it from the flesh with a knife. Then, when one has the skin…"

"It must be like a mask," Cané said.

"…the eyes and the lips are fastened, it is place over a vine shoot and put into a pan where a solution of water and chinchipi, a vegetal juice with astringent properties, is boiling. That way it is cleaned, it shrinks, and it acquires more consistency. It is cooled by placing it over a pole sunken into the ground."

"A flag. What a miracle: the skin of the face, like a flag," Cané said.

"Once it is cooled, a ring is made with a branch that is flexible, so it can fit it into the opening of the neck. As the skin is shrinking, the ring will also change so it has a smaller circumference."

"How nice! It will then be like a woman's purse, right?"

"Stop interrupting," the wife of Cané scolded her husband.

"After that some pebbles taken from the river are heated in a fire; once they are warm enough, they are dropped through the opening in the neck, first one stone, then another, and another. The head is spun so that the stones also spin, warming and smoothing the skin, and the remaining drops of blood that cover it."

"That is horrible," said the wife of Cané.

"Don't interrupt," Cané chides his wife, to get even.

"With some other stones the face is shaped on the outside. Then comes the interesting part. Some fine sand that is taken from the beach and heated in a clay pot over the fire. When it is warm enough it is poured into the head, until it is a little more than half the normal size."

"Hey, that's like putting yerba into mate."

"Again the head is spun around so the sand fills the entire inside of the skin. This whole operation is done several times. Before the head is refilled, the skin is scraped on the inside to make sure it is smooth. When the trophy is… 'Tsantsa' the Jivaros call it…"

Then Julian seemed to lose the thread. Silence.

"And?"

"What?"

"Oh Julian! Now you forgot what you were saying! So 'when the trophy is'… I don't know what else."

"Ah, yes. When the 'tsantsa' is dry, it starts shrinking. And while it is shrinking, the Jivaro uses his fingers with the skill of a sculptor to shape the different parts of the head.

It is necessary to burn the hair, which has become too large, now that the face is so so small. It is done with quickly with a torch, so as not to burn the eyebrows or the eyelashes. The last step is to sew the neck together; they us a certain type of needle to fasten the lips with red threads; then they cure the head, which was yellow, until it turns black… And they polish it."

"But this head doesn't have any lips."

"True. Perhaps they didn't finish it."

"So what is this head filled with? Because it is not hollow, is it."

"I don't know. I have never actually seen the inside of a 'tsantsa',"

Julian picked up the head and turned it around with his fingers and looked at it; then, he turned to his friends and said: "Do you think we should open it to see what's in it?"

Some said yes, and some said no. Finally, all said yes.

Julian began to open the neck with a knife. Maruja was sitting in her armchair looking quite disturbed. She had followed Julian's explanation without taking her eyes off him. Now, however, she did not want to watch what he was doing.

Julian put his fingers inside the 'tsantsa' and extracted the contents…

"Why, those are pages from a newspaper!" Sandrini exclaimed.

"Very strange," Julian murmured.

"Let's see?" Cané grabbed the wad of paper and quickly opened it. "It's a page from *The Telegraph*. But didn't you say that the Jivaros were savages from the jungle? Well, they are not very savage, are they? You see here; they read newspapers… Ha, ha!"

Maruja couldn't stand any more. She got up out of her chair and went to her room without anyone noticing.

"I don't understand, I don't understand," Julian muttered.

"Let's see," Cané said, "where did you get this head?"

"Eh, what did you say?"

"I said where did you get the head."

"This head? I bought it. I bought it in a bookstore. In Quito."

"A nice place to sell human heads… And are their many people who buy such things?"

"What things?"

"What do you mean, what things? What are we talking about? I asked you if there are many people who buy human heads like this one?"

"Yes. I suppose so. Museums from all over the world. People who are interested in ethnology, tourists."

"Then, that is clear. These criminals! They have found a way to make money. The merchants I mean. They found a way to make shrunken heads and sell them to collectors of macabre things. It must be a new fashion. Like necrophilia years ago. And now you have people preparing human heads and filling them with whatever is at hand, newspaper pages, for example. This head was probably stuffed by someone from the city, not by a Jivaro… Probably some ordinary criminal. How much did you pay for this head?"

Lost in his mental labyrinth, Julian did not respond to the question. Outside in the real world Cané was waiting impatiently, astonished by his slowness. He repeated:

"How much did you pay for this head?" he asked again.

"Eh? And… I paid… Let's see… sixty Argentinian pesos."

"So that's it. For sixty pesos they slice off a man's head."

"And is there a date on that newspaper page?" Sandrini asked.

"Let me see," Cané said. "Yes, here it is; the corpse was from about ten years ago. From the 28th of October in 1938. And look; here is an advertisement for a movie; they are showing *The Visit*, with Boris Karloff. Who knows if the murderer went to see that movie, and afterward he killed an man that was having an affair with his wife?"

Little by little, Julian was ingesting what Cané said. Except that Cané was making fun of everything. However, since he was beginning to suspect there was a vile business of selling tsantsas, he was discouraged. First he felt surprised. The he felt disgusted. A bit later when he had gotten the whole picture, he was indignant. It was like a flood of sentiments that led to successive violent shocks; and something must have been affecting him from the inside, because his face began to wrinkle with frowns. Finally, his hesitant steps began to speed up, and he was able to get out of the morass. He was outraged. As an ethnologist, he was interested in all types of customs, even the most abominable. He understood that they were part of the closed system of a foreign culture. When he looked at them, he restrained from making judgments. He saw them objectively, related to each other, but separated from his life as a civilized person. However, the hands of some other civilized person were involved in the production of this tsantsa. Hands like his had leafed through this newspaper. The presence of these pieces of paper in a tsantsa destroyed the innocence of Jivaro customs. It broke the circle and mixed with other human acts. It was necessary to judge them with a moral law. The Jivaro ritual was now a vulgar crime.

Sandrini's wife noticed the absence of Maruja.

"She must not have been feeling well, so she went to her room," Cané's wife said.

"Yes, she looked upset," Sandrini said.

"With good reason," Cané said.

After that they said goodbye and left.

Julian climbed slowly up the stairs. He started to enter his bedroom but he stopped, rooted in the opening of the doorway. Maruja, hysterical, with her eyes reddened from crying, was standing in the middle of the room looking at him with hate, and she shouted:

"Don't come in here! Murderer!"

Julian remained in the doorway , bewildered. He didn't say anything, but Maruja kept insulting him. He heard her insults, but they went in one ear and out the other. Julian couldn't understand them. He looked at his wife, vacantly. She must be sick. Finally, he moved toward her. Maruja recoiled like a dog that was about to lunge and bite him.

"Don't come near me, murderer."

"But dear… dear… What's wrong?"

"Murderer, murderer. You killed Alvarado. And if that wasn't enough, you cut off his head. And with some sort of witchcraft, when you knew very well what you were doing, you brought home his head, wrinkled and shrunk, like a trophy for your crime. Do you think I didn't recognize his face?"

Julian looked at her with astonishment. His mind was like a building with too many passages and stairways. The words spun around inside his head and got los; they opened one door and went out through another, before Julian was able to grasp them.

"Murderer. Wicked. Degenerate. Get out of here, and don't you dare to ever come back. You terrify me. If you don't get out of here, I am going to start shouting until they put you in jail as a murderer."

By now Julian had begun to realize that Maruja's anger was directed at him, and that he was somehow involved in this horror.

"But are you crazy, woman? What are you saying? That I killed Alvarado? Are you crazy? Why would I want to kill him?"

"Because he was my lover. For that. Because we loved each other. Yes, don't look at me like that. Don't act as though you are astonished. You knew it, you knew it. But you never dared say anything. You weren't man enough. Cuckold! You used your deceit to take Alvarado far away and kill him. I despise you. I hate you."

And Maruja began to laugh, and then cry. It was as though she couldn't breathe and, so she would not be suffocated, she needed to open her throat with a loud screech. She was rigid, but her whole body trembled. She tried to take a few steps, but she began to have convulsions until she collapsed on the floor in an agitated heap, and then she stayed there, whining and sobbing.

Julian tried to pick her up but he didn't have the strength, so he fell to the floor by her side and began to caress her. Then he continued insisting:

"I did not kill him, Maruja. I swear it… How could you think that? I did not kill him.

Maruja continued having convulsions. Her screeching became softer until it sounded like snoring. But then it began louder again, like whistling.

Julian found a bottle of cologne, and then he wiped it on her forehead and her wrists. After that he smoothed her hairs that were damp with sweat and cologne. Meanwhile, the bumblebee that had been resting quietly inside his head without him noticing it began to buzz and pound on the walls of its prison. Little by little, the bovine eyes of Julian began to darken. That was because, as he was finally able to shake off the sense of shame he felt—the shame of having them think that he was a murderer—he slowly began to focus on what Maruja had said:

"He was my lover, he was my lover."

THE TIRED BULLET
(La Bala Cansada)

(The place is a neighborhood plaza in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship of Peron. Students—most of them socialists—are just beginning to arrive from many different directions. They are coming one by one, although sometimes two at a time. They avoid forming groups. They do not speak to each other, as if they were not acquainted. They glance at each other without any sign of recognition. As for looking at each other face to face, that never happens. They can't waste time on looking; they need it to watch for the police. Hidden under their clothes, they are carrying pamphlets of anti-Peronist propaganda. At exactly six o'clock, when everything is organized, they start the "Lightning Demonstration." The first thing they shout is "Freedom!" Meanwhile, they pretend. They sit on benches in the plaza and open a newspaper. Or they walk through the paths of the garden. Or they stop on the corners, as if they are waiting for a streetcar; or in the doors of the houses as if they lived there. Or they pretend they are attracted by the display

in a shop window. Some wait in the movie theater. Some in the nearby church. Others in cafes, or in the Municipal Library.

The library is quite modest: four white walls, and only one floor. The only luxury in this large shoebox, hidden on one side, is a large window. Through it is where the librarian is now looking at the center of the plaza where there is a statue of a horse, with a general mounted on him.

The librarian: Jorge Greb.)

The librarian's obligation is to put books in the hands of the people, and that was precisely what annoyed Jorge Greb. He handled his obligation to the books wonderfully well; he ordered them, he catalogued them, and he took care of them. As for his obligation to the readers, not so much. In fact, he behaved as though the library was his; a private library, not a public one. He served the people. What else could he do? That was what they paid him for. However, he did it half-heartedly, according to the rules. Always very quick, and very strict. He took the book off the rack, wrote down the date of the loan, he recorded the due date with a rubber stamp, and that was it. Member 157 came to look for book AF.345. Whether that member was called Manuel Rodriguez, or Pedro Gonzalez, what did it matter to him? The fact is that Jorge Greb did not care about people, even though they were members of the library. He scorned them, and he ignored them. People, bah! They are not as important as the books. What he really wanted was to be alone with the books. And read. If no one visited the library (and of course, if they continued to pay his salary as a librarian), how nice that would be! As previously stated, he acted as if the library were his. Except that there were too many books. Of those that filled the shelves all the way to the ceiling, he read just a few, and those few books were, without exception, detective novels or stories. He kept them apart from the others, outside of their numerical order, on the rear wall in the alphabetical order of the authors. He considered those books like civilized people. Books with names, not with numbers.

A local library was usually something of a cultural center and a social gathering place. But not the library of Jorge Greb. Those solitary, bored, unoccupied readers who didn't particularly care about reading newspapers or leafing through a book, but actually were more interested in having a friendly conversation came to encounter an evasive librarian. Cold as a fish, and solemn as a fish.

(In the plaza, and around the plaza, young people were waiting. It was almost six o'clock. Their tense nerves were on the verge of exploding, like the nerves of an alarm clock, or a time bomb. The rest of the world that is not affected by these nerves with a fixed timetable was stupid. Clouds are stupid. Flowers are stupid. Birds are stupid. The dog passing by is stupid. The man with his face stuck to the window of the library is stupid.

It is Jorge Greb, gasping like a fish.)

Jorge Greb looked stupid. But he only seemed that way. The problem was that his body did not function well. Over his weak bones, a fat body had been formed. A flabby and pudgy forty-year-old who couldn't even shake hands because he lacked the muscles for a handshake. His pale flesh like that of a baby, a woman, or a eunuch, had only the bluish promise of a beard on his chin. His gonzo eyes lost the focus and squinted. His

face trembled with tics. His breaths were like snores. He stuttered. What sickness was rising in his body like a tidal wave? But he wasn't stupid; he just seemed that way. And, no matter how hidden it was, his spirit was that of a pure intellectual. The problem was that life disgusted him. ("Let the pigs wallow in the mud, if they want.") He was also disgusted by any literature that dealt with life and reality. ("What good does it do to put a mirror in the pigpen?") His intelligent mind preferred to stick to games that were free of charge.

His mind was suited for Philosophy, Mathematics, or Science; and without realizing it Jorge Greb was leaning in that direction. He couldn't fit the chaotic mass of events into a single formula, but he could calm his urge for rigidity by reading Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, or John Dickson Carr. He thought with the mind of Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Peter Wimsey, or Isidro Parodi, like others think like Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, Einstein, Bertrand Russell, or Carnap. But what can we do? When you don't have any bread, you have to eat cake. Jorge Greb ate his cake in one of the lowest branches of the tree of science: detective novels. Each novel was a charade, an enigma, a crossword puzzle, with a splendid solution that creates coherence out of confusion.

What he admired in detective novels was their intellectual intrigue. They were plots in which arbitrariness had been removed. Each novel was like a closed sphere that was disconnected from the earth. It is true that were figures that were vaguely human moving through the inner passages of these closed spheres. Characters, situations, circumstances. But who is going to be interested in all that, if it is just an appearance? In a detective novel people are not people, only concepts. And the action is not action, but rather a displacement that was regulated by the laws of an unalterable game of symbolic figures on a chess board. A fabrication of life, and nothing more. The human aspect of the detective novels is exactly that, a mere fabrication. Taking seriously the allusions to reality is the same as not knowing how to read. As absurd as if washing our hands with a soap that has the shape of an elephant makes us feel we are washing our hands with an elephant. What a payback against men Jorge Greb felt when he read one of those novels! Because in these novels where everything is hypothetical, men don't really matter. After all, do real men of flesh and blood really matter inside a concoction of maps, or statistics, or laws? No, of course not. By the same token, in a detective novel, with its trigonometrical precision, real men are left out. For entertained readers, the theme of a detective novel can be the killing of a man, but for Jorge Greb a detective novel murdered all men, in the sense that it eliminated them.

(And Jorge Greb would have gladly eliminated the man who came into the library and asked if he could use the telephone.

"This is a li… library," Jorge Greb said. "The tel… tel… telephone is not for the pub… public."

But without saying anything, the man looked at the desk and, seeing the phone, he picked up and called the police.

"Let me speak with Galindo… Galindo? Hello, it's me, Parpagno. How's it going? I'm calling to tell you that here there is going to be a problem… Yes, the students. There're up to something… And… when I came out of the house and

crossed the plaza… Yes here, right in front of the house… Send someone right away… Good. Great. Bye."

He hung up and left, without saying thanks.

Jorge Greb saw him walk toward the corner of the plaza. How he hated those brutes! But then, weren't all men brutes? All of them, every one of them, even those who were still young, had the aggressiveness of this brutish nature.)

The resentment that Jorge Greb felt toward his fellow men, toward the society from which he had been banished, for a life which he could not appreciate, was lessened when he read a detective novel that was dehumanized, cold, empty, and unreal. Some of these novels still seem too contaminated with humanity. He cast aside the impostures of the subspecies: adventure novels, police novels, novels of brutality and lust, like those of Sax Rohmer, Dashiell Hammet, James Sadley Chase, James M. Cain, and Mickey Spillane. The detectives in these spurious novels did not search for the truth with theoretical vigor; instead they impetuously linked together a hodgepodge of events. Instead of solving the mystery with analysis and deduction, they ascertained things with their fists, or with sex. What impurity! As if in some mathematical system the logarithms and the sinusoids suddenly felt the urge to live, or as if the hypotenuse in the theory of Pythagoras forgets its purpose is to demonstrate a necessary relation and decides to live alongside yokels. And Jorge Greb realized, with sadness, that the number of true detective novels was becoming less and less. They had had a century of glory after Poe invented them, but now they were ceasing to appear, leaving only a few inimitable classic examples. The description of scenery, an effort to make a psychological analysis, dialogues that tried to be realistic, motives of love and jealousy, of envy or greed, etc., offended him like excrescences. He would go directly to the clear morphology of the crime. Therefore, when he wrote (because Jorge Greb wrote things, but only for himself), they were not novels, but detective stories. The short length of these stories, straightforward and quick, was more suited for his ideas. When he wrote stories he took vengeance on reality, by obliterating it.

(Six in the afternoon. Their nerves tell what time it is. Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding. The great outrage of the alarm clock and the time bomb. They had broken out of their hiding places. Young people came out from everywhere, and then gathered together. Soon they moved toward the statue in the center of the plaza and began to shout: "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" A human inundation. All of the mouths were open; all of the heads were in continuous movement. All the Arms are like foam in the same tidal wave. All the eyes are a single brilliance in the liquid flood inundating the plaza. Students remove their hidden pamphlets and give them to the passers-by who are surprised and frightened. Some of them hurry to get away, others hurry to go and join the demonstration. One of the students climbs on a pedestal and harangues the crowd. Arms wave and faces light up with cheers, or calls to remove the tyrants. "Freedom, freedom, freedom."

Jorge Greb, who was watching through the window, went back into the main room to silence young people who were noisily closing their books and shouting "freedom," as they rushed toward the door, stumbling over the chairs.

"Hey! Be quiet! That's enough! Please be quiet. Eh, care… Be care… careful!"

But they had already left the library. He saw them run across the street, and then get lost in the crowd.

What an outrage! They don't even show any respect for the library. Another political demonstration! How long is this going to continue! What a country!

He walked away from the window with disgust and returned to his desk. He sat down and picked up the book he had been reading, *The Case of the Corpse in Triplicate.*

> (Suddenly, a car full of police arrives on one side of the plaza, and a squad on horseback on the other. Grim looking men in civilian clothes, but armed by the police, force their way into the crowd of protesters. "Peron, Peron, Peron!" "Espadrilles yes, books no!" There are blows, so people scramble. Shots are fired. "Hurray for freedom!" "Hurray for Peron!" The police on horseback cast their whips on the students. Other police handcuff the youths and put them in police cars. There are faces covered with blood. An unconscious student is carried away. Mad laughter erupted from a window, and the rump of a sorrel made the boy in the window continue laughing. A metal retaining wall was quickly put in place, and a street car had to brake just as quickly. The shouting in one part of the plaza was quieted a bit, but the volume increased in another part. Some doors closed violently. Others remained open, the entrance filled with bodies. Horseshoes slid over the cobblestones with sparks. A boy has climbed up the branches of a linden tree, and he is lowered with the slash of a saber. Every face is different in this big youthful wave, but there are rats, rats with uniforms, rats without uniforms, rats with weapons, sewer rats, large, dark, hairy, swollen, relentless, wretched rats with black eyes. They are thinking, "save a country, kill a student every day" and they shout "Long live Peron!"

Jorge Greb heard the shouts, and the exchange of gunshots, as if it was nothing. What a shame! In his neighborhood, in front of his library… There is no respect for anything. What a country! A stampede of human cattle. Beasts, beasts… And they call themselves students. What a country!; someone has to bring it into line. Oder, more order is what we need. What a country! What stupidity!

To start with, he sat down to read. At least in his mind he could control the disorder. Not paying attention to disorder was one way of restoring order. But he had to stand up again, because people fleeing from the disorder were coming to take refuge in the library.

"What… what… what's going on, what's going on, ge… gentlemen? We… we… are in a li… library. Please be qui… be quiet."

> (A boy with long hair the color of straw, and with sparkling eyes, looked at him mockingly.
>
> "But we came here to read!" he said.
>
> He had a defiant smile, a tear in his pocket, and a lump on his forehead that was covered with blood.
>
> He continued: "Don't you have the story of Little Red Ridding Hood?
>
> Some members of the group celebrated his humor with laughter. An older man, who had also come to take refuge, looked boy with concern and asked him:

"What's that on your forehead?"

"On my forehead? Oh, that's nothing. Just a lump, that's all."

"But didn't you feel something?"

"How could I feel anything with the fright?" and he laughed. "Though yes, now I feel it. A blow. Or maybe a wasp bite. Bah! A poke with a stick. It must have been a poke with a stick. With all the fright, I didn't feel it."

He laughed again. His skin was pale. The lump was strange: not round, but quite large.

"Permit me," the older man said And he felt the lump with his fingers. "No, my boy, that's not a lump; it's a bullet."

"A bullet?"

"It may have been a bullet that ricocheted off the wall. Or an old bullet. Or a stray bullet. But it's a bullet. Can't you feel it? It must be lodged between the skin and the bone. You need to go to the hospital."

"No. Don't even mention it. Not the hospital. That would give me a criminal record, and they would throw me out of the school."

"Okay, but any doctor that examined it would certainly put the blame on the police. It's a bullet. Don't you have some friendly doctor who could remove the bullet without saying anything? If not, it can cause an infection ."

Jorge Greb had looked at the wound without paying much attention and now, while the others gathered around the boy, giving him advice and offering to help him, he sat down. These people are all crazy! He had never read in one of his novels about a case where a bullet was lodged in someone's body without them being aware if it.

Jorge Greb no longer heard the exited discussion. It was barely a meaningless buzz. The things around him were fading away and losing color, as though the reality around him had been absorbed by a dream. No, it was more schematic and abstract than that; as if all the shouting, the gunshots of the police, the students dripping blood, the dashes to escape and, in fact, all the violence of that day was reduced to an algebraic theorem, to a purely mental image. The fluid reality had congealed into shapes. His misanthropy had led him to consider all those people as fictional characters, and the characters as cyphers. Even if it was City X, it could be Cities A, B, and C, the three vertices of a crime… The victim, the assassin, the detective, all unreal like the algebraic symbols of a triangle… Without mercy, without anger, without sympathy, without taking sides, without caring for justice, without compassion for pain and death, in the window he saw the police still battering students. He saw some boys carrying the friend-with-the-bullet-in-his-forehead to the office of a socialist doctor. But Jorge Greb was no longer there. He had entered the realm of a detective novel where there might be blows, and blood, and death, but without pain, because nothing is alive, and nothing is real. Everything had been closed off, like an enclosure that was fumigated with clouds of opium. And Jorge Greb was there in the center like a solipsistic god.

The story of the tired bullet that Jorge Greb is writing

For him this spring afternoon in Buenos Aires is now a winter night in Chicago: dark, and cloudy, and snowy, rounded like a sphere that is not connected to life.

The room in the library has been transformed into a hotel room; the desk, into a card table; the cards of books into playing cards. And all the people reduced to three entities: A, B, and C.

"A" will be Amaral, a Spaniard who is weak, nervous, and polite.

"B" will be Bebelberg, a north American Jew, with sparkling blue eyes and the long hair of a sorcerer.

"C" will be Cechece, a bank employee who is wobbly and sad.

Amaral and Bebelberg are intimate friends, and are partners when they play cards. Amaral reserves a room in a hotel. That night Bebelberg brings Cechece to trick him while playing poker. When Cechece realizes they are cheating, he knocks over the table and starts punching the cheaters with his fists. In the middle of the fight—chairs, bottles, cards, money, on the floor—Cechece hoists his cane and Amaral takes out his revolver. Cechece strikes Bebelberg on the head with his cane. At the same time Amaral fires a shot that doesn't hit anyone. Cechece flees, having lost all the money he had withdrawn that morning from the bank. Amaral and Bebelberg stay behind so they can put the room back in order. When they are done they say goodbye, Bebelberg still feeling the painful blow of the cane on his head. The next day the police find the body of Cechece floating in Lake Michigan, his body pierced by a gunshot. The bullet was lost since it had gone all the way through his body, and it would be impossible to find it on the botton of a lake. In Cechece's pocket police find the address of a hotel and the number of the room. The police learn that this room had been occupied by Amaral. They arrest him and, checking his revolver, they find that one cartridge is empty. They accuse him of murdering Cechece. Amaral says that he accidently fired a shot, but it didn't hit anyone. Where did he fire the shot? In the hotel room. The police inspect the room but they don't find a bullet. They interrogate Bebelberg, who defends Amaral telling the truth: yes, he fired a shot, but without hitting anyone. Although the police have not found a bullet, the fact that Cechece was hit with a bullet is sufficient evidence, and Amaral is convicted. The loyal Bebelberg decides to investigate without realizing that he is carrying in his body the bullet that could save Amaral: he has it lodged between his skull and the hairy skin, hidden by a thick lock of hair. When he touched it, he thought it was a lump caused by the blow from the cane. And Cechece's body? He committed suicide. The revolver, the bullet, and the body, all sank into the water of Lake Michigan: only the body with the bullet hole came back to the surface.

And while life howls through the streets, Jorge Greb is indifferent and non-comital while he writes his little murder mystery. He avoids all foreign intrusions, wanting to surprise the reader by searching for the most logical way of coming to the death of "C."

Before he wrote his little story, however, he was contacted by the police. He knew nothing to respond to the interrogation. Nothing. Not what had happened, nor who the wounded boy was, nor where they took him to take care of him, nor who they were or what they had said, nor why they never contacted the authorities… A policeman, whose name was Parpagnoli, accused him of refusing to let him use the telephone… They charged him with giving asylum to the traitors to the country in his reading room. He

was dismissed. What bad luck! Well, we can take consolation in the fact that after he was dismissed he had plenty of time to finish his little murder mystery.

THE KISS
(El beso)

One has to be clear so the reader can understand. So let's say everything clearly: the protagonist was called Leopoldo Vega and he was about 45 years old; his body was short, partly bald, rather pot-bellied, unattractive, myopic, and respectable; he was married to a woman of the same age, he had three grown children, he taught literature in a provincial university in Argentina, and, when what we are going to describe happened, he was on vacation in Spain, all by himself.

Yes, one has to be clear.

But these clear facts that we have just given no longer matter because Leopoldo Vega was very obscure. The figures can be painted in white, which is what we have done; but one must leave the canvas like it is, and the one we are discussing is an obscure canvas.

The railroad station is almost swallowed in darkness.

Leopoldo, leaning against a column in the platform, is waiting for the express train to Madrid. What station? He doesn't know, nor does it matter to him. Aranjuez? Toledo? Salamanca? So many trips, so many trains, so many times he has got on and off in some station… He no longer thinks about where he is.

Have we said that Leopoldo was already there at the bus stop before dawn? He heard the wind blowing. In spite of the winter, Leopoldo felt himself surrounded by a cloak of warm air. There wasn't a lamp lighted anywhere in the entire station. The things he was able to see were only those that seemed like gray images in the black cloud of night. A gray piece of sky, a gray train platform, the gray rails, a gray car on the siding. But there were so many different types of gray—shale gray, leaded gray, pearl gray—that the view was like a different colored landscape. This gray world pleased him; he saw it clearly, even without glasses. Not wearing glasses—dammed glasses, with black frames and thick lenses only depressed him and made him look older—contributed to his happiness. He felt like once again he was young, slender, agile, and muscular.

On one side of the platform a young woman wearing white silk like a parachute. She was as beautiful as a dream. Her beauty, however, lacked something. Perhaps it was the lack of awareness of itself, since its characteristics rested on her with such indolence, and seemed to abandon any effort to harmonize with each other in an expression of coquetry. Anything could happen to that face. For example, it might disappear under a large head of hair, or it might fall off like ashes. But for the moment it was a beautiful face. The eyes of that girl were looking at the eyes of Leopoldo. Or better said, they were looking first at one eye, and then at the other. Her eyes were fluctuating. From the right to the left, from the right to the left… A back and forth movement… And Leopoldo felt a wave of happiness flowing through his body. Swinging and swaying in the wind… Slowly rocking and listing… He felt like a sailor; he felt like the ocean was inside him. And he understood that what the girl was looking at was not his eyes, but a fish that was swimming—right and left, left and right—through the fishpond of his head.

Leopoldo started to step forward, but he had hardly moved when the melody from a flute made him stop. A microtonal melody that slid like a voice, holding and changing, with tiny intervals. His foot had stayed lifted in the air. He let it rest, but when his head dropped back an inch, he did not hear anything. (The girl kept on looking at him.) Leopoldo moved his head forward and once again he heard the plaintive "piccolo." He moved forward a little farther… then nothing! He had lost contact with it. He tried to find it again by slowly moving his head. He stopped with his head in one particular place where the music touched him sadly. Keep still, very still. Do not change your position. There, right there and only there was he able to hear the sound of the wind, like *La mer* of Debussy. A sonorous fountain from which the magic of dawn was rising, and one had to be part of that stream. In order to hear it, his ear had to be glued to that opening in the same way that, when he was a child, he had to stick his eye to the keyhole in order to see the servant taking her clothes off.

Held motionless by the delight of that sound, Leopoldo motioned to the girl to come closer, so she too could witness this miracle.

"Closer."

She approached, languorous, slow, and beautiful.

"Closer, still closer."

Leopoldo knew he ought to step back a step to let her reach the right place. But his hunger for the sound mattered more than courtesy, and he didn't move. He wanted to keep listening, but he also wanted her to listen. So he took her head in his hands—what pleasure it was to feel all that hair between his fingertips—and pressed it against his. He wanted their ears to touch each other so, the narrow thread of sound could enter both of them. But when he felt his cheek pressed against hers—soft, like the surface of a pillow that a sick person wants to touch when he has a fever—he couldn't resist the temptation; he turned her head so he could see her face and, seeing her half-open mouth, he kissed her softly for a long time, until the shock passed and his lips felt no more surprises. Then, when he moved back so that he could kiss her again with renewed eagerness, he saw a Guardia Civil who had stopped next to them and was watching them with a disapproving look.

"Why did you kiss her like that?" he said. There was something childish and comical in his three-cornered-hat. But not in the way he was looking at him.

"Why, because she is my girlfriend…"

After he had lied, Leopoldo thought about his wife and his children, and understood that the Guardia Civil wouldn't be able to believe him, and did not believe him. He felt like he was young, but the Guard obviously saw his old body. He also could see, as if he were looking through the Guard's eyes, that his body was aging. The older he got, the younger the girl became. A feeling of guilt, of shame, and of danger came to upset him. The typical theme of a newspaper article: the old man, and the nubile girl…

The Guardia Civil said, with sarcasm:

"Ah, so she is your girlfriend. Of course. Are you already engaged? Are you going to get married?"

"Yes, but what does this matter to you?"

While the policeman was frowning he stepped back and raised his arm, and Leopoldo realized that he had make a mistake. Instead of finding a way to explain, he had offended the Guard. If he arrested them, what a scandal that would be! Because he just realized

that this girl was one of his students at the University. What a scandal! A married professor with children, kissing one of his students? A scandal for the University, for his family, and for the public… And the poor girl… No, for nothing in the world would he ever let the Guard arrest them. If necessary, he would have to strike him and run away.

The Guard shouted:

"Ah, you think it doesn't matter? Well, you will see how things are, because it does matter. It matters to me. And now you and the girl are going to come with me to the station of the Guardia Civil."

And then something rattled noisily. The noise of a shutter being shaken by the wind. And Leopoldo felt a great relief, as if the problem had suddenly disappeared, and the road was cleared. Smiling (and he felt like laughing), he said:

"Don't be ridiculous! All I have to do in order to make you change your mind, is for me to wake up."

Leopoldo did nothing more than say that and, without being able to avoid it, he woke up. The Guardia Civil was gone. All that remained on that winter morning in Madrid was the wind on the balcony of the hotel that was still sounding like a flute.

THE TASTE OF LIPSTICK
(Sabor a Pintura de Labios)

With the last kiss, the most relaxed of all, I separated my head from Nora's and sank it into the pillow. After that I turned over, with my face to the ceiling, and clasped my hands behind the back of my neck. My gaze—unconsciously—turned toward the closed curtains. They were closed so that no one in the house next to us would be able to see us in bed, but open enough so that the light of the afternoon would slip through the crack, like a brilliant flower.

I imagined how the afternoon must look on the other side of the curtain. There must not be a single cloud over Buenos Aires, not even one cloud that would shut off the light. It must be a sky with the stillness of crystal. Only it would be blue, I thought. Still, at times the breeze that wafted over my naked body made me think that a woman, any woman, who was walking through the streets at that moment would have to hold on to the folds of her summer dress, so the wind would not lift them up.

I looked at myself. Squared hips, long legs. A young body that was white and more or less flat-chested. How odd. This body was mine, and as long as I can remember this body had been with me. Not in front of me, but with me. More loyal to me than to the rest of the world. But then, precisely because it was me who had it, that made it different from me. It wasn't an object. Not that. My body was not at the end of a perspective; it was my perspective. Nevertheless, wasn't my body the thing that made it possible for me to use all the other objects in the world? (Or perhaps the thing the world used to invade me with its objects?) I kept looking at my body. I thought about my eyes: if I closed one eye, I saw the point of my nose; and as I extended my vision to things farther away from my eyes, I saw myself as an anchor. My body was my anchor in the world.

A streetcar (the rusty sound of a streetcar) was coming from somewhere. When it got to the corner, it put on its brakes with so many moans that I thought it was going to die. Then, at my side I heard another moan and, when I looked, I saw Nora was crying.

With her legs bent and her hands covering her drooping face, that other human anchor looked like a big question mark. From behind she wasn't so beautiful. I tried to get her to look at me and unlock her arms, but Nora curved over even more and continued crying toward the other side of the wall.

"What's wrong?" I asked her. "You aren't ashamed, are you?" and I caressed her hair.

We had drunk a lot of cognac. I still felt a bit giddy, a pleasing giddiness that absolved me of guilt. Perhaps, in her the cognac was having a different effect.

"Are you ashamed? Don't be foolish. Why should you be ashamed?"

She finally laid down on the bed. Looking at her from the front was how I liked to see her. The waves of her flaxen hair flowed down over her shoulder. Although they were tousled, they still followed the direction they usually did. (The afternoon when we first met, those locks of hair that curved around her neck and fell over her right breast with such vigorous asymmetry disturbed me so much that I felt like, I don't know, like giving them a tug, twisting them in a bun on top of her head, dividing her hair on both sides, or cutting it off, or kissing it. Silky hair, not thick like mine. Her parents were German. Mine were too. But she was on the light-haired side of the race, and I on the dark. With her soft skin and her innocent blue eyes, she had the face of a baby. And her breasts, which looked enormous on her youthful figure, seemed to live on their own.

After a while, without looking at me, she said sadly:

"What we did was wrong. Very wrong. It couldn't be right. Not ever. It was wrong. Just wrong."

Her voice lit up and then went out, like the light of a firefly.

"That's not true," I insisted. "What's wrong about it? Come on, don't be silly. We have already talked about this many times. Don't be silly. It's perfectly natural."

A gust of wind made the flock of hair on her ear tremble. I had the urge to smooth it with my fingers, but I resisted.

"Can't you understand, Nora, that we haven't done anything wrong? We love each other. And the way we love each other, what do you expect? It's perfectly natural."

"This is not love, or anything like that. What do you know about loving? This is ugly, ugly. Leave me alone. Don't bother me any more. Leave me alone."

Once again she hid her forehead and her eyes in her hands. I looked at her for a while in silence. Her teeth slanted forward a bit, making her lips pout like they were expecting a kiss. What babyish skin, like a child who has just been bathed. And yet her curves were powerful, like two magnolias that had recently blossomed during the summer.

"You're not going to go back to him, are you? You are not going back to Arturo… after all this… after what we have been… This is perfect, Nora. We're not two different people, you and I. We are one. You are not going to go back to that man… to that animal."

"Why not?"

"After all this? How could you go back?"

"No, that's true. I couldn't go back. Even if Arturo wanted me… I couldn't go back," and she began to cry.

"Don't be silly, Nora. Look at me. Isn't it better like this? With me, you will have everything you want. Hasn't it been okay? Haven't you enjoyed it? Of course you have. And we can keep it that way. You won't have anything to worry about. Nothing. This" I said with a smile, "will not have consequences. I'm not like Arturo. The brute!"

Nota continued crying. I looked out the window.

The noise of the city was passing by without affecting her. I was beginning to feel impatient. Arturo, the brute… With that disgusting character. I hated him. Tall, strong, big-boned, with his black mustache and his self-satisfied smile. Disgusting. No, Nora would never go back to him. Not after what we had just done. As we know, when these things happen, we discover our true character. What we are. Arturo had possessed Nora ten or twenty times. He had made her his own. Not completely, of course. But the part of Nora that Arturo had possessed was something I could not take away. Yes, it was too late when Nora and I met. In the office of the Ministry. She had come when she was already traumatized. A new employee, a sweet young German woman with a languid voice. Our eyes made contact. And her first visit had been scarcely a week later when I invited her to have tea in my room. Our intimacy was easy. We spoke about this or that accomplishment. Our knees brushed against each other under the table. A casual caress. Then a kiss like someone who feels reluctant. Some nakedness. Only yesterday had I convinced her to spend the night with me. She had been Arturo's. The animal. But now she was mine. Who possessed more? We both possessed part of her, but who had more? No, Arturo would not return. Nora would be happy with me. That was my gift. What was important was to be happy. The first step was taken. It had gone well. I would pamper her and satisfy all her desires. No, why would she want to go back to that brute?

"Dear, don't be like that. Don't cry any more," I said to her. I was surprised to hear my voice soft and full of tenderness. "You are beautiful. I love you." And I kissed her.

"Leave me alone. Why don't you go away and leave me alone?"

She stretched out her hand toward the night table and took another glass of cognac.

I watched her for a while. It was useless to insist. It would be better to wait a while until she calmed down.

"Okay, I'm going. I will do some errands. I have to buy a few things. But I will come and get you about six o'clock. We can go out to eat, okay?"

I got out of the bed and took a shower. I got dressed. I fixed myself up quickly, hardly looking at myself in the mirror. Now Nora was lying on one side of the bed, covered with a sheet. Judging by her heavy breathing, she seemed to have fallen asleep. I went out without making any noise.

I went down the stairs inside the apartment house. The porter was still there.

He had a nasty smile spread across his poorly shaved face.

He looked me up and down, as though he was disrobing me, and he tried to start a conversation.

"It's really hot! Right? But there you are in that jacket. And with your hands in the pockets of the jacket! You know something? If you would just stop looking like you are the boss, and wear some other decent clothes, you would be…"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't want to talk to you? Don't you realize it annoys me?" I said to him, almost screaming. His impertinence made me furious. I went out into the street and started walking down Bartolome Mitre. Behind me, the porter shouted:

"Hey, senorita! Is your girlfriend up there all by herself?"

I bit my lips with anger, and then I noticed the taste of lipstick. I stubbornly kept on walking down the street

THE ELECTRIC LIGHT
(La Lamparilla Electrica)

I

Martin entered the office of Mister Drabble and greeted him respectfully. He showed him the monthly balance sheet. When he was about to leave, he stopped and said:

"Mister Drabble, our employee, Yates, would like a raise."

" Does he deserve one?"

"The boy works hard…"

"In that case, give him one."

"Oh, Mister Drabble," and now Martin smiled, as though he expected it to be rejected: "King has also asked me for a raise."

"King?" Mister Drabble repeated incredulously, and shrugging his shoulders he added:

"All right… give him one too."

"We shouldn't do that, Mister Drabble. I mean, I wouldn't advise it. King is no use to us. We need a younger employee who is more capable. In fact, I was thinking of talking to you about King."

"You mean you're thinking we ought to fire him?"

"Yes, I do."

"Oh no. Poor King. If you had done that without asking me… Not now. I couldn't do that. Poor King."

"But sir, King is unwell. He is neurasthenic. He complains about everything, and he is very forgetful. He can't even add. Today for example, I saw him fumbling with his pencil, moving up and down on a column of numbers. He is never certain. His memory is failing. And there's no hope that he will ever get better: why, he's already forty years old!"

"But he is honorable, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's true, in every respect. He handles the money of the "petty cash" with great care, penny by penny. But that doesn't mean that…"

"Well then," said Mister Drabble, rising up and smiling, "we have no other remedy but to give him a raise…"

"But… but Mister Drabble… King is not capable!"

(Martin was one of those practical people who would have liked to remove all the nervous tics from a sporadic humanity.)

Mister Drabble kindly took him by the arm, and while they were walking toward the door, he told him: "A hundred pesos, that's all, Martin; a hundred pesos."

II

Mister Drabble, who was English, had employed King, the son of an Englishman, only to fill a commitment. Someone in the Anglo-Argentine colony had recommended him with great eagerness. It is already known how those things are… One cannot say no. So as a special favor… since both their parents were from London, and the unfortunate fellow was having a rough time, any job would suit him just fine… So the children of Englishmen after all… and so on… At first glance Mister Drabble understood that King would be useless. But what else could he do? It was all done for good Anglo-Argentine relations. So he gave him a job, and he even came to feel sorry for him. But one thing was certain; he did not see anything that indicated that King was English. It was only his name that was English. All the workers in his Company were tall, and light skinned, and intelligent. King, on the other hand, was timid, small, and dark.

(Dark, as if the shadow of a cloud had fallen right over his face, while the rest of the room was illuminated by sunlight. Dark, because his tendency to appear so withdrawn gave rise to images of darkness: arcades, tents, lean-tos, window shades, sunshades, and eclipses… He kept his head bent down, and one imagined the eave of a rooftop. He walked nervously, as if he were about to change direction with each step, and it gave the impression that he was walking through deep tunnels, or going down to the basement in order to avoid the light and the open spaces. If someone touched him on the shoulder, King jumped back ready to take refuge in one of the burrows that surrounded him: and one imagined his face in the darkness of those burrows.

III

Even as a child King had already had difficulty having relations with other people.

Those "people" included his parents, who had given birth to him with disappointment, and hated it every time they looked at their rachitic child.

The "people" included the friends and relations of his parents, who asked him out of courtesy, "How are you?" and immediately withdrew their hand from this child who was so locked inside of himself, so opaque and so cold, that he seemed to be trapped, not in a body, but in some hole where there might be spiders.

The "people" included the other children in the apartment house where he lived, and later, in the school, who tried to trick him into their games in order to make fun of him and tease him, but were unable to, because of his immobility, so they left him alone.

And eventually, all of these people got used to the idea that it was better not to touch the fool and just leave him alone, the poor fellow.

After that they forgot about him, and he grew up without any friends, like a patch of dampness in an attic.

When he was twenty four years old, by a miracle he found a girlfriend. Her name was Amalia. She was only likeable when she smiled, but when she smiled her face became ugly, because of her swollen lips, and her widely separated teeth. Although Amalia was desperate to get married, their engagement only lasted a year. King was feeling pain in his stomach, his head, and his back, and one day Amalia couldn't stand it any longer so she said goodbye, and sent him packing:

"What you need, is to get married to a nurse."

King dove head first into the lake of Palermo. It didn't take him long to decide to do that, since he had often thought of committing suicide. They rescued him, but after being in the waters of the lake, he came down with pneumonia. He lost his job. He found another. But he lost that one too. The years passed; until finally Mister Drabble gave him a job in his company.

IV

He lived alone all by himself in a miserable hovel. He had nothing to do, unless it was to leaf through some newspaper and look at his hand resting on the newspaper like a paw. It was a paw! He was an animal with the illusion he was different because he was leafing through the paper with a paw. Paw, paw… While he was looking at the furniture, he looked at a vase on the table so fixedly that everything else disappeared. The table also disappeared and the vase was floating in the air, until King became frightened, and he used his vision to put the table back under the vase. He looked through the window at the roofs of the nearby houses; and he let himself be hypnotized by these things. He studied and studied them, and he felt part of them, not to humanize them, but to dehumanize himself. It was like a contraction of his self, like a suicide of his consciousness. He calmed himself until he became part of the world of objects. Inside he fell asleep, in the posture of a coat hanger, or a radio antenna. At times this inner imitation was so intense that while his eyes were studying the shape of a thing, his body felt like he was that thing, and like a ghost his arms were the handles of the sugar bowl, or the two posts of the bedframe, or his torso rocked like a bag hanging on a wire in the patio. During those moments he died and was carried away, until he recovered with a jolt of freedom. Then he was smothered by the pressure of the four walls and would have liked to tear them down. In order to enlarge the room he opened the window and the door, he opened the closet and the bathroom, he opened books, he opened envelopes, he opened his eyes and his mouth, and he even felt the urge to open his stomach by committing hara-kiri.

He was so accustomed to seeing that his room was empty, that if he were to suddenly see someone enter it, it would be no different than if at night he took off his sock and found he had a six toes.

One night, however, King returned to his room with another person.

So how was that? What had happened?

V

What happened? Okay: imagine the story (that Don Juan Manuel tells in *El Conde Lucanor*) about the poor man who cries and cries because he finds himself in the dire necessity of having to eat lupines until, when he turns his head, he sees another man who is even poorer than he is, following him and eating the shells that he throws away. With the addition—which Don Juan never thinks of—that the first man who is poor feels that he is the protector of the other man who is poorer. So here is what happened.

King was walking down Balcarce street. It was in Buenos Aires on one those rainy nights in winter. The irregularity of electric lights—some that were shining down from

above with large pools of light, and others were shining out of the shop windows—gave the shadows a curving motion. A shabby beggar came up to him and asked for charity. King replied that no, he could not do that; he was sorry but he didn't have any change. But the beggar's voice followed him, like an infection that was stuck to his ear. Everything was dark, and King felt apprehensive. He hoped he would not be attacked here at gunpoint. When he came to a dairy store that cast some light over the street, he looked back at the beggar to ask him to leave him alone. They saw each other eye to eye. And they recognized each other. "King!" "Mansilla!" It was an embarrassing moment. Mansilla bowed his head as if he were returning some charity. King patted him. The two companions from the Trade School who had never really been friends, were now reunited in this miserable situation and then were trapped in an astonished silence. (This strange reencounter could only be described with the music and the lyrics of a tango. To have an idea, we advise the reader to think of "La Cumparsita.") Little by little King began to feel, but without understanding it, something he never had felt before: that he, King, was worth more; that he, King, was in a position to help someone… And he took Mansilla by the arm and entered the dairy store. He paid for a tortilla, a coffee with cream, and a ham sandwich. Mansilla, the rascal, took advantage of the opportunity. He humbled himself. He flattered King. He pretended to be much worse than he was. He invented a story filled with pauses and uncertainties. And at the last moment he began to cry. There were several people in the dairy store, so King discreetly invited Mansilla to his room. Once there, with a voice full of emotion, he began to ask him questions. As if all his pride had given way to the need for assistance, Mansilla confessed that was in a terrible situation and if, by the next day, he didn't have five hundred pesos, he would be a lost man.

King didn't have five hundred pesos to loan him, but he promised he would get them. All of his doubts disappeared with the happiness that his friend had brought to him, by demonstrating that he, not King, was the failure.

VI

The next day he took the five hundred pesos out of petty cash. He would put them back at the end of the month.

But as fate would have it, the type of fate without which it is not possible to write stories, Martin entered the office at the exact moment that King was putting the bills in his pocket.

It was not really necessary, but King started with a long explanation. Martin became impatient. "It's okay, man; it's okay." And it was okay. After all, that's why King was in charge of petty cash. He was free to use the small amounts of money. For postage stamps, for supplies, for couriers, and minor expenses. Provided that, at the end of the month, the balance was right… But for King, it was not right. He was tormented. "I have not stolen anything, I have not stolen. I took out five hundred pesos to loan them to a friend. I was about to sign a receipt when you entered. I will do it right now. I hope, sir, that you do not lose your confidence in me because of this."

Very annoyed by now, Martin responded:

"It's okay, King. I already told you it is okay… As long as you don't do it again… And take my advice: never loan money."

King remained there muttering: “I’ve lost his confidence, I’ve lost his confidence.” And his fear of what had happened kept getting stronger and stronger. He put the five hundred pesos back in their place. That afternoon he gave Mansilla the bad news that he would not be able to loan him anything. The next day he asked Martin again:

“Sir, you haven’t lost confidence in me, have you?”

“No, no; don’t worry about it.”

Two days later, he asked again:

“Sir: is it true that I have not lost your confidence?”

On Friday Martin informed Mister Drabble about the whole episode. Mister Drabble reacted with a smile. Then, on Saturday he had the privilege of hearing about the matter from the mouth of King himself.

“How’s it going?” Mister Drabble had said without expecting an answer, when he saw King come in search of the correspondence box. (He entered looking for a pencil in each one of his pockets.) Thinking that he had actually asked him something, King began to speak fervently. He talked about his offence, and ended saying again:

“People have now lost their confidence in me, sir.”

Mister Drabble almost broke out laughing. But then, taking pity, he made an effort to show that he did have confidence in him.

“King,” he said, as if nothing had happened, “Monday, very early in the morning when I am at home, I am going to need to have five thousand pesos. Since today is Saturday and the bank is going to close, go right away and cash this check for me and then on Monday, instead of coming to the office, go directly to my house. Is nine in the morning, on Monday, okay with you? Good, I will expect you then at nine on Monday.”

King was overcome with happiness. They hadn’t lost confidence in him after all. He left the office practically dancing, his heart filled with gratitude, and then went to the bank to cash the check. With the five thousand pesos in his wallet, King zigzagged through the downtown streets. He avoided coming in contact with anyone and kept a close eye on any people he saw. Every once in a while he would touch his wallet. An emotional gesture of freshening his heart with his hand.

VII

On Sunday morning King woke up earlier than usual. (Only he had forgotten that it was Sunday and thought it was Monday.) He sat on the side of the bed and, while he was getting dressed, he thought about Mister Drabble. What a great guy! Such a gentleman. He must be English. He put on his shoes. And he, King, must deserve a great deal of confidence for Drabble to trust him with such a large amount of money. Five thousand pesos. He went to put on his trousers and, when he raised them, the lack of weight made him notice that something was missing. He checked the pockets and shouted: “ No! No!” His wallet was not there in his trousers.

His heart almost stopped beating.

No, that could not be!

He moved his hands through the pockets, all the pockets, again and again. He could not convince himself that the wallet had disappeared. He looked on the floor and under the bed. He looked underneath the rest of the furniture. He looked through the drawers.

He searched through the pockets of his jacket and his overcoat. And again his trousers. No, the wallet was gone. Not sign of it. He sat down on the bed, rigid and bewildered. His eyes looked like those of a corpse. His heart seemed to have stopped. As if he was seeing them through a telescope in reverse, the things in the distance were shrouded in an amber light. Things became transparent and the light shone through them like seeds through a white grape. Things that were farther away were wrapped in an amber light. A light of raw silk. The room looked pale, pale and sickly. Just like his face must look. It didn't feel like he was alive. His mouth felt dry, his body felt empty. He tried to recall what he had done after he left the office. Let's see. He had walked down San Martín. On Cangallo, an unusually large woman had pushed him off the sidewalk… The animal! (Someone near him had laughed: "ha, ha, ha!") No, he couldn't remember everything. His memory was terrible. The day of yesterday that was reflected in his memory was full of long moments of forgetfulness. Wait! What if Mansilla?… The last time they saw each other, he had said he would visit him… A visit during the night to rob him? No, that couldn't be. But there wasn't anything else it could be! It couldn't be a robbery or a loss. Still… He half-heartedly searched through his pant pockets again. What would Mister Drabble say? He had caught him red-handed, "in flagrante," taking five hundred pesos from petty cash. Now, it was five thousand pesos. Who was going to believe him? He had lost everyone's trust. And now… He glanced around the room. A vision of death. And everything looked indifferent, and farther and farther away. He looked at the ceiling, with cracks full of dust, and his eyes followed the electric wire that climbed up along the wall, turned around the cornice, ran along the central beam, and from there went down and was hanging… It was hanging, connected to a large light bulb. King fixed his eyes on the light bulb, hypnotized. The electric light bulb. He looked up at the light bulb hanging on a stretch of cord, and at the stillness of the strangled light bulb.

He got up and started working lethargically.

When everything was ready, he put the noose around his neck, he closed his eyes, he knocked over the chair with his feet and ouch!, he was hanging from a hook,

Then he remembered. The wallet was in a handbag, and the handbag was in a trash can where he had hidden it, fearful that it might be stolen.

VIII

(King and the light bulb were motionless. Each one the same, exactly the same.)

PATRICK O'HARA, THE LIBERATOR

When General San Martín was organizing the army of patriots to cross the Andes and liberate Chile from Spain, Patrick O'Hara asked for permission to go with them.

Since he came with a letter of recommendation from a Freemason friend in London, General San Martín consented.

While they were traveling, San Martín asked O'Higgins:

"You're part Irish, so what do you think of O'Hara?

"He's more of a windbag than a soldier," O'Higgins replied.

But it was too late to get rid of him. The Gauchos, on the other hand, all loved him. They had never seen a man with such bright laughter in his mouth, nor such a heavenly gaze in his eyes. He was tall, and slender, and flamboyant. They carried him like a flag during that summer of 1817.

O'Hara drank as much as the entire regiment. He liked to hug people and dance. He was aglow—like an intoxicated star with its own atmosphere—with a look of friendliness in his eyes. And how he talked! Yes, his tongue was a flag, a little red flag hidden in his mouth, waving in a wind of words. Story after story, lie after lie. As cool as a cucumber, he seemed to be completely sure of the truth of his stories.

One afternoon when they were climbing like condors through the Paso de Los Patos, O'Hara came to General San Martín and told him that he had just learned from an Indian named Coliqueo that farther to the south and hidden in a valley there was a town that had fallen asleep; and that the last gods of Arauco were living in the dreams of people in this sleeping town. O'Hara asked the General's permission to go and free those people.

San Martín listened seriously for a while, but then he couldn't stand it any more, and he broke into laughter.

"Okay," he said, giving him a pat on the shoulder, "if it is to liberate them, go ahead; but be careful, all right?

And he thought to himself, "oh well, this Irish windbag is a lousy soldier. He doesn't even see what is happening. He'll wander around for a while and, when he has had enough and sees that that town doesn't exist, he head for Mendoza. That's fine with me. He is not suitable for the discipline of the regiment. With so many tall stories he is going to go crazy before the month is out. That Indian is another story. I'd better talk to him."

And, in fact, he called Coliqueo and gave him a message for the chieftains farther down the river Diamante.

O'Hara and Coliqueo left the regiment and, riding on mule back, they traveled down one of the trails on the side of the mountain. They didn't have a map, but Coliqueo knew the landmarks. When suddenly saw, floating over that dry vastness, the phantasmagoria of an incredible outlook—a green sea, a pelican, a mangrove, a monkey, over a red valley, all emerging from nowhere—they knew that it had to be the location of the sleeping town that was condemned to assist the gods with their dreams.

For days and nights they rode through difficult passes of the mountains. They passed by precipices that dropped down out of sight; at the same time they found themselves at the bottom of other precipices rising up in the blue. Far behind them were the memories of the last carob trees, the last deciduous trees, the last thickets, and the last cactuses. (O'Hara remembered how they were leaning over and about to give up as they climbed up the steep mountainside.) The snowy peak of Aconcagua, mountains over mountains, the crevices under crevices, the escarpments and mountainsides, were seen all in open space. O'Hara increased his loquacity in those throats of stone. He was nothing more than a voice. The Indian didn't respond. He didn't even listen. O'Hara began to get bored, and then complained:

"But we are not getting anywhere. One step and we are still far away, but when we do make an effort to go forward, it seems like we have hardly advanced a step. It's always the same. Doesn't it seem like we're always in the same place?"

The Indian Coliqueo shook his head.

The mountain range was a sphere, and O'Hara was always in the center. A granite sphere covered with erosions and full of overflows. And O'Hara, always in the middle, traveling around through its spurs, its inclines, its abutments, its ridges and peaks, He looked out from different points of view, but always in the center. Tremendous blows seemed to have made indentations in the planet. Or was it that the planet had shrunk? But if it had shrunk, it had not done so everywhere. The places that had not shrunk were the mountains that O'Hara was looking up at.

They kept moving on, and moving on.

During the night they made a campfire, they had something to drink, and the Irishman tried to cheer himself up.

> One of those nights—but this doesn't have anything to do with our story—was when, for the first time in his life, O'Hara discovered that all of the cheerful events during his life in Ireland were only child's play, compared to the terrible Auracanian cosmogony of Coliqueo.
>
> O'Hara took out some playing cards and spread out them over the ground; and he said that the figures were astonished to be there amid desolate stones, so far from the the flowery meadows of Ulster. Because this king, he explained, was King Conchoba, and this was his beloved queen, the beautiful Deidre. And these were the sons of Usnach. There were also druids. And Aebgreine was the one with a face like an Ace of Coins; and Fergus armed from head to foot like an Ace of Spades. Gelban, happy as the Ace of Cups, and the Ace of Clubs, the faithful Levarcham of the forest. After that O'Hara played his guitar (he didn't have the fingers of a guitarist and he played it only with his thumb, like an English zither.) And he sang. He sang with a tenor voice that was light and heavenly, like his laughter and his gaze. He sang to the sea of his country that brings nets full of sirens to fish the fishermen. He sang to the elves of Velindra, and to the sidhes of Tyntagel. Then O'Hara stood up and began to dance and, with tender Gaelic phrases, inviting his own shadow that finally came and twirled with him around the flames of the campfire. And when O'Hara dropped to the ground breathless, the Indian Coliqueo began to speak.
>
> Coliqueo told how, in his town of Mapuche, each man had several souls and, when he died they left him, all following different paths. He knew this, thanks to his vision after drinking *ualumraqui*. One of the souls flew to the region of fire (*cutralmapu*), another one climbed to the top of the mountain (*uenumapu*), another disappeared in the underground labyrinths (*minchemapu*), and another crossed the sea (*n.omel.afquen*). They returned traveling on dreams of other men, but since they were not together, they were not able to reincarnate. Eventually they tired of their solitude and they died, this time for ever. Coliqueo spoke of the wickedness of the spirits of evil (*añchimallen and uecufu*), and the grace of the spirit of goodness (*ñunechien*). He told how the spirit of fertility dissolved in the arroyos and the lakes and waited there laughing, when the virgins came to bathe in order to have children. He spoke of the ability of *Cuyen* (the Moon, who was the wife of the Sun, and mother of stars) to give men children, or deny them. This ability began many, many centuries earlier, when a young girl went out on a

hill to stab herself without any clothes on. This was the exact time that the moon came out and, when it saw her, it condemned her to pay with her blood, for this lack of respect. Since then, each month all women are "sought out by the moon" (*pecuyen*), and each month the virgins pray to the new moon, those who are recently married pray to the waxing moon, and those who are going to have a child pray to the full moon, and old women pray to the waning moon. Coliqueo told of the rites of the *Copan*, that consists of burning the hand of children with a torch so that, after their death, the scars would create magical flames that would illuminate their path to the other world. He spoke of the image of supernatural beings that appear to older women in certain dreams (*perimontu*) that then possess them and make them pregnant. He spoke of the sacred sacrifice of *Coftun*, who helps a woman who is deceived, by making the guilty man sterile: how, in return, he causes an abortion, or strangles the child; then he cuts off his penis and burns it slowly in a fire, with a midwife witch (*machi*) dancing around it.

After he heard what his friend Coligueo said, O'Hara was overcome with shame, with sadness, and fear, and he no longer wanted to think of the goblins and the fairies of Ireland. He was ashamed that his own lies were so pallid in comparison with the beliefs of the Indian. He was saddened because he realized that he had lost forever the pleasure of telling fairy tales. He was frightened because the things that the Indian Coliqueo told him were not fantasies, but real customs that showed him a reality full of danger. O'Hara admired the adventures of Amadan, the killer of the giants of Slat Mor, Slat Marr, and Slat Beag. And in his dreams he, himself, was Amadan, and he also realized that he was getting closer to a world where magic causes real damage to a man. This was a real world, a cruel world, with lethargic men, and the brazen gods of human dreams.

Now it is midday of the following day, and O'Hara—now becoming taciturn—was looking and looking at Coliqueo, who was taking the lead.

After a while Coliqueo stopped his mule and began to listen.

"What do you hear?"

O'Hara, who did not hear anything, was looking at him with his mouth open. However, after a while he was able to make out a distant sound of a conversation and laughter.

"We are near it," Coliqueo said. "I can hear the sea, and people talking… Tomorrow we'll get there. Do you see that ravine? There is a narrow stream. If one follows the river, the town that sleeps is no more than an hour."

They dismounted and sat down to rest.

The mountains, with their slopes, gave form to the empty space. After some time, the night entered that vast theater of stone. Before going to sleep Coliqueo said:

"It would be best if you would go there by yourself."

"Who? Me?"

"You are not an Indian. You have nothing to fear. But if I go, since I am a Mapuche, the gods will make me dream of them. You already know what to do: all you have to do is wake them up. I'll wait for you here."

"That, certainly not!" O'Hara protested. Nothing is going to make me go alone. What do you think? Either we go together, or not at all."

Coliqueo did not answer and went to sleep. (While he was sleeping he looked like one more boulder that had rolled down the mountainside and was now resting quietly on the plateau.

The next morning when he woke up, O'Hara found himself alone. The damn Indian had even taken his mule. He only left him the weapons, and the knapsack. He looked everywhere but was never able to find any track of the Indian and the mules. He knew that Coliqueo had done this in order to force him to go on by himself. It would serve no purpose to keep looking for him. He was certain that the Indian would be watching him from somewhere above. He would wait for him (let's hope so, anyway!) like he had promised. Without him, he would not be able to get out of this geographical labyrinth. So, he had no choice but to keep going toward the ravine. But before he left, he took a good drink.

Before long he felt like the landscape had become less harsh. Even the slope felt softer under his feet. And suddenly, as he came out of the ravine, like a miraculous mirage he was able to see an enchanted countryside.

It was like an anthology, in miniature, of impossible landscapes. Impossible, because at this altitude of the Andes, in this desolate air that he was cutting his face with a cold wind, O'Hara could not believe that what he was seeing was so tropical. It was absurd, against nature. But there it was, tropical. An academic sea next to a beach with sonnets of regular waves. A sea there, in the middle of the Andes? A sky decorated with palm trees. Palm trees there? The coasts with a thousand mangrove branches. Mangroves at this altitude? Nearby was a jungle, so impenetrable that it did not let a single ray of light leak through. Underneath that vault, vines and lianas crawl along the ground, blinded by the darkness. In the clearings one could see herons, monkeys, parrots, and butterflies. In a swamp an alligator raised its head with a frog sitting between its eyes (a green frog, like a third eye). There were orchids and mimosas. There were mahogany trees and orange groves; weeping rubber trees, and smiling willows. A cloud traveling low through the humid sky was enjoying itself as if it were alive. The black ground was bleeding with wide red wounds. Only the sun was real. Everything else was unreal: a state of nature in the dreams of men from the desert, a state of nature which the gods had transformed. O'Hara's body could feel the that the nature was unreal. Except for his vision, all of the other senses of his body saw a desert, not an unrealistic oasis. The silence and the cold mountain wind shrouded everything, including the hardness of the granite and dryness of his mouth. His body did not feel what his eyes saw; he wasn't bitten by any of the mosquitos; he did not smell the putrefaction of the roots and the leaves; nor did he hear any chirps of the birds that flew by, no sound from so much moving water, no cicadas, no crack when the branches of the trees broke off under their own weight, no sound from the broad leaves of the banana trees. His eyes saw a tropic like one that was seen in a quiet stained-glass window. And inside the oasis he saw people who were fast asleep.

Some were sleeping under leather awnings. Others were walking, but they were sleepwalkers. In a field of poppies while a girl was sleeping (although O'Hara didn't know it, she was dreaming that a white man would someday come and wake them up.) O'Hara walked from one place to the other. He looked at the sleepers, he encountered those who were sleepwalking, and he caressed the sleeping girl. There was a shout. Some clapping of hands. Nothing else. All were deeply asleep, the girl and everyone else. O'Hara made a decision. He removed a canister of gunpowder from his backpack.

He poured it in a bowl and lit a match. A deafening explosion rocked the valley. All the Indians were awakened, and the gods that were living in their dreams began to die. And once they died, they recovered their true form, which was that of giants. All the trees of the forest came together and fused into one gigantic tree that twisted its branches into arms, split its trunk into legs, then grew a head that looked at the ground in desperation, after which it collapsed in the distance, splintering, and turning to dust. The plasma of all the animals came together in the plasma of an amoeba that was two was two miles high and began to stretch its protoplasm and take the shape of a huge man who immediately fell dead and sunk into the cracks of the hillside. The sea rose and stood up; for a moment it was standing in the middle of a basin which was now dry. It tried to say something that was liquid without sound, but then it turned into a cataract that spilled over O'Hara, the liberator.

When the next day came Coliqueo returned, and all the people were completely awake. In the landscape there was nothing tropic, nor any butterflies. Some Indians tested their weapons, others were eating. Coliqeo tried to explain to them what had happened, and render homage to the heroism of O'Hara, the Liberator; but they didn't want to believe him. They said they had never seen a white man, that they had never dreamed, and that they did not know what "gods" meant…

"Ingrates," Coliqueo thought.

And he turned toward the Diamante River to complete the mission that General Martín had given him.

MORE INCIDENTS
(Mas Casos)

A DIALOGUE
(Diálogo)

The first dialogue was not human. It is recounted in Genesis (I, 3).

God said:

"Let there be light."

And Chaos responded.

(There was no doubt that Chaos responded, because there was light.)

God and Chaos understood each other. And they continue to understand each other, as those who are capable of hearing the two voices in this conversation, know quite well.

THE BRIBE
(El Soborno)

Carlos was seven years old. They were eating supper and, all of a sudden, with a rapid movement so that his parents would not notice it, he removed a bone from the plate and tossed it over his shoulder to the dog.

"No, no! Don't do that. Don't ever do that!" insisted his mother. You might hit the Guardian Angel. Perhaps you just hit him in the eye. Do you think it would be good to go around with a one-eyed angel?

Carlos turned around and looked at the air, which was disturbed. That was how he learned that there was always a Guardian Angel behind him. After that, he grew up obedient, frustrated, and sad. The Angel followed him everywhere. Every time he was about to do something bad he heard his gilded voice: "Don't do that, don't do that."

One time—he was now fifteen years old—he was cutting off a bunch of grapes when the owner of the house came and slapped him in the face. Carlos, as quick as a viper, stabbed him in the heart with his knife.

Oh dear! What now?

He turned around and started talking to his Guardian Angel:

"Yes, I know you're there. I know that you are spying on me, and that you're going to go and tell God about it. But do you see this?" and he showed him the knife. "It is brand new, made of steel, with blood on it. You have never had anything like this, right? Well, I will give it to you, if you keep this secret."

The Guardian Angel accepted the bribe and went away, happily playing with the reflections of the knife.

God never knew about the crime of Carlos (nor did He even miss the angel who never returned to heaven).

But Carlos, removed from the vision of God and with no Guardian Angel, still felt the pangs of regret. Were God and the Angel only policemen in an opera? The bribe hadn't served for anything, His conscience had a voice of its own.

THE ERRANT GOD
(El Dios Errante)

He was a violent God. He created with great fury and, afterward, was so agitated that He could no longer come near His own creations, so that He would not destroy them with His tremendous suddenness. He had to look away and go dashing off—with a feeling of sadness—to create somewhere else.

When catastrophes were unleashed on earth, it was because this God, longing to make a visit, had taken a step in the direction of men.

THE SLEEPING LEG
(La Pierna Dormida)

That morning when he woke up Felix looked at his legs lying on the bed and, ready to get up, he thought to himself: "what if I left the left leg here?" He thought about it for a moment. "No, impossible; if I placed the right one on the floor, it would surely take the left one with it, because they're stuck together. Well then! Let's see what happens. And it worked. He went to the bathroom, hopping on one leg, while the left leg went on sleeping over the sheets.

THE TWO GHOSTS
(Las Dos Fantasmas)

On that dark, overcast, summer night I went to lie down under an ombu tree. I was about to fall asleep when it sounded like a cow began to moo. A long, rusty moo, of squeaky hinges. In the field—black, black, black—a large door opened with the same squeaky noise. And he came out of the door, like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Ah, pardon me," he said when he saw me. I must have been easier to see, illuminated by his bright glow.

I rose half way up, resting on my elbow, and with a dry throat I asked him:

"Who the heck are you?"

"Forgive me. I made a mistake."

"What do you want?"

"Me? Nothing. Goodbye. As I told you, I made a mistake. This is the other world, isn't it?"

"No. What do you mean the other world? This is the world."

"Ah, is that what you call it?"

And he disappeared.

DEATH
(La Muerte)

The woman driver (her dress was black, her hair was black, her eyes were black, but her face was so pale that, in spite of the fact it was midday, it looked like a flash of lightning had come to rest on her skin) the woman driver saw a girl in the road who was making signs that indicated she wanted her to stop. So she stopped.

"Could you give me a ride? Just to the town," the girl said.

"Get in," the female driver said, and the car sped off at full speed along the road that skirted around the mountain.

"Thank you very much," the girl said with a friendly expression, "but aren't you afraid to give a ride to unknown people? They could hurt you. It's so deserted here!"

"No, I'm not afraid."

"What if it was someone who robbed you?"

"I'm not afraid."

"And if they killed you?"

"I'm not afraid."

"You're not? Well then, let me introduce myself, said the girl who had large, bright, imaginative eyes. And immediately, trying to keep herself from laughing, she pretended to speak with a cavernous voice. "I am Death. D-e-a-t-h."

The female driver smiled mysteriously.

On the next curve the car careened off the road. The girl, lying among the stones, was dead. The woman driver continued on foot and, by the time she got to a cactus, she disappeared.

WINGS
(Alas)

I was then practicing medicine in Humahuaca. One afternoon they brought me an injured child. He had fallen off the edge of a cliff. When I removed his poncho in order to examine him, I saw two wings. I checked them, and they were not injured. As soon as the child was able to speak I asked him:

"When you felt yourself falling, son, why didn't you fly?"

"Fly?" he said. "Fly, and have everyone laugh at me?"

ECONOMY
(Economía)

The Angel said to him:

"Listen carefully, Cristobalón. I have given you what you asked for; now, from here on, you can perform all the miracles you want. However, every miracle you perform will shorten your life. How many will it take? I don't know"

Quite content, Cristobalón began to economize. And he died when he was ninety years old, without having performed a single miracle.

THE COURTESY OF GOD
(Courtesía de Dios)

Today I was resting in my dark corner, when I heard the footsteps of someone who was approaching. Another one who had discovered my hiding place, and had come to adore me! What would I have to transform myself into this time? I looked toward the corridor, and I saw the poor creature. He was hairy, he was walking on two feet, in his sunken eyes there was an expression of fear, of hope, and love, and his snout seemed to smile. Then, in order to be courteous to him, I adopted the form of a large chimpanzee and went to meet him.

THE FLUVIAL AWAKENING
(Despertar Fluvial)

The caravel was grounded on the bank between the stones and the branches. The crew, wearing red hats, was shouting so loud that I couldn't hear what the river was muttering. The river turned over in its bed and seemed like it was about to wake up. Shh!" I told the sailors. But it was too late. They disappeared, The caravel also disappeared. The river woke up, opened its eyes, looked at the empty riverbank, and began to flow.

THE SPIDER
(La Araña)

I felt something on my hand, and when I looked it was a spider.

I leaned over and asked it: "What are you doing here?"

But the spider jumped ahead of me and asked:

"What are you doing here?"

I leaned over again and said:

"I don't want to bother you, but this is my world, and you should go away…"

Again, the spider jumped ahead of me, and said:

"I don't want to bother you, but this is my world, and you should go away."

I understood then that it was impossible to engage in a dialogue. I left my hand behind and went away.

THE RAIN
(La Lluvia)

He was looking through the window at the street, and the mountain in the distance. The village was gleaming under the sun. However, inside the room it was pouring rain. With resignation, he opened the umbrella and sat down on the bed. The rain was falling steadily from the ceiling that had recently been painted with whitewash, but had no sign of a cloud. He knew it would be useless to try and escape. Before, he had been able to get away from irregularities like this, yes, but only to be faced with something that was worse. Now, even the umbrella seemed like a foolish protection. He closed it and felt the rain drumming on his head. He waited. The room was starting to become flooded. Some of the furniture began to float. He could no longer stand on his feet, and he swam from one wall of the room to the other. He looked through the window again, but horizontally, like a fish looking through an aquarium. The landscape outside was still gleaming in the sunlight. Finally, he could no longer see through window, because the line of flotation was approaching the ceiling. It finally reached the ceiling where he died, by drowning.

AN ANGEL
(Angel)

"Look, there's an angel over there," Luis told me, pointing to the other side of the room, where a girl—tall, slender, blonde, beautiful, and smiling—was chatting with a group of visitors.

At first it surprised me that she was moving her arms so much while she was talking. "The poor girl" I thought, "they have cut off her wings, so she has to flap her hands."

But no. She had wings, all right, though we couldn't see them. She must have had them because, when she left the party, she went out on the patio and began flying up into the night.

MICROSCOPY
(Microscopia)

We thought that what was hanging on the wall was something like the tusk of some hippopotamus, but our miniscule host explained that it was nothing more than his first milk tooth. It seemed incredible, but our host must have been a giant and was shrinking, year after year. Now the fifty-year-old was the size of a dwarf. However, he still had his graceful human figure. He walked with us toward the street where it had recently rained, and before he said goodbye, we saw him dive into a swamp. He shouted at us while he was swimming, that the next time we come to visit him we should bring a microscope.

THE SHIP
(El Barco)

When Captain Walter removed his clothes before he jumped into water, one could see the delicate pattern of blue veins under his skin. He did it in many different places with water. He worked patiently at a task that was subtle and delicate. It went on for years. At first people thought he was a masochist, but no, he was a sea dog with the soul of an artist. When he was finally done, he took out an X-ray and showed it to everyone with pride. Then we could see the beautiful ship that, with all the time he had spent in the water, had formed inside his flesh.

THE MIRROR AND THE WATCH
(El Espejo y el Reloj)

Everyone left: the mother, the father, and the sister. Everyone. Even the nurse went out into the street to speak with her boyfriend. Antonio took advantage of that moment of freedom. He rose up and got out of bed. As he did that he was filled with fever, with sweat, with throbbing, and pains. He had also grown some new legs that still didn't know how to walk. What a strange thing to raise up—higher, higher, and higher, and be lighter, lighter, and lighter—and then not fly. He began to wander around the inside of the house, room by room. He stopped in front of each piece of furniture and looked at it, amazed by how each one was comfortably enjoying its solitude, as though he, Antonio, had already died. He discovered the attic. The attic! After being forgotten for so many years, the attic had become shut off like a secret. Trembling with desire, Antonio pressed on the door, trying to force it, until it opened. With a great yawn the attic swallowed a mouthful of light. The rats, hiding in the hollows of the baseboard, saw how cockroaches were coming as fast as they could, but still rather slowly. A blowfly filled the air around Antonio with its raucous music and caused him to look around through it. There were all the pieces of junk of his crazy grandfather. Books, two trunks, an oil painting of some spider webs, four gas lamps, and a wicker rocking chair. And, one in front of the other, a large mirror with a scar on the side, and a grandfather clock that was still standing. He went to see himself in the dim moon of the mirror, but he was forced to deflect his vision to the reflection of the clock. And the clock which, for years and years had been keeping

track of the time in its large belly without the slightest sound, began to strike the hours in reverse. All the old, accumulated time poured out of the clock.

Antonio was startled. Ah, the yellow waters of the clock's reflection caught up with him and overwhelmed him. He suddenly felt himself violated by another self that had somehow gotten inside his soul, a self that, at the wrong time, was also keeping an eye on the mirror. And in order to look in the mirror, this other self was using his eyes. And with anxiety Antonio saw how, inside the mirror—that began to thaw like a frozen river in the spring—dead images came back to life, and he saw his grandfather—insane eyes, and drooling mouth—that became fused with the reflection of his own face.

THE MODULE
(El Módulo)

I don't know how (I suppose that darn Pythagoras was to blame) Bernardo Galindez got the idea that the universe (or the pluriverse, as he called it) was a system of numbers. If he had stayed there he would have been in the company of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz. But Bernardo went further. He believed in a God who was very interested in mathematics. The most basic operation of this God was to form a series of natural numbers. If He created something, He could no longer stop, and He did it over and over again, endlessly. (It was understood that He did not want to create anything that was unique; after all, the only unique thing in the pluriverse always had to be God Himself.) But since God was not going to spend eternity creating the same thing ad infinitum, He tired of what he was doing and suddenly interrupted one of His series. Out of laziness, He created some things with the capacity to reproduce themselves. His first great success was the amoeba. Except that in order to be sure that no other species would be immortal (God was pretty selfish, don't you think? He had to be the only immortal being in the pluriverse!) He decided to destroy His creations when they reached a certain number. Each species, therefore, had its own module of obliteration. Once this module was reached—definite for each species, but variable from species to species—pow! the whole series disappeared, as if by magic. That's how Bernardo explained the extinction of a species. A matter of modules! What, for example, had been the module of dinosaurs? The dinosaurs had started appearing one after the other, very happy and unscrupulous, until they reached the module; and once that happened they became extinct, just like that. (In vain we told him: "Now look, Bernardo, the species are not fixed since they evolve; just look, the species that have stayed unchangeable from the Cambrian period until today are precisely those who have produced a population of the highest number, and not even God puts limits on oysters. The cause of extinction must be seen as their inability to adapt to their environment. And look, a species doesn't become extinct all at once; it weakens little by little in a slow process until the one that dies is not the species, but a poor little animal, frightened and alone." But to no avail. Bernardo said: "The problem is that you don't believe in the Module!" And he walked away quite self-satisfied.)

The module of the human species was the real obsession of Bernardo. And that wasn't all. One day a baby was born and, before there was time to cut the umbilical cord, the baby reached the fulmination of the module and there it goes, along with the dinosaurs.

In order to see if he had found the human module—and to see if it could be avoided—Bernardo got caught up in the dizzying task of studying demographics. He studied the statistics of world population, and his heart started racing when he thought that five million years ago there were about twenty million people on the entire planet, and today the population of the world doubled that amount every year; so that by 1850 it had reached one billion, and seventy years later it had reached two and a quarter billion… Then our good friend Bernardo launched his most generous crusade to save humanity; and that was to convince people they must keep the population where it is now in order to keep it from reaching the module and Kaboom!: we become smoke. He wrote articles in favor of birth control, eugenics, polygenesis, euthanasia, and genocide. They published the articles because they thought they were insignificant, but when there were protests by those who were pious or democratic, in order to avoid a conflict the editors silenced what looked like an effort to destroy life. It seemed, though, that since Bernardo was not misanthropic, he was philanthropic. (This proved to be correct when the Fascists asked him to write in favor of war, "the best hygiene for the world," and he refused.) So still feeling philanthropic, but banned from all the newspapers, Bernardo had no alternative but to take direct action. He began to exterminate the lives of groups of people, using explosions. He chose groups carefully, for example, like when his explosion destroyed a synod of bishops who were composing a pastoral letter against the use of contraceptives. His exterminations were quite ingenious. They had the beauty of a perfect crime. We learned about them from the memoirs he wrote while he was in prison. Persecuted by the world and reduced to impotence, but more convinced than ever about his theory of the Module, in his memoirs he described how he had carried out his exterminations. And he ended with the advice that, in view of the difficulties, people ought to choose a heroic solution: committing suicide. After finishing his allegation, in order to practice what one preaches, he hanged himself in his cell, in this way distancing humanity, by at least one number, from the tragic Module.

THE HUNTER
(El Cazador)

The foolish child wanted to be a bird hunter. He went out in the forest with a slingshot in his hand. He heard the trembling of a flag in the wind. He turned around. It was a humming bird, vibrant and dark, like a hole in the light. As it flew away, the humming bird made a gash in the blue and white silk of the afternoon. There goes a humming bird! Pling, the foolish boy fired his slingshot. It did not hit the target.

From sharpening his senses he had learned how to tell when an angel was passing by. The invisibility of the angel made the other things more visible, accentuating their color, and brightening the air.

That was when the foolish boy invented his famous method for finding angels, and he started hunting for birds.

THE OUTCAST
(El Desterrado)

Federico took the train and returned to his house in Belgrano. It was night, and his wife and children would already be waiting for him. He saw the sign of the train station: B-E-L-G-R-A-N-O. He got off the train and began to walk. Suddenly he noticed that the streets were unfamiliar. Everything had changed: streets, buildings, gardens, everything but the train station. On the corner where his house should have been was another one. Before it had whitewashed limestone, now it had red bricks; before there was a tree in the front, now there was mailbox painted like an American flag. But the door was the same so he opened it and went inside. Seated around a table with glasses and bottles of brandy, were some strange looking men shooting dice. They looked at him angrily and started shouting something he could not understand. He could only tell that they were shouting at him in English. His heart stopped. He realized that tonight, with a big leap, the neighborhood of Belgrano had changed positions with another neighborhood that came from the devil knows where. He was walking through a neighborhood that had rushed here, in order to trap him. He tried to turn around and run back to the station. He ran, but didn't go anywhere. And while he was running and running without moving a step, the men roared with laughter and slowly began to surround him. They watched his legs that were running without advancing, and one of them grabbed him with both hands and began squeezing, squashing, and compressing until he got smaller and smaller. Finally he was only a dot. Like the dot on one of the dice. They put him in the cup with the other dice, and the men continued playing. Federico waited for his turn. Sooner or later his dot would have to roll around and come up on one of the dice. But they finished their game and started another, and he never came up. They kept on throwing the dice, but his dot never showed up; the dice flipped through the air and, click!, his dot ended up on the bottom. The cheater had loaded the dice. When he woke up, he was not in Belgrano; he was in Chicago.

AMOK
(Amok)

Santiago ran amok. It was homicidal madness, as rapid as spilled water. He launched himself into the street, with a dagger held in his hand. It was the time of the siesta, and the village was almost empty. A child was playing with some ants. Santiago gave him a stab, and went on like a flash. A peasant had just caught a fish in the river: another stab. Further on, an old woman was bending over to pick up a rag: she fell down when she was stabbed. Santiago continued running, and running, and running… Finally he could go no further. Exhausted, he dropped to the ground. There, he finally recovered his lucidity. He waited for them to come and exterminate him, like a mad dog.

What came was an angel.

"You have done wrong, but it wasn't your fault. Let's try to remedy it, okay? Now run back the same way you came, following your own footprints. When you pass one of your victims, touch them: they will get up again and live as if nothing had happened, without remembering your stab. This way you will erase your history of blood.

So he did that. He retraced his path and canceled the time that had passed. He touched the old woman who got up and picked up the rag. He touched the peasant who looked at his fish and smiled. He touched he child who raised his hand with an ant on his finger…

Nobody realized that Santiago had run amok. Nevertheless, the child, the peasant, and the old woman avoided him whenever he passed, afraid of him without knowing why. And when Santiago happened to see them somewhere in the village, he lowered his head with shame, and hurried away as though he was pursued by some lost soul.

THE NEEDY
(El Menesteroso)

The King was dying and the Prince knew that he would inherit the his powers before long. So the crown Prince announced that he would like to meet with the neediest person in the kingdom. (In that way he intended to win the sympathies of the people.) But there wasn't any needy person in the kingdom. Then the ministers picked a man at random, and they had him fired from his job, they took away his home, they mistreated him, and they injected him with a bacillus…

THE RING
(La Sortija)

It was Friday in the fisherman's house. When they gutted the fish they found a ring in its belly. The fish had swallowed it at the bottom of the sea. The youngest daughter put it on her finger. At school it astonished her little playmates, because it was an undulating ring of water…

CONVERSATION WITH THE PURSUER
(Diálogo con el Perseguidor)

In the mirrors Ramon could catch sight of someone spying on him from behind. He also heard a vague murmur behind his back, and he could feel someone's breath. But if he turned around, nothing. Still, he began to talk with his follower all the time. And he started walking sideways like a crab. That's how we saw him: bent to the right, his head twisted, speaking out of the side of his mouth, with blue pouring out of his strangely enlarged eye, in conversation with the invisible devil that was always hot on his heels.

THE FINAL JUDGEMENT
(El Juicio Final)

Raul became friends with his Guardian Angel. They had many long conversations with each other. About history, about art, about philosophy… One day the Angel—who was vacuous and insensitive—revealed the secret:

"The Final Judgement will come when the trumpet sounds, but it will be slow. All oranges will become an ideal orange. All the emeralds will become a pure emerald. All men with come together as an archetype of man… And the same with everything. When all the innumerable things, which are well classified, have become reduced to unique examples, God will preserve them as a museum.

ALMOST
(Casi)

"I hate this twentieth century where we live now," Raimundo exclaimed. "As far as I am concerned, all this can go to hell, and I going to to the Catholic eighteenth century."

"Ah, so you don't care about me!" Jacinta complained. "And what about me; what am I going to do? You're going to leave me here, all by my self?"

Raimundo reflected a moment, and afterward he replied:

"Yes, that's right. I cannot leave you. Okay, don't cry any more. Uff! That's enough, I'm staying. Didn't I say that I am not going to go, silly?"

And he stayed.

THE SWEET MEMORIES
(Las Dulces Remembranzas)

Old Manuel asked an angel to make him a child again. Those childhood memories are so sweet!

The angel made him a child.

Now Manuel doesn't have any sweet memories.

THE PRINCE
(El Príncipe)

When the prince was born, there was a grand national celebration. Dancing, fireworks, ringing of bells, and cannon shots.

With such a barrage of noise, the newborn died of fright.

SADISM AND MASOCHISM
(Sadismo y Masoquismo)

A scene in hell.

Sacher-Masoch comes to talk speak with the Marquis de Sade and, masochistically, asks him:

"Hit me, hit me! Hit me hard, that's what I like."

The Marquis de Sade raises his fist and is about to hit him, but he checks himself and, with a cruel expression, he tells him sadistically:

"No."

THE DESIRE TO INTRIGUE
(Ganas de Intrigar)

In the corridors of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters there a little of everything: a madman, a genius, a bookworm, a pedant, an extremist, a Don Juan, a fool, a coward, a miscreant. Octavio was the mysterious one.

He walked on tiptoes as though, at that very moment, he was going to sneak and wake up some sleeping truth. He moved his shoulder forward like a bishop in a game of chess. He delicately brought his fingers together, as if he were carrying invisible butterflies by their wings. His looks from the corner of his eyes, his insinuating smiles, the flirtation of his eyebrows, made him seem feminine. With the sharp edge of his voice he seemed to want to cut hairs in two, but he never finished an idea. He never gave away anything.

("I know what I am saying…;" "Ah, if I were to tell you…;" "Some day you will see…;" "Believe me, you are mistaken…;" "Yesterday… well… nothing… what for… you wouldn't understand me…")

ipeople to follow him. He approached a group of students, he listened to see what they were talking about and interrupted with a phrase like this:

"Well, I like Góngora better." And right away, he would leave without saying why.

Or maybe: "Of those three baroque writers, the second one makes me sick. I really can't stand him." And then with nothing more, he would walk away.

If someone asked him for an explanation about who this second baroque writer was, and who the other two writers were, turned his head without slowing down; he rolled his eyes and smiled pityingly, indicating with a slight wave of his hand that it was not worth the bother of adding any explanation. He seemed like some Mister High and Mighty of dialectics.

His use of witticisms that were only half finished really annoyed me. When Octavio finally came to realize that I had lost interest in his enigmas, he must have felt humiliated. No matter how he felt, he still tried to seek my friendship. I pretended not to notice. Then he resorted to laughter: it sounded like the first drops of rain on a dry newspaper that someone had forgotten in the patio. I never asked what he was laughing about. Then he resorted to the trick of using photographs: he would take them out of his pocket and look at them with expressions of delight, as if they were some sort of forbidden nudity. I never showed curiosity. Octavio became desperate. One day I was in the library reading an interesting theory by the eminent Cordovan Father, Nimio de Anquín, and Octavio came up to me:

"Hi there," he said to me. I didn't answer him, I didn't look at him.

He stayed there for a moment, reading over my shoulder. Then, suddenly he stuck his hand out toward the book, and he pointed his finger at a passage, exclaiming excitedly:

"Read that, read that! There is no place for me here any more!"

And after that he shot himself in his temple. The carpet slowly absorbed his blood.

I copied the passage his finger had pointed at (a finger that must have continued growing on its own by feeding off the cadaver):

"The essential understanding of the absolute object requires the nullification of any Other. But it means the immolation of the conscious mind, or rather the self-immolation of the Other that is absorbed or swallowed by the abyss of the Itself in its infinite process of self realization."

I always have this passage with me, and I read it constantly. Each time I understand it less. I know that is useless to look there for the cause of Octavio's suicide: he killed himself, pure and simply, out of the desire to intrigue. But now, each time I read the passage, I feel that Octavio inhabits it, and that he is laughing while he spies on me through the little holes of the "o."

THE UNDEAD
(El Muerto-Vivo)

We went to the cemetery to bid farewell to the body of Leon. It was a cold winter morning. Ever since dawn the dark, cloudy sky had threatened that it was going to rain. And now it was raining cats and dogs, and the wind was rocking the umbrellas. The father and the brother of Leon were weeping as they hugged each other. Shivering, soaked to the bone, with laryngitis, sneezing, and fever, I did my duty: I read the funeral sermon, based on a draft of *La Lira*. Suddenly, I saw him in the last line of the funeral procession. It was him, the deceased Leon! He was listening to me with his face hidden between the raised flaps of a raincoat, and a large sombrero. It shocked me so much that I let go of the handle of the umbrella, and it went flying away with its black wing. Someone respectfully brought it back to me. I continued my speech, but without really wanting to. I understood that Leon had tricked us all by pretending to be dead so that he could attend his own funeral and oblige us to praise him. Between the phrases I looked for him, and he was always there with his hands in his pockets, enjoying himself. At the end of my speech I tried to go and talk to him, but he quickly ran off through the crowd. He traveled rapidly, with short steps, so as not to stumble on the rough paving. Then, I saw him disappear in the narrow streets of the city.

Several years have passed, and everyone continues to believe he is dead. I do not dare tell anyone what I know of his disgusting joke. What for? They wouldn't believe me. Leon is now a major figure in the history of our poetry; "a distinguished poet, who died prematurely." And so on, and so on, blah, blah, blah. Nobody remembers me, except for my speech which was used as a prologue for his "posthumous" poetry. I will never forgive him. Every time I hear someone talk about Leon's poetry, I feel a burst of anger. I expect to see him someday, when I least expect it, as I turn around a corner. I am afraid to walk through the city, because I know that, when I see him, I will have to kill him.

THE MAN-FLY
(El Hombre-Mosca)

Leonidas had often seen a fly on the ceiling. But this was on Wednesday 17th, at five in the afternoon. He saw a fly and found his vocation. Leonidas forgot about everything. He climbed up the walls and did not speak anymore. He traveled on the ceiling through the entire house. To eat, he came down and walked on his hands and knees.

THE END
(El Fin)