

Carlos
Fuentes

A Change
of Skin

B O O K S B Y

C A R L O S F U E N T E S

Where the Air Is Clear

The Good Conscience

Aura

The Death of Artemio Cruz

A Change of Skin

Terra Nostra

The Hydra Head

Burnt Water

Distant Relations

The Old Gringo

**A
CHANGE
OF
SKIN**

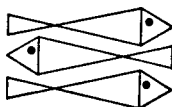
**CARLOS
FUENTES**

T R A N S L A T E D B Y

S A M H I L E M A N

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Carlos Fuentes

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1

AN

IMPOSSIBLE

FEAST

The Narrator ends his narration one September night in La Coupole and decides to employ the moth-eaten device of the epigraph. Seated at the next table, Alain Jouffroy hands him a copy of *Le Temps d'un Livre*:

*. . . comme si nous nous trouvions à la
veille d'une improbable catastrophe ou
au lendemain d'une impossible fête . . .*

That finished, the book begins. An impossible feast. And the Narrator, like the character of the ballad, before beginning to sing, first asks permission.

△ When the four of you entered today all you saw was the narrow filthy streets and the packed houses that are all alike, all of one story, all a blind wall with a too wide door of cracking wood, all daubed yellow and blue. Sure, I know, now and again you passed a dwelling that crowed money, an elegant home with windows that watch the street and boast those touches Mexicans find so irresistible, fancy wrought-iron grilles, projecting awnings of cross-ribbed canvas. But where, Isabel, were the good citizens who live behind

those windows? Did they come out to welcome you to town, or did they leave that office to the dust and the filth, the misery crowded around you, the barefoot women with dark faces wrapped in shawls, the heavy pregnant bellies, the naked children, the packs of street dogs. Packs of mongrels that drift everywhere, go nowhere. Some yellow, some black, all lost, listless, strengthless, hungry, scratching at their infestations of sores and fleas, poking along gutters for garbage scraps, crippled, emaciated, with the slanted red and yellow eyes, dripping infection, that betray their coyote ancestry; white-nosed, hair worn off, bare hides splotched with scabs, torpid and purposeless as they whine the slow rhythm of this torpid purposeless town that once upon a time was the pantheon of an ancient Mexican world. Cholula, town of misery today, festering today, this Sabbath the eleventh of April, 1965, with diseased dogs and women with swollen wombs who pad the dust barefoot and laugh silently as they exchange their joking secrets and their secret jokes in voices that cannot be heard, words thinly inflected, fused chains of inaudible syllables.

Hernán Cortés, man of Spain, observes the four Macehualte messengers who have come from Cholula bearing not provender but a dry reply: our caciques regret they're unable to attend you today, Teul. They find themselves ailing, too unwell to travel here and present their gifts. Cortés listens while the four Macehualtes mock him and the men of Tlaxcala, formerly his enemy, now his allies, frown and mutter. Beware of Cholula and the power of the city of Mexico, they warn. They offer ten thousand men at arms to accompany him. Cortés smiles. Only a thousand are needed. He will march echoing peace.

Echoing peace, the Spaniards march, making camp at the end of the day beside the river only a short league from Cholula. Their Indians throw up huts for them and join them in standing watch. Sounds in the darkness, the rustle of invisible movement through brush. The cold night. And during the night, emissaries come out from the city with chickens and corn bread that they heap around the fire before Cortés's hut. His hair rumpled and his shirt open at

the collar, Cortés directs his interpreters to express thanks. Jerónimo de Aguilar: low boots, cotton trousers. Malinche, who is the captain's mistress and guide as well as his interpreter, with her black tresses and ironic smile.

You saw their children today, Isabel. The women with narrow foreheads, small teeth set in thick gums, hair in short braids, the prematurely old, shawl-wrapped young women whose bellies are big with the next child while the last holds to their hand or sleeps in their arms or rides behind wrapped in the shawl. The men who wear white shirts and drill pants and stiff varnished straw hats and pass slowly on bicycles or walk by with the tools of their labor in their hands. Youths whose skin is smooth chocolate but whose dark hair bristles. Fat men with thin ragged mustaches and worn boots and starched shirts. Soldiers with pistol in belt, cap acock, cheek or temple or throat vividly scarred by a knife gash, toothpick between teeth as they lean their shaved necks back against the columns of the arcade that faces the wide, empty, decaying plaza. The four of you visited that plaza, but you didn't stay long. A garden gone dry. A cacophonic band in the arbor interminably grinding out cha-cha-chas. Didn't you dig that cheerful little band, Pussycat? And when the band rested, didn't you dig the plaza loudspeaker that was tuned in on a local radio disc jockey who played one twist record after another, dedicating each to a local señorita? You moved away past the dreadful statues that stand before the arcade: bronze Hidalgo with the standard of Guadalupe and the legend, Remember posterity; Juárez bathed in gold, his face solemn: He was shepherd, seer, and deliverer.

At dawn the sacred city's forty thousand white houses gleam. They move toward them, crossing the band of rich tillage land, densely populated, that lies around the city. Cortés, on horseback, observes water and pasture that might support great herds of cattle, but he also sees the army of beggars who have come out of the city and troop from dwelling to dwelling, marketplace to marketplace, a barefoot ragged multitude of deformities and outstretched hands, of mouths munching rotten ears of corn. The

Spaniards leave behind the plots of chile peppers, corn and vegetables, agave plants, and approach the high-towered city. They are welcomed by packs of starving dogs. Cholula, pantheon city of four hundred towers, oratories, pyramids. From the towers and the esplanades and the plazas rise the sounds of trumpets and kettledrums. They are met now by a procession of caciques and priests wearing embroidered cotton robes cut like tunics and waving censers of fragrant copal. The censers are dropped when the priests see the thousand Tlaxcalans. No, they protest, we cannot allow our enemies to enter. Cortés orders the men from Tlaxcala to camp in the fields and proceeds with only his Spaniards, his guard of Cempoaltecan, and the artillery. The people of Cholula look down from the flat rooftops with amazement and laughter. The horses, those gray and sorrel monsters. The crossbows, the cannon, the firelocks. Kettledrums go on booming.

Now, within the city, Cortés addresses them. They must abandon the worship of idols. They must cease human sacrifice. They must no longer eat the flesh of their fellow man. They must give up sodomy and their other degeneracies, and they must swear obedience to the King of Spain, as have so many other powerful caciques. The Cholulans reply: we will obey your king but we will not forsake our gods. Smiling, they conduct the captain and his tiny arm to great lodging halls.

You walked the length of the paint-flaking arcade, Isabel, Franz beside you, Elizabeth and Javier following. Green, gray, pallid yellow. From a small grocery came smells of soap and stale cheese. Next door was an oyster bar where the owner had placed two aluminum tables and seven wicker chairs out in the open air. But no one sat to eat the oysters in the wide tall jars of gray water. Officialdom occupies the central part of the arcade. The town hall, the treasury, the headquarters of the Third Battalion. Shyster fixers and go-betweens dressed in black. The distant, unworried, coldly smiling faces of the soldiers. Police headquarters behind a red mosaic. Then the general store of the Brothers García: brooms and brushes, sacks, cables, wire, mats, willow baskets, and a placard over the door: Without exception of persons, we do not want gossip.

For two days there is peace. But on the third day food is no longer supplied. Old men come bringing only water and firewood and stating that no food is left. Montezuma's latest envoy arrives and is conducted to Cortés, whom he advises, "Do not come to the city of Mexico." There are throttled screams, a faint stench of blood as the Cholulans make sacrifices for victory; during the night seven children have been killed on the altar of Huitzilopochtli. Cortés orders continuous alert and has two priests from the great pyramid brought before him. Wearing robes of black-dyed cotton, the priests converse with Malinche, the princess whom the Spaniards call Doña Marina. They reveal Montezuma's orders and the Cholulans' secret plans. The Spaniards are to be seized and twenty are to be sacrificed on the pyramid by Montezuma's direct command; he has sent the caciques promises, jewels, garments, a drum of purest gold. He has dispatched twenty thousand of his Aztecan warriors and they lie concealed in the brushy thickets and ravines around the city, even in houses within the city, their arms ready. Parapets have been raised to protect those who will fight from the rooftops. Deep holes have been dug in the streets and covered over with matting, to impede the Spaniards' horses. Other streets have been barricaded.

None of you spoke as you walked. You had been infected by the living death of the town, a deadness accentuated rather than opposed by the paradoxical racket of the loudspeaker in the plaza. In a bicycle shop three youths naked to the waist and smeared with grease exchanged whispered cracks and presented idiotic smiles as you passed. A smell of sulfur floated from the bathhouse where in the shadow a woman showed her rosy flanks while her open hand paddled a little boy who refused to step into the water. At the register of elections a painter was sweeping his brush across the façade, back and forth, back and forth, slowly erasing stroke by stroke the slogan of the old election, CROM WITH ADOLFO LÓPEZ MATEOS, and that of the recent one, CROM WITH GUSTAVO DÍAZ ORDAZ. The billiard parlor "Mother's Day" empty behind its swinging doors with the notice: Minors prohibited. An old man in a collarless striped shirt and an unbuttoned vest slowly rubbed chalk

on the tip of his cue and yawned, showing the black gaps in his teeth. At the corner, a man sat in a cane chair before the doctor's office where silver letters on a black ground announce: Diseases of childhood, of the skin, venereal infections. Analyses of blood, urine, sputum, and feces.

Cortés calls a council. One voice suggests that they take another route, proceed to the city of Mexico, only twenty leagues distant by way of Huejotzingo. Another advises coming to terms with the Cholulans, then return to Tlaxcala. A third points out that if the treachery of the Cholulans is countenanced, more treachery will follow. We must fight them, destroy them. Square-jawed Cortés decides to make a show of departure tomorrow. They pass the night armed and alert. The slow watches succeed one another, the torches burn out. Late at night, a toothless old woman creeps in and draws Doña Marina aside: Montezuma is bent on vengeance but Malinche can escape, if she will. The old woman will give her a son to marry and she will be safe. As for the Spaniards, they are doomed, everything has been prepared for their death. Malinche thanks her. She asks the old woman to wait while she collects her jewels and clothing. Instead, she goes to Cortés and tells him.

At dawn the next morning the Spaniards are awakened by the echoing laughter of Cholula. The trap is ready; now it will be sprung. But Cortés and his lieutenants calmly make their way to the Great Pyramid, accompanied by part of the artillery. There he confronts the caciques and priests in the central patio of the temple. Kettles of salt, chile, and tomatoes have already been made ready for the flesh of the twenty Spaniards whose sacrifice has been ordered by Montezuma, Emperor of the Golden Chair. On horseback, Cortés quietly gives a command and the guns explode. Cholula's caciques fall, their cotton tunics turning red; the black-clad priests fall. It is the signal for general battle. Whinnying horses charge. Plumed headdresses rise from the brush outside the city and advance running. A din of drums, whistles, conch horns, trumpets, kettledrums, cannon fire. The twang of crossbows. The crash of ballista stones. Screaming, armed with two-handed swords, pro-

tected by shields matted over with cotton, the thousand Tlaxcalans enter the city and advance smashing doors, setting fires, climbing to the rooftops to rape women while in the streets below the battle goes on man to man, hand to hand, feathered headdresses and iron helmets, humming arrows and darts, brown flesh and white flesh, cotton doublets and steel breastplates, ripped chinchilla cloaks and sweat-soaked wool, slings whirling fist-sized rocks, the cannon depressed to fire level across the flat ground, trumpets and whistles, copal incense burning in the temples, smashed casks of pulque drenching the streets with sticky alcohol that mixes with flowing blood, bags of grain slashed and spilling, dogs running swiftly and quietly, their muzzles greasy from bacon and white from cassava, burned arrow shafts in dark flesh, crash and shout, finally the red and white standards fall, the Tlaxcalans trot through burdened with captured gold, garments, cotton, salt, freed slaves swarm in naked crowds, Cholula reeks of fresh blood and eternal copal, of bacon, pulque, of guts. Cortés orders the towers and fortresses put to the torch. The Spaniards overturn and destroy the idols. In a shrine they hurriedly purify with a splatter of whitewash, they set up a cross. They free those the Cholulans had destined for sacrifice. The battle has lasted only five hours. Three thousand lie dead in the streets, in the ashes of the temples.

"They are gods," the word passes through the city. "They divine treachery and take their vengeance. No power can oppose them."

Thus the way to the city of Mexico, Great Tenochtitlán, is opened. Upon the ruins of Cholula are built four hundred churches, their foundations the razed cues, the platforms of the pyramids.

I watched the four of you cross the plaza toward the church of San Francisco. The convent. The fortress surrounded by a wall that in olden times turned back Indian attacks. You, Elizabeth, saw me as you passed, but you pretended not to see me. But you, Pussycat, little Isabel, abruptly stopped, staring nervously. Fortunately the others were looking across the wide expanse of the esplanade and no one noticed. Three ash trees, two pines, and a stone cross. The church has a series of arches and a walled-up porter's lodge. Like

the wall of the surrounding fortress, it is battlemented. A yellow façade, the buttresses brown stone sprinkled with black. Javier pointed to the center of the façade: the favorite motif of the native sculptors, a serpent—the serpent, always the serpent, Elizabeth thought for the second time today—worked in stone surrounds the high window. The inscription is above the stone urns in relief over the entrance. Javier read it aloud:

IHS

SPORTAHECAPERTAIPECATORIBUSPENITENCIA

Indians fill the atrium on the Day of Resurrection. They move forward slowly carrying their offerings: folded cloaks of rabbit skin and cotton embroidered with the names of Jesus and Mary, fringed, decorated with flowers and crosses. Before the wide steps they spread the garments and kneel. They lift the cloaks to their foreheads and bow. Silently they pray. They push their children forward so that they may show their offerings also and learn how to kneel. A great multitude, each patiently waiting his turn. They wait in silence, their faces dark, dressed in the remnants of their old ceremonial robes, many in everyday work clothing carefully washed and mended. Their feet are bare. Above their heads float the fumes of burning copal, the scent of roses.

I lit a cigarette and followed your movements. You tried to avoid my eyes, Isabel. With your companions you studied the three yellow-painted bell-chapels along the length of the old rampart. The simplicity of those chapels contrasts starkly with the rich ornamentation of the side entrance to the church. Innovation imposed upon the severity of the sixteenth century: the portal born again with mortised columns that are like sumptuous vines, born again in the Romantic spirit of the tombs which a century ago were ordered placed in this sacred ground by Cholula's wealthy: crosses of stone made to look like wood, false garlands of stone, stone missives addressed to the departed. And behind, the dark buttresses and the high grille-protected windows and a file of children passing with their ruler-armed Catechists, shrill voices repeating, "Three separate Persons, one true God."

The children learn to kneel. They offer copal and small crosses covered with gold, silver, feathers. They offer thick candles ornamented with green feathers and silver tracery, and they offer the stewed food they have brought in plates and bowls. Their parents lead forward living animals, pigs and lambs bound to poles. When they ascend to receive the benediction, they take the animals up in their arms and a wave of laughter spreads as one worshipper tries vainly to hold his piglet's feet, squelch its squeals.

You moved toward the royal chapel and I ground out my cigarette on the sole of my shoe. You turned, Isabel, pretending to admire the chapel but in reality looking to see if I was following; we both hid behind our dark glasses. In style the chapel originally was Arabic, with open arches in its seven naves where in olden times pageants were presented to the Indians gathered in the atrium, to teach them the myths of their new religion. Now the naves have been closed and the chapel has battlements, Gothic spires, gargoyle waterspouts, and all that remains of the original Arabic line, from the outside, is the mushroom cupolas set with square panes of old glass to illuminate the interior. The long chapel ends in a final tower, a yellow bell tower, which is entered by a door with two escutcheons: one portrays St. Francis's arm crossed with the arm of an Indian, while the other gives a native view of the five wounds of Christ, strange wounds of blood and feathers, the largest like a fist of mulberry leaves and berries.

You entered the chapel. I followed and waited in the door. You, Elizabeth, Dragoness, wet your fingers in one of the two baptismal fonts and I saw you smile as you realized the incongruity: those fonts are the ancient pagan urns into which the priests of Cholula used to cast the hearts of their human sacrifices. Pearl light filtered down from the Christo-Arabic arches and dulled the burned color of the tezontle-stone floor, giving to it an in-between tone, a middle tone of transition between the burning hell below and the opaque heaven above. The room is vast and almost empty. There is a Christ wearing mockery, a lace jacket and skirt and the crown of an emperor of thorns around a carefully frizzled wig, vinegar dripping from his lips, drops of blood clotted on his forehead, the ab-

surd staff of his buffoon power between his hands: a figure of inglorious humiliation, far removed from the four polychrome angels who guard the altar, but very near the symbols of purgatory that are the chief elements within the chapel: an altarpiece in relief in which the Queen of Heaven, crowned by angels, presides over the sufferings of mustached gentlemen, ladies with nude torsos and rosy breasts, tonsured friars, king and bishop licked by flames of repentance; and before the altarpiece is the tomb of a bishop, a skeleton with fallen miter and open intestines, and above it a tapestry of tortured spirits consumed by fire:

STATUM EST HOMINIBUS SE MELMORE & POST
HOC IUDICIUM

Indians seated in the great atrium smile as they watch the pagan portraying God's judgment against the first mortals, the couple who had no umbilicus. Huge rocks, trees, the whole garden of man's original felicity has been constructed between the chapel's arches. Golden birds with real feathers perch among the branches. Parrots chatter, monkeys wink at the fields of Eden. In the center stands the tree of life with its golden apples. A paradise of April and May. Turkeys strut across the scene shaking their combs and red mantles. Children dressed as animals scamper. Adam and Eve appear in their pristine innocence. Eve alluringly fondles Adam, tries to make him respond to her, pleads, but he rejects her with exaggerated dread. She eats from the tree, offers him the apple, and he finally consents to bite it. For a moment the audience laugh, but their faces fill with terror as mighty God and his angels descend. God orders Adam and Eve clothed. The angels instruct Adam in cultivation of the earth and give Eve a spindle for spinning thread. Then the fallen pair are driven out into the world and the watching Indians weep while the angels face them and sing:

*Why did you eat,
Thou first wife,
Why did you taste
The forbidden fruit?*

*I'll give you back
Your time.*

An old Lincoln convertible stopped before the plaza arcade and its driver, a blond, bearded youth, set the hand brake and opened the door. Beside him a girl wearing black pants, black sweater, and black boots stretched and yawned and the Negro youth in a charro sombrero who was on the right kissed her neck and laughed. A tall boy wearing a leather jacket jumped from the back seat to the stone-paved street, his guitar in his hand. The second girl, almost hidden behind her mirror-opaque dark glasses, the turned-up lapels of her coat, and the wide brims of her hat, stood and removed her glasses and looked around at Cholula. She wore no makeup, her eyebrows were shaved, her lips were almost invisible under very pale lipstick. She wrinkled her eyes and offered a hand to the young man still seated. Unlike the others, he was dressed conventionally, a jacket of maroon tweed, gray flannel trousers. He closed the yellow portfolio on his knees and said quietly, "Some day I'll have to persuade them."

"It doesn't matter," said the girl in black. She shrugged her shoulders and stood there as if she already owned the arcade.

"Oh, but it does," said the youth with the portfolio. "Music is inside. There is no need to wear a disguise. The true rebel dresses as I do."

"Look, man, we'll scare him more this way." The tall youth ran a mussing hand through his lank hair.

"Is he here?" said the girl with the shaved eyebrows. In the intense sunlight she was as defenseless as an albino.

"You can bet your life," said the Negro.

In the street, the girl in black turned on her transistor radio and looked for a station.

The bearded driver of the car took out a white crayon and wrote across the windshield: PROPERTY OF THE MONKS, and the girl in black found her station and the tall youth wiped sweat from his forehead and began to strum his guitar in accompaniment to the

music from the radio. All six of them joined arms and walked away under the arcade, singing:

I'll give you back your time.

But I could hear only the whimpering and sobbing, soft, fused, that I knew came from the trunk of their car.

2

IN BODY AND SOUL

Both are absent. "I wasn't there": quotation from a letter directed by the Narrator to his German grandfather, dead in 1880, a Lassalle socialist expelled from the Reich by the Iron Chancellor. The letter is not received. A change of skin. Mutating genes. "I wasn't there." Therefore the Narrator quotes Tristan Tzara: "Tout ce qu'on regarde est faux," in order to save himself from the Museum, from Perfection, and to participate in a personal Happening, a novel written for immediate consumption: recreation. Michel Foucault speaks:

"Et puisque cette magie a été prévue et décrite dans les livres, la différence illusoire qu'elle introduit ne sera jamais qu'une solitude enchantée."

Les Mots et les Choses

△ You were going to tell me some day, Elizabeth, that the snail was moving across the wall and you, lying on the bed, lifted your head and saw first the silver track and followed it so slowly that several seconds passed before your eyes reached the dark shell. You felt drowsy and there you were on the bed in the second-rate hotel with your neck stretching out and your hands in your armpits and all you saw was a snail on a wall of peeling green paint. Javier had worked the cord of the drapes and the room was in shadow. Now

he was unpacking, and you turned your head and watched him release the catches of the blue leather suitcase and pull the zipper and raise the top. Just then, Javier looked up and saw a second snail, this one gray-striped and motionless within its shell. The first snail approached the second and Javier looked down and admired the perfect order with which he had packed his clothing for this trip. You bent your knees and drew your heels back until they touched your buttocks and now you too observed that there was a second snail on the wall, that the first had stopped beside the second and was showing its head with the four tentacles. With one hand you smoothed your skirt while you studied the mouth of the snail, an open gap right in the middle of the wet horned head. Now the head of the second snail appeared too. Their shells were like small spirals pasted on the wall. Their sticky slaver dripped beneath them. The two sets of tentacles touched. You spread your eyes wider and wished that you could hear more acutely, microscopically as it were. The two soft driveling bodies slowly emerged from their shells and immediately, with a suave vigor, embraced. Javier, standing, was watching them. You, on the bed, spread your arms. The snails trembled lightly. Slowly they separated. They observed each other for a few seconds and then returned to their shells. You stretched a hand out and found your package of cigarettes on the table beside the bed. You lit a cigarette and wrinkled your eyebrows. Javier began to lift his trousers from the suitcase: the blue linen slacks, the cream linen slacks, the gray silk slacks. He laid them on the bed and smoothed them, passing his hand over the wrinkles. He went to the ancient wardrobe and got some coat hangers, carefully selected the least bent ones, returned to the suitcase on the bed. You observed every movement and you laughed with your cigarette resting against your cheek.

"You act like you're thinking of living here." You looked around the room, its damp walls, its broken windowpanes. Some pad.

With both hands Javier removed the socks he had chosen to match his slacks and shirts. "This was quite a modern hotel ten years ago, I believe," he said. "It has been eroded by all the unfortunate travelers forced to stop over, as we are, involuntarily."

That's how he talks, Dragoness. Yes, that's how your husband talks. You can bet all you have on it. You ask him. "When will the car be ready?" simply to hear him reply, very subtly, "You should ask Franz." He presses his socks to his chest while you exhale smoke.

"But really, why put your things in the drawers when we'll be here only one night?"

He carried his socks to the dresser as if they were a dozen fragile eggs.

"One night, one month, the principle is the same. We should take advantage of what time we have."

"Advantage?" You curled up in the bed, resting on your elbows. "In this miserable dump of a town?"

Javier arranged his socks all in a row in the top drawer. You began to laugh. You drew your legs up again and laughed and pushed out your breasts and watched him putting his shirts in the pine dresser one by one, very neatly, the blue cotton shirt, the black knit wool, the yellow silk, the pleated *guayabera*, the terry-cloth shirt to be used after swimming in the sea. You slapped your hands on your open thighs and laughed.

"The point is not that the town is miserable," said Javier, "but that whatever you see, you never really observe."

"I saw their benighted children, didn't I?"

His underwear was at the bottom of the suitcase. He lifted it out and on his open palms carried it to the dresser. There he counted: six jockey shorts, six undershirts. He made a face. You knew it: as usual he had forgotten his handkerchiefs.

"The beggars came out of the city at dawn and went from dwelling to dwelling, marketplace to marketplace . . ."

Abruptly you got up from the bed.

"You can't hear what they say here, Javier. You can't hear a damn word they say." And with both hands you struck Javier's hands, sending his underwear flying around the room. You laughed again.

". . . a barefoot multitude of rags and outstretched arms . . ."

You will tell me about it many times, Dragoness. You know that

the first time will be hard, that you will expect too much of the second, and that only the third time will everything seem right to you. So. You panted for a moment against Javier's face. Then you let yourself fall face down on the bed. "They were then just what they are today. Things with neither eyes nor ears nor voice. To hell with them, they bore me. Let me sleep now."

Javier knelt and retrieved his jockey shorts and undershirts. He placed them in the drawer.

"Don't you want to bathe, change clothes?"

"What for? To stroll in that withered-up park and listen to cha-cha-cha?"

You hid your face in the pillow again. Javier closed the drawer. You rolled over, shut your eyes. Javier looked at you, at the fatigue just faintly showing on a face that with the eyes closed seemed to disengage itself from the world as if its voice would never be heard again, as if its body were no longer there. He walked toward the bathroom carrying the small leather case in which his medicines and pomades travel. At the door he stopped and you said slowly, laughing quietly: "Abandon human sacrifices. Stop worshipping idols. Well, why not? No longer eat the flesh of your fellow man. Give up sodomy and your other stupid degeneracies. Hah, hah. Sure. Graduate and join the Navy and see the sea. Ship ahoy."

You rose and looked at your husband as you sat down before the broken-paned window that opened on a sour interior patio. You sat in a rocker beside the drapes and began to rock back and forth, awaiting the moment when you could say: "We walked along the arcade, silent, infected by the living death . . ."

You jerked the cord violently and the drapes swirled open and the afternoon sun poured in. Viciously you went on: ". . . by the dead life of this goddam funereal town. Javier! Javier, are you satisfied?"

You opened your eyes. He was no longer in the room.

"Javier! Javier! Don't you understand I'm doing it all for you?"

You heard a gush of water into the washbowl, then the voice of your husband: "The battle lasted only five hours. Three thousand lay dead in the streets, in the ashes of the destroyed temples."

You waited with your hands resting against the sides of the bathroom door and in a very slow voice you said quietly: "Oh, yes, they are gods. They divine treachery in advance and in advance they take their vengeance. Who can oppose them?"

You went into the bathroom. At its farther end, half hidden by the shower curtain, Javier sat on the throne with his naked knees showing, his trousers down around his ankles and shoes. You approached him without haste, even with a certain professional air. You pulled back the curtain and lifted him from the seat and offered him the roll of paper. He took it. Mechanically, yet precisely—oh, yes—he tore off exactly three segments. His hand went to his buttocks. Then he pulled the chain and hoisted his trousers. You smiled with a twisted mouth. Thus, good Father, would I like to stand before Thy final judgment.

"Rest now, Javier."

"But I don't believe I'm sleepy."

"Take one of your sleeping pills."

You embraced his waist, rested your chin on his shoulder.

"I haven't unpacked my medicines yet." He was motionless in your arms. "Elizabeth?"

"What, old man?"

"Why are we here?"

"Because we're on our way to the sea. Because once in a while we have to get away from the city. And you feel better for it, don't you? Isn't the lower altitude better? Come on now, lie down and rest. Get your sleeping pill."

"I forget its name. It's yellow, I think. A capsule. Good Lord, Ligeia. How well I used to know my medicines! What's coming over me?"

"Don't worry about it. Look for the pill and rest."

Javier stood in the bathroom door and stared down at the woman who had not had time or inclination to change the wrinkled skirt and blouse in which she had traveled from Mexico City to Cholula. At you, Elizabeth. Liz, Lizzie, Lisbeth. At you, Beth, Bette. He blew his nose on a Kleenex and drew up the zipper of his fly.

"Ligeia, do you know something?"

Oh boy, you thought. Here it comes.

"Do I know what?"

"The snail is androgynous. What was the point of those two snails coming out of their shells on the wall? I mean, if both are bisexual, what was the point of it? Can you tell me, Ligeia?"

△ And this morning, Dragoness, I also traveled from Mexico City to Cholula. I rode turning the pages of the Sunday paper and marking certain interesting items with a red pencil. For example: Linda Darnell and La Belle Otero died yesterday. Carolina Otero, of pure old age, ninety-seven. Ninety-seven long years with her fat clitoris always fighting the stout good fight. She died in a room beside the tracks, not a cent to her name, several years behind in the rent, nothing except some yellowed bonds from the time of the Tsar that a Russian noble once gave her, face value, one million rubles, but then came the revolution. The revolution always comes and goodbye bonds. And that was back when it was easy enough to predict your revolutions. Just the same, nowadays no one gives away bonds worth a million rubles, before the revolution or after it. La Belle Otero. And think of it, Dragoness, she left us just as we are moving into our own Belle Époque: she saw the age whooping back to art nouveau, to Gaudí, to Oscar Wilde and Beardsley and Firbank and Radiguet and Baron Corvo, and out she bowed. It says that she was born in Cádiz. The daughter of a gypsy girl who was seduced by a Greek officer vacationing in Andalusia. Knowing gypsies and the Greeks, I suspect it may have been the other way around. At the age of thirteen she ran away from school with a lover and went to Portugal and danced in a cabaret. Resolved: the profession of lover. She granted D'Annunzio her favors. Yes, her favors. Look at the picture of the old girl: some favors, eh? So D'Annunzio discovered that to write well a man must screw hard, and there he was, hooked and wriggling inside the sour cave of La Belle Otero, baffled by shadows, confounding observant asceticism with the hot balls of the stud. Well, for all that, something

worked. Pure sexotherapy. No. The best was the night she dined with five crowned heads: Edward VII of England, Nicholas II of Russia, Alfonso XIII of Spain, Wilhelm II of Germany, and Leopold II of Belgium. At the Café de Paris. Oh, the royal cocks! Now I understand it. Imagine the coolness, the disengagement and intelligence it took for her to give herself to them and yet preserve her essential virginity, that virginity born of absolute indifference and absolute sexual virtuosity. You must be very optimistic to make love in that way, neither hurried nor hopeless. Just as we do, La Belle Otero believed that her age would never end. Except that we disguise our conviction by putting on a pessimism that is really no more than an attempt to preserve psychological health: we tell ourselves that the world will die not with a cry but with a whimper, that Doctor Strangeloves are on the loose, that Big Brother is watching. The future is cloudy, we insist, we accept, we even enjoy. Mere psychotherapy. Our pessimism is hygiene for our invincible optimism. We use the condom provided by Thomas Stearns Orwell. In contrast, La Belle Otero and the Belle Époque knew very well that they could not last. Their cheerfulness actually expressed a profound despair, as sinister as the gingerbread castles of Barcelona, the flabby breasts of Beardsley's Salome. And then she went on the dole. She died yesterday, in the morning; they found her body. So I read my newspaper, Elizabeth, while you rode in the front seat of the Volkswagen beside your blond, sunburned German and Isabel and your husband rode side by side in the back seat and you turned the knob and the radio faded with the voices of the Beatles floating on for an instant, and then you looked ahead and saw the curve and said sharply, "Watch it!" and in one movement grabbed Franz's arm and pushed your foot down hard on an imaginary brake. In the seat behind Franz, Javier touched his handkerchief to his lips and smiled and said that the drawback to winding roads is that they make conversation difficult and Franz said that soon the worst of it would be behind and you were aware that Isabel had not grabbed Javier as you had Franz and that she was looking at you fixedly as you moved your hand from Franz's arm

and said: "Ten years ago this was all unbroken forest. But Mexicans don't know how to preserve their riches."

You turned your head and looked out at the stumps that had been the forest, at the deep gullies worn by the swift muddy water that carries Mexico's mountains down and levels her hills and presents us with a land of excrement, dry, suffocated, hostile. You closed your eyes and let yourself be lulled by the steady drone of the engine and the sway of the highway. Presently you heard Javier ask Franz to turn on the radio again, but Franz shook his head and said that you had gone to sleep. And then again presently you had opened your eyes with a start and interrupted Franz, who was saying something about the tightness of the curves, by asking: "Didn't they once have a big race all the way from one border to the other?"

Yes, Isabel replied, it was called the Pan-American Race, and no one who drove it survived. You paid no attention to Javier's nasal laugh, for now you were intent upon your purse, looking in it for your mirror and comb. You combed your ash-dyed hair with quick strokes, making a face of disapproval as you saw your reflection. You took out your lipstick and puckered your mouth and applied red to those lips which are indeed, sweet Dragoness, wide and full. You moved the mirror around in front of your face and allowed your gray eyes to study themselves. Now you noticed that Javier was talking again and that from time to time Franz was nodding without looking away from the road ahead. Javier was saying that perhaps simply to know it was enough for the woman, but it forced him, the man, to create something that might correspond. You turned and faced Javier and stared at him while Franz said dryly that after all there was the matter of the pleasure involved and that for his part he did not insist that any woman be this or that or the other, simply what she was. Franz pointed toward the valley and said that from here on the road was easier. That would be absurd, certainly, said your husband. Yes, that was what he said. You looked at him and spoke again: "How many hours before we'll get to the sea?"

"To the sea?" smiled Javier. "When, Franz?"

"Not until tomorrow."

You turned and closed your eyes again. For several minutes you were all silent. You sensed Franz feeling in his shirt pocket for his cigarettes and opened your eyes and reached across his chest and got the pack. You lit a cigarette and passed it to him stained with the red circle of your lips. Then you lit one for yourself. Only when you had finished the cigarette did you say, as if the conversation had not been interrupted for a moment: "I can accept everything except the same old thing forever repeated. Nothing is so marvelous that it can't eventually become boring."

You felt Javier's eyes and passed your hand over your hair.

"The truth of it is that love can be created without passion," Javier said. "One can appreciate beauty and a woman's character quite coldly and with no desire. Love without hunger, without urgency." Franz raised an eyebrow and shrugged his shoulder. I would have done the same, Dragoness. Really I would.

Now you were passing through a village and Franz slowed down. You deliberately turned your head away from the window. But Isabel pressed her nose to the glass and watched the gray, unwhitewashed, one-story adobe houses go by, the little roadside stands selling eggnog and mulberries and plums and cheap crockery junk, the motionless figures stiff with cold and wrapped in gray cloaks. Her nose was against the glass and her breath clouded it and she drew a cat in the cloud and then began to play tick-tack-toe with herself, drawing round O's and X's. Ah, me. Her right hand, which was drawing the X's, was defeated by the O's of her left. She stopped and stroked her fingers across the sun-brown skin of her arm. Now there was a true forest to the right and against that dark background Isabel ought to have been able to see her eyes reflected in the window, green and brilliant above her smooth high cheeks. A lovely woman, Dragoness. No one can accuse me of not appreciating her. No one. Suddenly she moved forward and leaned across the seat and opened the door beside you and without a sound lunged toward it. Javier caught her by the shoulders and jerked her

back just as soundlessly while you reached and pulled the door shut again and Franz said evenly and without surprise, "Careful there." Then Isabel had fallen face down across Javier's crossed legs, her mouth open against his thighs, and was crying, waiting for him to caress and calm her, touch her long dark hair, wipe away her tears. Javier paid her no attention. When he moved his hands, it was only to raise them and study his fingernails. He laughed softly and reached forward and touched the back of your neck. You did not move, Elizabeth. You stared straight ahead. Bravo. As you would put it, you had graduated and joined the Navy, ship ahoy.

"Which way here?" Franz asked.

You and Javier spoke at the same time: "Don't go through Cuernavaca." "Just follow the highway."

"Yes, but how far?"

"To the turnoff."

"Is it before or after the tollbooth?"

"After. You pay toll to Alpuyeca. Before Alpuyeca, you turn off."

"I remember now."

"You mean you've been to Xochicalco before?"

"Hell, Lisbeth, of course I have. All four of us were . . . I mean, the three of us were there just last year."

"How silly, I had forgotten. Little Isabel." That bitchy smile of yours.

"What?"

"Nothing. I meant that when we went to Xochicalco last year you hadn't made your debut yet."

"Very funny," Javier said slowly.

"Yes, isn't it?" At last you turned and looked back at them. But Isabel's head was not resting on your husband's thighs now. She was sitting up powdering her nose.

"How much is the toll?"

"I believe it's five pesos."

"I don't have change."

"I do. Here, take it."

"Then to the right?"

"Yes. I think there's an arrow you follow."

"Turn on the radio again, Franz."

"There, hold it, Franz. I like that."

"What waltz is it?"

"The Merry Widow," said Franz.

And while the four of you sped along a winding road exchanging your pleasantries, I was traveling the superhighway to Puebla leaning comfortably back and looking over certain tourists' pamphlets that are not passed out by travel agencies because a visit to such places gives a commission to no one. Still, one has to be informed. To know for example that the little fortress is entered by a stone door above the arch of which hangs a single yellow electric bulb, and on either side of the door is a window. Grass grows above from a thin scab of earth, as if the fortress were a cellar or a tomb or the buried gallery of a mine, and chimneys emerge factorylike from the grass. First is the administrative section with its flat ceilings: a reception room, the guards' room, a hall with racks for rifles, then the Commandant's office. To one side, the room where clothing is stored. Beyond, the garage, then the first yard, and at last you enter the prison proper. A brick wall encloses the yard. Around everything is a deep ditch bottomed with mud.

You move the mirror in front of your face and let your gray eyes study themselves and you notice that Javier is talking again, saying that perhaps simply to know that one loves is enough for the woman but it forces him, the man, to create something, a vision of the woman to correspond to his love. You turn and rest your arm on the back of the seat and stare fixedly at Javier, afraid of what he may say next, imploring him silently not to go on, not to repeat everything, to leave at least some of those words you know by heart well hidden, known only to himself and to you. You interrupt: "How many hours before we get to the sea?" and you try to think of some subject that may interest and divert him, a subject broad, deep, long enough to last all the way to the sea.

A village is passing and deliberately you turn away from the win-

dow and lift a hand to your eyes because you do not want to see it. One more village exactly like every other you have seen. None of them different from the first you saw when you first came to Mexico: all motionless wretched moribund. And you fool yourself thinking that was why you came: to discover romantic Mexico, your husband's homeland. If only he then, so handsome, so poetic, had resembled his country. Its misery, rags, sickness.

That is one face of Mexico. The other is the tawdry face of a land that has given up its poverty in order to achieve only vulgarity, only to ape the lousy States. So that in coming here you escaped nothing. You remained a captive. No, Dragoness, I'm not telling you. I'm just asking.

Isabel lies on Javier's knees. He feels her warm moist breath through the thin cloth of his trousers and he is thinking, you can be sure, that in truth the appeal of this young woman is based on a catlike mimesis (Am I doing well, Dragoness? Have I caught him?) that may be her most significant charm as well as her most obvious one. He holds up his hands and passes his fingers through his gray, thinning hair and with a sigh reflects that the tenderness Isabel believes is enough for herself and for a lover too might, if he were younger, be enough even for him. And she does not understand that it isn't enough. She does not know him.

Isabel cries, thinking that you and Franz can't hear her. What a childish, transparent act, you say silently. Well, let her cry until his pants are soaked, if she wants to. God knows who can understand her. And now he, just as transparent, is touching my neck and trying to tease me into looking back, but I won't do it. He wants me to turn and see him pawing her, letting her embrace him, kiss him, young, weak, young with the intuitive perversity of innocence, another woman, his little Isabel. I won't look back at them. I will keep my eyes straight ahead on the white line that separates traffic and proclaims that if you cross it you risk an accident, you chance death itself. A white line that will not end until we reach the sea.

"Have a cookie, Franz?"

He shook his head. You took one of the cookies and it crunched

in your mouth. You held the small cellophane-wrapped package behind your head. "Want a cookie back there?"

"What are they?" said Javier.

"Chocolate. Don't be afraid, they're from Sanborns. Especially baked for gringo stomachs." You laughed and waved the package around.

"How nicely Yankees offer everything," said Javier. "Crumbs for beggars."

"Now, now, please." You made a face of mock disapproval. "Please don't start your Yankee-baiting. Javier is like all Mexicans. They speak badly of gringos but they imitate us in everything. Pure envy." You tapped his hand lightly and withdrew the package. "Are you sure, Franz?"

Franz shook his head. The Merry Widow Waltz ended and the announcer began a commercial about a new subdivision. You snapped off the radio. All of you were silent for a time as the Volkswagen passed fields cultivated with rice and the other cereals that grow in the shadows of Mexico's volcanoes. But soon fertility, always isolated and unconvincing in this dry land, was left behind. The car began to climb a graveled road with small thirsty trees on both sides. Franz braked and stopped near the edge of a great cliff. You all got out and stretched your cramped, twitchy legs and brushed off crumbs and smoothed your wrinkled clothing. Before you lay the undulating immensity of the valley. Every tone of green from the pale washed green of young corn to the intense chrome-green of sugar cane and the dry, dead, straw-brown green of land that has been worn out or forgotten. And above, quick clouds in the Mexican sky that is and has to be incredibly beautiful as a kind of compensation for the waste and hopelessness of the earth it arches. Like your famous Greek sea, Elizabeth. There are lands that left to themselves would not endure a day: they must have the mirror of the sky—Mexico—or the sea—Greece. Quick eye-blinks of light and shadow as the small clouds now concealed, now revealed Mexico's sun. Sun and shadow and silence combined to pattern the valley in moving checks of light and darkness, to sculpture

the hills and depressions, to end by defining, at the jagged mountainous limit of the horizon, the reciprocity between a land that thrusts itself up in walls and peaks, and a sky that sags upon those natural accidents. Rotund small hills. High volcanoes. Dry craters. And surrounding everything the mass and violence of the mountains, which at this hour were clear, not far from the eye and the hand but already, in the farthest distance, beginning to haze toward the transparency of afternoon.

Isabel stood beside your husband. Her bare arm was just touching his arm. She was trembling slightly and in that faint movement Javier, always subtle and wary, could detect her woman's urge to fuse her beauty with the natural beauty spread before you, to make nature her accomplice first in love, then in possessiveness, and finally in her need to dominate. Javier, who forever walks the wrong way, turned his back on the scene and on Isabel too and she crossed her arm below her breasts and let the other arm hang, the fingers moving nervously on her thigh while she looked up at the sky and tried to find whales, faces, animals in the hurrying clouds.

You took Franz by the hand and moved up the path that leads to the ancient Toltec ceremonial center. Goats, their accustomed peace violated, jumped away with their hooves sounding like stone against stone. The path was rocky and on both sides were thorn bushes and dwarf ferns. You climbed quickly and reached the esplanade. Franz spread his arms. You, also smiling, were about to say that you were glad not to remember that visit here last year, it made this like the first time, the original surprise and pleasure, but Franz spoke first: "I had forgotten."

From the air Xochicalco must look like a sand castle after the tide has washed and smoothed it: it is pure form lacking all detail. The terraces rise with a capricious symmetry until the topmost culminates in the great main temple, alone in the center of its plaza but accompanied, distantly, by the broken columns of the roofless palace that hangs over the straight drop down to the lowest of the terraces, the ancient ball court with its blackened rings.

Franz rested both hands on your shoulders. You moved away

from him, passing Javier and Isabel, who had just reached the esplanade, and ran to the bas-relief that winds around the four sides of the base of the pyramid. That relief is a single serpent, a circle of serpents without beginning or end, a feathered serpent in flight, with many heads, many fanged gullets. You stopped and touched the gush of stone and then walked on around the pyramid. Out of sight, you stopped and touched it again, leaned forward with your arms resting upon the endless serpent whose contractions and prolongations seem provoked by the other figures in the relief, the men, animals, birds, and trees that are all contained within those twisting convolutions: seated Toltecan dignitaries wearing sumptuous ornaments, necklaces, and elaborate high headdresses; chopped-off trunks of cottonwoods; glyphs of human speech; jaguars, rabbits, crumbling eagles. You placed your face against one of the heads of the serpent and for a moment shared its profile, and I know the temptation you felt. You were thinking that this was how you would like to be swallowed up, to lose your will in this circle of violence, your identity in becoming the slave of a strength that resembled your own; that this was almost what you had always been searching for; that you would like to remain forever here in this house of prayer, this place of sacred rites, once more this beth hatefillah. Your hands caressed the ancient stone, the light and shadow made solid that had survived centuries and that you could believe contained the secret core of Mexico, the grain of that authentic being which is hidden behind our poverty and ostentation, our pride, wretchedness, cruelty, mediocrity. Here, you were thinking, was the occult greatness of this land: its eroded sun, its lost ray of moonlight. Okay, Dragoness, okay, we dig that you have read your D. H. Lawrence loud and clear. So there you were, leaning against the old granite snake and wanting to remain there in spirit although to the eye you would leave it and return to the Volkswagen and sit beside blond Franz and in front of graying Javier and young Isabel and resume speech, laughter, malice, love, despair, hope, while you waited, waited, hoped for the sea that you would not reach until tomorrow. You were tempted, Elizabeth. Oh, yes,

you were tempted. To become the prisoner of the serpent's rings, to be drowned in the flood of its crumbling feathers, to live with your eyes squinted tight shut once again and your hands crossed and motionless while you exulted in the might of passivity, the power of surrender, deciding nothing, not even not to decide, doing nothing, never putting your will to the most minor of tests, surviving entirely by abstention, once again in your juiverie, your vicus Judaeorum, your carriera, your Judengasse, your damned ghetto. Here you could return to this land and end your exile. What, Elizabeth? Were you going to escape from one trap only to fall into another?

You did not hear the steps of your quiet German, who had walked around the pyramid and now was standing some distance away watching you and smoking. Presently Isabel and Javier came and Franz deliberately blocked their view of you. "Let's go up," he said to them. The three moved away and climbed the great stairs to the flat top of the pyramid, where the tablets and reliefs are beyond the encircling power of the serpent at the base. Small glyphs float beside the lips of seated men. A jaguar, liberated, lies in ambush with its fangs showing. Stone jawbones that are part of no body chew a circle that is divided into quadrants by the foreign, intrusive cross.

"Do you have a match?" Javier said to Franz.

Franz held the match and waited for Javier to put his cigarette to his lips. Javier was staring into the distance. "Did you notice that there is only one serpent, that there are not several?" he said.

"Yes, I noticed that." The match burned down. Just before it would have burned him, Franz separated his fingers and let the match drop.

"Excuse me," Javier said.

Franz smiled and struck another match.

Isabel, putting on her straw hat and tying it under her chin with a kerchief of orange gauze, was standing before a group of amputated legs wearing high boots. Suddenly she laughed and skipped away, calling back: "Let's pretend we're enchanted!"

Franz laughed too and ran after her and caught her shoulder. Isabel held herself rigidly stiff. "Come touch me, Javier! Break the spell!"

Javier grinned and approached her. "Good, but be sure you realize that beside you is a witch who is rotting with age but has painted over the decay of her living face with a white skull mask. And with her, waiting for you, is her husband, surrounded by owls and spiders. So." He took her in his arms and kissed her as her arms tightened around his neck and Franz, smoking, watched them. Javier closed his eyes. "No," said Isabel. "Don't pull back." They kissed again and Franz watched them. Finally they separated from their kiss. They looked at Franz. Isabel's face was young and happy. Javier's was cold with snotty pride.

All three looked down and saw you far below making your way toward the ball court.

They descended the stairs. Halfway down, Javier stopped. He stretched his arm out and in the air traced the convolutions of the serpent.

"Are you talking to us?" Isabel smiled.

"Yes."

"You're really talking to us?" she repeated.

"Yes, yes."

She went on smiling.

"If I understand you, you're a silly."

She caressed his arm.

"Well, yes," said Javier. He touched his fingers to the pleats of his shirt. "Perchè sì fuggo questo chiaro inganno?"

△ And when Javier looked down at the pavement he told himself that the morning was going to be hot. He had just left behind the revolving door of his office building and now he was passing some fruit stands and he stopped and observed the heaped displays of fruit and moved closer and with a stiff little finger touched a slice of papaya and its cluster of black seeds. He watched the fruit vender cut into the heart of a watermelon with a single machete

stroke. He looked at two dogs chewing discarded orange peels. Juices ran from the wooden table down upon the dusty ground where, squatting on their heels, old market women with wrinkled immobile faces from time to time called their wares.

He put his hand into the inner pocket of his light gabardine jacket. He had chosen that gray jacket this morning because the paper had said that the day was going to be very warm and March in Mexico City can be warmer than warm, drier than dry, so dry that your skin and tongue feel that such liquids as fruit juices cannot exist, not even in the red heart of a melon. His hand touched the small leather carnet with its gold engraved letters, its properly sealed photograph, its very official, very important-looking ornate script: The bearer is an official of such and such center of studies of the Economic Commission for Latin America of the Organization of the United Nations. Which could be translated as a cubicle office behind gray-tinted glass that shut out the glare of the sun, a gray desk of steel with mountains of papers and reports printed in eight- and ten-point Bodoni, twenty-four quads, a well-fingered Charter of the United Nations—as if merely by touching it enough he could leave his personal imprint upon the world's constitution—a matted, framed photograph of Dag Hammarskjöld on the wall, a revolving chair with black-leather cushion and back rest and armrests of some nickel-plated metal he did not know. That was what the little red-leather carnet said and he always kept it in his inner pocket, near his heart, so that when his fingers went there, where he thought his heart was, he could reassure himself twice with one touch. Now he pressed his fingers against his chest and attempted to discover whether his heart was beating evenly, regularly, properly, and then raised his hand to his collar—an Arrow shirt, Gordon type, Oxford cloth, button-down collar tabs, neck 15½, sleeves thirty-three inches—and felt the dry drops of sweat that undoubtedly were staining the collar, combining with the dust and the invisible but unclean, fumes-contaminated air to draw a dark circle there, and the cuffs too would be dirty and he would have no time to return to the apartment and

change before going to that embassy cocktail party in the evening. But now at least he was free, he had gone out of his office without asking permission, had left his desk in disorder and had taken the elevator—Otis, automatic, smelling of chrome and leather—and had passed along the terrazzo hall and out the revolving door and without one backward glance had walked along the street to the market, imagining, as he always did, that it was a beach. For he enjoyed likening streets to a beach with towers and glass and doors and balconies, a beach that has no sea to spoil it, no tide to leave rotting fish and seaweed, no line of ocean meeting sky to distract the eye and entice it into voyaging too impossibly far. And if he was afraid now to look back—and he was afraid, the first conscious fear that morning—undoubtedly it was because he feared he would not see his footsteps in the sand of the sidewalk's concrete. Why had he run away from his office? His heart, which a moment ago had been obedient and correct, began to thump with an alarming violence, and a sickening sensation moved down from it toward that center in his solar plexus from whence radiated a vegetative life that doubtless had been awakened by this, his fifth cigarette of the morning, ousted from hiding, set free to spread like fear or hope through the complex conduits and interconnections of his nervous system which now, like a stranger in a strange land, had become alien to the body containing it. No, his nerves were not good this morning. They were tense, trembling. And somewhere in his cerebrum lay a tiny all-powerful lobule that needed only to be nudged, touched, just lightly pricked or even just slightly numbed, and he would lose the vestige of freedom that still, after centuries of evolution and years of marriage, remained to him, become as mechanical as a Pavlovian pup, reacting with whatever terror or fury or submissiveness that destroying hand armed with a steel punch or a chicken feather might care to have him display: be dominated, dominated absolutely and helplessly, impotent to make use of the ideas he had acquired so laboriously, the personality he had defined and formed so hopefully during forty and more long years; helpless even to make use of his most primitive sensuality. Well, that was a night-

mare, but one that he faced, thank God, only in his waking fantasies. Much worse was his sleeping nightmare of the ocean. A dream of fear, fear of going too near the ocean, of entering it and dying drowned with a kind of unconscious happiness and abandonment: he would be absolutely passive, he would move neither his arms nor his legs, the waves would surge over him and the black sand would suck him down, and he would not oppose them. A most terrible nightmare. Yet a fear that also was imaginary. Not imaginary was the violent beating of his heart. It might be bearable, however, if it were limited to itself, if it did not make cold sweat bead in his palms, bind his knees with a weight he could not carry, cause his head to whirl with a vertigo he could overcome only by stopping and bracing a hand against a green post and fixing his eyes steadily on the unlit tube of a neon sign. Maybe if he closed his eyes? No, for the darkness he would create would merely spin with mocking lights that would neither settle his vertigo nor distract his hearing from the shrill and discordant racket of the market crowd walking among the booths and stands, carrying naked chickens by the feathered head, weighing pigs' feet on the palm of a hand, sniffing at white cheese, arguing over prices, blowing whistles, shaking *matraca* rattles, stuffing twenty-centavo coins into the incessant jukebox, popping open bottles of beer. He wanted peace and there was no peace, neither around nor within him, no silence, no calm, no hidden inner cloister where even his own voice would not be heard relating the terror of his nightmare about the sea; there was no door, no way out, he had to meet everything head on, as bluntly as a fist. That was why he had left the apartment so early this morning and gone early to the office and then escaped from it to the street: he had hoped that just to walk the sidewalks, to move one foot after the other, to see passing windows and faces might give him the calm he would need to get through one more day of the old tension, the old crises. But now the acids in his stomach had begun to move up and down again, up to give a bitter metallic taste to his mouth, down to gnaw the irritated labyrinthine coils in his belly where every X ray these days revealed clearly and unmistak-

ably the zigzag of a spasm that reached all the way to the top of the colon. He left the market and raised his eyes to the blue unclean sky. A dust storm was imminent, the sky was trembling with it. And he had gone out of the office without telling anyone where he would be or when he would return. Slowly, dawdling, he walked along looking at shop windows. Those that were opaque with reflected glare he passed. Those that were transparent he examined, standing near the glass with his brows knitted: shoes of black patent leather, of alligator, of buckskin. Socks of nylon, silk, wool. Short-sleeved sports shirts decorated with colored piping. Dress shirts with labels guaranteeing that they would not shrink when laundered. Shirts with round collars, shirts with wide collars, striped shirts, colored shirts, white shirts yellowed by too long exposure to the sunlight. Behind them, smiling varnished manikins with blond wool hair and painted dark eyes and gleaming teeth, dressed in leather jackets, in gabardine business jackets, in pleated *guayaberas*. And one window farther down the street their female companions wearing black silk bras and lilac panties and garter belts. Multilated legs of crystalline plastic sheathed in nylons. Now he was before the window of a sweets shop. Mounds of chocolates. Domes of gumdrops. Pyramids of crystallized fruit. Boxes of pineapple compote. His saliva began to flow and his gastric juices redoubled their damned attack and he felt the sharp pain that his doctors had informed him was only a reflex and did not come from the site of the ulceration, the raw mouth of his stomach, but was some echo from the vicinity of his liver, as if the ulceration had dispatched a flaming arrow that he would have liked to blunt and damp out with a protective coating of sugar, except that he knew that if he ate a piece of candy the relief would last only a few minutes, the devouring sulfurous acids would be satiated for a little but only at the expense of a nervous indigestion from his intestines, that spasm which had already begun would run its course and end by refusing passage to the innocent candy but on the contrary would assault it viciously, agitate it violently, bombard it from all sides with the gases that would swell his belly tight and

assure either prolonged obstruction or equally prolonged diarrhea; and the first, because laxatives irritated him even more than his own bitter secretions, would have to be resolved by the indignity of a glycerine suppository, one of those they sell in striated transparent bottles with black caps, or by the worse indignity of an enema, at which he would have to ask his wife to assist and hold the can high while he would lie naked on the bed, partially covered by a sheet, with his legs raised and open, and with his own hand take the tube and search for his tense, apprehensive anus and insert the damn thing, feeling that that black nozzle was entering him in a most equivocal way, that it was exceeding its legitimate function and reaming him as high as his gullet, where he would be able to taste the warm liquid that would flow toward the center of his compacted guts and make them hurt and then flow out again carrying with it the intestinal flora he needed to digest anything, so that he would have to remind his wife to buy some yoghurt—today they have it in strawberry flavor—and put it in the icebox; yes, either a miserable obstruction or a diarrhea that at first he would blame on one of those infections so common in Mexico, as if he did not know that since childhood he had been well protected by his own amoebae against those outside him, by his own antibodies against the swarming microbes that come in the whitewash milk, the trichinotic meat, the sewage-contaminated drinking water; and he would have to take those Entero-Vioform tablets which always, curiously, calmed his nerves but had no effect whatsoever on his bowels. For a moment longer he looked in at the candies and the swarm of black flies hovering and crawling over them. Then he walked on, his hands cold with sweat. Several doors down the street he came to a small fruit-juice bar and he went in and ordered a tamarind water and watched the fat proprietor of the bar thrust a spoon into an aluminum container and then empty it into an opaque blue glass and add water and stir. He held the glass near his nostrils. He asked for another and the fat proprietor mixed it and handed it to him and he drank again and paid a peso, which the proprietor took wordlessly and stuck in his shirt pocket. He walked

out. Factory whistles were blowing. He had not the faintest notion what time they indicated, nor did he want to look at his watch. He walked very slowly, holding to the left side of the sidewalk, against traffic, jostling elbows and shoulders and taking advantage of these encounters to beg pardon, examine faces, touch hands, perhaps force those he bumped against to become aware of him. His fingers brushed the cropped hair of a small boy who was tossing three chipped marbles from palm to palm, the docile shoulders of a girl with a permanent and dark glasses and a cheap silk blouse that to the touch was what the sound of a blade scraping across a metal plate is to the hearing. He jostled them, elbowed them, bumped them like a blind man, but all the while he was sharply alert to their responses, gestures, expressions, their eyes, questioning, irritated, black, unprotected, accusing, wary, their full or linear mouths clamped or half open to suck in air, breathe it out, run the tongue across the lower lip. Presently he stopped and looked up and down the street and frowned. Where was he? He hadn't the least idea. He was lost. Yes, he was lost: he was a child again and had left the house to follow his mother, to try to learn where it was she disappeared to every afternoon, and had fallen too far behind her and now was lost because he knew only the familiar coordinates and the customary routes, from home on Calzada del Niño Perdido to the candy store at the corner or to the Parque de Ajusco or to the school of the Marist Fathers on Morelos. Lost he was all right, and they, those passing him as he stood on the sidewalk, did not know or care, he mattered not at all to any of them, had not the slightest importance except that standing there, motionless and puzzled, he was something of an obstacle, like a misplaced lamp-post, perhaps, or an errant mail pillar that they had to avoid a little, dodge, walk around. They did not know him or want to know him. They could not feel the burning juices in his belly, the irregular beating of his heart, the dead heaviness of his legs, the cold and sticky sweat in his palms, the protesting twitch of his nervous system as he put his fingers to his pack of cigarettes. They knew nothing about him, nothing at all, neither who he was nor

what he was nor why he was, nothing except the accidental and transient datum he happened to share with them at the moment but did not know himself, where he was. To hell with them. He would move out of their scurrying way, turn his back on the street and touch his wet palms to a wall of old carved stone, squint his eyes and shut off the dust-dissolved morning sun. He would lean against the wall for a few seconds and then pass through a doorway, partially blocked by fallen stone, and carefully make his way along a dark gallery that led to a wide and empty patio with a waterless fountain flowing over with yellowed newspapers and forgotten parcels wrappings. He sat on the edge of the fountain and immediately smelled an overwhelming stench. He stretched out his hand and tugged on the tail of the fly-covered, worm-infested cadaver of a yellow dog, its hide crusted brown and black with dried blood, its mouth open. A wave of nausea swept up from his stomach and he jerked his hand away and the dog fell soundlessly back among its newspapers and the worms in the rotting flesh wriggled and squirmed and then made themselves at home again. He stood and took out a Stelabid and tried to swallow it with saliva but the capsule stuck in his throat and choked him and he began to cough, cough until he had to pound the back of his neck with his fist. When he recovered his breath, he crossed his arms on his chest and looked about. It was one of the very old, very early colonial palaces, constructed by Indian masons under the direction of Spanish architects. Probably they had had to flatten a still earlier structure to create the site, one of their stone temples, perhaps; had broken it up and dumped its heavy fragments into the lake and then had brought boatloads and cartloads of the new stone, rose-colored volcanic tezontle, and had laid new foundations and raised the great thick walls and in the patio had built an ornate portal that now was almost invisible behind the faded signs of the shops and businesses that used to be housed here, a portal of two sinuous ductile stone columns resting on the large claws of some jungle animal, a tiger or a lion, and rising wound about with vines and clustered with grapes to join at the top, where the vines twined

and interlaced in a mazy network that supported the crown, the black stone cross. Far above, the small panes of the skylight patio roof and drains of lead that during the rainy season, not now, would empty gushing through the mouths of the cast gargoyles. The dry fountain in the center and in the center of the fountain the two tritons that once, painted gold, had spouted water but that now were scaling, greenish, dry, their open mouths blocked with dust and cobwebs. On either side, great ornate stone doors gave entrance to the old great chambers which long since had been subdivided, partitioned into many small rooms walled off from each other and reached from the abandoned patio by small doors of splintered wood and broken glass. He lifted his head and looked again at the intricate web of vines woven over the high portal and he could think only of the even more intricate web of small and great vessels and nerves that threaded through his own flesh. The Stelabid already was making him a little dizzy, a little drowsy, but it had not freed him from the pain near his liver. Slowly he walked out. He took his cigarettes from his pocket and put one of them between his lips, wetting the paper and sucking in air, holding the box of matches—Talismans: Imperial Quality, a golden scorpion on a red ground and unrolled papyrus with the admonition, *Do not be distrusting*. No, for mistrust and doubt and suspicion are invitations to betrayal. Distrust him who counsels you to distrust—knowing that there was no need to light the cigarette. Then he returned both cigarettes and matches to his pocket and heard the motors of cars, the sounds of radios, jukeboxes, shrill whistles, a voice singing, mortar slapping against bricks, the burrr-brrr of a handsaw, a tinkle of piano keys, the steps of a rag vender crying his wares, a clatter of dominoes spilled out on a tabletop, a sigh, a cry, the cackle of chickens passing in a cage carried on their owner's back. He opened his eyes. Black-clad mourners were walking out of a church. A hunchback was shining someone's shoes, his brushes and waxes and clothes in a small wooden box festooned with bits of glass and copper centavos. A kitchen with its nested kettles and its smells of boiled chicken, white rice, garbanzo soup. A bakery with trays

outside on the sidewalk showing large and small loaves and rolls, twists, puffs, muffins, coils, an endless variety. Across the street, a telegraph office. He moved toward it, dodging cars, and entered and propped his elbows on the marble counter and held his face between his hands. Now he was relaxed with the lassitude that was his compensation for the pain the barbital had subdued. But in an hour or two the lassitude would depart to be followed by its rebound, banal, sterile tension, and his nerves would be taut wires again and he would feel afraid, his fear of death by water or the absurd fear, the ridiculousness of which he would recognize but he would feel it just the same, of sudden death in the street. His fear would concentrate itself in the spastic pit of his belly and he would close his eyes and see himself laid out cold and colorless with a beard that like his fingernails and toenails would go on growing, with his guts distended by gases as if there were still life in him, as if the glassy eyes could still see, the gray-lipped mouth, hanging brutishly open, could still breathe. His hands cradled his face and became tactile mirrors reflecting its protruberances and declivities, its hairs, its orifices, its greases and oils, its dryness and dampness, its weight. They smelled of cologne still, his hands. He put them down. Scattered over the marble countertop were fresh telegraph forms and crumbled, wadded, discarded ones that he smoothed out and read: *Please return home everything forgiven. Happy birthday dearest mother. Arriving bus from Acapulco tonight. Freddy passed examinations all well kisses. Papa died yesterday please come. Rorra my life how long will you resist your big daddy. Reference our conversation bales ordered shipped. Intended no offense will you forgive remember nights of love. Baby boy Alicia fine all happy. Book required for thesis out of print. Wonderful time keys to the city wish you were here mother stop.* Stop, when perhaps the only way to ensure the permanence of a pleasure was to repeat it until simply that permanence became pleasurable no matter how jaded the repetition. *Remember nights of love.* The tachycardia had started again and his legs were leaden and the jerking in his chest would spread downward and excite the spasm and release the

burning juices upon the duodenal ulcer and in spite of everything he would have to return to the radiologist and sit for an hour in that room ineffectually disguised as a room for reading, surrounded by others who would be waiting just as wearily, all sitting like stiff wax dolls on the foam-rubber cushions, no one daring to begin a conversation, to say anything more than to ask for a light or an ashtray, all hungry for consolation that would be inappropriate and undeserved because it was not pain they were going to have to endure but simply an experience lacking all dignity. And when the dark-skinned nurse wearing spectacles came and called his name he would rise and leave behind their curious looks and follow her to the cramped dressing room, where, after removing his jacket, tie, and shirt, he would bump his elbows and knees against the walls trying to get out of his trousers and underwear and for a moment after he took off his shorts he would stand naked looking down at his feet in their red socks and black shoes and then he would put on the white robe, ragged from many launderings, that is open behind and must be fastened with ties. And when he came out the nurse would open the door and he would enter a dim room and stretch out on the colorless surface of a table and when he was prone there the doctor would appear and turn lights on and off and press buttons and the X-ray camera would first nudge his belly and then push hard all the way through to his backbone and they would order him to breathe, stop breathing, breathe, stop breathing, breathe while he would be thinking that no compassion so cold and objective as that of a doctor deserves the name of compassion. Then the table would be elevated and he would be vertical again, feeling afresh the coldness of the nickel and mica pressed against his skin. The nurse would give him a glass of that miserable mud to drink, that white clayey liquid still clogged with lumps. And they say that X rays can produce cancer, yet every time he felt the spasm he told himself that he had to go for more, a cure that might be worse than the sickness. After the second glass of barium they would let him rest and then they would order him to assume indecent postures so that the ultimate

kink of his intestines could be photographed and he would twist his body and raise a shoulder and tilt a hip, press his buttocks together and spread his feet, lie on one side and then the other and presently they would say that it was all over and he must take a laxative because barium can harden like stone in your belly. And the irritation would be worse because of the combination of barium and castor oil and X rays and heightened tension and one night he would wake vomiting blood, weak, frightened, and an ambulance would have to come and take him to the hospital hemorrhaging, dissolving, helpless, too late, too soon, too . . .

Ligeia often laughed. But that was another story.

Oh, yes, you laugh, Dragoness. The wonder is that you haven't died of laughter.

△ "Dragoness," I asked you, "tell me how it was the first time."

"I'll tell you, but don't look at me that way. Let me laugh."

"Okay, I'll behave. Tell me."

"He was sleeping. It had rained all afternoon and I took the subway to Flushing Meadows and he was in the motel sound asleep and I opened the door, soaked, my raincoat wet through . . ."

"You don't have to lie to me, Elizabeth."

"Who's lying to you? I'm telling you how it happened. He was lying on the bed fast asleep and I came in soaked to the skin and stood there in the door and looked at him."

"Okay. I'm not wondering what happened, but where it happened."

"I looked at him and waited."

"All evening?"

"No, *caifán*, not all evening. Stop interrupting. I waited because I was sure that my presence there would awaken him and because I wanted to feel him still asleep and feel myself waiting."

"Yes?"

"Yes, *caifán*. I believe everything they tell me. But you're a disbelieving type, aren't you? You don't trust people."

"That depends. I've been roasted trusting people sometimes."

"We're getting old, old man, that's all."

"Sure. I'll wear the bottoms of my pants rolled up. Forget it."

"It bothers you? That's funny, I think. Believe it or not, it doesn't bother me at all. Except for one thing. You begin to be too damn tolerant. Consciously and deliberately tolerant. What a horror that is."

"You're depressing me, Dragoness. Okay, now enough suspense. You waited. Did he wake up?"

"Of course he woke up. Then I went close to him with my dripping raincoat and my wet hair and drops of rain all over my face. I went close to him finally. At last. The boy I had met at City College and decided I had to have. The handsome boy from Mexico, so damn good-looking that when you saw him you felt you had to pinch yourself to be sure."

"A swarthy Apollo?"

"Yeah, you could say it that way. And I told my girlfriends, or maybe only myself, that one way or another, little by little and no matter how long it took, I was going to get that man."

"Win his lightning fast-on-the-drawers beauty with time and patience?"

"Bullshit, *caifán*. Stop grinning. That's the way it was."

"You aren't reading me clear, Dragoness."

"Clear enough. Why do you always laugh?"

"Maybe it's because I don't care for solutions."

"We're leaving on a vacation trip tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"Veracruz. I want to see the sea again."

"Who's going?"

"Javier and I."

"That's all? Come on, Dragoness, give."

"Little Isabel."

"And that's all?"

"All right. Franz."

"Ahhh."

"Well, it's a solution, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Let's go back to that motel room."

"I knelt on the bed and Javier opened his eyes and smiled at me. He reached his hand out and unbuttoned my raincoat. Under the raincoat I was wearing only panties. Javier was shocked, oh, he was scandalized. But really. 'Did you come that way all the way from home?' The same prude then that he is today, but at the time I thought it was his innocence, that he was pure, inexperienced. He was trembling . . ."

"And you, Elizabeth? What did you feel? Quick now."

"Well, that . . . That everything was going to happen very very quickly. Too quickly."

"For what?"

"Too quickly for . . . love, I suppose, magic, dream, reality. The word doesn't matter. That it was going to be over and behind us very quickly because the whole world was pushing us forward toward it, making us urgent, unable to wait, take our time . . ."

"Yes, I think I get it. Go on, Elizabeth."

"Well, then there we were. And now we had become a *pareja*, a couple."

"Already a couple?"

"Yes, already. You know, after we got up from the bed we filled the washbasin and washed our hands together in the motel bathroom, soaped and washed our hands together, our fingers touching in the warm water . . ."

"This may be too personal, but were you couple enough to come together that first time?"

"Nothing you ask me or I tell you is too personal, *caifán*. No, not then. Only much later, after years together."

"What did you say to him?"

"Afterward? I thanked him. I told him not to worry about it, just to try to let himself go as much as he could. That only by giving could he take, by spending, save. Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Sure, very true. How did he answer you?"

"Oh, quietly and with complicated words. But very sincerely. He

told me that he loved me because I wasn't an echo from his past, from his childhood or his teen years. That our relationship was authentic, not a parody. Something like that. Probably he had read it somewhere. But at the time he seemed very moved and very sincere."

"What did you say then?"

"I asked him how he could know he wasn't lying when he said he loved me."

"A proper question."

"He didn't answer it. We made love again and we went on feeling that we were joined together deeply. A couple now."

"That pretty couple. Self-sacramented. Stealing from each other."

"I suppose. But I think I sensed even then that he wanted a problem, something to worry about, to be disturbed, troubled by. And that maybe that was what I was for him. The *troublante*, the difficulty. Lord, I forget what language I'm speaking."

"You're speaking pop language, Dragoness. Pop literature, you know. The big sign in the background:

POP LIT

"What, *caifán*? Slow down. Sometimes you buzz like a neon light."

"Sorry, Pussycat. I was carried away. You say it was in Flushing Meadows?"

"What, Flushing Meadows? God, no. It was right here in Mexico. In a tourists' court on the road to Toluca. He took me there in a broken-down taxi."

"Off of it, Pussycat. No cracks about cabs. Cabs mean a lot to me. They bail me out. They keep me going. They're one of my trades. By my cab alone . . ."

"Sometime you're going to choke on pure air, *caifán*. Drowned by words."

"Well, words are another of my trades. What did he say to you?"

"At the court? Oh, you know. That he loved me. That he loved me because with me everything was new and fresh, he wasn't repeating anything from the past. You know the way he talks. That we weren't living out a parody. Jazz like that."

"And did you believe him?"

"Well, Proffy's sweet, you know. I liked it that after we made love he got up and went to the bathroom with no dignity at all, half groggy, half out of it, nothing hip. Do you know what I mean?"

"Sure, Isabel, I always know what you mean."

"He had brought along some panties and he made me put them on. Then he made me put on his trench coat and get in the shower and he turned on the water until I was soaked and laughing. He asked me to go outside and knock and come in again and look at him pretending to be asleep on the bed. I went to the bed and knelt beside him and he very slowly unbuttoned me and took the trench coat off. And there I was in those borrowed panties, so we made love and then we went to sleep. It was nice, *caifán*. Different."

"You went to sleep and the dreams began? Thought became a dream that whittled itself down?"

"Man, how did you know?"

"Artaud said: We believe in the absolute power of contradiction."

"Who are you?"

"Who are *you*? Let's keep it a secret."

△ You walked down the path to the Volkswagen thinking, Elizabeth, remembering. You were seated in a café in Herakleion. Javier was reciting a poem by Gaspara Stampa and looking at you while you watched the men passing in their gold-embroidered trousers and then he alluded to the Duino Elegies and asked if you hadn't been struck by the restraint of gesture and expression in the Greek stelae and you replied, sipping your Turkish coffee, that in Greece everything seemed to have its name while at home in the

States so many things were nameless, undefined or very vaguely defined and therefore hard to talk about, even to think about, and that was one of the reasons that you had been glad to come here and sit in a café and look at the leathered faces of men who knew the names and the meanings of things. Javier smiled and pressed your hand and said that he had come to see the living embodiments of the restraint to be found in the stelae, the memory of those gestures still maintained, the way they moved, extended an arm, held their heads. From reading books, he went on, one could deduce a way of thinking or speaking. But not physical movement. He had wanted to try to discover how such restraint could nevertheless hold such passion. While he was still young enough he wanted to learn the lesson that was first of all in their architecture, where the form is its own content with no need for ornament or commentary. Just as their tragedy is architectonic, so their architecture is their theater enacted in stone. Everything is exactly what it appears to be. Gray-haired women with paunches and double chins and fat arms called back and forth from their balconies and then you and Javier left to look at the golden Mycenaean masks, those funerary suns that provide a third face, one that lies between the faces of life and death and is the only face that we can receive from others, the only possible homage to death: to understand that beyond life but this side of death can lie a visage containing both. You went to see the dead children covered with beaten gold, the sketches in marble of the Cycladic women with their high breasts, their very simple figures, slender, angular, yet soft, a sharp contrast to the broad-buttocked women in the statues at Aegina whose strong hands rest upon their heavy knees, an equal contrast to the Athenian caryatids placed by their builders in stances of support but transcending that destiny thanks to their blind distant eyes looking forever far away, far beyond their setting of eternal fixation, beyond the Acropolis and beyond the step their motionless legs are about to take into another time, having outlived the time of their creation.

"Twice I made love to you, because I thought you understood."

Understand? You spent your days in Falaraki that summer and on into the soft Mediterranean autumn looking for beach pebbles. You became almost a tradition: the blond American girl who sought colored stones: Klondike Lizzie, the Pebble Rush.

And one day the sun did not come out. One day in November the little bay ran its waves agitated and cold against the shore and the sea became slate-gray and saltier than usual—you could taste it on your lips—stirred up, threatening. The fishermen decided not to go out. There was only one old man who stood far away on the rocks, flaying, under the rain, a dead octopus. You went to the empty beach because you wanted to swim. Javier trailed along some distance behind you. The rain wet his turtle-neck sweater and his corduroy pants and his bare feet sank into the once golden, now dark sand. You swam to the rock where the old man was flaying the octopus. You stretched your arms up from the water and the old fisherman grinned and threw the octopus down to you. Slowly you swam back. Everything seemed predetermined

“ . . . as though you were living out a pact, Ligeia . . . ”
and the white cat came from the house buried in the sand and waited for you, drenched and shivering on the sand

“ . . . and you came out of the sea, Ligeia . . . ”
out of the cold water, Elizabeth, with the black arms of the octopus twined around your own arms and your nude breasts. You stretched a hand and the cat moved to you and you lifted it up and placed it on top of your head and slowly, illuminated by a rose and ocher light that revealed all of the serene, almost static contours of your brown and blond figure crowned by a cat, you walked to Javier.

△ Dragoness, just look at the day we are living in. Here you have it in the paper. Dated Pittman, Nevada. Crime of passion in which the weapon was a two-motored Cessna. Three victims who were inside a bar, while the target of the deed was untouched. John Covarrubias (hey, a compatriot!), thirty-eight years of age (more, a contemporary!), had a violent argument with his wife in a bar dur-

ing the afternoon. In Pittman, Nevada. He wanted to effect a reconciliation and have her return to live with him, and when she refused, he became blind with fury and went and got his Cessna, flew over the town and dived at the bar. Missed. Destroyed two cars in the street, swiped the bar and injured three of its seated clients, and angry Mr. Covarrubias was killed but his good wife, who had just walked off down the street, was merely shocked and survived to live happily, we may suppose, ever after. And so it goes, sweet Elizabeth. Once you begin to monologue over the skull of Yorick you discover that the Dane's doubt is the only way to affirm the elemental truth that we are, yet we are not; we were, yet we were not; we shall be, yet we shall not be. Now you see me, now you don't: boo. That is: there is a state of nonbeing that summons us continually whether we are feeling terror or laughter or insanity. And we like to play games with it, but who knows, suddenly we may be only playing our role in earnest, our eternally present and eternally denied possibility of nothingness. Well, not everyone takes that step. The risks are too great. The devil takes you, or your name is Rimbaud. Which makes me ache with boredom, Elizabeth. And to return to you and yours, if we are ever going to know who Javier is and why he is, we must go back and remember and let him go back and remember. There is no other way, however tiring you find it as you sit in the rocker in your damp-smelling hotel room in Cholula and say to him: "You're exhausted, Javier. So much talk always wears you out. Why don't you lie down?"

Your husband pays you no attention. He unzips his little leather bag and one by one places his bottles and vials on the narrow glass shelf held by two nails above the washbasin in the bathroom. He sees himself in the mirror there and in a low voice asks, "Don't you want to unpack your things?"

"What? I can't hear you."

"I asked if you don't want . . . oh, nothing."

He places his shaving mug on the shelf, lifting it by its handle, and then puts the white-bristled brush within it, the silvery straight razor flat beside it.

"Ligeia, listen. The party was just about over . . ."

"What?"

"Worn down, tired, nearing its end, though the moment had come, as it comes to all parties, when those still present could believe that it had never begun and would never end. But to a newcomer just arriving, to me as I arrived, it was clear that the party was almost over."

He stands in the door of the bathroom looking at you and you say wearily: "Please, Javier, please. I know that old story. We both know it. It's past, done for, a closed chapter. Please don't go through it again."

"They greeted me with a certain coldness precisely for that reason, because I knew that it was over and they didn't want to know." He goes back into the bathroom and continues talking while he takes out bottles and places them in a row: the cologne—Jean-Marie Farina; the eyedrops; the Alka-Seltzer. Then his manicure tweezers and the bottle of Vitamin C tablets. The capsules of Desenfriol. "Yet they pretended gaiety, to be receiving me as a kind of prodigal son, the latecomer who could be forgiven because his arrival gave an excuse to go on, put on another record, look for an unopened bottle. But after a few brief and intoxicated words they abandoned me. Left me to my own devices and I searched for a clean glass and ice and something to drink."

The tortoiseshell comb. The bottle of deodorant. The round celluloid package of condoms wrapped in gold paper.

"Ligeia."

"What, Javier, what?"

"I forgot my toothbrush and toothpaste."

"So?"

"I can't brush my teeth. Why don't you take care of these things? Now we'll have to go out to a drugstore."

"If there is a drugstore."

"What?"

"If there is one, such a luxury as a drugstore in this damn place."

He laughs quietly. He goes on: "I couldn't find a clean glass. I

had to be satisfied with one some girl had used and had left marked with lipstick. It was given to me by the hand of a girl I couldn't see. Only her hand, her arm . . ."

He raises the opaque bottle with the green label and reads: 10 mgs. hydrochloride of 7-chlor-2-methylamine-5-phenyl-3-H-4-benzodiazepine oxide, with excipient 190 mgs., following the formula of F-Hoffmann-LaRoche & Cie., S.A., Basel, Switzerland. He places the bottle on the shelf.

". . . her hand and arm and the drink she held out to me. Amber liquid. Ice that had almost melted. The rim stained with her orange lipstick. A copper bracelet on her wrist. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Javier, I'm listening."

"The record player was playing and in the living room several couples were dancing. Someone had turned off the lights in the hall. I couldn't see her face in that broken, dim, flickering light. I could hear her voice singing very softly and I tried to imagine her orange lips, her invisible smile . . ."

Sitting in the rocker, you begin to hum. Finally the words come back to you: *It's the wrong song, in the wrong style, though your smile is lovely, it's the wrong smile . . .*

Again he is reading: Each troche contains 1.18 mgs. of Tripluo-perazine cyclohydrate, Isopramide diiodide 6.79 mgs. Mode of administration: oral. Dosage as instructed by the physician. To be dispensed only by the prescription and under the supervision of a physician licensed by the Department of Health and Assistance.

"Her voice was sugary and so very low that I could hardly hear it against the hidden voice from the record player. Presently she stopped singing and spoke."

"Hello. You're very handsome tonight."

"Yes, that's right. How did you know? I took her hand and drew her near me and put my other hand on her naked back. One of her arms went around my shoulders and the other dropped for me to take her wrist. We began to dance, dancing . . ."

You sing quietly: *"You don't know how happy I am that we met. I'm strangely attracted to you . . ."*

“ . . . very slowly, hardly moving, our bodies touching lightly and then separating. I could see her face now in the faint light, but not clearly. To have seen her clearly I would have had to step back from her and I preferred not to but rather to discover her without my eyes, a warm and elemental discovery of someone more forgotten than unknown.”

Javier lifts the bottle of Stelabid that he is holding and places it beside the reflection of his face in the bathroom mirror. You come into the bathroom and are reflected behind him. You look down at one of the bottles: Oratic acid 55.80 mgs., Xanthine 6.66 mgs., Adenine 3.34 mgs. Excipient c.p.b. 250 mgs. You put the bottle on the shelf.

“I didn’t speak to her. I was afraid that anything I said might only provoke her to laugh. Or that she, like me, would be able to speak only in clichés. So I kept silent. I closed my eyes against her cheek and felt her warm young breath and the vague fragrance of her high breasts, which as we separated from the embrace of dancing were illuminated by the flickering light. It drew her profile . . .”

You take off your blouse and hang it over the back of the toilet. With your hip you push Javier to the side of the washbasin. You turn on the water.

“Is there any hot water in this hole?”

You dip your fingers into the gush of rust-colored water.

“Cold. Of course. What can you do? Give me your razor, Javier.”

“We looked at each other. I saw her dark eyes, her eyelids long and thick as an Oriental’s, her orange lips, the deep hollows in her tense cheeks, the lightly tanned skin . . .”

You cock your arm over your head and begin to soap your armpit.

“I held her in my arms. I could see her then and forever.”

“Forever?” You furrow your brow with concentration and scrape the razor carefully across your armpit. Javier embraces you around the waist. He touches your breasts. “No!” he says sharply. “I tell you it’s all over, past and gone, done for! There’s no going back to

it. That record has finished. *There's someone I'm trying so hard to forget. . . .* "Javier! Damn it, you've made me cut myself!" You put your fingers to your armpit and show them smeared with blood. "Give me some of that cologne."

"I went back to the table where I had left my glass. I couldn't find it. I looked exactly where I had left it, but it wasn't there." He empties a squirt of cologne into his hand. "And then I looked, standing there, motionless, for the girl . . ."

"Please, Javier, hurry. I'm bleeding."

He rubs cologne in your armpit. The armpit of Señora Elizabeth Jonas de Ortega.

"Ouch! It burns."

"I tried to find her among the couples who were dancing slowly to the music of a new record. I remembered her waist, her cheek, the lobe of her ear, her smell. I remembered that we hadn't spoken, that I had not said a word, that it was over, gone . . ."

"Javier, please get back out of the way and leave me in peace." You begin to soap the other armpit. Javier leans against the wall. A wall of unevenly set tiles that here and there were once plastered. A *plus* in application, you grade him silently. *F minus* in conduct.

"No, it wasn't like that, Ligeia. Not like that. I've been lying."

Singing softly, "*You don't know how happy I am that we met,*" you shave yourself. "*I'm strangely attracted to you. There's someone I'm trying so hard to forget. Don't you want to forget someone too . . .*"

"Listen, Ligeia. Will you promise to be quiet and listen?"

"I think it's starting, Javier."

"What's starting?"

"My period, dope. See if we brought some Kotex among your medicinal treasures."

Javier opens the little leather case again and searches through the cotton, the adhesive tape, the gauze, the bottle of iodine.

"No, we didn't bring any."

Angry, you stop and stare at him. "No Kotex? Go on, make poetry of that."

"You should have taken care of it. You know . . ."

"But we didn't forget any of that crap for your nerves. The pills that merely poison you more."

He grabs your shoulders. "I'm a sick man. I need my medicine."

His hands are hurting you and you make a face but go on calmly: "Bullshit, my love. It's all in your mind. Every doctor tells you that. It's all . . ."

"The doctors don't know everything!" he begins to shake you violently.

"Javier, you're hurting me." You relax, let yourself go limp.

"I know when I have a pain and when I don't have a pain!"

"All right, Javier, of course you know."

He releases you finally and you squeeze yourself with your arms.

"Give me a little of that cotton, Javier."

Javier carefully pulls loose a handful of cotton and gives it to you. He leaves the bathroom and in the mirror you see him go to the bed and lie down. When you too leave the bathroom and walk across the squeaky boards of the bedroom, he rises again. You fall on the bed. You have been in that cheap room only two hours and yet you have already found two fleas fat with blood. The two splotches where you crushed them smear the wall above the bed.

"We should have gone straight through to Veracruz, Javier."

"It wasn't I who insisted on seeing the ruins. For my part . . ."

"And that story of yours bores me terribly."

He watches you stretch across the bed, and he thinks that, despite everything, your waist is still as flexible as a reed. What reed? It would be a pedantry, he tells himself, to remember its scientific name. Nevertheless, he murmurs, hoping that you do not hear him, "Phragmites communis." Well, Dragoness, man does not live by bread alone, and especially Javier doesn't. He commands himself again to be silent but already and automatically is giving the old definition: "Un roseau pensant . . ."

"I could tell some stories too, if I wanted to," you go on. You are face down across the bed and you let your head hang over one side, your feet over the other. The coverlet is white, here and there stained with yellow.

"Javier, please take a Kleenex and wipe away those two fleas I squashed."

Blood runs toward your head and swells the veins of your temples and forehead and neck. You let your shoes fall from your tired feet. You wriggle your toes as if they were fingers on a keyboard.

"Oh, if I wanted to, I could tell stories that would bore you too."

Javier fiddles with the bronze curtain rod from which hang the muslin curtains that cover the glass-paned door.

"Javier, it's smelly in here. Haven't you noticed? Doesn't it bother you? Why don't you go and complain to the manager."

"The picturesque usually smells a bit. Don't worry. Some day there will be a Cholula-Hilton."

The pressure of blood in your head begins to make you dizzy. And the squashed fleas are still there on the wall. Again you close your eyes. "For example, I could tell the story of Elena."

"Elena?"

You raise your head and look at him as if surprised.

"Elena, of course. Elena. Don't you remember the beach at Fararaki? The colored pebbles? The figs Elena sold? The hot, sun-rotted figs that she brought in a bucket and sold to sunbathers sprawled out on the sand under the sun that would end by rotting them too, the . . ."

"The sun, always the sun." While you are speaking, he closes the shutters of the door. "Ever since I've known you, you've always been looking for more sun."

"Why close the shutters at six in the afternoon?"

"Because it is a public hall and you are lying there with your skirt up to your ass."

You laugh a bubbling laugh and Javier closes his eyes in the darkness. He is wrong about the hall, Dragoness. It is not open to the public. It's a closed gallery that surrounds the four sides of a patio roofed with glass panes set in an iron spider web with dust gathered in its angles and crotches.

Javier folds down the coverlet and the sheets and in silence lies

on his stomach. You are seated with your legs drawn up, your knees holding the covers high. Although Javier tries to keep his face turned away, your woman's smells come to him: cologne water, menstruation, fatigue. With a fold of the sheet over his face, he murmurs: "Men from the States are more sensitive to smells than we are. They are aseptic. Every odor seems aggressive to them. Offends them, irritates them. Here, we're immune."

He removes the sheet from his face and out of the corner of his eye peeks at you as you sit smoking with open eyes that are pensive and distant. He covers his face again and again smells your smells.

Just a deterioratin' little boy, Mama-Dragoness.

He believes, when he wakes, that he has slept only a few seconds. He had felt nothing. But when he removes the sheet from his face with a jerk and calls out, "Ligeia! Ligeia!" he sees that you are no longer seated there. Your imprint is still visible on the pillow and the sheets, but you, Elizabeth, have vanished. And the light has vanished too. He sighs and says bitterly: "Ligeia, oh, for Christ's sake!"

△ Sometimes I really don't know how you speak or listen to him, Dragoness. He makes me too aware that all of us want to close the circle of our lives, to be able to think that the round line ends where it began, to want to live many lives within the one we do live, to be sure that if we only had more strength of mind, will, and dream, we could make our little pasts have meaning. Unconsciously we are all poets and we struggle to oppose nature with our patterns: nature which does not consider us individual beings at all but rather confluences of lives that cannot be isolated one from the other, that flow together in a great whirl that neither begins nor ends. Suppose then we are confronted by a man who believes that he has closed his circle once and for all, that he has left everything behind, that he has understood it all: what does he do when you address him speaking any words that may come to mind, any sentence whatsoever, no matter how cryptic. For example:

"That is a finger bowl. When you finish eating your shrimp, you

dip your fingers in it and wash them off. Like this, see? You must learn these things. If you don't, people will say that we don't know how to bring you up."

Then he will have to remember that he was thinking,

"Where will I go after dinner?"

and also that one day he wanted to follow her, to learn where she disappeared to every afternoon, but he fell too far behind and got lost. He was ten years old and it was the first time he had ever left the house without knowing where he was going. Before, when he went out alone, he always knew that it would be to the park or the candy store or to his school. And, moreover, he rode a school bus to school. This time he went beyond his coordinates—Calzada del Niño Perdido, Parque de Ajusco, the school of the Marist Fathers on Avenida Morelos—and in four or five blocks he was lost and he observed that he did not know the city, that in reality he knew nothing about it because he had never walked it alone.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"I went to the movie at the Parisiana."

"Who with?"

"Two boys from school."

"What are their names?"

"Pedro and Enrique."

"What picture did you see?"

"A talkie. I forget its name."

"Let me have the paper. It'll be there."

And, after all, he had not grown up in the city. He had been living there only a year. Before that, the trains were everything, much more than the cities. Always running behind schedule. Often stopped by breakdowns, stuck sometimes for twenty-four hours in a row in the middle of a desert while his mother dried herself with lace handkerchiefs and his father played cards with other men in the salon diner that smelled of too ripe bananas. At first the trainmen would say that no one should get off because the trouble was minor and they would be on their way again in twenty minutes. Then, when the rumor was circulating that the tracks ahead had

been blown up, some of the passengers would get down and smoke cigarettes and drink from canteens but the sun would be too blistering and they would climb aboard again seeking refuge, shadow, and his mother dried the back of her neck and between her breasts and said to him, "Don't get off the train. It's too dangerous," and on the other side of the dust-thick glass the desert could be seen like its own mirage, colorless, empty, a stage upon which at any moment something terrible might happen and all colors be born of the absence of any color. Only the clouds moved. They hurried along playing at racing each other and Javier could amuse himself watching them for a while, but not for long. He pretended that the train had gotten tired. It had huffed and puffed and groaned to reach the high desert and now it had fallen exhausted, mouth down, panting without strength, and everything smelled of tired steam, of grease and old food. With his finger he began to draw houses and trees and faces in the dust of the window.

"Go wash your hands while there's still water."

An old man was eating *chongos zamoranos* and offered the boy a bite. Javier was sweating but he had been forbidden to take off his brick-colored wool jacket. He sat beside the old man and the old man smiled and offered him a wooden spoonful of that curdled milk and Javier opened his mouth and tasted the sweetness and the grain of the chipped spoon. The old man smiled again. He had no teeth. The honey ran down his wrinkled chin and the front of his white, buttoned-up, tieless shirt. He was wearing a faded felt hat and a black suit with frayed elbows and lapels and he ate the *chongos* without saying a word.

"Where is the boy?"

"In the living room."

"What's he doing?"

"His homework."

"Close the door."

Yes, close the door. The door of their bedroom or the door of the compartment on the train when the train crossed the river and left behind the homes with lawns that had no walls but instead little signs with the name of the family living there, the stores, the

movies, the soda fountains. The people who were different. No, that wasn't right: the people who were different were those who boarded the train in Nuevo Laredo, after it had crossed the wide shallow brown river between the high earthen banks, the river with its little sand bars and islets and its bushes growing surrounded by water. And then he could understand the language again. The allusions, the jokes, that way of speaking without ever referring to things directly, as if the names of things burned the tongue a little, were prohibited and secret and needed to be approached lightly and laughingly from a distance because the direct word was dangerous. The lightening, softening diminutives. The oblique slang. While his father Raúl sat rubbing his head, his suspenders hanging loose, and one by one held out and examined the purchases he had made on the other side this time: the extension cords, the transformers, the electric irons and coffeepots. And Ofelia his mother stood in front of the compartment looking glass and held her new dress against her body until she saw him, her son, reflected in the glass also standing in the open door with a toy boat in his hand, and with a movement of her head she commanded him and he closed the door.

He seldom understood what they said at the table. And they spoke very little. Without his knowing why, he came to believe that their faces and their hands, their expressions and their gestures, so familiar, so habitual, had nothing to do with the words they spoke during their meals.

"Pass the salt, please."

And Raúl had the habit of breaking up his bread and dropping it small piece by small piece into his soup.

"You look tired."

While Ofelia always squeezed lemon into her soup. Always, every day.

"Yes. Well, what do you expect?"

Javier brushed away the flies from the metal net that protected the bread. Sometimes the bread became old there and began to turn white.

"Maybe we'll be able to take a vacation the end of this year."

Funniest of all were the dining room pictures. Long and narrow, they told the story of a boy who was teasing a sleeping dog (the first picture); the dog awakens (the second picture), bites the boy in the seat of the pants (the third), and the boy cries and climbs a tree.

"Maybe. I don't know. It depends."

The bead curtain that served as a door rustled as the single servant came from the distant kitchen, where the cooking was still done on charcoal braziers. Thin filets covered with onions.

"It would be nice to go down to the sea for a few days."

"Yes, Ofelia, it would be nice."

They stopped talking while the servant served them. They resumed again, with difficulty, after she had left the room.

"Javier is getting very good grades."

"Fine. That's fine."

"Aren't you, Javier?"

He nodded without stopping chewing and tried to understand what it was that his mother and father were saying so mechanically and expressionlessly though their lips were smiling. And now and then Ofelia would throw her head back almost happily: a vacation at the end of the year.

"Don't start eating before your father. It's bad manners. They'll say that we don't know how to . . ."

He opened the curtain in order to climb . . .

"Ligeia? Where are you? Oh, for Christ's sake."

. . . to his upper berth and there in the lower, where he had to be, where it was ordained that he be, was the old man of the *chongos zamoranos*, panting and gray-skinned but with the strength born of pure weariness that belongs to the aged because it has become their habit, on his face the toothless smile Javier did not then understand but which later, if he had tried to write or even to talk about it, he would have described as the transient mask worn when an instant prolongs itself toward fixity; withered, wiry, in his collarless white shirt that hung down to his flaccid buttocks, and beside him the old woman his wife who saw Javier first and pulled long

locks of her white hair across her face to conceal it but left her naked heavy breasts exposed, the nipples like brown craters, her wrinkled belly like old linen. She mumbled something and the man turned and observed Javier staring at them. That was how it was. Or no, that was not quite how it was, but really only where and what it was, and Javier never wrote about it because he felt that it had been a meaningless encounter, not one in which anyone had been involved, he told himself this and he put the incident aside, scribbled in one of his notebooks with the comment that sometimes the distance that separates us has not only more value but also more meaning than the closeness that joins us. He was to meet them again, not the same yet the same, years later when he was an adolescent schoolboy and was being punished for some misdemeanor such as forging his father Raúl's signature and had to stay in the classroom after everyone had left, alone writing on the blackboard *I will not forge my father's signature, I will not forge my father's signature, I will not forge my father's signature* twenty times until the blackboard was filled and then he erased and began another twenty *I will not forge my father's signature* and behind him the room, a makeshift basement classroom in the school of the Marist Fathers, began to change as darkness crept into it, ceased to be the familiar place of slanting light and shadow and familiar smells, ink, paper, crayons, sweat after coming in from exercises in the recreation yard, wood, floor oil, chalk dust, sky dust from the high small open windows and he sat there either not hearing the teacher at all or hearing very indistinctly like the buzz of a distant bee; it ceased to be that room and slowly filled with darkness and coolness that seemed to wipe away the smells of the day while he went on writing *I will not forge my father's signature* until he finished, left the last sentence he had written unerased but erased all the others and gathered up his things and took care to turn off the lights and close the door so that it would lock. And tomorrow confession would be given to all students in the first year of law. He had completed his punishment: done it on word of honor, as the teacher had ordered, and in the night the whole school was dark

except for those hidden and prohibited patios and rooms of the building next door where the nuns lived, the pale women without makeup who in those years of persecution could not wear their habits, their hair combed starkly back and tied in knots bristling with combs, their spectacles gold-framed, their clothing dark blouses and dark skirts with high-buttoned shoes. He came out to the corner. There they were, crossing the street, an old man in a black suit and a white-haired old woman in a gray and white polka-dot dress, humped, exhausted, patient, hurrying, the same and not the same, he had seen them again.

And if you had asked him, Dragoness, he could have explained to you that the whole point is not really to get close to someone but to know *how* to achieve closeness, that the knowledge is more important and enduring than the accomplishment. And when he called

“Ligeia! Ligeia!”

you were no longer seated beside him on the bed as he had seen you just before he closed his eyes. He looked toward the bathroom and the bathroom light was out. He sighed. He grunted sourly,

“Ligeia, some day I’m going to send you back to the heathens,” and he took the scissors from the night table beside the bed—Lord, have mercy upon us—and stretched his feet out—Christ, have mercy upon us—and began to cut his toenails very carefully and deliberately—Don’t put your hands in your pockets, Javier. It’s bad manners. They are going to say that we don’t—shaping each nail in the shape of an inverted half-moon, the sides extending out slightly to prevent the nail from growing inward. For once as an adolescent he had had to go to a pedicurist to have an ingrown nail removed. Presently he finished and got up and went into the bathroom and swallowed two Librium capsules. Amen.

△ I am sure you will forgive me, Pigeons, if I continue to read my tourists’ pamphlets as I whirl along the superhighway from Mexico City to Puebla and the four of you turn your backs on the ruins of Xochicalco and make your way down to Franz’s Volks-

wagen. You are in advance, Elizabeth, walking slowly. Your shawl has slipped from your shoulders and is dragging in the dust but you do not notice until Franz trots and catches up and tells you. For a moment you stop and look down into the *barranca*, the ravine, where the trees are stunted and the dusty earth is covered with the dry, hard, faintly sour-smelling excrement of goats. A short distance from the path lies the corpse of a dog, and overhead, patiently circling, are the buzzards that were feeding upon it before you came to interrupt them, that will feed upon it again as soon as you leave. You go down to the Volkswagen and get in, Isabel and your husband in back, you beside Franz in front, and the motor starts and the car moves off with a growl of gears and the sound of Franz's voice saying

"Erstaunte euch nicht auf attischen Stellen die Versicht menschlicher Geste?"

And in my *turismo* limousine I make myself as comfortable as I can and from time to time glance out the window at the fields that in the middle of April are white with hail, rest my cheek against the cold glass, and gradually allow myself to be absorbed reading the folder and remembering that around everything is a high-tension electric fence and a deep ditch of mud and you enter by a stone door over which hangs a single yellow electric bulb. A window on each side of the door. Grass above, as if the fortress were a cellar or a tomb; chimneys rising from the grass as if it were a buried factory. The administrative section. The square buildings with flat roofs. The muddy yards, the violet-colored walls, the barred windows. The disinfecting station. The room where prisoners are received. The guard room. A hall with locked racks for the rifles of the guards. The office of the Commandant. A storeroom for clothing. The triple gallery of the solitary cells with their two iron rings in the wall. The garage. Communal cells with three-decker wooden bunks against the wall, one stove that does not burn, a light that is always turned off, one toilet, one washbasin, the walls always damp. Cell 16, where the elderly and the feeble peel potatoes all day. Cell 13, dormitory for the prisoners who work

in the laundry. Cell 14, that of those VIP prisoners who fetch and carry, cook, serve table, cut hair. A door and a corridor and the twenty cells for the condemned: absolutely bare, only the cement floor. Dog kennels. A garbage shed. The infirmary, presided over by a prisoner-physician because the official doctor comes only twice a week in the evening and only to sign death certificates. A bridge and the old stable that is now the hospital. Straw-filled mattresses on the bare floor. The garrison garden where vegetables are grown by bent-backed female prisoners. The morgue, a dark room on a low elevation. Here the dead depart for the incinerator in the city, to return in urns marked *F* or *M*. The old mansion with its fences and graveled walks, its porches and attics, its central heating, its rooms filled with lacquered furniture and glass tables and paintings of scenes in the Alps, its large radio and its selection of classical recordings, its dining room with polished chairs, its bedrooms with mahogany beds. Another wall: the women's section. The same huge cells. The same three-decker wooden bunks. The same barred windows looking out on a muddy yard. The cell where women sit painting wooden buttons, knitting socks for the soldiers of the garrison, sewing dresses for the female guards, shirts for the male prisoners. The garrison canteen. Workshops. The forge. The locksmith. The carpenter: furniture, toys, coffins. The laundry, where only men work but where sometimes on Saturdays selected women prisoners are allowed to come to wash underwear. Then the fourth section, which was built later. Later, Elizabeth, I repeat, later when the prison was overflowing. The prisoners themselves built it. Five enormous communal cells. Solitary cells. A high wall and beyond it lawn, a movie theater, a swimming pool. The tunnel with bins of potatoes, guarded by two Alsatian dogs, the tunnel that leads to the execution yard with its scaffold and bullet-pocked wall. Finally the crematorium. It also was built later. Later, Elizabeth. The crematorium.

I put aside the folder and put memory aside. Why go on? It sickens me, a memory that is treason to my humanity. My nerves do not want me to remember. They reject it. I remember only as

discipline. And that may sicken you: vomit, if you want to, Elizabeth. And here I am, here I am, and tonight I will be there. So what? I am traveling the superhighway from Mexico City to Puebla while the four of you are crawling along a winding route, Mexico City–Cuernavaca–Xochicalco–Cuautla–Cholula, that will lead you to a meeting with me and my six young monkish friends. And tonight one of your little group will make his exit, Elizabeth. He will cop out, to be seen no more, and I will be there to attend his departure, to hold the door wide open for him, perhaps to nudge him a little until he walks through it. Tonight one of you will die, Elizabeth. But don't worry about it. I won't and God won't. Let us remember that *man seeks above all to give vent to his strength: life itself is will, and the instinct for self-preservation is only one of the indirect albeit more frequent results of this truth.* Or, if you don't like that, reflect that *the simplest surrealist action is simply to go out in the street and shoot indiscriminately into the crowd.* Nietzsche and Bretón, platoon leaders at Auschwitz? And I? Your *caifán* and your spinner of words and once your cabby: am I only another rebel without a cause who has begun to grow old, a middle-aging beatnik, an angry young man still angry enough but no longer so young? It makes you think, doesn't it, Dragoness. You say you don't like my quotations? Then you quote yours while I quote mine, and we'll both be happy.

And some day you will tell me that the flies were coming in the window and buzzing, irritating you, but Franz left the window open while you said to him,

△ “I walked out leaving him lying there on the bed half asleep, talking to himself, still telling that old story about the party. It's my period. Do you mind?”

“On the contrary,” Franz said as you rested your head on his nude chest. “We don't have to bother with rubbers.”

“Say something bad about him, Franz.”

Franz laughed and cupped your chin in his palm. You nestled against his shoulder.

"No, forgive me. Why bother with him at all? Tell me about you. A love story, Franz. Of real love. God, how he bored me. That same old tale. I've heard it a thousand times. Tell me a new story, Franz, a true one. One about youth and young love."

You lived on the beach at Falaraki. On the beach itself, in a little house half buried in the sand, there where the shore and the sea form a half-moon of white water the perfect symmetry of which is broken by gentle breezes that undulate the sea all the way to the horizon in perpetually moving silver bands. Say it, go ahead and say it: the foaming Greek sea, the dark empire, as dangerous as it is immense. And Javier said that he could understand it: it was a summons that had to be answered, a road that had to be traveled, an imperative contrast to the hummocks of yellow stone, the low arid mountains that were like the loin of some beast, the hump of a camel driven across the earth and barred from the sea. You rented the cottage. Like all the others it was white, white outside and inside, and sunken into the sand with two narrow windows, completely white under the hot sun but twined about with hyacinth, hibiscus, and oleander. The first morning you woke there, you held hands

" . . . and did what we ought to have done on the beach itself in broad daylight . . ."

smelling the thick perfume of the poisonous summer flowers, and behind their smell that of the sea with the dawning sun resting on its stone beds, that of the freshness of the darkness just fading. Javier squeezed your hand and you looked out the window beyond the yellow flowers and saw the earth and the sea, darkness and dawn, coolness and heat, the disappearing orange moon and the glass sun, the unfurled nets, the red fish, the olive trees and the rootless wind, and you felt that you were at the center of everything and that the words you spoke would spread in ever widening circles through all being. Ah, yes. Youth and young love.

And here, right at the beginning, let's stop, Elizabeth, and ask if you are sure you can avoid lying. You don't know whether to be ashamed or to feel pity when Javier tells the story of the girl at the

party, a story so complex and devious that it cannot be about love, yet in its own way a story of love too. He didn't use to be like that. You used to go to bed with such simplicity. There was no other way. Nothing could have been added to that summer on the coast of Rhodes. You had arrived very simply, traveling by steamer on the money Javier had gotten from selling his parents' home on Calzada del Niño Perdido, not enough for first class, but you didn't want first class. With a single trunk, and at that, most of its drawers were empty. You arrived simply after the simple events: meeting in New York at City College and falling in love. You said goodbye to Gershon and promised to write . . . did you keep that promise, Elizabeth? . . . and you didn't see Becky at all, for by that time you had stopped going to see her. And so you came to Rhodes on a slow ship, and once you were there, if you needed words, you left them for daylight or the ocean or books. Words were not for night when you lay together very simply in the plain white room with the white beams and the white chimney. And you could think with great clarity then, clearly and subtly because wrapped in each other's arms in that fishermen's bed you believed that together you were holding, forming, the parts of a very brief past. Today you find yourselves carrying the empty yet heavy shell of many years together, yet these years seem briefer than that little past you were discovering and creating together then, a past that taught you how simple love can be, yet how difficult. Like certain poems in which the words are not veiled and have meaning in themselves, yet at the same time are bridges to a hidden and deeper meaning, so your nights then were a story that told a second story, silent and concealed, in the background, and everything, your life in the cabin on the beach, like the writing Javier was beginning to do—and his writing was why you had come there—had two realities. There is a moment, and for you and Javier it came then perhaps, in the warm white room scented with hyacinth and ocean salt and old wine soaked into wood, a moment when we can act for ourselves and in concert with others because what we are doing is both meaningless and meaningful, not so much significant in itself

as in its revelation to us of the second reality that is sustained and concealed by what we do. Then we go back to fundamentals, and then only can we know that, like art, life is a struggle with what appears to be real, the stubborn world that makes demands upon us and restrains and represses us, a struggle to deform, reform, affirm, and negate reality until it becomes a truer reality, what we want and need. You and Javier came to Rhodes worn out by your struggle with the world, that was all. Perhaps you realized as you lay in his arms caressing his skin that never again would you possess the time and the clarity, the solitude and the closeness, to recover what each of you had lost in childhood in the great obligatory fusion of life lived with your families. And now you were alone together, yet joined. And it was that and not the mere sex, the commonplace of the century, not the physical communion alone, although that was full and complete, it was that which the two of you experienced in the heat and coolness of skin touching skin, hands interlaced, kisses endlessly prolonged and repeated. Alone and together, Elizabeth and Javier, in the night you made love to cease to be what you had been as children in your homes, what you had been hidden in the closet with your brother while your mother Becky looked for you to take you to dinner with the Mendelssohns, what Javier had been reading in the rainy patio under a naked light bulb buzzing with mosquitoes while Ofelia his mother spied upon him from the cracked bedroom door; what you had been mounted on your father's shoulders to ride along Manhattan's summer-blue streets to the Hudson; what he had been holding Raúl's hand and walking a Mexico City that on Sunday was thronged with organ-grinders and bored servant women. To cease to be what you had been, to become what you were. And you would never be sure, although those nights you had lived that certainty, whether like you Javier was denying the appearances of love that make it a semblant echo of the relationships we have with everyone. You told yourself that he was, for he never kissed you in public, never showed you off to others, never moved close to you simply to be close to you, never took advantage of an idle moment to hold you

in his arms and make love. Yet neither had he deformed your relationship by insisting, either in words or in his attitude, that it should have more meaning or value than it had sufficiently in itself. That was why your kisses could cover his body with full freedom and you could close yourself off from the persistent sounds of the sea and the night with its crickets and mandolins and give yourself completely, taking completely. The depth of your relationship was between only the two of you and meant nothing that could have meant anything to anyone else, nothing that could explain the world or speak even one word. Nevertheless only there, hidden between Javier's arms, Javier hidden in the darkness of your open flesh, did the world become orderly and serene. For you were neither of you asking for anything. You were both simply grateful. Grateful for the heavy August heat, almost tangible, for the thick scent of hyacinth, for the heavy bed that would never lose the smell of the lambskins the fishermen who usually occupied the cabin slept beneath, for the tactile closeness of the tile floor that retained the warmth of afternoon, for the weight of your two bodies above all; for without this diffuse denseness of feeling and smell and hearing the other, the cool and sufficient isolation of each in the very union of love, could not have happened. Thus as you came together you remained apart, maintained that essential distance that permits us to see and respect each other, the distance which is maintained by being broken in the fusion of sex, yet is not broken. Like wealth, this had value only if it was spent. The way to preserve it was to use it. And so you needed to remain yourself, he himself, not to plunge into the maze of entire oneness, both then and during the winter when the townspeople brought fish and resinous wine and goat's cheese and olives and the wind sounded ragged and gray and now and then a mountain of water would fall upon the pebbled beach and you and Javier would hide in the cabin and listen to the wind on the tiles of the roof and with gaiety and excitement pretend a fear that would draw you closer, give yourself to hours of long, unforeseen, always surprising caresses and kisses, each embrace longer, everything unnecessary suspended,

everything alien to the hours of your love removed as you lay together in front of the fire on the lambskins on the damp tiles looking up from time to time at the old beams beneath the roof that challenged and withstood the storm. And during the day Javier lost himself in thought, walking the wet beach in his turtleneck sweater and corduroy trousers, and then sat to write at the pine table that faced the sea, and you went out so as not to distract him. Barefoot, with your trench coat soaked, you would walk beside the sea and discover that in Greece the sea is not another face of the earth because there is no separation here between earth and sea, one does not go into the sea, there is no line of demarcation to pass, no frontier, no rupture. The quiet green sea remembers summer and rejects no one. It seems another, softer, sweeter land across which one can walk while the liquid earth rises and envelops but does not drown. A sea so calm. A sea that is faithful, always present, always real. A sea that wets your face with its spray and makes your tanned skin and your blond hair lustrous as you walk possessed by the sea and by the man who has brought you here, who has come here to write, to free himself from destructive denials, elegant demands. Who sits at his plain table writing and therefore also struggling with reality in order to deform it, reform it, assert it, make it clear, make it speak. And you ran to him when he finished his morning's work and appeared in the door of the cabin; ran to him while his forehead was still feverish from concentration, and then behind you, as you lay beneath him on the lambskins joining him in an act that was sufficient in itself, the sea could be heard and could be named with the words that remained always outside and behind, the words that could be spoken only to the extent that your love and pleasure could not be spoken. And the world also had a name and belonged to both of you because you possessed it by remaining alien to it, dominating it with solitude in which you could see only each other, together and apart in a dark arc that pulsated from the sexual hair to the seeking lips. You by your life gave life to the earth, and away from you the men who spoke the names of things could utter the names of the sea, the words by which they have

created and discovered the sea and the islands, the words that belong to all languages of all centuries:

Wine-dark sea of Ulysses.

"How did you pay for your trip to Greece?"

"I've told you. With the money from selling Javier's home. Or was it the money from his fellowship? I don't remember for sure."

Nymphs and sirens and ears sealed against the enchantment and temptation of the sea.

"A Lloyd-Triestino ship. An old tub."

Sea without bound or limit.

"How many days?"

"Oh, I don't remember. An orchestra playing waltzes and jazz too. You know how time slides by when you're at sea. How can you keep count of days?"

Choleric breath.

"Did you go first class?"

"No, we couldn't afford that. We traveled like sandwiches, between first class and steerage. Stop asking questions. Read *Ship of Fools*. Go see an old movie starring Kay Francis and William Powell."

Sea that is the home of the most powerful of gods.

"*One Way Passage*."

"Sure. They're all dead, you see, and they don't know it. The ship of Charon and all the rest. No. That's *Outward Bound*. Sorry."

Poseidon of the golden trident.

"Did you have much baggage?"

"Don't joke. One steamer trunk. A world. At that time everyone always traveled with a trunk."

Sea belting the earth.

"Sure. The three Marx brothers could have stowed away in one of those trunks."

"We died laughing at it. The hinges squeaked, the little drawers squeaked. The trunk was almost empty."

Sea boiling with winged weightless fish.

"But at that time you couldn't go anywhere without taking a world with you. It was a must. All for show. And out hopped Harpo with his harp and his eyes of a harmless madman."

Dolphins beloved by the muses.

"Harmless? Ask the ship's manicurist."

"You're way off, *caifán*. But you know about as much about the movies as I know about magnetic fields. Harpo was harmless, I tell you; the wolf was Groucho. But we staggered around more than any Marxist in that fifth-rate steamer."

Children of the sea.

"We wrote letters on notepaper and stuck them in the empty drawers of the trunk."

"What did you write about?"

Children of the Nereids.

"I won't tell you. You're too inquisitive."

"Okay. What clothes did you take along?"

Breast-fed by Amphitrite.

"The things that were in style then. I told you, like Kay Francis. A flowered print for daytime. An evening dress with wide skirts. Those tailored suits with a short jacket, a long skirt, and a blouse like a tuxedo, of piqué. That satisfy you?"

Sea of ships that open their wakes across the level green plain.

"Did you do your own washing in Falaraki?"

"Elena helped me."

Trackless sea.

"Who's Elena?"

"You don't pay close enough attention. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. What are you going to do with all these little details? Are you Gallup or Kinsey? Are you a recruiter for the war in Vietnam?"

Sea of purple-shadowed waves.

"You had money enough to pay a laundress?"

"You like to make the story go your way, don't you? Be patient, my love. Elena liked us. Understand?"

Sea joined to the dark good earth.

"Who did the cooking?"

"I did. But we bought most things. In winter the fishermen brought us things. Almost all of it was ready to begin with. You know, cheese, olives, wine. Sometimes I'd fry a squid. But we preferred food that came from the land. A land so dry . . . Jesus, I don't know how we survived."

Burned by the marine sun of Apollo.

"Like Crusoe and Friday, Dragoness. Like the *Medusa's* shipwrecked sailors. On the fare of the people themselves. I approve. Some day you and I will be worthy of each other. What was that fireplace like? Brick? Tile, stone?"

"It's easy to see you haven't traveled much. Everything is white there. It's not the material that matters, it's the color. Everything is plastered and white. Everything. Why don't you put out that marijuana? It stinks."

Sea of sails whipped by the tempest.

"And Javier?"

"Javier what? Let's don't go into Javier. Don't try to be his psychiatrist. He'd like nothing better."

Before Sappho caused the moon of the sea to rise with its pallid fingers . . .

"Psychoanalysis. Ho-hum. The science of feelings. Bullshit, *caifán*. All Freud did was make the melodramatic respectable. Oh, Javier loves it. He wants them to say 'Oedipus' or 'Jason' when he's really nothing but a bastard blend of John O'Hara and Caroline Invernizzo transplanted to cactus land. It's pure camp, all of it. Pure tango. Oh, don't get me started on Javier. I'm not interested in Javier. And the point is that nobody is interested in Javier."

"No, I was merely wondering how he dressed."

Moon of the sea . . .

"Free romantic bohemian, I suppose?"

"Well, I've already told you. Barefoot. Corduroy pants. A turtle-neck sweater. No, that . . ."

Surrounded by sea stars . . .

"That was a beach in Maine, the first time we . . ."

"Maine? I thought you said Long Island?"

While on the shore girls danced.

"Forget it. He was writing a novel. I got mixed up for a minute."

"I don't suppose you remember what he wrote in?"

"In Aramaic, wise guy, so Christ could understand. Oh, I don't care if it rains or freezes, long as I have my plastic Jesus."

"There's flies on you and there's flies on me, but there's no flies on old J.C. With the best-seller of all time. And ghost writers. Blood, balls, and the Holy Spirit, via Lloyd C. Douglas and Cecil B. De Mille."

And the sleep of dark eyes fell upon them and their wings closed.

"No, I meant what kind of paper. What sort of notebook."

"Hah! There he was always prepared. Wherever he went, he always took his notebooks. School notebooks, with lined pages."

Sea of Orpheus.

"He loaded up at a Woolworth's before we left New York. Ink, erasers, Faber pencils, an old orange-colored pen like Gironella's, Scotch tape, paper clips. Enough junk to make Barbara Hutton even richer."

"Dragoness, that isn't quite right."

Chieftain, immortal virgin.

"What isn't quite right?"

"Scotch tape hadn't been invented then."

"No. Excuse me. Anyone can make a slip. Don't look at me like that."

God-root of the sea.

"The notebooks."

"Lined. Marble covers. A multiplication table. The year's calendar."

Sea that stretches like the horns of a bull.

"And what year was that?"

"Oh, no, nosy. How do I know what year? You're trying to find out how old I am."

Sea that rocks in its immense awkwardness.

"What color ink did he use?"

"White. It didn't leave a trace, not a word. Invisible ink!"

Sea that sleeps at midday upon its bed of waves.

"I've seen his handwriting. It's small, very neat."

"Baloney. He writes like a hurricane. With waves, tides, mountain ranges. And tick-tack-toe and doodles."

Prophetic sea.

"You didn't have electric lights. What did you do after dark?"

"We played footsie, Mr. District Attorney. Look, we're getting nowhere fast. It was a time of feeling, love, poetry, and you want to hold an auction of it."

Sea armed with the ships of Troy.

"Pop lit, Dragoness. Does it bore you?"

"Okay, you have a point. Excuse me."

Sea of Prometheus who destroyed the trident of the ocean.

"But really, weren't you bored?"

"No. I had my collection of pebbles."

Blond sea.

"Just the same . . ."

"The best-seller that year was . . . was . . . *Anthony Adverse*. I read *Anthony Adverse* from cover to cover."

Mirror of the youth, of the little girl, of the tree, of the bird.

"I thought you had only seen the movie."

"No, I read the book and saw the movie, too. Fredric March and Claude Rains. And Olivia de Havilland when she was still lovely, before that miserable snake-pit thing."

Mirror of its own fish mute in its profundities.

"Holy macaroni!"

"Gulp! You mean you don't believe me? You doubt my veracity, eh? Well, just let me tell you what happened that year we went to Greece. Hitler gobbled up Austria. Mussolini pulled out of the League of Nations. We listened to Kate Smith and Kay Kyser and laughed at Jack Benny. Father Coughlin was spouting off. Huey Long was killed, I think. Cárdenas expropriated the oil companies. Garbo loved Taylor. Dick Tracy was working on Boris Arson. Little

Orphan Annie didn't grow an inch. Léon Blum's cabinet fell. Alice served tea to four lunatics at Berchtesgaden. John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* and John Ford made the movie with Henry Fonda. We were humming *a tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket*. Li'l Abner escaped from Daisy Mae again. Orson Welles invaded New Jersey. Let's see, what else? Snow White and her seven dwarfs. Enough?"

Sea: element withdrawn from the original One, that by losing itself, it might recover itself.

"Okay, okay, so we used acetylene lights. Write it down."

"Ten point o and you win your diploma, Dragoness. What about letters? Did you write home? To Gershon?"

"Are you nuts? Haven't I already told you? We threw the letters into the trunk."

"Well, the point is, I have an old envelope here."

Sea of whiteness.

"Give me that. Where in God's name did you find it?"

"In an old trunk, Dragoness. So?"

Cradle of dreams that ignore grief.

"Check the address. Avenida Amsterdam 85, Colonia Hipódromo, Mexico, D.F."

"No! You have no right! Not yet. Where did you find the trunk?"

Prince of magic hours.

"What's more, it isn't true . . . No . . . 85 West 99th Street. Yes, that's it. Or some address in the Bronx. I don't remember now. It's so long ago."

"Take it easy, Dragoness. We all want to be different from what we are."

Sea that receives the ashes of brothers.

"We can't be different today. Listen, *caifán*. We need something to hang on to. And this is all I can see, it's all that can be seen and touched, not Greece and not Mexico, not anything, just the world called Paramount Pictures Presents . . ."

"Sure, Elizabeth. The flag of Revlon. The national anthem of

Disneyland. General Motors' army. And the countries are called U. S. Steel and Conrad Hilton and IBM. That's the atlas of the stinking world we live in today."

Sea of Orestes and Electra.

"We don't have myths any more?"

"No, suddenly they are only dreams. But a dream you can touch is called a myth."

Sea of little voyages that cannot reach the regions of the sun.

"And a place, *caifán*. There has to be a place. It can be any place, even an imaginary one. So that we can go there and return reborn."

"A setting, Dragoness, a place to stand fast. *The Last Time I Saw Paris*. Or *San Francisco, Here I Come*.

Sea dyed with the blood of Agamemnon.

"What's wrong with Greece? The harmony, the classicism, the spirit. Our cradle."

"Pay now, travel later."

Rock of lamentation.

"I was more bored than an oyster. I don't know what you're going to tell."

"Yes, Medea."

Watched sea, guarded sea.

"Who told you?"

"Jason."

Sea of pitch.

"You found our traveling world."

"And opened its little drawers."

Port of nocturnal daggers.

"You know everything."

"Almost everything. As far as to where you wrote."

Sea of bloody vines.

"We were on the ship almost three weeks, *caifán*. An eternity. We had to amuse ourselves somehow."

"Yes, that's the simplest answer. Why make life complicated?"

Sea of conquest.

"I don't know if we foresaw everything or if it was that every time we wrote a scene that made us roll with laughter, and threw the page into the trunk, into the drawers of that world we traveled with, we condemned ourselves to live it out in real life sooner or later . . ."

"But there, then, there were only two characters. You and Javier. Remember?"

Sea of the rudder and sword of fortune.

"Yes, only two."

"Everything could be written, Allah willing, everything could be foreseen, and then the actors failed. They couldn't handle their roles."

Tomb of star watchers.

"The plan was so perfect. Only he, only I. Living what we had written in the steam of the ship."

"It wasn't perfect at all. No one can play all the roles in a movie, not even Erich von Stroheim. You have to have supporting actors."

"Promise me that you'll never mention any of this again."

Sea.

"Never again, Dragoness. I burned the pages. I had one hell of a time finding that trunk, let me tell you. I smelled my way through all of Mexico City. Finally one day I came across a place on Tacuba where an old Jew collected things people had given him or thrown away. So many Jews came to Mexico City during the war. And afterward, so many Germans. They never talk about these things, they've forgotten them, old trunks, suitcases, boxes tied with string, fetuses in alcohol, naked dolls, cellos, petticoats and hats, old picture albums, Nazi flags and armbands, old movie film, broken records, books without covers. Junk enough to write ten books about."

"It's funny. We would have liked to live our own novel, just the two of us, together."

United only by your hands. You fell on your knees before him in order to give it its name. He standing before you, you kneeling before him, you embraced his legs harder and harder and moved

your hands up to his waist as he reached down and held you by the hands only, you always lower, seeking the floor, he always higher. You rose, you sought him standing, joined together and sustained by your hands, then pushed backward without need for kisses or caresses, united and sustained, you over him and he beneath you, he pulling you upon him and you penetrating, imitating him, doing what he did, believing that you were possessing him in the way he possessed you, lying upon his thighs as he entered your thighs, saying to him: take my skin, Javier, take my breasts, learn to fulfill all your desires, sleep upon my breasts and don't wake until the day is as warm as we are and Elena knocks at the door . . .

△ The motor started and the car moved off with a growl of gears and Javier observed that as a boy he had often gone to the States by train with his father, who had been a businessman. But only to the border, to the other side of the Rio Grande, to Laredo. And he had used to return to Mexico with a feeling he could not define, shame, perhaps, or sadness. That was why a year ago he had traveled all the way to New York by train. He had wanted to remove the contrast with Mexico, to see the States not in relation to another country but isolated, a single canvas.

"There you go again," Elizabeth groaned.

Only two or three clear impressions remained from that trip. The junkyards of old cars: the masses of twisted steel, the sooty air, the absolute rustiness of everything.

"You could also see them like modern sculptures," you interrupted him, Elizabeth. "Like unforeseen, unexpected sculptures . . ."

No, said Javier. If Mexico is nature in ruin, the United States is machines in ruin. "In Mexico everything is a ruin because everything is promised and no promise is kept. In the United States all promises have been kept. Yet it is a ruin just the same."

"What else do you remember?" asked Isabel.

"Negroes seated on their porches watching cars go by on the superhighways, just as if they were looking at cemeteries or the mountainous junk heaps. And then I saw some men standing be-

hind a warehouse fence staring at the train as it passed, and I asked myself, 'Who are they? Who can they be?' I believe that's all."

"Because that was all you wanted to see," you smiled. "As for me, I get a kick out of places like Terre Haute or Indianapolis. I like to read the big signs over the factories. 'This is the home of Goodyear Tires.' 'Here Shredded Wheat is manufactured.' Those are the monuments of this century, just as Gothic cathedrals were monuments of another century. Or am I wrong?"

No one replied and you turned on the radio and it sang: *Help, I need somebody . . .*

"Some time I'd like to go back to Europe," Franz said.

"How long have you been away?" said Javier.

"Since the end of the war."

"Then why don't you go back?"

"They won't give me a visa."

"Who won't?" asked Isabel.

"The Czechs. When I say Europe I mean Prague. That's my home."

"Did you choose freedom?" Javier asked dryly.

Franz laughed. Isabel hummed to the music of the Beatles: *Not just anybody . . .*

"There you have an interesting thesis, Ligeia, if you want one," Javier said after a moment. "Today the tone comes from England. Fashions, the times, everything. The Beatles. The Rolling Stones. Petula Clark. Agent 007."

"Well, someone has to take revenge for the Thirteen Colonies." You yawned.

Isabel fell asleep with her head on Javier's shoulder. Franz tried to see her in the rearview mirror.

△ You stretched out like a lizard on Franz's body, supporting your face on the open palms of your hand, and looked at his face.

"Tell me a new story, Franz, a true one. One about youth and young love. What you used to like to do, how you were, where you

went. Anything, everything, so long as it's true. What did you study?"

"You know already, Lisbeth."

"That doesn't matter, tell me again. Where did you live? Who did you love? What was Prague like?"

Franz laughed and squeezed your shoulder and pulled you down on his chest again. He rubbed your head and said quietly, "I think sometimes that cities don't exist. If you love a city as I loved Prague, you can come to believe that it is your own creation and that when you leave it, it disappears. It stops."

"Why?"

"It's another way of saying that cities are kept alive by love. No, not quite that. I don't know . . . Well, if a city were a human body, and we could open it with a scapel . . ."

"Hold it. That scares me a little," you laughed.

"A city is a place where people are together. That's all. Think about what it conceals and what it allows to live. The rubbish, the sewers, the garbage cans. The places where the things we eat come and go. The things we drink and love. The cemeteries."

You curled up. "No," you said. "I don't see it like that."

"How then?"

You shook your head. "I can't explain it very clearly. But it seems to me that cities have an unconscious too, just as we do, an unconscious that is joined to ours. I believe that we try to defend ourselves against that unconscious. The songs, the neon lights, the advertisements in windows, the touch of the people we pass in the street or stand next to in the subway. Do you see what I mean? I am what I am because I lived in New York and carry inside me a song that says *any time at all* and an ad that says don't be this way when you can be that way. Contacts I neither wanted nor consciously accepted with someone's sweaty skin, someone's jacket or blouse. All that."

He kissed your cheek and smiled. "Yes. Prague is clean. That's why I love it. It's pure, it doesn't take liberties with your privacy. The city and its people are one there. Or at least that's how it used

to be. That's why I can't understand a place like Xochicalco. I can't imagine that living men ever loved that frozen stone."

"I think I understand. Maybe they didn't love it but were afraid of it."

"I don't know. Lie back, Elizabeth. I don't like your breath on my chest."

"That better?"

"Yes. In the old days when I used to cross the Karlsbrücke, when I was about nineteen, whether it was winter or summer I always left the city behind me wrapped in fog. Fog in Prague is different in the morning and the evening. And in winter it's gray, almost white. As if the breath from the statues on the bridge were condensing in clouds. In summer it's yellow and seems to come from far away. From the headwaters of the river. I used to stand in the middle of the bridge in those days, going and coming from my classes, with the fog wrapped around me. I felt myself at the same time both in the city and away from it. The fog surrounded me and carried me away. Or it took me back, just as I willed. From the Karlsbrücke you can see the entire city but still be in the city."

"Like taking the ferry to Staten Island and looking at Manhattan."

"No, that's not the same. There you've left the city. On the bridge, you see, it's still all around you. You can reach out and touch the Mala Strana and Hradcany on one side. On the other, St. Mesto and the hills of Bubeneč."

"Those are your names, Franz. They don't mean anything to me."

And from the ends of the bridge you can see the channels of the Vltava. They run beside yellow houses and from the bridge you look down on the grass of the river in the background, tones of green that change as the hours change and the season changes. There are barges anchored the length of the canals that flow into the river and under the bridge there are fishing skiffs. The walls of the houses that face the river are decorated with white figures on a dark ground. It's a tranquil river, flanked by ocher-colored palaces.

There are willows along the banks and the shores are pebbled and lined sometimes with fishermen, stubborn old men who use two lines and wear berets and canvas coats. Farther down, toward Hradcany, the castle of Prague with its heaped, asymmetrical roofs. Skylights and chimneys, church towers, Catholic spires, Byzantine domes, Protestant stained glass. The bells of Mala Strana are heard and you can smell the laurels and cypresses in the courtyards hidden behind the houses. You can also smell the stagnant water and the rotting leaves in clumps at the mouths of the drains, and the wild scent of the chestnut trees.

"I walked across the bridge every day toward Mala Strana, where Professor Maher lived."

"Who walked with you?"

"No one. I went alone. Lisbeth, it's very hot. Open the window."

You got out of bed, nude and willowy, and walked to the window. You opened it and spread your arms. And with your arms extended like wands you turned on your heels so that Franz could look at you. His eyes moved up and down your body appreciatively. A slender body, curiously short without high heels, a little loose-jointed. Your ash-dyed hair and the graying hair at your pubis. The depression of the muscles between your chest and umbilicus, the pale blue line of your stomach.

"Don't move, Lisbeth. Just stand there."

"I think I can feel a breeze beginning."

"You look lovely."

"Do I, Franz? I like to show myself to you like this. It's like a little secret voyage. Ship ahoy. It's a slap in the face of these super-modest Mexicans. I play the bitch with these people as often as I can. Their hypocrisy about sex makes me sick. Do you know that Javier's grandmother used to sleep in a nightgown down to her ankles with an embroidered hole in it for screwing? And before they made love, they would kneel down in front of a candle and recite a little poem Javier told me." You knelt beside the bed and rolled your eyes up and struck your chest with your fist:

*Oh it isn't from vice,
It isn't to fornicate,
It's to make a child
Who Thy service will take!*

You laughed and Franz, laughing too, kissed your neck. You went on: "And the old grandfather every time he would ejaculate would cry out, 'Kyrie eleison!' and his sainted wife would answer, 'Christe eleison!' God! I tell you, Mexico is the most morbid, puritanical country in the world. It disgusts me. Let's get out, Franz. Tell me that some day we'll take off together and leave it. Like Magellan or Gagarin. Tell me."

You stretched your hands out to him and Franz took them.

△ Gershon squeezed your hand and said bitterly: "In ignorance there is never justice. Never, Lizzie."

"It doesn't matter, Daddy."

"And how do you know such wisdom?"

"I'm telling you, it doesn't matter."

Your father held his cup under his nose and looked at you half squinting as if he were trying to make the dim light clearer. You were in the coffee shop hidden in the mezzanine of the station. He put his cup down on its saucer of cheap porcelain and took out his handkerchief and honked his nose and then he laughed. He dried his eyes and went on laughing with his tongue pushed against his teeth. With the extended fingers of one hand he tapped his head, then immediately hit his head with the closed fist of the other hand. He repeated this several times, saying: "Head against muscle, nothing more, that's what it is. That's all it is."

"Your cold is bad, Daddy. You should have asked off."

"Bah. Shutting oneself up to nurse a cold is no medicine. Better one should go out and let it breathe fresh air."

"You shouldn't have drunk that coffee."

"No? Tea I should be drinking?"

He touched his forehead, then his bicep.

"Brains against force. Always the same. Head against muscle."

The waiter approached with an air of bored disgust. He brushed flies away from the stiff cinnamon rolls and sighed and moved his head from side to side. Your hands gripped the cushion. The waiter tore off the check and threw it on the table. Gershon contemplated it for a moment and then looked down and began to feel for his wallet in the lining of his coat. He sneezed and the waiter stared up at the low ceiling and you closed your eyes and smelled the stale watery coffee and the grease and the glue of the dangling flypaper clustered with mounds and craters of dead flies. A faint scent of rotteness came from the flypaper. And the too-sweet smells of chocolate and blackberries and rootbeer. Old bread, fermented sugar, corruption. Gershon pushed a dollar bill toward the check. You opened your eyes and said, so that the waiter could hear you: "So a dollar is a dollar. Whose it is doesn't matter."

Under the table Gershon squeezed your knee with your hand and you were silent as the waiter looked at you rather pityingly and turned his back without picking up either the check or the dollar. He murmured something that you and your father could not hear. You stared out at the people moving toward the platform gates of Pennsylvania Station.

"Maybe you want something else, Lizzie? Another drink? Maybe a vanilla soda?"

"No, Daddy. No, thanks."

A redhaired sailor passed, looking in all directions, freckled, his canvas ditty bag in his hand, obviously lost. And an old man with a faded felt hat that came down over his ears was led by a young woman who looked like him, the same damp eyes and high cheekbones, the same pointed trembling nose. She stopped and tried to straighten the black band of his hat and in so doing exposed felt that was not faded. The old man paid no attention and she led him off toward the platform for Baltimore. Two girls leaned against an iron railing and played with joined hands, swinging their hands without looking at each other but sometimes looking down at their red socks and patent-leather shoes, and then they began to giggle nervously and then to laugh and finally they were silent again, one

of them raising a hand to her mouth, the other covering her face with both hands. They joined arms and leaned against the iron railing without looking at anything. Boys in white shirts, some short-sleeved with a school emblem, others sleeveless and tattered, crowded around the magazine kiosk and turned the pages of cowboy novels and muscle magazines full of pictures of strongmen wearing leopard-skin loincloths. Some of the boys took turns swelling out their biceps. Others laughed and rubbed the fuzz on their chests and in their armpits. The old man led by the woman passed again. They seemed as lost as the redheaded sailor, who was no longer in sight. He had found his train. But the old man and the woman had not found theirs. She supported him by the elbow as he stumbled. She looked through the window into the coffee shop, she looked at you. You closed your eyes again and again smelled the smells of coffee and grease and fermenting sugar and smoke from the trains and farther away, far away, the concrete sidewalks and the macadam streets and sweat-drenched clothing, sweat-darkened collars of this month of July.

Becky moaned and you hugged her around the waist. You felt her trembling sweaty hands and both of you shut your eyes and hid a little more, moved back a little more toward the farthest corner in this brown room illuminated by light that came from the gas pilots and from outside, the street lamps and store windows, and fell upon you like light in a theater, outlining Becky's profile, forming a faint aura around her hair so severely and cleanly drawn back with only a few loose hairs straggling and catching the light, the faint light that showed the flower vases dimly, the crocheted doilies pinned to the back of the velvet sofa, the vague swaying of the bead curtain between the living room and the kitchen-dining room.

"Mother, I tell you it is only the cat."

"*The* cat or *a* cat? Which are you saying?"

"It's the cat from next door. Joseph's cat."

"Hug me, Betele. Hug me tight."

"But, Mother, it's only the cat."

"You've said that already and you didn't say it right. You did not

say the truth. A cat isn't here and it isn't ours. Either there is cats or there is *a* cat, but *the* cat is not here."

"Mama, I don't know."

"Hug me tight. Can't you notice that I'm . . ."

"Please put on a light."

"Come and hug me. Tell me . . ."

"Yes, Mama. I'm afraid. I'm scared and I'm glad to be with you, the two of us together . . ."

"You're scared?"

"Yes, I'm very scared."

"You are sure it's a cat?"

"Yes. Don't you hear it miaowing?"

"And it stinks, Betele, doesn't it stink? Oh, hug me. It stinks from wetting. Don't say it doesn't. You smell it too, don't you smell it?"

"Yes, Mama."

"They're going to find us, Betele!"

"Please, Mama. Put on a light and don't be afraid."

"It is eleven o'clock in the evening. And your father hasn't come back yet. So why should I put on a light? Tell me, who puts on a light at eleven o'clock in the evening if the father is at home? And tell me, who would be afraid at eleven o'clock in the evening if . . ."

"Look, Mama! See, I was right, it's Joseph's cat!"

"Shameless! Chutzpah! Out, out with you, out of my house!"

And sometimes Gershon would take you down to the street without telling Becky. He would take your hand and you would go down the stairs with him and he would lift you to his shoulders with a smile and you would make yourself comfortable there and look up at the black iron fire escapes like webs down the black sides of the brick buildings, as black as if fire had already happened and the fire escapes had served for nothing.

"Superstitio et perfidia."

You put your penny in the slot and out came a hard candy round like a marble and you sucked it.

"Mitzvah. A good deed every day."

"Gershon! Salt and buy some herring for dinner!"

You sucked the sugar-covered ball and clung to your father's head and left behind the fire escapes. You smelled cheeses and garlic. Then a better smell, oranges and apples. Dogs barked and canaries chirruped. Vegetable shops. Hat shops. Tobacco shops. Delicatessens. Furriers. Shops where capes and silk and colored chintz were sold. The fluttering breasts of pigeons. And dogs, dogs that barked and barked and barked.

"They have destroyed the beautiful forests of New York and built the ugliest neighborhoods in the world. Thank you, our leaders."

The light, Elizabeth. The light in the dark living room where you could not see but had to imagine the bead curtain, the crocheted cushions, the flower vases, and light came in cross beams from the street and filled the room with false auras. And when the light ran away you had to go looking for it, or, better, looking, with an unconscious gratitude, for its origins: to a place on the Hudson where the river was silver, to the stained fog and green of the Palisades, to the yellow wind that came from where the worn gold sky, a gaseous gold, floated over lower Manhattan. Sometimes you would go down that way with a feeling of adventure. As far as the fish markets of Fulton Street. As far as South Street, Peck Slip, Chinatown, where the river is full of sound and the barges of freight cars pass and the tugboats that are towing no barge whistle and whistle because they are idle and free, and the cars passing over the bridge make a swift music, and the rumble of the elevated, a sound so repetitious, regular, so different.

You see, Dragoness, it is also my city of sun and fog.

"We are going to go to America. We are going to be men."

You and your brother Jake sat on Gershon's knees and Gershon slowly turned the thick yellowed pages of the old album and did not have to point at things. Look, just look at that already! Oh, no, not that! You and your brother Jake laughed and laughed. The streets without pavement, deep with mud, lined with wooden houses. In the distance towers crowned by bulbous cupolas. A man

with a long beard and high boots and a long black gaberdine coat. On his chest a yellow wheel.

"Yellow."

"Yid. Hey, Yid. Hep, hep."

"Ein Jude und ein Schwein dürfen hier nicht herein."

"Is it you?"

"It's you!"

You and Jake laughed and Gershon turned the pages and you could not believe that the man with sideburns and beard and the gaberdine coat and the young man in a vest and derby with a pearl in his tie were the same person. Then you turned to him and saw the other Gershon smiling and touching his tongue to the gap in his teeth. Wearing a striped shirt without a collar and checked trousers and loosed suspenders. Barefoot. The cuffs of his shirts too long but raised by Becky's needle and thread.

"Even his back is straighter. Look, even his face changed!"

"Haven't you been struck by the restraint of human gesture and expression in the Greek stelae?"

△ The Volkswagen pulled away with growling gears and Franz said that down the road there was a restaurant he liked. "Beer. Sausages, mustard."

Isabel looked out the window. Mexico's midland, semi-tropical, a road of straw huts with inclined thatch roofs, of low-flying vultures, of little boys wearing tattered short shirts with their small genitals showing and their bellies swollen out, little boys forgotten by parents who worked in blue shirts and muddy sandals, stooped over in the rice fields shoveling along with their hands the water that had to pass evenly the length of the meandering channels. And then the land changed. The Volkswagen descended the rim of the tableland into the zone of heat, from the high desert to the low coastal region.

Franz drove swiftly, expertly, slowing and accelerating smoothly, gearing down for turns, shifting up again without a jerk. It was his car and he knew it like his hand. A foreigner, like you, Dragoness.

And like you blond and graying but with a blondness that was almost white. His skin, in contrast, was burned dark by the sun. A face of precise firm lines: short nose, smooth forehead, smooth cheeks, firm jaw protruding a little. White, even teeth. Rather thin lips that smiled with restraint. A German, Dragoness, as German as they come.

△ He had used to love music and architecture, he said. Both. Music perhaps even more than the other, though it was architecture he studied. He lived with his friend Ulrich in a rented room on a winding narrow street. The gables of the houses facing across the street almost touched and made the street dark. You were too close to them, you could not get back far enough to admire their old baroque façades properly. More accurately, they were façades that had been added as decorations to the still older, medieval structures beneath. Smooth ancient stone, covered by yellow or rose plaster that today was falling off, allowing the original gray to be seen. And the city, a German city, was full of yellow plaster palaces with golden domes and striated columns, capricious eaves, niches filled with vines and cherubim, labyrinthine halls, patinaed mirrors.

Flies buzzed in and out through the open window. They irritated you. Franz was saying, "We had little money. Almost none. So we roomed together. It cut our expenses in half."

It halved also the effort and time needed to cook their meals on the electric hot plate and make up the bed and straighten the room. They took turns with the bed, Franz using it one week, Ulrich the next. The one who was bedless bunked on a narrow divan that creaked all night and forced him to sleep with his feet on a stool (Ulrich) or propped on the arm of the divan (Franz). Splitting its cost, they bought one wooden drawing table and a high stool. Rolls of paper were strewn around the floor, and the room smelled of India ink, of gutta-percha gum, of glue. On the papered walls they thumbtacked reproductions of classical architectural models: the Parthenon, Saint Sophia, Charlemagne's chapel at Aix-

la-Chapelle. Monday through Saturday they got up early. Franz would go out in the hall to fill a basin with cold water from the faucet while Ulrich rubbed his eyes and groggily warmed the coffeepot. They washed their faces mechanically and drank their coffee as they dressed.

"I remember him putting on his shoes. Sitting on the couch holding his cup in one hand. With the other hand pulling on his shoe without loosening the laces."

They would wrap in their mufflers and run out, hurrying to catch the 7:12 trolley, smiling as they trotted down the winding street, their breath clouds puffing before them. Caps tilted, mufflers up over their mouths, hands stuffed in their pockets, they would wait for the trolley and then swing aboard and stand outside on the platform swaying to keep balance as it moved away with a jerk and stopped with a jolt. The shaking trolley that carried them from the crowded streets to openness. Past the trolley yards. The park with its rusty statues and its fountains that now during the winter had no water. The art museum and the wide avenues beyond. Then a foggy plain and finally the school of architecture. There they separated. Ulrich was one year ahead of Franz. They met again at noon in the student tavern, the one arriving first grabbing a table, by force if necessary, and holding it until the other appeared, in the meantime ordering their standard meal: two sausages, cabbage, beer, a cream pastry they divided. And until then, all morning, they would rise to their feet as the professor entered the classroom. Four professors each morning, different names but the same pomp: black coat, striped trousers, wing collar, spats over high shoes.

"Emil Jannings in *The Blue Angel*," you interrupted, Dragoness, laughing. "Do you remember it? I saw it as a girl in the neighborhood movie. All of us wanted to be exactly like Marlene. What was she called?"

"Lola," said Franz, smiling. "Lola-Lola. And he was Professor Unrat. Professor Trash. Yes, Jannings made our professors into commonplace and very ordinary mortals."

But from his high seat in the lecture amphitheater, one of two hundred shivering students who clouded the air with the vapor of their breathing, Franz saw his professor as anything but ordinary, saw him as cold as the room, as aloof as he was distant. On the blackboard he swiftly traced calculations for a foundation. He related how Brunelleschi had climbed the vault of the Pantheon in Rome, removed some stones, and discovered the secret of the double structures sustaining each other reciprocally, and then had made his contemporaries marvel at his dome in Florence. He defended classical principles against the innovations proposed by Gropius and the Bauhaus group. To question the professor was forbidden. And he always entered with great solemnity, inclined his head briefly to the standing students, and launched off on a lecture

"... He had given over and over without changing a word for twenty or thirty years."

With your hand you brushed at a fly that was circling your nude bodies.

"Don't you want me to close the window, Franz?"

"No, leave it open. It's hot."

They had to eat lunch hurriedly because other students were waiting for the tables. Cigarette haze, smells of beer and human breath, smells made thick because the ceiling of the tavern was very low. After lunch they worked through the afternoon in a hall with high windows and dozens of inclined drawing tables. On Thursdays the tables were folded up and stacked against the wall and the hall was converted into a gymnasium and in long sweatshirts and black shorts and tennis shoes they jumped and sweated performing calisthenics, and lifted weights. They started home at five in the afternoon, walking. Despite the cold and darkness that the far-apart lampposts did not lighten, they enjoyed that long walk across a plain dotted with linden trees. Sometimes they bought roasted chestnuts at a stand mysteriously planted there far from traffic, far from people, and walked on chewing the dry sweet meat of the nuts. Spring came and their routine did not change. But now they

felt freed from so many things, from their mufflers, from the bite of the cold, the need to jump up and down in one spot to keep their blood circulating, to warm their hands in front of their open mouths. A freedom one never felt in Mexico, for one never had those needs.

"Yes. I miss the change of seasons too."

"I remember one spring. Not the year. I remember it because Ulrich got a check for his twenty-first birthday."

A great, an enormous event. Ulrich considered the situation very seriously. One day he cut classes and went shopping and when Franz returned to their room that evening there against the wall, white as an igloo, was an electric refrigerator. Ulrich smiled a little worriedly, almost shamefaced. He scratched his head. In those days he wore his hair very short and he was very blond. His spectacles glittered as he opened the door of the refrigerator. Sausages, spare-ribs, bottles of beer, and a tall thin bottle of wine.

"What a feast, Lisbeth!"

They opened the beer, uncorked the wine, smelled the fried sausages, and ate them smeared with mustard. Hurriedly, by huge mouthfuls, gulping down great swallows of the beer. They ended dancing around the room with enormous steps while singing at the top of their voices. Ulrich did side-splitting imitations of their professors and recited parts of Schiller's *Joan of Arc*, a work every German child knows by heart, and in his baritone voice sang arias from *Tristan* while Franz accompanied him with Isolde's notes and, in the solos, an imitation of the orchestra. Their fun abruptly ended when they heard a fist pounding on the door very energetically. Franz opened. He looked out and saw nothing. An imperious, deep-toned voice spoke and he looked down and there was the deformed figure of a dwarf, not so tall as his navel, glaring up at him with an infuriated face. He had tight lips surrounded by a mustache, a light but carefully trimmed beard. He was wrapped in a red silk bathrobe that clearly had been custom-tailored for him, for though it was a child's in size, it had all the details of an adult garment: blue borders embroidered with pagodas and dragons,

quilted black lapels, a wide tasseled belt. The dwarf picked up the end of his belt and shook its tassels in front of his nose and in his rich deep voice, really a beautiful voice, informed Franz that they had shattered his repose. One had a right to rest. The landlady had assured him that she kept a quiet and tranquil establishment, not a madhouse. Such a lack of respect for the rights of others was unworthy of beings calling themselves civilized. It was clear that as children they had not been taught even the most elementary courtesy. Franz offered apologies and tried to hide his drunken grin. They would not do it again. He promised. They had not known that the adjoining room was occupied now. "I moved in yesterday," said the little man. "And tomorrow I am going to move out again if this outrageous uproar doesn't stop." Ulrich stepped forward and hoped that their offense would be forgiven and pledged that in the future their deportment would be a model of exemplitude and ended by inviting their new neighbor to have beer with them next Saturday in the afternoon. Without a word the dwarf looked at them, his face still furious, haughtily lifted his large head and turned and went back to his room.

But the following Saturday at five in the afternoon knuckles tapped lightly on their door. He was there again, tiny in the shadows of the hall. He did not smile but his expression was amiable. He entered holding a visiting card between his gloved fingers. With solemnity he extended it to Ulrich. Franz looked over Ulrich's shoulder and read: *Urs von Schnepelbrücke. Works of Art. Dolls repaired.* Their guest slowly removed his gloves. He glanced inquisitively but briefly around the room. Then he seated himself on the divan. He had to put his hands down on the cushion and raise himself with great effort but finally succeeded and his short legs danced in the air, high-button shoes and gray spats. Now that his gloves were off, they could see his paint-stained hands, as disproportionately large as his enormous head. He waited silently, looking at them, until they remembered their manners and almost in unison gave him their names. Ulrich begged pardon for not having a visiting card to offer. The dwarf nodded and said that he

could see their situation at a glance. But poverty is the customary lot of students. It is almost to be expected.

They were intensely curious about their visitor's occupation, and while Ulrich took the promised beer from the refrigerator and opened and served it, Franz asked Herr von Schnepelbrücke if he found his new quarters a good place for his work. The dwarf savored the beer a moment and then drank, foaming his mustache. He spoke firmly and precisely: "One does not seek places for one's work. They come to one naturally. The new apartment buildings on the outskirts of the city are very ugly. Here, on the contrary, I have only to glance out my window to receive inspiration."

"Do you paint, sir?"

He touched his beard. "No, I am merely an illustrator, not a true artist. I have no pretensions to originality. I merely reproduce on canvas. The old buildings, the old streets, so that something will remain after they have been demolished and forgotten." He lowered his voice and hesitated, as if he were uncertain whether to honor them with his confidences.

Franz asked whether he did not believe, therefore, that it would be wise to photograph everything.

"No. A camera has neither patience nor passion," he replied gravely. "I do each of my paintings twice. Once when I see the scene with the eyes of repose, and again when my vision is exalted. And you may be certain that a great abyss lies between the two views."

The conversation was difficult. Herr von Schnepelbrücke seemed to have a fondness for very polished phrases and moreover he voiced them with a lofty certainty. They were able to learn nothing. There remained, however, the second statement on his visiting card. Ulrich asked him if he earned his living by his illustrations.

"No. My paintings are for myself, although it is true that I have succeeded in placing several. I leave it to time to determine the destiny of my works. I have no dreams. Neither do I have patrons."

His pedantry was beginning to irritate them.

He went on: "I live, I may say, by playthings. I repair dolls." He

extended his strong hands and moved the fingers. "My fingers have an astonishing flexibility. I can replace an eyelash, paint the tiniest lips, tie a wig together hair by hair. I have a certain clientele who bring me their little dolls bruised or broken by, usually, an excess of maternal love, and I put them right again with the same love. For to draw an eyebrow with the finest of brushes, to give back the blush to a faded cheek, these are labors of love and patience."

They looked at him and did not know what to say. His rather jumpy eyes observed them with good humor. "Are not we Germans a kind and good people?" he asked unexpectedly. "To the point sometimes that we find ourselves quite boring. It is because we are innocents. And for the same reason our behavior is sometimes disproportionate. We have not had the experience that could dictate to us the proper limits of our actions. That is why, after we have gone too far, we can claim the forgiveness and pity innocence merits. One cannot be very severe with a child who tears off the arm of his doll. Have you ever watched a child do that? His little face twitches with a momentary pleasure. Then he sees what he has done and he bursts into tears. And so we must pat his head and fondle him, and repair the damage." Herr von Schnepelbrücke finished his beer. He slipped down to the floor with the same awkwardness and difficulty he had had seating himself. He bowed to them.

"He was marvelous, Lizbeth. Marvelous. At any moment you expected the weight of his head to topple him over."

You both laughed.

"He promised to return our hospitality at the earliest moment possible, and left us. To go back to his works of art and his dolls."

"Wait," you said, stretching your arm out. "When I was little, they used to tell me the story of General Tom Thumb." You stretched your arm with an effort and finally reached the shoe you had dropped beside the bed. "General Tom Thumb was with Barnum's circus. Queen Victoria made him a general." Picking up the shoe, you turned and rose to your knees on the bed. The fly on the wall was motionless and unsuspecting. "He was famous in New

England, for he was from Bridgeport. And in our apartment Javier has a reproduction of that painting by Velázquez." Calculating, aiming, you swatted the fly with the shoe. The fly fell to the pillow. "*Antonio, el inglés*. With a rose on his shoulder and a plumed hat in his hand." Franz picked up the fly and flipped it to the floor. "He's carrying a little sword and he's in a little suit embroidered with gold."

"In Germany the dwarfs and gnomes used to live under the ground and were famous for goldsmithy," said Franz, smiling. "They even had a king. Alberich."

"Yes," you said. "Oberon."

△ Isabel was looking in the rearview mirror, trying to see Franz's eyes. For a moment he glanced up. Her green eyes looked at him. Then her head moved out of sight and was replaced by the swift, receding landscape.

You moved your head near Javier's, Pussycat, and in his ear whispered: "Tell me again. I want to hear it again."

"What?" said Javier, whispering too.

"What you told me yesterday. That I have two faces."

"You have two faces. Your nostrils separate them. One is the face of an angel, the other that of a demoness."

"Go on."

"When your eyes are innocent and clear, your smile is forced, almost a rictus."

"Go on."

"And when your mouth opens a little, with surprise or with sweetness, your eyes take their revenge."

"And what?"

"They turn very hard and very cold."

You smiled at him, Pussycat, and whispered: "Javier, write it! Write it!"

"Isn't saying it enough?" he whispered dryly.

△ Here, Elizabeth, is a clipping for you. Torn from today's pa-

per, so that you can show it to your husband. Dated Boonville, Missouri, April 11, 1965. No, I won't leave this day yet. If I did, you'd stop believing me. This old scribbler knows his tricks, Drag-oness, and does not act the crazy monk, not even for chuckles. Boonville: a mother and her son, driving in opposite directions, collided last night and both were killed. Mrs. Bertha Bowen, fifty-seven, was returning to Blackwater, Missouri, after visiting her daughter-in-law and newborn grandson in the hospital. Her son, Ronald Wayne Bowen, aged twenty-two, was on his way from Blackwater to Boonville to see his wife and their child. Mrs. Bowen, according to the police, apparently lost control of her car, swerved, and crashed head on into her son's car. Speak of coincidences, eh? But there it is, right in the paper, so we see that Dickens and Dumas knew the score after all, and Norman Mailer is as hip as the ordaining stars. And Albee may not be off in making Tiny Alice the wide and sticky road to heaven. Ream it anyway you will, my troublesome one, the business is Gothic.

Now consider this little item. Mexico City. Consagración Carranza de Gómez, white-haired and grandmotherly, having recently decided to do away with her husband, prepared a careful plan which came to its culmination during the early hours of April 9, near the end of a dinner at which the said husband, Abundio Gómez Loza, was the guest of honor. The murder itself was carried out with the assistance of a son by the good señora's first marriage, one Rubén Darío, and of her brother, Ubillado Carranza, and his son, her nephew, Venustiano Carranza Amarillas. It was effected by blows with clubs and fists, and by kicking, and Doña Consagración even went so far as to dance upon her dying husband's face, in order to disfigure him and prevent recognition of the corpse. During the meal many toasts were drunk in his honor and he became quite intoxicated. Earlier, his wife had disarmed him. These events took place in an impoverished hut, Number 54 on Los Cóndores Street, Colonia Las Aguilas, and the police succeeded in rounding up the perpetrators of the crime only yesterday. Reconstructing the story for the police, Doña Consagración stated: "I killed my hus-

band because he was jealous of me. Moreover, he had bewitched me. He knew black magic well and every little while he would tell me that the cards told him I was being unfaithful to him." Her brother, Ubillado Carranza, declared: "My sister gave me two hundred pesos to carry the body of her husband three blocks from the house and throw it into the Barranca del Muerto, but I swear that I had no part in the murder." "Neither did we kill the old man," claimed young Venustiano and Rubén Darío. "We were only playing a game with him, to see who was strongest." But these statements were made in the police station when they were questioned by reporters, and a few minutes later, when they were taken to the scene of the murder, their guilt overcame them and they confessed freely. Ubillado explained: "For two months my sister had wanted to get rid of her husband. She said that she could stand him no longer and she asked me to kill him. I refused, but suggested that we go together to Salvatierra, where we are from, and there hire someone to carry out the little job. My sister did not want to do this, for she had departed from Salvatierra with a bad reputation and didn't care to go back. She invited all of us to dine with them Saturday evening. All afternoon she was busy preparing the feast, buying beer, and so on. When Abundio came home, we were there waiting for him, my sister, myself, Rubén Darío, and my son Venustiano. We sat down and ate dinner and began to drink. By dawn Abundio was very drunk. At that point we proposed elbow-wrestling to see who was the strongest. Everything went according to plan, and finally Rubén Darío, my nephew, hit Abundio in the face with his fist and the old man fell backward and lay still. Rubén went on hitting him, and . . ." Here good Doña Consagración interrupted angrily: "No, you all hit him, you damned bastards, not just my son Rubén!" Unperturbed, Ubillado continued: "At any rate, we beat him up thoroughly. As he was still breathing, however, my sister proposed that we hang him. Then she danced on his body and face, to disfigure him, and we bound him with wire and put him into a carton that Consagración had bought specifically for this purpose. All of us refused to carry

the carton. In the end, she offered me two hundred pesos, so I agreed to do it." The macabre cortege left the hut and a few minutes later arrived at the Barranca del Muerto, and the cardboard box containing the cadaver was there abandoned. It was found the following day by several people of the neighborhood and they notified the police. One by one, the nearby homes were checked, but no one could identify the body, the face of which was indeed entirely beyond recognition. But day before yesterday the police turned up a clue that led directly to the widow. During her interrogation yesterday, Consagración was friendly and good-humored. When a photographer unintentionally knocked a religious image from its place, she rushed to protect it, crying in anguish: "Stop! Don't step on her! Don't step on my poor little saint!"

That little saint must have been the blessed Jeanne Féry, who was exorcised yesterday in Mons. Her story is told in the paper today by the present archbishop of Cambrai, M. François Buiseret. Between 1573 and 1585 Jeanne was possessed by no fewer than eight demons. She declared that she had been seduced by the devil himself at the age of fourteen. From that time on she suffered seizures that resembled epilepsy and was tormented by spirits of evil named Heresie, Treason, Wytchcrafte, Belial, True Libertee, Namon, Bludthyrstee, and Homicide. During her convulsion and delirium they make love to her. And as Jeanne does not care to make love with these spirits, she has her relatives and the priests immerse her in baths of holy water, during which treatments she vomits, from her mouth and nostrils, the testicles of a male goat and various animals transformed into hairy worms. Her attacks generally occur at night and she has visions of hell that verify what she has been told in sermons, "Fyre, Sulfure, Darkness and a most Abominable Stink." The pains in her belly are unbearable: it is as if a serpent is devouring her alive, and it is because of this torture that she agrees to meet willingly with her demons and shout the obscene words they dictate. She alternates between "*les douleurs continuelles*" and "*la grand joye*." In her moments of ecstasy she cannot eat, speak, or feel the pain of the lacerations which at other

times with the help of the demons she inflicts upon herself. Sometimes she returns to the simplicity of small childhood and forgets all she knows about God. She behaves like a spoiled little girl, plays with a figurine of Mary Magdalene as if it were a doll, offers it her breast to suck. One day following communion she utters a shrill cry and a priest finds her on her knees, her body rigid, her face pale, and her eyes open very wide. A little later she begins to laugh sweetly, as though to herself, and to sway her shoulders from side to side. Her heart is pounding and she trembles violently. She cannot speak, but with her hands she makes signs. A nun sits beside her and rubs her hands and legs. She is conducted to her cell and there made comfortable before a fire, and soon she expires.

So, Dragoness, Sister Jeanne Féry. And we see why instead of playing the usual and tired game and putting together our belly-buttons, we should take out our peashooters and force ourselves and others, Javier, for example, to face a little truth. Ah, Elizabeth. Between participation and escape there remain to us only our individual maladies, our personal cancers, our parodies of the great synthesis.

△ Javier folds down the coverlet and the sheets and in silence lies on his stomach. You are seated with your legs drawn up, your knees holding the covers high. Although he tries to keep his face turned away, your woman's smells come to him: cologne water, menstruation, fatigue. With a corner of the sheet over his face, he murmurs:

"I finally saw her and went near her because I could see that she had been crying. I thought to myself, a woman cries to attract, to show off her tears and share them. She would never cry in solitude. Or, if she did, it would be in the belief that her tears could be felt by someone even though he was not present, that they could charm him at a distance, move him, be heard by an ear that was out of sight but not out of reach. There are no tears in vain. I think that was what I thought. She went on crying and around us the

party went on. We were in darkness again. Perhaps only by chance I was the only person who noticed, the only one tuned to her wave length, open at that instant to her tears and the thread of silence that had led me to her, past the couples dancing and kissing in the dark room."

He removes the sheet from his face and out of the corner of his eye peeks at you as you sit smoking with your eyes pensive and distant. He covers his face again and again smells your smells.

"The music was pointing out that it was just one of those crazy flings," he says with his voice slightly muffled by the sheet. "Yes, for to go to a party is always to venture an encounter only chance controls. But not to venture it unarmed. No. Always with the breastplate of an attitude, the shield of words, the lance of memory. Always with a mockery ready, should the need for it come. A game to play. And what a laugh if the girl should play the game too.

"I found her again. A warm damp hand that I couldn't see took my hand, which apparently had reached toward her. It was she who took my hand. I didn't take hers, I swear it. She found me more than I found her. We stood in the darkness of the room, for the lights had been turned off now, and the contrast between her warm fingers and my cold ones must have seemed strange. Then it had to happen, I had to move close to her, let my skin feel the nearness of hers. Still not looking at her. And now I took her hand as she had taken mine. We embraced, we pasted our bodies together and began to dance again, discovering ourselves to each other little by little and gropingly, the softness of her skin, its fine golden hairs, her smooth blond hair combed to the side of her head. Her warm neck. Her breasts firm and free under her dress. Her thighs tight, hard.

"I said to her, 'So you came alone?' "

And you, Dragoness, sitting on the bed smoking, remember and say quietly: "The girl nodded yes."

"I asked her, 'Did they leave you all alone?' "

"She nodded yes again. Her hands were like yours. They were

giving names to the parts of your body without her imagining that you were both thinking the same thing."

" 'And the man you gave the drink to?' I said to her. 'Why didn't he say something to you?' "

"The girl shrugged her shoulders," you say, repeating the action with the words. For if he wants it this way now, Dragoness, you are willing, for a time at least, just as you were willing then. You go on: "In a low voice she sang along with Ella Fitzgerald, *'Too hot not to cool down.'* "

" 'Maybe,' I suggested, 'he had been worried by the mystery of your absence?' "

"She raised her face to you, Javier, and looked at you."

"And I went on, 'Maybe he wanted to avoid giving you pain. Perhaps he knew you would not have been happy if he had told you his thoughts.' "

"The girl answered that it's worse to live not knowing what someone is thinking, only imagining."

" 'No,' I told her. 'Often it's worse to know. Maybe when he found you there in the dim light and you gave him his drink, he loved you so much that he decided to say nothing.' "

"The girl said that she would have preferred that he not be so solicitous of her."

"That he be the partner of her intelligence as well as her passions?"

"Maybe, something like that, I suppose."

"But I replied, 'He would have had to give up his pride, and you would have stopped loving him. He knows that you love him only so long as you have his pride before you to overcome and defeat. That once you succeed in that, there will be no reason for love.' "

" 'Well, you know him if anyone does,' the girl said."

"I laughed. I laughed because she was playing my game so marvelously. I stopped and took a glass from a low table without releasing her waist. She had accepted the game, the parody. But at the same time it was beginning to be a little shaky, she was beginning to take it seriously. I decided not to let her know how it might end."

I said to her, 'Do you think he has exhausted all his surprises?'

You put out your cigarette and light another, Elizabeth, and exhale slowly, then say quietly, "Oh, don't say that!"

"Why?"

"Because,' the girl told you, 'this time you are going to repeat yourself.'"

"Want some of this drink?"

"Thanks."

"De l'amour j'ai toutes les fureurs . . ."

"Yes, de l'amour . . . ' Then she stopped. 'No, let me think about it.'"

"She thought for a moment. Finally she took the glass, snatched it away from my hand, and drained it while shaking her head no."

"She was saying no, that she would not drink to that tonight."

"Why? What was she concerned about, I thought. What did tonight mean to her? Did it mean the two of us together and alone in bed? Or with other people? No, I couldn't understand her."

"It meant labyrinth," you say, straightening your legs for a moment and then raising them again. You are restless with the day's fatigue. You are tired of this complicated game-within-a-game. "A worn-out labyrinth," you repeat a little wearily.

"No,' I told her." Javier's head is still covered by the sheet.

"Yes, oh yes,' the girl said. 'Theseus and the Minotaur.'"

"No,' I repeated. But she went on . . ."

"Ariadne's thread.'"

"No. Not that either.'"

"The Cyclops's cave,' said the girl."

"Nor that.'"

"Charybdis opens its devouring snout and vomits black waves and swallows them again. On the island of Trinacria the herds of the sun are grazing. Orion pursues the summer Pleiades and they rush into the sea. Ulysses no longer recognizes his homeland! Between Scylla and Charybdis the doves drop dead. There's no suspense, Javier. The myth is known in advance and is known by all.'"

"But the voyager no longer recognizes his homeland. That's the point.'"

" 'All right,' said the girl. 'Go on.' "

" 'I shall go down into the labyrinth with you.' "

" 'Yeeces,' she said. She was not certain now. "

" 'And together with you either be saved or be lost.' "

" 'Noooo,' said the girl. She was not sure at all. She was . . . "

" 'Kiss me,' I said. I didn't know the scene we were acting now. But I could guess what had to be done. 'Minstrel. Idiot. This cold night will turn us all to fools or madmen.' I was trapped by her lips, by your lips, Ligeia. To fools and madmen. You wouldn't let me go. This cold night. "

" 'Dost thou call me fool, boy?' she smiled at you. "

" 'A bitter fool!' I told her. "

" 'Bitter, perhaps,' the girl said. 'We've played it before, Javier. It's worn out too.' "

" 'You have never given the right answer,' I told her. "

" 'All right,' she said. 'What should I have said?' "

" 'All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou wert born with. You were born a fool and you will die a fool. Without ever knowing or understanding. Just as you were born flat on your back between the legs of your mother, so you will be carried away flat on your back on the shoulders of your pallbearers, a fool to the last, even in death. Womb to the tomb.' Then I added quietly, 'No. Can't pride be generous sometimes?' "

" 'And the girl answered, 'Yes, when it gives in.' "

" 'Gives in or is yoked?' I asked her. "

" 'I don't know, Javier,' the girl said. 'Tonight I don't know anything. I don't understand anything.' "

" 'I'm going to have to leave you.' "

" 'No,' she said. 'Please don't do that.' "

" 'And you won't be able to give yourself until I come back. And when you know my sin, when you learn the destiny that destroys me, you won't die less, but you will die feeling more guilty.' "

" 'Bah,' the girl said. 'What difference does dying make?' "

" I laughed again and hugged her and kissed her. She was wonderful. Simply wonderful. She had followed me like my own shadow, I couldn't confuse her. I wanted to leave with her now,

quickly, to give her a reward for the seriousness with which she had confronted and defeated my mockery. And she wanted to give me my reward too and she said, I said, we said it together, 'Let's get out of here.' Nat King Cole as we pushed our way past couples neither of us knew and out a door into the light of a hall where the women's coats were piled on a sofa. She searched for hers, *the Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble*, looked for her coat still holding my hand, turning the linings to find her initials, *they're only made of clay, but our love is here to stay*. In the taxi, we kissed again. We kissed with closed eyes, a kiss that did not end, but at the same time I was alert to every sound, as alert as I had ever been in my life. The silence of the expensive streets of Las Lomas. The whistles of night watchmen walking their rounds. The sounds of engines whirring swiftly past, the whiplike sounds of tires passing. The radio in the taxi: the voice of a little boy singing out winning national lottery tickets, and outside, the whisper of falling water at the fountain of Diana the Huntress. Another long silence. We stopped for a light. The mocking whistles of some kids in a car stopped alongside us. Radio music from other cars. A newsboy who wanted to get rid of his last copy of *Ultimas Noticias*. He stuck the paper in through the open window on the right and we separated from our kiss and she began to fix her hair while the cab driver took out a peso and gave it to the newsboy, at the same time rapping his knuckles and saying in English, 'Never,' as if we had been his partners in a conversation, and looking at us in his mirror, as he probably had been watching us all the time, he went on in Spanish,

"'You got to watch them all. There are some black souls in this town who will reach in and knock the flag down when you're stopped, and then you drive away with the meter off and your fare has a free ride.'

"'Let's go to the apartment,' the girl said to me. 'Now, quick.'

"No, I told her, we weren't going to the apartment. I told the cab driver to take us to the head of Avenida Juárez. He waved a hand in the air and I remember what he said:

"'Just as you say, Mustafa. It's your dough. No more one-peso

pickups to bother with for a while. Let 'em bang on the door if they want to, I'm in business now.'

"'Where?' said the girl. 'Javier, I want to be with you. Now. Where are you taking me? Let's go to the apartment.'

"'The Mustafa said Juárez,' said the cab driver. He was watching us in his mirror. The girl was silent. You were silent, Ligeia. Presently we were in front of Bellas Artes and I told the driver to stop. I got out and held my arm to the girl. She didn't want to get out. 'Take me to Rin and Nazas,' she said to the driver. But when I paid the driver and walked away, she left the cab and followed me along Aquiles-Serdán. I would stop and look back and she would stop and turn and touch the thick marble banister that runs beside Bellas Artes and then I would walk on and so would she. Our steps were one. And my senses were wire-tight. I heard the neon signs winking, bubbling, laughing in the night silence. The newspaper and magazine stands of galvanized iron were empty, their wire netting drawn. Trash along the street, thrown-away paper, tips of ice-cream cones, cigarette butts, torn cellophane, wads of gum, the river of refuse that flows along all the streets of Mexico City. The girl following, I walking ahead in the silence. My rubber-soled steps. Her clicking high heels. I waited for her to catch up and took her by the wrist.

"'No,' she protested. 'Not here. What do you want to do here?'

"'Here we enter our labyrinth,' I said to her.

"'No, Javier, please.' "

"'The voyager does not remember his homeland. He must rediscover it.' I laughed and pushed through the door, leading her by the wrist. Silence ended as they sang *Lo bajaron por la sierra, todo liado como un cohete* . . .

"'But rediscovery was hard in that smoke. 'Have you ever seen such smoke?' It clouded around us, almost suffocating.

"'It's horrible,' she said. 'Please, please, let's get out.'

"'We're going to have some drinks.'

"' . . . *lo traen desde San Miguel, lo llevan a Sombrerete* . . .

"'Bards, Ligeia. Minstrels. Bards with dyed silver hats and bel-

lies swollen by pulque. Let's sit down. Let's try to hear them. A violin. The guitar. A guitarrón. Bring us two tequilas.'

"'No, nothing for me.'

"'. . . *Oiga usted, mi general, oiga usted, mi general . . .*

"'Do you know what those voices remind me of, Ligeia?'

"'No,' she said quietly. 'What?'

"'Cries at birth. As though both mother and child were to go on shrieking their pain the rest of their lives.'

"'So what?' the girl said to me. 'It doesn't make a damn bit of difference to me, Javier. I'm not interested.'

"'As though the act of giving birth had never ended. They shriek, howl, blindly . . .'

"'. . . *yo también fui hombre valiente; quiero que usted me afusile en público de la gente . . .*

"'. . . as though the child were still tied by that blue flesh rope to his mother, who howls with him. As if he were still wrapped in the placenta. Look at them. In the eyes.'

"'I'm not interested, Javier. Let's go.'

"'. . . *tanto pelear y pelear, con el máuser en la mano . . .*

"'Listen to them. Listen to how they live today on violence from the past, as if when they are born they can remember the brutality of the act of conception . . .'

"'God, Javier, enough, enough. How tedious you can be.'

"'Cheers, Ligeia. Bring us two more.'

"'None for me.'

"'Then two for me.'

"'God, how tedious, how disagreeable . . .'

"'. . . *para acabar fusilado en el panteón de Durango . . .*

"'J'aime, je l'avouerais, cet orgueil généreux qui jamais n'a fléchi sous le joug amoureux . . .'

"'Cut it out. Javier. Don't keep it up now. It's broken already, beyond repair. It doesn't matter now, there's nothing you can do about it. Some other day.'

"'Oh, there's to be another day! Mourez donc, et gardez un silence inhumain; mais pour fermer vos yeux cherchez une autre main. Cheers.'

“ . . . ya no vivan tan engreídos de este mundo traidor . . .

“ ‘You’ve had enough,’ the girl said to me. ‘Don’t drink any more now.’

“ ‘Look at their eyes, Ligeia. They’re the children of the great whore.’

“ ‘Oh, my god, now he’s being original.’

“ ‘Yes, look at them. They see us and they hate our guts. They don’t want us to visit them here. Why should they? To them we are Martians. We don’t speak as they do or think as they do. We never stop even to glance at them casually. We merely boss the shit out of them. If we do see them, it’s like the zoo. So let’s take a peek at the little bastards, Ligeia. See, they’re monkeys dressed up for carnival time. Howling like coyotes. And we are their enemies and they know it. We stand outside the bars of their cage looking in at them. Good. Maybe we should throw them some nuts. Here, monkey, catch.’

“ ‘Javier! Stop it!’

“ ‘Open your mouths and catch them, monkeys. Pumpkin seeds for the little monkey bastards on the other side of the bars. Catch ’em! Eat ’em!’

“The music stopped. What did the man look like, Ligeia? Can you remember him? I remember all right. He was dark-skinned and tall and he had a bushy mustache that ringed his mouth the way the bushy hair of a monkey rings its red ass. A circle of mustache, without beginning or end, a snake swallowing its tail. His sombrero was decorated with silver roses and he swept it off with a dramatic gesture and walked slowly toward me. He moved like a lean black panther, the movement we with our inner-spring mattresses, our porcelain toilets, our steel desks have forgotten. Like a forest animal pushing its way with his head through ferns and vines. Like Rousseau’s tiger, burning bright in the forests of the night. His teeth sharp and white. The veins in his neck swollen. Claws that grabbed me by the lapels and a voice that grated, ‘Listen, drunk! Listen to me!’

“ ‘Listen? Now is the hour, eh? The moment has come to listen and pray. Your prayer, Tiger. To Eurynome, the mother of every-

thing, who rises naked from Chaos and by rubbing her hands on her belly creates the serpent Ophios and then dances wildly while he pushes up between her legs . . .’

“ ‘Knock it off, drunk. Shut up! Have some respect for the musicians.’

“ ‘. . . and copulates with the Mother of All Things, to the end that she may lay the great universal egg . . .’

“ ‘Didn’t you hear me, drunk? I said shut up!’

“ ‘. . . from which she hatches, while she sleeps, her son Ouranos, who sprinkles his semen between the legs of his mother and covers her with grass and rivers and flowers and birds. So the moral is, fuck your mother. Go look for your goddamn mother, Master of Musicians, and fuck her and this cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.’

“He jerked me up by the lapels. I no longer saw you, Elizabeth. I saw instead the crazy whirl of the starlike lights in the ceiling, the thick blue smoke of that cold night, the circle of lunatic bastard monkeys who were crowding around us shouting and laughing and climbing on chairs and tables, howling, shrieking, laughing, their gold teeth, their flat noses, their pock-marked cheeks, their dark greasy hair, their heavy breasts, their powdered arms and their satin skirts and their spindly legs, their black mustaches, their forked red tongues, their eyes of polished coal, their short necks, their dirty T shirts. All the world that until that moment had been silence and obedience was screaming now. ‘Give it to the son of a bitch, smash him, send him to the Red Cross, gouge his eyes, cut his balls, knife him, put him in his coffin, drown him, hang him by his horn, stomp him, cream him, choke him. Up his ass for the shit we’ve had to swallow, for the right you are sir and the just as you say sir, the step right this way, ma’am, the thank you for nothing, not a goddamn thing, for the fat-assed queers on the prowl, for the pinched asses and the broken promises, for the quick gallows and the crooked courts, for the hand that holds a whip and a pistol, for the foot that stands on us and holds us down. Cold-cock him, shiv him, cut him up!’ A screaming circle of violence and fury and the

tall tiger driving his fist home again and again, yet they still seemed far away and unimportant to me and I cried out to you where you stood looking on rigidly, loving me as you had never loved me before, my jerking body, my beaten face,

“‘Et Phèdre au labyrinthe avec vous descendue, se serait avec vous retrouvée ou perdue!’ and at the same time I tried to remember their words as they shrieked ‘Shut the bastard up! The fucking son of a bitch! Shut him up, shut him up!’ Then they were suddenly very close to me and fists were at my face, my chest, my belly, my testes, again and again until I fell crying to you . . .’

“‘Phaedra. Theseus. I wasn’t so far off, was I?’

“and finally they dragged it out of me, a wild helpless groan, ‘Ahhhhggggg!’ as I fell on the dirty floor amid the cigarette butts and the sputum and phlegm and the spilled tequila, a cry that was identical to their cry. They had beaten me and captured me. I was on their side of the cage now. I was an animal too and all I could do was lie there with my knees drawn up to protect my testes and my hands over my face, moaning while I caught glimpses of the ceiling lights wrapped in yellow cellophane and the face of the dark-skinned tiger who had overcome me as he turned and walked away rubbing his knuckles and cocking his sombrero again. The music again. The guitar. The guitarrón. The trumpet. Again a voice singing. I struggled up and hung on your neck. I couldn’t see your eyes as you took a handkerchief and wiped off my face. We moved toward the door. Someone was waiting there and helped us outside into the cold air of the street. It was the same cab driver who had brought us down from the Lomas. I smelled steam and coal smoke from locomotives. I tried to see what time it was, what had happened to the moon. Dawn was breaking. I heard the swish of sewers and the roar of the great trucks that come into the city at dawn loaded high with vegetables, beer, cheese, bales of cotton, fruit, frozen seafood, crates of eggs, flowers. Roaring motors of red-fingered dawn. Huge eight-wheeled trucks driven by men in leather jackets wearing straw sombreros who have driven all night from Veracruz or Monterrey, from the coast of Guerrero or the moun-

tains of Oaxaca. To feed us. To prevent us from once again eating each other's flesh.

"The same taxi was waiting and the driver opened the back door and pushed me in roughly and I sprawled there, drunk and exhausted, hardly conscious. You told him to take us to the corner of Rin and Nazas and you got in front beside him.

" 'Sure, little pigeon, I'll take you straight to your cage. We'll let the Mustafa rest in peace behind. I'll even go in with you before you fall dead too and I find myself out a fare.'

"We were in Mexico City again, Ligeia. We had returned."

Javier closed his eyes for a moment. Only a moment, he was sure of that. But when he clawed the sheet away from his face, you were no longer there.

"Ligeia! Ligeia!"

You were no longer seated on the bed where he had last seen and heard you. The imprint of your body remained on the sheets and pillow. He looked toward the bathroom. The light there had been turned off.

"Ligeia, for Christ's sake," he muttered. "We have come home again. Accept it. Accept it."

Lord, prevent that we fall into darkness.

△ "What are you doing? What? What are you thinking? Tell me!"

"Mother, please."

Raúl was different. Raúl asked no questions. Neither did he speak often. Of course he had attitudes: nearly always in support of his wife when she was correcting Javier, saying over and over that "For success in life good manners are indispensable," and not only his attitudes but also his quirks: he crumbled his bread and dropped the pieces into his soup, he dipped his pastry in his chocolate, he read the Montgomery Ward catalogue, while Ofelia's quirks were more enormous and complicated and made much more difference: she would snuff the lights and close the curtains as if she believed that in shadow their poverty would be less visible and

the huge old house, naked of all except the most indispensable furniture, with its unused rooms, like the forbidden stairs to the mansard attic, always shut and padlocked, might seem almost homelike. In the evenings Javier did his homework and Raúl read the Montgomery Ward catalogue and made marks with a blue and red pencil and scratched his bald head and said that he was getting old, he couldn't remember any more, and Javier could not see Ofelia's only response, a movement of her face, because she had made the room dark and was hidden in its shadow.

His escape was to the patio, where he did not have to pretend. Tall crockery vases shining with inset studs of glass and porcelain. Water drips from the iron railing and the shadow-loving plants are in the planter boxes on the stairs. Shirts and sheets cross in all directions. He sits there in the twilight of a March afternoon, one of those fevered days that always make him so restless. The cold transparency of winter has vanished and without a season of transition heat has come and the dust has risen and hangs over the city in clouds. A yellow mantle every afternoon, and through it the sun seems to gain heaviness and penetration, and he wishes that it were rainy July, just as in July he wishes it were dry January, as he sits on the wicker chair near the high vases with his hands behind his head feeling that some of the dampness of the plants has worked its way deep into his vitals. The parrots have gone to sleep. Soon Ofelia comes and makes the round of the patio covering the birdcages with hoods of old sheeting. Into some of the red and white cages she tosses a handful of seed. The boy and mother do not speak, though their glances cross. He stretches his leg. Ofelia disappears but she has not gone. She is behind the partially opened door watching him, spying on him this afternoon as every afternoon. She sees him bathed in the misty light, calm, quiet, and her eyes pass from his curly hair down to his bare feet on the tezontle stones that in March evaporate so quickly and secretly the bucketfuls of water that the servant throws upon them every morning. She is wrapped in her flowered robe, her red hair is neatly combed, her face is drowsy as she stands behind the cracked door and watches

him. The boy, fourteen now, sits in the rocker and reads and feels her eyes and senses clearly that one of the reasons she spies upon him is that he reminds her of his father, who is gone now. Like Raúl, he is dark and silent, captured by his own distance, lost in dreams. He is incomprehensible to her and she is trying perhaps bitterly, perhaps desperately or maybe only in loneliness, but always secretly and always avidly, to fix and simplify him, understand him. Now that Raúl has gone, she is far different from the woman who bought new dresses in Laredo, Texas. Her face is a red purse, her bust a heavy tide, her abdomen round and hard, and she stands with her legs well spread and her hands pressed to her belly as if she were trying to remember with her touch the pain that is the first memory she has of him; wearing a cotton skirt and the apron that has become eternal, the apron of their hurried meals and her hurried cleaning, she stands at the door and spies on him unaware that he heard the creak of the hinges when she cracked the door and can see her eyes against the dark background of the bedroom, kept in shadow to disguise their poverty. And after their meals, meals to which only the two of them sit now that Raúl has gone, she still leaves the house and disappears without saying where she is going and he makes no attempt to follow her because he knows that if he tries, he will only end by getting lost, he still does not know the city, still must confine himself to the limits of the familiar and obligatory streets.

Before, when Raúl was with them, life was different. Or maybe it merely seems that it was different because now Raúl has gone. No, it really had been different. With Raúl he would go out walking, holding his father's hand, without worry or fear, walking slowly and enjoying himself. Very early Sunday mornings they would make their way to Chapultepec park. Sometimes they would rent a boat and row on the artificial lake looking at the girls who were rowing alone and at the boys who took other boats to follow the girls and scare them. Entire families would be out rowing, loaded down with paper bags and buckets of ice from which stuck the necks of cooling soft-drink bottles. Sometimes a boat would sink

and the girls would shriek and the youths in shirt-sleeves laugh. And there were popsicles and clouds of sugar cotton, yellow and blue balloons, bags of peanuts, the cries of children, the whistles of the balloon venders. Hand in hand with his father he would walk the yellow meadows beneath trees stirred by the wind or stroll along the central avenue of the park watching passing cars, high and black, tops down, sounding horns to spread the swarms of pedestrians out of the way, moving slowly as if promenading, exchanging from car to car stares of interrogation, cries of recognition, words of alarmed or disarmed modesty. They would sit in front of the pergola where the band played Weber and Rossini overtures and Javier would laugh when his father signaled to the musicians with a finger. The imperturbable musicians, concentrated and serious as they puffed and plucked and bowed or adjusted their music stands or put a folded handkerchief to the shoulder. They played continuously and Raúl smelled of sweat, tobacco, leather, and shaving soap, and for the boy he came to be that Sunday music, the band in the pergola and the guitarists in the little open structures of iron where there were tables and benches and beer, soft drinks, and sandwiches could be bought. And away from the park a small fair was set up in a vacant lot, a few patched tents, a few booths, a rickety Ferris wheel, and the wooden horses of the merry-go-round whirled to the scratched music of a record, and down forgotten streets wandering entertainers walked, tooting their feeble trumpets, and an organ-grinder turned his crank while servant girls who had not gone out for the day listened from open windows. Sunday, their one day of freedom and companionship together, the day when they would go to all these places and hear all these sounds and he would ask his father what other people did on Sunday and Raúl laughed and said that some stood in line at movies and others slept all day, some did not shave, some dressed up in their best clothes, some read the comics and some pushed a baby carriage and many worked at weekend jobs to eke out their too small incomes, the women went to Mass and at four in the afternoon there were the bullfights. But that was

not what Lupe, the servant, told him. Lupe said that on Sunday she sometimes would go to Tlaxcala to visit her family or enjoy a triple-feature movie or take the bus to the radio studios and enter free and obey the instructions of the master of ceremonies: laughter, applause, silence. Or she might merely go to the park and lie on the grass and let herself be sprinkled by spray blown from a fountain. And occasionally she had sex on Sunday:

"She used to pay a peso, Ligeia, for admission to a dark room where a man would fuck her standing, sometimes the same man, sometimes an unknown one, beside other couples."

On Sunday sounds were different, clearer. Even the barking of dogs was louder and sharper. And it was the day when the wives of prisoners went to the prisons to visit and sleep with their husbands. Raúl said that it must be a very sad thing to die on Sunday. He rubbed Javier's head and then Ofelia called to him and they shut themselves up in their bedroom and spoke in voices so low that not even a murmur could be heard.

"Can memory return to us the places we have known, the people, the feelings, make us experience them again? I don't know, Ligeia. But I know that you and I have come home and that you must accept it."

△ The highway twisted back and forth pressed upon by basalt walls scarred by picks and showing dark veins of hard stone separated by pale, softer bands. Franz drove swiftly, expertly, gradually accelerating as the stone walls spread apart to become a canyon of lustrous clay. Javier moved away from Isabel and leaned forward resting his elbows on the back of Franz's seat. He touched Franz's shoulder.

"You slipped off from our talk after the movie the other night. I still hold that love is created, that it is an act of the will . . ."

Franz did not reply. You half turned, Dragoness, and said to your husband, "Please, Javier. You told us that only a few minutes ago. You've said it a thousand times. Please don't make us listen again."

Javier tilted his head to observe your head tilted, its vertical line now formed by your eyebrows. A real mocker, Elizabeth. He said dryly, "Since the first day you knew me, all I have done is repeat one or two ideas that had been written before you knew me, in that little book that won me the fellowship to the United States and so allowed you to hear my ideas."

"I haven't heard them," said Isabel, touching Javier's arm. "To me everything you say is new."

"At any event, they are words that can stand to be revived." Javier leaned back and spread his knees. "As if they were being taken from some ancient ceremonial urn and burned in penitence for our deaths. Our deaths, Ligeia. We ourselves, the death of what we once were but have ceased to be. For all of us, except Isabel, of course, have been very different persons than we are today."

"Why did the audience laugh and hoot and yawn during the movie?" Isabel asked. Javier looked at her appreciatively. She was holding a characteristic pose, her hands together beneath her breasts ready to caress or squeeze her body with a grace and smoothness that would be accentuated by the opaque sheen of her yellow shantung dress.

"Because they didn't understand it," said Javier. "They're not used to seeing life itself on a screen. But ask Ligeia. She's the expert on movies. She spent her entire teens in one long movie."

You did not look at him, Dragoness. "No, it's more than that." Nervously you opened your handbag and searched for your mirror and didn't find it. You closed the bag. "Those apes who whistle and make cracks during a movie like that do it because they feel outraged. They can't take it that Antonioni deals with Monica Vitti with respect and love, that he sees her as a human being."

"You mean that he communicates his own rhythm while receiving that of another," Javier said. "Be careful now."

With your left hand you nervously twisted the rear-view mirror until you could see your reflection in it.

"Come on, Elizabeth," Franz said brusquely. "This is a damn dangerous road." He raised his hand and readjusted the mirror and

looked into it briefly at the car behind just swinging out to pass. The car, a Ford, went by, floating back a string of curses.

"It bothers them to see simple objects," said Javier. "Books, ash-trays, lamps, the things that are part of our lives but not part of us. They would prefer to humanize everything, it's their guilt complex. The things a woman touches when she and her lover separate. That part of her life which is not her, which she won't see or touch again, which has value precisely because it isn't her. It disturbs them to see how living men and women leave each other. They would prefer something melodramatic that would give a kind of integrity to the disguise they insist life must wear. They are, as Usigli has said, gesticulators, in love with the gestures of living, not with life itself. They don't care to accept that people simply lose time, walk along a street, stop to think. They don't care to see the true slow light of dawn, day, sunset, darkness. They want to go on hearing the lies that have comforted them for a century and a half, from the time poetry was written for young ladies down to the latest suds opus on Channel 4. They live in eclipse and honest light terrifies them."

"No, it's more than that," you said again. "What they can't stand is that a woman should be more than simply a cunt dressed out in some romantic illusion. To see the birth of a love in which the woman is just as free and just as much a person as the man makes them furious. When Vitti and Delon go to the apartment and instead of jumping straight into bed take time to discover themselves slowly to each other, to play together like little rabbits and to do this because they *must* discover themselves first and share laughter and a game in order to go to bed only later, only apocalyptically, if you see what I mean, everything for everything, entirely committed with all their defects and fears and hatreds and weaknesses . . . *that's* what offends your Mexican he-man *macho* male. What did they call out during that scene?"

"Put it to her, put it to her," Isabel laughed.

"Yes, that's right." You directed a dry smile to Isabel. "Put it to her. Get it over and done with fast, pronto, for that's what a

woman is for. Underneath, the *macho* Mexican is merely an onanist. If he could have intercourse with himself, he would do it. The woman he takes is no more than an object that happens to be necessary. Bah, they disgust me. Underneath they are secret homosexuals. The hidden desire of every one of the mustached bastards is enchiladas with cold cream, as a *caifán* friend of mine once said."

Thank you, Professoress Dragoness. I read you clear: Latins are lousy lovers.

"Have you known anything better?" said Javier, arching an eyebrow.

"Don't be coarse, Javier." You let your head rest back against the cushion. "You're many things, but you aren't coarse."

You closed your eyes and smiled and began to hum while your hand blindly looked for a radio station. *¿Dónde están mis amigos queridos de entonces? ¡A pan y agua!* "Someday," you murmured, "the women of the world will raise a statue to Michelangelo Antonioni. The David who cut down the Goliath of misogyny." You laughed and went on without looking toward your husband, "You would like to accept it intellectually, Javier. But underneath you react like all Mexican men. You can't help yourself."

"You're wrong," Javier protested. "I'm for womanhood too."

"There: 'womanhood.' But Antonioni is for *this* woman or *that* woman, and without demanding anything from her, he wants to give her everything."

Franz's hand pushed your hand from the knob and he turned it, looking for a station.

"Now who's repeating?" said Javier. "That's exactly what Franz said a little while back. And moreover, do you think to offer a woman only pessimism is really to offer her anything?"

"Leave the tango, Franz. For an intellectual, you're very thick sometimes, Javier. Don't you see that we can't help accepting that we will never attain some things, and that to admit this is not to deny the value of those things? It's to find freedom."

You turned the volume of the radio up. *Este tango nos unía en*

aquellas noches inolvidables de Armenonville. And the whole point, Dragoness, is to move first. To take hold of the world before it can take hold of you.

△ Buenos Aires. January. Javier had rather uncertainly promised to meet you at a tearoom on Avenida Santa Fe. You remember the month because the streets were almost impossible. The tar of the macadam had melted in the heat and on some corners they had laid boards from sidewalk to sidewalk so that people could cross. You had walked all afternoon. Lunch alone. Then to Harrod's to choose some wool material for an autumn suit, but when you pushed through the revolving door you changed your mind and walked on around and out again, the glass moving in front of you. A rebellion, but not a very important one. You felt the damp heat on your skin, heat mixed with the smells you always associate with that city: Argentine gasoline, which is different from any gasoline in the world and is the city's most characteristic odor, even more identifying than its smells of the shops and restaurants, linen, wool, and leather, warmed-over pizza, grilled steaks, fried sausage, kishke, the fainter scent of chocolate-topped ice cream, and above everything, or within it, the smells from the docks: tar, coal, steam, frozen meat, livestock, fertilizer, bales of wool. Why had the thought of an autumn suit come to you in January? You walked on. A building was being constructed at the corner of Maipú and Sarmiento and the workers had stopped to eat. Some of them were standing on the sidewalk at the entrance to the job, others were seated high among the girders of the framework, as if in niches. They were eating long flutelike rolls stuffed with cheese and ham or slices of beef loin; they were drinking wine while conversing in Argentine Spanish with Polish and Italian accents. You stopped in front of store windows: crocodile purses, swatches of merino and alpaca, ponchos. A perfume shop on Maipú. You entered and they offered you ten or twelve perfumes in succession and you laughed and let them spray you with all of them and left the shop wrapped in fragrance and without buying anything. You would end, you

knew, spending an hour in the Ateneo bookstore, finally emerging with a copy of *Martín Fierro* bound in cowhide. You avoided Florida, closed off at this hour of the day for auto traffic only. You walked along Lavalle to look at the placard-bearing tripods in front of the movie houses. Maybe there were some new movies playing, or an old one you had missed. They often showed, unadvertised, old Argentine films that you enjoyed enormously. Terrible melodramas with many tangos, thick with nostalgia for the Belle Époque of the Centenary, alive with folklore from the various parts of the great city. Walking slowly, you stopped in front of each of the thirty movie houses on Lavalle. You were wearing an orange silk print and white high heels that picked up the hot tar and you were carrying a purse you had bought in Buenos Aires and you looked at the placards, the stills of a triple-feature of Luis Sandrini and next door *La Vuelta de Rocha* was showing, with Mercedes Simone and Hugo del Carril, and the music of the city during that period enchanted you and in the summer you would go to the open-air restaurants on Maldonado and Belgrano, on the way to the Tigre, to hear the orchestras of Canaro or Pichuco. You also enjoyed music from the interior of the country, the *carnavalito*, the *pericón*, the *vidalita*. *Malambo* with Delia Garcés was showing. You saw many titles and names that were familiar because you had come here every afternoon since you and Javier had been living in Buenos Aires, to Lavalle Street to see movies, Floren Delbene, Tita Merello, *Tres Hombres del Río*, Nini Marshall, Esteban Serrador, Santiago Gómez Gou, *Los Ojos Más Lindos del Mundo*, Enrico Muño, Angel Magaña, the Legrand sisters, *Los Martes Orquídeas*, Petrone, Amelia Bence, Silvana Roth, *La Casa de los Millones*, Olinda Bozán, Semillita . . .

"J'étais une vraie cinglée du cinéma argentin . . ."

Finally you stopped before the stills of *Los Muchachos de Antes No Usaban Gomina*, a title you found amusing. You bought your ticket and went into the tiny theater, narrow, the wooden seats high and uncomfortable, the whirl of the ventilating fans louder than the sound track of the film. You found a place in one

of the front rows. The picture had already begun. Two dandies of the 1900's were out on a carouse and had just met the great courtesan of the Centenary, blond Mireya, played by Mecha Ortiz, and they were dancing the *milonga* "The Swan" and you felt your hand touched and looked to the right and there was Larraín, the secretary of the Chilean embassy, sucking chocolate milk through a straw. He bent to greet you and said that it was a small world and offered you a sip of his drink, suggesting softly but shrilly that for that one afternoon you could pretend to be sweethearts, it would be a secret no one else would know. You wanted to sit there relaxed, escaped, and watch how Mireya would relentlessly descend the path of her destiny, a way as relentless as a tango, to end up an aged vender of flowers living in the gutter, to be rediscovered there by and by, in the last reel, by Arrieta and Parravicini, the dandies grown elderly. Twenty-five Aprils that will not return. The tango, you told yourself absently, is one of the few contemporary forms of tragedy, and you got up and moved toward the aisle.

"But you've just come . . ."

You murmured that you had forgotten an appointment and you walked out of the theater. To the Ateneo bookstore. There no one would bother you. You walked to Florida and let yourself be swept along toward Corrientes by the crowd of men in jackets with too wide shoulder pads, high stiff piqué collars with big-knotted ties, their hair pomaded. Old men and youths were reading bulletins at La Nación. Women whose hair was dyed two tones. The bookstore was not crowded. The familiar clerks wearing linen dusters with their sleeves wrapped to the elbow in black damask. You came out eventually with a book bound in lambskin. "Moreira was never one of the cowardly sort of gaucho lost in crime and with a completely perverted moral sense." You closed the book and escaped from Florida toward Maipú and went down to the San Martín Plaza and there sat on a bench facing the Torre de los Ingleses. You breathed the fresh scent of the high trees and looked, just to be looking at something, at the sidewalk with its design of pink squares. You opened the book again. "No, Moreira was like most

of our gauchos. He was blessed with a strong soul and a generous heart, and if destiny had launched him along a more noble path, at the head of a regiment of cavalry, for example, he would have been a glory to his motherland." There were many children about, for this was vacation time, children playing in white and blue dresses, youths in knickers who were reading *Billiken*, and you thought to yourself that you had never seen boys more serious or better reared than the Argentines. A boy whose hair was plastered smooth sat next to you, wearing a tie even in that heat, and opened one of the little volumes of the Sopena classics series.

"I don't remember what it was. In that heat . . ."

He inclined his head slightly in greeting to you and you returned the salutation. Then you both settled to your reading, turning the pages almost at the same time, and as you grew engrossed, you forgot the youth. The adventures of the gaucho Moreira on his home ground. You thought of Javier as you observed how Moreira was both the actor and the victim of his own words: "Fearless and sure of himself, always in the middle of things, not very Catholic, sticking to his enemies like their shadows, good at dancing, his eyes always open, always a little suspicious and always alert . . ."

You read until the sun dropped below the branches of the trees and struck your face. You closed the book. In the glare and shadow of the sun, the buildings that surrounded the plaza had lost all detail and become shapes and farther off you could see the smoke plumes of the Retiro train station and the haze leading down to the docks along the brownish Río de la Plata, as opaque as the skin of a lizard despite the setting sun. You looked at your watch. It would soon be five. You got up and nodded goodbye to the boy and he rose to his feet for a moment and you walked off toward Santa Fe. A record shop detained you for a moment. *Noches del Palais de Glace . . . dream . . . ya no estás . . . se me encoge el corazón . . .*

The little tearoom was air-conditioned. You seated yourself on green velvet before a table of gray marble with mahogany legs where a service for two was already laid out, cups, small plates,

sugar bowl, silver spoons and forks. You ordered tea and paté sandwiches and took your Chesterfields from your purse. The waiter came with the flame of his lighter. You breathed in slowly, your eyes closed, without looking around you, without paying attention to the quiet conversations of the no-longer-young ladies who were habituées of the tearoom. You held your cigarette between your fingers and studied the ring of saliva that you always left on a cigarette when you smoked: Javier had told you that it looked very ugly. Fifteen. Your tea was served and you said that you didn't need cream. You unwrapped two lumps of sugar and let them drop into the cup with a noise that was surprisingly loud. You squeezed lemon juice and watched it begin to dissolve the sugar, and you waited before pouring the tea. You waited. After only two or three puffs you put out your cigarette. A string trio was playing something by Lehar,

"Maybe it was the Merry Widow Waltz . . ."

and finally you took the teapot and poured your cup. You sipped the tea slowly. When it was all gone, you took the silver fork and began to plow furrows and construct four-lane highways across the white tablecloth. Straight lines, then circles, then crosses. Again. Still again, imagining that the tablecloth was a snow-covered landscape seen from the air. Then you beat jerky time to the waltz, moving the fork back and forth and destroying the fields and roads you had made. You lit another cigarette and let it hang from your lips while you went on making lines with the fork. Five-twenty. The waiter coughed beside your elbow and you looked up and smiled at him and with your hand concealed the marks you had made on the tablecloth. The waiter asked if you were expecting someone to join you. You didn't answer. You looked away from his angular face, his graying hair somewhat darkened by the brilliantine that pasted it down. His high thin eyebrows, his aquiline nose, his lips pressed firmly together to conceal, no doubt, a black denture.

Without looking at the waiter again, you snuffed out your cigarette. You picked up your white kid gloves and caressed them, smelled them, lifted them to your lips. You began to toy with them. Empty white gloves. You spread them out finger by finger.

You rubbed one against the other. You made them dance together, thumb to thumb. You hung them from the points of your fingers. You squeezed them in your fist to wad them against the open palm of the other hand. Five thirty-five. You laid your gloves on your purse again. The waiter was holding his lighter for you. You moved your Chesterfield into the small flame without looking at him.

"Don't you care for the sandwiches, Señora?"

You looked down at the little damp sandwiches. Rye bread, paté. The waiter suddenly half bowed and said good afternoon and moved to the chair opposite you and pulled it back.

"Yes, it's clear that it's a small world."

Larraín smiled, wrinkling his nose. With a gesture of his right hand he invited himself to sit down as the waiter brushed the chair off with a napkin and held it for him. You blushed.

"No . . . I'm late already. Waiter, my check, please."

They stood before you in confusion while you went on blushing. The minutes would pass while the waiter went for the check and brought it and then went to get your change.

"Sit down, Larraín, and keep the table if you want to."

Larraín sat with his insufferable air of knowing all the secrets of your life, of having surprised you in some act of abandoned vice. He arched an eyebrow, as if expecting an explanation.

"He sat in front of me, Javier, and I refused to let him suspect that I had been there forty minutes waiting for you."

The waiter brought the check. Larraín pursed his lips and lifted an index finger and took his billfold from the inside pocket of his coat. You got up. You said neither goodbye nor thanks. You simply walked out. Santa Fe, filled with tall young women with long legs and flaming cheeks, beautiful young women, the women of Buenos Aires . . .

"And I knew them: servants, maids, clerks in shops and offices, performers . . ."

There was still sunlight. You stopped in front of the record shop again. *Me dejaste en la palmera, me afanaste* . . . You felt the sticky heat.

"You had told me, 'At five, but I'm not sure I will make it.

Maybe I will. In any case, wait for me there. But I'm not sure. I have so many things to do today. If I'm not there by five-fifteen, don't wait any longer.' "

Pickpockets. You. Your mother, your father. You walked along Santa Fe and on to the apartment building on Quintana. The doorman greeted you with his Polish accent. The lobby smelled of gardenias. Javier was not in the apartment. You lay down on the sofa and let your shoes slip off.

"Oh, shit, Javier! Shit, shit, shit!"

You stood and in your stockinged feet went into the bedroom and opened the closet and stood there touching Javier's clothing, the jackets, the trousers, the orderly shirts, smelling the soap that he had placed among his handkerchiefs.

△ Franz braked, at the same time accelerating the engine to shift down. You heard the gears, Isabel, the growl and then the smooth even whir. You were staring at the rearview mirror, trying to see Franz. For a moment he glanced up and saw your green eyes looking at him. Then your head moved out of sight and was replaced by the swift, receding landscape. High Oriental straw roofs topping huts of woven reeds. Copper-colored faces, wide, the flat cheekbones pushed out and the eyes buried and slightly slanted. You moved your head near Javier's and in his ear whispered: "Tell me again. I want to hear it again."

"It isn't original with me," Javier said, whispering also. "It's a classic. To take the body of a woman and to enjoy sex with her is proof enough of possession for a modest man, but another, with a thirst for possession more suspicious and ambitious, understands the doubtful and merely apparent nature of physical union and demands more convincing evidence, insisting that the woman must not only give herself to him but in doing so renounce for his sake everything that she possesses or would like to possess. But still a third type is not even satisfied by that. He asks himself dubiously whether the woman in renouncing everything for his sake has not done it because she has an illusory image of him, is mistaken about

him. He demands that she know him truly, deeply, and completely. So in order to be loved, he discloses himself to her. Only then, when she is not deceived about him, can he feel that she is really his . . .”

△ Yes, Dragoness, that first night in your apartment at the corner of Rin and Nazas you talked like your husband. Like him and about him and to him, despite the fact that I was apparently your listener and had my stiff cat’s head buried in your pleasant fishbowl while Javier, your perfect model of a modern spouse, lay passed out on the sofa in the living room. You spoke of the Greek sea, their wine, their islands, your name, and above all, over and over, of sex . . .

“Ligeia. You gave me that name. My real name is Elizabeth. Ligeia. How silly. You remembered something. ‘A man does not completely surrender to the angels, not even in death, except from the debility of his will.’ You remembered that and you named me Ligeia. How silly, silly. Bette, Beth, Betele, Liz, Elizabeth, Liza. You were very different then. At times you understood exactly what I wanted and at other times . . .”

At other times he made you understand. But those were not your best times. Your best times were when everything was as spontaneous and natural as sleeping or waking. If you saw him exhausted, not from having emptied himself but because he had worked all day yet had accomplished nothing, and his energy, so nervous and volatile, had found no escape, you would undress slowly before him, in the living room or the kitchen or wherever you happened to be and whatever you happened to be doing, smoking, opening a soft drink, preparing a sandwich. If he was angry with himself you would rub his temples and pull him back on your lap, light his cigarette for him between your lips, place the cushions on the floor and wait for him with a certainty that you do not feel today, that you have lost today, and that then, without your knowing it, offended you in a way: the certainty that as you gave yourself to him because he needed you, an outlet for his frustration, as you

gave him yourself because you also needed it, you would meet on the spread cushions naked and panting and would loose the tight reins of the words that neither of you had ever dared to speak, neither he in his writing nor you with your lips, and nothing would have to be overcome, there would be no obstacle, no difficulty. And it was different again and worse when there did not exist even that invitation to give yourself, his frustration and anger and irritation, when without any pretext or any special reason

“ . . . we would grab each other blindly, in the darkness of waking at dawn, and it would be only my body and your body, two bodies that came together and united for no reason except their closeness, the warmth of their skin, the cold of the morning, the fact that we were husband and wife now and lived together. It couldn't go on that way, so pointlessly and mechanically. Who was it, was it you or I, who first asked for something more? To possess, to possess. How we appeased our dissatisfaction during those first years by telling ourselves that each of us possessed the other. That was enough, we tried to insist. Enough, shit. Did either of us count the times we possessed and wasted each other in those days? Without either of us losing himself, only because we happened to be together. Your obscenities in Spanish and mine in English, sometimes exchanging our languages in order to try to say the same thing, just what we didn't know, we had to learn, your kisses finding me and taking apart all my secrets, discovering every inch of my flesh, moving across my forehead and down my back and I felt your breath on my face and then on my thighs and then between my buttocks while your tongue touched every part of me, your spit tried to possess me, your tongue and your fingers and your breath and your hair and your eyelashes . . . ”

How many places. On a wet gray Atlantic beach under the rain. In a hut of old beams and white plaster on the island of Rhodes, beside a wooden table soaked by spilled wine and scarred by heavy knives. On a Spanish steamer, twenty days from Vigo to Veracruz, when Javier decided that the time had come to return to Mexico City, that he needed Mexico again, that if he did not face

and overcome its terrible negations he would always believe that he had taken the easy road and his writing could have no value: on the Spanish steamer beneath a porthole dirty from smoke and encrusted salt, in a narrow bunk. In your apartment in Colonia Cuauhtémoc on a wide bed in a room decorated with posters from the shows you had visited before the war in Paris and Haarlem and Milan, dramatic letters and brilliant, contrasting colors, the names and images that now were lost, Franz Hals, Gustave Moreau, Paul Klee, Ivan Meštrović.

“Every month those old posters became a little more tattered until finally we forgot them and painted the walls and threw the posters out. For we had come home to Mexico City. We had sold the furniture that had been left from the old house on Calzada del Niño Perdido. You had been taken, as usual, practically giving the furniture away, but nevertheless we had a little money again and could go on living and you could devote yourself to writing. You would leave the apartment and roam all over the city looking for God knows what, contrasts, images, words, profiles, masks. For you were writing the poetry of the commonplace, the visible-invisible ordinary and everyday, and you went out to find your words in that world that belonged to you and that I was discovering beside you. The poetry of the commonplace. You know, someday I’d like to read that poetry, I wish someone *would* write it, the poetry of the old movies we remember and the old songs, the things that take up more than half our lives. So many lovely forgotten songs. Remember *The Isle of Capri*? *In a Secluded Rendezvous*? *Flying down to Rio*? *Cheek to Cheek*? What was I saying?”

You were saying that in the Orient all the men wore pith sun helmets and white suits à la Clark Gable in *China Seas* and the background would be a shot of Singapore or Macao and gliding by would be Anna May Wong, Sessue Hayakawa, and Warner Oland, who was also Charlie Chan; even Peter Lorre, who played Mr. Moto. Marlene Dietrich you discovered, of course, in *The Blue Angel*, with Emil Jannings, and you remember it as if it were only yesterday or a moment ago, Marlene sitting astride to sing in a

silver top hat and black stockings. No, Marlene and Garbo never acted in the same picture. Garbo, wrapped in fox, entered the Grand Hotel where John Barrymore was smoking as he paced the floor in his black silk pajamas and Joan Crawford was taking dictation from Wallace Beery, who played a horny industrialist dressed in a jacket with a wing-collar shirt. "He pretended to have a German accent and Lionel sat at an enormous chrome bar and got drunk and the hotel was run by Lewis Stone, who hid half his face because it had been burned by acid, and Lionel was dying of cancer and that was why Crawford, in a dark dress with a large white voile collar, agreed to marry him, it would be for only a few months and then she would inherit his money. She was called Flemschen . . . Flemschen or something like Flemschen, and she was simply divine, the best actress in the movie, the most modern of them all. Even Jean Hersholt played in *Grand Hotel*. Do you remember? Afterward he played the doctor who brought the quintuplets into the world. Dr. Dafoe. You don't remember. I bet you don't. But we used to know them all. Every afternoon after school we would go to the movies. Or we would sit in the soda fountain and ask movie riddles, to see who knew the casts best, the cameramen, the other technicians. Yes, we even knew the names of the cameramen. And today the only ones I remember are Tolland and James Wong Howe, and Tissé, who was Eisenstein's cameraman. But then we knew them all, both of us, Javier. We were like one memory, we went to the movies like one pair of eyes and ears, do you remember? And which of us was the first to ask for something more? Were you thinking then what I was thinking? I heard you come home one night . . ."

You heard the key scratching, Elizabeth, searching for and finding the keyhole. Then silence as he remembered that it had to be upside down, the serrated edge up, and the scratch as he tried again, this time with too much force, for that lock required

"Gentleness, almost tenderness, as if you were threading the eye of a needle or making a cheese soufflé . . ."

He tried a third time, now inserting the key slowly, and the lock

turned and you heard the squeak of the hinges and then the creaking of a board in the floor and all these very habitual sounds irritated you precisely because they were so habitual, pointless, involuntary, yet so significant, his steps across the living room, a pause as he picked up the mail, a tearing of paper as he slit the envelopes with his fingernail, the soft sound as he sat down on the sofa, then again the step you knew so well approaching the bedroom and

“That disgusting politeness, that night for the first time, the first time you had ever used it with me, your fingers tapping the door as if you had to warn me, as if you were afraid you might find me with a lover and wanted to avoid a scene, or as if you were playing a game with the first girl you ever slept with, and above all, and this was your irony, as if you wanted to flatter me with a show of respect I had never asked of you, treating me like your hired housekeeper, and maybe you didn’t mean it that way but that was how I took it and I was as furious because that afternoon a survey-taker came and asked me if I was listening to station XEW and without asking me wrote down on his tablet that my occupation was ‘housekeeper.’ That eternal Mexican ‘may I,’ that damned monotonous and completely false, merely decorative courtesy which is valued because it provides a contrast for your violence and brutality: before you drive the knife into the belly of your wife’s lover you tell him to make himself at ease, your home will always be his home. Then you opened the door and came in and I saw your body and your hair and eyes and hands and for a moment I felt you as I liked to feel you, handsome, warm, generous, ready to do anything to please me. And it was that that disturbed me more than anything, Javier. That absolute and unreserved admiration I felt for you, the gratitude I felt because you loved me and knew how to love me, my gratefulness for what each of us gave the other. And I really was grateful to you. It was thanks to you that I had escaped from New York, the Bronx, from Gershon and Becky and dead Jake. Yet I felt that to feel so grateful was somehow belittling to me, and again and again I had a deep urge to show myself to you differently, in a way that would be just as honest and more dignified but

that you, with your good looks and your constant tenderness, would not let me attempt. And I knew, not that night, no, nor the following day, but many days, maybe even many months, a long time afterward, I knew that I had to let you know me in order to force you to let me know you. Our mere possession of each other, so complete, was blocking me up and shutting me off and denying a possibility that I carried inside myself and that could lead you to love me not the same, differently, but with just as much intensity. I wanted you to be not just gentle and amiable and obliging, but what you really were, what I didn't know about you. If we could be ourselves completely, our love would be the richer for it.

"You rapped on the door most politely and waited and came in and I said, 'Here, this letter came for you.' I had opened it. You took it without a word. You put it in your pocket and went out of the room. You didn't seem angry with me for having opened it. Fifteen minutes later we were eating supper together and both of us were smiling as if nothing had happened."

This you have offered, Father, to your ancient seed.

△ The Volkswagen left the winding stretch of road and moved swiftly beside a field where sandy-colored calves were playing. The descent was toward dry pastures, down a spur of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Beyond the plain, in the distance, the mountains rose in successive walls of mute transparent blue, each fainter than the one before. The calves ran and jumped, rolled and tumbled, jerked their heads from side to side, kicked up their hind legs. Across the field was a grove of round-topped elms where only a few weeks ago the calves had dropped from their mothers.

Franz slowed and Javier spread the map on his knees and hunched over it and announced, "We'll have to ford a river. There's no bridge."

"God," you sighed. "Why didn't we go straight on to Veracruz?"

"Well, it wasn't I who insisted on seeing Xochicalco and Cholulu." Javier folded up the map again.

"There, Franz, ask that man," you said, pointing ahead to a figure walking slowly beside the road.

Franz slowed to a crawl. Isabel put her head into the window and called out, "Which way to the ford?" just as you were saying, "Please, señor, where is . . ." When Isabel interrupted you, you became silent. Franz stopped the car.

The man was old, gray-haired, with bent shoulders. He walked mechanically and as if he were carrying a heavy load on his back. Old and gone. Exhausted by labor and years. And when he turned slowly and faced you, his forehead was wrinkled as if it were still bound by a porter's headband, a strap that he had worn for decades, the burden on his back shifting to the movements of his tired thin body as he came and went from the mountains with firewood. He stopped and stared at you and took off his tattered straw hat, a peasant's hat with a flat low round crown and wide unraveling brims. Once it had been white, now it was bands of black and dull yellow. Franz set the hand brake and leaving the engine running got out and walked toward the old man and both you, Dragoness, and Isabel watched, though Javier did not, and you tried to hear but because of the sound of the idling engine you couldn't. You saw Franz reach the old man and unbutton his hip pocket and take out his wallet as he spoke to the man and the man answered, stretching an arm and pointing to the right. He stood with his hat flat on his chest and his arm across it and with a completely expressionless face he looked at Franz and at the car. It was a face with a thick mustache around a large mouth, the lips invisible. He was very small, not so high as Franz's shoulders, and he was dressed in rags and patches: a shirt that originally had been white and had no buttons, so that he must have put it on by pulling it down over his head, loose in front over the belly, a somewhat military-looking collar, wide sleeves that reached halfway down his arm. White tight pants, also without buttons, that extended to the mid-calf and were secured around the waist by the two bands that were part of the waist, not by a belt. Long ago the first tears and holes had been repaired with patches of white cotton cut from some older,

worn-out garment, and then the patches had grown tired and had come apart and had had to be patched themselves, so that now he seemed to be dressed in a web of threads, a vague integument of joined rags that all together were simply one large rag. And his worn sandals seemed integral with his callused, gnarled, dusty old feet, not separate objects. Franz took out a peso bill and spoke and the old man laughed and covered his mouth with a brown hand and with the same hand wiped his nose and Franz held the bill to him and the old man laughed again while looking at Franz with half-closed eyes and an expression that now was a little malicious, ferocious. He took the bill and turned his back and walked on, slow, old, mechanical. Franz returned to the car.

"The road to the ford is just ahead on the left."

"But he pointed to the right," you said, Dragoness.

"Yes," said Franz. "He wanted to deceive us."

The Volkswagen passed the old man and he removed his hat but did not stop his slow trot. Ah, Macehual.

A paved road appeared.

"There, you see?" you said. "It is to the right."

△ "Oberon," you said, nestling against Franz's shoulder. He nodded.

One day in May the concierge brought them a card from Herr von Schnepelbrücke. It was an invitation to have dinner with him in a small neighborhood restaurant. Their June examinations were near and neither of them could afford to take an evening off from studies, so Franz went to Herr Urs's door and tapped. The dwarf answered but did not open the door. Franz explained their situation and in his splendid deep voice Herr von Schnepelbrücke said that he understood and would hope to have the pleasure of inviting them out again once they had successfully passed their exams, as he was sure they would. He did not come into the hall, he spoke from behind the closed door. And that was how it always was: they never saw him, never heard a sound from him. They were curious and would have liked to question the concierge, but being two

months behind in their rent, they found it best to stay away from that sharp-voiced woman, who, when she was not boasting about the excellence of the house and the good breeding of its tenants, was shrilly and zealously trying to collect for its anonymous owners. They had had their troubles with the concierge and they avoided her as much as possible. Even to stop to say good afternoon was to risk indignity, a humiliating tirade.

Once they passed their examinations, however, they would have their revenge. They planned a celebration and had invited a number of their classmates. They owned the only refrigerator in the student community and would stock it with wine and beer. Their guests would all bring additional bottles. A costume party. A real blast.

"The day we were examined we almost danced all the way home. We had both passed. We cracked jokes, sang songs. But in front of the house we found the concierge standing with her apron raised to her face, biting her nails. She called to us to run, quick, quick. We imagined some disaster. A short circuit in the refrigerator. The ice had melted and run over the room. Or a fire had started."

As they hurried up the stairs, the concierge explained. Something was wrong with Herr von Schnepelbrücke. He had not been seen since day before yesterday. She was sure that he had not come out of his room, neither to go to his meals nor to pick up dolls to repair. And his door was locked. Something had happened! Franz took the knob and turned it. The door was locked, all right. Ulrich put his mouth near the door and shouted. "Herr von Schnepelbrücke! Open the door, sir!" "I tell you I've already tried the master key," said the concierge. "It's barred inside." At once they ran against the door with their shoulders while the concierge wailed and crossed herself and said she would report them to the landlord if the door was damaged. The rickety bar finally gave. The door opened. They ran inside, one looking for the light switch while the other opened the drawn curtains.

They found themselves in the midst of an amazing confusion. Broken dolls hung from wires attached to the ceiling, a whole ar-

ray of little figures that as Franz and Ulrich bumped into them knocked against each other, emitting small cries and complaints. Twenty dolls hanging with wires twisted around their small necks. Blond wigs and black wigs. Tulle skirts. Patent-leather slippers. Staring porcelain eyes. They were not surprised, at first, for they knew Herr Urs's occupation. Then they looked closer and were astonished. The dolls had a shocking peculiarity. All that were female had some male garment or characteristic; all that were male had something female. A hussar wore a lace bodice beneath his gold-buttoned fur jacket. A girl in crinoline showed off military boots and carried a whip in her hand. A train conductor with a striped cap was dressed in cambric panties. A little Chinese girl with black braid and silver hairpins possessed a small male phallus carefully glued between her legs, the plaster still damp and unpainted.

"Stop, Franz," you said quietly, Elizabeth. He was exceeding his role, surprising you with something that perhaps was not subtle but that you had not expected. Now, however, you could guess what would follow. Good nose, Dragoness.

"Then, while the concierge covered her face with her apron and began to pray, we looked at the walls and found the same kind of incongruence. On the one hand, there were canvases of the most ordinary and traditional scenes. A ship entering harbor. A party lunching on the bank of a river. The rooftops of Munich. Flowers in Chinese vases. That sort of thing. And on the other hand, paintings that were deformed and insane or obscene. Vague shapes with gaping mouths and terrified eyes. Hands with long curling fingernails. Heaps of excrement. Animals copulating. Dead, rotting snakes and elephants swarmed over with flies. Severed smiling heads of bulls and boars. A tiny man carried high in the air by the claw of a gigantic invisible bird."

"I know, Franz. I know. You don't have to go on. I can see it."

They stared around the room and entirely forgot why they had entered. Then gradually, little by little, they both became aware of

the dominating object in the room, an enormous old-fashioned four-poster bed, its mahogany posts carved with climbing vines and topped by urns. "A wide bed, Lisbeth, a vast desert of a bed, the kind they don't make any more. Huge pillows. The covers in confusion. Beneath the bedspread, extending up under one of the lace pillows, a tiny shape. We lifted the pillow and saw his head. His enormous head."

"I know it already, Franz. Caligari and the Sleepwalker, lost in a white labyrinth. You don't have to go on."

He lay there as if sleeping. Like a child having a nightmare. Sleeping with his eyes and mouth open, his black hair down over his forehead, his hands joined under one cheek. Small and made even smaller because his short legs were drawn up and bent. Yellow and old like a centuries-old papyrus.

Ulrich touched one of the sleeping shoulders and prodded it. He put his hand to the temple of Herr von Schnepelbrücke and felt for a pulse. He announced that Herr von Schnepelbrücke was dead. "Do you know whether he has any relatives?" Franz asked the concierge. With her head and hands she indicated that she did not know. "Where he keeps his money?" Again no. "Someone may owe him something on these dolls or perhaps for one of his paintings," Ulrich suggested, and both of them smiled. The concierge was wailing again. What was she to do? What was she to do? A dwarf dead in one of her best rooms. Suppose the other tenants were to learn? Everyone would move out. The house would be emptied overnight.

"Ulrich and I looked at each other. We had lived together for a year and a half. We knew each other completely, we had become like one mind, and now the same thought came to both of us. Want a cigarette, Lisbeth?"

"Yes, thanks. No, Franz, you were different. He was Ulrich and you were Franz. You've never been anyone but yourself." Franz lit your cigarette and handed it to you. In the mirror across the room you saw your naked bodies on the bed, the cigarette in your mouth, the smoke rising.

"We told the concierge not to worry, that we would take care of everything. She must stand in the corridor and make sure no one saw us. We wrapped Herr Urs in his bedspread and Ulrich took him in his arms. We went out quickly, quickly into our room. The concierge wanted to follow but I put my finger to my lips and warned her: not a word or the other tenants would find out and take their departure. Nothing had happened. Nothing at all. Clean up his room and throw out his things and forget him."

You moved your head from his shoulder and studied your reflections in the mirror.

"That's enough, Franz. Look at us in the mirror. What do we look like?"

"I don't know, Lisbeth. Like Lisbeth and Franz. What?"

"We look like a memory or a premonition."

"You're being as complicated as your husband."

"Are you through?"

"No. I'll tell you about the party."

"Let's smoke first. What did you say to that old Indian this morning?"

"Nothing, Lisbeth. Nothing at all."

"You know, I can take almost anything so long as there are compensations. Not just part, either, but everything. But there has to be a compensation. I really love these people. And maybe to love them earns a kind of forgiveness."

"Maybe, if I understand you."

"Don't look at me as if I were an ingénue. It's true. In the end I have no other way."

"It's a woman's way."

"It's mine. Smoke your cigarette, Franz, and then put your head on my breast and fall asleep. Sleep until the room is as warm as we are."

△ Elena rapped on the cabin door and came in, saying in her broken Italian that it was a beautiful day out, and put the fresh figs

on the table and winked an eye. Javier got up from bed. Elena laughed and said wheeee! showing the stumps of her teeth; she crossed herself and covered her face with widespread fingers and said that it would be a better world if the signor could walk on the beach exactly like that, and you, Dragoness, were lucky, oh, quant'è lungo, oh, quant'è bello il signor, sei fortunata, signorina, sei fortunatissima. You got up too and put on your bathrobe while Elena waxed as eloquent about your beauty as she had about Javier's, and the three of you walked out Indian-file, Elena and her bucket of figs first, her face dark and wrinkled as the kernel of a nut with eyes and a brilliant smile, wrapped in a black shawl, the torn white shawl beneath framing her brown face. Elena with her stride that was at once both light and tired. Elena with her black stockings and her canvas shoes which she placed on the sand with supreme elegance as she told you what she told you every morning, the story of her eight children. She has eight children and five of them die (she never used the past tense in speaking of them) and her husband is sick with rheumatism and the oldest son works in Athens but she knows nothing about his job, nothing except that he has a girl there and never sends money home, while the other son is a waiter in a café in Rhodes and the last child is a little girl. And every day someone leaves the island, emigrates to a better country, for here wealth is to have olive trees and not many do have them. She raises her arm and gestures toward the restaurant near the beach. The couple who own that restaurant used to be as poor and skinny as she herself. Today they are fat pigs. She aims her finger at them and shows her rotten teeth as she shouts "Brava, brava!" She laughs and shouts at them that now that they weigh two hundred kilos each they have forgotten that once they didn't own a pot to piss in. The fat owners of the restaurant grunt and turn and run inside. Elena shouts "Brava, Brava!" and shows you and Javier her hands: twice a week she must scrub clothes; she shows you the copper bracelet that is her amulet and serves to protect her skin and nerves from the effects of hard labor. The owners of the café reappear with a *carabiniere*. They shout in Greek, he in

Italian: they have told her again and again to stay away from the beach in front of their restaurant, that she may not sell her figs there, how many times must they repeat it? Elena plants her bucket of figs on the sand before her, she looks at Javier, she looks at you. Loudly she hums a song that makes the proprietor of the restaurant furious. The *carabiniere* moves toward her and she begins to sing. You look at Javier and he is motionless, merely observing. You step in front of Elena.

"If you people bother her, we won't eat in your restaurant. Never again."

The fat couple stare at you and then at each other. They put their heads together. They shrug their shoulders finally and invite the *carabiniere* to step inside for a glass of Lindos wine. Elena laughs and laughs and offers you a fig and you feel yourself the mistress of Falaraki.

"Soy la dueña!" you say to Javier. "I'm the mistress, the lady of the manor!"

"Mitzvah," Javier laughs. "A good deed every day. Oh, the spirit of the Boy Scout."

"Soy la dueña!" you repeat.

To become baroque for a little, Dragoness. Falaraki is a beach rimmed with the pebbles that follow the line of the coast. While Javier sits at the table in the cabin and writes, you walk the beach gathering pebbles. You have nothing to do except love your husband and wade along the beach, sometimes diving, stretching your fingers for those small polished stones. When still wet they are brilliant, like mirrors, you can even see your face in them. For hours you sit on the beach sorting out your pebbles and giving them names. You call them the hemispheres of the hours of the sea. You say that the pebbles of the coast of Rhodes are like the island's sternest sons and you think that some secret depth of the sea gave them their watery colors long ago so that those colors would never be lost. Some are red, some ocher, some white, green, yellow, black, but not these colors as they are seen on land; no, different, new, like the polished shield-shaped stone you hold now: all grays unite

in it, the veins are of transparent white, the nerves of silver, the arteries of duller tin. Some of the stones are like sculpted eggs, some are tablets of mustard, some are half-moons, and all have been polished and smoothed by the friction of water and sand. They are valueless, but the treasures of the island's poor. Children adorn their sand castles with them. Fishermen's wives string them into necklaces. But away from the water, the pebbles lose their brilliance and become opaque and in the end forget their origin. So say the women of Rhodes, and they are right.

You never know which pebble to choose. There are so many and when they lie on the soft sand where the beach enters the sea they are all beautiful. They are of the sea and of the land also, and when brought ashore they become like the land. But within the sea they reproduce all its lights and shadows, all its colors. They are the gentle teeth of the sea fastened in the land to allow the sea to hold itself to the land, and without them the sea would be different, a different world, faith, dream, the promise of a different millennium. You sit on the beach entire hours fingering your pebbles, staring at them. You have found every color except blue.

You sort your pebbles out. You know that each of them will change color as the sun moves. Noon's yellow becomes orange as the afternoon lengthens, is red at twilight, beneath the moon is violet, a fusion of red and blue. But not beyond that: a clear and unmixed blue never appears. It is there, that blue, buried within the tight concentric circles of the little pebble, you believe. And every day the pebble must withstand the attack of the sun, which would like to force the blue out into sight. The pebble allows itself to be overcome and transformed, from yellow through orange to violet, then to white at dawn and at noon back to yellow again. But only darkness is permitted to see the secret blue.

So much for your pebble hunting, Elizabeth. You were young and idle in those days and it was indeed an innocent enough pastime, harmless, in a vague way poetic. Now I must quote you a classic: *What you say to me is not true but nevertheless, simply because you say it, it reveals your being.*

Okay, Dragoness?

Okay.

△ You had changed clothes, Isabel, and now were wearing tight black stretch pants and an open-throated white blouse. Your breasts danced as you whirled on your toes, frowning with dissatisfaction and concentration, biting the nail of your little finger, with your long hair loose and your feet bare. A João Gilberto recording.

"No, damn it, that's not how it goes."

You moved your right leg forward and whirled again. You placed your arms in the pose of a Hindu goddess and bit your fingernail.

"Watch me now. Tell me if I get it right this time."

"But, Isabel . . ."

"I know you can't dance, Proffy. But you can give an opinion, can't you? Sing out, darling. Look, the trick of the bossa nova is to hold the rhythm of the samba against the cross rhythm of the jazz. Like this, see?"

You whirled again, laughing. You walked toward Javier, who was lying on the bed smoking and watching you. You smiled and half narrowed your eyes.

. . . *não pode ser, não pode ser* . . .

You fell on Javier's chest and kissed his forehead.

"Proffy, I love you."

Then you hopped up again and ran to your open bottle of Coke and belted it down. Javier placed his notebook on his knees and chewed the eraser of his pencil. You went near him again and caressed—yes, Pussycat, *caressed*—his thinning hair.

"Like the way I've fixed up my room?"

"Of course I like it. It's amazing. You should see ours."

"What do you mean, 'ours'?"

"Mine and Elizabeth's, across the corridor. There were even two snails on the wall."

"Where is she now?"

"She's taking a nap. It looks as if you've been here for days."

"That's the record player, Proffy. Have phonograph, can travel. And Coke for those who think young. What are you writing?"

"Oh, just some thoughts I want to remember."

"Like maybe the day we met?"

"It does seem a long time ago."

"Four months, Proffy, darling. You had just flunked me in Classical Literature. I told you I didn't care, because now I could take it over and have you for my proffy again."

"And I asked you out to dinner. Immediately."

"From sheer narcissism, sweetheart. I built you up."

"You did that, all right, just by being with me. Maybe that's why I teach, to keep in touch with kids who are kind enough to build me up sometimes."

"Don't lie, Proffy. I had you hanging on the ropes."

"Well," Javier smiled, "you were quite a discovery. And it continued in the taxi and in the restaurant you picked out. The discovery of the two halves of your face, one half angel, the other demon. Your face framed by your straight dark hair."

"Keep going, darling. You're doing great."

"Your green eyes. The eyes of a child, without malice, when your mouth is in repose. Brilliant and cold eyes when your mouth laughs so innocently and you talk about the simplicities of your life as a well-reared young lady."

"Well-reared? Hah! A discovery?" You got up and turned the record. Once more you began to dance, smiling. "You know, someone told me once that he liked me so much he was afraid to come near me. Really! And for a whole year, until you flunked me and I spoke to you, I was just another of your students. I wasn't even a rabbit to trap. And at home no one ever made any fuss about my looks. God, no! Now, darling, watch this step. Then you told me I was beautiful and you turned me on. You're still a lively old Proffy."

"Still lively? Thanks."

"You're very welcome, darling. My man of distinction whose hair has begun to gray, though you know, you *are* getting to be a bit bald. I like your complexion, too. That paleness."

"So you attend the university only to observe the good looks of fortyish professors."

"No, darling, I go to splash in culture. That's you too." You balanced on your toes and laughed. "Really, when you talk, my wheels begin to go around. I get ideas. Imagine! And it's relaxing, too. As if I were floating. What it comes down to is that I like you. Just that."

"And I you, Isabel. From the first day of class last year."

"At home everything was 'Chabela, don't do this, Chabela, don't do that. Don't wear your hair loose, you look like an existentialist or a straw broom. Chabela, don't pick your nose, you'll make your nostrils even bigger than they are already.' You can imagine what I felt. Am I boring you?"

Javier shook his head.

"I like to get rid of my complexes talking about them."

"But above all . . ."

"Above all, my dear parents. Did you know my father has made a mountain of money higher than the Matterhorn, which is where he keeps it, by the way."

"How?"

"Gas stations. You do it like this. They give you a concession and you rake in thousands and let a little trickle back to Pemex. And the next thing we knew we had our house in the Lomas de Chapultepec. And God, talk about houses! You remember that plantation house in the movie we saw together?"

"Gone with the Wind?"

"Yes. There you have it. Doric-Ionic or Ionic-Doric columns or whatever they are. Green slate roof. French windows with louvers, darling. Everything! And inside! God only knows where they found that furniture. Authentic Chippendale, Mother says. What a blast! She's off two centuries and one continent. Don't you believe me?"

"I always believe you."

"Some of the chairs have leather backs with copper tacks. Some have blue embroidering and skinny legs, and some have lilac brocade and enormous fat legs. And don't even mention my bedroom."

"I'd never dare to."

"Silly. When I turned fifteen and became a young lady, they bought everything new for me. A bed with a canopy, you know, and some prints that Mother said were French. Rosy-cheeked girls carrying parasols. A dressing table that would make you upchuck, darling, all cambric and tulle. Everything for a very well-bred young lady."

The record stopped and you stood with your legs apart and your arms akimbo and tossed your head to throw your hair back.

"Don't you want a Coke?"

"No, Isabel. You know that I can't drink soda."

"Ay, tú. You and your precious stomach." You opened another bottle and drank it quickly. "Then the old man pulled another little deal. Remember the last devaluation?"

"Yes, I do, but you don't. You were still a baby then."

"Well, I found out about it later. Father knew ahead of time and bought dollars like a lunatic."

"I suppose he cries when they play the national anthem."

"Oh, at least. It was on a Friday. Saturday the news broke and dear Papa had made I don't know how many millions without turning a finger. What do you think of that?"

"A man of great ability, Isabel. He's got it. He's . . ."

"I've never heard of anyone who's made so much doing so little. He's a genius. And he believes it, too. He talks the livelong day about work and struggle and hardship and how we manage to skimp by, only thanks to his sweat. Shall I go on?"

"If I may go on listening."

"Listen, then. Then there's Mother. She's an antique herself. From the time I started kindergarten, I had to study with the nuns. Everything always just so. Confession and communion every first Friday. Don't step outside the house during Holy Week. And what ideas. 'Chabela, don't dance. Don't go to the movies. Watch out for boys. Don't wear makeup. Chabela, be careful, you are a lily the devil would like to pluck.' Ay, that old debbil devil! He plays the clarinet at dances. He waits to pick you up outside movie houses. He drives by in a convertible whistling at you. And

Mother, always the contritest of the contrite, with all her hopes in me."

"I can believe that."

"Yes. I had to be a saint who would out-virgin the Virgin of Fatima. And I had to cry by the bucketful, so that my tears could wash away poor Mother's sins. But what sins, darling? I would puzzle and puzzle and still couldn't think of a single one. But there was one. Oh, yes!"

"A terrible sin," Javier smiled.

"Can you guess? One day I went to steal a cigarette from Father's night table and there they were. Their condoms. That was her great sin. Violins, please. She couldn't accept the stream of brats the good Lord might want to send through her, so they used rubbers and that was why she felt somewhat less holy than the Magdalene and never went to confession even though she attended Mass every morning. I laughed and laughed and after that I was never able to take them seriously again. I asked her, you know. She broke into tears. How could an innocent girl like Chabela know about such things? So, I graduated from the nuns' school and entered the university, and the end of the story is that now they just give me my allowance and leave me alone. Now and then they come to the end of the rope and they jump me and ask how I can ever hope to become engaged to a decent young man with a good future when I spend all my time hanging around those university good-for-nothings, who are all Reds and troublemakers. So, Proffy! Sweet and lovely, tra-la-la-la, the girl with the Ipana smile. Now stop writing. That's enough."

"But I haven't even started yet."

"Don't start yet. You have plenty of time. All the time in the world."

"Isabel, Isabel."

Javier kissed the hands that went around his neck.

△ The girl appeared when autumn came. Your apartment had a small balcony, hardly large enough for the awning-shaded coaster.

During the heat of summer you both stayed inside, for the apartment was air-conditioned. Now, however, as cooler weather came on, you began to use the balcony. Several linden trees grew as high as the story above you and during the summer their thick-leaved branches hung over the balcony. Now the leaves gradually disappeared, first turning golden, then floating down in the silent breeze. You and Javier would sit swinging gently in the coaster watching the leaves fall, he in his old turtle-neck sweater, you hugging yourself with your arms, and every day the sunlight was weaker and cooler. Sometimes Javier would precede you outside. He would put a mixture of blues and fox-trot records on the phonograph and go out to rock in the coaster and you would throw a sweater over your shoulders and follow him and sit beside him. You would talk a little, with long intervals of silence. He told you about happenings at the embassy, about invitations to dinners and cocktail parties. You made plans to go to Bariloche, in the south, or across the river to Carrasco, if Javier could get ten days off in June or November. And you would watch summer's curtain of leaves drift down and reveal the pastel-colored building across the street, a building neither of you had noticed before.

Javier discovered the girl first. You never knew just what he saw then, though you imagined that her behavior had been no different than it was later. You always saw her cut in half by the window, invisible below the torso, and sometimes, when the wind blew the curtain across the window, she was concealed entirely. In no way was she different from the girls who walked along Santa Fe or Florida in the afternoon. If it had been that important, you could have waited and seen her enter or leave the building dressed for the street. But you never did. You saw her only in the window with her arms raised as she tied her hair up with a ribbon, arms that were as bare and brown as her face. From the front sometimes, her armpit curly and her pectoral muscles standing out. Sometimes in profile, her bust small but erect. Sometimes from behind, the muscles of her back tense as she held her arms high to tie her hair, place her combs. You saw her in snapshot glimpses, snapshots of a turning

statue. She would rub cream on her face, pluck her eyebrows, apply eye shadow and lipstick. Always alone: no one else ever entered that bedroom, although in the adjacent windows could be seen servants with feather dusters, students with open books, men grabbing a meal between their regular and their moonlight jobs. There surrounded by those conventional sights, a turning statue making herself up or combing her hair, every afternoon exactly at three. Sometimes she would put her head out the window and look down at the street. Sometimes her lips would move as if she were singing. Little by little, day by day, her skin lost the deep tan she had acquired at Punta del Este or Mar del Plata. She never smoked. Apparently she slept all day and got up at three. One day she drew back her blue curtain and had a glass in her hand. Immediately she disappeared. A little later she was seated as usual at her dressing table.

"I remember her partly because I discovered, when I tried to see her face clearly, that my eyes were bad."

Really, Dragoness? Oh, come on, now!

You had to wrinkle your eyes in order to make out her thick eyebrows, her small precise mouth with its small full lips bright with lipstick, her almond eyes, her tipped-up nose, her slightly forward chin. So one day you went to an oculist and learned that your left eye was off one diopter and a half. You thought that Javier would laugh when he came home to lunch and saw you wearing your tortoiseshell glasses. He didn't laugh. He was shocked. He requested you, with an ill-humor that was not well concealed, not to wear the glasses on the street.

"And when I go to a movie?"

"No. Not there either."

"And to see the girl in the window across the street better?"

He looked at you as if you had violated one of his most intimate secrets, Dragoness, and you went on sharply: Did he think that he had been the only one aware of her all these weeks? Did he believe that she was his private property? What were you supposed to look at, the bare branches of the trees, passing buses, maybe the Polish

doorman? So that to see the unknown girl might be his privilege and not yours? And you understood: he would like to say to her all the words he had never dared to write and that he had spoken to you only silently. The secret, untouchable girl across the street. His in something more than just his imagination. Ship ahoy! His in the reverse of desire, his famous desire-without-desire. You laughed and put on your yellow sweater and went out on the balcony and Javier, who had not said a word, followed you. You proposed that you play games about the girl. That you try to guess her name, her education, whether she had ever been married, her hopes. She was a heroine, let her have the name of a heroine: Ulalume, Berenice, or perhaps even Ligeia? Aurelia, Myrto, Paquita of the golden eyes? Or, trying another tradition, Becky, perhaps, or Jane or Tess? And she had to have her hero: shadowy Heathcliff? Ridiculous Colonel Crawley? Frivulus de Marsay? How about Javier for the name of her hero? Or . . . Superman! Yes, let Superman fly to her window and discover whether she was a prostitute or a mezzo-soprano at the Maipo theater, a student of chemistry, a governess, a teacher of Yiddish. Yes, Yiddish: she was Rebecca or Sarah or Miriam, a Jewess despite her tipped-up nose, a beautiful dark Jewess, for with your new glasses you could see the drops of blue sweat on her temples, in her armpits, at the division of her breasts. A brunette Jewess, that he might have a contrasting pair: yourself the blond Saxon Jewess, Miriam the dark Eastern one, a woman of slow speech, of black prolonged orgasms, a woman who was married, who was having an affair, a virgin girl, a spinster, a widow.

"She's America just discovered, Javier. Bullshit. Why don't you go closer to her? There are only the sidewalk and the street between you. A bell, an elevator, and land ho! Go and get her and bring her back. Or don't bring her back. Just tell me about her. Tell me how you make love to a woman today."

Without a word Javier got up from the coaster and went inside. He turned his back on Miriam, and Miriam, as if an invisible signal had reached her, drew the blue curtain to dress or undress, to receive her lover, to take a nap. Neither of you went out on the

balcony again. Spring came, the end of the season, the closing of the Teatro Colón, your fur coat put away with mothballs, your print dresses to be cleaned, Perón in power, Eva on the balconies of the Plaza de Mayo, slogans chanted at mass meetings, and the lindens turned green again, the foliage began to thicken, hiding your view of the building across the street.

But the leaves were not too thick to prevent you from discovering, one afternoon when you happened to look out across the balcony, that the blue curtain had disappeared. There was only a bare window, an empty room now. Empty rooms seem larger, lighter. The shadows of the furniture, the pictures on the wall, the clothing thrown over the back of a chair, had all vanished, as if by witchcraft.

△ Speaking of witchcraft, Dragoness, you won't believe this but it is right here in the newspaper. Mistress Jane, daughter of the wealthy burgess Robert Throckmorton, a resident of Warboys, at the age of ten is the victim of strange and violent attacks. She sneezes for half an hour and then faints with her eyes still open. Afterward her belly swells up and she cannot be persuaded to lie down. Her legs quiver, sometimes one, sometimes the other. An elderly woman of the neighborhood, Mrs. Alice Samuel, seventy, comes to visit the family and is taken into the bedroom to see the sick child. Jane cries out: "Look at the witch sitting there! Have you ever seen anyone who looked more like a witch?" Mrs. Throckmorton, a sensible woman, pays no attention, and the doctors go on treating her daughter. But two months later Jane's four sisters—the youngest is nine, the eldest fifteen—show the same symptoms, and soon afterward seven of the Throckmorton servant girls begin to sneeze, cry, faint, shake their arms and legs, and so on. One of the physicians attending admits that they are dealing with a clear case of witchcraft and the parents bring their children face to face with their elderly neighbor, Nanny Samuel. The children burst out weeping, throw themselves on the floor in strange torments, and extend their arms beseechingly to the old woman. For a time the attacks occur only when Nanny Samuel is near.

Then they begin to happen at all hours and the children insist that they feel better when Mrs. Samuel is with them. The Throckmortons thereupon take the old woman into their household, forcing her to sleep in the same room with their daughters, and the girls disturb her mightily by asking her if she cannot see the shapes that run and jump and play around them. In September of 1590 Lady Cromwell, the most distinguished lady in the county, visits the Throckmortons and when she sees Nanny Samuel declares her to be an obvious witch, knocks off her bonnet with a single blow, and orders that a lock of her hair be burned. The old woman weeps, but it is known that later Lady Cromwell begins to suffer nightmares, her health fails, and finally she dies in July of 1592. The Throckmorton daughters continue to suffer their strange attacks until Christmas of that year, when Nanny Samuel pleads with them to start behaving themselves. The attacks cease. Now Mr. and Mrs. Throckmorton have no doubts and Alice Samuel herself ceases to believe in her innocence and asks them to forgive her. At last, Pastor Dorrington persuades the old woman to confess. On the following day, however, after resting overnight, Mrs. Samuel retracts her confession. She is taken by the sheriff and put to judgment, the Throckmorton girls appearing as her accusers, once again possessed by their attacks. They insinuate that Mrs. Samuel caused the death of Lady Cromwell. Exalted by their great adventure, laughing nervously and looking at each other with malicious glee, the girls do not rest until Nanny Samuel confesses again and accepts everything with which she is charged, including carnal knowledge of the devil. When it is suggested, however, that she can escape being hanged if she will admit that she is pregnant by Satan, the old woman puts the noose around her neck herself and cries out: "I may be a witch, but I was never a whore!" And thus exits Mrs. Alice Samuel.

"I know these charms," said Medea.

"Are you through?"

△ "No, not yet. We closed the door. Ulrich opened the refrigerator and I nodded. We picked up the body of Herr Urs. We

removed the red bedspread in which we had wrapped him and stood him up. He was wearing a very long nightgown and in life would have tripped over its tails. We straightened, with difficulty, his legs and moved his arms from their sleeping posture and tied them at his hips. His head refused to go straight and remained leaning on one shoulder, but we closed his eyes and pulled his jaw up and tied it with a handkerchief around his head. I quickly took out the cheese, the beer, and the lettuce. And Herr von Schnepelbrücke entered the refrigerator, slightly bowlegged but on the whole erect and dignified enough. We closed the refrigerator and sighed. Give me a cigarette, Lisbeth."

"It's good, Franz," you said as you lit two cigarettes and passed him one of them. "It's very good. I didn't expect it. But do you know what it makes me miss? *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. *The Monk*. *The Castle of Otranto*. *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Mrs. Radcliffe. Monk Lewis. Walpole. Maturin. Do you know what I enjoy most? Jean Epstein. Robert Weine. Henrik Gaalen. Paul Leni. Murnau. Fritz Lang. Conrad Veidt. When I was a little girl I used to dream about Conrad Veidt. Dreams in which all his faces appeared superimposed on each other, but each completely present and visible. Have you finished yet?"

You pass, Dragoness. Whoever made up that line that the heroine is the princess and not the witch? Pitee ye poore Monsters, Dragoness! Your classic of 91 Revere Street advises this and I assure you it's not mistaken. Have pity on Herr Voivode Dracula, even when he dons his alias of Nosferatu, for he lacks what we mortals have but don't need. Or what we believe, fools that we are, that we don't need. Imagine the vista that opens if alongside the so ordinary necessities to wake to the alarm clock, shave with brushless cream, breakfast on stereophonic cereal, and take the tram at eight to the office, there exist the parallel necessities to drink the blood of English young ladies, surround oneself with vampires in a pad in the Carpathians, voyage in a ship without a crew, take one's daily nap in an iron coffin filled with Transylvanian earth. To say nothing of the fact that mirrors refuse to reflect you. And consider

that to the alarm clock they give social security and paid vacations and a pension plan and a senior citizens' community with nurse service and bingo, and that all this provokes endless debate in parliament, endless echoes in the press and in citizens' campaigns, but for poor Dracula there exists no humanitarian legislation by which he can enjoy a tranquil eternity with regular fixes of hemoglobin. Do we hear someone object that Voivode performs no function useful to society? Bah, successful disguise is itself an uncommonly useful function socially. Don't we all put on our disguises when we need them, when we don't care to be recognized by the shopkeeper or greeted by the landlord or dressed down by the boss? And if you would follow a truly revolutionary road, Dragoness, you would don the disguise of Major Barbara and with your blue coif and your beggar's bowl circulate, demanding suffrage for the witches of *Macbeth*, so that when the hurly-burly's done they might count on their old folks' home and when finally, as tired as we, preceding us and acting as our heralds, they renounce immortality, they might find rest in some more dignified spectral Forest Lawn. And that's the point: our witches and monsters refuse the last curtain and thereby expose themselves, while we go on tied to this mortal coil; they opt to be immortal, which is a much harder apple to peel than the anguish of dead-ended living. They make their way to that other land that is beyond both mortality and immortality, that is a parallel of mortality of which we do not even receive distant sniffs despite the fact that Purdy, wreathed with acanthus, has informed us that "Silhouettes tell everything." And who indeed has the right to snap the endless thread of a Medusa, a creature who represents a way of remaining fixed and stable rather than rattling from here to there with a too sentimental, worn-out, and rather useless nervous system? Consider Perseus, for bad example. That paragon of clean homey Olympic youth frustrated us forever with his damn dutiful hypocrisy, robbed us of the one monster worth careful contemplation, took him to the boat and thus shipped a good and useful potential for thought clean out of the repertory of the natural and possible. But if someone needs to be eliminated, then let fried sau-

sage be made of that Al Capone of antiquity, bloody Hercules, whose murders twisted nature awry and removed from her and from us the invulnerable lion, the seminal hydra, the mad bull and the charmed oxen, beings which represented alternative possibilities for nature, who today observes us coldly if not suspiciously, doubtless wondering whether we may not once again give the name of hero to any mere advocate of straightforwardness who may insist that we make her complexity conform to our own anthropomorphic simplicity. No, let us have variety, for God's sake. Noah committed a great goof when he left to drown the couples of the unicorn, the salamander, and the phoenix. And who the hell told Orestes that he ought to subjugate the Furies and chase them underground where their sacred blood could no longer drain rivers dry and burn harvests? They also were obeying nature. Sanctimonious Orestes, a Boy Scout in Greek sandals, merely opened to them the opportunities of the negated: the chance to reappear sea-changed, their visages simulating neatness and order but their blood still envenomed, still sowing confusion. And there you have it: when the ancient heroes slaughtered nature's darker powers and forced them to return to the human scene disguised, they gave birth to literature, to the epic, the lyric, to tragedy, psychology, and all those moral dramas that hang upon struggle, a surprise, a divorce, a masturbation, upon the ambiguity between the limited Hero and the depthless Furies who remain as they have always been the children of proliferating and all-including nature. What I am most annoyed by is those Sherlocks of history who rush around with their lenses and their analyses, pursuing the guilty. There are no guilty. Leave Professor Moriarty in peace, and be grateful that he helped to create a little confusion among nations and to kick flags and loyalty to king and country in the ass. He had his revenge upon Sherlock when Holmes took that Victorian square Watson to cohabituate with him; what was elementary about the good Galenist was not limited to his noodle, and Holmes's continual complaint would be a fit study by Wilhelm Reich. But one good turn deserves another, so today the English themselves have given us the sex-sleuth, James

Bond. The cape and dagger become pretexts for ejaculation. Sure, something big is coming up, and it is not the robbery of Fort Knox but the fleshy horn of Agent 007. Orrida maestà nel fiero aspetto! Or, to quote your classic Baudelaire that Javier was wrestling with before you left Mexico City (*Flowers of Evil* is a fine little book to read before a vacation, Dragoness), "Jusqu'à cette froideur par où tu m'es plus belle!" Or did you know already that everything that maims morality enhances poetry? And whether you hail from heaven or hell, what the hell difference does it make: Oh, Beauty, enormous monster, horrendous, naïve . . .

I think I'm going to put the Sunday paper aside for a while, Dragoness. That editorial was too boring.

△ "Yes, if you want me to, I'll tell you how I pass my days."

"Fine. Let's start with getting up. Do you find it hard, Dragoness?"

"Hard to wake up, *caifán*. Not hard to get up. The moment I sense myself awake, before I open my eyes, I feel around with my feet for a cool spot, a spot that hasn't been slept on, you know, and when I find one, there's a terrific temptation to go back to sleep."

"But you put down the temptation."

"Usually, yes."

"Because Javier has to go to the office."

"That's right. And I have to get up before he does."

"Why? To cook his breakfast?"

"Of course not. You won't believe me."

"I believe everything you tell me, Elizabeth, even when you don't believe it."

"Some time I'll have to think about that. Well, I get up first to win a little victory over Javier. To prove that I'm very active and energetic, that while he still lies there in bed, I'm already ready for whatever the day may bring."

"The war between the sexes narrowed down to the civil war of wife against husband."

"What else? And while he watches me with eyes that keep fall-

ing shut again, I open the window, oh, very briskly, and do my yoga exercises. And that's another victory. I haven't changed a pound or an inch in twenty years, and he is beginning to develop a pot."

"And so you prove your Yankee mental and moral superiority to a drowsy Mexican male. That's psychological imperialism, Dragon-ess."

"My drowsy Mexican male brings it on himself, like most forms of imperialism. God, how he provokes me. His laziness, his hypochondria, his flabby body."

"What else provokes you? I don't necessarily mean Javier. Don't you like Mexico?"

"I think I may love Mexico, but I'm damn sure I often don't like it. This city is impossible. You have a secret code by which you communicate here. And just when an outsider thinks he has it figured, everything backfires. I mean, he goes into Bar X and buys a drink for the house and they love him and cry with him and call him *cuate, mano*, whatever you want. Then he goes into Bar Y and buys everyone a round and they take out their knives and *ya*, the communication ends with his guts spilling out."

"Well, at least it's spontaneous."

"Spontaneous, shit. It's merely unconscious premeditation. Death and fiesta, they are your two poles, *caifán*, and everything in between is ceremonial rigidity."

"If we're stiff, Elizabeth, it's because we're scared stiff. Mexico is a country with a tiger sleeping on its belly and we're all afraid that at any moment it may wake."

"Yes. And in the meantime you keep it knocked out with the sleeping pill of corruption. Do you know that I gave up driving and we sold my car? Every time I went out, a cop would stop me and I would have to pay him a bribe. Every time, the same cop, as regular as Sunday. And I always believed that he was hooked up with the burglars that would rob the apartment periodically. When he saw me out and stopped me, he would phone them and tell them the coast was clear. It stinks, *caifán*. It really stinks. The crook robs the citizen and splits with the cop, who splits with his captain, who

robs the cops under him and splits with the mayor, who robs from his captains and department heads and inspectors, and so on, and splits with the district commissioner, who robs from all the mayors he controls and splits with the PRI delegate, who robs all his districts and splits with the governor, who robs from all his delegates and splits with the minister, who robs from everyone he can and splits with the president. In Mexico you end up paying yourself a bribe every now and then. It's lunacy."

"It's the old pyramid of power, Dragoness, that's all. Can't you admire its aesthetic? Everything in Mexico forms a pyramid: politics, economics, love, culture. You have to step on the poor bastard beneath you and let the son of a bitch above you step on you. Give and take. And the man above always solves the problem for the one below, right up to the supreme father at the top who is disguised in the name of society itself. We're all disguised, one face when we look down, another when we look up."

"I know. But you're the worst actors in the world just the same. When I first came here, I enrolled in a theater-arts class to kill time and to learn Spanish. And you know, not one of the people in the class could act. I mean *act* . . . repeat words written by someone else with authenticity enough to make them your own words. Play a role. The people I was in the class with couldn't come even close. Everything was always phony, phony, phony."

"Because they had been playing a role, each one of them, all their lives, and to have taken on another would have been redundancy. You have to be somebody before you can pretend to be somebody else. And the only person you can really successfully pretend to be is yourself, which is the secret, I suspect, behind our excellent gunmen and our lousy bullfighters. How long did you study acting?"

"Not long. Then I joined an English-language group and we did Noel Coward plays, one after the other, until that became a bore too. And then I read novels and that's how I've passed my days since I came to Mexico, fifteen years of days, lover *caifán*. Ugh."

"Well, at least one can choose among one's memories."

"Yes."

"And fifteen years ago this city was a fun place."

"You're right, it was. A kind of innocent lay. The whorehouses with their emerald lights and their smell of disinfectant. The hundreds of cabarets dressed out in tinsel. The Indian prostitutes parading in their satin dresses. It was a city full of con men and bouncers and pimps. And people like Diego Rivera and Siqueiros and María Félix and Tongolele. It was a brash, sentimental, gutty world."

"All that was left of the revolution, just before it became the Establishment."

"I suppose. You're always saying that the revolution was betrayed. I don't know."

"Revolutions are always betrayed, Elizabeth. It's inevitable."

"Why?"

"Look, a revolution destroys one status quo and creates another. That's all. But in between the two there can be some glorious times. And that is all."

"I guess. Our life has certainly gone on being the same these fifteen years. Javier with his nervous stomach and his X rays and his pills, his teaching at the university and his job with the United Nations. Me with my best-sellers. God, is there any point in even talking about it?"

"Tell me what you want, don't tell me if you don't want to. We aren't writing a book."

"Oh, hell no. And speaking of books, lover, the other day I was reading a really good one. A novel by Styron. If you ever need an epigraph, here's one I memorized for you. 'Didn't that show you that the wages of sin is not death, but isolation?' "

"Put it the other way around, Dragoness, and you'll understand why Borges says that at wakes, as the process of decay proceeds, the dead man recovers all of his previous faces."

"The film reversed."

"Yes. By the way, no matter what your husband thinks, I enjoy watching you jump up from bed. Zip, pow, like the Marines making a landing."

"Get off my neck, *caifán*. What you like is not how I get out of bed but the way I hop into it."

△ "Have you finished yet?"

"No, Lisbeth, not yet. I want to tell you about our party."

Yes, the party, Dragoness. An end of the semester celebration by young German students, in costumes yet.

"Ulrich and I sat beside the coffin-refrigerator for quite a long time, as if we were holding a wake for Herr Schnepelbrücke. But darkness was about to fall, and with it, our guests. I ran out to buy more beer and wine. When I came back, Ulrich already had his costume on. I laughed when I saw him. A brown uniform with a wide black belt and a wide strap slanting down across his chest, black boots, a swastika arm band. I laughed and he laughed and he pranced around the room goose-stepping, throwing his right arm up stiffly, crying 'Heil, Heil, Sieg Heil!' He did it perfectly. I roared until my sides hurt."

"The Nazis were a joke to you then, Franz?"

"I went behind the screen and put on my own costume. A horned helmet, a chest-plate and long red skirts, a yellow wig of curls that came down to my neck, a bronze lance. I came out with a shrill Valkyrie howl and it was Ulrich's turn to laugh.

"There was a knock at the door and our guests rushed in, happy, shouting, carrying bottles and cans, loaves of bread, sausages, Limburger, all of them disguised. Heinrich was old Goethe and with him was our classmate Elizabeth decked out as Mephistopheles, her eyes blue and candid beneath the painted arched eyebrows, her red lips smiling above the pointed painted beard. Reinhardt and Elsa were dressed as Tyrolean peasants. Malaquias was a Prussian officer. Otto was an Austro-Hungarian hussar. Ruby, in wooden shoes and a striped skirt and the customary liberty cap with its tricolor ribbons, was a French Marianne. Lorenz was Rasputin: black gown, long beard and wig. And Lya was dressed like me but had a higher rank; she was Brunhilde and I was her aide-de-camp. Everyone cried out 'Yo-ho-to-ho-ho' and danced around chanting the Valkyrie music and using the wine bottles as lances.

High-pitched voices, low-pitched, a crazy chorus, all of us in costume to celebrate the end of the school year. Finally the singing died down.

"Reinhardt and Elsa were the first to head for the refrigerator, laughing, with their bottles of white wine in their arms. I jumped in front of them, almost tripping over my skirts, and spread my arms dramatically and cried out: 'No! Forbidden! Decree of Woden. The libations must be made at once. No bottle that enters our refrigerator shall ever come forth from it again!' Heinrich and Lisbeth protested, groaning, but the others shouted and laughed and Ulrich quickly grabbed a bottle from Lorenz-Rasputin, uncorked it, and raised it to his lips. Everyone began to open bottles then, gathering in a circle to pull the corks out. We drank with heroic, grandiose gestures, letting the wine wet our false beards, smear our painted lips, splash down our bodices. The naked bulb that hung from the ceiling cast a cold and too direct white light. I turned on the light on the drawing board, turned off the overhead bulb, shouting, 'Shadows! Twilight! The dead year wants no light, the dead year is buried!' Our Tyrolean couple embraced with mock fear and everyone laughed again. I went from guest to guest passing out drinks, sweating inside my wig and armor. 'Celebrate! Three months of freedom! Three months before us without the beard of Professor Essler, without the pompous jokes of Professor Von Cluck! Without . . .' 'Don't even mention them,' Ruby-Marianne interrupted. Her cap had fallen down to her eyebrows. 'Franz,' she said, 'you're a phony.' 'Frankness, honesty forever!' I replied. Ruby sat on the floor with her eyebrows heavy and her lipstick smeared and took off her wooden shoes and her red and white striped stockings and began to rub her feet. I emptied my cup over her head and she slapped me. The party was on its way."

"The dirty jokes began," you suggested, Dragoness.

"No, Lisbeth. The ideology. Heinrich-Goethe proclaimed that all greatness has always come from aristocracy. Malaquias, the Prussian officer, shouted that power must remain with the people. Heinrich shouted back: 'Oh, to hell with your free people! Look at

your ridiculous Weimar Republic! Your miserable Stresemann, the inflation, the unemployment, the national humiliation! There you can see what happens when the magnificent people govern themselves!' Malaquias raised his thumb to his nose and wagged his fingers. Heinrich, shouting violently about the Jews and the bankers, grabbed him by the ears and knocked off his proud helmet with its gilded imperial eagle. I separated them and emptied the last of a bottle into their glasses.

"Elsa, sitting on the bed between Reinhardt and Elizabeth, was saying that love comes only once. She squeezed Reinhardt's hand and with her other hand smoothed her Tyrolean skirt. Elizabeth smiled dryly and said that if Reinhardt was true to her, it was because he had never been sufficiently tempted. Elsa looked questioningly at Reinhardt. He caressed her hand and said that in January, when he took his degree, they would be married. I poured their glasses again and asked Reinhardt if he had a job lined up yet. No, he said, not yet, but his father had connections in Cologne that might lead to something. At first, he went on, they would make their home with his parents. Elizabeth, who seemed to be taking her role as Mephistopheles seriously, laughed. 'And that will be the end of love, Elsa!' Elsa calmly shook her head. No, she liked Reinhardt's family and they liked her. 'You'll see how much they like you when they start correcting you, asking where in the world were you brought up, telling you that that's not the way to handle a baby, hinting that their handsome Reinhardt deserves something better.' 'Cut it out, Elizabeth,' Reinhardt said, looking at her coldly. 'We're going to be very happy.' 'Okay, okay, be happy,' said Elizabeth. 'Be happy as birds.' 'We need so little that we can't help but be happy,' said Elsa. 'And just what do you need?' smiled Elizabeth. 'To be together the rest of our lives,' said Elsa. 'That's all.' 'To have a decent job and be respected,' said Reinhardt. Elizabeth raised her glass to them. 'God bless you both!' She jumped up from the bed and began to dance, alone, humming. 'Berlin for me!' she cried. She was pliable and slender in her red costume, happily unworried as she spread the corners of her cape like wings. 'Berlin and

freedom! Let blockheads peel potatoes! The cafés, the theaters! Nobody bothers you! Berlin! Freedom! Hoppla, wir leben!' Heinrich grinned and embraced her. Then Otto, the hussar, took off his cape and began to play at bullfighting with Elizabeth. She would charge him, jerking her horned head and grunting ferociously. We formed a circle around her and applauded, spilling our drinks as we interlocked arms, all of us beginning to sweat now and to feel that our costumes had lost their freshness and elegance. Suddenly Heinrich broke the circle and rushed at Ulrich and grabbed him by both shoulders. 'I won't tolerate it any longer!' he said angrily. Ulrich, astonished, stared at him. 'You see, I tell you straight, straight to your face,' said Heinrich. 'And it was with good reason,' he went on, turning until he was facing me, 'that I said we ought not to have our party in the room of a goddamn foreigner!' I started to move toward him but Ruby pulled me back, saying wearily, 'Oh, Heinrich, what a bore you are!' 'What's bothering you so?' Ulrich asked quietly. 'Your costume, pig!' Heinrich shouted. 'It's a mockery! A calculated insult!' He extended his arm and jerked off the red band with the black swastika. Ulrich's response was to drive his fist into Heinrich's face. Heinrich's gray wig fell as he threw himself upon Ulrich with all his weight and carried him down to the floor. They rolled there, Heinrich on top trying to rip the brown shirt off, Ulrich trying to choke him as he went on shouting 'Pig! Pig!' Lorenz and I pulled them apart to cries of 'What a loused-up party!' 'Drink, you idiots, get up and drink!' 'Stop spoiling the evening!' We pulled them apart and helped them up and they glared at each other with false smiles, pressed teeth. Finally Ulrich shrugged and extended his hand, Heinrich, sneering, turned his back on him and embraced Elizabeth. I snapped off the remaining light and went from mug to mug pouring beer as a peace offering. Our guests found places on the divan, the bed, on the floor, and their conversations dropped to murmurs as the kisses and caresses began.

"I sat on the floor, leaning back against the bed, with my arm resting on Reinhardt's bare knees. I closed my eyes and heard Elsa

whispering to him about a certain dress she would have to buy before their marriage, about the furniture they would need, about their honeymoon trip to Switzerland. She was afraid that Reinhardt had not worked out their itinerary well enough and she made him repeat its timetable: Lucerne, Lake of Thun, Wengen, the Jungfrau. Ruby, carrying her stockings and wooden shoes, which she put down with a clump, sat beside me. I felt her warm hand take mine. Very softly she said to me, 'And you, aren't you going to go anywhere during the vacation?' It was true: we were really on vacation now. I had known it and celebrated it, but it was only now, feeling Ruby's hand and the breath of her voice in my ear, that I really grasped that another year had gone by and ahead of me lay a time of freedom to be enjoyed, lazy idle reading, unhurried long walks. Ruby put her legs across my knees and asked me to rub her feet. In a voice even softer than hers, as if I were speaking only to myself, Lisbeth, I told her, 'I don't know if I will go anywhere this year. Next year, yes, when I take my degree, I want to take a long slow trip to all those places I have never seen. From city to city, just looking.' 'Where?' said Ruby, who had bent until her head was resting on her knees and I could smell the perfume of her hair each time I breathed. 'To Treves to see the ruins of the baths and the basilicas. To Aix-la-Chapelle to see the chapel of Charlemagne. Then down the Rhine. The cathedrals at Worms and Mainz, the abbey at Laach. And Cologne, St. Mary in the Capitol, the Holy Apostles . . . I want to see it all and feel it all, Ruby, because I believe that it has to be preserved, that man is his building, his stone, his love for what he has constructed.' I stopped. 'Why am I talking like this to you, little mocker? You'll be laughing at me.' 'No, I'm not laughing. Take me with you.' Ruby raised her face until she touched her nose to my cheek, like this, Lisbeth, so lightly I could hardly feel it. I took her hand like this, between my hands, in the darkness that gave us freedom and daring and let us speak the truth, as if it were carnival time. 'Ruby . . . Lisbeth . . . I want to build. I want to make buildings by instinct. . . . I don't want the old Greek Valhallas that at school they insist we

admire. Still less, glass boxes. I don't know. Do you understand me? I want to make a building as a bear finds its cave or an eagle builds its nest, that naturally. Buildings like placentas, warm and humid, without vertices, without . . . No, I don't know. Do you understand me, Ruby? Lisbeth? Something new and free and natural, no longer slave to the old models, to the old prestigious. . . . Do you understand?' Ruby kissed me. Like this. And I took her in my arms, like this. And we were silent now, listening to silence, our eyes closed, a little dizzy from the beer and wine. And listening also, willy-nilly, to the voices of Elsa and Reinhardt on the bed behind us:

" 'Is what Elizabeth said true?'

" 'What?'

" 'That if you were tempted enough, you would love someone else.'

" 'You are the only girl I love, Elsa.'

" 'But maybe . . . some day . . .'

" 'No, Elsa. I understand my duties and responsibilities.'

" 'And I'm sure that I can love only once in my life.'

" 'Yes. Nothing will ever separate us.'

" 'Nothing, Reinhardt. And when we have children, we'll be even closer.'

" 'How many shall we have?'

" 'As many as God sends us.'

" 'I believe I've chosen well. Without a woman to give us breath, we can't do anything in life.'

" 'I want to see you honored, respected by everyone. You're going to be a great architect, Reinhardt.'

" 'I couldn't take it any longer, Lisbeth. I had to cover my mouth. I pushed Ruby away and opened my eyes. Everything was spinning. I tried to look at Elsa and Reinhardt and I saw four of them. The couples talking in whispers seemed very near yet very far and my own body was enormous yet at the same time tiny, as if my knees were heavy mountains yet also feathers in the wind. I leaned forward vomiting. Elsa gave a little cry. Reinhardt knelt over me.

'Hey, Franz is sick. A glass of water.' The ceiling light came on, white and cold again. I closed my eyes and then opened them immediately and looked toward the refrigerator, our piece of furniture that was as cold and colorless as the light. Lorenz, the black-clad Russian monk, was moving toward the refrigerator with a clean glass in his hand. I shouted, 'No, Lorenz, please!' Lorenz opened the refrigerator. 'Close it, Lorenz, please, close it! You're drunk, it isn't true, you haven't seen anything!' Lorenz let the glass drop to the floor. Lya, standing behind him, screamed, screamed, bit her nails and screamed, her face as pale as flour. Herr Urs von Schnepelbrücke, lightly covered with frost, had arrived at our party."

Franz stopped.

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing. Reinhardt married Elsa. He was killed shortly afterward, right at the beginning, in Poland."

"And the dwarf?"

"He finally crashed the party. Haven't I just told you?"

"Yes, but what happened to him after the party?"

"Nothing. He stayed there in our little students' room in Germany. He must still be there."

△ "Javier? Are you here? Put on the light, I can't see the bed. That goddamn mania you have for always drawing the curtains. Or is it night already? Javier, are you here? Did you take your blessed Nembutal? Okay, okay, if you don't want to answer, I don't really care. Aaaay, I'm bushed. Damn it, if you don't turn the light on, I'm going to fall over something. This rotten little stinking little hotel. We ought to have gone straight on to Veracruz, Javier, to the sea. That's all right, you don't have to move. Aaaaay, all I want to do is rest. The pillow's cool, thank God. Christ, wouldn't I give something to sleep the way you do? You don't really need those silly pills. Do you hear me? I say you don't need those stupid pills. I wish we had gone straight on to the sea and were there already. Javier. Do you hear me? Why don't you answer me? Are you here?"

Javier, Javier, I swear, forgive me, I don't do it to hurt you but to help us both. To offer you, to offer both of us, with naturalness and spontaneity, a way out. A way to keep the dream going, Javier. To keep it up."

When he brought you home to Mexico City, at the outbreak of the war, you went on dreaming about him. It had become your habit to go to bed with a book and little by little to let your attention drift away from your reading as you repeated his name over and over, until finally you fell asleep with the book open, hypnotized by the word Javier. You knew that a little later he would come into the bedroom, close your book, and put out the light. Your dream would already have formed: his face and figure, exactly. Yet perhaps not completely: perhaps only a color, a glitter, an iridescence like that of the stars that roll through space, the blue stars that come toward us, the red ones that move away, the yellow stars that do not move at all. His presence in your dream was like a flaming blue star. And when you woke in the morning and saw him face down beside you with his hair mussed, you would have liked to prolong that presence within you, but you couldn't: he would have to wake and dress and go out and you would be left to pass the day alone in your apartment on Nazas, there alone or walking the neighborhood alone. After breakfast he left, and there you were. You had a yellow lamp of tarnished glass that had been made from an old pulque demijohn. You could see your face in it, deformed by the refraction, and you used to run your hands over the smoothness of the glass. And seated on the sofa with your knees together you would lean forward and pick up the black ashtray of burned Oaxacan clay that was your husband's favorite, that he always used when he was in the living room and always carried to the table to smoke after lunch and into the bedroom when he read and smoked in bed. You ran the sensitive tips of your fingers over the black clay. You passed your fingers also over the square low table of polished pine that stood before the sofa, let your fingertips linger on the rings left by his glass of beer, on the scars where his cigarettes had burned out. You would walk across the jute rug with

your hands together behind your back, slowly, reflectively, as though you were trying to step in his steps, all the way to the squeaking board that always announced his arrival home again, and then back, repeating your actions in reverse: walk across the rug, touch the marks and scars on the table, feel the weight of the black ashtray between your hands, touch the imperfect mirror of the demijohn lamp. Nor did you stop there. You searched for other things that would speak to you of him. You would sit on your heels on the floor or cross-legged or lying back against the sofa or lying forward with your chin propped on your palms, and look at every corner of this room you shared with him. The bookshelves that occupied one entire wall from the door to the corner; the titles and authors that were arranged according to no plan, entirely helter-skelter: Rilke, Dostoevsky, Cervantes, Reyes, Huidobro, Kleist, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, Sheridan Le Fanu, Gérard de Nerval, Emily Brönte, D. H. Lawrence, Byron, Euripides, Quiroga. The pine stool in front of the books was covered with a hand-loomed piece of Huichol cloth and on it was the pulque demijohn. From your position on the floor all the room was reflected in the yellow glass, the closer objects made very large, those farther away small at the end of a tunnel of light, the cblong of the window brilliant and motionless on one curving side. The deep, comfortable sofa with its Scotch plaid upholstery that was beginning to be a little worn now. The wide low table marked by his beer glass and his cigarettes, with his favorite ashtray and a candelabra without candles, a clay and plaster tree painted a thousand colors supported by a legless angel who carried on his rosy shoulders the trunk, the branches, the blue and yellow and red blooms. A pack of "Alas" cigarettes that he had forgotten. A box of "La Central" matches with its sand-paper striking surface and its blurred small reproduction of Corot's "The Sowers." The thin English chair that Javier had rescued from his parents' home, with its lace back. Here he read, made notes, and consulted books, seated on the floor like you with his book open on the low table, his glass of beer staining the polished tabletop, his cigarette butts burning it, his arm, some-

times his head, resting on the chair. You spent many mornings studying the apartment in this way, always seated on the floor or stretched out, looking at the ceiling and watching the changing lights of passing day that entered through the Venetian blinds and made figures on the ceiling, reflections from the sun, from white clouds, from the chrome accessories of automobiles, even the nickel-plated bells of street venders.

"It was in those days that Vasco Montero returned to Mexico City from Spain. Earlier he had fought there on the Republican side. He had written beautiful war songs with Prados and Alberti. His first book had come out and there were many parties given to fete him. And presently he was your competitor, Javier, you who were coasting still on the prestige of your own first book, published in 1937. But Vasco Montero was a generous and good-intentioned man and he wanted no part of a literary rivalry. Maybe you would have preferred rivalry, an open war. It didn't happen, however, and I felt that precisely because the rivalry never came out into the open, it was deeper and more serious to you and more demanding upon you. You hadn't published again. You kept your plans entirely to yourself. I had no way of knowing whether your project of a great poem about Mexico City was advancing. And you and I were passing through another crisis, a different crisis and one that now seems set in another century.

"You know, almost my earliest memory has to do with those two in Boston, Sacco and Vanzetti. Gershon told me about them. Two humble immigrants who had been framed because they had passed out leaflets Gershon read to me . . . 'Fellow workers, you have fought all wars . . . ' When they were finally executed, I remember Gershon wore a black armband for days."

Yes, Dragoness. Everything was clear then and became clearer as the thirties came on. Not even justice was ambiguous. Nor dream itself: dream was only the light cast by a darker reality. History was idea and politics was morality. Do you remember? Everything was so clear. Children were selling apples on street corners in New York. The lines of those waiting for the handout of relief, bread

and beans, wound for blocks. The unemployed marched on Washington in their dirty felt hats and their tattered coats. Okies in the Dust Bowl, wooden shacks, mouths empty not only of food but of teeth, babies with rickets, young women with dry breasts. Paul Muni in *I Am a Fugitive*. Dos Passos. While in Russia Stalin was building a new world free of those horrors and in Spain the war for all mankind was being fought: those were the good. The evil was Father Coughlin ranting over the radio, Huey Long ranting in Baton Rouge, the American Bund ranting in the beerhalls of the Middle West, Hitler ranting at demonstrations in Nuremberg.

It was all very clear. The revolution was the unity of all humble human beings, Dragoness. All artists, all men of justice, all over the world. A unity that transcended governments and nationalities. Politics had to be moral, history had to be conscious.

"Then one day in Greece we opened the paper and we couldn't believe it. A pact between Ribbentrop and Molotov. It wasn't true, it couldn't be true. It was one more lie by the news services, which always lied. But it wasn't a lie. It was true all right."

You have wandered all lands.

Then you could only tell yourselves that so long as the two of you, and others like you, maintained it and believed it, the dream could be kept alive. The revolution was art and art was the revolution. Picasso was the revolution, so was Brecht, so was Eisenstein. The rest didn't matter. The rest would pass. Some day sooner or later Stalin would die. But the dream would not die.

". . . Christ, wouldn't I give something to sleep the way you do. You don't really need those silly pills. Do you hear me? I say you don't need those stupid pills. I wish we had gone straight on to the sea . . ."

Javier brought you home to Mexico City and the days passed with you alone in the apartment on Nazas while he walked the city and whether his writing was moving ahead or not was unknown to you, and the days passed with the objects in the living room and the light from the window, the days passed. And one night you snapped on the bed lamp at three in the morning and kissed

Javier's neck and waited for him to turn over. He covered his eyes with one hand and finally, groggily, looked at you and listened to you. Those long hours alone in the apartment, during which you stared at and animated all the things that surround us and touch us and become part of our lives at the same time that we become part of them, had given you your theme, a theme that in appearance had nothing to do with our illusory sadness, our petty bourgeois and idealistic sadness, but that by a kind of transmutation, a secret communication between mirroring surfaces that did not know how close together they were, had been born of the objects in the room.

So one day youth enters the apartment. Your own youth.

You summon up your youth. Thanks to a sustained and unhappy effort of your imagination, an effort that almost destroys you, you succeed in giving body again to your youth, not in your own body but separated from you: a phantom.

Have you harvested the fruit of your labors?

"Listen to me, *caifán*. Drowsy, Javier lit a cigarette and I told him."

For several hours, several days, you succeed in maintaining that reincarnated image from your past. And what do you do with it? You use it to make love. You become young again and now you can make love truly, through the phantom that is you, with all the experience added, the nostalgia, the retrospective desire that you could not feel when you were really young. Yes, you tell him, we can possess what we desire only when we have ceased to desire it. Something like that. And Javier writes it down and makes it his second book, a novella of eighty pages that was published in a beautiful binding.

Why did you tell him that story, Dragoness? Maybe because one day you had dared to open a letter addressed to him. Maybe because you knew that he wanted proof that your love for him meant a sacrifice and a loss and a sorrow for you, and for that reason was a more valiant love, just as you both believed, without saying it, that when our external dream breaks down and falls apart we are merely compelled to maintain it within us, inside us, with greater suffering

and greater fidelity: and perhaps in the end, when his mistrust of you finally became converted into a motive for love, Javier feared that although you were giving up everything for him, you were doing it because you loved him not as he really was but as he seemed to be, his mask. Could that have been why you told him that story, Dragoness? So that through his imagination written out, a phantom, he would show you what it was he feared that you loved: his own and real phantom?

△ Look, Elizabeth, it's a hall of mirrors, it's always been a hall of mirrors, but only now do we understand. And you, you understand too, don't you? The electric fence charged at high tension. The first prisoners pass through it June 14, 1940. That's what my brochure says, and brochures don't lie. The portal above which grass grows today opens only to allow the columns of trucks to come and go to and from other prisons, and the car of Commandant Jökel to pass in and out. The prisoners arrive and are taken to a receiving room and made to face the wall. Their valuables are removed from them and their names are removed from them and they are given numbers they do not know and their descriptions are recorded. Next to the receiving room is the guard room, where the work details are checked in and out, where mail is censored. And then the hall with the locked gun racks for the guards' rifles, and the office of Commandant Jökel. The clothing room where they turn in their civilian garments and receive trousers marked with three red stripes and a military jacket with a red triangle on its back or, if you're a Jew, a yellow star. Once a week towels are passed out and now and then sheets and even underwear. You can see the garage where the Commandant's car and a truck are kept, and then you enter the prison proper passing beneath the huge inscription, ARBEIT MACHT FREI, and on to the administration offices where Rokyo assigns cells and duties and decides who will leave each morning to work in the Schicht factory, who to the Sputh factory in Lovisice, who to the leather factory in Zalhostice, who to the brick kiln, for everyone must work, seven in the morning until

seven at night. Then the mess hall and the guard Hohaus who is in charge of buying food for the fortress and feeding the prisoners: half a pound of bread and a cup of black bitter water in the morning before leaving for work; at noon thin soup or herb tea; more soup just as watery at night after returning. The barbershop, where they have their hair shaved when they first come and afterward the weekly sterilization, the disinfectant rubbed in. Next to the kitchen the boiler room. Then the cells with the double-deck wooden bunks against the wall, the stove that is never used, the light bulb it is forbidden to turn on, cells always damp where men and women and children return from work drenched and cannot dry their clothes but must put them on wet again at five the next morning. One hundred and twenty to each cell, one toilet, one sink, the windows always closed despite the stench. Cell 16, where old men and the feeble peel potatoes. Cell 14, the dormitory of those who work in the laundry. Cell 13, home of those Very Important Prisoners who carry packages and letters, the cooks and valets and barbers of the Black Shirts. Cell 12, for prisoners of German nationality who have squealed. Then the solitary cells, twenty of them along a corridor, no light, concrete floors, open only to Rokyo and Neubauer. Beyond the solitary cells, the prison kennels and another corridor. Two shower heads and a wooden bathtub. But this is not for washing but for torture, for interrogation beneath the ice-cold streams to the slap and whip of rubber hoses. The true bathroom, beside the hut that is used both for garbage and for disinfecting prisoners. The bath is for Saturday. First the women, then the men, and before the women go, all the doors of the men's cells are locked. Adjoining the bath, the infirmary tended by a prisoner-physician; the official doctor visits twice a week, in the evenings, and merely to sign death certificates. There are real beds in the infirmary, but Jews are not allowed there. A small concrete bridge that leads to the old stable, now become the hospital for women. Cells 9 and 8. There are beds for two hundred but there are five hundred patients, they infect one another, the beds must be reserved for gangrenes and abscesses. The

men's hospital, its floor covered with straw and paper mattresses stained by dysentery. The guards' garden, where women prisoners raise vegetables. Beyond the bridge, to the right, on a low earthen elevation, the morgue, the small dark room from which the dead prisoners go out to the incinerator in the ghetto: and the ghetto comprises the entire city. From the incinerator they return to the prison in urns marked *F* or *M*, Frau, Mann. Cell 2, for Jews; Cell 1, for Russian prisoners. The Herrenhaus, the mansard-roofed mansion with porches and central heating and surrounding hedges and rooms filled with lacquered furniture and a huge radio and small glass tables and reproductions of Alpine landscapes and a selection of classical records, the dining room with its polished chairs, the bedrooms with their mahogany beds, and the Czech maids, the park with its graveled paths, and beyond, the women's section. The same monotonous cells, the same wooden bunks, the same closed windows looking out on the gray mud of the Moravian landscape. Four cells for female political prisoners. One for Jewesses. Two for the women who have rebelled against their work assignments under the Occupation; they will stay only two weeks, and some, those who have entirely refused to work, will be sent to Germany. A cell where wooden buttons are painted, socks for the troops are knitted. Some of the women work in the guards' vegetable garden, sew dresses for the female guards, make prisoners' shirts and underwear. Some clean the officers' bedrooms and offices, some milk the cows and goats. Cell 32, the isolation cell for women who are sick; here only the doctor can pass. Cell 33, for the condemned. Here sixty-five women lie on the floor. They are fed every third day, once every third day. No one is allowed near them, but from the mess hall next door the men of the Lebensmittelraum have dug a tunnel through which they pass food in. The canteen of the SS, where women prisoners scrub floors and wash windows three times a week. Behind the canteen, in the same building, the shops: blacksmith, locksmith, carpenter: toys, coffins, knives. Then wash-troughs where only men work, except when on occasional Saturdays a few women prisoners are allowed to scrub their sisters'

underwear. The fourth yard of the fortress. Four great rooms on the left: here the bunks are of four tiers and there are eight hundred prisoners to each of the enormous cells, with one small window and three sinks. During winter the damp walls are covered with frost and the sinks are frozen. These prisoners suffer from diarrhea, there are not enough bunks to go around, they must sleep on the floor in their own excrement, and each new group arrives with its own fleas, lice, and typhus. By the end of the war, this part of the fortress will have infected all the rest. On the right, the solitary cells. Then through a door along a long dank corridor with bins of potatoes on both sides, and out through a small iron door to the execution yard: the scaffold on the left; on the right, the wall. Jökel himself gives the command to fire; it is repeated by Oberscharführer Josef Lewinski, and the rifles crack. Here is the Hundenkommando with the Alsatian dogs Jökel has trained. And just beyond are the guards' recreation rooms, their movie theater, the swimming pool where Jökel's daughters giggle and splash in their flowery bathing suits. Around everything trenches are being dug constantly. There are no shovels for the prisoners and they excavate the earth handful by handful and carry it off in their caps. *Arbeit Macht Frei.*

Have you harvested the fruit of your labors?

△ A paved road appeared.

"There, you see?" you said, looking at Franz. "It is to the right."

Franz nodded and swung off to the right and you moved along an avenue of eucalyptus trees. All of you felt the presence of the animals ahead before you saw them, even before you heard their bellowing, smelled them. You sensed some obstacle ahead. The pavement ended and Franz slowed. Dust swirled up and you closed your window.

△ You rubbed the back of Javier's neck and laughed, Pussycat, "You know, you really thought I would be a virgin! It made me laugh. But I laughed with you, Proffy, not at you. What do you

think? It was my first act of emancipation, as they say. I don't even remember his face." You ran your fingers through Javier's thinning hair. "No joke, I don't remember anything, but absolutely nothing, about him. Imagine: I had just shaken free from my family and that nut wanted to tie me down again! You can't trust anyone, Proffy. 'Don't date anyone except me. Don't leave the house without phoning me. Wait for me after your classes.' And he was studying veterinary medicine. Good God. He intended to spend the rest of his life nursing lap dogs. Well, that was still part of the nest, and when I found out what I needed to know, I jumped out once and for all and got rid of my new puppy. I didn't miss him. After all, sex in itself isn't much. Everything depends on the other person. As long as I didn't have someone special, no sex was okay with me. I certainly wasn't going to let it throw me. Nor anything else, for that matter. Now with you, it's fun. You know how to take me."

"You women tell us how we should take you," said Javier. You unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his body.

"Which women?" You loosened his shoelaces and pulled off his shoes.

"All of you. Don't you realize that we live in a great matriarchy?"

You rubbed Javier's feet and then took off your blouse and stretch pants.

"Of course, it doesn't seem that way," Javier went on. "Every man tells himself that he is *muy macho*, all balls, virile . . ."

Javier pushed the hair back from your eyes so that he could see your face as you leaned over him and kissed him. You gave him a hug.

"These sheets are cold. Well, at least that means they wash them once in a while."

Javier sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his pants. "Doesn't it bother you that we always meet in motel rooms?"

"Are you nuts?" you said, tickling him. "My, what a soft tummy."

Javier covered his stomach with the sheet. "We might go to Acapulco some weekend."

"No, that's not secluded enough."

"Where, then?"

You thought about it for a moment, Isabel, while Javier looked at you, prone, tan, surrounded by the smoke you exhaled through your nostrils. The smoke swirled down as far as your navel. He touched you.

"Oh, Barbados. Trinidad. Jamaica. Bermuda."

"Mexican women make believe that they are dominated by their men. But in reality . . ."

"God, what are you talking about?" You rubbed his ear. You turned your back to him and with one arm pulled him down.

"In reality it's the women who do the dominating. I sometimes think that Mexican women themselves invented the myth of the *macho* male simply to deceive their men about what was happening, to offer them a kind of compensation for their subjugation to their daughters, their mothers, their wives, all the devouring women who impose their values on us, the only values that really count here."

"You may be right. Father said he was an atheist, but I was sent to the nuns' school."

"An example. Let the men have their fun. Wear your face of martyrdom in public, but in private die laughing."

You laughed. "Let's make some fun now." With your hand you touched him, caressed him, invited him. "Oh, there's only one Mexico," you said as he took your breasts. "Our little mother of Guadalupe." Your legs and his laced together. "There's nothing so cool as our Mexican music." You slid down his legs. "Our brave Boy Heroes." With your buttocks you pushed his legs apart. "We may be poor, but we have heart." You were tight against him now, back to back. "Go on and laugh, Javier. Don't I sound just like your precious television? Now I'll change channels. Captain Jackson of the CIA arrives in Singapore." Javier chuckled. "A thick net of intrigue envelops this mysterious port, a rendezvous of world espionage." You turned quickly and rubbed your nose against his.

"Jackson is blond, tall, muscular, and he lights his cigarettes staring without blinking into the eyes of the enemy." Your breasts were becoming hot under his hands. "If we don't destroy the threat to the free world here, the enemy will soon be at our door, Jackson says. He points to a map of explosive Southeast Asia, the little countries ready to fall like a row of dominoes." Your thighs were damp from the movement. "And now the commercial. Señora, don't let your children develop dangerous incestuous complexes. Use the pre-sterilized Baby Suckett. Don't nurse your infant. Avoid tired tits. Maintain your endowment erect, firm, and fully packed. Your breasts have rights, too. Listen to what Jayne Mansfield advises."

"Isabel, Isabel."

"Ayyy, *papacito*."

"Is it good, my love?"

"It's good, good."

"Listen to me. So it won't stop. It's like the first time."

"Don't talk. Let me concentrate."

"Let me do it, Ligeia."

"Yes, darling. Keep on. Keep on."

"I don't want to begin all over each time . . ."

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"In, out, slowly, slowly."

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"And now . . ."

"Yes."

"Now no more."

Javier moved off of your body and fell face down on the pillow as if he were hiding. You remained as you were. Javier looked at you from the corner of his eye. You did not turn your head, did not seek him.

"Isabel," he murmured.

"Not so good, Javier?"

"No, my love. Not so good. This miserable room. We can't go on this way, Isabel. Now we'll go back to Mexico City and it will be motel rooms again, the cold sheets and the cold walls. The tele-

phone beside the bed. The taxi waiting for us outside. The window with a curtain of orange stripes. Bah. When I think about the places we've met on the road to Toluca, I feel sick. Maybe . . ."

"I know. Yes, Javier!"

"Yes what?"

"We'll rent a little apartment!"

"An apartment?"

"Of course, darling, and I have it picked out already! A really cool studio in Coyoacán. You won't believe it when you see it. We'll . . ."

"But Isabel, I didn't mean . . ."

"Look, it's right over a pop-art store. I'll decorate it."

"But I . . ."

"It's really only a studio. One huge room, a little bath, and a kitchen. Oh, it's terrific, Javier! I'll have them wax the floor as soon as we get back."

"Isabel, I meant . . ."

"Paint the beams and whitewash the walls. Yellow curtains, good thick ones, for the big window. It looks out on the plaza of Chimalistac."

"But I was thinking that . . ."

"I'll track down some light cedar furniture and have the cushions made of blue Indian-head cotton. We'll need some tables, wrought-iron and glass. I'll buy some papier-mâché Judas figures downstairs in the pop-art store and hang them around the walls. A sofa that converts into a bed. You'll bring your books and I'll buy an antique writing table I saw in San Angel. It's a colonial table of marquetry, with drawers and all sorts of things. You can keep your writing there, eh?"

"But how much is all this going to cost?"

"Cost? Well, figure it yourself. Furniture, curtains, material for the cushions, paint, varnish, wax, ashtrays, utensils for the kitchen, light, gas, telephone . . . I'd say about forty thousand pesos."

"A motel room is only thirty pesos, Isabel. Well, at least we will save on food. We won't be eating out."

"Oh, yes, we will. I like to show you off and I don't know how to cook. I like to broil my steaks at Delmonico's, Javier, to cook my Dutch tongue on Jena and my *quenelles* in La Lorraine . . ." You laughed. Then you went on, "No, I don't mean it. I don't care about fancy restaurants. The important thing is to be with you, and it doesn't matter where. There's another point . . . we won't waste so much time. Oh, yes, a record player. I can't live without a record player."

"Live?"

"Two or three nights a week, silly. And if one of us wants to be alone, the other takes off. Don't you like to be alone now and then?"

You rubbed your chin, put on a record, and began to whirl slowly.

"Trini López at PJ's. Recorded live. *If I had a hammer* . . ."

You went into the bathroom and closed the door behind you. Javier sat alone on the bed. He tapped his stomach reflectively. Water began to run loudly.

"Isabel?"

You did not answer.

"Isabel!" he raised his voice.

"What?" you said from the bathroom.

"I didn't expect you to suggest an apartment. I was hoping that . . ."

"I can't hear you, Javier. I'll be out in a second."

"You're tired of it now. You have other things to do. Okay, I understand. Yes. Thanks anyhow . . ."

I'd hammer in the morning . . .

". . . 'You're older than I am. Your life is settled, you don't want to change it. Your character, too. I can understand . . . Thanks, thanks for everything. It was nice while it lasted. I'll never forget you . . . ' Oh, shit."

If I had a bell . . .

"'. . . Oh, I knew it couldn't go on. I never had any illusions . . ."

I'd ring it in the morning . . .

"'. . . But I didn't just make you up. I touched you and you were real . . .'"

It's the bell of freedom . . .

"A motel room on the road to Toluca, Isabel. With the taxi waiting outside. Is that all?"

"I'm coming right out. Be a little patient."

"The same old thing? Believing that now it is different?"

The record ended. Javier listened to the gurgle and bubble of the water running from the faucets and in the bowl of the toilet.

You came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. With one hand you shook out your wet hair.

"What were you saying?"

Javier covered his lower abdomen. You hummed to yourself as you worked your hair into a ponytail and tied it with a yellow ribbon. You threw your hair forward over your head again, the hairpins between your teeth. When you finished putting your hair up, you rubbed your head with both hands and looked for your lipstick in the disorder of the dresser top. You pursed your lips to paint them orange.

"Isabel, when we were at Xochicalco today . . ." Javier began quietly.

You stopped with the lipstick raised to your mouth. "No, Javier."

"Yes, no. None of you ever understand."

"Just no." You got up, dropping the towel.

"But listen to me."

"I told you no." You retrieved the towel and folded it like a wet, heavy whip.

"I want to talk with you about Xochicalco. About what we saw this morning."

"I know what you want to talk about. No, it bores me." You slapped Javier's legs with the wet towel.

"Stop it, Isabel." Javier drew his legs back. Laughing, you slapped his buttocks. "Stop it, it hurts." He hunched up, chin to his knees, and closed his eyes.

"The silly things you say hurt more. Who wants to hear about Xochicalco? What's Xochicalco to me?" You knelt on the bed beside him and tickled his waist. "What a tummy you have."

Javier opened his eyes. "Why did you open that door this morning?"

"Which door?"

"The car door." Javier did not look at you.

"Because you were talking to me, not to Betty, who I suppose is used to you."

"What? What did I say?"

"The same thing you say so often. You need love without love. You prefer desire without desire. No, you weren't talking to Betty. You were talking to me." You put your mouth to Javier's ear and whispered: "Do you know what you call me when we make love?"

Javier hid his face in the pillow. "Forgive me. Please, forgive me."

You laughed and jerked the sheet off him.

"Stop it!" he cried sharply. "I tell you I don't like it."

"I'm not allowed to see it except when it's stiff and hard? I'd like to see it taking a little nap sometime."

"Then here, and stop talking."

You moved between his legs and laughed. "Baby," you said. "Big baby. What do you really think? Go on, chatter all you want to, I don't really care. My darling. Do you know something? Today I've found out that you tell fibs."

△ "No, it was true. I made love to you twice because I thought that you had understood. You had to understand, for not long afterward you repeated it. They sent me along with the secretariat to a conference in London. A Modigliani show was on at the Tate."

You agreed to meet there after the morning plenary session and Javier said goodbye to you, to Elizabeth with the falsely gray hair and the heavy eyebrows and the thick lips and the Chanel suit with its torero jacket embroidered with pearls. He arrived at the Tate at two in the afternoon and did not look for you immediately. He

studied the paintings with a certain distraction, seeking first a spontaneous reaction to those women with long necks and eyes lacking the cornea, with dark pubes and thin lips, women he had always associated with the twenties but who now he realized were the living women of Thessaly, Mycenae, and Crete, lank and linear; and now it all came back suddenly and without warning, the smells and lights and sounds of the time spent in Greece. Those women of Modigliani's, fixed in their frames, gave off scents of hyacinth and hibiscus, sounds of draymen's horses clomping along the pavement, of carpenters' hammers, the light of the sun filtering through to the bottom of the sea. The orange of the fishing boats, the blue of the Chapel of St. Nicholas, the white of the stairs and pedestals at Mykonos, the ocher and red of the warrior-saint altarpieces, the Naples yellow of the windmills; once again the haze of incense, the smells of smoking pigs with their bellies open, of donkeys lying dead beneath vultures and flies, of frying chitterlings in the impenetrable kitchens, of garlic, olives, cheese. Javier turned with the feeling that he was being stared through as if his body were transparent, and there they were, the English girls who had come here to see themselves in the Italian mirror, today's women with loose dark hair and low-cut sweaters and red, green, black stockings of filigree, looking with their black and green eyes at their own images reflected in the paintings. The models had returned to life and were visiting themselves. And behind them, the woman, her hair dyed black now and loose like that of the nude woman on the blue cushion in the painting at her back, her eyebrows plucked thin, her lips painted narrow, her mascara-weighted lashes curling around her clear eyes, her neck made longer by the frill of lace that extended to her waist. She herself had contrived that out-of-date get up, the dress as loose and shapeless as a tunic, falling from her shoulders like a pen stroke. In her smile was readiness, in her eyes was nostalgia. Her long pale hands were joined at the level of her hips with a kind of self-consciousness, the knowledge that they could serve to hide or isolate or protect the sacred parts of a body that belonged to herself and to him at the same time.

"This effort to remember is in reality an attempt to forget, Dragoness."

△ Do you remember? Irene Dunne played the absent-minded millionairess. Jean Arthur was the vulgar newswoman with a heart of gold, William Powell the ironic majordomo, Alice Brady the lady with bats in the belfry, Eugene Pallette the diabetic millionaire, Myrna Loy the wife with a good sense of humor, Roland Young the rich tourist with a fondness for ectoplasm, Cary Grant the epitome of natural elegance, Charles Ruggles the man of large means who won the English valet in a poker game. And beautiful, mad, irresistible Carole Lombard, and Mae West who winked one eye and said "Beulah, peel me a grape" and wriggled her hourglass body. And you and Javier were holding hands in the Brooklyn movie and watching *The Four Daughters* because John Garfield was in it and you had never liked any actor as much as you liked John Garfield, who looked like Javier and whose name was Jules Garfinkle and who had lived walking with humiliation on one side and danger on the other, intuitively the first existential hero, before Bogart or Brando or Dean: that living contradiction, the hero-villain, the saint-assassin, the artist-vulgarian who died fucking. And today when the television shows some old movie featuring John Garfield, you see to it that Javier is there to watch and remember.

You and Javier do not see eye to eye about Latin American artists and intellectuals. "They are all alike," you say vehemently. "Using art merely to be able to feel like aristocrats, to climb into the oligarchy they pretend to be struggling against. Everything they do is so elegant, so nice, so pretty-pretty. It's simply their way to escape from the horrors of the crude, foolish, stuttering middle class. That's all. They may call it 'form' or 'good taste' but it is really impotence and fear and a longing for the past. And most of all it is vulgar social climbing."

"And your gringo artists?" Javier retorts. "The hero with hair on his chest? Aren't they trying to escape their different middle class

by pretending to be stevedores, baseball players, tiger hunters, railroad workers, boxers?"

It ends calmly. "Florence Rice," you say quietly. "Who remembers Florence Rice today? Or Arline Judge? So many lovely faces that once were as famous as Rochelle Hudson and Madge Evans and Jean Parker, and today no one even knows their names."

You held hands together in the movie and the movie made everything the same for both of you. Then when it was over you walked out into that other movie that had not changed all through your childhood: the *kleikodeschnik* standing outside the synagogue with his face contrite and his hands joined, the *ototot* forever trimming his old Russian beard, the languid and cultivated *schönerjud* who played chess on the second floor of a neighborhood café, the old woman waiting for the funeral to emerge, her handkerchief already open to receive alms from the mourners, the emancipated *radikalke* with the shrill voice . . .

"And would you like that I should be such a crazy woman like that, Beth? That is what you would like I should be?"

"No, Mama. I didn't say that."

"Then stop paying attention to your father. Let him play pinochle and feel modern. Let him be all wrong, only don't let him know it. Come and take my hand, Beth. Lie down here beside me. We can't escape it. It's deeper even than we think. You will see if then he doesn't understand what I have understood. That the important thing in life is what we are leaving behind when we die. Those who will cry for us."

You squeezed Javier's hand in the Brooklyn theater and again watching television today. John Garfield, playing the piano. "It doesn't seem the same today, does it? Today there is nothing unusual about it."

"Today there is no point in the mother tongue," whispered Gershon.

"Shut up! What are you saying? Renegade! Goy!"

"All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient," you say to yourself as the car leaves the shadows of the avenue of trees. It is one in the afternoon. Franz glances at his watch. The earth is

white. White trees. White hillsides. The fine dust rises. Ahead is the river, the ford. "Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord."

△ Franz slowed to a stop, cut off the motor, and set the hand brake. All of you got out, silent, though Isabel held back for a moment. Dust swirled up around your legs. You stood beside the car. In the ford, almost motionless, was a herd of cattle. They covered the narrow strip of earth that stretched between the two arms of the river. Bulls, cows, yearlings, in the middle of the ford blocking your way. Bulls with short thin horns and brown hides glistening under the sun. Bulls with curly foreheads and short necks, with powerful haunches and planted hooves, motionless, guarding the passage across the river. Bulls with thick high skulls and long tails, their muzzles buried in the swift water. Short-horned heifers feeding on the white grass on the other side with a side-to-side munching movement of the head. Nervous, jumpy yearlings peering through between the legs and beneath the stomachs of the larger bulls. Bulls with myopic eyes, smoothly bellowing, bulls with rubber-capped horn tips and heavy dewlaps. The protruding sleepy eyes of the cows.

You walked forward, the four of you, to the edge of the finger of sandy soil from which extended the natural bridge the river had created between two whirling pools. Downstream a little way, the river poured over a falls. The cattle watched you with a low, lost gaze, moved their short round ears nervously, went on sweating sweat you could smell. Suddenly a cow lost her footing at the edge of the ford and slipped slowly, at first with a pathetic serenity and torpidity, then with nervous hopelessness, toward the deep water. She sank with all her weight, began to swim showing the crown of her head a few times, and then was swept out of sight over the waterfall. None of the animals turned toward her. Although nervous, their movements were peaceful. Slowly they munched the white grass, drank the green water. Their swollen eyes seemed distant and unseeing.

The four of you stared at the cattle. Isabel, very nervous, laughed

and then covered her mouth. Abruptly, Franz took your black shawl, Dragoness, and walked out along the finger of sand toward a large bull that little by little, as Franz drew nearer, appeared more and more nervous. The bull swayed his head from side to side. He sniffed the air. So did the other animals, and suddenly the bull had become their chieftain. He did not conceal his fear of the man advancing toward him. Sweat poured out and made his black hide more lustrous. He humped and pissed, and his eyes became opaque. Franz continued to move toward him. Finally the bull's eyes seemed to fix themselves upon the man, to separate him from his scent and from the sound of his feet sliding across the sand. Both eyes slowly focused and the bull bellowed and jerked his head violently backward. He was seeking anything, a smell or a snort or any noise, that might be able to draw his fear and attention away from the tenacious figure still walking toward him: the bull was seeking an escape, a way out. But the herd had become a motionless wall of black hides and eyes and green and white horns. His only escape was to move forward, to charge.

The bull stopped bellowing. He stiffened, as if for all to see him. His cowardice had become courage and there was also his physical pride in simply being there beneath the sun. His torpid eyes became large black coins, living and brilliant. He dilated his wet and elastic nostrils and snorted. He began to tremble with fury, his straight loins, his haunches and rump, the sharp ridge of his back. All his body was made for struggle now: the thick and powerful muscles in front, the lean swiftness behind. His hooves were black, his nostrils large, his chest deep, his breathing savage, and he was filled with the bravery that rises only from fear. Franz, the shawl cape held open at his side, was still approaching, and the two figures, the slow moving man and the motionless bull on the white sand, made an image fit for the painted wall of an ancient cave, the face of an imperial Roman coin, a Greek mosaic.

At last the bull's eyes understood that there were two objects before him: the man and the cape. Franz became still. He held the shawl motionless in his sun-browned fists and the wind hardly

stirred it. The veins in his forearm were swollen and bluish. His heels were together, his right leg tense, ready to stiffen when the bull charged. You stared with fear, Elizabeth, while Isabel, tittering, held back her laughter and Javier merely looked on. Franz had dominated the bull. Everything, the scent of the cows, the bellowing of the other bulls and the yearlings, the roar of the waterfall, had disappeared, and the bull had become deaf, completely hypnotized by the man and the black cape. The bull charged. His head lifted the cape and he swept past Franz, furiously hooking his horns to the right. Carried forward by his weight, the bull skidded to the end of the strip of sand and bellowed with pain as he fell. He rose again. For a second he tried to rest, but Franz was already pressing him, pinning him where he stood by repeating "Toro! Toro!" Franz's jaw protruded, his lips were parted stiffly. Both man and animal were wet with fear. Franz's shirt stuck to his back, the dust had whitened his leather shoes. Beneath his clothing his body could be seen stripped down to violence and tenseness, stripped to nerves and muscles and concentration.

Again the bull charged. Again his head and shoulders swept past Franz's sucked-in belly, again he lifted the cape with his neck in a movement that was fixed yet flexible. He was completely dominated now. This time he did not slide and fall; he whirled like a spark and charged a third time as Javier turned his back and walked to the Volkswagen, opened the door and sat behind the wheel and with all his strength pushed down on the horn. The horn blared, guttural, cutting, penetrating, filled the silent air with noise, and Javier stared through the dusty windshield and saw the bull make a new charge and the moment of danger when Franz, distracted by the horn a moment before the bull reacted to it, raised his head. The bull's head was wrapped in the black shawl. The cattle jerked into sound and movement. Nervous, bellowing, they tried to locate the source of the frightening horn. Javier continued to press down as sweat dripped from his forehead. Franz stood on the strip of sand still trying to hold the bull's attention, and beyond were the herd with their growing fear. The first to

move was a sandy-colored heifer who bellowed and turned; then a bull with a ragged hide and then all of them, bellowing, tossing their heads and snorting as fear ran from one to the other like an electric shock. Their sweat and slaver fell from them, urine dribbled, their bellies heaved. Some threw themselves into the river and were carried toward the falls. Others, caught up by terror, stampeded toward the far bank with their shoulders and horns bumping. Finally the bull facing Franz also caught the fear. He bellowed louder than any of them, shook his head crazily, and ran after the herd. The cattle reached the other side of the river and disappeared in a cloud of dust as they raced away from the lunatic racket of the horn.

Franz hung his head. You ran toward him, Elizabeth, and embraced him. Isabel smiled and walked to the car, where Javier, exhausted, was leaning forward upon the button of the still-sounding horn.

The ford was free. The bellowing and the sound of hooves became faint. The sun shone down on a green river of vague slime. Javier straightened and the horn stopped. Once again the chirruping of birds in the round trees across the river could be heard. Javier stepped out of the car and pushed the seat forward and got into the back seat. Isabel followed him. Her smile was hidden but showed in her mischievous eyes as she looked at Javier, trying to find the same amusement in him. You and Franz neared the car, Elizabeth. The two men had the same tenseness, the same serious pallor. To fight a bull: to rest a fist on the button of a horn.

"You put him in danger. Good God, didn't you know what you were doing?"

"It doesn't matter," said Franz. "He chased them away better than I did."

"Don't make excuses for him! What if they had stampeded toward us?"

"As it turned out, they didn't."

"And he distracted you. You could have been gored. What a difference then!"

"Honestly, it isn't important."

"My God, what a difference!"

Javier smiled at you, Elizabeth.

Franz started the engine. He drove forward without moving his head. His blue polo shirt was wet with sweat. His gray flannel trousers and his shoes were covered with dust.

Isabel whispered something.

"What?" said Javier.

You straightened Franz's corduroy coat on the back of the seat, Dragoness. His dark glasses fell out. You retrieved them and carefully cleaned them, using a handkerchief from your purse, and returned them to his pocket.

"This scene with the bulls," Isabel whispered in Javier's ear, smiling. "Why don't you write it."

"Isabel, Isabel," Javier said, almost groaning.

△ Javier had gone to sleep on the bed, Isabel, and you were reading his notebook and quietly humming "Moon River."

. . . But one must suspect that despite their apparent freedom and disinterest, all of the elements of the sky bow before the stone memory of the serpent that girds and imprisons the base of the altar. They were men. Where are they now? Does a hidden river of blood flow down the stairs? Stone cannot see, but the time that culminated here could see. And death can see. The water-sun flows over this world and its men die by drowning. The earth-sun—and I see you, sculptured earth that bears the weight of the pyramid, tilled earth as rigid as the fangs of the serpent in stone which will not endure so long as you—the earth-sun receives the blood. The fire-sun, above and within at the same time, consumes and murders. The air-sun, most ferocious of all, in its silence contains the others, earth, fire, and water. And where are you, you who were once living men? Come forth. Speak to me. What will you say? Look, eyes, and see. Don't lose a single heartbeat of this still living earth. We stand here, the four of us, facing your symbols, all that remains after the great conflagration of noon. Your symbols? And how are we different from you? Do we await, as you did, the cataclysm, the rupture of

the veil, the appearance of the twilight monsters who will devour us? And are they not always here among us? I draw closer. I touch the stone feathers . . .

Beside you Javier moved and you closed the notebook and looked over at him. He was sleeping the stupor of Cholula's afternoon. With one hand you covered your mouth to hold back your laughter as you read on:

. . . What beauty is this, and how does it differ from the beauty we know? Can you say? Yes: for us, our beauty is a model, an example to be followed, an incitement to transpose the model from its fixed expression into our own living experience. The example of art is held before us to be actualized again, though what we create may fall far short of the model, actualized in our daily life. Thus beauty ends up wasted in the merely fashionable. But the beauty I find here, this richness, this barbaric luxury of Xochicalco is something else. Something that is realized not as a model, not to be repeated, that indeed is incapable of further extension. The beauty of the barbaric ends in itself, lives in its distance from, not its identification with, life . . .

You could no longer restrain your laughter, Isabel. You say that it welled up from deep within you, from the very soles of your feet, and burst out, though you tried to stifle it with your hand and Javier's open notebook. You laughed so violently, though still silently, that the bed began to shake and Javier drowsily opened his eyes. Now you had no time to return the notebook to the night table. Javier opened his eyes and your laughter burst into sound and he could not understand it, and you, feeling caught, read aloud: "*You are in a moment when time seems to flee from you, yet stand still . . .*"

Javier stared at you, his mouth hanging open. He still did not understand. You scrambled up and knelt on the bed beside him and read again: "*The beginning and the end are identical, like the serpent . . .*" You went on rocking with laughter.

Javier lifted himself on his elbows and across his face ran every possible emotion. He loves me, he hates me, you said to yourself. I

please him. I humiliate him. I excite him. You read aloud a third time as he grabbed at your thigh and you jumped from the bed. *"And therefore there is neither beginning nor end but only an opaque and eternal nightmare during which one waits vainly . . ."*

He grunted and jumped after you. You had never seen him like that. But you still laughed as you spun away from him, escaping his lethargic hands: *" . . . waits for another dawn . . ."*

He leaped toward you and you fought back with the notebook, your mouth opened and your eyes shining. You dodged behind the table. Javier knocked the table over and you yelled something and ran swiftly toward the bed with the notebook between your hands. For the first time you were aware that you were naked. And he, just as naked, forgetting his flaccid exposed penis—that exhausted sunflower, Pussycat—and his flabby stomach, was seeing your nakedness for the first time, as if desire were being born again from his fury. You noticed something new in the swift rush of your blood, in the flush that spread over you as you stood there feeling fear for the first time, paralyzed, trapped, smelling all the smells that you had not left in the bathroom. He was attracted or even captured by those smells, you realized, and now only one decision was left to you, whether to walk to him and offer yourself quickly and quietly, or to stop and wait until he felt himself to be master of the situation simply because you were doing nothing. You say that you did not even turn your back on him, you continued facing him, so that he could see and feel your fear. But ah, Isabel, you understood that even that movement would have petrified him and made him see that you knew exactly what was happening. No, you didn't move. You stood there, rigid and motionless, the notebook in your hands, trying to disappear without daring to close your eyes. You were an ostrich with its head sunk in who knows what dark sands of your body. You were a chameleon, trying to take on the transparent color of the air. And he walked toward you as if you were not really there and as he embraced you, sluggishly, almost like a child, almost helplessly, you were aware of his nakedness too and that he smelled of something sour and spoiled. He took your shoul-

ders and turned you until your back was against his chest, your damp hair, of black sand, against his face. His hand spread your buttocks, first very gently. Then the fingers stiffened and entered your anus and the sand of your hiding place broke apart and you were concealed no longer as the opening that had been dry and tense now softened to a melted, smooth stickiness. He passed his other hand forward between your legs and rubbed your clitoris. You bent like a stretched bow, Isabel, and fell on the bed face down, already lost in a dark forest of salty flowers and rotted ferns and damp roots. The fish, hard as silver, as glass, sought its stinking algae. Now there were no secrets. The mine had been opened and pierced to its deepest, rose and black gallery. Your ultimate shame had been uncovered and the conquest had turned you into a statue of salt. Nevertheless, it was your victory, one that you had forced upon him without saying it or wishing it, making him believe that he had accomplished what in reality was the consequence of the strength of your passivity, that enduring strength you had never before put to the proof and that now had made him reveal himself in the act of sodomy, made him destroy with each thrust and withdrawal, telling you by his violent panting that now the words and apologies were behind, literature had ended, there was only this ultimate liberty which you granted with clenched teeth and a pain like that of giving birth. It was new for both of you, yet you understood quite clearly what was happening to you for the first time at the age of twenty-three. He himself had let you read the explanation not long after you had first met him, back during those days when he still behaved as if you were only another student he had seduced, a girl who wanted to receive not his love but his knowledge. They were words written in the same blue notebook that now had fallen from your hands:

. . . Perhaps then, when I first met Ligeia, the tenderness that Isabel thinks is enough for her and enough for a lover would have been enough for me too. But she doesn't understand. She doesn't realize that a writer's entire life is like some absorbing novel read in the small hours of the morning during adolescence,

read just as dawn breaks, a novel with the title *Lost Illusions*. It is a bitter and sad paradox that in attempting to say everything, to give everything its meaning, one ends by emptying all life of what meaning it has naturally and by coming to see that after all nothing can be said through the cold and artificial forms of literature. When did I discover this? Was it the very vulgarity of a vender of figs, skinny and penniless, who was forced off a beach by the owners of a restaurant? Was it my refusal to see her searching helpless eyes, to allow her and her problems to break the delicate balance between imagination and act that I had come to the islands to find? Was it losing Ligeia's collection of little pebbles? Why did I let all that distract me from my central passion, my poem, from the concentration of my purpose? What did my poem have to do with an old woman who sold figs, or with colored pebbles, or even with Ligeia? My unity was overcome by divisiveness: words could not conquer the fragmentation of reality, a fragmentation that was there already, before I tried to write it. Then once again only the determination to make everything fixed, and again the failure to fix the past, to devour the present, to accept all of the future's premonitions. *Moi, j'aurais porté toute une société dans ma tête? Ah, ha, ha . . .*

"God, what a difference!"

"You found it so different? It really surprised you? Yet it didn't last long. How long does it take for an effrontery imposed upon the body to wear off? By contrast with what I have wanted to share with you, and you have never understood, what does this matter?"

. . . To struggle with a fleshless enemy. Never to know whether abstention rather than the work in progress is the sure way. I must think this through. How do you live suspended in air, uncertain of the real value of what you do and what you cease to do? If to act is to fail, and to abstain is to succeed because abstention leaves at least a mark of protest, then how can one describe an epoch that ought to be left undescribed? For this monstrosity of an era should not be allowed to leave any of its demented words for the ear of posterity . . .

"Would you laugh at me, Ligeia? Yes, you would. You can't understand."

. . . From our first years together I always understood that the meaning of our age is to be found in taking all meaning away from it. The absurd. That is to be Byron today . . . and every effort to answer that deafness with a creative effort, a book or a painting or a score, is to cooperate with an era that deserves only its silence. The artist's work must remain within him and never be given light. To hand it over to those who do not deserve it is obvious weakness. So long as we do not share our work, our work can have value, that is the precondition for value today. Within me, within *me*: the whole struggle. The meeting between what I feel intuitively and what I understand. The bridge of my spirit, to be crossed only by my spirit. Within *me* the debate between the tradition's conventions, the strength of one century become the limitations and debilities of the next. Within *me* the search for the absolute, the failure of incompleteness, the creation of that incompleteness which, simply because it is all that can be attained, is converted into my tiny absolute. Within *me* the giants disguised as windmills: no one will ever believe that they are giants, that the insane has become the rational because it alone sees what reasonable fools cannot see. To hold faith: not to express anything, not to reveal anything. Not to expose ourselves, neither to attrition before dogma nor to the diminution of mere indifference: why should what we have be taken from us to be destroyed and prostituted? Better silence. Always silence, if we prefer not to accept the corruption of those who insist we be what we are not, and of those others who isolate us and gnaw upon us and render us harmless. I don't know. I don't want to look behind me. I don't live in some other century but in this one, a time that assassinates with prison or with success, that destroys with the gallows or with applause, that, whether it accepts or refuses what we write, nevertheless always attacks and annihilates us. There is no way out. So long as our age of ironic barbarism endures, we must hold fast and sing the panegyric of a society that insists upon being called holy, or hold fast and serve the grindstone wheels of that other society which already feels itself to be holy because it distributes refrigerators liberally. There's no solution. No one wants our work. Everyone demands us to be high priests, acolytes of the great cults. Who will save himself? He who must sing the glories of labor or he who must sing the glories of the products of labor? There is no way out. Better to keep silent.

"That is the heroism that you never recognize in me, Ligeia. Ah. It would be more heroic then to write, write, write, but never to publish, to hold back waiting for a better era. I don't know. Ask me some day and see if then I answer you. For now I don't know. Honestly, I do not know. Believe me."

"Javier," you whispered in his ear, Pussycat, as the car moved across the ford.

"What?"

"This scene with the bulls," you smiled. "Why don't you write it?"

△ "Javier? Are you here? Put on the light, I can't see the bed. That goddamn mania you have for always drawing the curtains. Or is it night already? Javier, are you here? Did you take your blessed Nembutal? Okay, okay, if you don't want to answer, I don't really care." For whether or not he was there, sleeping or paying you no attention, it was all the same. It made no difference at all.

You know, Dragoness, some actions lead to a magnificent absence of conclusions: nothingness is the real value of certain moments in life. And you say to Javier, who perhaps is not even in the room, that following the incident of your opening his letter, for many months you and he lived a suspended kind of life that consisted indeed of desiring and awaiting, but each alone and separately. You would like to recall it clearly, for it was the bridge across time that led you—little by little, of course, with all the fine gradations, the dead moments and the stretched ones, that one could ask for—to what you live and are today. Says who, eh? Greece, your return, the first months in Mexico City, when the war began, those days remained behind you, pushed back by a desire you both shared but neither mentioned aloud: to attain some new discovery that would not suppress but sharpen your passion. As you put it, Ship ahoy, to graduate and join the Navy. If the road toward that waiting and unknown truth was a time of imperceptible change, slow, marked by an absence of visible events, yet you walked it together. You can confess that when the change came,

you were both hoping that it would be an explosion that would blow your lives up and split them apart.

"No, it wasn't like that. It was never like that. What can I know about him? I speak for myself alone."

You speak for the silent although smiling breakfasts during which you waited without daring to drink your coffee, driven by God knows what need to preserve the surface of all those actions that concealed the happiness and the desperation of your desire. You would put the slices of bread in the toaster . . .

". . . Adjust the heat, serve marmalade on the little plates. When the toast was ready, I would smear it with butter, and all the time, every morning, I waited for you to speak, to ask something of me, and you went on reading the newspaper in silence—and I shall never forget the names in those black headlines: Rundstedt, Wavell, Gamelin, Timoshenko—reading, sometimes smiling at me as in silence I implored you to tell me what you saw when you walked the city, how your writing was going, begged you to let me read what you wrote as you used to . . ."

"Do you remember Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Ligeia? I want to find something like that. To give the city its echo in poetry."

After breakfast he would go out to wander the city in search of the sounds he wanted to echo. And you would go out and walk too.

"Yes, like you, I would go out and walk alone. But we didn't walk the same parts of the city. I confined myself to our neighborhood, to the streets near Reforma. Reforma between Chapultepec and the Cuauhtémoc circle . . ."

. . . was your limited area. The length of the dusty promenade—today it is concrete—beneath the ash trees, past streets that in those days were quiet, past elaborate residences dating back to the turn of the century and boasting relief decorations of urns and vines, some boasting mansard roofs that awaited snow that would never come, carriage gates painted green, white-framed French windows, stone balustrades around the level roofs, up the steep steps to the reception floor. Damp cellars, servants standing in the

half-opened doors, elderly inhabitants passing in and out in their elderly expensive cars, a Pierce-Arrow, an Isotta-Fraschini, a Rolls with fringed red-velvet cushions and much luster of gold, passing through wide green gates into the parklike gardens, invisible from the street because of the high walls, of manicured lawn and tall palms. It was a Mexico City you did not know, a disappearing Mexico City, a quarter from the past which had been reserved for you and welcomed you, defended you from the city you feared, that you knew only by fragmentary hurried glimpses caught while you were on your way to a movie downtown or to some restaurant: the shadowed city of hard faces, Dragoness, of criminal eyes, scars, misfortunes, curt and injurious speech, a city always near violence: Mesones, San Juan de Letrán, La Moneda, Corregidora, Argentina, Guerrero, Peralvillo: where the city's sleeping lions lie, the buyers and sellers of pot and horse, the women of the night who chew our language and spit it back at us transformed, our bat-breed. The bullfights, the cabarets, the cheap movie houses, the vaudeville theaters of that time, all these made you afraid, Dragoness. I know, oh, don't I know. You always felt that you were followed and spied upon, feared that the muttered compliment of some man who watched you pass might change, without the slightest hesitation, into an act of blood. You doubted your physical integrity: it was as if those glassy eyes, eyes not only of the staring men but of the women and children too, could see more about you than you knew yourself. It was as if they were all diviners and magicians, those dark-skinned millions with their intolerable passivity, their sudden violence, their unhappy smiles, their jeering sadness, their brutality and rancor; it was as if they were the priests of a magic that could turn a simple crossing of glances into some petty death, some destiny as shadowy as that carried in their dark eyes, their callused hands, their thick lips, in their centuries of humiliation and frustrated revenge.

"I think sometimes that all Mexicans just want to get even."

No, you did not have to go to their haunts and lairs. You could remain far from them, in a neighborhood that at that time was

peaceful. Soon the impoverished old families would sell their homes and Niza, Hamburgo, Génova, and Londres would become streets of fashionable restaurants, expensive shops, cabarets, and open-air cafés, a prowling ground for Lancias and Jaguars and vampires in black sweaters and black net stockings and immigrant gringos and the existential heroes of the Café Tirol and the Kinneret, those careful and impatient revolutionaries who make the revolution inside themselves in order to get it over and done with the quicker. And even then these streets would remain for you a barrier against the gangrenous darker city, the hovels of mud and galvanized iron, the bare feet, the scabies, the hands searching through trash and garbage, the black eyes with their criminal or scatological or magical purposes.

"Every Mexican's look has three possibilities. To kill or to undress or to bless. You had a question to ask of the city, Javier, but you didn't get an answer. The city had not changed, but you changed. Only a year and a half ago we came home to the apartment late one night and we met a death that didn't need to happen. That was what I thought. But you thought that it was a necessary death precisely because it was so trivial. I saw the boy's body lying there against the door of our building. I didn't know how to respond to it . . ."

No, Dragoness, for you Yankees have made it a law that in order to show respect for death, one must not know how to react to it. Above all, one must be shocked, believe that death has broken something and that it will break those who contemplate it. Above all, one must have no answer for death.

"I didn't know what to say. And before I said anything, I was filled with pain."

Yes, Elizabeth. Pain must be silent at first. Later it may howl, but not immediately. Suffer. Then you have the right to talk about suffering. Be the suffering as little as a chance corpse on your doorstep, or as much as a chance cancer in your guts, don't speak about it until you know it.

"You felt no pain, Javier. I think you felt nothing at all. He was

lying in front of the door of our apartment house in his stocking feet, yes, his shoes were gone, and the knife was still in him and his eyes were wide open. I looked around us as if to make sure I knew where we were. The bookstore that stayed open until midnight, Durrell's *Quartet* in the display window along with *Hopscotch*, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, and *The Mind of an Assassin*, the mind of the man who murdered Trotsky. What a laugh: the mind of an assassin. And Trotsky had been killed a year or two after we came back from Europe. I remember his picture in the paper, his head bandaged, no glasses, his little white goatee, dead. And the ciné-club of the French Institute, where we had gone together to see *An Andalusian Dog* and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. A tailor's shop. On the corner, a bakery, and in front of the door of our building, the body with the knife in it. We had spent the evening dancing the twist in a cabaret on San Juan de Letrán. Some of your students had persuaded you to take me along because they were sure I had to be an expert at the twist, and we had danced all evening while the voice at the microphone repeated endlessly, *twist again like we did last summer, twist again like we did last night*, until we were sick of it and our arms ached and the muscles of our bellies were sore, the right leg stiff with the foot gyrating about itself, the hips moving in the opposite direction, the arms holding still a third rhythm, *twist again like we did last summer*. But last summer we were not twisting, goddamn it, last summer we were young, we were in the islands and we loved each other. And the other last summer we weren't twisting either: we were making love, fucking to kill time and reading Robert Lowell and Octavio Paz and William Styron and the afternoon showers came along and we were tired of reading and you came to me already stiff and I was waiting for you and we made love as if I were a bitch in heat, without really wanting it, just smelling of it and needing it, expecting it of the summer, the long rainy afternoons, the sultry and brown-faced afternoons of Mexico City, fucking because fucking was better than getting drunk or running out for some goddamn pill of yours, last summer we made love and twenty-five years ago

in Greece we made love and the day they killed Trotsky too . . .”

And here you can have another quote, Elizabeth. Catch! *Oh, Mexico City, if all your sewers were scents and your modern apartments lost their cracks, would your women cease to look so sad, your men so silly?**

“But when autumn finally came,” you went on, letting yourself fall on the squeaky bed and reflecting that if you turned on the light you would merely see again the smears on the wall left by the dead fleas and the bisexual snails, “when autumn did come, we didn’t remember it. It didn’t matter to us, despite the fact of there being no seasons in this damn country and every hour being exactly like every other hour . . .”

A plateau that is either dry dust or dust lashed by rain. A place where time curls up, Elizabeth, with its teeth sunk in its tail, like the serpent at Xochicalco.

“This damn country where you brought me, Javier, and made me lose the seasons I loved so. The different clothing. The changing hours for meals. Oh, how I miss it! To wear white dresses through a summer that is really a summer. To put on a tailored wool suit for an autumn that is really an autumn. To buy snow boots for winter. In the spring to go shopping for a straw hat with ribbons . . . You made me lose my changing weather until I stopped even remembering it. You made me come to believe that summer with its rains is a real season, the season when you used to be horny and I would be forced to respond with an excitement that, that . . .

△ Rain began to fall in the patio of the old house on Calzada del Niño Perdido. Javier closed his book and rested his elbows on the railing. July’s shower redeemed the hot morning that preceded it and the lichens dampened and the geraniums began to droop, humble and grateful, beneath the silent quick rain. He had just finished reading one of Byron’s letters: *Passion is the element in which we live; without it, we hardly even vegetate*. The only sound was water running toward the drain in the center of the patio. He

* Who said MAILER, brethren? If we were born to die!

turned up the lapels of his coat but decided not to go into the house, though he knew that Ofelia was there waiting for him, tonight as every night, that she was seated in the living room and soon, roused by his tardiness, would come to the hall door and wait behind it, this evening as every evening, wait for him to keep his promise and come in and spend half an hour with her before dinner. He opened the book again and sat under the naked light and the buzzing mosquitoes, opened the book so that she, hiding behind the door with an incomprehensible presentiment, with a long-ing fear, would see him occupied and he, when the meal came that he had forbidden himself to miss, would have a concrete excuse for being late.

"I've been thinking," he said as Ofelia served the tamales and the watered wine. "What are we doing living in this house? We really ought to sell it."

"When I am dead, sell it. Not before."

"When *we* are dead," Javier said, simply to introduce the prohibited "we," the "we" of the time before.

"Look," Raúl said, running his index finger across the wet front page of the newspaper. "It says that the Cristeros are the ones who have been blowing up the railroad tracks. Now, there you are. How is a good Catholic businessman going to make a living when it's the Cristeros themselves who keep us from working? I'll be damned if I can understand anything that happens in this country. Why don't they let decent people work in peace? I don't understand a damn thing. Why kill priests and blow up trains?"

"Javier, don't walk with your hands in your pockets. It looks very ugly."

"Who's going to buy anything when the country is in such confusion?" said Raúl as he turned the pages of the Montgomery Ward catalogue. "Yesterday I was asked to cancel an order for transformers. Last week, the irons I ordered didn't come." He loosened his suspenders. "Figure it yourself. Five hundred pesos less this month, for sure."

"Enough!"

"Ofelia . . . What . . . ?"

"Enough, be quiet!" She turned her back to them and retreated into the shadows she herself had created in this house of drawn curtains and padlocked doors. Ofelia, his mother, at that time still slender, her face pale and her features still attractive, even though nagging. Raúl looked at him questioningly.

"Now what the hell have I done? I must have done something . . . I don't understand . . ."

"Javier, go to your room."

"Damn it, Ofelia, the boy's thirteen now!"

She ran out of the living room with her closed fist over her lips, and Raúl, shaking his head and plodding heavily, followed her.

That was what he was used to: the whisper of voices which although distant were never alien, voices that were suppressed to make their absence habitual, a different kind of presence in a world that had to give itself order behind its four walls if it was to oppose the chaotic violence and brutality beyond and surrounding it. Ofelia was to tell him this, though not in the same words, shortly before her death: she had wanted to overcome the anarchy of the country in those years by countering it with a shield of domestic calm behind which he could grow up protected and secure, behind which his childhood, a time that sooner or later he would want to return to and would not be able to except in memory, could be prolonged. And he, when he wrote his first book, the book he began that same evening after hearing Raúl talk about blown-up railroad tracks and cancelled orders, he wrote about that closed-off and isolated world, perhaps because it was the only world he wanted to write about or could write about then, the only one he knew. He wrote about the world of his childhood and about the way our energy is spent and wasted by the emotional erosion of daily life. If he had only been able to negate himself in that world, to remain silent himself, to accept without protest the reprimands and punishments he received when he refused to answer the prying questions that drained away his strength, where had he gone, with whom had he gone, what had he done, what was he thinking. But to have been that enduring and perfect he would have had to cease

to be what he was. That was what he said in his first book, and in each of its poems he probed the events of day-to-day existence in a dialogue between reason and will from which reason emerged the victor precisely because it could not understand what was happening around it. And thus those poems, new and virginal, fresh and solitary, built of the artificial shadows in his home, built of Sundays beside the lake in the park and walking the lonely streets and listening to the organ-grinder and watching the servant girls, built of Raúl's smells, tobacco and shaving soap, and of Ofelia's face of a little girl grown old: thus his poems came to hold the truth, the mistaken certainty, of adolescence, the truth reason speaks when it tells the certain lie that it must supply order to the world if the world is incomprehensible. But only a world that cannot be understood, neither at its irrational edges nor in its core, can be an object to be acted upon by the will, the strength of maturity.

"Did I escape from it, Ligeia? Tell me, please. I ask you today with words, but I have been asking you silently since the first day I met you and told myself that you possessed what I lacked, the will to leave the patio and the shadows of the house and go out into the world and there recover the strength that had been robbed from me by Raúl and Ofelia. That was why I fell in love with you . . ."

"Your trouble is simple. You want to understand everything, and to do nothing. No, Javier. I'm too tired."

"We might sell the house," Raúl whispered.

Ofelia's voice turned shrill. "No! It's his only illusion! I won't take it away from him!"

But it was not his illusion but hers. The voices became faint again as Ofelia put her finger to her lips. It was an illusion that would remain silent and motionless because elegance demanded silence and stillness, that would remain a way of belonging rather than of being until one day, crystalline and brittle, it would break forever. The woman of fifty with the face of a contrite young girl would say later that nothing had been important except their decision to hold on, even if what they were holding to was merely appearances. "I was not going to allow you to attend public school and grow up unprepared for life, with no manners . . . No!"

He noticed that that Christmas Raúl wanted to be closer to her and bought her a new dress. But when he approached her, he could only embrace her and then step back with his hands on her shoulders, shy, tender, mute, without kissing her. Neither did she kiss him. With a tired smile she thanked him and after the meal she went out as usual to return three or four hours later fresh, revived, and one day Raúl did not appear for supper and then there were two mysteries. Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory, Holy Father. Hosanna in the highest. In that other time.

△ Sure, let him give thanks if he wants to for the beginnings of another dry and long and timeless time when he can use his endless words. For you only the rainy months are different: a line drawn in the dust which you welcome, Elizabeth, because you need dates, frontiers of time to cross and leave behind, in order to assure yourself that you still preserve the strength of your youth.

"And that's what we live for. Nothing else. Are you listening to me, Javier? I tell you that's all, and if you don't believe me, then ship ahoy, graduate and join the Navy. Okay, okay, hold your horses."

We live only to store up strength that will allow us to sustain our postures during old age. Everything is a remnant of youth, something saved from that which was not for its own sake but for the sake of what it was going to become. Good night, sweet prince: life is usury. Well, usury or not, life is for you definitely not anonymous death on the sidewalk before a glass and concrete apartment building, a modern building that was divided up into apartments when it was first constructed, not, like the old homes, years afterward. For you, that is, life is not death. But for Javier death is life. His answer to the body on the sidewalk was in his eyes before his eyes saw the body, a dead lump thrown there before your building. He already knew what to say because he had said it and written it a thousand times, that that dead lump or any other dead lump on the sidewalk before any building is living, still a part of life as it dies. You saw how he looked at the corpse. His eyes thanked it for

being there face down, stabbed through, its tongue lapping the puddle of its own blood.

"You thanked him because it was he who was dead and not you, Javier. That was it. That's why all of you in Mexico carry that expression in your eyes. You are all always expecting and waiting for the act or the accident that will eliminate someone else instead of you. That's all. And so silently you were telling that poor defunct cadaver, as my *caifán* friend would put it, that his death was the . . ."

The most important event in his life. Of course, Dragoness, though neither you nor any of your countrymen understand it. To commit murder or to be murdered is to acquire a value which our other life, our life of breathing, digesting, moving, cannot afford. You know, Elizabeth, there's something I've been wanting to explain to you . . .

"Who was he? Did he have a name? I suggested that we telephone the police immediately. You looked at me with pity, Javier, and said no, we were not going to call the police. I didn't understand. I knew nothing about it. Juan Jiménez or Pedro López, a mechanic or a cab driver or a pimp or a civil servant, married, single, old, young, happy or beset by misfortune, was lying there stiffening and still bleeding, living, you told me, the most important event of his life without even knowing it. And you and I were his only witnesses, as if he had died merely for you and me to see him. But what did he know about our presence and our certainty that he was dead."

It's a myth, Elizabeth. Listen now. How could he be grateful to you and Javier for knowing that at its end his life had finally accomplished that other act, the only act of value since the moment he had emerged wet and blind between the legs of his mother? I tell you it is simply an old and familiar myth. You know in advance how it will end. Ulysses will return to Ithaca. Penelope will be faithful to her weaving. Medea will murder her own children. What do you expect?

"You squeezed my hand. You told me that the dead man before us was finally alive. That all the dead are living."

That you were observing a vital, not a mortal, rearrangement of the relationships the man held with the world. That his murder had given value to a being who had no other value. That you should forget your simple logic: life is good, death ends life, therefore death is bad. That we deceive ourselves when we think we achieve a revenge or inflict a punishment when we murder a man. That the murdered man had not died because he lacked the words to persuade his murderer not to do it, to substitute words for death. No, not even that. He had been murdered because his murderer wanted to give him the totality of life. His murderer in killing him had done him a favor.

"We stepped across the body. You yawned. You opened the door and silently we went up to our apartment. The board squeaked just as always. You said that you had decided not to go to the office tomorrow. And when tomorrow came, you didn't even listen to me when I brought in the afternoon paper and read aloud about the murder. His name was Enrique Rocha. A medical student. A couple had been standing on the sidewalk kissing and a cop came along and told them to break it up. Enrique Rocha, who just happened to be passing, asked the cop what the hell difference did it make whether or not they were kissing on the sidewalk? Let him mind his own business and leave lovers in peace. In peace, Javier, in peace. The cop swung at Enrique Rocha and Enrique defended himself. The cop pulled out a knife and stabbed him. The couple who had been kissing ran off but today they decided to tell their story. The cop fled after robbing the dying medical student of his shoes. Today he is hiding somewhere. They're looking for him, they'll find him, and then they'll let him go."

So the student was outfielded by the old man with the scythe, and the copper skipped. That's the way it always goes, Dragoness. Ciao, Enrique Rocha. Bye-bye, copper. It's myth, Elizabeth. Pure myth.

"So you had been right. I wanted to call the police and you wouldn't let me. Enrique Rocha? A medical student? No. Simply an abstract being who discovered as he lay there, with his mouth

open and his eyes open and the knife in his guts, that in Mexico death is alive."

Javier laughed: "And you wanted me to call the police!"

He laughed a long time and my eyes wandered around our apartment, the same apartment we had taken so many years ago when we returned from Europe and the same one we have today, except that today it is joined to the next apartment: we had the wall torn down and made the two into one, spacious and comfortable, when we returned to Mexico for the second time in 1950. How many things remain that we had in the beginning? I don't know. Sometimes I feel sad touching the old sandalwood bookcase, now out of sight in the maid's room, used to keep linen. When I rub my fingers over the bindings of the old secondhand books we bought and loved in those days. *Faust* translated by Nerval. Do you remember it? Kleist's *Penthesilea*. Even a life of Byron by Maurois that we picked up from an old bookseller on the Quai Voltaire. Second-hand, the Grasset edition, wrapped in cellophane that was supposed to make it look newer and that gave a devilish glitter to Byron's face on the cover. Some of those books are gone now, you've taken them away, leaving gaps. And our posters we threw out with the trash, silently, a little ashamed, when they began to be tattered. The poster of bright flags and a fantastic nude surrounded by puffy shadows. That of the red-faced beer drinker clad in black. The Yugoslav peasant woman, thin as the spire of a cathedral. Moreau, Hals, Meštrović. And the clothing, the suits, shoes, underwear, and the combs, vases, the leather cases, the sheets, towels, even the silver and china, everything leaves us, disappears so silently and gradually that we are not even aware. I used to like to smell your towel when you dried yourself after your shower. Today so little is left. Almost nothing except the books. The books we have kept; when we traveled, they traveled with us. We packed them in wooden boxes lined with newspaper and nailed the boards down and shipped them to Argentina when our money ran out and you took that job in the diplomatic service.

△ Your head rolled to the left until it leaned on Franz's shoulder. He looked away from the road and glanced at you. The ash-gray hair that you color afresh each night using a lacquer dye, not a real dye, and an atomizer; you could wash the gray out any time you cared to and make your hair a different color. Your half-open mouth, wide, the lips full. Your plucked eyebrows. Your large, aquiline nose, the nostrils dilated a little. Your closed eyes. Gray eyes, Elizabeth, that change colors as the hours of the day change. Your broad strong hands. Your arms, crossed beneath the black shawl. Your white blouse, your tamarind-colored skirt, the glistening stockings, the low-heeled shoes. Franz looked at you and you opened your eyes and his head turned back to his driving.

"By repeated crime, even a queen survives her little time."

△ Your times with Franz have all been like this twilight in Cholula. When he looked at you in the car this morning, you opened your eyes and returned his look but rather than seeing him you were remembering him, as though to you his present moment were, because of your memories, a kind of longing for the past that Franz himself once explained by reading aloud a beautiful letter of Freud's you showed him in a biography: "Strange and secret desires emerge inside me—perhaps from my ancestral heritage—toward the Orient and the Mediterranean and a very different life; desires from the close of infancy that will never be fulfilled, that do not conform to reality." Well, Elizabeth, what do you know about this man who awakens in you strange and secret desires? That he came to Mexico after the war, that for some time he worked as a mechanic, that today he is a salesman in an agency that sells European cars. You met him little more than a year ago. You arrived alone at a Cuevas show where Javier had agreed to meet you. You were looking at and admiring a sepia drawing of the Marquis de Sade and his family, an obscene, peaceful intimacy of the sort we can be rescued from only by the devil or a clown, and Sade as Cuevas had depicted him was both: the devil-clown, as though

Chaplin and Mephistopheles had joined hands to create a new being, a saintly criminal, an erotic ascetic, an assassin who gives birth, a liberator who tyrannizes. You shuffled names—the famous who constitute your kudos—and with Cuevas repeated Buster Keaton and Boris Karloff, Tod Browning and Jean Genet, George Grosz and Al Capone. You were not attempting to justify yourself or to become one with the age; you were merely taking pleasure in the awareness that incompatibles no longer exist, that the old Manichaeism which has led us by the split nose since the time of Plato, obliging us always to make choices, always to create blacks and whites, has taken a step that cannot be reversed toward the only position that matters today: a position not midway between external good and evil, objective, clearly separated, but between the moral options that are found only in subjective unity: the evil, he said, is not to be a thief but to be a petty pickpocket; not to be a murderer but to be an incompetent murderer.

“And if they capture you?” you asked, opening your eyes wide.

“That makes no difference. Every murderer wants to be captured, even compels his capture. But the bad murderer lets himself be captured merely through negligence. He is a good murderer if he is discovered despite his professional competence, knowing that he *must* be judged because that is part of the dialectic of the myth, required in order to fulfill the legendary beauty of redemption. Raskolnikov. And then his every act becomes important and meaningful.”

“Like Monsieur Verdoux.”

“Exactly. There you have the clown-criminal, the juggler-murderer whose being is a fusion of opposites.”

And Franz, beside you, merely said: “We can commune only with our opposites.”

△ Franz lay beside you on the thin hard mattress in the hotel in Cholula, whistled the Merry Widow Waltz, and from time to time spoke, coldly, distantly, almost curtly, a word at a time, now and then whistling again to space out his narrative:

"We were students of architecture. But music was our passion. Those were good days. Youth. Mugs of beer. Talk, talk, talk until dawn. Schultzie. How we used to laugh with Schultzie, the waitress in the rathskeller. We'd pinch her behind. We'd laugh. She wore no panties. In our honor, she said. So that we could pinch her as we pleased. That was what she said. She served us beer. Beer, beer. And we were studying architecture but our love was music. *Can-tata 106. Actus Tragicus. Ein Deutsches Requiem. Tristan*. That was happiness. More beer. A round for the whole house. White sausages with yellow mustard. The *Dreigroschenoper* came to Munich. Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne. Ulrich suggested we go to Albertstrasse. Heinrich didn't want to. He finally confessed he had the clap. We laughed and laughed, but Heinrich cried. Schultzie rubbed his head. She told him to pinch her and cheer up. We ate marinated herring. Den man Mackie Messer nennt. We went to the theater, the three of us. The shark has teeth. Heinrich stomped out before the third act ended. We found him in a nearby beer hall. He was furious. Brecht was an anarchist. An enemy. We saw Schultzie walk by without her cap and apron. She didn't greet us."

He turned the knob of his transistor radio. Stately, solemn music. "Hah," He chuckled. "Brahms in Holy Week." You listened, lying naked beside him while night fell over Cholula. You looked at him questioningly, dubiously. "Of course I recognize it," he said, answering your eyes. "I've heard it a dozen times in the garden of the Wallenstein Palace. In the evening. Sitting on a folding chair. Almost darkness. Looking without much attention toward the baroque portico. Between the columns, very slender columns, Elizabeth, were the orchestra, the soloists, the chorus. Figures that in a certain way complemented the architecture. An eighteenth-century palace. At the beginning, each time, maybe I wasn't really listening. Just remembering what I had been taught. Brahms found his title in an old notebook of his teacher, Schumann. That sort of thing. Thinking more than listening. And not noticing that something else, a girl's hair, had caught and was holding my attention. Then afterward, everything flowed together. The

darkness. The graveled path crunching beneath my feet. The bells of the Mala Strana . . .”

In the darkness of Prague's night, the bells of the Mala Strana are tolling. One, two, strongly. Three, softly. Four, five, the deep penetrating response. He ascends through a tunnel of light to a garden higher than the level of the street. Another baroque palace, long abandoned. Decapitated statues and black cherubin scattered without order, sacks of lime and heaps of coal piled against them. *Brahms found his title in 1856, he repeats to himself. Then he worked on the Requiem for ten years.* He knows that there are passageways from courtyard to courtyard, palace to palace, and if he hears footsteps behind him on the gravel, he is no more frightened today that he was at the age of seven when he first began to discover this city, a city that like no other seems to have been built by the lightest and most mysterious of fantasies. He knows that when he reaches the end of the maze of walks and corridors, Prague will lie before him, and he feels himself master of the old palaces, of the spacious darkness; he walks along humming the first movement. *Each movement has three parts: a masterpiece of balance and tripartite symmetry.* He comes out on a terrace with stone balustrades from which he sees rows and rows of houses and also the Vltava, a strip of silver fixed between its bridges; and farther, beyond the green cupolas and the brown towers, is the forest. Yes, there are steps behind him. In the white summer night he stares at the lamps on the roof of Czerny Palace. *And if Mozart holds to the Latin of the liturgy, Brahms writes his Requiem in German.* The balustrades of the Church of Loreto show a dance of cherubim who sustain the holy shields above the entrance. The angels are cupids with halos of black iron. The cloister has a chapel with the remains of old frescoes and a golden altar among the sunflowers and the dry grass. The gravel paths have baroque statues: centurions, angels, a dancing Christ. Is he aware of the shadow that follows him? He will not stop, will not turn. Standing in the churchyard, in the warm darkness, in a rich moment into which is fused everything he loves, the city, the music, the old buildings, the

darkness itself, he hums and does not look back. *It is disorderly order that permits an infinity of approaches. Yet the classical element limits the levels of comprehension and makes them rational. A musical prayer that now is not for the dead threatened with the horrors of final judgment, but for the living who must accept suffering and death.* The steps behind follow him to the greenhouses beyond the churchyard, greenhouses no higher than the earth itself. Then a street, the street lamps black iron columns with the lamps grouped around them. He walks slowly past wooden gates and white passageways with small asymmetrical doors; he slows still more and the steps behind him stop, a girl's steps, her heels tapping the paving stones of Loretanzka Street. He turns, looking about him at the painted façade of the Museum of Arms, the stone gladiators with their maces and daggers, the dripping mouths of the gargoyles, the covered stairs and the iron railings, the motionless hanging clothes, the great walls, the Christ which serves as a drain for the water flying on the tower. He goes on, down toward the river and the bridge, humming, looking at the paving stones under his feet, thinking that *in 1639 Heinrich Schütz composed the first Mass for the dead to have a German text, a Teutsche Begräbniss-Missa; Bach's Cantata 106 unites old hymns, biblical texts, and texts by the composer himself; but where Bach writes of the charity and help of a Redeemer who guides dead souls to a better world, Brahms avoids the name of Christ entirely. Brahms's German Requiem ends as it begins: the first movement and the seventh are identical; the content of the second movement reappears, more vigorously organized, in the sixth: in the second, the dance of death gives way to a hymn of happiness, while in the sixth, the mourning uncertainty opens upon a serene vision of the Last Judgment, and the movement ends with a powerful, glorious Handelian double fugue. Only the third and fifth movements begin with solo voices. In the third the voice is that of desperate, suffering man; in the fifth it is the consoling voice of a woman.* He stopped, in sight of the bridge. The steps following him had already become something familiar and accustomed. He stopped in

the square before the bridge and saw a blind man with a white cane waiting for the last trolley and turned around until he saw her, stopped also. She walked forward into the dim greenish light of the lamps on the bridge. He waited. She made a gesture that was partly fearful, partly shy. A dark beret. Lustrous dark bobbed hair. A short jacket, a skirt belted around her thighs. A handbag of glossy beads which she was carrying near her breasts. *The third movement begins with the words "He passed by like a shadow" and the orchestration is light and the melody is passed from instrument to instrument . . .*

She smiled shyly and at last spoke: "It's . . . it's that I've seen you every time there's been a concert in the Wallenstein gardens." She hesitated, then continued haltingly, "Do you . . . do you have a season ticket?"

He laughed and said yes, he did, but she was already going on: "It's . . . Well, I saw you always alone and I realized that after the concert you would walk the streets and . . . Forgive me . . . I never know what to do after the concert and I thought . . . you seem so . . . so immersed in the music, and I . . ."

"You thought that . . ."

"Yes. Yes, that maybe if I walked the streets too, like you . . ."

"The music might be prolonged a little?"

"Yes, that too. And . . ."

"And we could walk together?"

She blushed and smiled and timidly extended her hand.

"Hanna. Hanna Werner."

"Franz Jelinek. Would you like me to walk you home?"

"No, please, that would be too much trouble. I'm going to the other side, to the old city."

"That's where I live too."

The Karlsbrücke is long and beautiful. In the summer night its lamps are less luminous than the sky and succeed only in creating shadows from the columns of clouds and cherubim, the great baroque dance of sultans with scimitars, of dogs and horses and monks and souls from purgatory stirring behind a spiked fence

guarded by pagans. St. George, St. Anthony, and St. Francis gaze upon the golden crowns of the Virgin and the Holy Child. Gold on black. St. Sigismund and St. Wenceslaus and the Patriarch Norbert observe the crowned skeleton that lies on a cushion and holds a metal scepter.

They walked on, slowly.

"What do you study, Hanna?"

"Music. Composition. And you?"

"Some day I want to be an architect."

"Good! Now we have something to talk about."

She laughed and with both hands caressed her black shining hair. The bridge seemed to float on the summer mist. Out of the mist rose Mary and her Child with a kneeling monk. Happy cherubim climbed the cross, converting its seriousness into graceful gaiety. Which, Franz reflected, was the very soul of the baroque. Now lives of the saints in black and the central statues of the Crucifixion and the Pietà, facing each other. Franz and Hanna looked over the balustrade. Fishermen, as always, the younger men standing in boats, the older sitting bundled up on the green barges.

They said goodbye to each other under the arch of the bridge tower. Hanna took a deep breath and looked toward an avenue of fragile trees.

"Will you be at the concert next Friday?"

"Yes, but I'd like to see you sooner than that."

"I take my lessons in Professor Maher's studio. We passed by it. Write it down. Loretanzka 12."

"Thank you. I'll come one afternoon."

"Yes, I'll be so happy . . . I mean, I'll be very pleased to . . . Goodbye."

She ran down the passageway and went on running past the arcades and the National Theater.

△ Here's something for you, Elizabeth. Something ripe. Yesterday fourteen women in their sixties wearing fashionable hats of felt and velvet and fur-trimmed winter coats sat in a Munich court-

room in the leather chairs provided for the accused and awaited the court's verdict. Fourteen middle-aged ladies with red noses, bifocals, and scarves. Between 1942 and 1945 they were employed as nurses in the insane asylum at Obrawalde and the charge is that during that time they murdered some eight hundred persons who were neither inmates of the asylum nor patients but had been sent there precisely to be murdered. There's a picture of the asylum, too. Very handsome. Large buildings, a surrounding park. Each patient was examined when he arrived. The sturdier ones were dispatched to Department 19, the forced labor camp. Those who were feebler went to Department 20 to be liquidated. The method was simple and direct: a massive intravenous injection of barbiturate. For the children something a bit more humane: spoonfuls of jelly with the drug mixed into it. Those who resisted were tubed, orally or anally. They were all defectives: retarded mentally or physically deformed. At Obrawalde alone, eight thousand of them were murdered in the program of euthanasian extermination decreed by the Third Reich. The secret was known: a group of children peeked through a keyhole and saw and told the asylum dentist. But it went no further, for the dentist knew that, after all, the good nurses were merely carrying out orders, and orders are orders. Several of the ladies had balls of yarn in their laps and knitted as they awaited the verdict. One of them testified that she administered the children's little spoonfuls lovingly, and the children always smiled at her. "If it wasn't legal," protested another, "why didn't the police come and forbid it?" The judge set them free. "They were mere automatons," he pronounced. "They were simple-minded women incapable of understanding what they were doing." By way of celebration, the fourteen ladies went from the courtroom to a teahouse around the corner and there ordered coffee, chocolate, and slices of pie topped with whipped cream.

△ Franz looked in the rearview mirror and saw Isabel's face half hidden by the orange gauze that secured her Italian straw hat. He could not see but imagined her green eyes, her long neck, her

tanned shoulders, her sleeveless dress of yellow shantung. Then her face was concealed entirely as Javier kissed her. Javier's shaved cheeks. His sad dark eyes, closed now. His thick eyebrows and his thinning, graying hair.

"I can't wait to get where it's hot," Isabel whispered.

"We'll be in Veracruz tomorrow."

"That's not soon enough. Why can't we drive all night? I can take turns with Franz."

"Our plan was to loaf along slowly and see everything. It was your idea."

"We can see everything on the way back. Now I want to be in the heat and the sun as soon as I can. I want to be in the sea. Don't you?"

"No, I want to kiss you. Why did you open the door?"

"How will we manage tonight?"

"I'll think of a way."

You laughed softly, Pussycat, and tickled Javier's ears.

△ As he released you and fell exhausted on the bed, you remained there on all fours, shaking your loose hair like a lioness. You would have liked to be able to roar at him. Instead you said curtly: "So now there's nothing left, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"That was all that was missing."

"When it's all over, anything left is surprising," said Javier.

"Don't babble. Oh, you'll use it."

"Yes? Just how?"

"To get rid of another illusion. Go on, Proffy. I can Freudianize you as far as you want."

"You speak the damndest Spanish I've ever heard, Isabel."

"Never mind what kind of Spanish I speak. It's a living Spanish, at least, and you can use a little life, Professor. That's why you don't write anything."

"Just what do you know about it?"

"Plenty, my love, plenty. I've got a nose that can smell some stinks a mile away and against the wind."

"May God bless you and your perceptive nose, Isabel."

"You're impulsive, my love. That's what you are."

"Yes, I may be impulsive. And you, aren't you tired of standing there humped like a camel?"

"Leave me alone. It still burns. Look, Javier, you just can't be a middle-aged beatnik. It's out of the question. So for Christ's sake stop playing games. If you're a son of the age of Don Porfirio and Queen Victoria, that's what you are, don't you understand, and you better stop fooling yourself. Face up to the truth. Stop losing sleep. You're not a romantic, so forget it. So . . . No, Javier! No, no, stay still. Javier, Javier, not that way . . ."

△ You sat in the rocker for several minutes, Elizabeth, your eyes still not adjusted to the darkness. The small glowing hands of your watch showed 8:15.

"So you still don't want to answer me. I've startled you and you haven't had time yet to think what to say. Or maybe it's just that you aren't here. Are you here, Javier? Really and completely here? Okay, okay, don't talk to me. I wouldn't listen if you did. I would think about something to avoid hearing you. *The Virginian*, for example. Richard Arlen and Mary Brian, but Gary Cooper and Walter Huston had the leads. At the end they shot it out in the street while everyone ducked for cover. The good guy and the bad guy. Gary Cooper."

When you say that, smile, pardner.

Sure, smile, Dragoness. Laugh. And when you and Jake hid in the closet you had to put your hands to your mouth and nose to keep from laughing. At first her voice was as calm as usual. "Beth, Jake, come on, we have to go out." She was making an effort to control herself, you could tell that. You held back your laughter. "I'm telling you to come on. They're waiting for us. We shouldn't be late." Jake pinched you and you shook silently. "Children, children, where are you? It is Friday evening and they are waiting us. The food will get cold. Be good now. There's going to be matzo balls and gefilte fish. Don't that sound good? Children, come on out now. It's late already and they're waiting." Jake pinched your

thigh and you tugged on your braids to keep from laughing and your mother's voice rose and began to tremble. "They're not here? Out with their father, that's where they must have gone. I bet they went out with their father! Bethel, Yankele, where are you? You are tormenting me, stop it! Come on out! The Mendelssohns will be insulted! On time we can never be now, please, please!" You and Jake held hands, waiting, calm now, quite certain of what she would yell next. "Beth! Jake! You're scaring me! You're making me afraid! I'm afraid, don't you hear me? I'm afraid!" With your eyes closed in the darkness of the closet you could see her clearly, her hair drawn severely back but as always wavy and electric with tones of copper, a few rebellious wisps surrounding her pale, transparent, veinless face. Her thick arms and her knotty hands extended beseechingly.

"Beth, make the light."

She would never turn on the light herself. She always asked someone. And when the light went on, her hands would move absently to her forehead as if she were brushing something away. One Friday a month you were invited to the Mendelssohns. The Mendelssohns who had known Rebecca's parents in the old country and here were successful, already well-to-do, and Rebecca when she came in from the street, from the half darkness of that thirteen-block walk, would put her hand to her forehead, brushing the light away.

"Gershon took them with him."

You and Jake stood laughing beside Gershon at his stand in the street. He sharpened his razors and now and then shouted: "Razors! Good honest razors!"

You laughed hardest once when he reached out and stopped a man with long hair and a curly beard and asked him: "You still are going to shul?" The man nodded and your father laughed and by the lapels of his coat pulled him closer. With a swift movement of a razor, he cut off a lock of the man's long hair. He laughed. "See how good they cut? Razors, razors, fine sharp razors!" And the man stood there, stupefied, first touching his shorn hair, then grabbing

the oily lock from your father's hands while howling incomprehensibly in Polish. You and Jake rocked with laughter and Gershon frowned and shouted: "Now he is trying to insult me! Not yet has anyone ever been able to insult me, and now he is trying! How much is it worth to you, eh? Two cents? Three? For three cents' worth of hair he's calling me names! Listen, my friend, the man who can insult me has not yet been born! Razors! Razors!" And the Polish Jew walked away caressing his lock of hair and muttering and you and Jake and your father laughed and the man in the next stand, who sold neckties, held his wares up to his customers' throats and Gershon shouted: "Mordecai, those are ties you are selling, or sausages? Mister, let me tell you, to buy a tie from Mordecai is like to buy a rope from the hangman. Those ties have been stolen."

Mordecai curses and at the ceremonial meals one Friday a month Mr. Mendelssohn says sadly: "Complaints, complaints, always he has only complaints, Mrs. Jonas. Everything fails him. I have to tell you, Mrs. Jonas, your husband is a schlemiel. There is no point for me to waste my time and my money to try to help him."

"Mama, what is a schlemiel?" asks Jake as you walk home that night. Rebecca moans. Her felt hat is crooked and sticks out too far over her forehead, making her face of anguish look foolish; her figure, yellow and black, pale in the half-light, look absurd.

"And so long I have known you, I could be wrong? Just a bum, wasting his time with other bums who are there only waiting that a tenth man should be called for prayer. Not from faith. From pure laziness. Without even believing in the words! Waiting, always waiting ever since his teens, for a handout to come along, for the sky to drop easy money."

You and Jake came out of the closet holding hands, laughing, shivering. Becky stopped in the darkness of the living room, paralyzed, as if she didn't believe her eyes. But the surface of normality had always to be preserved. She hid her surprise and said only, "Good, it's late already, they are waiting us, there'll be pumper-

nickel, Mr. Mendelssohn knows how much you like pumpernickel. My hat, Bethel, where's my hat? Please get it for me. I thought you had gone out with your father. So now let's be going."

Mr. Mendelssohn talked. Only Mr. Mendelssohn. A shame, Mrs. Jonas, an eternal shame. And the very Jewish merchants who sell these products have been the worst enemies of the kosher laws. An eternal shame, I say. You and Jake ate greedily, rye bread and bagel, your eyes staring at the way Mr. Mendelssohn's wing collar moved as he swallowed. Mrs. Jonas, the Reform Jew is no less than a renegade. It is good that you at least stand fast. Your children should owe you more than they will suspect. With tears in her eyes, Rebecca nodded.

"You will not make renegades of my children!"

Gershon shrugged. "Renegades? No. Invisible, yes. Just invisible, Becky. Can you understand that?"

"*Superstitio et perfidia Judaica.*"

Invisible, Dragoness. Ah, yes, all of you.

Franz listened and you lay face down on the hard bed and told him everything. The pillow you had pulled over your head muffled your words. You told him that you loved your beautiful Northeast. Fertile, ripe New England. White winter when you can hear sleigh bells and the old men smoke their corncob pipes standing around the iron stove in the general store, and the children make snowmen with lumps of coal for eyes and a carrot for a nose. The hills with their silver fir trees, silhouettes drawn in lean ink, the ice-encased poplars. The pond frozen over, couples skating on it wearing red scarves and wool caps, thick stockings and tweed skirts and earmuffs. And the brief afternoons around the open fire are lovely.

That's what you told Franz, Dragoness?

Yes. Night comes suddenly and you lock yourself in your room to read, lying on old cushions in the seat of a window that looks out on the red barn fences, the undulating low hills striped and spotted with rich black earth, the stables where the horses breathe white vapor. Your brother Jake gives you a ride on his sled from the top of the highest hill. You're afraid. He laughs at you. He

makes you sit on the sled and tells you to hold tight, Lizzie, hold tight, his hobnailed boots kick the hard and lumpy snow and down you go, your arms wrapped around his waist, while flakes of snow, those dancing jewels, arc in two waves of frozen dust on either side, whitening your caps, yours of blue wool, his of black leather with a black celluloid visor, down you go, the wind whipping your cheeks, your nose and your ears and your fingers numb, dodging fence posts, the naked trunks of fir trees, the hummocks of snow-covered bushes.

"Yes, so I took them to Macy's to see Santa Claus. That bothers you?"

Jake puts the sled away. He drags it sadly to the shed where it will rest until next winter. The shining sled, just painted, with your name on it: LIZ. Now it is rust and peeling paint and your name has long ago disappeared. Puddles of water from melting snow surround the farmhouse. Though a cold wind still lashes the shutters, your mother sets out to paint the house white, the pine siding, the gables, and to paper the rooms within with scenes of old-time country merrymaking, shepherdesses in crinoline carrying crooked staves and surrounded by sheep and by young men who lean against the cypresses and toot on flutes.

"Mr. Mendelssohn's children spent Christmas on a farm in Connecticut."

And now, Franz, spring comes. Fine gray rain turns all the country roads to mud and forces us to wear our rubber boots as we tramp around the chicken yard throwing fistfuls of oats to the chickens that run away from us, clucking, with their feathers made smooth and lustrous by the rain.

"In Prague, in 1473, the Jews living outside the Judenstadt decided to move into it and join their brethren. No one forced them. They went into the ghetto voluntarily."

Spring, the season when your mother sells the hogs she has fattened all winter in their protected pen, feeding them yellow corn and oats, sells them to Mr. Duggan, the owner of the general store (Duggan? Duggan, Dragoness? Well, why not? Duggan), and you

and Jake on your way home from school pass the store and sadly look at Porky, Fats, and Beulah lying in the window with red apples in their mouths.

"Can Beth spend the weekend at the farm with us, Mrs. Jonas?"

Restlessness enters through the open windows of the classroom and the attentiveness of winter vanishes. Miss Longfellow (Longfellow, Dragoness? Okay, Longfellow) wears a look of impatience and again and again, rapping the desk with her ruler, orders them to keep their eyes on their books. But she herself, rosy in her print dress and new permanent, can't keep from glancing at the cherry tree that grows outside the window, and one day, after reading aloud ("The Mississippi is well worth our attention, children. It is not an ordinary river but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable"), she suggests that all of you look at the cherry buds, the most beautiful and softest of all buds, that little by little have sprouted and opened and now, in April, fill the window with whiteness.

"I'm going to go to City College, Mama, and I don't care what you say. Do you think that there I'll see anything I haven't already seen? Where in God's name do you think we live?"

On Easter Sunday you show off your new bonnet . . .

"That one, Mama! The straw with the red ribbon. Please!"

. . . and the entire congregation joins in the hymns. And outside in the warm sun the farmers rest for a day, sitting on their porches with straws in their mouths, telling stories. All week they have mowed and raked and filled their silos and loaded their trucks with the oats and wheat that grew under the winter snow. Today they rest in contentment.

"So what the hell does it mean to be a Presbyterian or a Baptist? Eh, Lizzie? Instead of . . ."

Then beautiful summer. Even though Jake went away after the winter and spring we had spent together. He made new friends and took school excursions and went fishing and swimming in the pond . . .

"Polio, Mr. Jonas. It is polio."

. . . and made trips to the ocean, to a fishing town that still

remembered the great days of whaling and the houses were gay, painted in vivid colors, and everyone was happy, at home with the sea . . .

"It's a punishment upon us! A punishment! Let me hold you in my arms, Jake, my little Jake! Oh, it's a punishment upon us."

But the ocean wasn't for girls. Dressed in muslin you ran and skipped as you walked alone all the long hot summer, discovering an entire world of creatures that during the rest of the year were in hiding: squirrels and lizards, crickets, spiders, owls, deer, caterpillars and butterflies, robins and larks in the woods where you spent your days beneath the song-filled almond trees and the great sycamores . . .

"Jake! Lizzie! Come quick! The truck that sprinkles the streets is here. Hurry, quick, take off your clothes, quick before it goes away!"

. . . with their soft green bark that you pulled off in strips to make little boats with newspaper sails on pine-twigg masts. You sailed them on the little lake, in a favorite corner far from the shouts of the diving boys . . .

"Liz is a kike! Liz is a kike! Liz is a kike!"

Cool hours beside the cool water. The voices of the birds that had come home from winter in the south. The low voice of the robin, the imitative song of the thrush, the agile notes of the blackbird, the crazy chirruping of a magpie. You could tell them by their songs and you were grateful for their lack of fear as they came near you. Robin with his red breast, as if he were a soldier or a musician in a royal band. The thrush's round eye and black-striped shirt. The star on the forehead of the blackbird. The slanted eyes and soft roundness of the magpie.

"Let me go on, Javier. Let me have my dream. I am willing to play your game. Now you let me play mine."

You touch the canary when you open its cage and put in the seeds and water. Rebecca moans and asks that you draw the curtains.

"Do you have a headache, Mama?"

“Ach, it’s the heat, the heat. It will go away.”

All afternoon beside the almost motionless surface of the pond. You looked at the water and thought of a palace beneath the ice of winter where summer’s birds and creatures could live protected and warm.

“And Israel Baal Shem Tov taught us that true salvation lies not in Talmudic wisdom but in full devotion to God, in the simplest faith, the most sincere prayer. A simple man who prays with all his heart is closer to God and more loved by God than the Talmudic scholar.”

Bengal lights and candied apples; carousels with white horses; noisy organ-grinders; mirrors that made you look larger and fatter or smaller, like a dwarf (Jake, where is Jake?); the magician whose summer tour brings him to town in July with a top hat and a menagerie of hungry rabbits, trained crows, and blind mice that appear from the folds of his red and black cape, like Mandrake. Pitchers of lemonade and strawberry water; shavings of chocolate and orange peel. The porch with its rocking coaster covered with blue and white striped canvas. The farmers sowing again under the sun: straw hats, blue denim shirts. Oh, say can you see, you have fought all wars, Mama loshon, Na-Aseh V’Nishma, we will do and we will obey, let us go to America said a Jew from Kiev to his wife after he had lost his fortune in a pogrom. Let us leave this hellish place where men are beasts and let us go to America where there is no ghetto and no pale, where there are no pogroms, where even Jews are men.

And afterward, when it was all over, your father looked for you and you told him you had only a minute at a corner, the corner of Forty-fifth and Madison or any other downtown corner, and the old man in the double-breasted suit and the gray hat walked toward you and gave you his card with the name and address of a hotel on Central Park North and told you that was where he lived now and he would never again live as part of a family or a community; he told you, rapidly, without looking up, that at a hotel you can go and come as you please, you eat alone, whenever you want to eat, you don’t have to talk to anyone, not even the waitresses,

and in the evening you can go alone to a movie and maybe eventually you make a friend and even play golf; if you wanted to see him, ask for Johnson, Gershon Johnson, they would know at the desk of the hotel. Without kissing you, he disappeared whistling down Madison Avenue.

"Jake! Beth! Come out, stop scaring me! Do you hear me? Listen, come on out, I feel scared and they're waiting us already, for dinner, children, we shouldn't be late."

△ Outside Cuautla beside the highway was a posterlike sign made of silver foil shaken by the wind and shining in the sun. "Restaurant Corinto." "It's the place I was telling you about," said Franz. The front glass, and behind it a dozen tables with red-and-white checked tablecloths, wicker chairs, the wall showing a long shelf on which stood porcelain plates with German, Swiss, and Austrian scenes: you know the sort, the Lorelei, the Matterhorn, Salzburg. The four of you entered and were received by a red-faced type who rubbed his hands on his apron and when he saw Franz shouted: "Señor! Señor! It's been a long time!" Franz smiled and the fat owner of the restaurant invited you to a table by spreading his arms.

"Today there is sauerkraut or good barbecue. And beer, of course, beer . . ."

You all took seats and Franz ordered sauerkraut and mustard and mugs of beer. The beer immediately: driving had tired him. He did not ask the rest of you if that was what you wanted. Javier rubbed his stomach with his hand and said nothing.

"The sausage will upset your stomach," Isabel said to him.

"You aren't my doctor." He picked up a toothpick and did not look toward her.

"Oh, excuse *me*," said Isabel.

You looked at them, Dragoness. First at your husband, then at Isabel.

"A chronic colitis can never be cured," said Javier slowly. "It's part of your personality. I would have to change my whole psychology."

"It must be like dying of thirst at sea," Franz smiled. "Not to be able to enjoy so many good things."

"Oh, you get used to it," said Javier. "It's like living during wartime. Constant rationing."

He looked up and smiled at Franz and Franz smiled dryly back. "There's a little difference," he said. "During war you can feel heroic when you go hungry. With colitis, you can only feel ridiculous."

"Touché, Franz," you sighed.

"Who asked for your comment?" said Javier. "And besides, there is more than one way to be ridiculous."

An Indian waiter bowed and placed the mugs on the table. Franz drank rapidly, with gusto. The rest of you sipped slowly.

"Look, we're talking too seriously," Franz laughed. "We're supposed to be having fun, aren't we? Let's drink to Mackie. You know, the *Threepenny Opera* is running again. I first saw it thirty years ago. Thirty years!" He began to sing: "Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne . . ."

You smiled, Dragoness. Franz pounded his mug on the table to the beat of the song. At the end of each line, he drank. His cheeks were becoming red. You tried to match his gaiety and make it your mood too, humming and smiling. Javier and Isabel silently observed you and Franz, the two foreigners who seemed so sure of the immediate merriment of a song sung with energy and good will. The fat owner of the restaurant stuck his head through the kitchen door and beamed and wagged his head to the rhythm. He sent another round of beer. Again Franz drank quickly. He looked at Javier's and Isabel's full mugs and reached over and took them, one in the right hand, one in the left, and tried to drink from both at the same time. Beer gushed down his chin and he burst into laughter and you laughed with him while Javier and Isabel looked on.

"Shall we serve your meal yet?" said the restaurant owner. "It's ready. But if you prefer to have more beer first . . ."

Franz slapped his open palm against the belly of the owner of the restaurant and laughed. "Patience, señor. Patience is a fine Christian virtue. So bring on the food!"

The fat owner of the restaurant laughed and the waiter came in with a platter of smoking sauerkraut. He placed the mustard beside Franz's elbow. Franz talked with his mouth full:

"Four hours' driving. But it's a great car, a really great car. For Mexican highways it's a superb car. I enjoy selling them. No high pressure. The car sells itself. No need to lie about it. A solid product." He looked at Javier. "But I envy you. You've never been in business. You've done what you wanted to do."

Isabel turned. "Not in business? Why, what bigger or dirtier business is there than television?"

Javier stared stolidly straight ahead without blinking, Dragoness, and you looked at him in disbelief while Franz said to Isabel, "Television? Who's in television?"

"Javier is," said Isabel. "He's not only a professor, he works in TV too."

As if Isabel were not present, Javier said solemnly, "I used to be in the diplomatic corps. You have to do many things and one of them is usually to put up with a superior who is an ass, some idiot of a politician who has been given his post to get him out of the way . . ."

You held back your laughter, Dragoness, while Javier went on, ". . . When you are in the diplomatic service, you live isolated in a small circle of vain and hypersensitive bureaucrats." Your laughter finally burst out, but Javier did not seem disturbed. "Now that I am an official in an international organization, my job isn't ideal. But I earn more and at least the hierarchy is more diffused."

Franz began to laugh too. Isabel peeked at the three of you from the corner of her eye and seemed not to understand anything. Then Franz lifted his mug again and again began to sing the ballad of Mackie. Now and then he pounded his mug on the table. The restaurant owner stood in the kitchen door wagging his head and Javier ate silently and Isabel looked at him with a puzzled frown and you, Elizabeth, laughed, laughed, laughed.

△ The man in the beach chair was a German, robust, red-faced, in his fifties. He swelled out his bare chest and with a certain

ferocity touched his gray mustache. A virile show-off, with a white sailor hat. Presently he began to shake with silent laughter, his eyes became mischievous. He placed several small pebbles on the flat arm of the chair and by straightening his crooked forefinger shot them at his wife, who was lying facing the sea. She squealed playfully. She put her hands together beneath her chin and said, giggling, "Nein, Rudy, nein. Soyez gentil . . ."

The German in the beach chair went on shooting pebbles at his wife while his inner laughter continued to grow until it finally emerged as a snort, foaming out through his nose, his ears, finally his open mouth, where gold teeth could be seen. His wife curled up a little. She was docile, ethereal, a sweet Hausfrau, less irritated than flattered by the bombardment of tiny stones.

"I can't stand that woman's coyness," you said, putting on your dark glasses.

"I can't stand German gemütlich," Javier said.

The man stood, stretching his fat arms, patting his oil-smeared paunch. He ran toward the water. You and Javier watched him swim vigorously out to the raft, while the woman, unaware that he had departed, went on moaning like a joyous prisoner: "Rudy, Rudy, nein."

"Javier."

"Yes?"

"What did you do with my collection of pebbles?"

"Elena. She came while I was writing. She saw your pebbles and got all worked up about them. You know how she talks . . ."

The German spat a geyser and waved his arm.

". . . God Almighty. Holy Virgin. St. Joseph and a large assortment of fellow saints and a few archangels. In short, she had never seen a prettier collection of pebbles. So I gave them to her. I told her to make them into a necklace. I felt you'd be pleased, since you like her so much."

The German swam wearing his sailor hat and summer ended and you no longer looked for pebbles. The sea turned cold and gray. More and more you and Javier shut yourselves up in the cabin at Falaraki. You would make a fire in the fireplace and then get in

bed and listen to the panting, under the bed, of the dog that Javier had once let in during a storm and that had stayed on. You watched Javier at work and sometimes asked him to read you what he had written, but he always said no, not until the poem was complete and he had gotten well into his novel. So far, indeed, he had only their titles: "The Golden Fleece," a poem with Greece as its point of departure and return; *Pandora's Box*, a novel about secret love. And now and then you made excursions and returned to Rhodes in a boat shaken by the November sea. The eroded stairs at Ladigo Point. The lemon-colored water along the coast of Zambica. The walk to the ruins at Camirus, the dead city that lies open before the Aegean like an amphitheater. The climb to the monastery of Fileremus, a cloister surrounded by white villages and pomegranate orchards, by laurel and oleander. The Valley of the Butterflies. Farfale. The butterflies were not there when you went, but in spring and summer, you were told, they swarmed so thickly that the sky could not be seen. You walked up from the road along a path of dry pine needles, guided by the sound of the water rushing down. Sometimes it happens in a forest that one does not dare speak because the silence is so full of forgotten sounds that can be heard only at such moments. As you put it, the forest makes us remember what we have lost and after a little time in that silence, one's daily life vanishes, yet the forgotten life the forest promises is not yet found. You let yourselves be guided by the sound of the waterfall until you came to the thread of water flowing between the ferns and rocks. You wanted to follow it to its source and you climbed laboriously until you reached the falls, but you did not find the spring. By some secret acoustic trickery, what was distance was disguised as closeness. The valley of Farfale had discovered a way to hold trespassers off: a wall of deceiving echoes.

You turned to say this to Javier and you realized that you were alone now, that he had stopped somewhere. For a moment you felt lost. You yelled, but the sound went nowhere, it hung above your head as if it wanted to return to your lips. You decided that if you tried to go farther into the valley you would end up lost in earnest. Instead you would climb to the naked top of the mountain and

there get your bearings, locate the road in the distance below and see the way to return to it. The pines became farther apart now. And now there was no path, there were only brambles and clods of loose earth that turned beneath your feet. You climbed, pulling yourself along by holding to the bushes until one bush came out by the roots and dropped you back into red thorns. You were only halfway to the top of the mountain, but already exhausted, and your legs were scratched and your blouse torn. You looked behind you. If you tried to go back the way you had come, you would fall down the steep slope and in the end merely be where you had been when you started. So you scrambled up and continued to climb, slowly elbowing your way through the yellow thistles. You were exhausted, Dragoness, but some force pushed you toward the summit. You thought you would never reach it. As your breath came panting, you cursed silently, cursed the mountain and yourself and especially Javier because he had let you go on alone. And still cursing, you finally reached the top. You fell on your face to the bleating of wild goats that were creatures from mythology put here to guard and protect the height. They looked at you and jumped off, moving down, among the rocks. In the distance the sea and islands that emerged from the sea like mountains and were severed from it by the haze in which they floated. Still farther, the coast of Anatolia stretching like the claw of a puma toward the island of Rhodes.

You could not see the road. The sun dropped lower and was concealed by the clouds that had drifted west from Asia Minor. You waited. Javier would simply have to look for you and find you. The people of the valley would tell him how to climb up to you. You sat on a rock and rubbed your arms where they had been scratched. With tinkling bells the black goats gathered around and looked at you. You thought how it would be to stay here forever, alone, cut off from the world forever, companioned by goats on the dusty summit of a mountain that had lost all contact with the land below, if indeed there had ever been any contact in the first place. You opened your eyes on solitude, awaking from a dream in which other beings existed, your parents and your brother, old school-

mates, old boyfriends, your husband, acquaintances, people known and unknown, living phantoms very busily delivering milk or driving taxis or selling razors or writing books or publishing newspapers or signing documents that declared war or peace . . . You sighed with a mixture of fear and relief. And there you were, you and the black goats, alone, staring at each other, high in the air on a coin of dust and stone, solitary, sufficient, eternal. Abruptly you jerked to your feet and ran among the jumping goats toward the distant promontory of the Turkish coast. Swift clouds cut the light, made it blaze, sifted it fine, and you ran down through the brush and thistles, down, holding your terror in your throat, unable to find a sound or a word that could express it, down with your eyes fixed on the distant shore, your eyes fixed because otherwise the drumming silence, the radiant darkness, the still wind would have devoured you, down in a descent without a path toward the Aegean.

Asphalt was beneath your feet again. You stopped running and walked slowly, kicking at little pebbles, your arms hugging your chest. The road was narrow, winding. Much sooner than you expected, the roadside refreshment stand appeared and there was Javier seated beneath the naked arbor drinking wine. He saw you on the road and came to meet you. You watched him run toward you: his black hair, his corduroy pants, his turtle-neck sweater. You embraced him. He told you that the police in the valley had merely laughed when you did not appear. It happened often that someone was delayed, but it had never yet happened that anyone had been lost very long in the Valley of the Butterflies. You would show up by and by, frightened perhaps but not the worst for it. You hugged Javier and kissed his neck. Let's go straight back to Falaraki, you said. You were sleepy and tired, you wanted to lie down.

"What's happened to Rudy?"

"The German?"

"Yes." You rubbed cream on the sunburned points of your cheekbones.

Javier stared at the pebbled shore of Rhodes, thronged with vacationers this year of Munich and the Anschluss.

"Rudy is dead," said Javier. "His wife drowned him while they

were swimming. The waiter told me this morning. I thought you knew."

△ Franz finished his beer in a gulp. He paid and the four of you left the restaurant without saying goodbye to the owner.

"Let's go straight on to Cholula," you suggested. "There's no reason to stop in Cuautla."

"I'm tired of driving," said Franz.

"Let me take over," Isabel cried. Franz got in back beside Javier, and Isabel sat behind the wheel.

Isabel takes over, all right. She starts the car and drives off and with one movement of her slender arm reaches toward the radio and turns it on and finds the station that she knows and prefers. Their voices pound out at you, the minstrels, bards, heralds of the new age, the androgynous pages of the monarchic republic, of the democratic elite, who pass up and down from the docks in Liverpool with the poise of the courtier who plays the lute in Giorgione's country concert. Their hair worn long in the style of Venetians painted by Giovanni Bellini, their lips fixed in the ironic smile of Mantegna's most amusing St. George, a knight whose graceful armor seems fitter for the conquest of the ladies who await him in the golden palace in the Paduan background than for battle with the green stage-prop dragon that lies at his feet less pagan and less diabolic than the saint himself, now an unarmed saint whose broken lance can serve only to spear the fruit, limes, pears, cherries, pomegranates, that cluster around the frame. As distant as Caesars, as close as Satans, as innocent as angels, they sing

I love you because you tell me things I want to know

and I go on reading my newspaper as I am driven along the superhighway from Mexico City to Puebla. It is an odd sort of newspaper, Dragoness, one I don't entirely trust, not even when the byline lists someone so respectable as Jacob von Königshofen. His dispatch informs me that in this year of 1349 the worst plague in

memory is raging; death runs from one end of the world to the other on both sides of the Mediterranean and is even more terrible for the Moors than for the Christians. In some regions the entire populace is dead, there are no survivors. Full-laden ships have been found drifting at sea with dead crews. Half of Marseilles has perished, the bishop and all his priests, while the toll in other cities and kingdoms defies description. The Pope, in Avignon, has adjourned his Court, has forbidden strangers to come near him, has ordered that a fire be kept blazing before him night and day. Nor can the sages and physicians say more than it is God's good will, and that it will not cease until it runs its course.

You sit beside St. Isabel, Dragoness, with your eyes closed while the Volkswagen passes Cuautla, constantly accelerating

There's a place where I can go

swerving around slower cars without blowing the horn, hitting eighty kilometers an hour, then ninety, then a hundred and ten while chickens leap out of the way with flying feathers and bloody-eyed dogs howl and the car races for a moment along the rough shoulder and raises a cloud of dust and shakes the walls of straw-roofed adobe huts and a boy shouts from behind a fence of cactus and Isabel steers with one hand and with the other adjusts the radio, turning the volume up

*In my mind there's no sorrow,
Don't you know that it's so?*

the voices of the young men who like the painted figures of Luca Signorelli garb themselves with testicular elegance and, releasing the constructive aspects of their spirits of destruction, create around them a world as vast, rich, confused, free, ordered as a canvas by Uccello, as piously demonic as one by the Bosch who pays the price of admission to the rites of Satan. And you have read, Dragoness, and you, Isabel, know intuitively, that no one has clearer visions of God than those of the Devil. That is precisely why

he stands so aloof from God; he is God's other face and like Him is a succession of contraries, a permanent fusion of antitheses:

*What am I supposed to do?
Give back your ring to me
And I will set you free:
Go with him*

and so they sing, setting us free from all the false and murderous dualisms upon which has been built the civilization of the judges, the priests, the philosophers, the artists and hangmen and merchants, and Plato dies drowning, surrendering, entangled in their long hair, mesmerized by their drowning voices, trampled upon by the pound of their rhythm as the Beatles, liberated, leap high to their heaven and slowly float down again, like Antheus, to the new earth where there are neither men nor women, good nor evil, body nor spirit, substance nor extension, essence nor accident; where there is only the dance and the rite, the fusion and the flowering mask of Arcimboldi which grows continually around everything and is the being and the nothingness of everything, its own moment seen from a helicopter that comprises the totality, the unity, in which die the old schizophrenias of the Greco-Christian-Judaeo-Protestant-Marxist-industrial dualism

*There'll be no sad tomorrow
Don't you know that it's so . . .*

and this summer, the newspaper goes on, the plague has reached Strasbourg, where it is estimated that sixteen thousand souls have expired. All over the world, Jews have been charged with causing the plague, they have been cursed, they have been accused of poisoning wells and springs and in Berne and Zofingen a number of them, put to torture, admitted their crime and it was discovered that the wells they mentioned had indeed been poisoned. So from the Mediterranean to Germany, though not in Avignon, where the Pope protects them, Jews have been burned at the stake, and in

Basel townsmen have marched on the Council and forced them to swear not to admit any Jew into the city for the next two hundred years. The bishop of Strasbourg, the feudal lords of Alsatia, and representatives of the three cities have gathered in Benfeld and questioned the deputies from Strasbourg about the fate of the Jewish population of that city. The deputies replied that they knew of no crime with which the Jews should be charged. Then why, they were asked, had they covered the city's wells? Thus a clamor of indignation rose against the deputies from Strasbourg and in the end the Bishop and the lords of the Imperial Cities agreed to annihilate their Jews. Thereupon Jews were burned in the cities, and when they were merely expelled, the peasants in the countryside captured them, drowned many, put others to death by stabbing. It was on Saturday, St. Valentine's day, that the Jews of Strasbourg were burned on a great wooden platform in their cemetery. Two thousand of them. Those who asked to be baptized were permitted to live. Many children were removed from the pyre and baptized against their parents' wishes. And in this way were burned the Jews in Strasbourg and in all the cities of the Rhine, whether Imperial Cities or free cities. In some places they were formally tried, in others not. In some cities, toward the end, they set fire to their own homes and died in flames they had started themselves. It was generally ordered that their property be expropriated and the promissory notes they held made void, and at Strasbourg it was decreed that no Jew be allowed within the city for the next hundred years, but before twenty years had passed, the Council and magistrates reversed this decision, and in the year of our Lord 1368, the Jews returned.

It's been a hard day's night

And afterward, Dragoness, one had to dance on as if nothing had happened, forget forget forget so that it would not happen again, cast up the sum of agony afresh, though to do so might be all but impossible, and recover the Renaissance that had been made and

stolen by Vico and Calvin and Descartes, the Renaissance that ended swamped by its rationality and its history, its good, evil, predestination, Natural Man, its Faustian activism and its will to the tragic, that had ended incinerated in the ovens of Auschwitz and on the leveled plain of Hiroshima, while now the innocent cynics sing

You can't buy me love

and the women who worship them attire themselves from time to time in the cardinals' hats and the black and red garments of the Constable of Bourgogne and the Bishop of Beauvais and the she-Pope Joan, cover themselves with the Gothic cloths which were used in the coronation of the kings of Hungary and are preserved among the treasures of Bamberg and Ratisbon and resurrected from the *Livre des Métiers* of Etienne Boileau; the rain capes of the Passion of St. Bertrand de Comminges are worn by the Dianan nymphs who dance in the discothèques of New York and Paris and London, the saddles of the Apocalypse at the cathedral of Angers shake to the rhythms of freed slaves in every whiskey-à-go-go, and in the new Missa Luba Hecate, dressed like Eleanor of Castile, and angular Circe, pale as Our Lady the Virgin of Beaune, mix the ashes of Tournai and Valenciennes with the rotten vegetation of Gabon and Nigeria while shaking to the throb of John Henry and King Oliver and Johnny Dodds, Billie Holliday, Satchmo, Cannonball Adderley:

*Hesitatin' Mama, hesitatin' blues
Tell me how long do I have to wait,*

and the new *pervigilium veneris* is officiated by the virgin witches who have betrothed themselves to the angelic Satan and forever mock the *jus primae noctis* while charming the Priapus-Bacchus-Sabatius, the kid on St. John's day with the short chin whiskers and thick lips and tight pants and cowboy boots and a large rowdy court of relatives, wolves, elves, gnomes, white cats, legless fat dogs,

ox-headed hounds, black rabbits, who celebrate the Black Mass of the great synthesis, the great game of opposites outlawed by the judge called rationality and the hangman called morality and the jailer called history, and clamor to God that He release His thunderbolt, the punishment of sins and hells that no longer exist, and the new Sibyl and the new Pan profane the idols of twenty-five centuries of lying prejudices, terrors, excuses, and become themselves the altars—of service and sacrifice—in the garden—remembered and promised—and there begin the new dance of St. Vitus, the ballet of the existential revolution that digests everything and consecrates and sacrifices to the human purpose everything, in its pulse, its fleeting eternal validity

She's got the devil in her heart,

and so, Dragoness, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, and you, Isabel, for I am talking to you too, to both of you because this Mass must be celebrated first by a woman: all Masses begin with an Introit, just as do the life of every woman and the lives of the men who are born of women; you, Isabel, will discover only what you accept and you must accept everything. And having begun with the Introit, we end with piety before the Anointed Priapus, before Christ-Bacchus who at the very end does not demand the love of the God who abandoned him but the consolation of the witch, Mary wise in lore of potions and sleep-inducing herbs: Devil Lady, Green Virgin, Rosemary, Angels' Ass, Burning Hair, Vinegar Woman, White Princess, Juanita, Marijuana, and also the drugs that make desire and vitality live again, drugs that bear the names of women too but are children of the totemic snakes of Mexico and Africa and the witches of Oaxaca and the Peruvian Highland and the black Congo who go into the white world with their rhythms and mushrooms and songs and magic in order to become part of the New Renaissance, the renaissance of the Only Faith, that of body and soul fused upon the cinder ruins of a Dark Age of bankers and

munitions makers and Talmudic commissars and Pentagonic marines, all the planners and orators of the crusades for collective death and individual degradation. And Isabel sings with the radio

Anytime atall, anytime atall,

and suddenly closes her eyes and hits the brakes and the car rocks, skids, finally stops just short of a plaster-flaking adobe wall in front of which a child of two is rolling over and over with his scabies-ridden pup, crying, laughing, and you, Elizabeth, screamed as if you had given birth and opened the door and ran to the child and snatched him up in your arms, crying, "I can't stand it, I can't stand it any longer!" by which you meant the terror, not just the terror of Isabel's lunatic driving and the frightened baby but the terror of terror itself, and the child became quiet in your arms, as if he recognized you, and you lifted him and held him high, as if you were displaying him to the sun, while Isabel sat behind the wheel with her eyes squinted shut and her clenched hands wet with sweat, and Javier watched you and Franz calmly smoked his cigarette.

△ "All right, Javier, if you're there, turn the lights on. I'm tired and I want to lie down. Don't you hear me? I think that maybe you aren't there, or you don't want to hear me. You never want to hear the truth, do you? What really happened, instead of your pretty dream. Well, let's see, when was it? A year ago . . . eighteen months? I had already dressed and you were shaving and you told me to go on, you would join me later, and you told me the address and I still remember it: 1270 Sierra Paracaíma, the party would begin at ten. Who was giving it? Oh, that didn't matter. We wouldn't know anyone. But because of your work, it was important for us to be there. I left you. At ten exactly I was there, and as you had predicted, they were all strangers. All except Vasco. You remember him, Javier. Vasco Montero, who came back from Spain. At the party he wasn't the same Vasco. Fifteen years had passed and he had aged. I hardly recognized him."

And you see, more real now through the wall of flabby flesh and wrinkled skin, the form of the man who was, the man who has forgotten his own geometry. His jawline, once so sharp and lean, always brown from the sun, the foundation for the angularity of his nose and mouth, had come apart, swollen up, degenerated into carefully shaven floury bags. Vasco Montero, grown old.

"Vasco didn't greet me. I don't know whether or not he recognized me. But yes, he must have, for I've hardly changed. Have I, Javier? I've been careful to stay trim. Pictures don't lie. The fashions have changed, clothes and hair, but I haven't, not an inch or a pound, I look exactly as I did twenty years ago. But maybe he didn't recognize me. Maybe he saw me and saw that I hadn't come apart, as he had, and couldn't believe it, thought I had to be someone else, not myself. Javier, how do people see us? As we see them? It would be ridiculous to live fifteen years and then be recognized. For time passes, I've lived with myself and I know I am different, even though I don't look different. Why did Vasco stare at me?

"We went in for dinner and you still hadn't arrived. I went in alone, holding my bag in my hands. Vasco had disappeared and I didn't dare go look for him. The buffet was served on a long table in front of a window that looked out on the lighted garden. I took a plate and filled it, the usual things . . . you know, chicken cooked with almonds, ravioli, baked ham and pineapple. No one said a word to me. No one knew me. I went back to the living room and sat on a taboret. I recognized a few faces. The faces that one sees on the society pages, the people who give teas, receive showers, go sailing at Acapulco. Jaime Ceballos and his wife, the daughter of the banker . . . Régules, I think; they picked out the records for the changer and turned the lights down. Pedro Caseaux, the polo player, was there with an absolutely silent girl on his arm. Charlotte García, the famous party giver of the international set. And with her, her eternal Bobó. Both as aged as mummies, withered and yellow, like Lotte Lenya with Peter Lorre. Our host turned out to be Reynaldo Padilla, who inherited the empire of old Artemio Cruz. You remember Artemio Cruz, I know. He died six or seven years ago and the newspapers wrote about him for a

month afterward. We read those eulogies and died laughing. He was simply an old millionaire, but you would have thought he was a great national hero. I sat alone on the taboret and ate my chicken and understood that you had sent me alone simply because you knew I would know no one at that party and could talk with no one and would have nothing to do except think about you, tell myself that however I might feel about you sometimes, to have you was good, at least it kept away the loneliness of this country, this city where even after so many years I was still a foreigner, an outsider isolated from these silly people who all knew each other and talked about the same silly things, their servants, their children, their priests. I was annoyed by their damned rudeness, leaving me alone, no one walking over to talk with me, to ask me who I was and where I was from, why they had never seen me in their clubs or at their beach houses. I tried to laugh at them. At their stupid serene confidence that they were the incarnate belly buttons of the entire world, the center of everything. I told myself that maybe I had changed more than I knew and that was why Vasco hadn't spoken. And then, just as I was beginning to feel really out of it, you arrived. I noticed suddenly that I was sitting in darkness and that people were dancing and Judy Garland was singing *Alone*. You stretched your hand to me in the darkness and led me out to dance too, touching me as if we were meeting for the first time, as if this were our first evening together and I was once again the unknown to you, the unrevealed, a girl to be discovered and conquered. I let you pretend whatever you wanted to pretend, let myself be caressed and returned the caresses because they came from you, from Javier, the man I had loved and lived with so long. I declined to pretend too, my love. I could tell that you were touching me as if it were for the first time and that disgusted me and made me shiver. Yet I gave in and played along because it was you and you were mine and I had given up everything for you, had left my home and my country to follow you, Javier, and I returned your caresses precisely because you were familiar, known, not a stranger, and now in your arms I was feeling as I had used to feel, that

everything had worked out all right, that though I had given up much, I had gained just the same because I had gained you and you were worth everything. That was what I was feeling and it was all I wanted to feel, that confidence and happiness again. The party was horrible, but I had you. And for you it was just as horrible, but you had a new woman in your arms, a new woman to discover as we danced together in the darkness. Oh, I understood. I knew that you were touching me because you had made me cease to be Elizabeth Jonas, born in New York forty-two years ago, and had transformed me into an adventure. And how you touched me, Javier! Your hands were on my thighs, your cheek rubbed against mine, you nibbled at my hair, felt my breasts beneath the sleeveless dress; oh, you were great, the cock of the roost in action, the seducer of virgins, the answer to every woman's dream, out with a new lay while Ligeia sat at home in the apartment with a best-seller in her lap. Shit, Javier. Just shit. And you were telling yourself that you were risking everything, while I, at home alone, played it always safe, always secure. As if any woman is ever safe. I'd rather go into battle a thousand times than give birth once, that's how safe it is. And when will it be possible to be a woman and yet not feel that fear? No, I don't mean that. I take it back. I have to hang on to you. Yes. I put my arms around you and hold to you, for you're all I have, I have no home, no country, no parents, no brother, just you. That's why I let myself play your game. Sure, I'll drink with you, dance with you, let you dream I'm anyone you please, it's all right. I'll try to guess each move fast enough to keep up with you, try to remember the scene, the lines, the business, a scene that after all we have played a hundred times before. That's been our whole life together, hasn't it? And I chose it, didn't I, freely, voluntarily? Ha, ha, ha. It's our very life, Javier. That's why we read so much, you and I."

You read as actors reading scripts, Elizabeth, to find, written by others, words and actions you can build your days of. And on that night at the party, you made up the answers as you went along, followed the path he hinted at: a path that led to a love that with-

out pride would be lost because pride, impeding it, forced it into being. That led to a man who could be the accomplice of your passion but not your intelligence, a man Javier would never know. The real stranger in this game he forced upon you was that unknown lover, not you. He himself, in the role he was acting, was the stranger, and you played your responding part because you wanted the promised reward: that he would take you afterward and fuck you as he hadn't for a long time, as if you were indeed a new woman and he a new man, and it wouldn't matter by whose name he called you as you made love, all that would matter would be the passion you had found together again after so long, had found through different names and different faces but the same pulsing flesh . . .

"So I said to you, silently at first, Let's go now, to the apartment. Quick, quick, let's go to your apartment, the one I do not know tonight though I know it better than the mirror there knows my face, my hands have touched and remember every inch, every angle, every surface. I've done my part. I waited for him, I let him make believe about me. And now nothing matters except to lie beneath him, beneath you, as quickly as I can. You can call me any name you want. That doesn't matter. Nothing matters except . . ."

You embraced him in the taxi, Dragoness. You kissed up his body, his chest, his neck, his cheek, his ear, his eyes, finally his lips. Then a long and silent kiss that lasted blocks. Every movement you made I could see in the rear-view mirror.

"We kissed in the taxi and I stopped hearing, seeing, I merely felt. I was hot, Javier, as hot as I have ever been in my life. I could hardly wait, control myself. Then the cab driver said something. I don't remember what. Whatever it was, it broke everything apart."

The cab passed the circle at Rin and Niza without turning off. It continued on down to the Caballito, then down Avenida Juárez. Javier told me to stop at the corner in front of Bellas Artes.

"You weren't going to take me to the apartment. Your apartment, ours, whose didn't matter, just so it had a bed. Everything

would be wasted. I didn't want to leave the cab. I still wanted to have you naked on top of me, that was all I wanted. To strip off my stupid dress and the garters and the stockings, which were all I was wearing under it, and be fucked, fucked, fucked. But you wouldn't let that happen. You took me by the wrist and made me get out. We walked along a deserted street. I following, with the passion I had felt hotter and stronger than for years slowly draining away. What did you want now? What new game was this, or what part of what old game? Earlier in the evening you told me that you hadn't used up all your supprises. What did that matter? I didn't want to be surprised. I wanted the habitual. The old habit when it had been new, before it became old and a habit. The love we had made in the beginning."

That was what you told me later that evening, Dragoness. I remember well. Javier lying passed out in the living room. I with my candle cooking your papaya for you. And by the way, I didn't notice you cooled off so much then.

"We stopped in front of a little joint. Somewhere near the Plaza Garibaldi. I went into a cave filled with smoke, following you, a little hole that stank of piss and beer. What in God's name could you want there? Two tequilas. Then two more. And words, words, words. And then to toss pumpkin seeds at the face of the mariachi musician who was blowing the trumpet. You threw the seeds at him, right in his face, and waited motionless while he walked toward us, fat, dark-skinned, and put down his instrument and took off his hat and grabbed you by the lapels and began to beat you, there in front of all of them . . ."

Muscular and graceful as a tiger? Come off it. I saw him too. Fat-bellied, flabby, less than nothing, his cheeks powerful from blowing the trumpet so many years, for the rest less than nothing. His mustache curled around his mouth.

"They made a circle around us and laughed and yelled."

They were coaching from the corner, Dragoness, that's all. Give it to him, the son of a bitch, smash him, send him to the Red Cross, gouge his eyes, slice his balls, shiv him, put him in his coffin, choke

him, hang him by his horn, stomp him, cold-cock him. Up his ass for the shit we've had to swallow, for the right you are sir and the just as you say sir, the step this way ma'm, the thank you for nothing, not a goddamn thing, for the fat-assed queers on the prowl. Kill him. Kill him!

"I couldn't move. I understood that I was there to be your witness, to see you with blood running from your nose and gums. They kicked the air out of you and you doubled up. Your face began to look battered. Your hair came down over your forehead. Your eyes were closed. Tears were pouring down your cheeks."

He fell to the floor amid the butts, the upset cuspidors, the bottle caps. And you had to watch, to take it all in. Before he would make love to you, you had to know him this way. A ruin to be pitied, not slept with, Dragoness. And you had to accept him so. Pick him up from the floor and lead him out into the cold dawn on Aquiles Serdán. Wipe him off, gently, with your handkerchief. That was what he had wanted.

"These people don't understand me, Ligeia. I've said it before and it's true, in Mexico a man can't do anything. They can't criticize, they can't appreciate, there are no standards, there is no certainty, everything is liking or disliking, mere feeling. And unlike Vasco Montero, I don't own a chapel. Look. Look what they say about the book here."

The little book bound in manila paper that took its place on the lowest shelf of the bookcase and there gathered dust. He did not publish again.

"Come on, Javier. Let's go home now."

Home in the same taxi that had brought you. The driver had waited.

"Shit, Javier. Shit."

You got out of bed and left the room without turning on the light and walked along the hotel corridor to Franz's room.

△ " 'Paul traveled, but only to cities where Jews lived or Jewish culture was known, for only there could they understand his teach-

ing. And after the dispersion of the year 70, a Jew had to buy the right to live in Gentile communities. That was how the German Judengasse formed, the Portuguese judiaria, the Provençal carriera, the French juiverie. The Church forbade Christians to engage in commerce. But not the Hebrews. Recently arrived, free of local customs, they had a point of view the local people lacked, and could see and seize opportunities the latter were blind to. The Council of Ravenna decreed that all Jews must wear a wheel cut of yellow cloth . . . so they could be distinguished from Christians. The Jews gathered in the Italian borghetto were the first bourgeoisie. The last ghetto in Western Europe was the *serraglio degli ebrei* or *saeptum Hebraicum* in Rome; it came to an end in 1885.' "

Professor Maher closed his book.

"Pivo! Pivo!" he shouted.

Franz and Hanna laughed. Kamilla was already at the door, plump and smiling, with the beer on a tray. She entered immediately and served their glasses. The room, Maher's studio, smelled of old muslin and waxed stone. A large house, five stories high, entered through the broad arcade in front of the plaza; a varnished cedar gate, then up the stairs to Professor Maher's quarters, weakly illuminated by winter light that came through honey-colored stained panes the leaded dividers of which formed, curiously, the head of Jan Hus.

They laughed and drank and the conversation followed the course that had been established the first time Hanna had brought Franz there: music versus architecture. Franz's simple idea was that the new in architecture is not something that just happens but that it results, in the first place, from the fact that the people who live in buildings change. Because people change, so must architecture, which must be at the service of valid human needs, not of some fixed idea about what is and is not monumental, or of models handed down from the past, or of the spirit of decorativeness. Maher, on the contrary, thought precisely in terms of models from the past: if a building of the twentieth century did not attain the total integration and eternality of the cathedral of St. Vitus, it was

not worth the raising. For Maher, the architect would always be the medieval master-builder surrounded by his apprentices and assistants. Franz pointed out that unfortunately this could no longer be. If Gropius was right about anything, he was dead right in warning that today the architect had been abandoned by the craftsmen, they had vanished into industry; today the architect had to compete with scientists, engineers, industrial researchers, and labor as merely one more wheel in a collective undertaking in which, nevertheless, his role was to provide that tension between reality and illusion which can make a building be at the same time both a work of art and a functional object. Maher, as Hanna smiled, became impatient with such theorizing and grunted that certainly architecture might confuse its function with that of mere utilitarianism, for it was, after all, an art of the concrete. For himself, he would simply go on building and visiting Gothic cathedrals in his imagination, abstract and musical. He wiped the foam from his lips and added, Well, yes, Franz might be right. All abstract beauty probably *was* born of something very concrete, of the tension the young man referred to.

Kamilla, and at times Hanna, for she liked to help, labored hard to keep the professor's instruments polished and gleaming. And he, for all his spirituality, with no apology minutely scrutinized his accounts and carried on a permanent inquiry with Kamilla concerning the fate of the crowns earned by five lessons, seven students a day, fourteen tiring hours, with three bottles of *pivo* at the end of it. Well, why not *pivo*? Beer is a fit drink for a man who earns his livelihood by working with the classical wind instruments: the flute, the oboe, the clarinet, and the bass horn: windy work, foamy refreshment, eh? And Franz and Hanna would hold hands and know that the moment had come for stories, for the old music teacher to remember the origins of his instruments the way other men remember great events or the faces of women they have loved or the names of their noblest ancestors. Take the oboe, for example. He reached out and caressed the instrument. The oboe was born in the court of Louis XIV. Oboe, hautbois. When Lully was

named superintendent of music for the royal chamber, he introduced the Italian style of indoor music-making and little by little shifted the former open-air concerts into the rooms of the palace, thus converting music from what one heard in the background during public ceremonies into an entertainment based on intimacy, closed doors. The musicians of the Écurie du Roi accepted the style and from their effort at refinement was born the oboe, invented by Jean Hotteterre and Michel Philidor. And so the good professor drank and orated, waxing eloquent as he referred to the clarinet, invented by Denner in Nuremberg and discovered by Mozart thanks to the musicians of Mannheim, the oboe di caccia and the oboe d'amore of Bach; and the Arabic instrument, the lute, first manufactured by the German craftsmen of Bologna, the Malers, Hans Frei, and Nikola Sconvelt first, later the Germans of Padua, the Hartungs, and of Venice, Magno Dieffopruchar, and of Rome, Büchenberg. The Germans of Italy . . . that German weakness for sunny skies!

Kamilla served the *knedlik* with a kind of mustard sauce and between bites Maher would go on reminiscing, as if he had at that moment entered an ancient hall in which in a single circle were gathered all his loved instruments, the viola, the rebec, the zither, the lute, the psaltery, the harp, the drum, the trumpets, the horns, the cymbals, the bells, the timbrels, the flutes, the German cornet, the various medieval bagpipes: the cornemuse, the chevrette, the muse de blef. And Hanna, smiling, followed the score of Guillaume de Machaut while Maher sang from memory and concluded: "And to me it seems that such a melody has never been seen or heard . . ."

They continued to see each other every Friday evening at the concerts in the Wallenstein Palace, sitting on folding chairs in front of an open hall with stucco decorations and mythological frescoes illuminated by floodlights. They listened to Brahms's *German Requiem* sitting closer and closer together, their shoulders and arms touching, then holding hands, then Franz's arm around her.

"Aren't you cold?"

"No, I'm fine now."

Grant them eternal rest, oh Lord, and eternal light. Two groups of cellos. Separated by the gloomy violas. The choir at its softest. A lament. But the melancholy and sadness of the instruments is endowed with a certain gaiety by the human voice. The voices in two groups too: the men low, the women higher-toned, happier. The brilliant sounds of the violins, the clarinets, and the flutes are here excluded. The lament of the cellos, their chords opening and stretching to unite them, a movement that is interrupted by the violas. The meaning of the tonal color: that we do not go down to sadness, we rise to it. It is a scream that is not a scream, an ascending unhappiness that contains yet conceals its secret shriek.

"Where do you live, Hanna?"

"In a boarding house. My family live in Zvolen. I used to go see them during vacation. But there are so many things to do, to hear in Prague in the summer. I think they understand. And you?"

The resigned, melancholy file of mourners moves forward. They bear the body of the one who has died. They carry him, and us, to the place of rest. They remember him. The harp remembers. Life lives surrounded by grief. That tension increases. In counterpoint the voices of the men and the women endure their suffering, elevate it. But the organ drags them downward again, prevents them from remembering, forces the music into a funerary march dominated by the voices of the men. Those of the women repeat in a tone that tries to recapture fleeing life.

"I'll go to Germany in the fall. To study architecture."

"Oh . . ."

Now the violas in a struggle burdened with pain. Memory tries to enter. It becomes the razor's edge between life and death, but it cannot separate them and melts, becomes confused. A mixed choir now: memory and life and death are one. A solemn acceptance, dignified, not weeping. The women alone, soft, slow. The men again with prolonged accents: the march resumes. A horn announces that they had stopped, impels them to continue moving

toward the place of rest. They walk slowly, their voices rising to create the illusion of a haste that wants to escape pain while their bodies desire to prolong it.

"No, there's no one in the boarding house Sundays. They all go out. Especially now, when it's so warm and beautiful."

"Hanna."

The invitation of the harp: let us rest, remember, for one instant. Let us stop and remember. The march resumes. Death is with us already. Memory cannot resurrect life. It cannot bring back the beat of a heart, sweat in a palm, the blink of living eyes. In their highest registers the violin and the viola accompany the mourners, are doubled, and finally attend the unconscious transformation of the march into dance.

"Hanna! Stop! Wait for me! What's wrong?"

"Never mind, it's nothing, nothing. I'm tired, that's all. Don't pay any attention. I ran and got tired. Really, that's all. Come on now, catch me."

"Hanna!"

"It's just the wind, that's all. It makes me cry. Always. Catch me!"

The women's voices as they separate from the mourners and sinuously move their arms above their heads. A muted diminuendo thins and at the same time makes brilliant. Spectral happiness, its eyes shut, leads the dancers. The dance and the funeral procession advance together. They recognize each other. For a brief moment happiness. And when it is suspended, the tone of grief does not return. A different tone appears, a natural, almost everyday tone. It distracts them. It contrasts with sorrow that is authentic, just as the happiness was authentic. A celebration now. Every act in which we join together must be festive. Birth. Marriage. Death. Feasting. Everything that unites us, that takes us away from our solitude. Dance. A duel. Drunkenness. War. A party.

"I love you."

"We'll have time, Hanna. More than enough. I promise you."

"Don't talk. Come."

A brilliant, spectral, happy, sorrowing fugue. The organ stops all movement. For a moment so brief. Only a moment. The dance of death is a hymn of happiness. Listen. Don't stop listening. Johannes Brahms. Who worked for ten years on this funeral file of voices and tones, this wreath that cannot be touched, this *Deutsches Requiem*. He found the title in a forgotten notebook that had belonged to his teacher, Robert Schumann. Now almost a pizzicato. It dies, ends. The dancers return to their places in the procession. Their voices are silent as the horn speaks. The march. The lament. An effort to recapture the dance.

"Why?"

"It's like learning to remember you."

The procession has created its own memory. First that of the corpse they carry on their shoulders. Now memory of the procession itself, its grave pace, its lament, its dance. Even what is happening in this moment is memory. The orchestra begins to recover all the loose threads. The voices, dispersed for a little, unite. What they have been is reviewed and remembered and then they burst forth with the jubilation of trumpets: a plea for resurrection, the will to be born again. The brasses that formerly were sad now are gay in a great double fugue of faces rising toward the light, voices set free but nevertheless prescient of a grieving horn that proclaims desire and denies its fulfillment.

"No, Franz, not this way. It's not what I want."

"Forgive me."

"Forgive you for what? Desires are never evil."

"No, they say that an intention alone can damn you."

"That's foolish. It's like music, Franz. Only when you play it and hear it does it become music. Isn't that the point? I love you. But I want time to love you . . ."

Rest. Acceptance. Serenity. Enjoyment. A last, quick affirmation. Before resignation again. No one will understand it. Johannes Brahms. After ten years composing it, he performed it for the first time in the cathedral at Bremen. The Weser with its intertwining yellow fogs. Its mirror of oil and gasoline. An eleventh-century ca-

thedral. Crude, clean. A stone skeleton. Iron. Ships. Textiles. Tobacco. Sugar. Bremerhaven.

"I was in Germany when I was a little boy."

"I've never been to Germany."

A moment of rest. Solitude. The voice of a man, a man alone who sings above all of them: *mein Herz*. From his heart. He sings, with his heart open, the lament: "He passed like a shadow." The choir repeats that grief from afar. Merely repeats. Then begins to grow, led by him, his solitary voice lifting it to a summit of weariness, exhaustion. The choir collapses. His voice revives it. He offers new words: "My life." My life is your life.

"No, I have nothing to complain about."

"Will you wait for me?"

The orchestra, light, isolated, stripped of all excess, transposes the melody from instrument to instrument. The voice of the man, grief and liberation, despair and faith, dominates, creating an oasis in death's desert, convoking the brilliant brasses. He asks that everything be forgotten, even this death that unites them. So that they can be. In order to be. They will not understand. No one will understand. In order to be. Requiem.

"Goodbye. Goodbye, Franz. Write to me. Franz, Franz, don't forget me."

"Let me go now, Hanna. I have to go. I'll write to you."

A German requiem. The liturgical words are not used. No. Those words pray for the dead who confront the horrors of the Last Judgment. These are words of consolation. They try to reconcile the living to the ideas of suffering and death.

"Who are you? Tell me, I'm asking you."

"Excuse me. I musn't be late. Let me pass."

Bach: *Actus Tragicus*. *Cantata* 106. Bach asks the love and aid of the Redeemer who leads dead souls to a better world. But not Brahms. This is a German requiem. Never pronounce that name: Christ. Don't even think of Him. That's for those who believe. But the voice of the Redeemer is still here. The Fourth Movement. Sweetness. The eternal dialogue between male and female. Life

accepted. An intent to humanize everything. To make pain and death ours. To name them and see them so that they can be what we possess. Everything will pass, will pass. Be comforted.

"I'm sorry. We don't have that name."

"Excuse me. Heil Hitler!"

And man will abide. Will labor. Make love. Thus. As always. Will be again what we were before. We shall labor. Raise the burned buildings. Sing with our mugs of beer tapping a table. Weep over our misfortunes, the misfortunes of others. Love our wives, our parents, our children. Hope. And be pitied. We deserve to be pitied. For now we are weak. Ah: the mother. The voice of woman. The Fifth Movement. It corresponds to the Third. It's the response to the Third. Union with the voice of man. The woman's solo, reminding us again of our loss, comforting us with tenderness.

"Put her on the list."

"And the boy?"

The male solo is confirmed on a different level. The mother too sustains the pace and power of the march. She gives a tender dignity to might and justice. She tells us: "We also suffered, understood, proved ourselves. Let us go forward." She prepares us for a new effort. She comforts us. No eagles now, no fire, only the voice of our mother who comes into the field and picks us up, leads us home again, secretly promises us return and resurrection. Softly she tells us that we have been defeated. A horn is heard. The choir is asking for judgment.

"Yes. Yesterday at six in the morning."

"And he too?"

Now the voice of the man states days of wrath. *Dies irae. Dies illa. Solvet saeculum in favilla. Teste David cum Sybilla.* The choir is not sure. Death, defeat, and rejection have weakened it. But the man's voice soars again, dominating, giving the choir wings and strength. And as the choir supports him, he allows himself a moment of gentleness. The choir lifts him on its wave and carries him to the last movement. The First Movement again. March, processional, march, processional, and the eagles reappear on the golden

standards, the black flags again unfurl. They were men, they were ours. We shall not allow the judgment of other men to be made against them. They are our dead. Let them rest. Though they have died, we live.

"Franz, Franz! They're playing Brahms's *Requiem* tonight in the palace garden!"

"I'll get our tickets. Wait for me there."

He who would touch our coldness will burn his fingers. Our tears are fed by a frozen heart.

"For over a thousand years the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia were part of the territory of our people. Czechoslovakia, having evinced its inherent powerlessness to survive, has fallen prey to its own dissolution. The German Reich cannot tolerate continual disturbances in these areas."

"Hanna, my love, my love, my love."

△ You turned off the radio, laughing: "Brahms in Holy Week. That's lack of respect."

"How will we manage tonight?"

"I'll think of something. Why?"

Isabel laughed and tickled Javier's ear.

On the plain stood the blackened ruins of old haciendas. Burned lifeless walls, fields that afterward had not been tilled again. High walls without windows, with open holes. Towers of dark brick. Old wooden gates that had passed through fire. Cane presses, abandoned, rusty. Abandoned high-wheeled carts. Burned-out stables, grain rooms, vague memories of patios. Empty fields. The towers of the old haciendas ruined, alone.

"The road to the right goes into Cholula," said Javier.

△ Javier said: I won't pay attention to you. I'll go back to Isabel's room. No, I'll stop in the corridor and look through the keyhole. Darkness. I'll open the door gently, and you won't wake. You always succeed in disappointing me. And that isn't easy. You are lying there whispering, not asleep. You didn't deserve my

worry. Now I'll be quiet not for you but for myself. I'll tiptoe barefoot across the room. Barefoot because I left my shoes in Isabel's room. I forgot them. Into the bathroom like a shadow in the night. I won't turn on the light. I'll find my pills and take one. I can tell them by their size. There, I'll swallow it. I don't want a stomach spasm and I know that one is coming. The pill will stop it. I'll sit on the john and wait. Think about something else. Just as I do when I make love. There are problems I must consider, solve, that's why they pay me. And Monday I'll be back in the office. I have to check those recommendations before they are sent to New York. I'll stress that high prices for imports must not be established unless simultaneously prices of raw materials are regulated. Request the Economic and Social Council to submit its findings to the General Assembly. Aaaahhh, there now. And Goodchild is scheming to be promoted over me. I'll have to go to New York to fight that. The Ministry of Foreign Relations will stand behind me, I think. They can't be allowed to discriminate against Latin Americans. Oh, no. Resolution . . . in my briefcase, Resolution Three-forty-one, section twelve. Let's have it, make it serve for something now and then. Aaaah, again. What day's today? Wednesday. Wednesday, not Holy Thursday. Wednesday? Yes, let it serve for something finally. No, it's Sunday. Only Sunday. When do they perform the Passion? Every goddamn day. Every day, hunger, then agony. Will there ever be a day that won't be the same? The day I die, maybe. We're all going to die. And Ligeia will be beside me, forcing me to understand that in loving all life we also loved all death. And at last I'll be able to laugh at her, stop listening to her, be alone with my fear that I may know I'm dying, be aware of it. Damn, I'm going to have to take another pill. Yes, to die consciously, certain of death in the moment of death. Before eternity can be discerned. Another wait, longer than this one. To be dead waiting for eternity to put in its appearance, which it refuses to do, to go on, dead, waiting. And Ligeia will have been right and death will simply be another life with the same old rules. I remember a Bosch painting in the museum in Rotterdam. Figures in par-

adise, but paradise has its own hell, a hell that in turn opens upon another abyss even blacker. No way out. No way. For in our imaginations are all possibilities, and our imaginations go where we go. Harvard. The river Charles in summer, swimming with sun-puffed condoms. And I in love with Ligeia. I thought you understood. It was there, then. Have you ever realized how I loved you, distant but at every moment present in my imagination? Nature represented, remembered, not nature itself, which was what you wanted to be. My Attic stella, distant, motionless, frozen, beyond reach, complete, a woman who could contain and satisfy all my hunger for variety, my mental polygamy . . .

△ A world of ants was there and Javier wanted to give it his attention, Elizabeth, because although minuscule, it contained everything. He began to follow the ants and his path became the entire length of the island of Delos, for the ants had taken possession of it all. They carried microscopic bits of marble. That fascinated him. Little by little, a grain at a time, as the centuries had passed they had carried away the dwelling place of Hermes and the temple of Isis. And you didn't want to look at the ants, you stopped in the House of Masks, fascinated, in turn, by the floor mosaic of Bacchus. You interrupted and distracted Javier, forcing him to look at what you began to explain to him, as if it were not present before his eyes: the panther, at once grave and vital, one claw raised and an acanthus necklace, while the God astride him holds a lance of peace (ribbons and laurel) and a mirror. He rides there examining himself, narcissistically. Androgynous Dionysus, pearls at his throat, his chest covered, his belly naked, his hips broad, his robe rolled and falling down over the loins of the panther. The ants, you told me, streamed through the panther's yellow eye, gnawing it, blinding it, and Javier stared at them and followed them and did not notice the mosaic masks, the alternating devils and angels with false faces; he went out into the debris of walls, columns, streets, pediments, temples, porticoes, from which Apollo's light was to have been born. Ants and the wind and the sun

and the thistles had built a second Delos that you explored without a guide. Open to the sky, Delos of the lost faces, eroded away if not beheaded. Pagan Isis in the center of the simplicity of a temple of two columns and two buttresses, a contrived simplicity that contrasted with the confused richness of the striated rocks and the yellow thistles above which rose the foreign sanctuary of the second Pantheon. Chameleons jumped among the rocks, brown as the stone itself, or stretched on scattered statues of Cleopatra and her husband Dioscurides, Artemis and her deer, Cybele, the great phallus of porous marble set erect above enormous testes. The water in the pools among the ruins and at the bottom of the cistern was stagnant. Javier observed details while you raised your eyes and searched for some totality that would encompass everything, some tactile, audible unity in this lifeless world that possesses no surviving or resurrected being in what you are accustomed to. Delos is not a museum. It is not the ancient preserved for modern appreciation. Nor is it a point of contrast that can sharpen the definitions of a life foreign to it, a past which, Javier wrote in his notebook, if it could be held by or included within the contemporary rat race might perhaps console us for certain of our lacks. Nor is it even a ruin that grows alongside the lives, indifferent to the old stone, of the descendants, fishermen and peasants, of the ancient faces; there are no descendants, no one lives on Delos, in Delos there is only Delos, not man, there is only what time and the wind and the sun and the ants have made of what Delos was. Nevertheless, Delos is not dead. And your eyes, Elizabeth-Ligeia, insisted that morning on grasping everything, fusing everything and carrying away a complete picture of the dry mountains and the bare rocks that here, as in all Greece, are the objects toward which the marble arms stretch to rescue, here beside the sun and the sea, from impenetrable sadness and distance. Ah, Dragoness, here again you insisted on creating a mirage. You, Dragoness, the young wife, are dreaming on top of Mount Cynthus. If Javier looks down to see the minute concrete reality, you break in and force him to look up, at the dream. Your fantasy obtrudes upon his observation and

thought. You move side by side, his slacks touching your skirt, and you feel compelled, driven, to drag him down to that sufficient lie which offers us consolation and inflicts upon us paralysis . . .

"Did you believe that it was later? No, right there and then. There, there . . ."

. . . descending among the stones toward the distant and beautiful point of the island, you both approached it that hot September morning, naked and sweating beneath the burning sun, with the same fear. He held your hand and would have liked to find an answer for you, but your questions that afternoon when you returned to Mykonos on the Meltemi, rocked by an Aegean which had begun to lose summer's calm, the patched and mended canvas sails swelling, your unspoken questions would not permit him to answer.

"And just what overwhelming thought was it that came to you in the ruins of Delos, Ligeia, and made it possible for your make-believe to become mere bitching as we were eating in that restaurant on the dock?"

"Oh? You have a free moment when you can listen to me? You don't have to run scribble something down?"

You drank Turkish coffee together and Javier paid and you got up and walked in step toward the Matoyannia and the high white-washed stairs with painted wooden railings that lead directly from the street to the quarries above.

"But you don't carry it off well, my love. When you pretend that your muse is sweating you, you don't really seem at all burdened. Or at least, not burdened with inspiration."

Badly shaven men wearing white shirts and old caps, donkeys loaded with baskets: grapes, figs, tomatoes, pumpkins. You walked past the Alefcandra, where the white houses fall with mossy skirts into the gulf, showing their piles of gnawed green wood covered with barnacles like the hull of a ship.

"What you fail to pretend well is that you aren't pretending. It shows, Javier. Fake, fake. You're not so goddamn tired. You're just tired of me."

Javier looked up toward the mountain. Then the church of Paraportiani, the sand castle of his boyhood, of the vacations Ofelia and Raúl had promised and never provided, a white sand castle with smooth corners caressed rather than built by two hands, left to crystallize in the sun, to be worn away by waves of hard white water.

"But maybe I'm wrong. Let's look at it another way. You've come to be afraid you may satiate me. Can that be it? Admit it, Javier. That's why you stay at your work so long. You . . ."

You pass into the Hagia Heleni. A golden belly, a cloister where you cannot breathe. Incense rises as high as the shining cross, the copper candelabra. Light enters from a very high, very small niche. The walls are covered with icons of dull gold. Javier is in front of you and your voice pursues him: "You don't want me to think that you . . ."

Fifty saints, apostles, virgins, martyrs, patriarchs, priests, each framed by a golden circle, all surrounding the virgin of St. Cyril. In her arms she holds a child who lifts her mantle with one hand and in some secret, even forbidden way seems to dominate her.

"That you're available . . ."

Javier hurries on down a white street past the statue of the heroine of 1821, Mado Mavrogenous. Your sandals, following, are noisy upon the cobblestones.

"But don't be afraid of exhausting our love, Javier. If you trust yours, then don't worry about the weakness of mine."

You follow him down the little street, smudging your shoulders with white plaster. There are many small shrines. High chairs line each side. The whiteness blinds and tires Javier and he searches for some relief from it. Venders of cactus leaves and chestnuts. The millers who at twilight roll up the sails of their wind vanes. Children with cropped scabby heads. Old women, staring, with enormous balls of yarn. Sailors who sweat as they haul boats up the sand. Porters with their pants rolled to their knees and makeshift jute hoods.

"Do you think that we should give ourselves to each other only

when everything is perfect? I understand, Javier, but you're wrong."

You sit again at the same café facing the bay. Night falls. You order ouzo again and they bring you the white bottle.

"Please, Javier, I do understand. But our love exists to be used. I don't want only the rare perfect moments. Javier, Javier, don't hurt me. Love is made to be used, to be spent. Only by using it can we make it last. Only when it is gone will it renew itself. Give yourself to me, Javier. Only by giving will you receive."

White, bled, and exhausted, are the guardian lions of the island of Delos alive? Javier was afraid to go down to them and so were you. The point is that they are there and they aren't there. They are there because their hind legs rest sunken forever in the stone pedestal, their forelegs are erect and secure, about to rush upon whoever would profane; they are there because of their long torsos and powerful ribs, their eroded heads, their open throats, their grieving eyes. But they are not there because your Island of Delos itself is not there, Elizabeth. It's a dream, a mirage, and everything it contains is a dream. It exists only for you. And you want your men, myself, Franz, Javier, to let themselves be dragged into the mirage, to be infected by it and participate in it. When you and Javier stopped before the lions, you dared to say that they held a mystery, a miracle, a surprise, and Javier said nothing. And that afternoon in Mykonos, on your way back, you pursued him like a rejected and bitter fury, baiting him . . .

"You wanted to defeat me, Ligeia. You've always wanted to defeat me, to pull me away from my purposes and down me and drown me in the rites of your sensuality. And I had wanted you because I needed a bridge between my world and the world of what is. You didn't give it to me. You gave me only an appetite that was always aroused, always waiting to be satisfied. You demanded that I attend to it, and to your dream built upon it, rather than to my own needs. Shut up now. Shut up, it's enough, enough! You will never understand how you have destroyed me."

You burst out laughing.

In the first chapter of his *Pandora's Box*, Javier wrote: "A novel discloses what the world has within itself but has not yet discovered and may never discover."

△ "It looks like scenery from a movie by Pedro Armendáriz and María Félix," Isabel laughed. She pressed down harder on the accelerator.

You turned and looked back at your husband, seated beside Franz. "And I know all your defects."

"The advantage in losing your innocence is that you also lose your prejudices," Javier replied.

"Hey, we're going into Cholula now," said Franz.

"Listen!" you cried, Dragoness. "Listen, I'm going to tell everything! Out with it, everything!" You looked at them, from one to the other, and found only patient, tolerant smiles. There was no need for Javier to lean forward, apparently to light your cigarette, and whisper, "I remember, too, Ligeia, but I don't talk."

Aloud, he went on: "As a child, I used to scribble on the walls of toilets the words I was afraid to speak to anyone's face. Bitter insults . . . challenges. Then later I came to understand that writing books amounts to the same thing . . . insults and challenges converted into the names of characters. But the advantage was now my dream and my life were the same at least, and one could summon up the other at any time. How about you, Franz?"

"I've said it before. The small truth becomes the big lie. And it's the same with lies." Isabel turned down the radio to listen to him. "For example, it's a small lie that when you are accused, you always stand, while your accuser kneels. But just the same, that's a big truth. It's what really happens."

It's so nice to have a man around the house, sang Eartha Kitt.

You laughed, Elizabeth, Ligeia, Dragoness. "I've wanted to tell you something, Javier. That we make love and speak and write the words of love only to add to the unreality of the world. To make life a little better lie."

Javier nodded. "We say things that are alien to life," he said

quietly. "Fearing that the world may merely accept their strangeness and observe to us, somehow, that it has all been said before, that we've failed to surprise, nor have we made the world change in the least."

"Zero hits, zero runs, one big error," said Isabel. She laughed alone. "And which needs the new manager, the writer or the world?"

△ I got out of my turismo limousine in the square in Cholula and said to you, Dragoness, though you didn't hear, that the evil is not to be a whore but to be a whore who makes bad investments. The evil is not to be a thief, but to be a crummy pickpocket. The evil's not to be a crook, but to be . . . But what the hell, what difference does it make in the end? All that matters is the harem and the sideshow, the carnival acts that can divert us for a little. The magician Simon, for example. Simon Magus, who sought the mother of everyone, the mother of the temple, the mother of everyone, the loving bitch who becomes, in Irenaeus's translation, the Helen whose skin launched the ships of Troy and who emigrates from flesh to flesh until she finally reaches the cathouse: our little lost lamb, the only lamb who merits redemption. But Hippolytus lays it on the line: the whole earth is only earth and it makes small difference where you sow, so long as you sow. And when Simon the Magician got to Rome, he ordered his disciples to bury him alive so that he could rise again on the third day, a ploy he found most admirable. They obeyed. They dug his grave and put him into it and waited three days and then many more, but Simon Magus did not rise, then or later. No, adds malicious Hippolytus, "for he was not the Redeemer." That may be granted, but it's beside the point. The point is that orthodoxy is no stronger or weaker than the heresies that keep it bouncing. A dogma without its heresy is pale and feeble tea indeed, Dragoness. For when orthodoxy absorbs the central moonshine of a faith, all tenets and rites that lie toward the fringes—the midnight eye, the seer's crystal ball, the fangs of the vampire—can live on only as heresy, only by going underground in

the hope of some day being touched by the purple of bonding consecration. The beauty of a well-made gospel is that it has two faces and it survives precisely because we can play heads and tails with it. Pascal, that Dracula whose beat was from convent to convent, shocks us: "Earth is not the dwelling place of truth; truth wanders among men lost and unrecognized." And the very Testament of your old folk proclaims: "Follow not the multitude." What if fair-haired J.C., our era's first hippie, had made his peace with Rome and the Pharisees and sat down to a few quiet hands of gin rummy with Iscariot, as if his ministry were a movie made by Buñuel? Or what if he had joined the laundry soap business of Pilate, Procter, and Gamble? What our gentry don't dig about the Holy Ghostling nailed to His cross is that in reality He was history's first psychopath, the first Son of Man really way out in grassy left, and that if He were making His pitch today we would find Him with His legs wrapped around a motorcycle, His eyes goggled and a wide belt circling His waist, or shaking His behind to the watusi in order to shake free of the sanctimonious. And those bits about reviving the dead, walking on water, and sailing up from neighborhood chimneys were merely shock treatments, for then as now, to shock was the only way to consecrate. Suppose J.C. had had the politician-sportsmen of the P.R.I. in his corner, or that master handler, L.B.J.; Jesus, he would still be stuck there in Israel, buried in his little province, and the New Testament would have to be written by Theodore White: *The Making of a Savior*, A.D. 32. No, whatever He was, Christ was no square. He was cool enough to come across with a new nervous system for the race called human, and that was why the stay-putters of the time saw Him as an undesirable. The stay-putter always has it all worked out, a code that covers everything, a rule for whatever turns up. But the hipster, the Son of Man who lives on gut, must gamble everything, for only by doing so can he fuse opposites, integrate the poles of life, and refuse to be stopped by every chance "Hey, hold it there." And who can you trust, Dragoness, if not those who depend only on themselves: the whores and the crooks, the artists

and the exiles, the refugees and the hermits; in short, the heretics, Christ's children, who are one with the Children of Mary. The story of our Shining Childe Christ is simply the story of individual energy, apocalyptic, devastating, then as now the only true salvation for anyone. That's precisely what He wanted to tell us. Come on over to the other side, my Magdalene, and don't let them piss on you, and I'll sober you up with water from the Dead Sea. And you, my Hooligan Twelve, let's split the hell out of here fast, for time is running and we still have the merchants to instruct on whether business is always business, lepers are crawling around us like lice, children are waiting, little and afraid of my spikes, too long and too scary, and last but not least, I have a date with my Father to keep. Hustle, cats, hustle. And suddenly only Lautréamont could finish the parable of the children: they end up maimed. You don't like that, eh? Look, Dragoness, the New Testament tells us in words that are beat enough to be almost clear that J.C. was going, going, man, going cool and crazy and high and open, clawing, digging it, swinging, with it. And if you give the Bastard the credit He deserves, you have to admit that He chose his time and place well and knew exactly the right moment to let the curtain drop. A Cat like that don't live to die of old age, Dragoness, in His carpenter's pad with His chest clogged up with anti-phlogiston. No: He gets the word young and goes straight to the hairy mountain of Ixtapalapa, dying young like James Dean and John Garfield and Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan and Raymond Radiguet and Shelley, Novalis and Isidore Ducasse, to say nothing of Mayakovsky, Kleist, Pushkin, Sergei Esenin, Alexander Blok, and Gaudier-Brzeska: one more year and they would be saying there goes an old bum with dove shit on his forehead instead of a crown of thorns. Do you know why He could stand up to temptation in the desert? Because He was His own tempter, His own crippled Satan. God, imagine how it would have turned out if the Establishment could have gotten Him to stretch out on a couch and talk away His manias of persecution, His complexes about His Holy Father and His Virgin Mother, His double personality . . .

or was it triple? Then goodbye my beloved Calvary, and out He passes with sand up to his neck *en attendant* Golgotha. I tell you, Dragoness, He made it damn rough for them, for no one could be sure whether a true follower should be a fisherman cockfighter or one of those others, those who kept up the Pharisee routine, Barabbas and Judas Iscariot and my abused Magdalene and all the Starters and Stoppers, Leapers and Hoppers, whether he should be a Saul Stalin (Qui Jacet S.S.) or one of those who play the classic spiritual stud but without facing temptation or discovering truth. Consider the Gnostics, for example: they tell faith to go to hell if that will lead them to knowledge, always secret, diabolic wisdom, the universe itself become a great unanswered question. And they never tired of poking their inquiries at an ailing God who was Creator of the black world that now went its way without Him, masterless. Then they emptied themselves writing the fantastic literature that their gospels represent. To give an example: it was Simon the Cyrenaic who was crucified, not Christ; Christ, dying of laughter, had hauled ass to the hills of the Lord where the wine flows and the Salomes cheerfully go down on their backs. Read well your Clement of Alexandria, Dragoness. There you learn that it was the Gnostics who had the guts to rehabilitate Cain. And if there was ever a fugitive, a man persecuted and alienated, it was Cain, a son rejected by the cruel Maker of Gods, the God who antedated Creation. Fair-haired Christopher, the God-Discoverer, came to cry fool to Him, but was frustrated by the mealy priests. Well, who has a better right to redemption than Cain or the Sodomites or Esau, or for that matter Judas himself, who gave Christopher the shaft with such ease and without whom the Crucifixion would never have come to be, and ergo . . . ? The bitching Gnostics prefigured that great pastor the Marquis de Sade and extended salvation to the condemned and made them ours. For if the Savior came to save, why in God's name should the Church give itself over to damning? And do you think they had done enough then? You don't know them, Dragoness; the Gnostics were not boys to stop halfway and secure. They go on and tell you that if you want to fight your

lasciviousness, give in and enjoy it, that to extirpate your sensuality, you must free and satiate your sensuality. For if there is a divine nature in all of us, is the good only that which lays down external dogma, the Christian line? Why the hell do we participate each of us in the Divine—grace—if not to go our own individual ways, unforeseen, even heretical? So here we go, Dragoness. That's called taking the sword in your mouth and swallowing it up to the hilt, and sure enough, the Fair-Haired One told us, "There are eunuchs who have become eunuchs only to win the kingdom of heaven." So, you see, the Gnostics put their balls on the table so that Baudelaire and Breton could be born, and Genet and Miller, so that we could dream the American Dream that enacts the crimes of Monk Ambrose in the feudal castles of Beverly Hills with the Bleeding Nun, la Belle Dame Sans Merci, Pollyanna Equanil of our masturbating dreams; you can hear his steps on the carpets of the glass prisons. And in regard to Marcion, when Polycarp saw him, he shouted, "I know you, First-born of Satan!" simply because Marcion, a hipster if there ever was one, had been the first to understand that God is the Alien, the entirely Other: for if the world is no more than an unrealizable tension between love and justice that ends in the final proof of nothingness—the corpse and the pit—then the Creator of the World is no Kin to God, Who is absolute Love and Justice. We can indeed blame the Creator for the horrors of life. But not God, the Alienated, the Outsider. And with Him only those like Himself can communicate: the beats and the lunatics, the apostates, the lost in heresy. Such, my dear Elizabeth, is the miracle of hell. So Origen said rightly that once Christ showed up we could see that thanks to Him there have been and there will be many more Christs. No one will remain Satan forever: only God is eternal, all can become Christs, even Satan himself; everything will make its way back to Divinity, murder as well as sodomy, rebellion like incest, blasphemy like prostitution. For if only God is eternal, how can hell be eternal? It don't figure, does it, Dragoness? Thus Satan cannot remain eternally alienated from God: if he could, that would be his victory; and the miracle of hell is that all

its tormented roads lead to paradise. Origen was anathematized, but he, prescient, had already cut off his balls to throw them in their faces. Which was why I told you in the beginning that Simon Magus scored a solid point when he testickled the sense of humor of St. Peter, the cockfighter and fisherman, by offering him gold in exchange for the secrets of the Holy Ghost, the first simony. Solemn old Pete observed him quietly and Simon the Magician went into myth, along with his Helen of Troy, the prostitute of the Phoenician temple who was the mother of God and of the myth itself, and ended buried alive in order to demonstrate that he was not by a long shot the Redeemer, to squelch the pompous mummies who had then as now taken over the whole show.

And if you hear me, you deny me. *Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine, cum sanctis tuis in aeternum.*

△ Isabel stopped in the Cholula market in front of the clothing stall. A mended canvas, held up by two staves in front and in back tied to an iron ring in the wall that formerly was probably used to tie horses and mules; shadowed heaps of skirts, blouses, and shawls. The woman attending was an Indian with narrow forehead and wide cheeks. She offered the shawls silently, spreading them in the sun so that Isabel and you, Elizabeth, could see the details that had been wrought slowly and lovingly, thread by thread, in the distant huts of the old women weavers who had spent their entire lives before their looms, joining the threads patiently, red, blue, black, yellow, shading the tones until each shawl would glisten a little in sunlight and retain that light in darkness, shining with the slightest movement of head or arm. The old woman showed them without speaking. She was small and dark, as ageless as all Indians, her face wrinkled but her hair lustrous and young. She chewed a tortilla and showed the shawls.

"Let me see the yellow one," Isabel said. The woman offered it, her face completely passive. Isabel spread the shawl around her shoulders and crossed it over her breasts. She raised it until it covered her head. You watched her, Elizabeth.

"What do you think?"

"It's very pretty. But why spend money?"

"What do you mean?"

You took off your own black shawl and held it in your hands. You looked at it.

"I mean I'll give you mine."

"But, Betty, I . . ."

"Take it, please. I'd like to give it to you."

The old woman listened impassively, continuing to show one shawl after the other. She said quietly, without looking at Isabel:

"Better to buy one. New."

"Pardon me?" said Isabel.

"Go on and take it, Isabel. I want you to have it."

The old woman nodded and Isabel covered herself with your shawl and you walked on, and when you met Franz and Javier again, Javier looked at Isabel and saw that she was wearing your shawl now, that it almost concealed her face.

△ Ofelia opened the door and went out onto the gallery that surrounded the patio. Javier kept his eyes fixed on his book. Mosquitoes buzzed around the naked light bulb and Ofelia stood there with her face of a girl grown old. Javier prayed silently that she would go away again, if only to preserve the rites of the habitual. She ought not to have come out of her dark room, where steps could be heard, then not heard. He was always hearing her. Her hand touched the knob of his bedroom, then left it. A key opened a padlock and a door that was never opened creaked slowly. A dog barked softly in this house that never had pets. Ofelia in the kitchen making a racket with her pots and pans. And his own steps in the rooms that were used every day, the rooms that were dark but had at least a little furniture. He felt that the noises like the silences were contrived, artful, that that was why they existed. It was a house of absences. Some ghostly hand had removed the ornaments from the wooden pedestals, those legacies from another era, another family, that had once held statues: an era that had been

Ofelia alone, or Ofelia with Raúl, perhaps, but each alone; and now its remnants had neither being nor reason for being. Perhaps the house had once belonged to his grandparents and that was why Ofelia wanted to hold on to it until the end. He never knew for sure, for just as the present could not be talked about simply because it was the present, so the past was excluded, because it was not the present, from those hardly audible conversations of his childhood, conversations carried on almost in whispers behind the closed door of a bedroom or a train compartment. What was this old house with its stone façade and its steep mansard roofs in a land where snow never fell? Who had built it, for whom had it been built? Why had they returned there after fifteen years living on trains and in border towns and thereafter preserved the building, though it was decaying, instead of selling it and moving to some smaller, newer house in a modern neighborhood? Later, when he learned all that had happened during the years of the old building, he made up stories of violence and bloodshed, but he could not quite believe them. Brush your teeth. Don't walk with your hands in your pockets. Don't begin eating until your father begins. He could not believe that there had been real violence outside that silent house where the only words ever spoken to him had to do with good manners. At any rate, he could not believe in a violence that could destroy fortunes and displace lives. Such tales as those were only in books or songs. If violence existed at all, it existed only in the lower berth of a sleeper or in the hidden play-yard of a priests' school, concealed and furtive violence that never presented itself openly proclaiming itself to be what it is, with everyone looking on. Violence had been the secret accident of innocent eyes meeting a private life into which those eyes had peeked; violence was what was created by innocence as it rushed pell-mell into a world that had not invited it. Precisely for that reason the exhaustion he suffered because of his mother's silent persecution, because of the wordless war of steps and coughs and keys and rattles and barking dogs and silence again, seemed too much. He could not see clearly that Ofelia was playing the role of an inno-

cence which, like that of a child who unconsciously opens the curtains of a berth, discovered him in behavior that would be seen as evil only if observed by others. Nor could he understand yet that everything Ofelia did was a plea for grace, a desire, as she provoked him and wearied him, that he would come near and join her in a guilt she did not want to bear alone longer, but to share. How do I know all this, Elizabeth? I know it because I read that little book of Javier's, his first, *The Dream*. And it's possible for me to read it, as it isn't for you, because I'm not involved in his games or he in mine, nor do I, as you do, have to read looking for my own image in the imagery of the poems: I never, as you did, fell in love with him through his writing. You thought that he had written for you and to you before he had ever met you. As though he had a clear premonition of you even as an adolescent, as though when he wrote about the summer rain in a shadowy patio in Mexico City he were already in touch with you in the small and shadowy room of your Jewish home in New York City.

Well, maybe . . . but now: Ofelia dares to cross her threshold and to advance toward her son, closing her flowery bathrobe as she nears him, adjusting a comb in her red hair. She hands him a letter, its envelope already torn open.

"Here. This came for you."

Javier takes the opened letter and without attentiveness reads what the editor has written: his book has been accepted, they congratulate him, please come to our office on Argentina to sign your contract. And immediately and for the first time in his life he felt the trembling of that secret cranial lobule that moves from its position in order to pierce our helpless meninges like an awl; the fever, the pain that spreads through the entire body, which is unprepared and surprised because an ordered and well-mannered brain knows by heart that one must not begin to eat before Father and that the fingerbowl is used to wash your hands after eating shrimp. He dropped the letter and sprang up and grabbed his mother by the shoulders and stared at her wildly, while Ofelia opened her mouth and simply stood there.

"You have no right! No right!"

She tried to close her mouth and escape from him.

"You've never done anything except humiliate me! Lie to me! You're indecent!"

He pushed her harshly away and raised his hand and felt his open palm sting against her dry, slightly oily skin, the wrinkles and bags where the face cream had penetrated, the flabby furrows of her face. He moved away and knelt and picked up the letter and avoided her eyes. But Ofelia—he did not see her face, nor did he know whether she was crying—took him by both hands and forced him to stand and squeezed him against her breasts, loose beneath the cotton robe, made his head rest on her shoulder as she caressed his neck and told him, then or later, when she died, that a woman, she, owed obedience and that she had always wished only to obey and something in her world had broken when the man she had chosen had not understood that, either did not know how to command or didn't want to command. In Ofelia's arms, feeling her aroused nipples against his smooth slender chest, Javier finally told her that it was no good, useless: neither she nor Raúl could ever tell him who he was; it was useless. He admitted that he was not ready to accept others' pain or joy and he refused to pity anyone. He told her that he was giving her notice that he intended to leave, to go away and leave her as soon as he had the means. From time to time she nodded and caressed the back of his head as it leaned on her shoulder, and said to him words that were entirely irrelevant: first get your degree, you need a profession, you're not going to sell electric cords like your father, you're not going to talk about money all day. Are you? Are you, Javier? And Javier, who had no other hold by which to grip the memory of his father, read over Raúl's journals and account books, the memorials he had left of his life of additions and subtractions, credits and debits, his correspondence with Montgomery Ward, the names with which he had walked through the world, brokers, commission agents, traveling salesmen, clerks, the books collated and sewn together like a gospel: the Ordinary Expenditures and the Capital Expenditures, the

Inventory Book, the Book of Balances and the imperatives of Yahweh: a guilty bankrupt, a fraudulent bankrupt: was that the reason, Mama? Was that why? Don't you know? Aren't you ever going to tell me?

And the old man sits on an iron bench in the Alameda and looks tired. The afternoon is damp and sultry, the air is hazy with dust. Passers-by do not turn to glance at him. Nevertheless, he resembles only himself. Maybe his curly gray hair is not unusual. But between his forehead and his eyelashes lies a message that no casual observer could understand. His eyes are dark, veiled like the dusty air. Inspecting them from close enough, one might suspect, though one would never state it, that he is dreaming awake, calmly dreaming his private nightmare, which is simply everyone's nightmare. That is why he holds his eyes open. No one asks him about his dream. Probably he would not tell. But it is also true that he waits now, and has long waited, seated in the Alameda, for someone to discover that dream with no assistance beyond the veiled look in his eyes. That is why he is sitting there. Around his eyes is a fine net of wrinkles which if they were deeper would disappear. Two deep nervous lines cross his cheeks and join on his chin. And it is all a mask: the body is hidden by a cheap, shapeless, nondescript suit, gray, bulky around the shoulders and the lapels, old, not too worn, too large for the emaciated figure within it. A Sunday suit, old Sundays, few Sundays. He raises his finger to the collar of his checked red shirt—he is wearing no tie—and feels that he is suffocating silently and without need to. Near him, a fountain drips; above, trees interlace. The dust thickens, a vertical mirror of frosted glass that thickens the shadows at the corners of the park, the shadows of the surrounding buildings. The old man sits looking toward Avenida Hidalgo. Toward the domes and the red stone façades and high towers of San Hipólito, toward the Plaza Morelos, freshened by a fountain of frogs, cherubim, and tritons, toward the market where funeral crowns and wreaths are sold, horseshoes of white and violet flowers, toward the tilting tezontle front of Santa Veracruz. Now he looks down at his shoes. Beside his shoes

is the same cardboard suitcase of the old journeys by train. He wants to shut his eyes. In the darkness of his closed eyes liquid trills and murmurs will pass. And what if in this moment that his eyes are shut there should pass also the one person who is capable of understanding his look? His expression becomes more intense. He offers his dream; he even makes an involuntary gesture of imploration. His eyes search eagerly for what they must remember: the bronze of the fountain, the painted iron of the bench, dried foam, the black cloth of the park photographer, brown trunks of trees, the fleeting flight of wings. He studies the sides of the Alameda a long time, and finally, tired, shuts his eyes.

Javier stops in the distance and looks at him. He can't be sure. If the old man would only open his eyes. No, no, it's merely another of the city's paupers. That's all. Doubtless burdened with some melodramatic, sordid story: a bore. But the suitcase? No, no. And the old man does not open his eyes and Javier walks on to Bolívar and buys his train ticket to New York, his ticket away from the flat, dark, incomprehensible world of his home, away from this city that lets itself be loved only from afar, that exacts sacrifice from all who are near.

△ And you, Elizabeth, perhaps were already awaiting his arrival as you listened to the dry sound of the little cards falling on the paved path. Jake smiled as he tossed them down. If they landed face up, he smiled again. If instead they showed their backs, printed with the story of some last-century soldier or Indian chief, he said, "Oh, shucks."

A card landed with the face of Sitting Bull looking up at the sky. Jake laughed and said to his playmate, "I win. Give me a Crazy Horse."

You were seated on a bench near your brother's wheelchair, reading, preparing for your first year's finals at City College. Now and then you looked at Jake playing with the boy who picked the cards up for him. The cards came with bubble gum. There were other series: baseball, boxing, airplanes. But those with the Indian

chiefs were the most coveted. They were larger, shinier, and more durable.

"Let's see now, I'm missing Rain-in-the-Face," said Jake. "And I have two too many Thunderclouds."

"Oh, pick them up yourself," said the boy who kept losing. He walked away into the park, slouching his shoulders.

You shut your book and ran to Jake and picked up the cards. You knelt before him and handed them to him one by one. He shuffled the cards and said, "I'm still missing Rain-in-the-Face."

"You've played long enough, Jake."

"All right."

He sat in his wheelchair and fingered and admired the cards he had won that Saturday afternoon. You returned to your bench and went on reading without understanding the words you read. You were thinking that what you feared every time you brought Jake to the park had not happened today: nobody had yelled at him. He had added to his collection of cards, and when you went home, he would sit on the floor and spread them out on the couch and examine them for hours, arrange them chronologically, with a serious face read the stories printed on the back. You interrupted him:

"Jake, do you want to go to City College when you're old enough?"

Immediately you felt bad. It was a clumsy question, for Jake had already missed one year of school because of his sickness. He shrugged his shoulders and without looking at you said, "I don't know." He stopped playing with his cards. He gathered them together, slowly, into a stack. His eyelids were dark and drooping. You bit your lip.

"What pretty cards you won today."

But Jake didn't smile. And when he did, merely to thank you, it was already too late and you knew you couldn't believe his smile. You rubbed his curly hair and regretted that too and Jake remained motionless and you went to your room, nervous and sad, and tried to read, following the words mechanically: *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, by Nathanael West. You were tempted to go

back to the living room and say something. But what should you say? Maybe it was better to leave things as they were and to resolve never to make another mistake with your brother. You put the book aside. How were you supposed to act with him? You didn't know. Which attitudes seemed merely condescending, which hurt him, which seemed natural to him? You went to your door and cracked it and listened, but Jake was silent.

Before the paralysis when you had used to say, "When we grow up, we'll go to the university together," it had been understood that your dream, and his too, was that you would both leave the world of your parents behind and do things, simple, natural things, actions that would be entirely your own, not inherited, not bound to the past. And then he would laugh and accept it as if you were stating the only possibility. Now everything was again as it used to be when you were small and would hide in the closet and listen to your mother Becky looking for you, saying that she was afraid, please you should both of you come out and turn on the lights, except that now Jake was not in the closet with you but outside in the living room with Becky, you were alone and did not know who hid in this game, you or Jake and your mother, and it was you who had to ask them to come out and not frighten you.

"Who is he?"

"He's a Mexican. He has a scholarship and is going to spend the semester here."

△ The newspaper again, *Dragoness*, for a final time. The story is datelined San Luis Potosí and I read it as I walk under the arcades of the Cholula plaza. At the Rancho de los Humos, which belongs to the Municipal District of Valles, a young woman, assisted by her husband and his friend, murdered her three newborn children and buried them. Her name is Delia Alvarado Olguín, her husband-accomplice is Emiliano Hernández Lucio, and the friend is one Gabriel García. Mere ignorance was the principal element in the triple infanticide. Poverty was an important consideration. Three babies had been born when only one was expected. Delia

couldn't cut it. She asked her husband if he agreed and when he gave his consent, she suffocated the three babies and her husband and Gabriel García buried them. That was several days ago. The neighbors found it strange that a woman who had been about to give birth was from one day to the next no longer pregnant, yet there was no newborn child in the house, and they notified the police, who yesterday investigated. Delia and her husband and their friend are now in jail. The neighborhood is in a uproar, the hue and cry is that the unnatural mother must be killed. And she, Delia, if she had a chronicler beside her, would exclaim: "Receive me into the home of your different land, into your halls, and I will do away with your sterility, I will give you children of your seed, such enchantments do I know." And the chronicler, tired, tempted to change his role to one of participation in the game, would reply sententiously: "Yes, my name will die with me, so come with me, be my woman. But you yourself must make your own escape from this land, for I must be innocent, innocent even in the eyes of strangers." And Delia, before the act, would whisper: "Don't exile me. I am a woman and there is nothing more brutal. I will be brave. I will not doubt you. But a woman is only a woman and is born to weep." And then the chorus of all the women of Los Humos, a chorus of black witches, would remember and screech, "You are man's fate, less than a shadow. You may kill but the dead will love you and you will love the dead. Your children have departed. They live no longer. Think about your children." Delia would console herself quietly: "Pain itself is good. Oh, children, children, destroyed by the lasciviousness of a father. For it was your lust, your hunger for new loves, that killed them."

So I finish reading and throw the newspaper aside, Elizabeth, Dragoness. I have read it from cover to cover, beginning to end, and now know all the news of this Sunday, April 11, 1965.

△ The world has surrendered to insistent sleep when you wake, Elizabeth, alone in the night in Cholula, alone in a hotel bedroom, awake remembering a nightmare you would like to go on dream-

ing. In the darkness you look for the body of your man but it is not there beside you. You put on your robe and run into the corridor to Franz's room at the same moment that Isabel moves away from Javier and he lies on her bed face down.

"So now there's nothing left, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"That was all that was missing."

"When it's all over, anything that is left is surprising."

"I tell you that if you think you're tired of me, then you better damn well let me go my way and you go yours."

"Little girl. Silly little girl. Come here."

"Leave me alone. Let me think about this. Don't touch me. Let me tell you straight to your face that whatever you have to do, Proffy, you have to do with your bourgeois family and your stupid drugs and your busy little prick and your sinecure with the United Nations, with your violence, with everything else you are. Sure, anything can be used for a book. But you've got it backwards. You don't use everything for writing. You use it for doing nothing. So split, seagulls, split."

"And my indifference to everything? The nothingness? The no one?"

"You mean your self-centered narcissism, that's all. You don't want to risk the knockout, that's all. Listen, Javier, the point is that my generation was born psychoanalyzed while yours hasn't even made an appointment to see the doctor yet. You want me to tell you something? For me there's no waiting. Do you understand that? No waiting! If I want something, I take it, do it, or drop it. You've really made me laugh, you know. Courting me a whole year, little by little, always strictly by the old-fashioned rules. You behaved with me like a Freddy Ainsworth-Hill. Ay, those pretty formalities. The long preparation. The holy conventions to be observed before the final beginning lay. Well, please yourself, Prof, but it's too much for me. Neither of us has to render his account to anyone. So bang, you go your way and I'll go mine. Goodbye, sayonara, ciao. As a friend of mine puts it, rape unto others as they would rape unto you."

"Little girl, little girl. Let me tell you a story, so you'll understand something. You publish a book and immediately they raise you high. You've given Mexican literature its new and ordained direction. You're the greatest. You're king of them all. You're Big Shit. Do you know why? So that by and by they can cut your balls off next to your neck. They build you up first, so they can chop you down later. They make you into a demi-god so that when they castrate you they can feel they've done something. And when they do castrate you, it's all over. Ya, the end, that's it, period. You think I can't speak your language, little nut? I know your language and I know more. I know the crazy logic of this country. If you fall on your ass here, it's fuck you, friend, fuck you. But if you do something, it's the same thing. And you never expect that. It takes you by surprise. You expect to be crushed if you fail, but not to be murdered because you succeed. But that's Mexico. If you dare to go on living, you're the failure of failures. If you die in time, you've got it made. Do you understand me, Isabel? That's our little Mexico. And that's all our little Mexico is. The only country in the world that hasn't killed its gods. Everyone else, including the chicken-shit Christians wherever you find them, kills his gods so he can worship them. But here they're still on the loose, laughing, mocking, setting everything upside down, making national heroes of the most blatant traitors, making Robin Hoods of pickpockets. Oh, I could tell you about it. But you know already."

"Proffy, I give up trying to understand you. It's like all that complicated nothing you wrote about the Indians, in your little notebook. So what? Who cares about the Indians? I certainly don't. Do you think I give a damn about that stupid Pepsicoatl? I'm tight, Proffy, nothing can shake me up. Nothing, do you get that? What you just did to me, for example. For you it was a great experience. But for me, I knew it already, even though it was the first time. I'm ready . . . ready for everything, even when it takes me by surprise. And there you have it. That's the difference between you and your kind and me and my kind. Don't worry, Javier, I won't tie you down. You can stop shaking. Relax. I'm not looking for a husband. All I'm looking for is orgasms. How's that?"

"May God bless you, Isabel."

"You're impulsive, my love. That's what you are. Impulsive."

"Yes, I may be impulsive. And you, aren't you tired of standing there humped like a camel?"

"Leave me alone. It still burns. For Christ's sake, Javier, stop playing games. If you're a son of the age of Don Porfirio and Queen Victoria, that's what you are, don't you understand? Please, stop fooling yourself. Do you think I don't know you? Why did you feed me that line about working in television? Do girls fall for it? You tell them you'll make them stars? Are you ashamed of the work you really do? God, what mediocrity! God, what a drag you are! No, Javier. No, no, stay still. Javier, Javier, not that way . . ."

It seems that sometimes one has to think about something that has nothing to do with the present, in order to prolong the present. Javier placed his hands on your waist and closed his eyes. When you noticed, Isabel, you were already saying:

"Second-rate, Javier. You're just second-rate. They all say so. The whole faculty, the students."

Javier was silent and you sighed with relief, Pussycat.

"What's wrong, Isabel?"

"It burns, *tú*."

△ You parked your brother under a tree and he smiled and said that you could leave him there for a while. He wanted to read. You and Javier walked away down one of the paths in Central Park. It was cold, the trees were bare. You took Javier's arm to stop for a moment and look back at Jake in his wheelchair. He waved one hand to you and with the other pulled up the zipper of his Scotch-plaid jacket. The cold had reddened his face, his eyes were dark and deep-set, his black hair was curly. He had taken after Gershon, he was clearly a Jew, while you, Elizabeth, were falsely Jewish, a blonde. Jake looked small and helpless and somber in the distance. He began to read and you and Javier walked on holding hands and you invited him to come to your home that evening and listen to records, you had a collection of Kay Kyser that he would enjoy, and

afterward you could go to a movie. New York was filled with those signs: *Garbo loves Taylor*. You began to talk about the movies, telling him that you went two or three times a week and one of the best scenes you had ever seen was the one where James Cagney pushed a grapefruit in the face of Mae Clarke, a good way to begin the day, eh? Both of them in pajamas. You talked about love, adventure, violence in the movies, about Clark Gable on the deck of the *Bounty* challenging malevolent Charles Laughton, about Errol Flynn as Captain Blood dueling on a tropical beach with that English villain, Basil Rathbone, who ended up cut through by Blood's sword and tossed aside on the sand, his face washed by waves. You told Javier that you wanted him to teach you many things. Everything, for you knew nothing except what you had learned in the movies and you didn't want to spend your time with him telling each other "Me Tarzan, you Jane," or repeating over and over "Lizzie loves Javier." You stopped and the noises were the accustomed ones, the elevated in the distance, dry twigs under your feet, muffled traffic, the laughter of some girls who were singing very far away. And maybe, you weren't sure, the voice of a radio, the music of a record player. Then you were racing back along the path with a look of disbelief on your face, your hands to your mouth as if to stifle a scream, your shawl and heavy brown coat flying, Javier right behind you unable yet to see what you saw: Jake's wheelchair whirling toward the stone bridge pushed by black-skinned hands while Jake tried to get up, get out, and looked all around for you and your boyfriend, the wheels sliding across wet grass and mud, shouts, "Kike Christ-killer, Christ-killer," shouts and laughter, out of sight beneath the bridge, the sound of baseball bats against flesh and metal, shouts of triumph, then the swift flight of the Negro youths, six, eight, nine, a whole gang of them who ran away as hard as they could without looking back, leather jackets, wool caps, the book lying on the path. And there, under the bridge, lying beside his overturned and smashed wheelchair in a stink of urine and sodden newspaper, Jake with his legs in their leather and steel braces raised on one of the wheels. His face white.

His mouth open. His skull misshapen and bleeding from the blows of the bats. Cards with the faces of Indian chiefs strewn around him. He had died with his arms raised helplessly to protect his head. He had died at thirteen, captured, defeated. And you, Elizabeth, knelt in the water beside him and touched his red lips.

△ You found Franz, Dragoness, outside Isabel's door.

"I've been looking for you."

Franz raised his finger to his lips. You put your arms around his neck and hugged him and did not try to listen too, because inside you a creeping snail was telling you softly about your dream and then as you stood there embracing Franz you saw the white empty corridors of an insane asylum, the white and chrome rooms of a hospital, nor did you think for a moment that Franz might have a dream very like yours, that he might be seeing also a world of black tiles covered by a cold tangle of low twisted trees growing over seventy-eight thousand corpses, the dead of seven centuries gathered layer upon layer in Prague's Jewish Cemetery under the carved symbols: Israel's clusters of grapes, Levi's sacred cup, Cohen's open and joined hands; and stones are at the corners of the graves because these dead are in the desert and the wind of Exodus must not be allowed to uproot them and carry them away converted into sand; no, they must become the stone and moss of centuries, and Franz looked among the black stones for a name, Rissenfeld, Lederova, Waldstein, Schön, Maher . . . But he found only the names of the places on the monument raised at the entrance to the cemetery:

Belsec

Majdanek

Flossenburg

Lodz

Stutthof

Ravensbrück

Riga

Monovice
Piaski
Mauthausen
Trostinec
Oranienburg
Treblinka
Auschwitz
Bergen-Belsen
Buchenwald
Dachau
Raasika
Terezin

There are no tombstones standing erect and worn, covered by moss and lichen. The name he seeks is not there. And you, embracing Franz in the corridor of the hotel, stopped on the Long Island highway without hearing or seeing the cars passing and finally opened your eyes, shivering with your hands deep in the pockets of your raincoat and the brim of your hat down. You lost all contact with reality and saw only the vertical stones of Mount Zion cemetery, the gray tombstones crowded together, the graves squeezed against each other, a plain of graves stretching all the way to the horizon and eventually becoming lost on this autumn afternoon against the skyland of Manhattan across the river; and in Queens this cemetery was the model or anticipation, perhaps the specter of the city and when you returned home you sat on the old couch with its worn velvet and the crocheted backs and armrests and you thought about Jake, looked at your hands, stretched them out, twitched them, and thought about Jake while your hands sought something to protect, cover, conceal.

"Why are we alive?"

And in the hotel corridor in front of Isabel's room you hugged Franz and did not hear the voices, violent, imploring, of the two Mexicans locked behind the door. You smelled Franz's sour sweat. He seemed not to notice you; he was intent on his eaves-

dropping. You could safely murmur that it need never be mentioned, that you had promised, that no one should ever have to be taken by night, in a taxi, to that house beyond Avenida Ribera de San Cosme, and Javier, invisible behind the door, was looking at you beseechingly, with his hands telling you not to go on, not to speak those words which you would never need to speak but which finally you would be unable to hold back, betraying with your utterance not Javier or the promise you had made him but yourself. For we have not yet reached the state of grace, Dragoness; we must still go through crises and make exaggerated, emotional gestures in order to convince ourselves that we are ourselves. Yes, you know, all right. And as you move away from Franz you tell yourself that both he and you know why you have sought each other out and made love together: it's because you, like him, can keep a secret: how to reveal the consequences of behavior without mentioning the behavior itself.

You walk away, alone, down the hotel corridor, you return to your room and Franz remains there as if he had not heard you or touched you, his ear against Isabel's door. You walked alone and satisfied, for you were telling yourself that all that matters is the external, swift, always changing surface of the world, that throb of the real which denies our private and hidden sordidness, which drowns out our stories, old stories, ever repeating, dead without knowing it before they are born.

△ Becky moved away from the door without looking at anyone, neither at you, who were staring at your hands, nor at Gershon, standing beside the window with his hat on, staring also, down at the empty street, at the iron fire escape beyond the gauze window curtain; without looking at either of you, Becky said: "It is all forbidden."

She took off her hat. Gershon did not turn. She went on: "And who told me that things would be this way, that we should never get out of this city where they shut us up? That was not the promise. They promised us that the walls would come down. You, Betele, give me the duster."

You got up from the sofa and brought her the feather duster from the closet.

"Here, Mama."

She snatched it without looking at you. Her eyes were very narrow, almost yellow, old and secretive, set deep in the broken porcelain that clung to the bones beneath them. She began to dust. The clock, the shelves, the sofa, the knobs of the doors, the sills of the windows.

"Maybe some day we will be able to leave the city. No one has lived in cities so long as we have. Sometimes I can't go to sleep, trying to think of someone in our family who ever lived in the country. You know one? Nor me, neither. There is not one. We live like animals, crowded together in a herd. But we're alone. Isn't that funny, we lived piled up on top of each other, yet alone, like lepers. Jake was an alien. My son was an alien. Like a beggar he lived here. Like a schnorrer, yes, yes. I remember him like he was an old man sitting outside the synagogue. Oh, Jake, so much you have learned! Look, you have let your hair and your beard grow. With your hand stretched out, you are asking for alms. Oh, Jake, Jake, with such insolence you receive those pennies as you sit in your wheelchair that is a throne. Oh, Jake, my son, so much you have learned! Come here and let me kiss you, little boy. To the man who gives you money you do a great favor. You save him. Because of you he is nearer the Lord's heaven. And at parties I push your chair and all of them you surprise by laughing and singing and dancing. You're a little clown, Jake, you're very funny. And you won't be a renegade. That I won't allow. You'll wear your hair and your fine long black coat and your boots and your beard when you grow up. And you'll be afraid to go out on the street, to go beyond the streets with me, for you know they can kill you, Jake. No, don't dare to go out. Stay here with me, little darling. I'll tell you something. You can escape only to another city and it will be just the same. Wherever you go, always the same. Do you think I can't understand? My poor son, a servant. He is a servant in his blood. My poor little son."

Gershon took off his hat and lit a cigarette.

"Becky. Be quiet now."

"Is that you? Can that be you?" She did not look at him. She went on dusting. "And do you know that there is no escape?"

"Yes, there's escape," Gershon said loudly. "He has done it."

"No." Her smile was as distant as the smile of a statue. "He knows that here we were born and here we must die. And if he runs away, how should he hide his shame for having abandoned us? He can't escape from us. I will go every day alone and visit his cradle and tell him that. How should he run away? And if you two don't want to go with me, I go alone."

"Mother, Mother, please be quiet." You looked at her sadly, knowing that she would not look at you, that she would never look at you again. "Leave him in peace."

"I'm telling you, he has escaped already," said Gershon.

"Nobody, nobody, nobody," Becky said. She dropped the duster and waited for you to notice and retrieve it. "Nobody knows how deep this is. If they should have to admit it is so deep as it is, they would die of fear. Oh, yes, it's scary. So scary it is to be seen on the street."

You picked up the duster.

"Swear to me that you will never let me go out." She rushed into your arms as you held the duster to her. Very softly she said, "Your father wants I should go out on the street dressed as a prostitute. He would throw me out dressed like a whore. He would sell me on the corners. Jake, Jake, swear to me you won't let him do it."

Gershon laughed. "Jake is invisible now. You can't see him."

Becky looked at him and smiled. "Welcome, sir, you are welcome. The pinochle players are upstairs. Please come in. A dollar is a dollar. Schlemiel!"

"He's invisible!" Gershon raised an imaginary glass in toast. "They can't hate him now. They can't bother him. He has gone out from Egypt, you crazy old woman!"

"Sir," said Becky, trembling as she hugged your shoulders, "sir, be gentle with me and I won't mind. Look, I can do many things. My father was a shohet who killed chickens whispering a prayer as

he cut their throats. Under my pillow I have a butcher's knife hidden. Better I should warn you. But don't worry. It's a chalef, it is blessed and approved. With me you are safe. And don't you think it is very exciting to sleep with a woman who has a ritual knife under her pillow?"

Gershon dropped on the couch. "You don't believe anything. Never have you believed anything. You have done that just to bother me. You want to make our life together hard."

"If they shouldn't see him, how can they hate him?" whispered Becky. You pushed her away and saw on her face a look that would never recognize you again. Gershon, fallen on the couch, whispered, "Yes, invisible, invisible." For the last time you stared at her transparent face where the eyes blinked off the seconds and the nervous, coated tongue came out and wet the lips you did not dare kiss. Gershon laughed in a low voice:

"And we, what right have we to be alive yet?"

△ Hold fast to your decade of the thirties, Dragoness, the decade of your youth, and lie to yourself by saying that the seed of everything since lay then in John Garfield, the first existential hero. Perhaps it did, but that is hindsight and the fact is that at the time you got a much bigger charge from Paul Muni breaking rocks in *I Am a Fugitive*. And you know it. But the real weakness was that you and Javier and all your crowd of the thirties wanted your opium trip to be clean and safe and standard. That was where you slipped up, for you should have wanted risk, confusion, a crazy mixture of things. Leave standard dreams, that is, orthodoxy, to those who play it safe and make others play it safe: for how long are those who free us going to go on feeling themselves free once they seize power by the horns? That's precisely when orthodoxy sets in, and then we have to come up with a fresh heresy or the dance is over. I tell you, Dragoness, every dogma must continuously generate its corresponding heresy or the illusion of freedom, which is perhaps as close as we can come to genuine freedom, can't be maintained. And here as in all things political the man of

wisdom is old Machiavelli, who seems cynical because he refuses to tell us fairy tales but is never foolish. Let us go on plowing the sea, as our grandfather Bolivar directed before becoming a statue, for we know that if the Banana Republicans are not allowed to moralize, they feel themselves oppressed, or, worse, are left with nothing at all to do with themselves. Machiavelli laid it on the line: politics is not concerned in the least with ethics, not because ethics should be scorned but simply because if one mixes politics and morality the nature of each is removed and the result is thorough confusion. And each time our munificent governors toss us a bouquet of flowers, let's remember Mack the Veil (and the shark always has shiny teeth though the moon may be beaming over Soho) and keep clearly in mind that politics is the human struggle for relative power, not for a final idealistic Utopia, and that to govern means to keep your subjects well subjected so that they won't attempt to grab your power. The old Florentine knew all the answers: men scorn what they possess, praise what has established itself, condemn the present, long for what is yet to come. Are they contented? Show me just one. No, but the point is that although discontented, they are passive and unless someone stirs them up they are entirely uninterested in power. It seems to me that just as your Yankee janizaries never examine Jefferson, so those on the other side ignore Marx, and my temporary Montezuma pays no attention to the constituents of the Seventeen; and when Louis the Fourteenth lifts his arms and moans, "*Je vous ai compris*," he is referring to friendly Mack and not to Montesquieu, who is hoarding his sous in a stocking. Machiavelli whispers, Dragoness, that those who are ruled ask only for security, peace, and quiet, the chance to take care of their little private affairs, and the trick is not to irritate them while continuing to serve them up glorious speeches, refrigerators on the time-payment plan, vacations with pay. That done, they won't even dream of barricades and guillotines. Mack the Veil is too often abused. Do you think he was describing abstract power, cold and isolated? I tell you, he knew what he was talking about, and before the rule of the fox, be he a fox of many or of one, there is always plenty of dialectic, as my Cuban cousins who happen to be at

bat now would put it: for virtue leads to peace, peace to idleness, idleness to rebellion, rebellion to destruction, destruction to order, and order to virtue, and here we go again in the hall of many mirrors. What Mackie suggests is simply that we understand what makes the merry-go-round go around, so that we can take advantage of our chances when they present themselves. The ruler need not be either cruel or benevolent, humane or tyrannous, or anything at all except what the times advise. And on the other side of the fence, in the pasture of the sheep, every one of us must be aware of the real nature of the situation, not lost in foggy dreams; we will be free only when we can tell the yolk of the egg from the white and comprehend that mosquitoes buzz around the heads of the mighty too. Only if we stay on our toes can we achieve true freedom and make our revolution permanent no matter what may happen, or who the mammoth that may come along. But you, my Shirley Temples, all you Leftists of the thirties, waited for the apocalypse to arrive by a kind of lawful natural succession, while the fact is that the exercise of power subjects nature and almost negates it. The natural is revolution, which is why revolution cannot be withstood long. Established power is an old fox indeed, crafty at hiding and disguising the face of truth. Revolution strips men down to the soul and strips away those who resist the violence of truth. Permanent revolution is permanent heterodoxy, not a moment of illumination doomed to be isolated and condemned between two Establishments. Permanent revolution is the daily conquest of the outer limits of truth, creativity, the disorder that must always oppose the orthodox. Shake them up, Feodor Mihailovitch and Lev Davidovitch, for at this moment we have less time left than the shadows of jackals as dawn rises, and we still fail to take on color and solidity, they still hold the mirror before our noses and nothing is reflected. My kingdom for a necklace of garlic. Is that how it goes?

△ “Maybe you want something else, Lizzie? Another drink? Maybe a vanilla soda?”

“No, Daddy. No thanks.”

You got up and walked out of the smell of smoke and grease and chocolate and coffee and a red-headed sailor passed looking in all directions, freckled, his canvas ditty bag in his hands, obviously lost, and an old man with a faded felt hat that came down over his ears was led along by a young woman who looked like him, the same damp eyes and high cheekbones, the same pointed trembling nose. She stopped and tried to straighten the black band of his hat and they walked toward the train platforms.

"Have you been to see your mother?" asked Gershon.

"No. Have you?"

Gershon smiled and adjusted his suspenders. "No, no, not me. I trust you to go see her once in a while. I leave it to you."

You walked on, your heads down.

"It takes a weight off my shoulders knowing that you go there once in a while. And it isn't like I like you should see that place."

Two girls leaned against an iron railing and played with their hands joined, swinging their hands without looking at each other, with growing nervous giggling that finally shook them into silence. One of them raised a hand to her mouth. The other covered her face with both hands. They joined arms again and leaned against the iron railing without looking at anything.

"Maybe one day we ought to go together," you said.

Gershon shook his head, not once but several times.

"You mean it's no use?"

"You know it's no use, Lizzie. The doctor told me the last time I went. Not even me she recognizes."

"Do you know what she does?"

"No, I don't know anything."

"I do."

"What does she do?"

"She says over and over again the same things she said that afternoon."

"Yes, yes."

Boys in white shirts stood arms on each other's shoulders at the newsstand kiosk and thumbed cowboy magazines and magazines

with pictures of nude males. They swelled their biceps and wrestled without laughing.

You and Gershon went down the iron stairs.

"Careful, Lizzie. Don't slip in your heels."

The Negro porters gathered at the bottom of the steps were laughing. You stopped and said, "Excuse me," to pass through. One of them put on his red cap and said something vulgar as you went past holding your skirt in with your hands and Gershon stopped and said, "Dirty niggers," and showed them the badge that he wore pinned to the lining of his coat. The Negro put his hand to his cap and grinned, "Sorry, capt'n," and you walked along the deserted platform beside the public rest rooms.

"I have to go, Daddy."

"Why? Come in and visit with me a little."

"I have to study for an exam tonight."

"Think about it. You don't want to go back home?"

"We've already talked about that."

"Don't living alone make you feel sad?"

"I've already told you. I don't want to live there again. You don't need me. Now you're free, as you've wanted to be."

"I'm asking you, Lizzie, if it don't make you sad to live by yourself."

"No, it doesn't. I'm fine."

"Come in here with me for a little."

"This is where you work?"

"Sometimes. I cover the whole station. Why are you laughing?"

"I'm laughing from love, Daddy. It's seeing you working as a policeman."

"Well, the world should keep turning."

You followed him through a narrow door that he opened with his key. He removed the padlock and put it in his pocket. A short corridor with piled-up, unused lockers. The stench of urine.

"So you're fine, you say. Just fine."

"I am, really. I swear it."

"Because you are sleeping with that boy."

"That's none of your business."

Gershon closed one eye and put the other to a tiny hole in the wall. With the butt of his cigar between his teeth, he whispered: "We become invisible. Sure we do."

You smiled. "It smells in here, Daddy."

Gershon began to laugh, his teeth biting down on the cigar. In the shadow his broad laughing face was like a theatrical comic mask. He took you by the arm as his laughter came out thick, halting, speckled with spit.

"Look, Lizzie."

"What?"

"Take a look, I'm telling you."

Laughing at first, you put your eye to the peephole. You saw an old man's hands and heard whispers you could not understand. Gershon squeezed your arm. The smells of urine and disinfectant were overpowering. You peeped again and saw their pants and the hand of the boy taking the old man's hand in the public rest room next door. You moved away silently.

"This is the third time I've caught that old pig," Gershon said. "The kids never come back, but the old bastard never learns." He looked at you for a long time. "Well, it's all in a day's work." He patted your cheek. "You should come back with me. I'm all alone. For all that your mother rubbed me the wrong way, still . . ." He laughed and then sighed and you turned your back. "Are you coming for Sunday supper, Lizzie? I have to go take care of this now." You shook your head and went out onto the platform again.

And that weekend you had to yell over the sound of the sea as you lay in Javier's arms and begged him to take you away, to the ocean before anywhere, so that you could know him, for here you were separated from each other: the feverish sea of Long Island, that sea of your lies, that sea that rises in flames to embrace the coast while Javier points, with the same hand that today rubbed your neck in the Volkswagen, and recites poetry about the sea, naked, a foreigner, a man from another world, with a different skin, olive-colored, with black curly hair whipped by the wind of a

summer storm, hair that makes his eyebrows even darker and his eyes darker too, the shadow on his unshaven cheeks, and you went out on the wet beach with him in brown rain that you both welcomed, both of you wearing sweaters that you pulled off to run toward the waves of the foaming, agitated Atlantic, slate-gray, cold as lemon, hard, and dove in and swam in the effervescent foam. At last you knew each other. He held you against his chest to protect you from the high waves and while the rain pattered against your heads he murmured: "Like the clean new earth. The earth of the beginning, before it's touched, built upon, scratched open. Earth before man's first death. Earth where no one has been buried. Ligeia . . . Ligeia . . . Ligeia . . . Ligeia."

Man does not surrender wholly, neither to angels nor to death, except from the debility of his feeble will.

"I live in a hotel now, Lizzie. In a hotel you come and go as you please. You eat by yourself and when you want to eat. You don't have to talk even to the waiter. In the evening you go to the movies. And maybe you make some friends in good time. Maybe you even play golf with them. If you want to see me, ask for Johnson. Gershon Johnson. They will know at the desk."

△ "I was waiting for you," you said, Pussycat.

Franz looked at you doubtfully. You shrugged your shoulders and tied the tails of your white shirt around your waist.

"I tell you, I was. I knew you were coming. And now here you are."

You walked to your record player and listened to it for a moment. *Pretty woman, have mercy on me*. You didn't laugh, Isabel. You took the record off and looked at Franz. A graying blond German wearing a blue shirt, gray trousers, no shoes. His shirt unbuttoned. You unplugged the record player and the flickering dim light in the room brightened perceptibly. But you were still almost in shadow. You were wearing only the shirt and you played with it, showing and then hiding, hiding and then showing your pubis, soft as a tongue of the sea. He stood beside the door and

began to feel aroused. You could sense that as you walked toward him. Through the open window came distant hushed voices and lost horns and tires on the highway and boleros from the loud-speakers around the plaza where you had strolled during the afternoon. You stopped and stood before him and he knelt to kiss what you were offering him. Young, soft, clean, Isabel, after so much washing that afternoon, lacking that taste of rotted seafood that earlier you had given to Javier. Dry now, clean. But now maybe your juices would flow again.

△ I was not far behind you when you left your car and began the slow walk up the stone path that leads very steeply from the base of the pyramid to the Spanish chapel on its top. The pyramid does not look like a pyramid; from a distance it is simply a high rounded hill flattened off at the summit. It is covered with earth and shaggy pines grow thick and the terraces under which the stone mass lies have almost vanished. Actually there are seven pyramids, they are nested inside each other, the first is smallest and is covered by the second, which is covered by the third, until the seventh is reached, and it is covered by earth. The Great Pyramid of Cholula. The Great Cue. Every cycle of fifty-two years a new pyramid was raised on the base of the old one, for the end of a cycle required, as homage to the arrival of the new, that the old should disappear.

You walked slowly up the slope and reached the summit. A flat, attractive landscape lay around you. The great circle of the valley locked between the cardinal points of snowy Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl in the west, the distant white star of Pico de Orizaba to the north, the enormous foothills of Malinche to the east, the humped shoulders of the Sierra Madre to the south. A level valley dotted with round-crowned trees and green squares and domes of glazed tile, hundreds of churches that glistened in the sun.

You reached the top of the pyramid out of breath. A belvedere, flat, with a balustrade, surrounds the chapel, which is walled with yellow stucco. It was Spain's final reply to the underground world of stone and sacred monsters that lies far below the little church

beneath four centuries' accretion of earth. You entered the shrine. Four slender cypresses stand in the atrium. At the end of the nave, beneath a glass bell, is the Virgen de los Remedios, a diminutive doll in a bulky skirt, standing on a half-moon that looks like the horns of a bull. The four of you examined the image briefly and then went back outside. Isabel was the first to notice the nineteenth-century red and yellow brick buildings below you, the neoclassic portico, the stone balustrades and high fences behind which were a series of park-like yards with narrow gravel paths and palm trees and benches. Some of the buildings had barred doors and windows. Men were walking across the lawns and along the paths. Men made small by your height above them. Men with shaved heads or cropped heads, wearing gray pants and gray shirts, many of them barefoot. They walked with their heads down, staring at the ground, or looking up at the sky, sometimes accompanied by men in white. They sat in twos and threes on the stone benches, hiding their ears or eyes with their hands, scratching their ribs or their shaved heads, rubbing their chins. Some sat with open mouths and merely stared. Some crouched on the grass with their knees supporting their faces, like squatting monkeys. Others sat with their feet drawn up to their mouths.

"Who are they?" said Isabel. "Who are they?"

"They're mental patients," said Javier. "Lunatics. This is the Cholula insane asylum."

Pigeons flew above the heads of the men below. One patient had a transistor radio turned to the top of its volume. Their voices could not be heard but the sound of the radio floated up clearly as the patient moved the tuning knob and finally found a station he liked. A corrido from the north, its words carried up to you, *Valentín como era hombre de nada les dió la razón . . .* A group seemed to form around the radio. But they weren't really interested; they listened without curiosity for a moment and then drifted away. One of them was dragging the rope belt of a bathrobe along the path. The music rose: *Estas son las mañanitas de un hombre valiente que fue Valentín*. You, Elizabeth, rested your el-

bows on the yellow-painted balustrade. Now lunch was being served. A group of suntanned men in gray sat on a bench and one of them had a nested column of kettles which he set down one by one. He separated a stack of bowls and began to pass them to his companions. But it was not really lunch. They knew, and you knew, that the bowls and kettles were empty. The man shook his arms. He must have said something but his voice did not carry to you. He made a gesture with his closed fist, jabbing the thumb down toward the ground like Nero commanding gladiators to die.

"He is asking for salt," guessed Javier, who as a child had not understood gestures. He looked at Franz. But Franz's face was empty, or at most merely showed that seriousness some of us adopt when we are witnessing something that is generally supposed to be of interest, even of scientific interest.

Look at them, Dragoness. Observe them from the distance. Don't identify with them, don't go near them. And come into my arms, Betele, hold me, don't let me go out. Turn the lights on. The lights, please. You are scaring me. Don't be scaring me, turn the lights on and . . .

One of the patients suddenly dropped his pants. Another knelt behind him and a white-jacketed attendant ran to separate them. A bell was heard. *Madre mía de Guadalupe* . . . A doctor moved among them as another attendant read a list aloud. *Por tu religión me van a matar* . . . "Because of your religion they are going to kill me . . ."

Javier looked at Franz and Franz looked back at him.

△ The last day he had found himself in an abandoned barn that was empty of everything, where there was nothing except shadows to hide behind. He told himself that shadows alone could conceal him. Seated on the floor of the wooden loft with his legs spread, he told himself that it was precisely the absence of grain, fodder, animals, that assured he would not be found. Not even horseshoes were left. There was only a leather bellows beside a cold forge, a few pieces of the iron that once had been worked here. No

hammer, no nails. He leaned forward and began to pick up bits of straw from between the cracks of the boards. Nothing was real to him in that moment except his hunger. Because of his hunger he would have liked to have been outside in the fields: the sun is brother of abundance. And today he would not ask for much. A very modest life, simple, lacking ambition, above all undisturbed. That vision came back to him again and again. A little life of quiet comfort at his childhood home in Prague with his parents, those quiet and comfortable Sudeten Germans who, he realized now, only now, had merely wanted to defend their comfort, to find order and stability, and had believed that that was all they had wanted. He crawled through the darkness of the barn loft picking up whatever he could find and hoarding it in his fist. And on his hands and knees, wearing a stained torn uniform and mud-caked boots, he could laugh and see that what his parents had wanted to preserve had now been destroyed forever with his parents' aid. His fist was full of bits of straw. He stopped laughing. He thought of his parents and saw them clearly, a quiet couple who had passed from adolescence into old age as if the years between had not existed, unable to understand the time of inflation, unable to comprehend the shifts in national boundaries and fortune, the violence and the killing; who had comforted themselves in the early days of Hitler by saying, "He studied architecture, he is one of our class," and later, "He has given us the Autobahn and established order," and finally, "Because of him, Germans can be proud again." He felt in his tunic pocket for a scrap of wrinkled brown paper. Some sort of document. He emptied the straw into the paper and rolled a makeshift cigarette. He felt in his pants pockets for his matches, matches that had resisted dampness, fire, mud; as always, excellent manufacture, even under these conditions. Efficiency. He smoked slowly, coughing repeatedly. The substitute tobacco eased his hunger pangs a little, let him think of something besides food. He rubbed his face with his free hand and tried to remember himself as he was. His skin lay thin against his bones, tight across his forehead, loose around his nostrils and mouth; he had a seven days'

beard. He would have liked to sleep. He raised his head and leaned forward away from the wall. He put his hand to his empty holster. That morning he had thrown his pistol into a river after firing his last cartridge.

He listened. Someone had coughed. After the cough, a sound of crawling and then a moan. Slowly he lay face down, defenseless or at least with no more defense than the lucidity brought on by hunger and solitude. There in the loft he was both crippled and protected. He was not seen, but neither could he see. He waited for whoever had coughed and moaned and now was crawling toward a bar of May sunlight that came through the side window above the abandoned forge. Now that someone was nearing him, he felt more alone, alone for the first time in years, alone and without orders to execute, alone and for the first time free to stop and tell himself that we must blame only ourselves, there is only our own guilt, a thought that eased his fear slightly, though probably he was thinking only because he had not eaten for so long; and now his unknown companion was touched by the shaft of light: a gray uniform, a cap that pretended to be military but seemed only what it really was, the cap of a schoolboy, a cap that fell and showed blond hair yellow in the sunlight, loose and silky as the cornsilk that formerly was perhaps to be found here in the loft, in happier times. It's a kid, perception told him immediately. But does reality always speak truth? He got up, leaning against a beam, and saw not only a child but also an innocent who, having fled the light of the fields and the crash of bombardment, had come here into the barn to hide but nevertheless had stopped within reach of the sun, within the fringe of light from the window. Franz yelled down at him. He yelled for him not to stay there where he could be seen, the idiot. And now that the boy rose to his feet, Franz could see that he was wearing the thick, badly made uniform of the last conscripts, those who normally would be dressed in short pants and blouses and squeezing their pimples, and the boy turned and the sun blinded his blue eyes while his weaponless, lost hands in desperation sought for something to grab. Then, his face twisting, he stumbled again and

with both hands squeezed his knee. Franz went down to pick him up and move him out of the light, carried him in his arms to the loft, and it had been centuries, the centuries of the past few days, since his flesh had touched the flesh of another human being. And now while his right hand went one way and the left another, and his thought walked out of step with his heart, he climbed to his hiding place carrying the light body of a boy, a body that smelled of young sweat, still childish, the sweat of boarding-school kids who wash too hurriedly after the heat of their games, the blond hair falling over his forehead as if he had just won a foot race and his fatigue were not from a wound but from hours of sports; while he climbed with the unconscious boy, he told him silently that he, a child, was not guilty of anything, he had merely followed orders as he himself, Franz, had, and that was what they all would say: he, Franz, had been an officer yet only an architect attached to the army, and certainly there was no guilt in serving the army, doing one's duty, the army came before everything, it was the very German nation, and the army had had to win the war in order to rid the country of the Party and its leaders, yes, that was how it had been, and this child could not possibly be guilty. He gently laid the boy on the loft floor. The boy had a canteen slung from his shoulder. Franz removed it, uncapped it, put it to his lips. The boy tried to open his eyes. One hand went to the shoulder where the canteen strap had been. He looked at Franz. He saw the uniform first, then Franz's eyes. He took Franz by the hand and said haltingly, his mind still confused, that he was glad to have found an officer, the only officer he had seen all day, all day walking across the fields. He had an order to execute. What order? They sent me to tell the reserves that the Americans are only five kilometers away, that's all. They gave me these hand grenades—he touched the other shoulder and the bag of grenades that hung there. Franz took the bag and told the boy to listen carefully. There were no reserves. There was not even a rear guard any more. There was nothing. Be quiet now, and listen. They listened, the boy lying stretched on the floor and Franz kneeling beside him, and they heard the howitzers very close

both to the east and the west. No, it was time to go home now, not to try to deliver orders. Where did he live? In a town a few kilometers away. Good, he must go there at once. The boy's eyes pleaded with Franz and Franz asked himself what he and the boy could do together and answered, nothing, the boy must get out of that uniform and go home. He unbuttoned him quickly, threw the woolen tunic aside, and asked the boy his name. My name is Ulrich, sir. Ulrich Zimmerman. The boy wiped his nose with his open hand and was left in his undershirt and again Franz told himself that the boy must go home, home as quickly as possible, but he did not say this to him; instead he asked, what happened to your leg? The boy laughed and touched his knee. It's nothing, sir. I just fell down in a ditch. I was stupid. I'm good at bike riding and as soon as I started running across that field alone I fell in a ditch and sprained something. But it's nothing, nothing, sir, really. His look was confident now. He expected immediate orders from Franz and that was why he could speak so quickly and securely. The hierarchy had been reestablished, there was order again, he felt secure because he had someone from whom to receive commands. Franz understood and said to him, I have to get rid of my uniform too and find some civilian clothes. The boy did not hesitate, though Franz feared he might be puzzled, might ask why, ask if the war was over, ask if he intended to desert, and if he did, Franz would not be able to explain, this time to a child, what he had become convinced of himself: that everything was pointless now, there was no escape, he must have civvies quickly, immediately. But the boy did not doubt or question. He looked at Franz and said with a smile, Last night I saw two people who were on a motorcycle hide a suitcase in the woods across the field there. They left it and got back on their motorcycle and rode away. Then go, Franz whispered. I can't go, for I don't know the place. Go get that suitcase. How's your knee, can you make it? The boy looked at him as if the question were an insult. He stood up. I'll be all right. I'll be right back, sir. Out of the barn he hobbled. And Franz realized that he had forgotten to ask him to get food somewhere.

And now Franz could sleep. At high noon, using the boy's wadded tunic as a pillow, a pillow that smelled of a child's perspiration, sweet and innocent as the child himself. In the darkness of the barn loft. While outside, in the fields, the woods, there was a desert hunted over by ghosts. He could sleep and dream. He told you that dream once again in Cholula, Dragoness, just as he had told it to you the first time you slept together, and you believed him because you believe only those dreams that have their interpretations within themselves; you have read your Nemerov and know that like a dream interpreted by one still sleeping, the interpretation is only the next room of the dream. Howard Nemerov is great, Dragoness. He is a poet who comes to me when I least expect him and it is thanks to him that I can understand why Franz looks at Javier as the four of you descend from the church by the steep path.

And now he was in bed with Elizabeth and she too would hear the dream. The boy returned with civilian clothing and Franz led him by the hand to a German town with an open square of red-yellow earth surrounded by medieval buildings with high leaded roofs, pointed arches, with atriums and ensigns and standards. At first the scene was like an engraving by a monogrammist, a vertical plane, a flat surface without perspective, everything presented in only two dimensions, horses, stones, trees, lakes, ships, castles. But that was only the curtain concealing the stage and it opened to reveal the sensual games of the Meister mit den Brandollen, lovers surprised, women bathing while preached to by their guardians of good manners, one of whom took advantage of his opportunity and hoisted a naked woman high into the air, and above them flew the bird-beast monsters of Martin Schongauer, goats with the wings and heads of birds of prey. That was a curtain also and it separated and displayed, finally, fusions of that spontaneous art which resolves the tension and conflict between the lives of a folk and the legends of Christianity. Children's games. A carnival in opposition to Lent. Franz came out on the stage led by his young guide named Ulrich, the limping light-haired boy who had

been raised here and knew all the secrets of the town: the secret of promised sensuality, be it carnival or Lent or a country circle-dance. Satiation, suppression, and longing were all dissolved by approaches to, presence with, or withdrawal from that sensuality which exorcised first their King of Misbehavior, Momus with eyes of different colors, one blue, the other brown, Momus who, made of a gray stick and a distorted headpiece and crowned by a wicker garbage basket, held a reed scepter from which hung two dead fish and was drawn along by a cowled archivist-priest who repeatedly said heh-heh, was followed by children with rattles who moved forward on the stage and played hoops but then went back and followed sad-faced Momus, the gloomy-eyed monarch with pointed nose and ill-trimmed beard who presided over these days of *fastus*, these days belonging to the legless cripple that rocked painfully along on his buttocks while a cowled figure threw coins at him, belonged to the villain with a monkey in a basket on his back, to the blind beggars with empty bowls, to the dying boy wrapped in a gown and lying in the middle of the street with his false mother squatting beside him receiving alms. Leaning on a rifle that served him as a crutch, Ulrich ascended with long swinging steps to the roof of the central building in order to show Franz the square on the other side, where happy games were played by laughing children. Inflated bladders. Blankets for tossing. Barrels for jumping. Wooden horses. Johnny on the pony. Snap the whip. Franz resisted this scene, although the boy, disconsolate suddenly, pointed to the large open-air table where an old woman kneaded dough for bread. Franz looked back, down the rooftops at the wild boars, the fish, the pigs, at a fat figure in red stockings and blue doublet who sat astride a barrel of beer and with a stiletto pierced the dead mouth of a wild boar's head. Then the carnival lunatics wearing tight cotton masks that showed the shape of their features without revealing their faces. Franz laughed and jabbed the boy with his elbow. Shaking with deep laughter, he explained to him that the elderly dwarfs were really disguised children, children with charcoal wrinkles drawn under their eyes, with carrot noses. Following the chil-

dren came a troop of court jesters playing the mandolin, swaying cotton paunches beneath their white gowns, and wearing clusters of onions around their necks. Ulrich tugged on Franz's sleeve. Happy children could be seen blowing soap bubbles, making lame birds sound again, making dolls. They ran in circles, costumed, wearing hoods. Franz paid no attention to the boy but went on laughing. A thick-legged cook passed with a pie of black crows and a skillet on his head, and behind him came another, even fatter, carrying on his head a table with golden bread and a dwarf dressed like a king in an ermine cape and an Oriental turban. It's a little boy, Ulrich, Franz said, and so is that devil in red with blue and white stripes down his side. Ulrich released Franz's hand and looked at him with impatience. Franz felt delight as the false Christ appeared, humped over, disheveled, with a dissolute face, dragged forth from a tent of patched canvas and now permitted to perform miracles, to cure the cripple crawling on his belly with his legs in the air in violent opposition to Lent, drawing himself along by grasping posts and corners and followed by a crowd of brother cripples using canes and crutches. They swarmed round the little stalls where eggs, bread, and fish were sold; they moved toward the barrels and the cooking fires, and behind, from the tall gray cathedral, a pile of pious women and black nuns emerged and turned their backs on the carnival. Ulrich threw his rifle-crutch in the air and slid down the red slate roof like sliding down a cellar door and with a pirouette fell among the playing children. He looked back at Franz and stuck out his tongue. But Franz laughed, for he knew that Ulrich was performing for him, capering in his yellow doublet and scarlet hood with gold bells, the black platter with which he was picking up the bread, fish, and papier-mâché masks that the children would need to save themselves. Ulrich ran to the bramble hedge around the garden. The other boys had climbed up there and were standing on their heads while two double files of girls hopped along the road lifting their knees high. Ulrich raced among the children who were playing blindman's buff, among those who were riding on each other's shoulders, among those

jousting on stilts. He squeezed between the canes of the blind men. He pulled girls' hair and jerked his hood down to his nose as he stood jeering before a magician who concealed a treasure under three nutshells and challenged him to guess which one. He performed balancing tricks and gymnastics on a hitching rail for horses. He climbed up the legs and arms of the goblins and rode piggyback. He lifted the flying skirts of the girls even higher, as if he wanted to hide among their petticoats. He climbed trees, he threw down a scrap of awning at a group of children who stood watching him. He spun two tops in his open palms and held them up, offering them to Franz, who was still perched high on the rooftop with the wind in his ear. Ulrich had become the leader they all followed and imitated, whether he put on a circus act or swallowed herring or threw himself into the river or leaped off the cliff to fall among the rocks. And now he went away followed by hundreds of children, pale boys, chubby boys, girls with white ribbons, dogs, mountebanks, and magicians with false noses. Franz stretched out his hand to touch that soft face which above its drowsy eyes had no eyelashes. He reached to touch the silver, blue, green, pale-rose bird's wing. To touch the lotus flowers, the lilies, the grasses growing beside the river. But the scene changed. An old woman threw out a bucketful of water and hollow-sounding balls hailed down and a blue belt tied to a stick was lonely as it was shaken by the wind. A boy hid behind a window and peeped out, others dove into the river, a girl ran into a house balancing a broom on one finger, caps were tossed high and the littlest girls walked in single file singing with the staves of their music cut out and hanging from a tree branch. From the square where the carnival was proceeding, mountebanks wearing striped gray uniforms on which yellow stars were sewn began to climb toward Franz. In the other square, boys hid in a sand mountain and a girl holding a broken doll peered through a barrel without ends and with her finger pointed at Franz. Children who had been baking bricks began to throw them up at the roof and the gray-clad gymnasts crawled on all fours across the leads and an owl in a loft observed him and solemnly

winked. Then the crawling figures attacked him, grabbed him by the neck, the arms, the thighs, the feet. Franz could only stare down at the square with its patches of light and shadow and its sordid merrymaking, the dry earth of dead branches and empty cartons, eggshells, old placards, bones sucked hollow, gray oyster shells, stones that rolled in circles while to the laughter and obscenities of the two kings, Momus and Christ, his attackers wrestled with him and dragged him down among the dwarfs and beggars, the cripples and minstrels, the nuns and the venders, to the center of the square, to the deep well where a spectacled old man in the garb of a priest, after inspecting the bucket, pushed him off the cliff and he fell away from them lying on his back and looking up at the rectangle of sky blocked by the shaven heads of those looking down at his fall. Then the painted curtain was drawn. A scene of infanticides, dogs and knives and guards in armor who slaughtered children and pursued them across a snowy field toward stumps of trees that were also white, covered with ice, while an orchestra played Viennese waltzes, the trumpet sounding clear and loud over the dead of all lands, gathering them all before the throne of judgment. Death and nature would halt astonished while creation rose from the grave to give its answers to the Judge. A written book would be read aloud, all the words and accusations and confessions by which the world must be tried. And thus when the Judge seated himself, all that had been concealed would be open, nothing would go unpunished. And now, there was Ulrich again.

Ulrich again, panting, exhausted, in his undershirt, with the suitcase in his hands. Franz asked him if anyone had seen him. The boy shook his head. Franz told him that they must hurry, but hurry cautiously. Those who pursue always expect those who flee to travel at top speed and they themselves move all the swifter; slow flight might deceive them. He had just dreamed this, Franz told him, the way to escape. The boy did not answer. He stood with the suitcase in his hands. After a moment of silence, Franz nervously took the suitcase and opened it. He looked up at the boy and the

boy knew that he would have no other opportunity to be commanded, to obey orders; he stood stiffly at attention and stared straight ahead without blinking. Franz thought: some day this child too will throw his hand to his cap in salute, click his booted heels together, drink too much beer while singing songs ripe with sentimentality. He wondered if the boy had already looked into the suitcase and seen what it contained: the uniform of a Luftwaffe general, the complete uniform, gray-green, gold buttons, black belt, black velvet collar, insignia of rank, cross pinned to the chest. It was the Ritterkreuz, proof of courage and loyalty. And it had been abandoned in the forest.

"Whose uniform is this?"

The boy did not blink an eyelash.

"Whose?"

The boy lowered his head.

"Did you see him run away? Was he wearing civvies?"

The boy nodded without looking at Franz.

"Was a woman with him? And before he left, did he order you to notify the reserves that the Americans were closing in? Did he tell you and the other boys that the glory of the Fatherland demanded you must fight to the end? That you must die?"

The boy nodded and grimaced as he held back his tears. Then at last he wept without restraint, throwing himself into Franz's arms, tears of frustrated bravery, of confusion, inability to understand. Franz felt like crying too, dry tears, hidden, as he thought of Germany's leaders in flight with their women and their wealth and their works of art while the old men and the children were given hand grenades and left behind to be the final line of defense, the last show of pointless courage; and if he knew now that it was pointless, later they would all know it; indeed, they had known it all along, and for months later, as he walked and walked across the destroyed land trying to make his way back to Prague without knowing anything or learning anything, he would tell himself that in the end the only patriotism worthy of reward is that of simply sinking into the war-torn earth and serving as a stone in a highway

or as seed or fertilizer, lost forever beneath the wheels of trucks and tractors. Dressed in a stolen suit that was too small for him, worn at the elbows, the knees threadbare, the seat thin, the cuffs frayed, he wandered across fields where abandoned trucks and rusting bazookas lay deep in the winter mud, deep beneath the autumn straw, through dead cities where the burned-out shells of cathedrals still rose above the slap of bare feet, the scurrying of beggars and prostitutes, obsessed with only one idea, to see Prague again and discover some certainty even if that certainty should be a name on a tombstone in the Jewish cemetery.

"Come on, Ulrich. We have to get out of here. We'll leave the suitcase."

He took the boy by the hand. They couldn't go to his home, Ulrich said, that town had by now been taken by the Americans. We're going there to surrender, Franz said quietly. He told the boy to put his tunic on again. They would surrender in uniform. He took him by the hand and they climbed down from the loft and went past the old forge out into the May fields, walking toward distant slopes where the sound of guns could be heard, artillery, tanks. The earth was covered with clover and daisies. The sun insisted on seeming benevolent and joyous, the sun, the earth his parents had wanted to preserve. Out in the open, Ulrich was transformed. He squeezed Franz's hand and told him that when they reached his home, he would give him food. He began to talk about his schoolmates, to wonder what had happened to them. They had been formed in groups and sent to defend the highway and the bridge, and some of them, like him, had been sent to join and notify the reserves, and now maybe they would all come safely home again if it was true, as some peasants had told him on his way back to the barn with the general's suitcase, that the war was over. But many didn't know it was over yet and many others had been told time and again that even if they heard the war was over, they must go on fighting until the last man fell, not one German soldier was left alive. That was what they were told, the boy repeated; the enemy must not find one single German still alive. They walked

on, the boy leaning against Franz for support because of his leg, following the winding course of the river, for that would lead them to the town. It came to Franz that in this way, suddenly, everything could have ended a long time ago; and now there was no possibility of going back to that moment. They walked along a slope above the sleeping river and he asked the boy for a drink of water. The boy pushed back a lock of yellow hair and opened his canteen. He laughed and turned it down; it was empty. "Wait," he cried, and laughing as he ran with difficulty, his sprained knee obviously hurting, he went down toward the river through a bank of thistles, the thistledown rising around him like a cloud of tiny butterflies. He reached the bank of the river and knelt and dipped the canteen. There were two dry rifle shots. The boy cried out and pitched forward, face down, into the water and lay still. For the first time during the war, Franz screamed. He ran through the thistles, ran summoning something to his aid, asking the earth, the thistles on the breeze, the sun itself to save a little life for that guiltless child. He knelt beside the boy's body. Two American soldiers appeared, their short combat boots sinking into the mud, their rifles cradled in their elbows, as Franz lifted the boy's head from the water and kissed his cheeks and temples. One of the Americans knelt too. He shook his head and said, "Goddammit, just a kid."

"It ain't our fault they make their kids fight."

The American who had spoken first shook his head again. "I was just practicin'. How the hell did I know I could get him at that range?" He fitted a new cartridge into his clip. "Going to frisk him?"

"Naw, what would a kid have?" With the butt of his rifle the American prodded Franz's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Buster, if that helps. Come on with us. The war's over."

Franz fell sobbing on the boy's body and knew no more.

△ "Not only madmen were locked up in the Charenton asylum," Javier said as the four of you turned your backs on the scene below. "They also kept libertines and spendthrifts there."

"Look," said Isabel, glancing at the patients a last time. One of them was trying to tie his shoes and was laughing at his futile efforts. "My God, the way he shows his teeth."

Franz ran his finger along the stone balustrade, heaping a little pile of dust. "That's what happens to you when you're locked up long enough. You grab everything that happens as an excuse for laughter. And usually nothing is very funny. It just happens to be unusual, to break the monotony."

"There's rather more than that to it," said Javier. "Notice how furiously he laughs. Habitually he is sad, and now he laughs as if he wanted to destroy whatever is amusing him."

"He knows the amusement won't last long, that's all," you said, Dragoness. "Come on, let's go, please."

"Let's go into the pyramid," said Isabel, passing her hands through her silky long hair.

"Maybe madness is worse there," you said.

The four of you walked slowly down.

"The lunatics in Charenton were put on show," Javier said quietly. "They were paraded before the good citizens of Paris as a spectacle, and the good citizens went home again with quiet consciences. They could congratulate themselves that they weren't like the patients." He looked at you. "Every writer must be afraid that he is doing much the same thing. He displays the horror of life and character, only to have his banker-reader sigh and say, Thank God, I am not one of those monsters. The poor writer can well think that he is scandalizing the bourgeoisie, but he isn't. What a laugh. Following *L'âge d'Or*, the bourgeoisie developed defenses. Do you think that Tennessee Williams shocks anyone? No, he just makes them feel comforted, like the lunatics of Charenton."

From the plaza came music, dance tunes dedicated to the young ladies of the city.

"The ancient Germans," Franz said, as though he had not heard Javier, "were permitted to kill their children if they were insane or deformed."

△ What didn't occur to you, Dragoness, was that the asylum

attendants were like priests. Priests have always watched over madmen, giving them versions of life and the world that they can comprehend, changing their hatred into love, finding peace for them, providing them with the exaltation and the calm that a lunatic needs to go on following his thread. The priest, the writer, the artist, the politician, everyone who supplies the world with images of itself, artificial, false images, interpretations, incantatorial psalms, all of them know that they are manipulating their lunatics. But the madmen, for example my friend Tristram Shandy, don't even hear the rhetoric. They laugh at their mentors and at the same time gradually transform them into the lunatics of lunatics. Which doesn't matter: the artful artificers go right on, don't give up, the idiots. They refuse to recognize that what was reason has become insanity and they disguise it with eroticism or military glory or statism or our need for eternal salvation. The madmen cooperate willingly, for they know that by feeding the lunacy of those who attend them, they make it possible for their own lunacy to go unnoticed. And this is the point, Dragoness: the illusion of rationality must be preserved in order to preserve the illusion of life. Our hall of mirrors again. Baudelaire, hip as they come, decks the corpse out in the myth of Eros, while Nietzsche's trolley bus parades as the power of Will. Withered old Marx is concealed behind the promise of a second terrestrial paradise (and hold up, comrades, our first paradise was one too many) and great Daddy Feodor Mihailovitch lurks under the advent of that Third Rome which somehow or other escaped Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya. Your countryman Walt Whitman provides us with his optimistic hope for a new, democratic, egalitarian world (We Shall Overcome and the walls will come tumblin' down), while our vampire-friend Rimbaud assures us of the divinity of words alone. But look what we have come to. Candy, Lolita, torture, the crematorium, the Moscow trials, Trotsky's assassination, the Bay of Pigs, police dogs loosed against the Negroes in Montgomery. Buy it and use it and look more beautiful than ever, my Pepsicoatl. That's the trick of it, too. For you see, Elizabeth, in the age of Victoria and Porfirio, neither

Prometheus nor Caesar nor Medea nor the Cid is two persons; even old Don Quixote, with his madness, ends up the poor, defeated shamed old man, Alonzo Quijano, never that other, his secret double. The Dane himself smelled rottenness but had to wait more years than are numbered in heaven, on earth, or in hell, nor dreamt of in anyone's philosophy, simply to light the fuse of that old cracker Voltaire who believed that the unity of the religious world once smashed, an equally united lay world could be supported; and so off we go: virtue without witness and evil without witness are unthinkable, and when God ceased to be our spectator, we had to create another looker-on, our alter ego, Mr. Hyde, or William Wilson, our double. So we see that Blake was not bleary: *Thou art a Man, God is no more; Thine own humanity learn to adore*; and that Kleist was riding the wave when he stood up: *Now stop beside me, God, for I am two: I am ghost and I walk through the night*. And the hell of it is that this also became a *vieux jeu* when Pirandello and Brecht closed the circle. Drop dead, corpse; every character is another character, himself and his mask, himself and his counterpart, himself and his own looker-on, victim and executioner at once. And haven't you read Swinburne, the consecrator of English vice? "The day's spider kills the day's fly, and calls it a crime? Nay, could we thwart nature, then might crime become possible and sin an actual thing. Could but a man do this; could he cross the courses of the stars, and put back the times of the sea; could he change the ways of the world and find out the house of life to destroy it; could he go into heaven to defile it and into hell to deliver it from subjection; could he draw down the sun to consume the earth, and bid the moon shed poison or fire upon the air; could he kill the fruit in the seed and corrode the child's mouth with the mother's milk; then had he sinned and done evil against nature. Nay, and not then: for nature would fain have it so, that she might create a world of new things; for she is weary of the ancient life: her eyes are sick of seeing and her ears are heavy with hearing; with the lust of creation she is burnt up, and rent in twain with travail until she bring forth change; she would fain create

afresh, and cannot, except it be by destroying: in all her energies she is athirst for mortal food, and with all her forces she labours in desire of death. And what are the worst sins we can do—we who live for a day and die in a night?"

△ You stood before the narrow entrance to the tunnel at the base of the pyramid. There were steel rails on which ran the little cars used to remove the excavated earth. Isabel gestured into the tunnel. "Shouldn't we go in?"

"I'm tired," Franz said.

"And I'd like to take a bath," you said, Dragoness. "I wish we were already at the sea." You walked toward the small store with an icebox beside its door and got a soft drink while Franz moved to the car, parked a little way from the pyramid. You drank your pop and Javier and Isabel opened drinks also. Franz, in the car, turned on the radio. He moved the knob all the way across the dial, quickly passing commercials, Afro-Cuban music, mariachis, the sound of surf, and stopped at a voice: ". . . performed by the Symphony Orchestra of Vienna, under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler . . ." He raised his hands, covered his eyes with his handkerchief, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He stuck his head out the window and called, "If you people plan on getting to Veracruz tonight . . ." He pressed the starter and nothing happened. Javier paid for your drinks and you walked toward the car. Franz was moving the gearshift lever back and forth.

"I don't understand," he said. "The gears don't seem to work."

Javier smiled.

Franz got out and went to the back of the car and opened the engine hood. He put his hands inside. Then he shrugged his shoulders and wiped his hands on his handkerchief.

"This is the end of the road for a while," he said quietly. "Someone has smashed the gearbox."

"We'll have to find a mechanic," said Isabel.

"How long will it take, Franz?" you asked.

He shrugged again. "It'll have to be checked thoroughly. We'll

probably have to have the car towed into Puebla. I suppose we can spend the night in Cholula and go on tomorrow."

"Oh, no," you groaned. "Is there a hotel?"

"There's a hotel," Javier said. "It's not too good, but . . ."

"Look," said Franz, showing broken wires. "Someone cut the wires from the distributor head."

"Sure," you said dryly. You crossed your arms and leaned against the door of the car. "What do you expect? It's that mania for destruction. Someone just got angry at your little car."

"A patient from the asylum," Isabel laughed. She finished her drink and walked toward the store to return the bottle.

"I'll go to the gas station and call the AMA and arrange for towing," said Franz. "But first let's get out the suitcases."

"Javier, do something, for God's sake," you said, your arms crossed. "Help him with the bags."

△ You woke up and turned over in bed.

"Oh, you're back now?"

"What do you mean, back? I haven't gone anywhere."

"What time is it?"

"Going on ten. Let's get something to eat."

"What for? Besides, it will upset your stomach."

"Well, my stomach isn't my fault. It's not my fault that we live seven thousand meters straight up, with eagles and snakes."

"Hold it, Javier, hold it. I haven't said a word."

"Do me a favor, Ligeia. Get me my medicine and a glass of water."

"What's wrong?"

"Just acidity, that's all."

"Don't hog the whole sheet. You always do that."

"Well, what does Franz say? Will the car be ready in the morning?"

"How should I know? I haven't seen Franz. Wouldn't your stomach feel better if you ate something? Acidity is worse on an empty stomach."

"The medicine will trick them."

"Trick who?"

"The damned juices in my stomach."

"Come on, Javier. Get up, let's do something."

"What, for example?"

"Well . . . did you bring the dominoes?"

"Yes. They're there in the suitcase."

You got up and opened the suitcase.

"I laugh when I remember how you used to eat when you were younger. God, nothing bothered you."

Javier's eyes said nothing. You felt for the box of dominoes. "When you were just a kid, old man. In New York. When we met at City College and fell in love." You found the box and shook it. You looked around the room and finally emptied the box out on the night table.

"Remember the black olives? The big black olives? Remember where we ate them?"

"I remember that we drank a very dry white wine and that we were sitting facing the wharf."

"What was the name of the town? I bet you don't remember."

"And I remember that we ate a red fish."

"Aren't you going to get up and play dominoes?"

"Put them on the bed."

You looked at Javier and sighed and shoved the dominoes on to the bed.

"Bring my pen, Ligeia. It's in my coat pocket. And we'll need a piece of paper."

"No."

"We have to keep score."

"No. Let whoever wins win and that's enough."

"All right." Javier mixed the dominoes on the bed.

"The black olives were from Kalamatis. Kalamatis, Javier."

"Take your pieces."

"How many do you take when just two are playing?"

"Seven. You know perfectly well that you always take seven. Go on. Open with the sixes."

"I don't have it."

"Neither do I. I'll open with the fives."

"I'm hungry. I'd like some black olives from Kalamatis. You knew the name very well. Why did you pretend you couldn't remember?"

"I didn't remember. And names are of no importance."

"What does matter, if names don't?"

"I've told you before, Ligeia. The things that come back to you only now and then and unexpectedly. Go on and play."

You played mechanically, trying to remember things you didn't remember often, objects of terra cotta, alabaster, marble, ivory. You remembered pigeons, bulls, fish, monkeys, sheep, turtledoves, owls, deer, lions, a man carrying a dead goat around his neck.

"Take it."

And many urns for the serpents. Yes, above all the serpent, the lion, and the bull. The three of them together.

"I was remembering things today, Javier. At Xochicalco and again later when we were at the river."

"Damn, you've ruined my double-six."

"Two-six. I can run it alone. Double-six. Six-five. There, I'm out."

"I'll mix them again."

"Careful. One of them is under the sheet."

"Yes. Ligeia."

"What?"

"You've forgotten something."

"What?"

"My medicine and a glass of water."

"I'm sorry. I'll go get them now."

"And something else."

"What?"

"I wasn't there, Ligeia. I wasn't there."

Why did you insist on saying that he was too there and that he must recall the names of the white wine and the black olives? You went into the bathroom and turned on the light. All that he needed to know he could learn from looking at pictures in a book

or reading a travel guide, couldn't he? You looked among the medicines for the bottle of Maalox. That would be enough to tell him that the palace of Minos rises above olive orchards on a pale rocky mountain. You found the bottle and turned on the faucet to fill the glass. In the midst of cypress trees, ravines, vines, laurel shrubs. The water came out brown with rust and you emptied the glass. That all day long crickets can be heard, that at Knossos the earth is reddish and the bulls painted on the walls are the same color. You turned off the light and stopped just inside the door. That there are vineyards all around and in the palace storerooms are great many-handled urns that were used to store grain. That the entire palace is a beehive of rooms, cloisters, archives, shops, halls, bedrooms, sunken baths. You went back into the bedroom. Javier had just finished mixing the dominoes again. And a stage for theater.

"Here, Javier. But you can't drink this water."

"That's all right. I can take the medicine straight."

"What were you saying to yourself just now?"

"Nothing. Well . . . that the only thing living there was a pen where a single pig rooted and scared away the hens and then scratched himself against the stones of the wall."

"So you *were* there."

"No, Ligeia."

"And you were on Herakleion, too. And on Rhodes. And at Falaraki on the beach. Falaraki, Javier, Falaraki, don't you remember? You have to remember . . ."

"I have the double-six."

"Look, how long did we stay at Falaraki?"

"I don't know. Just as long as you please. We were never there in the first place. Go on and play."

"We stayed in a white cottage half buried in the sand. With narrow little windows. White with plaster. Yes, and it had . . . I don't know. Forgive me, Javier."

Javier gathered up his dominoes. He deliberately tipped over those that you were holding upright.

"Javier, I told you . . ."

"Look, what I remember is a building black from coal smoke, a house where your mother served matzo balls and passed bitter gossip along to your brother and your father never understood anything that was happening, and if you want to remember something, remember that and not that silly cottage beside the sea."

You jumped up from the bed. "What difference does it make to you? You weren't there."

"And I wasn't in Greece, either."

"But I was."

You paced back and forth between the end of the bed and the wardrobe, thinking. That you had arrived at Falaraki in darkness, in a little boat that had brought you from the pier at Rhodes. And when you reached Falaraki, all you could see was the black loin of the mountain. The captain offered you glasses of ouzo with water and the boat rocked heavily. And since that moment you have always understood that Greece has always lived beside the sea because the sea is its promise, the mirage that never vanishes, a second earth visible all day to the eyes of those who would like to abandon their real earth, flat and dry, where only olive trees flourish and everything else, hyacinth, oleander, lilies, hibiscus, is a perfume, an intoxication, an alchemy created to reply to the sea's beauty and give men a reason to remain on land. You thought that you asked Javier to write it down for you. But he . . .

"Shit, Javier. I'm hungry. I'm going to order something to drink."

You put on your robe and went out in the hall.

"He wasn't there," Javier said to himself as you, in the hall, shouted: "Clerk! Bellboy! Miss! Hey, whoever's in charge here! What sort of a dump is this, anyhow?"

"The Cholula-Hilton," Javier murmured.

A young Indian appeared.

"What drinks do you have? Tequila? Do you have Damiana liqueur?"

The youth nodded yes, no, again and again, constantly smiling. He went away. You dropped on the bed.

"Who was Alexander Hamilton?" Javier said idly. He was building a castle with the dominoes.

"George Arliss, my love."

"Juárez?"

"Paul Muni. He and Arliss split the biographical parts. Riche-lieu, Pasteur, Zola, Wellington. Voltaire, Rothschild."

"Good. Who invented the telephone?"

"Don Ameche."

"The electric light?"

"Spencer Tracy."

"The news services?"

"Edward G. Robinson."

"*Beau Geste*, first and second?"

"Ronald Colman, Ralph Forbes, Neil Hamilton. Gary Cooper, Ray Milland, and Robert Preston; Mary Brian or Susan Hayward; Noah Beery or Brian Donlevy; William Powell or J. Carrol Naish."

"Excellent, Ligeia. You pass."

"Oh, I used to see three or four movies a week. Sometimes more. All of us belonged to fan clubs. But you don't remember. I bet you don't remember James Cagney squeezing a grapefruit in Mae Clarke's face. Or Clark Gable on the hatch of the *Bounty*. Or Errol Flynn as Captain Blood dueling on the Spanish Main." You laughed and drew your robe over your breasts. "Poor Olivia de Havilland was in all those movies. All of them, always pretty, sighing, her face deadly serious. The girl who was really elegant was Kay Francis. Very languid, very slender."

Javier yawned and his castle of dominoes collapsed.

"We all tried to imitate Kay Francis. We would try to make our voices nasal like hers. We'd practice lying down on a sofa, sipping a cocktail. Of course her sofas were always covered with white fur. Then Carole Lombard came along with a new style. A woman's spontaneity. Wackiness, comedy. We wanted to leave home forever and have careers in Manhattan, to be like Rosalind Russell and marry someone like Cary Grant. Ha, Javier. Garbo was something else again. She was simply divine. A woman who belonged to

the gods. And John Garfield, John Garfield! He died fucking. Yes, I pass, all right!"

The Indian youth entered carrying a tin tray with a bottle of tequila on it, two small glasses, a saucer of slices of lemon, and a salt shaker. Printed on the tray was *Cerveza Corona la Rubia de Categoría*. He put the tray on the night table and said he was sorry, they had no Damiana.

"What a pity. It's an aphrodisiac." You gave the boy a peso. He smiled and hesitated. "Go on, take it."

You poured the two glasses and passed the salt shaker and the lemon slices to Javier. He squeezed lemon into his glass and sprinkled the rim of the glass with salt. "This won't be good for my stomach, Ligeia. You know that."

You looked at each other as he slowly sipped his tequila.

"John Garfield," Javier sighed. He looked up at the ceiling, with his glass in his hand. "You know, when you witness death, it changes you. Cruelly, unnecessarily. You never want to think again of the man who died. John Garfield."

"Forget John Garfield. Never mind him. Forget him." You drank the clear liquid squeezing the lemon into your lips and sucking the salt that you had on your fist.

Javier drank. He spat a lemon seed.

"But you don't want to forget anything, do you?" You took your wristwatch from the night table and stared at it for several minutes. Later you were going to tell me that once again you were thinking that when it first started, you hadn't wanted to blame his attitude on something so simple as your having opened one of his letters. A letter you didn't even read. You had preferred to blame it on yourself, on your slowness in responding to the immediate passion you had both felt when you first met. Or, rather, on your insistence that passion should be more than passion, that it should uncover his broken, hidden mask. You had told yourself that was the reason for the new silences, for the new kind of happiness which for you was indeed happiness, though different, for the behavior that was never decisive, for the long hours alone in the

apartment while Javier went out to explore the streets of Mexico City. And you didn't realize at the time that gradually your passion was becoming merely a feeling that went on calmly from day to day without moments of crisis or climax. A sentiment, a direction rather than movement in that direction. You told me that once, Dragoness. Or maybe it was I who told you. You went on to say that a sentiment locks us up inside ourselves, does not, like passion, throw us into the arms of others. Passion is shared; sentiment is not. And now as you sipped your drink you realized that twenty years ago you had sought to return to passion by finding it in Javier's writing, not only the words but the act.

"No, Javier, you always want to hang on to everything, don't you?"

"I've told you that . . ."

"I refused to admit that everything happened simply because I opened that letter of yours. That would have been ridiculous."

You rested your chin on your fist, dampened by saliva, tasting of salt. You began to hum. Javier tried to guess the tune. You lowered your voice and leaned forward, letting your face drop until your forehead touched your knee. You rubbed your leg.

"I always thought you understood," Javier whispered. He looked at the back of your head and reached out and took the wristwatch and turned the hands. "I had gone to see you, not only women younger than you but you too in paintings that had been done by a man who had died of tuberculosis God knows when. I took your hand and we walked out of the gallery, Ligeia. And for the second time you were my Greek stele . . ."

You raised your head from your knee. "No, I told myself it was my fault, because I hadn't been content with the passion we felt when we first met, I wanted more. That it should reveal us to each other, the things hidden."

The watch skipped several hours and Javier laughed.

"My Attic stele. Distant. Motionless. At rest. Remote. One woman who could satisfy my hunger for many women."

Again you looked at each other.

"We could have played games, Javier. Who did the girl in the window run away with? Miriam. Where did she go? Why didn't you go after her? So now you'll never know her name or hear her voice. Please . . ."

Javier finished his tequila with one swallow and poured his glass full again.

"It's going to hurt your stomach, Javier. Tomorrow you'll feel sick and you'll be complaining that now your vacation has been spoiled."

"Take another drink yourself. If I could only be sure about it."

"About what?"

"My stomach. If I could only say, operate on the duodenum, take out the gall bladder. But no one knows where the trouble is. Upset stomach. Tiredness. Cold hands. Gas pains. A longing never to open my eyes again. Insomnia. Shit. What were you humming?"

"Cannonball Adderley. *Lillie*. Sweet and slow. And listen to Yusef Lateef's flute. There's a Mephistopheles for you. A Negro one."

Javier calmly threw his tequila glass at the bureau mirror. You watched him and went on quietly, "Their only way of communicating is their music. *Lillie*. It's a song of desperation. That's all." The mirror shattered and the pieces fell, showing black paint on their backs, their sound covered that of the glass falling.

"Do you want to bet?" Javier said.

You got up and retrieved his unbroken glass and filled it with tequila again.

"I don't bet. You win, it's not broken."

Javier looked at the glass. He rubbed it and smiled. "It's very simple. Mirrors break and glasses don't. But suppose it were the other way around? Suppose mirrors never shattered and glasses always did. Take your boyfriend German, for example."

"What do you mean, my boyfriend German? He . . ."

"Yes, it may all be necessary. To do what you ought not do, to do it anyhow, saying so what. I, on the other hand, when I was a kid I used to shut myself up in the bathroom and write words I was

afraid to speak. Do you understand that? On the walls of the toilet, the words I was afraid to say to the bullies at my school."

"Gold butterfly. No, brass butterfly. God knows why I love you, knowing your defects so well."

"Precisely because you do know. To be innocent is to be indecent. And the advantage in losing innocence is that at the same time you lose prejudice. N'est-ce pas?"

"Aye, aye, Gautama. Now sit cross-legged."

Javier chuckled. "Maybe I ought to. And you, don't move now. Stay just the way you are with your hands at your sides and realize that light is slowly wasting you, Ligeia, slowly wearing you away. Light, not time. Or light because it is time. And time stops, but light doesn't. So time becomes light, and it's light that carries you away."

"Write it, Javier, write it."

He moved from the bed and knelt before you. He tied the belt of your robe tight around your waist. He opened the robe at your breasts and took your breasts in the cups of his hands, lifted them, dropped them. He stood and put his hand in your hair.

"Javier. You're hurting me."

He put his face near yours.

"Now you can say it, if you will."

"All right. It was only a dream. Just a dream. That's all."

His fingernails were digging into your scalp and you wanted to free yourself. He, not realizing that he was hurting you, was saying, "When we opened the window in Falaraki that morning, just to be there was to believe in what we had never seen . . ." Slowly he released you.

"Okay. We could believe only what we had never seen or said. Sure. Go join the Navy, Javier, join the Navy."

"It was there and like this that I loved you," Javier murmured.

You put your hands to his and your fingers interlaced. Then, you told him softly, when you woke, the curtain of the summer was a crown of poisonous flowers and you looked beyond them at the sun still resting on the bed of the transparent Aegean. And you had

knelt as you were kneeling now and had whispered his name and looked for him and as you repeated his name over and over the very sound of your voice became thick. And now as then he was standing before you, you were kneeling before him with your arms around first his legs and then his buttocks and your hands in the small of his back. Then you released him and fell back to the floor and he stood tall before you with his penis rising and stiffening, and you got up and led him to the bed, then, in Falaraki, to see day born of night's placation of the silver sea, the last darkness fading, and now far away you heard cars and the horns of cars on the Mexico City-Puebla highway as you both leaned backward and joined with no need for kisses or caresses, joined and supported each other until Javier fell back and you fell with him, on him, unable to separate from him, above him in his position imitating him, doing to him what he did to you, tied together at the genitals, your damp and long pubic hair against his dry curly hair, you thinking that now you were possessing him as he usually possessed you, that your pleasure in imitation of his was entering his thighs as he, prone under you, was entering yours, and time counted its own seconds and minutes, words spoke themselves in an effort to prolong the dark and vibrating sensations of your intercourse, he transformed into your woman and you into his man in shared desire that was a fruit falling from but still hanging to a single tree; you and Javier, Javier and you on the hot stone floor of the cabin, on the cold wooden floor of the hotel room, you and he, father and mother, mother and son, father and daughter, brothers, brother and sister, sisters, two women, two men, you and he making love now with your mouths while the first pleasure ebbed, seeking a different way that it might be sustained, your buttocks, your armpits, his hands in your hair, your feet covering his eyes, your teeth at his ear, his face near your navel, your thighs spread above his head, his fingernails digging your neck, your knee doubled upon his belly. And it could not end. You hid yourselves in the sheets in order to discover yourselves again. Slowly, Javier walking toward you from afar, you moving toward him until you both stretched your hands and as in a

dream removed the veils that concealed you, slowly, expectantly as in a dream, and saw yourselves naked again and again felt passion. You lay down and he took your feet and pulled you, your head down, until he had your body at the height he wanted and you looked up at him with your eyes, your forehead, your lips, while a double pleasure flowed through you, one from what he was giving you, the other from what he was taking from you, flowed and fused somewhere between your crotch and your breasts. You kiss and join again and you fall face down as he turns your body over and opens your buttocks and tears you apart and asks for your sweat, your smell, your breath, your farts while you lie with your face against the floor and your thighs gripping his chest. You don't know how to stop. You don't want to stop. You grab your bra and wrap it around Javier's dark chest covering his nipples, put his shirt on, smell and kiss the inside of his shoes. Sitting side by side on the bed you masturbate, each watching the other, he with his penis wrapped in your stocking, you with your hands wet with his eau de cologne, finding now the only pleasure that had been lacking, that of a child alone; and you don't want to stop, you want it never to end: to die in this moment renouncing life if the pleasure can only go on. Trembling you let him rub your nipples with his shaving brush and then offer him your belt and fall on the bed as he lashes your legs and buttocks and back while you beg him to go on, go on, leave nothing undone, speak the secret names of the girls he had wanted but never been able to take, of the adolescent boys he had liked, and you in turn will speak your names, not only the men you have wanted but those who have wanted you, and now in making love with each other, you will make love with all of them, the rabbi who once sat you on his lap when your mother took you to see him, the priest who took Javier by the hand during confession, the nun he caught peeking at him while he bathed, his mother the first time he saw her naked, all the names, all the bodies and faces, until at last you fall asleep not to awaken until the day is as warm as your skin and Elena knocks on the door . . .

"May I pick up the tray?"

"What? Who? What . . . ?"

Knuckles rapped the door again.

"May I pick up . . ."

Finally you realized that it was the voice of the hotel waiter.

"No, please, not now. Later, please."

You covered yourself with the sheet. Javier, clenching his teeth, put his hands over his eyes.

"You've done it again, Ligeia. Exhausted me. Worn me out. I'm empty. And it was the same thing in Falaraki. Your love kept demanding of me, demanding, demanding. Again and again, never satisfied, simply to exhaust me. And I wanted you to be remote. Distant. Ready to answer and come to me whenever I might call. An image I could summon up when I needed it."

"Do you think I've been anything else, Javier? Do you think I'm still Elizabeth Jonas, the girl you met in New York? Don't you see that I've become you yourself? What you've wanted me to become. That I speak and think now not as myself but as you? That my own being has vanished?"

"I know that you're confused. That you have always wanted to exhaust me. That you never understood me."

"No, Javier, that's not true." You sat on the edge of the bed, hollow with tiredness. "I've understood you, all right. I wanted to join your Miriam game in Buenos Aires. But you refused to let me, you wanted to play alone. Always alone. And when I understood that, that you would never share, and you knew that I did, the coldness and scorn began. Oh, I understand. To you love and the new, the undiscovered, are the same thing. Do you admit that?"

"I won't talk like this, Ligeia."

You wrapped the sheet around you and went into the bathroom. You shut the door. Behind you, Javier was saying harshly: "You'll never understand the ways you destroyed me!"

And you, hearing him without hearing him, knowing without hearing, repeated it: he would never understand how you had destroyed him, yet become the victim yourself. And had it really begun that first morning in Delos?

Running water could be heard in the bathroom. Javier hid his face in the pillow.

"You had no right, Ligeia. No right, no right."

You looked at your naked body in the bathroom mirror. He would be saying that the ruins you had visited today could belong to you only if they did not belong to you. You went to the tub and dipped your fingers.

"Look, at night they do have hot water."

"I know now that it's impossible. I've stopped blaming you . . ."

"Hey! There's hot water."

And later you would believe and tell yourself that with you out of the bedroom he said dryly that the Greek ruins are not really ruins, because man has issued from them, descended from them, and that you had understood this and that was why today you had insisted on returning to Xochicalco . . .

"You're missing a good chance to shave."

"Do you think I'm blind? That I didn't notice you hiding at the foot of the pyramid trying to wrap the stone serpent around you? What do you think you were doing? What were you looking for?"

You sat in the tub and sighed.

"No, it isn't possible any longer. It can't go on. Why do you think we went back to Xochicalco?"

You bit your finger and smiled.

"Those ruins," he would be saying, and you would not hear, "are not like the Greek ruins."

Silently you got out of the tub. He would be saying now that the ancient Mexican ruins belonged to no one, were isolated from everything, everyone, had no echo. Without drying off, you went to the medicine cabinet. They never decay, he would be going on, because decay can be detected only by a point of reference and the Mexican ruins have none. They have never been part of life or of man. You began to laugh. You took the bottle of tranquilizers and opened it. Covering your laughter with the palm of your hand, you dumped the capsules into the toilet and watched them lose their

layer of green gelatine and become soft and then sink, loosing their white dust as they disintegrated.

"But be careful. They're going to snatch your damn myths away from you."

You returned to the medicine cabinet and got the stomach pills and dumped them into the toilet too.

"What did you do with my collection of pebbles, Javier?" you shouted, laughing.

You stuck your head into the bedroom.

"Why don't you answer me? You're so damned exasperating with your silence."

Javier heard your voice and rose from the bed. He walked toward you, pulling on his jockey shorts. You watched him through the cracked door.

"What, Ligeia?"

"I asked why don't you answer me?"

He leaned against the door, exhausted.

"What is it you want me to say?"

"Shit," you said from the other side of the door. "Don't you know the only thing that ever bothers me? When you start with someone new, you break away from the someone old."

"What in God's name are you talking about? Don't you have Franz? Your affair with him is newer still. Than what is left of our old affair, Ligeia, the remnant that hangs on holding itself intact still for some reason, God knows why."

"My problem is to be young. That's the new, the undiscovered."

"Let me in."

"No. If you come in here, we won't be able to talk. That's my problem, Javier. Franz . . . Franz is merely looking for something he has lost a long time. That's what I think, at least. And I'm looking for the love you stopped giving me. Isabel is the only danger. She's the only one who can mean the future, not the past. And you, when you used to love me, what did you want from me?"

"You know what I wanted, Ligeia."

"I have nothing now. I gave up everything for you. Neither par-

ents nor brother nor anything. If you leave me, I have no country to go home to. I gave up everything."

"Why, Ligeia? Why?"

"Because I loved you!"

"You loved me. Are you so sure of that? Wasn't it perhaps that you had to have someone, maybe anyone, to take you away from your family and your country, to take you to other lands that you had distorted and colored with that crazy romantic imagination of yours, made into realms of sun and happiness? You and Franz understand each other precisely because you are both Northerners. All of you from the North are always running away from your fog, your Holy Scriptures, puritanism, order. From death. Toward the sun, toward us who live under the sun, toward the south . . ."

"I loved you! I loved your dream!"

"And now you feel that a fraud has been played upon you?"

"What a word. I only wish I could hold in my loss and my pain, Javier. Javier, what happened, what happened? I loved you and you loved me . . ."

"You were a princess with the lust of a bull. You made love like a lioness giving birth. And you made me into a sterile ruin. I didn't marry a woman. I married a tigress. A tigress in her imagination, in her words, in her constant demands, in her cunt . . ."

"Javier, Javier, not now. Don't say words that aren't really your own. Don't play games, not now . . ."

"You know the old king who too late learned to distrust the words of women and to see them as they really are: the daughters of gods in their breasts, of Satan himself in their loins."

"Javier. You promised. You promised."

"Shut up. Open the door. Look at me."

"No. We won't be able to talk."

Javier pushed against the door and you did not resist. You stared at each other, both nearly naked. Javier took you by the arm and pushed you roughly into the bedroom.

"There's your sulfur pit. Burning, stinking. Consuming itself and whoever touches it." He pushed you down on the bed. He

took three drawers from the bureau one after the other and threw them on the floor. "Okay, Ligeia. Let's go! Let's roll!" His clothing was strewn around the room. You got up from the bed as he went on: "Men heaped on women, women on beasts, beasts on other men, all endlessly fucking, a chain of nose to ass from which none can free himself. Like dogs in the street."

You were already standing in front of the wardrobe mirror, looking at yourself, lifting your breasts in your hands, studying your face.

"We tie ourselves to each other so that we can destroy each other. To rob each of us of his solitary identity."

You turned your back on the mirror and against your back felt the coolness of the glass. You felt your tiredness.

"That isn't what I wanted," Javier said. Very slowly he began to kick the drawers, crushing in their flimsy ends and backs. "But you wanted it and you achieved it."

You spread your arms in front of the mirror as if to protect it.

"Don't blame me, Javier." You were thinking and wanted to go on thinking. "Don't blame me for what Mexico has done to you, not I."

Javier picked a shirt up from the floor and stared at you unbelievably.

"It's Mexico, Javier. You've said it yourself. You know it."

He began to rip the shirt. "No," he laughed. "Not Mexico. You. I."

Mexico is a mask, you were thinking, quoting words that Javier had written somewhere, sometime, maybe only on a scrap of paper that he had thrown away. Unless you understand that, it makes no sense. A place of exile for aliens, no one's home. Here we are prisoners. Prisoners and in love with the mask. If the mask broke, light would blind us. We come here seeking refuge.

You huddled against the cold mirror and said nothing. Javier slowly walked near you. He touched your shoulders and you guessed his intention.

"Don't you realize . . ." he began.

"No," you interrupted loudly. "It isn't true about the fog and the sun. I didn't come here looking for that."

"Don't you realize how ridiculous it is?" he went on. He squeezed you against him.

"Not in search of the sun, but the sun as a mask. That's different, Javier."

You were in his arms, your neck bent backward, your eyes closed.

"Why did we do today what we did in Falaraki twenty years ago? How absurd. What are we looking for today? We're too old for that now, Ligeia."

"Javier! Don't leave me!"

"Too old, Ligeia. Just plain middle-aged. We have no right to want now what we wanted when we were twenty-five. Or to need what we needed then. You've made us act like fools, Ligeia. We have no right, neither to the actions nor to the words . . ."

You clung to him.

"Don't leave me for Isabel!"

He pushed you away.

"A tired and sterile ruin. And you did it."

He went to the night table and with a sweep of his hand brushed the tray off onto the floor. The bottle of tequila smashed. From the broken glass rose that bitter smell. You moved from the wardrobe mirror.

"I? I? When I gave you my love only so long as you wanted it?"

Now you too looked toward the mirror with horror and hatred. You began to pick up the bits of the broken bottle. Javier was pulling the sheets from the bed.

"You, you, Ligeia. Your sex robbed me of the years I needed. You made me believe that there was something more important than my writing. That it was more important to make love with you, to deny myself for your sake. And there you were with your skirt always up and your legs always spread and we would be young only once and there would be time, there would be time, more than enough when the young years were behind us and we would retire like a couple of Yankees with pensions. You, you!"

You threw the broken bottle at the wardrobe mirror. The silvered glass fell. You ran and picked up pieces, looked at your face reflected in those fragments.

"From the very beginning you wanted anything except that I should work! You were a bitch always in heat, always smelling of it, showing yourself to me without shame at all hours, asking for it . . ."

"But you wanted it too!"

You dropped the sliver of glass you held between your hands.

"And if you had loved me, you could have stopped it at any time if you had really wanted to . . ."

"I? I? Who was it that said he had to have sex to write?"

He threw the crumpled sheets on the bed and lay down on them. You sat beside him.

"You talk about your sterility, Javier. Look at mine. Barren, childless, because of you."

"Shut up. You promised . . ."

"You couldn't have a child in the house. It would disturb you too much."

"Don't lie. You yourself . . ."

"I'm a woman, Javier. There's no more brutal word. And a barren woman."

"You wanted the abortion. Not me. You yourself decided to go to the doctor. You asked me for the five hundred pesos."

You laughed. "Five hundred pesos! Almost enough for dinner at the Ambassadeurs! Less than enough for a new refrigerator! Miser, stingy, you dirty vomiting skinflint!"

"Don't yell. It was . . ."

"And where are the books that a child would prevent you from writing? Where are they?"

"No, Ligeia," Javier said. He went into the bathroom and turned on the light. "You didn't want the child. You would lose your figure, your youth. The big belly. The swollen tits. It was your decision and only yours. You're lying."

You bit your fist.

"Ligeia! What the hell have you done with my tranquilizers?"

"What did you do with my collection of pebbles?" you shouted back.

He came out of the bathroom with the empty bottle and looked at you.

"I gave your bloody pebbles to Elena. You know that."

"No. You didn't."

"All right. I threw them into the sea. I gave them back to the sea."

Strengthlessly he dropped the bottle and it bounced on the unpainted wooden floor. You sat up and crossed your legs and lit a cigarette.

"You are my lord and master, Javier. Give me one good reason to go on living."

He shook his head.

"One good reason, master. You bastard who is playing with Isabel's youth simply to poison it. Who excuses his failures by blaming me. And we both know that even in failure we could be a man and woman who could support each other, lean on and love each other. Oh, you're vile, vile, shit!"

"Stop yelling. They'll hear you all over the hotel."

"Let them hear! Let them hear how love can be lost and what kind of hatred comes to replace it!"

He crossed his arms and smiled. "My princess with the emotions of a bull."

Resting your hands against the mattress, you said softly, almost secretly, "And it's not true. We could have made it work. We could have."

"No, Ligeia."

"You're right. No."

"Then shut up and let things be as they are."

He began to collect his clothing from the floor.

"No, I won't shut up! I want to hurt you! I'll feel better!"

"God. All you have left now is your pride."

"Pride? When I crawl to you begging pity, begging you not to leave me? Javier! Promise me that you won't leave me for her!"

You stretched out your arms and he, on his haunches, went on gathering up his clothes.

"So you want a promise now. But I don't know myself, Ligeia. There have been too many promises. Promise to love you, to make you happy. To live with you and write. Promise not to let myself be defeated. Promise not to mention the real reasons for anything."

You rolled off the bed and fell on him and pulled him down to the floor.

"Coward! Coward!"

"No," he panted. "No more promises. I'll just let things happen."

You began to kiss him furiously, to touch him without noticing that it was his skin you were caressing. As if he were merely another body that happened to be present.

"You're already making plans with her. You're going to take an apartment. Little by little she's been laying her trap. And now you're caught in it! You know you are, unless you lie to yourself. And you don't want to lose face now. That's all."

He struggled against you, pushed you away, as if he were afraid of you.

"Then stop complaining, old woman. If I should leave you today, you ought to feel contented. You've taken a damn sight more than you've given. I took you from a miserable home where you were being destroyed. I took you out into a world you would never have known. And if you gave up something, at least you got my love in return. What more did you want?"

You held him, refused to let him go.

"You're insulting me now. Stop it, Javier. You'll tempt me to hurt you really. To say something that won't be nice."

You were fondling his penis, trying to arouse him, but there was no strength in you and he smiled because there was none in him either.

"Don't try to tell me that the life of exile I've lived with you has been good. Don't say that on the day you leave me for another

woman. Don't make me remember that my time with you has been borrowed time. Think of my brother, murdered. Think of my father in his lonely hotel room. Of my mother locked up in an asylum cursing me for having abandoned my race to be your wife."

There was a secret game in your words now, although neither of you were aware of it. You had agreed to prove that each of you was helpless. Neither of you quite knew what you were saying.

"My race . . . God . . . To be a Jew."

Javier touched you in the crotch and nothing happened.

"The word I heard all my childhood. Jew, Jew. The only word that still ties me to my dead brother and my crazy mother. Becky used to say it during meals, breaking into the conversation, and then begin to moan, almost to lose control of herself. She would get up and walk away trembling. Desperate. They . . . because of the way life has always been for us, Javier, the life of Jews, they taught me that the only way is to demand, to insist, and to doubt. That even when we're trampled on, locked up in concentration camps, thrown into exile, our salvation is to go on demanding, demanding, refusing to be content, and doubting."

"Be quiet, Ligeia. You're babbling."

"Demand and doubt. That's the way I am. And that was where I made the mistake with you. I made you fail by asking too much of you, demanding more than . . ."

"Leave me alone! Shut up!"

"That you should write more and better than you could write. That you should love me more than you could love me."

"Shut up! And take your hand away!"

"And even if you hadn't failed, I would have doubted your success and you and myself, everything. I can't believe blindfolded. I have to do things, to test things and be sure. I have to believe without believing."

"And I? Belief without doubt for me?"

You moved away from him. "You, Javier? For you, whatever people believe in. It doesn't matter. You know better than I."

"No, it doesn't matter. Faith is nothing. What counts is what you know. That's much more destructive."

"I'm tired, Javier." You stood up. "Don't go through that again. I've heard it over and over."

He remained on the floor. You picked up the dented tray.

"No, faith doesn't hurt us. It's knowledge. Ligeia. Listen to me. Do you remember that novel I started?"

"How could I forget it?" You felt light, free, safe, as you calmly picked up the fragments of the mirror and the bottle. "It came and went and came and went in your black briefcase, always a plan, never an act. Shit. Chapters you were going to make notes for and organize and some day, when you had time, inspiration, the right mood, God knows what . . ."

"Tell me: tell me what it was about."

"A man who loved a woman who loved him."

"Yes, on the surface that was all. But there was more to it than that. Tell me."

"Love brought them to knowledge they hadn't had before."

"Yes. Go on."

"In the flesh there's a miracle that must be suppressed. Everyone has felt it. Everyone lets it escape. But not these two. They knew how to preserve the miracle, to hold on to it. Shit, Javier! You dirty bastard!"

"And then?"

"And then they understand that their secret can't be communicated. But they're tempted and they try. Temptation comes disguised as an impulse to be generous. They reveal their secret to others and at once the miracle vanishes. It's misunderstood. They are left naked, saddened. They have opened Pandora's box."

"Which is?"

"I don't remember, Javier. How can I remember everything? The point was that when they opened it their treasure turned to ashes. So you have to be selfish. Some things can't be shared. Love is between two people and only two people, even if it is poor, pretentious, clumsy, absurd. Love that others can share is not love. Love exists only for the lovers. I think that's about it."

"Yes. There was no answer. What the man and the woman had discovered could be known only to themselves."

You had put the pieces of glass on the tray and now you stood. You were tired, it was hard to move. "Why didn't you write that book, Javier? You had a beautiful theme."

He joined his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling.

"I don't really know. Or rather, I do know. I did have the feeling the book needed, an intuition of the beauty that was possible. But I never wrote it because I thought no one would understand me."

"You can't mean that. What a child."

"No, I don't mean it. It's just one more excuse. The fact was that the theme itself didn't allow me to write it. It would have been like revealing a secret that ought not be revealed. It would have violated the very logic of the book."

"Javier, my love . . ."

You stood beside him. There was something in the air, a feeling of repose, of a little truth finally attained. "We've lived through so much together. Isn't the past enough to go . . ."

"No, it isn't." He looked at you, his head still resting back on his joined hands. "It isn't enough because now we know each other. It's a great lie that the more you know each other, the more you love each other. A proud and foolish lie. What you love is the unknown. What you haven't possessed yet. And maybe to stop loving when you begin to know the other person is . . . well, necessary for sanity. Because if we loved and knew each other, yet went on loving, we would all be out of our minds."

You hugged him and said quietly, "You don't know me, Javier, all you know is how to talk. And I've caught your damn wordiness. You're like every other Mexican. You have to justify yourself with words. Anything can be an excuse. The climate, the cactus, Montezuma, the shit you have to eat. Javier . . ."

"Yes?"

"We used to dream together. Why did we stop?"

"We stopped one dream when Russia and Germany signed a treaty of friendship. Ribbentrop and Molotov. And what difference did it make? Who were Ribbentrop and Molotov?"

You caressed his neck. "We believed in so much in those days. Maybe that could have saved us, to go on believing in something. It was a kind of faith. You and I together in the LEAR, singing the Internationale. Together reading Dos Passos and Miguel Hernández. Together listening to the Spanish Civil War songs. Raising our clenched fists . . ."

He moved away from your face and saw your gray eyes filled with tears, Elizabeth, and his lips trembled.

"Who knows? We learned that we're all guilty. Maybe that was the only lesson of those days."

You let him hold you and were grateful for the weakness of your body in his arms, for the shadows of the bedroom.

"Yes. And only now, so late, have we come to see that the guiltiest of all are those who know that they aren't innocent and so stop fighting their guilt. Javier . . . Javier . . ."

Your face moved away from his shoulder. Your body moved away. You held him with your hands on his shoulders, knowing something at last, at last finding the words before they were forgotten again and forever.

"I understand, Javier. Let me say it quickly. The struggle is between those who are all guilty and that's why it is tragic. The just and the unjust are both guilty. Neither is innocent. Justice isn't innocent, merely just. That's why it's so terrible. Do you see what I mean, Javier?"

He did understand, you knew, yet he could answer you laughing. Maybe that was what you found unforgivable.

"Madness may be the mask too much knowledge wears, Ligeia. I'm tired. Go get in the tub and finish what you were doing. Hurry up. I want to take a shower."

You wiped away your tears.

"Is Isabel waiting for you?"

"Ligeia, please, please . . ."

"You must feel very satisfied with yourself."

You went to the bathroom. Javier had left the light on.

"Why?"

"Now you can go to a living woman. With a name. Isabel. Before you were looking for a phantom. And phantoms are more comfortable but less satisfying to your pride."

You opened his medicine kit again.

"A phantom?"

It was empty. All the bottles were on the shelf.

"Me. Your phantom. Like that night at the party when you pretended I was some other woman, an unknown woman, so that you could live out your fantasy. Phaedra. Medea. I don't remember now. Do you? We went down into a cave together. Oh, boy. The mariachi musicians. A private voyage to Cathay."

"You cooperated willingly enough."

You began to open the bottles of medicine.

"Because I loved you. But you have never loved me or any woman. You've loved Woman. Capital W. Phantom. That was how you could go on feeling free and unchained. A real woman of flesh and blood would have been too much burden for you. Whatever her name, Ligeia or Isabel. Listen to me, Javier."

Silently, calmly, without fear, almost professionally, you emptied the rest of his medicines into the toilet.

"Isabel is flesh and blood too, you know. Just like me. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

"She too will demand your time, your love. And you aren't the young man you were twenty years ago. Listen, Javier. She's twenty-three. And you are over forty."

You pulled the chain of the toilet and watched the whirlpool of pills and water as Javier shouted from the bedroom: "But I don't have the illusions I had twenty years ago! Can't you understand that? With her I don't go out to conquer the golden fleece the way I did with you! The golden fleece!"

He laughed louder than the sucking of the toilet.

"It escaped us, Ligeia. We didn't find it. We spent our lives looking, but we couldn't get past the guards at the door, the monsters, the dragons, the bulls, the snakes! There were too many of

them. So it wasn't worth it. Nothing was worth it. Neither your father nor your brother nor your crazy mother. Nothing, nothing."

You turned off the bathroom light.

"I can go with Isabel now if I want to, precisely because my illusions are gone. And because Isabel is young. Do you hear me, Ligeia? She's young! She doesn't have lines at the corners of her eyes . . ."

You turned on the light again and looked for your lipstick, your eyebrow pencil, your eyeshadow. Swiftly you began to put makeup on.

"She doesn't have a double chin. She doesn't have a flabby belly . . ."

You looked for your stockings, your panties, your brassière among the wet towels thrown on the tile floor.

"Do you hear me? She's young! Isabel is young, she's twenty-three years old . . . Ligeia . . . answer me!"

You did not see yourself in the mirror, so you had no way of knowing how you looked. You came out of the bathroom slipping on your bra, feeling for its hooks, and Javier saw you with your makeup on, your eyebrows black, your lips red. Your voice was calm as you continued, awkwardly, nervously, to put on your clothes.

"Just remember, Javier, that for me there was only one moment. A moment when I woke in New York, I think, or in Falaraki, yes, no, on the coast of Long Island after a night of rain. The first time."

"She's young," Javier hissed.

"Just that moment when I woke and felt you get up and move aside the sheets that covered my feet and look at me tenderly. Tenderly, afraid you might wake me."

"The sea. You always remember the sea. You're lying. Women hate the sea."

"You wanted to touch my lips, but you were afraid you'd wake me. Then finally you couldn't resist. You took me in your arms and lifted me as I opened my eyes. You closed my eyes with your fin-

gers and I was small and tender in your arms. On that one moment I have lived. Always hoping that some day it might come back. But not any more."

You put on your blouse and buttoned it.

"I slept with Vasco, Javier."

You touched your hair, shook it out, short and faded, graying. You did not look at Javier.

"Yes, I slept with him. And it was from him that I got that story, that story of youth returning, that story you wrote. It was really written by Vasco Montero. He thought of it. I stole it. You put it in words, that was all."

You looked for your purse in the debris of the room.

"I went that far, yet you failed. I wanted to conquer a whole world for you. But you let that world slip out of your hands. That was just as well. You weren't worthy of it."

You waited. Javier didn't speak. You kept your eyes away from him. "I'm telling you that I went to bed with Vasco to get a story for you."

"You really did, didn't you?" Javier said. "And you made me think that we had thought of it together."

"You'd like to escape." Finally you faced him. "But you can't. For you everything is an aphorism. Except this: you couldn't get anywhere with your own ideas. You had to accept and use Vasco Montero's alms. Leavings from a rich table, from a true poet who could afford to throw you his scraps and be none the poorer."

You were going to tell me some day, Dragoness, that after that you and Javier said no more. You, dressed, your face made up, your purse in your hand, sat on the edge of the bed thinking about what you would some day have to tell me. You were thinking that this was the end of the road, of the memories and the lies too, a long long road in search of what you had already possessed. All that you knew, all that you wanted, all that you lost and all that you found, you had known, wanted, lost and found in the very beginning as much as now. But in the beginning a part of you had defeated the rest of you and that made all the difference. It made you helpless

to use your wisdom. And tonight another part of you was holding you as helpless to use your wisdom as you had been then. Ah, Dragoness, the difficult answer is that we must be able to bless whatever we love, whatever we dream, touch, even what we scorn or fear and reject.

△ With the plans spread on his knees, Franz looked up and saw the staked hops, beyond them a row of bushy trees, an apple orchard to the right, and to the left, beet fields stretching all the way to the forest on the distant slope. A few farm workers were busy among the hops, sitting or squatting, harvesting the vines that wound up the black stakes. He looked back at the site that had been chosen. A brick kiln had stood here once and he was able to use its old foundations as footing. Later in the day, trucks with bricks from the Lovosice yard would arrive and work could begin immediately. The construction crew was already there, standing in files of five, their clothing gray and their heads shaved. The timbers were already stacked, the clay and lime had been heaped in piles, the kegs of nails had been opened. Slowly he rolled up the blueprints and then he went to talk to the foremen and he did not return to Terezin until after dark, in the old convertible Mercedes, and as they passed the train station in Theresienstadt he asked the driver to stop. He stood up and tried to understand what was going on on the platform. Someone was playing chords on a double bass and to its accompaniment dark figures were moving, unintelligible voices rose singing. Smoke from the locomotives wreathed low, now concealing, now revealing the dancing figures. Franz got out of the convertible and walked toward them. They were wearing top hats and their gray clothes and their faces were smeared with coal dust and they were unloading coal and singing as they worked. One of them had the double bass. Franz could understand nothing of their song except the words, *Now Marion is leaving*. Some of the guards were urging the singers on and others were kicking the round cardboard boxes in which the top hats had arrived, playing imaginary soccer. It was a grotesque scene: the dim lights, the

clouds of smoke and steam, the dancing figures, the music. His driver picked up three more double basses at the station, to be deposited in the storerooms where all the equally useless confiscated things were kept. The old derbies and the dusty dress forms, the ragged prayer books, the horse-drawn hearses, the postcards, the family daguerreotypes, the mustache cups, the straw- and sawdust-stuffed horses, the glass paperweights containing a landscape upon which snow fell when they were shaken. And what were the gold-framed portraits of the old emperors, Wilhelm and Franz Josef, doing here among all this junk? He shook the paperweight and watched the false snow drift down and in the distance heard the Merry Widow Waltz. Then he walked out and saw the top-hatted workers from the station marching in. Later it transpired that beneath their hats they were smuggling in stolen coal and stolen sausages.

"I will have the building ready within the month."

"It has to be ready. That's an order."

Franz lay in your arms in the hotel room in Cholula, Isabel, and you listened and said nothing because you knew that that was why he had come to you. And he was laughing softly, hidden in your arms, remembering that it had been a cold night and the river had been frozen. He walked into the fortress and one of the guards said that it would be fun to skate as they had as boys. The earth crunched beneath their boots. There was no snow, but the earth was stiff with frost. It was hard to see clearly. The floodlights were on but the evening mist hung low and diffused the light and made it almost as opaque as the mist itself. And for once there was utter silence. What made him aware of it was the absence of the barking of the dogs. At Terezin the dogs could always be heard, at all hours, but tonight they were silent. Maybe it was also the absence of human voices. When the voices of men are still, much becomes audible that usually is not. The scrape of boots over concrete. The pad of bare feet on bare dirt. The creak of unoiled hinges. The distant tap of a typewriter. The click of rifle locks being cocked. The sounds of the snouts of dogs and the lips of children as they eat.

The building rose steadily, quickly. He attended its construction closely, for although the foremen knew their business, he wanted to keep an eye on things, and for the time being he had nothing more important to do. Often he knew that his presence was not needed and perhaps even not welcomed. But he went every day, returning to the fortress at night, sometimes in the truck, sometimes in the Mercedes with the Commandant, sometimes alone, walking, thinking. Thinking that it was his first job. Repeating it: my first job, Isabel, my first job. Yes, Franz, they sent me there because I was efficient, it was their decision, not mine. Yes, Franz, I want to understand you.

In the beginning the bodies of those who died in the Terezin fortress were taken to the incinerator in Theresienstadt, the town that had been transformed into a ghetto by Himmler's orders. Later that was not enough and he, as architect attached to the camp, was ordered to build a crematorium on the site of the old kiln near Litomerice. He finished it on schedule and the two ovens were installed with their iron tracks and the lever that moved the cadavers into the ovens mechanically. The ashes were returned to the fortress in urns marked *F* or *M*, Frau or Mann. Later the ashes were simply thrown into the river, and still later, when it became impossible to control the epidemics in the fortress, a common burial pit was opened near the north wall. Nevertheless, the commerce continued: in return for a sum of money, the relatives and friends of a deceased prisoner received an urn filled with earth from Terezin. Not Ulrich. Ulrich refused.

He went to the railroad, where they were working now, every morning, passing through the town that had become a single ghetto, returning at night across a field that had once been planted to beets but now was fallow with open ditches that had to be avoided. Beyond the field was the rutted dirt road that led to the fortress. The darkness was silent. Sometimes a faint buzzing behind his back, a sound that could not be defined. Then the lights of the fortress opaque in the ground fog. And no one spoke, Isabel. It was a place that has to be remembered like a silent movie. Did you ever see *Caligari*? No, how can you know what it was. They

made a poll among youths: who is Hitler? No one knew, Pussycat, no one remembered now, no one young had heard anyone talk about him. Have you noticed that? And Franz talks to you, the most youthful of all of us: the walls of Theresienstadt stood straight, the mansard roofs and the gardens of the old buildings were all straight and nevertheless nothing seemed straight, it all seemed oblique, to exist in an insane space with insane coordinates of its own, to be like a stage backdrop where the lines are all drawn to recede as if straight in the true perspective of a scene, but in reality are all slanted and distorted. A backdrop seen from too close, without the illusion. Shadows that were real colliding with painted shadows and creating a maze of false light and true light, apparent distance and true distance. And everything richly ornamented, that mania for the decorative, as if there were an effort to make the lunacy of an asylum viable and normal. Have you never heard of *Caligari*? Above all, the silence. Sometimes he tried to hear something, anything, and found that he could hear only his own breathing. And she, later, if they had ever talked, could have told him that in the silence of Theresienstadt there had been secret music, singers who looked just like everyone else and came and went by day without drawing attention to themselves. Their sheets of music were passed from hand to hand and one day two old men were able to smuggle violins and violas to their meeting place. A cello that had been hidden in an abandoned barn arrived in a cart beneath a load of hay. She could have told him, if they had talked, but they never talked. All he knew was that a work crew one day discovered an entire set of orchestral instruments hidden behind a bricked-up wall. In their cases and wrapped against the dampness, a complete set, brasses, woodwinds, drums.

The Commandant was not angry but on the contrary pleased. "A stroke of luck. We need to prepare a ceremony for the official visit. What could be better than a concert?"

"Again and again we try to justify ourselves for what we did."

"Really?"

"Yes. The words never matter."

"Why don't they matter?"

"Because they are always the same. The words everyone knows."

"Then what does matter?"

"That we were fighting a final battle, Isabel. The last battle of the ancient German dream of heroism."

"Bewegung!"

The command rang up and down the corridors and staircases of the old building the Jews were using as a hospital. There was to be a concert. A concert hall had to be made ready. The attic here was enormous. Boots on the stone floor. Shots fired merely for the noise. Beds overturned. Cries of surprise, fear. Those who were strong enough walked to the street themselves, some leaned on others. Most, too weak to stand, were simply dragged outside, where friends and relatives were beginning to gather, no one understanding what was happening, why the hospital was being emptied. The patients stretched their arms out and relatives ran to help their kin, acquaintances to help those they recognized or thought they recognized. The Commandant had mobilized all available transport: the three tractors and their twelve towed wagons, the two trucks, the sixteen farm carts, the forty-eight horse-drawn Jewish hearses, and a number of wheelchairs. But these were not enough and many of the patients simply lay down on the stones or wandered around dazed or were led away by relatives who themselves did not know what to do. Meanwhile the guards went up into the huge attic and brought down the heaped-up coffins and threw them into the truck that carried corpses to the crematorium. New corpses no one knew about were discovered, and Franz, looking on, smelled the stink of death among the living stinks of men and women who no longer could smell themselves. He walked toward a child and an old man dead two days or five days or a week. But not Ulrich. Ulrich refused. And one night Ulrich disappeared. In about two hours the attic was cleared and Franz remained there alone beneath the immense roof supported by perpendicular beams. He walked through the empty rooms where there had never been anything that could burn, neither mattress nor blanket nor pillow.

"The order has been executed. You can transform it into a theater now."

He will tell you that the Scriptures speak of the time of love and the time of death but forget the time of waiting. And one night, returning, he reached the dirt road that led to the prison—he embraced you, Isabel, and told you twice that Ulrich did not want to wait—one night returning from the railroad he was overtaken by a convoy of seven trucks that moved heavily in the muddy, deeply rutted road and again and again stalled and guards and prisoners alike shouted and ran to help the soldiers who got out and pushed, sinking in the mud up to the tops of their boots. He jumped on the running board of the first truck to guide it, for he knew the road. A young corporal wearing glasses was the driver and beside him sat a sergeant with a machine gun on his knees. The corporal was still in his teens and his blue eyes were made huge by the thickness of his glasses. Franz told him here to the right, here swing off the road altogether and cut across the field, now back to the road but hold to the left, here right again. The corporal never looked at him. He drove with concentration and seriousness. He was doing his duty and doing it well. Maybe at other times he cracked jokes with his companion, but not now. It was certain that only a few months ago he had gone to the Volksschule and studied calculus or world literature. Maybe he had liked music. Schoolboys were sometimes taken to hear concerts or operas. Or at least that was how it had once been.

I promised her that I would come back. But the time of returning was not our time yet. Our time was only the time of waiting. Don't yell, Franz. I hear you.

He knew that an order had been issued: the musicians and singers at the camp and in the ghetto city were to remain. They were not to be shipped off to the death camps, they would remain and be saved. Maestro Professor Schachter would be allowed to continue his musical efforts, and although the children would have to depart, others would arrive to replace them in the child's opera. The musicians and singers would remain. Though they could, of course, if they wished, climb into the cattle cars with their relatives and accompany them. The children, the orphans, and the widows

were being sent away simply for humanitarian reasons: there would be fewer people now and all would live better.

Now, possibly, the theater in his home town had been bombed out. What city was he from? Franz did not know, for the corporal had not spoken. And beside him sat the sergeant, silent, cradling the machine gun. Franz said nothing to him. To the left. Careful now. More to the left, there's a deep hole, a well of a hole. And after the war they would all be able to go back to their cities and towns and live normal lives again. The Wallenstein Gardens were awaiting his return. The musicians would be in their accustomed places beneath the baroque portal. She would be waiting for him too, sitting in the same row as always. The great *German Requiem* of Brahms would begin. Franz and the corporal laughed. The sergeant looked at him sourly.

"Why don't you keep this road in better shape?"

"The railroad is more important."

"Don't you have workers enough for both?"

"No. This is a very small camp."

"Bah. And you, what the hell do you do here?"

"I'm the architect assigned to the camp."

"Bah."

The sergeant laughed and the face of the young corporal was motionless as the floodlights at the corners of the fortress glinted on his glasses and blinded him. He raised a hand to his eyes and braked.

"What are you stopping for?" the sergeant yelled.

The bumper of the truck behind hit them. Someone swore. The corporal said nothing. A shower of sparks showed that the current of the electric fence had been turned off so that the men in black could open the gate. Isabel, why are you moving away from me? Here, come back.

"This is where you get off," said the sergeant to Franz. Then to the corporal, "Chin up now, man. Remember you're a soldier."

The corporal adjusted his glasses, stiffened his head, and smiled. Franz swung down and the trucks moved past him. Slowly he

walked into the fortress. Voices of command, repeated shouts. And a hidden sound of singing, buried but penetrating. He asked a passing officer what the singing was and the officer said he didn't know. Another officer, walking swiftly by, said that it was the Jews practicing in the stockrooms and cellars. The Commandant had given them orders to sing, to rehearse an opera or something. The Jews that had been recruited by Raphael Schachter: Germans, Austrians, Dutchmen, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, the whole caboodle. As Franz walked to the side and listened, their voices rose:

*Lacrimosa dies illa,
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus*

The loudspeaker:

"Achtung!"

The echo, "Achtuuung!"

"Take your places!"

In groups of five the guards ran to the rear of the trucks, which were still moving slowly with motors roaring and exhausts open. The trucks' headlights went out. Dogs were barking furiously. The small band, standing on a mound beyond the trucks, a band made up of six women prisoners, began to play again. The director moved her arms, her gray baton, and the Merry Widow Waltz began, two violins, a flute, a double bass, cymbals. The loudspeaker:

"Stand by. Open the doors."

And she would have told him if they had ever spoken with each other again that in the beginning Maestro Raphael Schachter had only two pianos, one provided by the president of the Jewish community, the other the one used in the fortress to accompany movies with music. He needed four soloists, a choir of a hundred and fifty voices, and as many instruments and musicians as was possible. The instruments appeared: the cello that had been hidden in the barn in the farm cart beneath straw, the cache of orchestral instruments that had been concealed behind the bricked-up

wall, the violins and violas of the two old men, the double basses that had been tossed aside in a storeroom among top hats and dress forms and glass paperweights. Schachter gathered his soloists, his instrumentalists, and his choir, feeling safe and protected by the Commandant's orders that the musicians and performers were to remain, were not to be interfered with. But when the children and old folks were packed off east in cattle cars, three of his soloists elected to go with them. Every convoy that departed took performers away, every convoy that arrived brought replacements who had to be trained and rehearsed. At one time he was missing twenty-four voices from his choir and twelve musicians from his orchestra. Again and again he had to start over from the beginning.

*Rex tremendae majestatis,
Qui salvandos salvas gratis,
Salva me, fons pietatis.*

The newcomers began to get down from the trucks. The rear doors had been unlocked and swung open, and in each group of guards, one raised his arms to help the prisoners down, a second sang out numbers which a third checked against a list, and the remaining two held their machine guns and looked on. The waltz tripped into the frozen night. Dogs howled. And the prisoners got down, some accepting the guard's raised arms, some jumping down unaided, all silent, motionless for a moment, some rubbing their eyes, others bowing their heads, some laughing, others crying. Comrades looked for comrades, husbands for wives, parents for children. Old men wearing overcoats and hats. Men with their coat lapels and collars turned up against the cold. Women bundled in blankets, with children in their arms. Girls in woolen socks, scarves around their heads. Boys in short pants, woolen caps. Little girls carrying dolls. Cardboard suitcases, boxes tied with twine, bundles of clothing, a sewing machine, a cobbler's bench, a violin case. Stars pinned to lapels or sewn to their backs. Many did not get down from the trucks. They were dead on their feet, as dead as all were silent.

The Commandant informed Berlin that for the day of the official visit to confer decorations there would be a banquet and a concert. Franz, standing beside the canteen stove, remarked that the facilities that the Commandant had granted the musicians and chorus, and now at last their performance, indicated that things were not going so well at the camp. Almost proof that they had failed. Those gathered about him laughed and raised their mugs of beer beneath the Bavarian lanterns.

The old man carrying the cobbler's bench stopped and looked around smiling as if pleased by the scene and the music. A dark-haired little girl dropped her doll and its porcelain head broke in half. Franz, remembering a dead dwarf in a refrigerator, smiled. The little girl cried and tried to put the head of her doll together again. The old man caressed her gently and wrapped her in his shawl, saying over and over, "Vacation. It's vacation."

"Isabel. Forgive me, Isabel. I heard you."

"When, Franz?"

"Earlier, when Javier was with you. I couldn't help it."

"But what I told him was different. We were talking about splitting, Franz, playing it alone. Do you understand me? Alone."

"Not alone, Isabel, you can't. If you take something, no matter what it is, it's because someone else has given it up. Ulrich refused to do that. I stood in his place and witnessed what he refused to accept."

"Franz, I don't know who Ulrich was. You have to explain everything. I'm not going to tell anyone. Never, I swear it. It's between you and me and no one else will know. Understand me, Franz, I take all my chances alone. That was what I was telling Javier. I don't rely on any man, anyone. Not now. Maybe it was better when I did. But I don't know. All I know is that all of a sudden you find yourself kicked in the teeth, and I say to hell with that. You can trust me, Franz. I'll never repeat one word you tell me."

"Franz! Franz, Franz!"

A woman tried to move away from her group, spreading her

arms toward a man in another group who answered her quietly as she was drawn back: "Here, Teresa! I'm all right. Teresa, Teresa."

The orchestra played a Lehar medley and Franz hummed the words. *I always go to Maxim's at night. And there with the grisettes I await the new sun. Loló. Frufrú. Margot.* The guards formed the prisoners in files. From the Hundenkommando came the barking of the dogs.

"For-ward!"

They walked in file across the bridge then into the fortress beneath the rain-bleached legend, *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

*Confutatis maledictis,
Flammis acribus addictis
Voca me cum benedictis.*

"In Berlin they no longer have such diversions," the Commandant smiled. "It will be an agreeable interlude for everyone. Visitors, ourselves, and, not least, the Jews."

But she knew, and she would have told Franz if they had ever spoken again, that Epstein, the president of the Jewish community, had said to Schachter: "You are shaming us. These are our people you have gathered together and now they are going to sing for our oppressors. You have made our suffering worse. The sick have been thrown out of the hospital. So much suffering, merely for a show. No, Schachter, it isn't right. You will be honoring those who oppress us. At their request. They will think that you have surrendered everything to them. You, Maestro, a Czech. Maybe they will give you a medal yet. Do something. Cancel the concert. Do something. I am helpless. But I tell you, it isn't right. I'm afraid."

Under the faint light that hung above the keystone of the arch the prisoners entered as the small band reached its final crescendo and the waltz ended. They were conducted to the receiving room, a hundred and forty of them. There they were made to face the wall. A long line of backs, but that did not matter, their backs were the same as their faces. Twenty in the first group, while the rest waited

in a file that stretched all the way to the bridge. The room had bare yellow walls. Their backs were their names. Burian knew it and walked slowly, studying them as they stood facing the wall. Guards collected the suitcases, the bundles and boxes the prisoners had set down on the floor beside them. Burian himself took the cobbler's bench from the old man, who turned and looked and smiled. Every word or movement of protest was squelched. Burian gave an order. They removed their watches, medallions, combs and hair ornaments, cuff links.

"Name?"

"Marketa Silberstein."

The guard with the notebook spoke a number and wrote it down. Burian walked back and forth, watching them. An ear uncovered by drawn back hair trembled. Franz stared. He knew that hair. He remembered her.

"David Rosen."

"Six-five-seven-eight-two."

"Kamilla."

"Kamilla what?"

"It's Kamilla Neuberg. She's my daughter."

"Six-five-seven-eight-three."

Burian stopped behind a young man who was leaning his arm against the wall. Next to him was the girl. She was small and was wearing sandals. She leaned her forehead against the wall too. Burian touched her shoulder and pulled her back. He took the violin case she was holding. Franz was about to step forward. The same green eyes. The same clean-lined facial bones. Franz slowly kissed Isabel; she rubbed his head.

"Always, Isabel, always . . ."

"What? Always what?"

"You always have to give up something so that the other can go on living."

"Who Franz?"

"You. I. We. Betty. I don't know."

"Go on, Franz. Go on, güero. I'm listening."

They filed out of the receiving room, passed the guardroom, where the teletype could be heard tapping. Maloth appeared with a bundle of mail in his hand. He gave several letters to Franz, and the new shipment of prisoners moved on into the clothing room, where Wacholz measured each of them with his eyes and selected garments for them.

"Jewish?"

The man, robust and red-faced, shook his head. Wacholz looked at him again and handed him gray trousers with three red stripes down the side and a gray jacket with a red triangle on its back. The man started to undress, then stopped and looked at the women behind him. Wacholz stepped forward, jerked his fly open, and pulled his pants down.

"Jewish?"

"Yes."

Wacholz gave the girl a striped dress with a yellow star sewed on its shoulder. Silently she undressed. She remembered something and raised her arms and took out her hairpins. Her hair fell below her shoulders. She handed the hairpins to one of the guards. Franz watched from the door. The letters were in his hand. He opened one and pretended to read.

"Jewish?"

"No. No!"

The youth faced Wacholz with his arms crossed as the girl finished slipping the striped dress over her shoulders and looked at him. Mechanically Wacholz handed the youth the uniform with the red stripes. Burian stepped out of the shadow and picked up a striped coat with a yellow star. He glanced mockingly at Wacholz and gave the jacket of the Jews to the youth.

"It's not true!" the boy yelled. He was blond and pale and now he stepped out of the line and touched the arm of the girl, who remained motionless. Now, as his face lifted, his eyes could be seen: one blue, the other brown. "It isn't true. I'm only a third . . ."

The girl was some other girl.

"My mother did it. She thought I'd be safer here than at the front. So she made it up that I'm Jewish. To protect me!"

And finally he saw her from in front. She did not look up. She made no response to the touch of the youth. She lowered her eyes to avoid seeing his, one brown and the other blue, staring at her imploringly.

"Tell them," the youth pleaded with her. "Tell them. You know all about it. I told you on the train."

Franz would have liked to have seen her earlier, one moment before she entered the little fortress of Terezin and changed her clothes, for now she was some other girl. And she wasn't looking at him. She didn't look at anyone. No, Isabel, at none of us. Maybe she would have looked at Ulrich. At Ulrich, if he had recognized her. But Ulrich had said "No" as she had just finished saying "Yes." One night they came to our room, knocked on the door, woke us up, and took Ulrich away, precisely because he had said "No."

"I went back to Prague to look for her, Isabel."

"Weren't they after you?"

"No, they didn't have time for that. I died, changed my name, came to America. Besides, no one cared about me. I had been a nothing, a nobody. What would have been the point of making an example of me? They neither tried me nor condemned nor absolved me. They didn't care. And I made my life over again with the same indifference. History never flowed through me, Isabel. I just happened to be around."

When he finished building the crematorium, a new assignment awaited him. The fortress was now too small for the number of prisoners it contained. A new cell block was needed—immediately, sooner, as soon as possible. He drew up the plans and construction began in October 1943 and continued an entire year. But, Franz, there may be others who are still looking for you. You may still not be safe. I'll never breathe a word of what you tell me. Don't try to apologize, make excuses. Just hold me close and tell me about my face and eyes, about Elizabeth's blood. Be patient and we will be together again. Rub my hair, Franz.

They walk across an open space between buildings. It is eleven at night now. They line up again. The barber, a Greek prisoner, is ready. One by one they undress and get into the five tubs filled with viscous cresyl, while twenty guards look on. Their eyes smart from the disinfectant. They get out and are made to stand against the wall and the barber comes with his scissors and clippers and razor. Their heads shaved, they stand facing the wall. Now they are mechanically holding hands and their eyes are shut so that they will not see each other. The barber sweeps up their fallen hair and gives it to a guard, for everything can be used, nothing is wasted.

"Of course it's to our credit," chuckled the Commandant. "It's a proof of the good order we've maintained. It will take care of the accusations that have been made against us. Here we have freedom. Freedom, art, music, eh?"

And during the banquet that followed the ceremony of pinning on the decorations, the Commandant stood and proposed a toast. He said that this day would be engraved in letters of gold in the annals of the Terezin garrison. He was seated beside Eichmann. Eichmann asked quietly about the performance that would conclude the activities of the day.

"The musicians from the Jewish community have prepared a concert," said the Commandant.

"Good. Do you know the program?"

"Of course. Nothing happens here without my knowing it."

The construction of the new cell block proceeded at top speed and in one year the building was ready for occupancy, although the roof was not yet finished. Franz had provided five large communal cells on the left, each with a capacity of a hundred and sixty prisoners, each with three basins, two toilets, and a single window. On the right were the eighteen solitary confinement cells. The execution wall behind, like the stage of an amphitheater. It was well, efficiently planned. Soukop was in charge of the Baukommando: hundreds of Jewish prisoners. With them Franz had nothing to do; he merely planned and supervised. A year's work. He works an entire year and his eyes are those of a man relentlessly searching, seeking, following as he moves through the straight and slanted spaces, un-

dulant yet stable, of that artificial universe, of that spider's world where the steel webs are the electric fences charged at high tension that she passed through, in the beginning, in the morning on her way to work at the I. G. Farben factory in Monovice; out beneath the stone door above which grass grows as if the fortress were underground, a labyrinth of galleries sunken beneath the brown surface of the earth, and by day he seeks her as he walks the triple corridor of the solitary confinement cells in that world that must mean more than its stone and brick say, that world where she lives and some day has to appear among the bloodless, shaven, emaciated faces that are so strange yet so hauntingly similar to some presentiment or some memory drawn stark in black and white without shading, faces that drink the coal-dark water and the pale vegetable soup and every morning at seven line up before marching off to be freed by labor; he searches for her among the toothless gums that gnaw potatoes and beets, among the naked bodies that lie down at night after removing sweat-drenched, rain-drenched clothing that tomorrow must be worn again, shining brightness, his flashlight in his hand, upon them for any pretext, no pretext, light upon the sleeping faces of the women stretched on the board beds, and again, in daylight, he looks among them as they riot in silence before the only toilet in the cell, a hundred and twenty women and a single basin, and her green eyes have to move, as his own do, hurriedly across the gray buildings and the frost-covered walls that must symbolize something, must be trying to say something, to offer some kind of faith in some kind of order in the midst of this lunatic maze where his eyes stare and seek and search for her before it is too late and the face he remembers is lost forever among the brick walls and the garages and the mud-deep trenches and pits and the make-believe, stagelike backdrops of the dog kennels and the baths of wood and the garbage heaps and the infirmaries and stables, while every day another feature of that face he remembers will be eroding, decaying, disappearing until she will be lost forever in a straw mattress or a wooden tub or the blank negation of a walled-up window; he hears her yell among the women danc-

ing beneath the freezing shower, he searches after her in a world that because it is its own fiction resists all other imagination: all Terezin, the fields, the buildings, the ghetto, is the reply of a free and disembodied imagination to the slavedom of reality: this is not reality but a nightmare or a nightmare representation of reality through which he searches for her, sometimes feverishly, at other times coldly and restrained, among the stained mattresses on the excrement-smeared floors of the infirmary, among the lice in the eyelashes and eyebrows of the men, women, and children dead from typhus who have been thrown into the common pit dug beside the Ohre River where the guards leap in on all fours and with pliers and knives pick out gold-filled teeth before the river filters into the grave and the dead breathe that water which, because they are dead, can no longer infect them with its pestilence. He searches for her in the garrison garden, where a few women work cultivating vegetables; and beyond, to the right, where the morgue stands small and dark on its mound of brown earth. He searches for her among the Czech maids at the Herrenhaus at Christmas when the officers of the garrison stroll between the hedges along the graveled paths carrying their gifts and go inside to exchange toasts with the Commandant and admire the Chinese-lacquered furniture and listen to the latest news on the radio and peer nostalgically at the framed landscape prints and listen to Wagner and set down their glasses of brandy on the glass-top tables. And in the women's section he lashes his whip against his heel and orders them to look up and give him their names as they paint wooden buttons and sew arch supports for boots and knit soldiers' socks and clean the rooms and offices: Gertrude Schön, Herr Architekt, Karolina Simon, Theresa Lederova, but it is forbidden to give names, Herr Architekt, here we all have numbers. And he tries, raving, to enter the hospital before he forgets her face forever, before it can be wiped away forever by the cresyl and Formalin, the injections of sea water, the experiments with typhus and skin grafts, the transformations and exchanges of faces and hands and buttocks shuffled around in this laboratory where the entire universe is reordered, transplanted

freely, without limit, to fulfill the image and semblance of an unspeakable and irrepeatable yet ultimately possible dream.

"I promise you that you will find the evening pleasant," said the Commandant.

When the Protector of Bohemia and Moravia was assassinated, it was decreed that the lives of three thousand Jews must be given in exchange for his. Heinrich came to Theresienstadt to organize their transport to Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and Treblinka. As always he was very confident and very lucid. He and Franz walked through the square of the ghetto town with their thumbs hooked in their belts and Heinrich laughed recalling that fight years ago at the students' party Herr Urs, the dwarf, had crashed wrapped in a pillowcase and refrigerator frost. Franz laughed too, and Heinrich, winking, said that Franz might yet find himself in some difficulties because of the costume Ulrich had worn that night. They walked side by side and laughed a great deal and Heinrich said that no matter how the war turned out it could never be denied that at last German life had been reduced to rationality and exalted to greatness. What they were inflicting on others they risked having inflicted upon themselves, and if that should happen, they would accept it without protest. For in the end human existence is a lonely and bitter footrace which does not go to the fleet or to the daring or even to the patient but to those who have a vision of their own possible grandeur and the courage to live up to their vision. The secret of Germany was that each individual German had such a vision of himself, alone, solitary. It was the accomplishment of the Third Reich to have organized those secret and hidden visions of solitude into a common national purpose, exalted and sufficient. They all had that sense of exaltation. Because of it, if they were defeated, they would be able to accept not only defeat, not only death, but even humiliation. In a few days Heinrich finished his mission. The Attentat auf Heydrich transport was efficiently organized and the three thousand Jews departed from the Theresienstadt ghetto, never, Heinrich assured Franz, to be seen again.

"And what if some day you find yourself in the hands of the Americans or the Russians?" Franz asked, smiling, as Heinrich boarded his truck.

Heinrich threw his hand to his visored cap in mockery of an American salute.

"Then I'll become an American or a Russian," he laughed. "I'll turn traitor, I'll sell secrets, I'll swap parties. Treu bis zum Tod!"

The truck pulled off and Franz laughed too and swung his arm up to return the salute.

Huic ergo pace, Deus:

Pie Jesus Domine:

Dona eis requiem. Amen.

"The Jews," said the Commandant casually, picking a tooth and covering his mouth with the other hand, "are going to perform Verdi's *Requiem*."

Eichmann lifted an eyebrow. All the officers at the long table stopped their conversations. The Commandant went on picking his tooth in the frozen silence. Finally Eichmann began to laugh. He slapped his open palm on the tablecloth and laughed, and they all imitated him, slapped the table, each other's shoulders, and laughed. The whole room laughed, those sitting far away not sure of the joke, merely doing what those who were nearer did. Eichmann wiped tears from his eyes.

And she, if she had ever talked with Franz, could have told him that for months Raphael Schachter had no basso. Just when he was becoming desperate, one day as he was walking the streets of the ghetto thanks to the freedom granted him and his artists he heard a diabolic voice floating over his head. She was with Schachter, and when he asked her if she heard the same thing, she nodded and smiled. They walked from one end of the street to the other, searching, listening, becoming more certain and elated all the time. Finally they climbed wooden stairs in a house where children were playing in the halls and walked through empty bedrooms. The

voice sounded closer and closer, and Schachter climbed out a tall window on to the roof and she followed and they saw a lean man dressed in black bent over a chimney, singing. He looked at them. He moved away from the chimney and wiped a hand across his soot-blackened face. They had found the basso for the *Requiem*.

You laughed, Pussycat, lying with your soft protecting arms around Franz in your room in the hotel in Cholula. But afterward you would tell yourself that that night he had talked without knowing what he was saying to you, sometimes breaking into tears as they all break into tears when they go back at last, when they come at last to the end of the time of waiting and return to their towns and cities and discover that no one has waited for them.

And she understood everything when the general rehearsal was held and there was no spirit, no life, no enthusiasm. Schachter believed that he had failed. They had not responded to him, they had not understood his purposes. She took his arm, moving with difficulty because of her stomach, and told him no, they were not indifferent or resentful. It was simply shock, astonishment, astonishment.

"So the Jews are going to sing their own death chant!" said Eichmann, and everyone laughed and went on laughing as they made their way to the enormous improvised concert hall beneath the roof of the building that had been a hospital, and took their places, the ranking officers in the first row of chairs and the others and the enlisted guards crowded in behind and Franz in one of the last seats of all. And on the other side of the curtain the soloists and the chorus and the orchestra were ready and waiting and Epstein was telling Schachter once again that he was dubious, very dubious of everything, he feared that it could well be construed as a capitulation. A messenger came from the Commandant with an order: the performance must last no longer than one hour. Schachter clenched his teeth and in a whisper told them, "We shall begin with the line 'Confutatis maledictis.'" Then the curtain opened and in front of them were the officers newly decorated with the KVK cross, smiling.

*Confutatis maledictis,
Flammis acribus addictis,
Voca me cum benedictis.*

Beneath the silent vault rose the voice of the basso chimney sweep. When the damned are confounded and cast into the living flames, call me to join the blessed. Franz saw her. She was seated on the conductor's right, playing first violin. The voice of the chorus, loud yet hesitant in the "Dies Irae." He could not see her clearly, nor could he see Eichmann's eyebrow and smile and the Commandant's air of complacent satisfaction. There was no conviction in the chorus: the day of wrath would come and the world would dissolve in ashes . . . perhaps. Franz leaned forward and twisted his head to see the girl playing the violin, to see her and ask her to remember a different Requiem, a German Requiem: grant us rest, Lord; would she remember? Two groups of cellos, separated by somber violas. The chorus at its softest, in lamentation. But the human voice, simply because it is human, creates a certain joy that moves in front of the sadness of the instruments. Schachter had his back to them. He had closed his eyes. Now the officers and the SS men knew that he had been defeated, that his people had been defeated; and the reason for their defeat, whether it was fear or indifference or astonishment, was of no importance. The girl playing the violin kept her eyes fixed on Schachter. She compelled him to look at her. She played exactly as he wanted, with the intensity and purpose he was asking of her. But now her face was resigned. Eichmann, listening intently, smiled. But at that instant, as if he had understood the full meaning of the resignation on the face of the girl, his smile changed from dry amusement to a gentler expression almost of forgiveness. And Franz, far back in the hall, remembered their nights in the Wallenstein Gardens in Prague, remembered a face that resembled the face of the girl playing the violin, and wanted to re-create that other Requiem, the Requiem of Brahms, to hear it rather than this one. The voices of the women repeated what the voices of the men had said. They attempt to

recapture life. Memory tries to find its way, its path down the honed edge of the blade between life and death. But life, death, and memory fuse. The chorus is silent for a moment while Schachter's arms move and the four soloists stand. Bietya, the soprano, softly begins the "Domine Jesu Christe, Rex Gloriam," and Franz wants to reject those words as he murmurs the words of the German Requiem, *Der Tod ist verschlungen in den Sieg, Tod, wo ist dein Stachel!* and the sound of the instruments is overcome by the words: in that other orchestra, the horn gives life to the march, the violins and violas walk beside the mourners, and the organ stops everything. But he could not remember it. The Latin voices, almost unaccompanied, voices alone, slow voices, less solid than echoes, prevented memory. The tenor:

Hostias et preces tibi, Domine, laudis offerimus,

joined immediately by the basso, the soprano, the mezzo-soprano,

Faceas, Domine, de morte transire ad vitam.

Franz looked at the face of the girl playing the violin and silently asked her: Hanna, are these simple voices, humble, ordinary, naked, almost archaic, more powerful than the Brahms? Is this ancient, this dead litany more powerful than all of Brahms's instruments and brilliance? Schachter closed his eyes and smiled. But the girl did not relax the tension that was sustaining her. Receive us as we pass into death. Receive us as we pass:

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna in excelsis.

Yes, he believed that she had seen him in the pause between the "Sanctus" and the "Agnus Dei." Eichmann stirred in his chair. The Commandant remained rigid and glanced at his watch. Now the "Agnus," placating, humble, humiliated, charitable, poor, merciful, fearful. The officers tried to smile. But Franz, looking around

him, saw their eyes dampening as they listened to the purest part of the Requiem:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: dona eis requiem.

"Forgive me, Isabel. You don't know how sentimental we can be."

"I know, Franz. I saw you drinking beer and singing today."

Schachter hesitated, feeling the emotion in the hall at his back. The girl playing the violin stopped for an instant and Schachter looked toward her questioningly, and Franz, far back in the hall, was asking her to remember those long-ago evenings and their first meeting and their walk across the Karlsbrücke and the afternoons in Maher's studio and the lonely summer when the city smelled of chestnuts and the banks of the river were alive with grass and flowers and the women who lived in her boarding house went walking in the country and they were left alone and ran up and down the stairs and halls and cooked their meal and told each other what had to be said, I love you, promise not to ask me for anything, when you come back from Germany I'll be a great soloist and won't even notice you, I don't want to go away, it will only be for a few years, it won't change anything, and I'll come back, Hanna, wait for me, Hanna, no, Franz, no, wait, not yet, not this way, I swear I'll wait and you will be the first, alone in the boarding house on a summer Sunday afternoon, the protruding bones of her face illuminated by the slanting light, her green eyes submissive, proud, her dark hair touched by the last sun as they sat beside the open window and ate their meal and looked out across the black stones of Prague's Jewish cemetery.

They all sensed the change. It wasn't in the music. It was physical, as if everyone on the improvised stage had stepped forward, Schachter, the soloists, the chorus, the orchestra, as if they had all moved forward one long stride. No longer was it Verdi's *Requiem*, that sweet southern requiem from the cities of the sun. It was a circus act now. It was music-hall jazz: three short beats cracking

with anger, then the long defiant beat. Bitter voices, agonized and infuriated at once, suddenly awakened, far from the patience of the "Agnus," heedless of the music, challenging, all in unison shouting:

Libera me! Libera me!

The three violent short beats, then the long drawn one,

Li-be-ra meeeee!

Free me, Lord, from eternal death on the day of overwhelming wrath when heaven and earth shall be shaken! When You shall come to judge with fire! I tremble, fearing that moment of judgment and wrath. When heaven and earth will tremble also. The day of calamity and sorrow, a great and bitter day, the day of wrath. And grant them eternal rest, Lord, and may everlasting light shine upon them. They knocked over our chairs and drawing table, Isabel. They threw our books and drawings and tracings out the window and grabbed Ulrich and stomped on his glasses and kicked him in the kidneys and dragged him away down the stairs. For Ulrich had said no. No. I never saw him again. *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna.*

The chorus and orchestra were silent. Schachter turned and faced his audience for the first time. He did not bow. Everyone waited for Eichmann to give the cue, to set the example. Presently the Oberscharführer began to clap, alone, the sound of his hands the only sound in the hall. He applauded with a dry, forced smile.

Franz left the hall and went down the maze of stone stairs and waited in the street. He concealed himself behind an arch when the guards and officers came out in silence. His comrades. Then the others, the Jewish artists. She was leaning on the arm of the chimney-sweep basso. Schachter went to her and said something Franz could not hear. She took Schachter's arm and went with him, walking as if walking were difficult, her feet dragging over the stones of the narrow street. At a gate where the paint had faded

they stopped and Schachter kissed her hand and said goodbye and she went in. As soon as Schachter was out of sight, Franz followed her. He heard her heavy step moving up the dark stairs. He heard her stop, panting, to rest. Heard her go on. The creaking of hinges. He ran up and saw her pass through the door. For a moment he waited. *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna*. He stood on the rotted topmost stair with his hand on the worn banister, his head down, his eyes staring into unanswering darkness. Everything will pass. Be reconciled, be consoled. For man will remain. Will labor. Will love. We will be again what we were before. As always. What we have been, not what we have wanted to be. We will toil. We will raise again the burned and fallen walls. We will sing again rapping our mugs on the table. We will weep, thinking of our sorrows and the sorrows of others. We will love our parents, our wives, our children. And we will wait. Yes, we will wait. We deserve to be pitied.

He moved to the door and opened it. The hinges creaked but she did not turn to look at him. A small room naked of all furniture except a two-deck wooden bunk. Other women, sleeping. She stood in front of a walled-up window that looked out on nothing. She was nude and was humming softly. She touched her enormous belly and sang in a low voice. She touched her short hair and then again her pregnant abdomen. Her flesh was colorless, young still but not as it used to be. On her breasts and her belly and the bones of her cheeks lay luminous light, and her eyes were half closed.

Franz left the room and did not look back. He closed the door. He walked down to the street loosening his black tie. It was summer and hot. In the street he took off his jacket.

No trouble, Herr Architekt, no trouble at all, I assure you, sir. Go right ahead and examine whatever documents you care to see, the archive is at your service. Though of course we don't have much time left now. I'm afraid you may find it quite difficult to locate the file on the person you mention. We have handled so many prisoners here at Terezin. And you don't give me much information to go on. But I shall try, sir, heh-heh, that's all you can

ask of me, I think. Now, when did that group take their leave? You know, I'm sure, that we use only their numbers here. No names. Oh, heavens no, no names. Let's see now. Spring. Summer. Ah! it was in October, Herr Architekt, October of 1944. The trees in the square of Theresienstadt were bare, and dead leaves floated along the banks of the river. Heh, to be a bit fanciful, eh? Well, why not? Sticking to plain facts, sir, they departed in a rail convoy of cattle cars, packed in like so many sardines, their arms locked together, heh, scarcely room enough to breathe, I should imagine. But you, I'm sure, have seen those miserable convoy trains, we all have. Maestro Schachter and the musicians and performers who provided Verdi's *Requiem* the day Oberscharführer Eichmann visited us. Their destination was Auschwitz. Yes, Herr Architekt, you're quite right, one of the women musicians was with child. She gave birth shortly before they departed. Now, let's see, let's see. Child a boy. Himself dispatched to Treblinka later. In the arms of a nurse, I suppose, heh-heh. Further details? The hospital authorities, perhaps, sir, if they are still here. Now, the man you mention. The spring register. Summer. Herr Architekt, I really must have more details. Young, blond? Pah, hundreds were young and blond. An apostate Jew? There were many of those, too, sir. But we smelled them out. Heh, yes, we ran them to ground. Pale? They were all pale, my dear young Herr Architekt, if not when they arrived, then soon after. Heh! So, so. His mother had believed he would be safer here than at the front? Well, now! Heh . . . I suppose she may well have felt so . . . heh . . . but we don't have records on the thoughts of the prisoners' mothers, you know. Only their bloodlines, sir, only their bloodlines. Still . . . and by the way, Herr Architekt, speaking of safety, I trust you have a suit of civilian wear laid handily by? Not yet? Ach, sir, you must take care of that quickly, quickly. They say that we're surrounded now. But I suspect that an agile young person like yourself might make his way west and south toward the Americans. I'm told that the roads are packed, a multitude of refugees. But not in uniform, sir. We in the archives plan to burn our documents in a few hours now. With

them our uniforms. As for the buildings, the prison and the crematorium, I understand that they shall be left standing. Good solid construction, Herr Architekt, you have every reason to feel proud of them. Of course, if we're shelled . . . But doubtless it won't come to that, so long as there are prisoners left. Yes, yes, to return to your pale blond young man with the oversolicitous mother, heh. Now really, I must have some concrete detail. One eye blue, the other brown? Hah, Herr Architekt! Splendid! Such a curiosity is sure to have caught someone's notice. Our doctors would have been most interested. Hmmm, one eye blue, the other brown. Heh, if the prisoner is still among the quick rather than the dead, Herr Architekt, I will wager that now he has neither a blue, nor a brown eye! Oh, no, no, just empty sockets, for eyes of two colors are contrary to nature, and our doctors, you know . . . heh, heh. Of course, they may have limited themselves to corneal transplantation. But such an opportunity would not have been wasted. Oh, never. One eye blue, the other gray. Ach, yes, brown, brown. No, sir, Herr Architekt, I cannot locate the file. We need his number. Without a number . . . Still, you yourself saw him arrive. I find no death report, and I'm sure the eyes would have been noted. There is just a chance, sir, a very slim chance, in view of the epidemics these last months, that he is still here. I doubt it very much, sir. Most improbable. Still . . . shall we go to the cells and have a look? Perhaps, perhaps . . . I trust your immunizations are up to date? Of course . . . And a handkerchief, sir, one needs a handkerchief, preferably, heh-heh, a scented one, the stench in the cells is . . . ach! No, not many are left. A very few. The hardest of the vermin, the most stubborn and resistant. This way, sir. Once outside, I shall follow you. You know your way through this maze far better than I. Yes, Herr Architekt, the buildings will remain standing. Perhaps, heh, they may be used again, after a few years have gone by. For everything passes, as they say. Victory. Defeat also. Really, sir, you must provide yourself with civilian wear. It's essential. Now, allow me, this is a master key. The Archivist must go everywhere at one time or another, you know. Data must always be

confirmed. Down this corridor? Listen to the cannon. Ach, it won't be long now. And the dogs, how they're howling! I think no one has fed those dogs in quite a long time. Ah, well, with such confusion. Herr Architekt, may I wonder why you wish to find this prisoner? Is my suspicion correct, sir, that you wish to take him along with you today as a kind of safe-conduct? Heh, it's an idea that has occurred to me also. But you shall have to carry him on your shoulders, sir, none of these prisoners is able to walk now. And I am too old, not strong enough for such exertion. No, I shall have to take my chances. Dressed as a priest, Herr Architekt, I have the garments all ready. But you, perhaps it may work. You'll have to have documents, of course. The bearer, Herr Architekt Franz Jellinek, is certified by Number so-and-so . . . ach, perhaps we had best forego the number and use his name . . . has assisted me to escape . . . The wording must be precise. And once we have his number, I can give you his file, too, if that will help. An idea, sir, certainly a very possible idea. Any port in a storm, as they say. Here, here we are. Just allow me to open this door. If you will use my flashlight now . . . not too close to them, Herr Architekt, they're pestilence itself . . . Vermin! Scum! On your feet, on your feet, swine! There, heaped in the corner. Up, up! No, they can't stand. They will be dead very soon now. They will never be rescued by any one, I believe. Pigs, open your eyes! Your eyes, we want to see your eyes! One brown, one blue. No . . . I don't . . . Just a moment, there, dragging himself along the wall. But not too near him, Herr Architekt. Ach, the stench! Is it he? Yes, yes, I really believe . . . Open your eyes wider, pig! What, Herr Architekt? A knife? As it happens, sir, I do have one. A keepsake of the old days. Heh-heh. You push the button, the blade appears. Very sharp, too. I use it for erasures. Occasionally, you know, even the most meticulous of clerks commits an error, and a little scraping is required to . . . Herr Architekt, what are you about there, sir! Herr Architekt! No, sir, no, I protest! I am in no position to give you orders, but operations are the function of the doctors, sir, they're . . . Herr Architekt! My God, Herr Architekt, what have

you done? I shall have to report this to your superiors! Why, the man is almost dead! No, no! Into the handkerchief with it, man, quick now. Then I suggest you throw the handkerchief into the river. Good God, sir, if I had known . . . Still, you have your reasons, I'm sure, you must have your reasons. At least no one has seen us. Quickly, now, Herr Architekt. I shall make my report . . . But to whom? No, I shall make no report after all. And the pig will doubtless be dead in a matter of hours. He may well bleed to death now. But my God . . . To the river, sir. I confess I'm afraid. If it should ever be suspected that I participated . . . at least, witnessed . . . And my disguise as a priest may not serve well enough . . . I'm not a young man, I shall have to walk slowly, I shall tire quickly. So many years among documents. The Archivist. And now, now . . . Blood is dripping on your trousers, Herr Architekt, hold the handkerchief farther out. Directly to the river, sir, I say, directly, directly . . . No witness except myself. But if times were . . . your superiors . . . if the swine should live, he will never pass along his bi-colored eyes, at least . . . but still, Herr Architekt, still . . . and they say that last night a wolf was prowling near the fence . . . The cannon seem closer now. Perhaps after all they will shell us. We must hurry, hurry, we don't have time to waste, sir. I go to burn the archive. You, to the river, to throw that . . . that . . .

△ You jumped out of bed, Pussycat, humming. Franz arched an eyebrow.

"Up, man, up!" you grinned at him. "Get dressed!"

"Why?"

"We're going to explore the pyramid!"

"It's after midnight," he protested, looking at his wristwatch.

"All the better. The witches and goblins will be out. Get dressed, Franz, and I'll go after Javier and Betty."

You put on a record, just for a change, *Anytime atall*, and wriggled into your yellow shantung dress, naked beneath it. Hold-

ing your golden slippers in your hand, you went out into the hall. You closed the door and stopped beside me. For I was waiting for you.

“Is everything ready?” you asked.

3

VISIT OUR CELLARS

That same September night the Narrator is led by Fatality to the Place. The only Reading he takes along with him is a poem by Octavio Paz which at this time has yet to be published:

*Water above
Below, the forest
Wind along the paths*

*The well is motionless
The bucket black The water solid*

*Water goes down to the trees
Sky rises up to our lips*

The Narrator decides to ponder over this poem. Feeling ashamed, he asks himself why poets can say everything in so few lines and Baudelaire replies, he believes, that only poetry is intelligent. The Narrator, Xipe Totec, Our Lord of the Flayed Hide, changes his skin.

△ You stopped at the base of the enormous hill-like pyramid, in front of the entrance to the tunnel. There were iron rails for the wheels of the mine carts used to move out the excavated earth. The tunnel stretched in a straight line, illuminated by hanging naked light bulbs, as far as the eye could see. Javier stepped aside and Franz went in first, then Elizabeth, then Javier, and finally you, Isabel. The tunnel was low and the men had to stoop to dodge the electric cable overhead. Franz stopped for a moment with his fin-

gers touching the smooth black wall. Elizabeth rested her hand on his shoulder and felt his sweat. But the air was not hot here, a cold current of air swept in from the entrance. Shafts led off to right and left. Franz moved forward again and Elizabeth kept her hand on his shoulder.

"Straight ahead," Javier said quietly. His voice was muffled, yet seemed to echo. The four of you walked on slowly. As you approached one of the hanging bulbs, your shadows stretched behind you; as you walked on beyond it, they moved out in front of you, your shoulders magnified to spread all the way across the narrow tunnel. Franz reached a low dark arch and stopped. Javier felt until he found the light switch on the wall. Illuminated stairs climbed out of sight, almost vertically, to the foundations of the chapel, a dizzying ascent. Javier turned the light off.

"Franz?" a voice said. "Franz?" The voice was neither near nor far. It was penetrating without being loud. It lost itself in echoes and all of you stopped. Elizabeth thought that the voice had been Javier. She turned to him angrily: "Javier, shut up!"

"Franz, where have you been hiding?"

"Shut up, I said! Don't pay any attention to him, Franz. He's spent his entire life playing let's-pretend games. They're not worth worrying about."

But Javier and you, Isabel, both knew that the voice had not been Javier's. You said nothing. Javier, confused, did not know what to do, what attitude to adopt, whether to be ironic or amused. He spoke, still quietly,

"To the right, Franz,"

and Franz led you down a dark gallery of uneven stone. The lighting was not so bright now. Franz bumped against three protruding steps, the profile of one of the seven ancient pyramids that form the great hill. Elizabeth grabbed him by the waist to keep him from falling.

"Straight on, Franz," Javier said.

And the unknown voice, louder than Javier: "Franz, haven't you expected anyone to find you? Did you think you were finally safe?"

"Don't listen to him!" Elizabeth hissed. "He's out of his mind!"

Franz slowly, gropingly moved forward, the palms of his hands touching the rough stone walls. Now the cold draft from the entrance corridor was behind you. The air was thick, motionless. You were deep within the hill in a labyrinth of galleries and cross-galleries that seemed suspended in darkness and space, timeless. Water dripped softly and invisibly, as if the seven pyramids nested one upon the other concealed a secret spring, or as if the stone itself were sweating.

"Up the steps, Franz. We're right behind you," said Javier.

Franz raised his face and climbed slowly, as a sleepwalker. He reached the topmost step and stopped.

"Now," said Javier, "we are approaching the heart of the pyramid."

"No," said Elizabeth. "Don't believe him. Don't listen to him."

The air was dense, almost suffocating, and you could feel the weight of the thousands of tons of earth and stone above you pressing down, wanting to settle the last few inches or few feet that would close the tunnels forever. Elizabeth reached forward to touch Franz again but hesitated and instead turned and stared at Javier's expressionless face, its whiteness accentuated by the pale light of the naked bulbs.

"We've come far enough," Elizabeth said. "I want to go back."

"Now take the stairs to the left."

Franz moved on and after a moment Elizabeth hurried after him. He ducked his head to enter the stairs. The ceiling here was loose adobe bricks, unsafe, dangerous. He climbed slowly. Finally he emerged in a vaulted gallery decorated with a frieze in vegetable colors. It was the core, the solidity that supported the great mass above. Franz moved into the gallery and Elizabeth followed him. Javier next. You, Isabel, held back, standing near the top of the stairs. Elizabeth stared around her and felt dizzy. Light bulbs hung far apart, high above, faintly illuminating the frieze, which consisted of a succession of round-headed locusts, round skeletons with round eyes, sunken cheeks, hollow nostrils and sharp teeth, in three colors: yellow, red, and black.

Javier moved forward to lecture: "The locusts, gods of the

mountain. Plague of the harvest, yet at the same time its guardian."

Franz turned his back on the frieze and rested his head against the wall. Elizabeth also leaned against the wall staring at the locusts' red teeth.

"Red, the death color," Javier went on. "Yellow, life." He studied the frieze thoughtfully. "The locust brings forth both life and death. Like all of the ancient Mexican gods, it is ambiguous. It belongs to a cosmogony of paradox in which death is life's prerequisite, life is death's herald."

Franz was not listening. He had turned his back on all of you, leaning with his forehead against the frieze.

"Those monsters simply laugh at the pleasant saints in the chapel up there," Javier said, looking toward the ceiling. "They make frightening faces and scare the cabbage-headed little Virgin."

You had held back, Isabel, at the entrance to the gallery, hugging yourself with folded arms, looking at Franz, Javier, and Elizabeth as if they were three actors on a stage that every moment moved farther away from you. Listening to Javier's cold, precise comments. And now at last Franz's voice, strident, metallic, with the echoing resonance of this chamber deep in the earth:

"Javier! That wasn't your voice! I tell you, it wasn't your voice!"

And Javier replied quietly, "No, Franz, it wasn't," as Franz was already moving toward him with his hands at his sides and his fists clenched. Javier suddenly lost his composure and began to tremble. He looked at Elizabeth beseechingly, but Elizabeth had merely stepped back and watched as Franz moved forward, perspiring, his shirt-sleeves rolled above the elbow, his muscles tense. With his gray eyes he stared at Javier and Elizabeth saw in that gaze all the cruelty and almost childlike tenderness she had loved in Franz, the cruelty and tenderness that are prerequisites for each other, a necessary fusion, serene inner life and violent outer life, loss, self-apology, action impelled by orders given long ago and still obeyed, action and dream long ago, blind, confident, insane, but always action, lumbering forward gracelessly toward Javier's opposing absolute passivity, Javier facing a rendering of accounts he had not writ-

ten, pitying and waiting for the attack he would welcome. They touched and Franz's arms went around Javier to wrestle him to the ground while Javier's arms went around Franz to embrace him, hold him, be near him. And as they gripped each other, the attack ended as suddenly as it had begun. The tension between violent strength and accepting weakness dissolved and very slowly they pressed their bodies together, joined at the belly and the thighs, still embracing each other without now admitting their true intention, a violent embrace of hatred transforming itself, as the two women looked on, into desire that neither of the women could understand or participate in. A sensual, excited embrace between two men who drew back their hands, their heads, and their feet, but remained locked together at the loins in a way that neither had expected, neither had foreseen, each of them suddenly become a sleepwalker in the damp, stifling gallery beside the frieze of darkness and mystery, the red and yellow and black locust gods of life and death, each of them now far from this place and this moment but each calling to the other to return and join him and each about to disappear, and Javier trembles and whispers something: the tomb of the dead gods is moving, swaying, it's a quake, an earthquake, take cover . . . Earth rains down from the vaulted loose adobe overhead . . . The walls shake, shake . . . centuries and centuries collapsing . . . and the locusts hold the weight of seven stone pyramids on their feeble backs . . . Loose adobe bricks . . . friezes crushed . . . walls, steps, galleries, the church above swaying . . . And noise can bring down hills, even mountain peaks . . . darkness falling upon them from above . . . everything falling, falling . . . Ligeia leaping forward to embrace Franz . . . Isabel grabbing Javier, trying to pull him toward Franz and Elizabeth . . . Javier takes her arms and draws her back . . . everyone shouting, screaming . . . rock crashes down separating the two couples, a mass of dead stone, broken bricks, old adobe . . . Javier and Isabel run . . . They escape down the stairs, down the corridor, followed by the thunder of falling earth and rock . . . Some day it had to happen . . . Ligeia and Franz have remained,

trapped on the other side, where there is no way out . . . Locked behind the collapse of the hill-pyramid . . . Yes, he hears their voices, their shouts . . . Ligeia screaming his name . . . Franz shouting . . . Ligeia screaming that she can't get her breath . . . And they're trapped, trapped . . . Isabel and Javier hear them and embrace . . . Javier hugs her, kisses her . . . "Now we will love each other," he says. "We'll have to love each other . . ." Isabel squeezes his hand and they go down the tunnel holding hands, see the exit shining in the distance like an incandescent point . . . Holding hands they emerged into the sun, the sun, the night sun . . . They had gone in in darkness and they came out into the shining sun . . . They got into the car . . . Now only two of them, Isabel and Javier, Javier and Isabel . . . Isabel drives . . . They go toward the hotel, Isabel looking straight ahead with a motionless face, through the streets of Cholula, past the smooth-skinned emaciated dogs that run barking after them, past the big-bellied women and the soldiers with knife-scarred faces . . . the car bounces across ruts and holes . . . And Javier can read Isabel's mind . . . Yes, she is telling herself, I can be his strength, his inspiration, his everything, but he doesn't understand that. He thinks that he is sacrificing himself. That when he married Ligeia he destroyed his ambitions. Married her, lived with her, slept with her. A way of dying . . . If I only had more experience, Isabel is thinking, if I could let him know what I know. But even if I did, by living with him, sleeping with him, marrying him, he would still not be convinced . . . that it's not too late . . . That is what she is thinking . . . it's what she has to be thinking as she drives from the pyramid to the hotel, Javier thinking for her: his dream is not lost but only with me can it come true, with me who can be his strength, his harmony, his peace, he understanding that this is what I was born for, that I can't live alone, that I must be joined to him, a man I can understand: I want to be his earth, his roots, his air, I want to tremble when his hands touch my nipples, his lips kiss my clitoris, his breath goes into my ear. I want to lie on the bed and have him lie upon me and take me as I take him, together,

without victory, without defeat, I want to praise him without shame, to stare at him without modesty, to touch him without haste, to live and make love without haste, the long slow mornings waiting for the always new surprise that will come when he wakes: that's it, that's what I want, and all the rest too, to learn his likes and dislikes, to cheer him up when he's depressed, to listen to records with him, to read with him, travel with him, nurse him when he's sick, go to the drugstore and buy his razor blades, his shaving cream, his soap, his soda bicarb, see him dance with another woman, see him angry, sleeping as if, without ever telling me, he always knows that I am with him, supporting him, nurturing him, that I don't want to possess him for myself or to see myself, but to be all that he needs while remaining outside him: not that he should cease to suffer but that he should find the suffering he needs in my suffering, not that he should have no doubts, but that in me . . . that's it, that's it: that he should accept everything not as if it were fated but only as if it were necessary: things happen to us not because of destiny but because we need them to happen, and so I will be able to hold off destiny, fate, circumstances, fatality, prevent them from touching him until I offer them to him transformed by me, by Isabel, and if he understands, that is how it will be, how it will have to be; a woman is never overcome by a man but overcomes herself in order to love him and be his; there is never rape, every woman always lets herself be taken; there is no love that does not rest upon humiliation; and that is why I am here, why I took this trip to the sea with him; maybe he'll understand . . . The car stops in front of the hotel . . . They get out . . . slam the doors . . . enter the hotel . . . ask for the key to Isabel's room. . . walk along the halls . . . hear the fountain in the glass-roofed patio . . . open the bedroom door . . . Isabel throws herself on the bed crying . . . Javier unbuttons his shirt . . . wads it into a ball and wipes his armpits with it . . . takes off his shoes, covered with dust, and his trousers, and sits on the bed to take off his socks . . . keeps his underwear on and sits holding his socks . . . he is thinking that maybe she believes she

understands, but she doesn't understand . . . she thinks she does, but she doesn't . . . she wants to offer herself to him now . . . she is hoping that he will unbutton her dress, but he turns his back on her and she lies there crying, meek, submissive, humble now after the hell of the afternoon with Ligeia . . . he unbuttons her yellow shantung dress, looks at her back covered with droplets of sweat . . . she is thinking, he reflects, about her humility, her strength to endure . . . She shrugs her shoulders to wriggle out of the dress and he looks at her nude, sweat-beaded body . . . She is thinking of a life of tenderness and compassion in which she, sacrificing her possibilities, will guide a poor unsuccessful author back to creativity, giving him through herself a second birth, confidence . . . beneath her protective wing she will make him sit down and do his daily stint, now and then bringing him a cup of herb tea to calm his colitis . . . Why not? He grunts and throws his socks down . . . No, she doesn't understand . . . she doesn't understand that Ligeia, his poison, his toxin, is also his life, his habit, that without that habit his world would collapse . . . that he prefers Ligeia, with her barrenness and her routines, to someone else who would be equally barren and have worse routines . . . that he prefers Ligeia because she is violent and given to extremes, that anything else would be flat and tasteless . . . and with any woman he would merely go on breathing, chewing, swallowing, digesting, seeing, touching, smelling, the same tube called a man that stretches from his mouth to his anus . . . she does not understand that he no longer writes books but reports for a committee of the United Nations, that he is just as he would be no matter what he did, for all he can do is fill out his allotted time, no more . . . Tender and compassionate . . . she thinks she understands, but she doesn't . . . she lies there, motionless, nude, thinking that she understands and not realizing that she too makes demands . . . insists on understanding me and overwhelming me with her pretended gifts, her subjugation given with loyalty, insists that I live only for her, only so that she can care for me, flatter me, protect me, nurture me, she and she alone: an iron instinct that I can

never break, no, neither I nor any man . . . I cannot transform either myself or the world so that all of us, men and women alike, can be alone and solitary, alone when we want to be alone, joined to others when we need it, always free to choose and decide, to be the same or different, to belong to and possess whomever we care to . . . Can she understand this? . . . She is waiting for me to move nearer . . . she doesn't understand why I don't go to her and touch the nipples she is offering me . . . For her, humiliation; for me merely freedom, necessary, rational: can she understand? . . . will she allow me to be openly unfaithful? . . . Oh, no, she won't . . . I know that well . . . And then the disillusionment, the tears, the hurt feelings, the certainty that I don't know how to appreciate her or I would not leave her for anyone, and finally the hatred, the rebellion, her own unfaithfulness: a betrayal that I would not want to face and accept, for from the beginning she would have denied freedom and now she would be claiming it . . . And who am I talking about? My head aches, hurts . . . Bring me an aspirin . . . Isabel, bring me an aspirin . . . now . . . Isabel who is Ligeia . . . she will be Ligeia . . . and she knows it . . . she'll want everything for herself alone . . . all my time . . . all my love . . . and will be disillusioned, hurt . . . will hate me . . . will give me Ligeia's hell again . . . He looks at her . . . She does not move toward him . . . Maybe she in her turn is mind-reading . . . What can he do except stay with Ligeia, the familiar port, rather than venturing to begin again, risk everything with a fear he will not conceal, simply so that Isabel may become his new Ligeia, new young flesh, rosy lips, heavy pubis, hard breasts, firm thighs . . . how young they are and how they show themselves at first, how they respond when there is neither old habit nor old understanding, how charming is young clumsiness, what a discovery, what a surprise . . . He gets up from the bed . . . Isabel lies there, naked, her legs spread, waiting for him . . . He looks for and finds the black shawl . . . No, no man wants to repeat life . . . Isabel will never be Ligeia . . . Isabel will be a fleeting love . . . forever beautiful, a sweet, warm mem-

ory, never old . . . He takes the shawl in his hands and stretches it . . . He wants to be alone . . . I want to be alone, Isabel, don't you understand that? . . . And you will remain young . . . Always young . . . I promise you your youth as I walk toward you with Ligeia's black shawl in my hands . . . You will never age and I will always remember you as you are, as you were . . . Isabel's arms rise to receive him . . . Quickly he slips the shawl around her neck and twists it . . . She doesn't suspect yet . . . she thinks that my fury is merely a new proof of love . . . that today I offer her once again a new and different experience . . . and I tighten the shawl, tighten it, and do not look at her bulging eyes, at her open mouth with the protruding tongue . . . how long, my God, her tongue is . . .

△ The men were still standing pressed against each other when I moved forward from the stairs to where you stood just inside the gallery. I took your hand, Isabel, so that you would know I was there. Javier did not notice me. Neither did Elizabeth. Only Franz saw me and asked who I was. But immediately the Monks arrived with their insane noise, the music of the electric guitars they had prepared earlier, during the afternoon, their singing voices as they moved toward the frieze from both ends of the gallery, and Javier suddenly collapsed in the dust and did not understand and Elizabeth knelt to hold him while Franz stared and the music pounded its defiance and challenge

*Now the day has come
That day has come, oh, oh, oh
Judgment day, judgment daaaaay*

They came in from the two ends of the gallery preceded by their two minstrels, the Negro wearing the charro sombrero and holding the guitar away from his chest, the tall youth with the long unkempt hair and the tight rose-colored pants and the leather jacket, carrying the other guitar tight in his arms, one from the left, the other from the right

*Man, man, count your time
The minutes left, oh, oh, oh*

and behind them the others: behind the Negro, the girl dressed all in black; behind the tall youth the girl with her eyes hidden behind dark glasses, wearing the Greta Garbo hat with its wide fallen brim, her trench coat with raised lapels, her face pale with pallid makeup that caused her features to disappear in the dim light: mouth and dark glasses, that was all that could be seen of her,

*Pop your eyes, death and nature
Judgment day, oh, oh, oh
Let creation rise and shake*

then the blond, bearded young man in corduroys and sandals, and behind him the youth conventionally dressed, but now incongruously, in a tweed jacket and flannel trousers. The Monks had arrived:

*What did David tell the Sibyl?
Gonna be no getaway*

The Monks had arrived, and as they passed us, they squeezed my arm, Isabel, and kissed you, and moved on with swaying hips and sliding feet to form a circle around Franz while Elizabeth, understanding nothing, her eyes wide with fear, went on kneeling beside Javier, who now had fainted or gotten drunk and passed out or simply crinkled up like tissue paper in the wind. They formed a circle around Franz and danced around him to the throbbing hum of their guitars, to the crazily echoing boom of their voices, twisting their supple hips, shaking their heads

*For oh, oh, that day has come
Nobody hides forever*

Then they stopped and were silent. Franz leaned back against the wall, his arms spread, his palms flat on the stone. They tightened their circle around him.

△ Isabel brought the six Monks one afternoon so that they could meet me and we could get together on all this. Right from the first my young guests took over, settling themselves around my living room as if it had been theirs all their lives. They sprawled out on the floor on my old reed mats, charred by years of careless cigarette butts. They propped themselves comfortably against the walls that had once been two subtle tones of blue and now had aged and faded to many tones of gray and yellow. Their tequila glasses made new rings on my square coffee table—well, it's also a worktable, comrades—and they heaped their cigarette butts—when they first hit Mexico City they had discovered and taken to the brand called “Pharaohs” and two or three of them were smoking pot, from the smell I thought it was the Negro dressed up in the charro outfit and the albinolike girl with the shaved eyebrows whom I immediately, secretly nicknamed White Rabbit—in the Olmecan saucers that serve as my ashtrays. I told them a little about my castle called home. That originally it had been an outlying farm building on land that belonged to a Jesuit monastery. That by and by the Jesuits had been bumped on their devious way and the monastery was destroyed, and when I found it, the building belonged to no one, was lived in by no one, apparently had been entirely forgotten. So in I had moved, for I liked the privacy and saw the possibilities, and the rent a squatter pays can't be beat. Perhaps they had noticed that from the alley the house was concealed by the thick hedge of prickly briar. A good neighborhood, too, what Mexico City's political fathers usually call “proletarian.” But even the poorest and weariest of proletarians have not only chains but also refuse to get rid of, and for years everyone there had ditched his on my side of the hedge, creating the savory Dadaist garden my guests had observed as they entered: rotting garbage, rusting cans, broken bottles, disintegrating scraps of clothing, with here and there in the fly-swarmed stink, the languid arms of the old maguey plants. Groovy, eh? And immediately around the house, like a line of last defense, was my second hedge of intergrown high shrubs. Isabel,

that little Pussycat, stood near the door listening and after a while said that she had to leave, she had a date to go with her Proffy to the magnificent motel where he always took her, so ciao, cats, and good luck. Exit Pussycat. But not the Monks. They spent the rest of the day and most of the night with me, concentrated and intense but at the same time swinging loose.

They began by asking me about myself. I made it brief: I write when I feel like it and also when I don't, and now and then I drive a cab to get with it again, back in it again, and that was how I met our friends Javier and Elizabeth. In a word, I have a kind of independent income. They laughed and said sure you do, and we all laughed because we all knew that no one can live beat or Viet very long without some hardworking old bourgeois paterfamilias behind him to pick up the check for the ass he sacks and the glass houses he cracks, and all that. And already White Rabbit had found my last bottle of Poire William's, worth a small fortune at the Mini-max supermarket, and was gulping it down like so much water, and now she waved the bottle at me and said, "Okay, writer or cabby, whichever you prefer, we read you but do you read us? Are you with us?" I told her yes, of course, why the hell not, sure I was with them . . . in principle. Not that I intended to take an active part in it. No, my role would be strictly Vergilian: their observer now and later, when I came to write about it, their amiable Narrator. But for that I needed to know even more than if I were to be one of the actors. I had to have everything scribbled down neatly in my notebooks, and because I didn't know everything now, not by a long shot, just what reasons they might have, I would like them to persuade me a little. As for approving or disapproving, to hell with it. I was simply glad to have them there with me for a while.

They listened as I told them what I knew. Then we agreed, except that they refused to give me their real names, that would be taking too much of a chance. So I gave them nicknames based partly on their physical appearances and partly on the roles they played that evening. White Rabbit. Brother Thomas for the Negro. Morgana for the bewitchingly sexy girl dressed all in black,

black sweater, black pants, black boots. Two names for the youth in the pink mountebank's trousers: Rose Ass and Long Dong, according, as you will see after a little, to the situation. For the yellow-haired bearded young man who drove their car, an old Lincoln convertible, a good stout Mexican nickname, El Güero, which means, for those of you who don't know us as well as we know you, something between Fair-Haired Childe Christ and Blond Bastard. And finally, Werner, Jakob Werner, the one who wore the tweed jacket and flannels and carried a briefcase: Jakob I gave no nickname because he gave me his own name, even offered me a card. Brother Thomas opened the window presently and tossed out the roach of the joint he had been stinking up my house with, a little crime I had already forgiven, for as you know I am pushing forty and look upon youth with a genial toleration, and besides I enjoy marijuana myself, and he said worriedly: "The trouble is that we don't know how to answer questions. What we do is ask questions. And these people we have to talk about now belong to the Stone Age. They play with pretty words. They spout speeches. I don't think it's going to be easy."

I rested my head back against the copy of *Hopscotch* I was using as a pillow and told them that in that case maybe we better switch roles. I, like every Latin American intellectual who is worth his salt and his sinecure, knew nothing at all except how to wax grandiloquent. To rock with rhetoric, as it were. So . . . But White Rabbit, waving her bottle around like a club (and she didn't have to do that; when she shook it, it looked like a miserable lemon pop. Ah, appearances and reality) and taking an enormous slug of it that made her tremble, said, "Children, let's stop wasting time. I have a very simple idea." She waved the bottle again. "Our Vergilian friend has told us about Javier and Elizabeth or Bette or Ligeia or whatever she calls herself." I closed my eyes and touched the tip of my tongue to my teeth. "Now, let's get moving. Let's come to some conclusions. Let's go ahead and hold the trial."

The little pear inside White Rabbit's bottle bobbed around like a bewhiskered, wrinkled fetus. As if it were trying with its reborn

roots to grip the glass, to change the glass and the alcohol back into earth and benevolent rain. Morgana put on a Beatles record and suddenly they were all dancing and the light was fading and I understood nothing, nothing at all, but decided to ride with them very patiently. The electricity had been disconnected because for four or five months I hadn't paid, and I had made a pleasant virtue of dark necessity: I lived, I told them, by pale candlelight alone, like a demented monk. And the record player, then? Why, batteries, obviously. Anyhow, the record player wasn't going around. Only I was going around, for I had asked White Rabbit (and I was beginning to like that little gringa) to teach me how to frug and all of them were laughing at me and for a moment I really thought that they had put on a record but actually it was Rose Ass-Long Dong and his guitar playing "Yesterdays," a song I was sure the Monks had known long before the music was published or the Beatles recorded it. Hey, brethren. So back we go to the jungle of beginnings and I twist my sluggish behind without moving my feet, trying as hard as I can to imitate White Rabbit, but try as I may, I can't keep up with the movement, at once elegant and savage, of her beautiful young arms. "Good," says Brother Thomas. "We'll hold the trial and I will be the attorney for the defense." He jerks his head like a wound-up toy turtle, keeping his hands fast in the pockets of his charro pants. "And I'll take on Franz," mumbles El Güero, whose face has disappeared behind a waterfall of long yellow hair as he shakes, clicking his heels, to the almost visible rhythm. It is White Rabbit's turn. Dramatically, now motionless, fixed in an arch pose of heavy espionage, the collar of her trench coat up, the brim of her floppy Garbo hat drooping around her ears, she announces, "I'll be Elizabeth, Ligeia, Lisbeth, whatever her name is."

I observe that they are all observing me and laughing at me for the clumsy absurdity I am making of a dance that is entirely improvisation, yet at the same time, and this is the rub, completely a rite. The need to display a bit of rhetoric comes over me and I begin to point out to them that one by one, nation by nation,

people by people, we are all of us returning to our original prototypes. The Yankees are becoming an army of Edgar Allan Poseurs complete with the Gothic castles and the dripping dungeons that Pollyanna and Horatio Alger preferred to conceal beneath marmalade and Wall Streets paved with silver dollars; the English are going back as fast as they can to Tommy Jones and Mollucky Flanders and all the belching and bawding that Victoria and Gladstone wanted to screen away behind cricket and croquet. And as for the doughty Germans, they have been and will always be . . .

"I'll take the bench and be judge," Morgana interrupts. She is sliding gracefully through a series of steps that beyond doubt began as part of some puberty ritual. "I am Javier!" cries Rose Ass (not at this moment Long Dong. His guitar is weary and sad. Jakob clasps him by the shoulder and forces him, Javier be nimble, Javier be quick, Javier hop over your stick, to jump over his guitar). "And I," says Jakob, "the prosecuting attorney."

The guitar is silent. With one movement they all fall to their knees in a circle, holding hands.

They begin to howl like coyotes, at first softly, then louder.

I stand alone, stopped in an awkward movement of my hips. There is no light now and outside the mongrel dogs of the neighborhood are replying to the howling of my six young guests. At the same time you can hear the termites gnawing the beams beneath the old floor, sifting their eternal dust, and the scampering through the walls of rats who are as terrified by silence as by racket.

"What is the plea?" Jakob asks sharply. "Guilty or not guilty?"

I have my matches in my hand and am looking for a candle.

"Guilty, but with extenuating circumstances, I suppose," speaks Brother Thomas in the darkness. "Good God, wasn't his soul his own to do with as he damn well pleased?" Brother T.'s voice mocks itself. It is deep as Paul Robeson singing "Ol' Man River," yet as shrill as Butterfly McQueen begging Scarlett O'Hara to forgive her. The voice of a slave and rebel crawling up from the slime. Of a bird just loosed and still bewildered. Of sweaty torches winking through a night of fog. "He had a dream, man. He wanted to make it come true. The same as all of us. Just the same."

"Will the attorney for the defense specify precisely what dream?" Judge Morgana asks.

And now we are leaving. In the darkness the flies that during daylight hang like clouds in my garden of refuse have departed. The smell is sweet, rotten, sticky. Broken glass, rags, vomit, excrement. And here and there something that might be used again, for even the poor have their moments of luxurious denial: that bicycle wheel, for example. Brother Thomas, picking his way through with enormous grace, is still speaking, and I can't tell from his accent whether he comes from a ghetto in the North or a sharecropper's cabin in the South. "The dream precisely? Precisely the dream of long-frustrated desire finally confessed and fulfilled. Of lost unity in life recovered again. Of complete power put to the final proof, to the test, man, make or break. He had one chance. His only chance. He had to take it and do with it what he could." The stench of the rottenness around us is a little dizzying, a little like sweet wine. "But no one understood. Really, you know, quite a great dream. Merely a hopeless one. For he dared to believe that a life of heroism was still possible." None of us pays Brother Thomas the least attention. We let him rattle on and don't listen, for the attorney for the defense is expected to lie, that's his function and duty. Or isn't it?

I lead them through the narrow way out and now we are in the alley in front of the tiny neighborhood store. For twelve years the storekeeper has known that I was squatting here but he has never squealed on me. A scholar and a gentleman. "The accused," Brother Thomas is going on, "because he lived that dream, could comprehend its poetic and mystic greatness." Brother T. is the Invisible Man. He is Uncle Thomas now, not Brother Thomas. I greet the storekeeper with a nod and we all crowd in to buy cigarettes and Pepsis. The storekeeper's daughter, a girl of thirteen, straight-haired and pallidly green, like a willow, puts our purchases on the glass-top counter and holds out her open hand for us to pay and Brother Thomas is saying in his tenor-basso voice, "You may ask, what did the accused abandon for the sake of his dream? Music and architecture? Yes, but remember, music and architec-

ture without the possibility of greatness." We tilt our Pepsis back and White Rabbit steps in front of a votive candle that casts flickering light on a print of a Black Virgin who weeps wax tears and wears tinsel and satin clothing. White Rabbit crosses herself. "A world in which he could not be a musician or an architect without accepting beforehand that society would not honor his occupation but would regard it as something at most to be tolerated, basically useless, such a world," Brother Thomas is saying, "seemed to the accused to be a world that ought to be destroyed. Music. Architecture. Mere pastimes not related to the basic business of living, the getting . . ." The green-skinned daughter of the storekeeper listens and laughs and covers her mouth with her hands, their fingers rose-nailed, dark hands adorned with sick but happy roses. She cannot understand Thomas, for he is speaking English, his voice booming low, squealing high. But she laughs. She senses that she is watching a performance. Yes, it's a minstrel show and Brother Thomas is Al Jolson, saying, ". . . the getting together of money so that you could live high on the hog down in Alabammy." The storekeeper sits outside with his chair tilted against the wall. A small chair with a painted back, red and yellow flowers and blue one-eyed ducks, and he is very dark and very fat and breathes audibly, heavy as a burro, as an ocean. "To live high on the hog with a fat bank account and an easy conscience, using all the old familiar words to stay on top and to keep those not also on top jumping through the hoop just as always: be patient, brothers, be patient, your time will come. Oh, yes. Turn the other cheek. Be loving. Yes, oh yes, be charitable. The meek shall inherit the earth. By and by. By and by." Brother Thomas is on his way now. He is on his pony, jogging rhythmically, chanting while the others clap their hands to his beat and sing out the proper responses: amen, say it, brother, say it. In the alley a dog begins to whimper and the storekeeper kicks at it and suddenly a crowd of ragged children appear from nowhere, barefoot urchins in gray overalls who throw stones at piles of dust in the alley and then give their attention to chasing after the dog, which now is howling, running away while Brother Thomas in his

charro costume goes on with his star-touching, earth-rooted chant, cold, fleshless, yet as compelling as the beat of a tomtom:

"For all men are created equal . . ."

"Tell, us man, tell us."

"Oh, yes, equal. And ought to be free to vote now and then."

"Vote, brothers, vote."

"Amen! Forty acres of your own."

"Nobody else!"

"Forty acres and your soul. But be nice, baby, be nice."

It's a litany and neither the children in the alley nor the fat storekeeper can understand, but they feel the rhythm and they listen intently. They too clap their hands and out into the alley we march, like General Booth on his way to heaven, led by a black-faced captain of saints in the costume of a charro, surrounded now by the children. Behind us, smells of licorice and cinnamon and teaberry and Mimi suckers and chlorophyllic chewing gum. We are on our way too, now, to see where our legs will take us.

Brother Thomas ends his singsong abruptly and wipes his fingers on the loose-hanging tails of his charro shirt and with one hand on my shoulder for balance tugs at his fly to piss. "Hey, man, how do you want me to do it? A cowboy there, a charro here. That's the answer, eh?"

I offer him a pair of white gloves I have in my jacket pocket. The children level the barrels of their index fingers at Thomas and, pow-pow-pow, shoot him and then the rest of us. "Charros, charros, charros! Drop dead, you phonies! Give us a quinto, blackman! A quinto to buy a pop! Come on, don't be like that, give us a quinto!" Brother Thomas has his fly open and calmly pisses and resumes his defense-attorney speech: "The accused claimed the right to take what he had never possessed, neither strength nor wealth nor even life. He made his own right. The right to wipe away that old world and build a new one."

El Güero hangs his head and surprises us with his voice: faint, hopeless, the cultivated accent of a very proper Bostonian. "No, it wasn't like that. No. It was . . . destiny, I think. I was caught up in

my times. And . . . I was used to obeying, that was my habit, more than my habit, my duty. And I didn't want . . ."

The children turn and stare at him and nudge each other with their elbows. He shines a little in the darkness. His yellow hair lights up his face. He is almost iridescent. "A *güero*," the children are whispering. "A gringo *güero*."

"I didn't know what was really happening. I just went on doing, being what I had always done and been. Nothing changed for me. Nothing has ever changed. I'm still today just what I was then. I swear it . . . I thought I was doing the right thing. Others were fighting and dying for my sake. They were heroes in my name. Maybe I felt grateful to them for letting me go on being the same as always, for allowing me to feel heroic without having to be heroic. Maybe . . . maybe . . ."

The children grin at him and form a ring around him and begin to dance.

Mistress Morgana, our honorable judge, plants her black boots in the dust. She is just out of a comic strip, but she doesn't know it. "The accused will remain silent while the attorney for the defense tries to save his skin for him," she pronounces rather grimly.

The small brown arms of the children rise, jabbing, pointing. "El *Güero*! Father Jesus! Father Jesus!"

Brother Thomas tries to interrupt them: "Yes, he had to live inside a dream. A dream of a heroic people, Volk. With heroic leaders. For if he kept himself apart from it, he would never understand it, or, above all, understand the terror . . ."

"Father Jesus!" yell the children, and maybe they are mocking our Bostonian blond German and maybe they are not. They grab him and he stiffens to his full height, trying to escape their small brown hands. Brother Thomas goes on like an opera basso: ". . . the terror and the pain of knowing something that after all can never be understood."

"Come on, holy Jesus, touch us, let us touch you! Give us your hand! Bless us!" El *Güero*, ringed by the prancing, shouting children, has fallen behind us. "The accused wanted to be able to be-

lieve the last legend, to take part in the last battle of the legendary warriors, the struggle fast and last against modern mediocrity." Brother Thomas is shaking with laughter now. He is a plantation slave defending his master. And his master, shoved off balance by the clawing hands of the children, stumbles and falls into the briars of the thick hedge, while the window of one of the adobe huts that line the alley opens and a woman shouts, "What the hell are you kids up to out there? Leave those gringos alone!" Laughing, laughing, Brother Thomas continues, "He wanted to prove that the strength of the ancient heroes is still possible, that it can be the strength of feeble modern man if he will only give up his comfortable middle-class myths, his golden life in the miserable mean, his masks of decency and decorum."

The children have pounced on El Güero where he lies sprawled in the hedge. "Get away from me!" he yells at them. "Goddammit, don't touch me! Don't let them touch me! They want to hurt me!" He struggles free and stands with his face hidden behind his palms. Then his hands move away and show his eyes open very wide, his lips peeled back from his white teeth, his golden hair shining in the darkness. The children, silent, retreat one step, only to return again throwing a mocking chant into the night air like a mortal leap,

*Dingaling let's go to mass
And fuck Jesus up his ass*

and Brother Thomas must raise his voice: "Give up those absurdities and have faith once again in his hidden and secret powers that for centuries have been suppressed by the faithless faithful, the chicken-shit believers and the self-satisfied unbelievers and the well-educated burghers whose credo is the dollar now and after death, an even greener reward." El Güero, standing again, lifts his hands in a pious gesture and announces: "I forgive them. They know not what they are doing."

"For God's sake," Jakob mutters. "Playing Christ isn't in the script. Stick to your role."

"No," admits El Güero. "But I like it. I saw Buñuel's *Nazarín* a few days ago."

"For God's sake," Jakob repeats.

I notice that the kids are picking up stones and are going to throw them. I shout a warning and we are all running toward the wide avenue at the end of the alley, the swift Beltway, cold white lights of a hospital, a morgue, a mortuary. The kids race after us but stop at the end of the alley. It's their frontier, not one more step. Brown-skinned little sons and daughters of the great whore, swollen small bellies, worm-infested blood, infection in their guts, tetany in their skinny necks, shouting after us and shaking clenched fists that hold stones they do not throw.

"Well, you were enjoying yourself," White Rabbit is saying to El Güero. "Why didn't you go through with it to the end? We could have found you a cross somewhere."

"I didn't care for the set," he replies.

We are standing on the narrow traffic island in the middle of the Beltway. All of us in a line holding hands like shipwrecked sailors, one misstep and we will all fall, and now and then no cars pass but now and then again they go by like projectiles. White Rabbit is beside me. Her hand is in mine and I can smell her makeup, which has dried and stiffened and is ready to crack. I smell her like an ocean beach about to be murdered by dawn, small in the trench coat that is exactly like the ones Sam Spade and his sons Garfield-Bogart-Belmondo used to wear. "Your style will come in again," I am about to say to her. I let her hand go and hug myself with both arms and by breathing in her smells I secretly embrace her. "Long hair will go out, little gringa, dated, washed up, old hat." I say it silently and feel stronger. But White Rabbit is not reading my thoughts. She is murmuring to El Güero, "I suppose you wanted Cecil B. De Mille as your director." Her voice is amused and tender.

"Why not?" he replies in his damn Brahmin accent, the accent of a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (for which read Wasp), the accent of a Boston Boy, which is what I think I shall call him from

here on out. He has something hidden under his long corduroy frock coat. It's a cardboard box full of wriggling earthworms. Yes, that it is, that it is. And why the hell not? Can't a Boston Boy carry worms around?

"What are you hiding there?" White Rabbit asks. Her pink eyes are golden through her dark glasses. "And who made that coat for you?"

"Cut it out, you two," Jakob says harshly. "We're not here to discuss our personal problems. No one is interested now. Stick to your roles."

"But I *am* looking for a savior, a god, something," White Rabbit retorts. "In all seriousness."

Jakob calmly slaps her cheek.

"Shit, it is my role!" she says. "Do you think this is *me*?"

"Okay, okay, so excuse me, I'm sorry, I'm wrong," Jakob bobs his head up and down as if he were memorizing something. Brother Thomas, his voice deep in his chest, shouts, "An ultra-mundane glory! A loving forgiveness!" Now he is begging like the plasm of a ghost abruptly remembering what it is, who he must be, the attorney for the defense, Franz Boston Boy's alter ego. "Full pardon for the most extreme excesses, those of a life of conformity, for the pointless squandering of transient strength, oh Hero, oh Captain."

We stand there arm in arm and I feel the coldness of the night and don't want to run away from anything, from this drowned meeting with the whimpers and soft moans that come from beneath Boston Boy's long-skirted coat of the Romantics, tight around the chest, loose below. I read in *Harper's Bazaar* that Pierre Cardin has made that style coat the fashion again. Or, to drop a pleasant name, China Machado told me, and certainly she must know, for she is the most exciting woman in the world (except you, little Pussycat, of course). And none of us is exposed to anything. We risk nothing. No one is going to stop us and ask us what the hell we are doing here, why Brother Thomas is crooning to us a repetitive canticle of abstractions so dry and remote that they are

entirely senseless. "They marched forward to meet what man had lost. The tragic life. The life of the animal. The final dangerous and true limits of human action. The will to continue to the end, to the edge, to the precipice." Yes, the papier-mâché mountains of *Götterdämmerung*. The mighty Hausfrauen carrying lances and wearing gold breastplates and horned helmets. Sure, and Goebbels was Siegfried, I suppose. "Joyous acceptance of all the faces of man. That freedom." Sure, sure, Brother Thomas. Oh, bullshit. Stuff it, stuff it.

At this instant a car whirls by with mocking voices, laughter, jeers, waving fists, the horn honking *shave and a haircut, two bits*, the voices crying *go fuck your goddamn mothers* as a cellophane bag filled with urine flies out the window and hits good Brother Thomas squarely in the face. He is drenched and the rest of us are spattered. He ignores it. "That true freedom to accept all, not only what man is but what he may be. All the powers of Man, of Man, of Mangy, Maniac, Manacled Manequin Man." He wipes the piss off and gravely concludes: "All human being. The most secret and the most terrifying."

For a moment we stiffen our poses in a phony, absurd Laocoön group.

But the figures of our ensemble come apart and the only serpent is the embroidered silver snake that twists across the ass of Brother Thomas's charro trousers gobbling up a silver eagle.

Feeling a little melancholy, we cross the Beltway. Brother Thomas is speaking very softly, sadly. "Because you, all of you, have hidden, buried, killed your being. You have created a crooked, mutilated half-man, a man lacking myth." Oh-ho. Master Swift, who despises the Animal, Man, yet so loves Tom, Dick, and Harry, I remember you, and so does Brother T.

We approach the old Lincoln convertible. "But not the Accused and his comrades. They dug up again the buried pieces of man, pulled aside the veil to show him entire and whole again." Boston Boy raises the lid of the trunk. It is filled with a tangle of clothing. Their disguises, I guess. None of them suspects my surprise, nor do

I suspect theirs, when Boston Boy gravely removes the living, moving, moaning, threatening little bundle he has been carrying buttoned inside his frock coat and tenderly deposits it in the car trunk. No, not worms after all. Two tiny animals. Each wrapped around the other and each quietly, patiently eating the other alive. Yes, that's clear enough. The lid slams down. We can still hear the whimpering, the tiny moans, the choking sounds. All of us stare at Boston Boy but he is completely self-possessed and unconcerned and none of us says a word, and who knows what will be the end of this journey that will end when night does.

The Monks stand there and I turn my back on them and get in the car. Brother Thomas follows, muttering: "For man is Satan's son too, Old Harry's heir, born on St. Bartholomew's Day." The springs of the seat creak beneath us. I move my feet around among cans of motor oil, looking for room. "And he, man of evil as well as man of good, is complete only when he accepts, parades, makes use of his nocturnal face." Rose Ass and White Rabbit squeeze in as best they can on my left, their weight pushing the cushion down as the springs creak again. Jakob and Judge Morgana sit in front on the right and Boston Boy is behind the wheel. "Where to?" asks Jakob. I tell him, Calzada del Niño Perdido. "That hidden face of darkness that for centuries was concealed by the Judaic-Christian barbarism that maimed and mutilated him. Thomas. Peter. John." Yes, Niño Perdido, and we can stay on the Beltway as far as the Barranca del Muerto. "Let Gimp Man render unto Goof God what is of God, and unto Purty Gerty what is hers. Amen." No one echoes this time. Brother T.'s chorus, like myself, has had enough. "The accused had to say everything that had gone unspoken. He had to find the fury and strength to go back to frightened God and face him once and for all, confront him with human unity, oneness, integrality, the unity the holy circumcised and the faint-hearted faithful had forbidden, the weapon man had always possessed, but had forgotten how to use." I say softly, Sure: and every year too many children are born in Mexico and Haiti and India and maybe in hell too, and must starve sucking withered breasts,

while in the less fecund States, in half a decade seventy-five percent of the two hundred million or so good citizens will be under twenty-five, by which statistic my graying Yankee contemporaries can understand that their revolution is already upon them and comes not only with demonstrations and marches, long hair and miniskirts, but also like an avalanche, is no more to be resisted than an avalanche. "What," Brother Thomas is saying, "what does the evil in us prove? Simply that evil is as human as every other attribute of man." "Cut out," says White Rabbit. "Can it, for Christ's sake. You're crazy. You're out of it." "Yes, and in a world that believes itself to be so impeccably in it, rich with Rationality and strong with Sanity, someone *has* to be out of it, to be openly and proudly sick and lunatic." I hunch forward and look at the heap of magazines and newspapers and posters that these Monks carry with them on their pilgrimages or perhaps pick up along the way. *Eros*. *The Evergreen Review*. *The Adventures of Barbarella*. Circus posters with their sadism. Shirley Temple and Boris Karloff movie stills. *The Wall Street Journal*. *Der Spiegel*. Charlie Brown staring at Snoopy. Brother Thomas is beginning to give me a royal pain in the ass. If he is a defense attorney, I am the Secretary of State. Every word he speaks seems planned to harm our blond accused, not help him. Why for God's sake is he standing up now, braced against the folded back top of the convertible, and laughing, laughing, laughing and shouting as we whirl through the underpasses of the Beltway, "The accused was Sick, Sick, Sick and Crazy . . . but in the name and for the sake of all mankind, that all might be healthy! And that is what you will never understand . . . Nev-eeeeer!" laughing again as we bank around a curve, "and not even failure teaches you!" I wait for him to be silent. Then I observe, shouting to be heard over the rush of wind, "Master Swift offered the only way out, you know. To fatten the offspring of the poor and when the babies are one year old and, as Swift puts it, at their most succulent, to market them as gastronomic delicacies. A black market, I suppose . . ."

The city slides past us in glimpses and fragments. Brother Thomas takes off his Mexican sombrero with its decorations of

dark silver roses and waves it over his head, greeting the World, the Universe: "You will never understand because today you feel that you have proven yourselves right and anointed in contrast to the demonstrated insanity of the accused. Yet nevertheless he is your savior. His rich insanity remembered what all of you had forgotten, that every goddamn one of us is capable of cruelty as far as cruelty can go, of total pride, even of a little suffering." The Monks have begun to sing, quietly, *Pretty Woman, Holy Mamma, have mercy on me*. A traffic cop blasts his whistle at us. And my city, I tell them, though they don't hear me, is falling apart into islands between which we make our lonely voyages, we see no one standing on his own feet, we see nothing, the rich live hidden in their phony reproductions of colonial-period palaces behind high walls topped with pieces of broken glass, as if with barbed wire, while the poor live hidden in the ruins that are left of the authentic colonial palaces on the impenetrable other side of deserts of pavement where living men are never seen: we see only speeding cars and overloaded speeding buses and trams, everyone is locked up in a steel capsule that orbits on rubber wheels, and the schedules of these transitory planets are so arranged that their trajectories never cross, no one ever meets his brother, no face ever gazes upon a comrade face, we forget in our alienation that others exist too, and indeed we fear to encounter another existence because that might lead to an understanding of the value of our own and end in mutual murder: oh, my Mexico City, impoverished metropolis with feet of clay, poor village greasy as *tuna* candy cakes, village that stretches, like an oil slick, the length and breadth of the wasteland valley, poor salt castle awaiting the oncoming tide of sulfur: and I see Jakob looking at me in the rearview mirror, it seems with an expression of understanding and compassion, while Brother Thomas drones his empty monody of hollow words and windy ideas, and it seems to me that the rest of the Monks have gone to sleep like tired children, or perhaps died like old hatreds, none of them hears me and it wouldn't matter if any did, for this is my city, not theirs. And from the trunk comes an infant-like moaning that the roar of the open muffler suffocates. No, the Monks are not sleeping or dead.

They are awake, whispering with each other, preparing the scene that will follow this Judgment Scene for which Jakob, good German, is responsible, a farce trial full of legalisms and empty of blood. It's true that Brother Thomas has spoken as fervently as an itinerant tent-preacher with one eye on the Holy Spirit and the other on the redhead in the third row. But he has convinced no one. Brother Thomas in his role of defense attorney is a shyster and a fraud. He's a switch knife with a blade of soft rubber. A hammer with a cork head. The tiny pellet of a boy's BB rifle. Yet he goes on: "Try to understand, try to see it. We were liberators, not oppressors. We were the only mortals in ten thousand centuries who had dared to feel and acknowledge the evil within us, who had the courage to act out that evil instead of crippling and smothering its power." He throws his sombrero high in the air and it floats down and is leaped upon by dogs barking from the sidewalk. Long-snouted dogs with slobbering mouths and eyes of feverish razor blades. "We could love as you could not, for as you could not, we could also hate." He collapses on the seat beside me. "We demanded to be hated bitterly, because we knew that only if we were hated could we be loved with equal intenseness." He coughs.

All of us are silent and now we're there. "To the left," I say. "Park at the filling station. They know me there."

"No, no one understood," Boston Boy Franz murmurs as he swings the convertible into the station. "Why couldn't anyone understand?"

White Rabbit Elizabeth stares at him with disgust. "Oh, I understand. You wanted me only because . . ."

"Yes! Believe it, Bette. Don't fool yourself." He takes her hand and twists it.

"Let me go, damn you! You wanted me only to make your peace with yourself. You had to have a woman like me, any woman, didn't matter who . . ."

He turns her and pins her arms to her buttocks. "No, you're wrong. Not even that."

I sigh and want to get out of the car. I don't want to understand too much now. If everything becomes too clear, I'll lose interest. I

have come this far because I wanted mystery, an approach to the mystery that is left, genuine and baffling, once the pseudo-mysteries of similarities and contrasts dissolve. I wave a hand to the man coming out of the filling station toward us, but he doesn't recognize me. I vault out of the car. "Hey, José! We're going to leave our wheels here. Okay?" Nothing can be heard from the trunk of the car now. José suddenly smiles. "Yes, sir! For a minute I didn't know you."

"No, not even that," Boston Boy insists. White Rabbit has taken off her glasses and without them her eyes are small and a little crossed. "You didn't understand," goes on Boston Boy, who has jumped out after me. White Rabbit stands there, slow to react. We move toward the street. Suddenly she is shouting.

"You've got to tell me! You've treated me just like Javier!" She runs to one of the gasoline pumps. "And at least he never tried to deceive me!" She grabs the hose by the nozzle and drags it toward us. "I always knew what he wanted, that I had to pretend to be another woman." She squeezes the trigger and gasoline showers upon us. "No, he never tried to deceive me!" We run to the sidewalk, away from her, and she lifts the nozzle so that the stream of gasoline arches after us. "He made me play games." José grabs her from behind, around the waist. "I had to go late to a party so that he could come even later and find me there and pretend I was a new love." She tries to bite José's hand. "A love he had never known before." Both White Rabbit and José are drenched with gasoline now. "He would arouse me, then deny me satisfaction." José hoists her high, kicking, wriggling, and she lets the hose go. "He offered me one humiliation after another." Her skirt is up and I can see her lovely thighs and a glimpse for a second of her crotch glistening copper under the cold glare of the filling station's powerful mercury lights, and my breathing has quickened. "He made me share his own humiliation, his failure, but at least . . ." She falls to her knees, soaked with gasoline. "At least he was willing to gamble that I could take it and survive it." She has a box of matches in her hand. "No, he never deceived me." Good God, I am thinking. And this is how you ought to be, little White Rabbit, nameless White

Rabbit, the way I and any man must want you. My prick is stiff and I think to myself, I have what you're asking for, White Rabbit, and I want to give it to you. José, red with fury, is putting the nozzle of the hose back in its hanger. "I always knew his game, always."

She gets to her feet and crosses after us. She comes toward us holding the box of matches extended. We all stink of gasoline. None of us dares move. I think: you don't have to put a match to me, little gringa nun. I'm hot enough already. She lights a match and stares first at the flame and then at blond Boston Boy Franz: she doesn't even glance at the hard bulge behind my fly. She says to him, after waiting several long seconds, "And you . . ."

"Here, wait a minute," Boston Boy grins. He opens his frock coat and from the inside pocket takes out a creased envelope, from the envelope a letter. Jonathan Nathan Richardson. Greetings. Having passed all tests. Will present yourself for induction. Proceed then directly to Basic Training Camp X, South Carolina. And so off friend Boston Boy will go, Uncle Ho, to call upon you with gifts of napalm and lazy dogs.

White Rabbit laughs and touches her match to the letter. It burns like a bamboo Buddhist Monk.

They chuckle and begin to sing the Marines' Hymn, everyone except White Rabbit, Jakob, and myself, who have something of a sense of propriety.

"Look, we better go inside quick," I say to them. "The cops keep an eye on this place."

No one moves. They are holding themselves stiff, at attention. *From the halls of Montezuma . . .* Sure, the goddamn bastards began their legend right here in Mexico.

Boston Boy moves closer to her. I would like to hold a match to him, his yellow beard and hair. He takes her arm. "No, Lisbeth. I didn't want you for that. I swear it. Not to wipe away a guilt I never felt for a moment." White Rabbit lifts her face, washed of its makeup by the gasoline, a face without eyebrows, without lips, without shadows, a face with slightly crossed eyes.

"Then why?"

"You'll die if I don't explain everything, won't you?" He speaks with his voice softer and softer. "To possess again a girl I had lost years ago." His voice drops to a whisper in her wet hair.

"Come on, come on, we have to get inside."

"What? Hanna? Who is Hanna?" Not a muscle of her face moves. Face of the sea, of the green wet earth, of dry flame. Everyone stares with phony seriousness at Jakob while Boston Boy raps his knuckles on the brass door and the eyes of Gladiolo appear in the peep window. "I don't know who Hanna is," says Boston Boy. "I never knew her well." Gladiolo stares at us, sniffs, sees and recognizes me. "Order, order," snaps our judge. "The witnesses will testify in turn." "Did you fall into an oil well or something?" asks Gladiolo, sniffing. His face is rouged and powdered, his eyes are made up.

The Capitana, the madam of the house, greets us and leads us through crowded drawing rooms. It's an old building, from the end of the last century. The stink of our gasoline-drenched clothes overpowers smells of powder and perfume and ripe fish. The whores are in a group at the foot of the wide stairs quietly jabbering with each other while their customers, tight pants and narrow lapels, drink at the bar and the girls' pimps circulate with drinks on embossed metal trays. The Capitana, shaking her head and fanning her fingers delicately back and forth in front of her nostrils, guides us to the stairs. "The girls with you probably want to be alone, I suppose, very secluded, eh? We have some fine shows later in the evening. The drinks will come up in just a minute. Cigarettes, whatever you care for. How many girls do you want? I have to admit," shaking her head and chuckling a little, "that I don't know which of you want girls and which want men. You there in the red pants, how about it, pussy or prick? Unbutton, *joven*, and let an old woman have a peek at you." Rose Ass-Long Dong unbuckles his belt and drops his pants and the Capitana stares. "God save us! Girls, take a look at the way this man is hung!"

Long Dong-Rose Ass is pale, his hair is like straw, his nose a little like Pinocchio's. He speaks, softly, "It's that I wanted . . . to be a witness of something . . ."

"Witness?" cries the madam. "With that hose between your legs, you only want to watch? Ah, come off it, don't be selfish. Ay, *papacito*."

Long Dong sits bare-assed on the edge of the bed. The room is very large and has no windows. The windows have been bricked up, plastered over. Once, perhaps, there was a balcony to the right. "And maybe," Long Dong goes on, "that's all I have been. I've remained merely a witness. Only a looker-on. But I swear I didn't know it." Judge Morgana has jerked off her boots and she falls on top of Long Dong. "The witness will be coherent or shut his mouth." She shuts his mouth for him, with kisses. Long Dong quickly undresses her. "Capitana," I say, "dry our clothes for us, won't you? This night will be longer than a forest road, deeper than the mountains of the sea. And none of us is Sanforized. Tell the girls to be a little less impatient. To step back and stop biting their fingernails. Better: make them look the other way." "Let's get the hell out of here," a whore mutters. "They don't want *us*." "No, they're not serious clients. They've just come for the kicks." "But my God, look at that man's prick! He's hung like a Piedras Negras bull. Like a Zacatlan burro." "Ay, what a shaft, what a baseball bat!" "Girls, listen!" cries the Capitana. "We'll hold a raffle for him!" She stands like an oak. An old oak with hanging moss, her double chins. "We'll raffle him off. Get them undressed." They crowd around us, laughing, murmuring, on their knees with their heads bowed, trembling with excitement and with satisfaction in the servility of their roles. Professionals, their hands expert. They are ancient slave girls. They are cinnamon-skinned geishas, pock-marked, overperfumed, undressing their lords and ladies, ourselves, who stand like statues. Long Dong and Judge Morgana are alone in the bed. An enormous bed such as you don't see any more. Four posts carved with vines and topped with urns. A high headboard. A red silk coverlet. Long Dong the muddled witness but the experienced lover; Morgana the passive judge naked except for the black garter belt that hangs upon the bones of her hips like a cowboy's cartridge belt without cartridges. Long Dong is saying: "If I could

only get my thoughts straight. But it seems that everything happened so long ago. We all had that dream. Didn't you have it?" "Who wants to buy her chance in the raffle? The chance of a lifetime, girls. You'll never see another to equal it." While the trial continues:

"What dream? Please relate it. Dates and facts."

"The dream with which I left Mexico and my mother?"

"Continue. In detail. Don't summarize."

"The dream that took us to Greece?"

"Remember carefully. Precisely."

"The dream of the thirties. Of my early reading, of the romantics . . ."

"The witness will please define what is a romantic."

"Someone who paws your dream."

"That is sufficient. Go on."

"Everything is impending. Everything is an aberration. Both the beautiful and the criminal."

"You need not follow chronological order. Let the first be last."

"I can say on oath that I have remembered Raúl and Ofelia only to try to know whether they lived for my sake. But I don't want to go on talking about them. If I can, I'll stop."

"The witness will endeavor to be born again."

And the girls wait, staring at Long Dong's blooded razor, his lecherous shadow, his Nestle tower, his golden banana, his octopus nerve, his black fish. "Who wants in the raffle?" "Here, Capitana, here's my ten pesos." "Here's mine." Stone ear of yellow-kerneled corn. Slim head of a slant-eyed fox. Fur of a puma. And the hump-backed older woman, squat Elenita, the towel girl, with her wrinkled elephant skin, tough hide that will never serve for a lady's gloves. "Pay up, girls, pay up." The Capitana's teeth grin like piano keys. "What's he saying to her there?" "Christ knows. They're speaking Chinese or something." ". . . And the point is, a few minutes ago the attorney for the defense spoke about rediscovering the unity we have lost. About desire fulfilled simply by being desired. And I realized . . ." "Yes, my love. Deeper. A little deeper." ". . . that

both the poets and the criminals . . ." "You, too, Elenita? You can't resist a horn like that either? Well, pay up, pay up. God will choose the winner." ". . . could be born of the same mother. Sade is named Auschwitz. Lautréamont is Treblinka. Nietzsche is Terezin . . ." "No more now. The cards go into the chamber pot and each of you will draw one. The girl who draws the rooster wins the cock." ". . . And our dream, the dream I could never write, was born of the spirit of those times . . ." Into the white chamber pot drop the cards one by one: the Soldier, the Serpent, the small Negro, the Watermelon, the Rooster . . . ". . . and was part of those times and had to die with those times . . ." "Quick, my love! Now, quick! Don't worry about who's next. Come for me now, I'm first." She has her legs locked around his waist. ". . . to end with the end of that world which had crippled all of us . . ." The Charro. The Skeleton, with its tapers. The Hunchback. One card for each whore. ". . . and the only way to destroy that world was to do just what the attorney for the defense said. Put everything to the test. Compel reality to submit itself to will and our purpose. Our desire that no man had dared to feel before . . ." The Capitana hoists the chamber pot and shakes it well, rotates it, mixes the cards. "Wait your turns. No cheating. Everything square and aboveboard. We're whores all right, but we're honest whores." "More, my lover! More, more!" ". . . So there had to be two revolutions instead of one. One in the world. One within ourselves." "Oh, my love, my love, my love!" "Victory for will and desire at last. At last an end to the terrible oppositions that for centuries had isolated us from each other. Yours and mine. Word and action. Dream and waking. Body and soul. Homeland, flag, family, property . . ." He stops. If he were to go on, his words would be drowned, he would have to squirt them out as foam.

"And was that your dream too, Elizabeth?" asks Brother Thomas.

The whores draw their cards one by one and hold them face side down. At a signal from the Capitana, they all turn the cards over. "Ooooooh, nooooo! Look who has the rooster!" "God, what luck!" "What saint did you pray to, Elenita?" "But she doesn't know her

cunt from a hole in the ground. She's no more a whore than I am a copper." "If that black-haired bitch who came with them hasn't tired him out, you'll be flying high in a minute or two, Elenita." "A pearl before a sow . . . shit, shit!" And the Capitana, the only gentle voice: "Put down your towels, Elenita. Your chance has come." "Better have an alcohol rub first. You'll need all the pep you can find." "We were cheated. Capitana, you did that on purpose!" "I? I didn't do anything. Didn't you see her draw it herself?" So Elena the towel girl wins the raffle. Short stooped figure wearing black cotton stockings, a checked gingham dress, a tattered white sweater. The towel girl. Flabby breasts. Wrinkled face. Sinewy arms. Brown hands accustomed to wiping away blood and semen, to cleaning the cunts of whores and the pricks of apes like King Kong, monarch of the jungle. Elena of the warm washcloths, the soft white towels, always ready, quick, Long Dong is yours, you can forget your towels for a while.

In the hot season, snakes leave their dens. Their old skin is no longer good enough, and abandoning their solitude they go out into the sun to join their brothers in a tangled mass and wriggle over the trampled fields of Eden, scraping across the bristled earth until their skin is pulled away in strips and they become naked skeletons with egglike eyes. And I don't know who touches whom when Rose Ass-Long Dong-Javier rises from the bed and we all pile in. I don't know what he says to Elenita, the runt, twisted, ugly towel girl who has seated herself on a stool beside him, still holding her stack of towels, while the Capitana amuses me with the black kiss and a pair of socks that I think belong to Jakob fly past my nose.

"I wrote a short book. I left my mother. I met a woman and we went to Greece. That much I know is true. At least I believe it is true. But the world didn't change. It denied me and refused to notice me."

"Look, young señor, the rooster!"

"I wanted to be one with the world, with my dream, with art, action . . ."

"Look, señor, just look."

"Did I lose confidence in the strength of my desire?"

"See, señor, I have the rooster."

"Now let me try to stand beside Franz. Accuse me too . . ."

"I won, señor! I won!"

"We are just alike. Except that what was action in him in me was only possibility, latency. In me it lacked all greatness, all courage. I have been a kind of larva Franz."

"I won the raffle, señor."

"Try to see it, Elenita. We were told that the world could be made over only when we all acted together, as one. A single man, alone, could do . . ."

"The raffle, I won the raffle!"

"But history never thinks. History acts."

"And my prize, señor? What about my prize?"

"My isolated desire could do nothing. Nor could love, the proclamation of the desire we all have."

"Aren't you going to be nice to me, señor?"

"Can love be a summary of everything the world is? Can we be one with the world by making ourselves one with a woman?"

"That's in God's hands, señor. Are you going to force me to be satisfied just watching?"

"And isn't love really a struggle, a resistance, a desire: like the world, something we must conquer or let conquer us? Doesn't one lover always impose his being upon the other, prevent the other from becoming what he might? And . . . what? What the hell comes next? Damn my memory, I've . . ."

"Elena! Elenita! A towel to Number 6! Damn it, where has she taken off to now? Elena! Why in God's name do we pay her? All she does is sit and listen to the drunks make their confessions. Elena! I'm dripping like a sponge, damn it, hurry up!"

"Touch it if you want to, Elenita."

"Oh, I want to, señor."

"You have very pretty hands."

"I have to have something pretty. The rest of me . . ."

"I like your hands. They're heavy as two wet stones. They're heavy as a bag full of silver."

"That's from carrying the towels all the time. Sometimes my arms are so numb I can't feel them."

"Is it enough for you just to watch?"

"But I ought not to have entered the raffle. Meddling in something that isn't my business. They're going to be mad at me. They'll holler and yell at me. Better put the little rooster back and let someone else . . . Thank you, young señor. You've been kind."

"They're yelling for you already. Is it true that you listen to men's confessions, Elenita?"

"Yes, when they're drunk they like to talk and they know I never tell. But I have to go. They'll fire me if I don't hurry."

"Sit still. I'll pay them for the time you stay with me. What do you earn?"

"Just my tips, my meal. Now and then a drink."

"Come here, Elenita."

"No, señor. Not to the bed. They'll get mad."

"Come here, Elenita. Come and listen to my confession. Just listen, that's all. Can you understand me?"

"No, I never understand. That's why men talk to me. While they're waiting, before or after, they all talk to me, like cloudbursts they talk. And I forget everything, every word. I can't remember. They call me forgotten Elenita, the forgetter. Yes. That's me."

"Come here and forget some things that don't mean anything."

"No, señor. I'm not the one for you to do this with."

"Lie down."

Jey joneybonch. Loveydovey. Hazme un huequito, cherriblossom. Foqui-foqui . . .

"I'll put the light out now."

"Ay, señor, señor!"

"Good, Elenita? Deep enough?"

"Oh, my God. Everybody fuck everybody."

"Do you smell my Negro friend, Elena? Who ever made up that lie that Negroes smell different from the rest of us, worse? Touch the blond señor's whiskers. Rub the back of our girlfriend who has no eyebrows. Jakob, what the hell are you doing with your socks on

in bed? Listen, Elena, while I ask Jakob a few silly questions. Are you trying to shape up by making love, Jake? Don't you know that while we forget it the world goes its own way? Don't you see that in your battle, which is exactly like mine, my first dream, that dream of far away, of rebellion, you have been defeated too?"

And I am among, beneath, between the tangle of bodies, half suffocated. The absence of laughter frightens me. The cadaverous solemnity in which none of us touches any of the others, in which we are all kept secure by the mask of the language we are speaking, English, English too in the mouths of these dark Mexican whores with their *joneybonch* and *foqui-foqui*, and when Rose Ass puts out the light, every hand is withdrawn from the skin it was touching, darkness snatches our pleasure away from us, our hands flee to refuge against their own bodies, and the lingua franca of young, beardless Rose Ass forces isolation upon all of us who understand his Germanic English . . . "The destroyers of idols have now become the idolizers of idols . . ." and Rose Ass lies like a thin sardine on the edge of the silent, creaking bed, pressed against Elena the towel girl . . . ". . . Triumphant rebellion becomes the new institution, the law of the new oppression imposes respectability upon all until we must flee to imagine an untouchable madness, to feel the new sickness that has come to infect us . . ." and the foreign tongue immobilizes the whores, restrains their mockery, protects us from them, and in their own way they are part of our game too, listening without understanding as he says in English:

"What is left of our dream?"

and White Rabbit, sighing beside me, pushes away all the cold arms and replies:

"The tragedy of the little tragedies. Tragedy without a tragic mask. Loss of illusion. Understanding at last what is really possible and what is not."

"The testimony of the witness is accepted," whispers Judge Morgana. A pillow is over her face. I think to myself, Christ, what a bitch of a judge. She carries her ceremonial wig in her crotch, well soaked now. They stand her on her head in the courtroom of

Old Bailey and she pronounces sentence with a wriggle of her umbilicus and no one understands her. And there she is, when Rose Ass turns on the light again and everyone cries out and covers his mouth and the whores leap from the bed and crouch on the floor and seize handfuls of toilet paper and wipe between their legs, take alcohol and begin to rub each other's backs and thighs: the old show has ended now, this is the new show, and there is Morgana our judge with her legs high, propped against the mahogany head of the bed. Rose Ass says quietly: "I don't know. I still don't know."

White Rabbit is standing and Rose Ass reaches into the enormous pocket of her trench coat and takes out a lipstick. He begins to draw something on Morgana's belly.

"The witness is impertinent."

"No. 'Avez-vous déjà giflé un mort?' 'Avez-vous déjà tué un juif?'"

He draws on her belly the head of Cyclops Cyclon-B, the eyeball belly button of a clown with Tyrolean mustaches.

"That was what I wanted to say . . ."

The Capitana of the house, disappointed because for her nothing happened during the darkness, hands the attorney for the defense his charro pants and he puts them on, draws them up over his buttocks, stuffs in his balls, while he talks: "Love is good even when it's sad. We love most those who hurt us most, for we know at least we matter to them."

"Words, words, sophistry," Jakob growls. He pulls up his socks while White Rabbit moves among the whores, who are departing, who open the door, ask for towels, receive our clothing, now dry and ironed, and Elena is pushed out of the bed, for her the party is over and she must return to her duties, but White Rabbit closes the door, steps in front of her, takes her by the sloping shoulders and holds her, facing us, holding her by the hair, and says to her: "Why can't they accept it? Why must they live with ghosts?" She puts a finger under Elena's chin and lifts it. "Why don't they prefer a living woman, despite the responsibilities she imposes, to the

women of their imaginations?" Elena tries to smile. To close her eyes, to participate in this new show. "Is a flesh-and-body woman a chain around a man?" "A chain of flowers," smiles Elena. White Rabbit Ligeia goes on, "Why do they give their love to creatures that are as unreal as dreams, the harems of their masturbation, the seraglios of their eunuch impotency?" All of us look at Elenita, short, crooked, dark. Like a good fighting cock, she raises her arms high and closes her eyes and begins to strut before us. She tries to dance. "Why don't they prefer to love a woman, damn it, a woman who walks, sleeps, eats, pisses, menstruates?" But Elena's dancing is that of a wooden doll or puppet. One two three, onetwothree, two small steps forward, one back, an ancient Indian ritual dance of beginnings, of terror placated. She is embarrassed as she shuffles before us in her buttoned sweater and her cotton stockings.

White Rabbit has been holding Elena up. Now she gives her a push and the towel girl sprawls on the floor. "Goddamn it, won't anyone love *me*? Must I always be the repetition of some adolescent nightmare or the preview of some senile dream in order to have a man make love to me?" Elena lies on the floor softly squealing like a hurt small pig. The whores have gathered around their madam like chicks around the hen and the madam stares at White Rabbit first suspiciously and then with hatred while the whores cry, "Shut her up! Get her out! Call Gladiolo! They're all of them crazy! The police will come! She's gone out of her head! See what happens when you let women in!" White Rabbit speaks as if she doesn't hear them: "What have you given me? Where are my children?" And it is sure there will be an earthquake when there are so many omens and White Rabbit goes slowly to the great bed and we all watch her, our backs against the walls; sure it will rain in Sayula as she lies down and all of us see the bed become a stage: the four-poster throne-bed of this house of many beds, an ancient vast bed such as you never see these days, of heavy solid mahogany, its head high and varnished, and sure rain is falling in Yucatan as Rose Ass tries to leap into the bed after her and Brother Thomas and Jakob grab and hold him and he cries to her: "No, you promised!"

And now the Chontalpa is flooding and roses of the Virgin are growing in winter and White Rabbit is joined by Witch-Judge Morgana, who leans on one of the vine-twined corner posts and seems to be waiting. "Yes, I promised. Never to mention it." White Rabbit spreads her legs and Morgana throws aside the huge pillows and draws back the blankets and her hand, day's white spider, moves limping across the red sheet and the whores know that now the show has started, the real show, and Morgana understands how to build her suspense, like Peter Lorre, Dragoness, when he played the Hairless Mexican Porfirio Montezuma Count of Ombú, her hand is the day's spider and it moves slowly across the red silk searching, seeking, smelling out milk and stars while the Capitana and her whores avidly eat peanuts and crush the empty hulls and throw them to the floor where Elenita the towel girl still lies, the forgotten forgetful one. I want to ask the good Capitana how she came by that bed. But the Capitana is the Capitana and she is peeling grapes with an air mixed of sensuality and boredom while her eyes fasten on the white spider that walks upon Morgana's fingernails, drunk, alone, as if it carried with it lost but recoverable greatness, such greatness that no mere immediate and transitory pleasure is possible. So inch by inch the spider of the day advances toward the waiting, motionless, pink and silver fly of the day, an immobile fly fixed by the gold pins of a collector of insects between White Rabbit Ligeia's spread legs.

"Capitana, may I ask where . . ."

"Be quiet, *caifán*, be quiet. Would you like a grape?"

The slow sobbing of the forgotten towel girl on the floor is the wind that spreads the sails of the criminal hand now leaping, turning, advancing, retreating across the red silk, scratching the air, rolling, mimicking, chatting, commanding, movement that has become as agile and clear as spoken words and just as loud; and Elena lies on the floor among wads of sperm-smeared toilet paper and puddles of alcohol and heaps of empty peanut shells and the pile of shoes, the laces of which are sleeping worms that Morgana's moving claw with only a tiny slip, an infinitesimal imprecision, can change into the guardian serpents of the pyramid.

"Tell me where you got that bed, Capitana, or I'll make them stop."

"Go ahead, *caifán*, make them stop. Who cares?"

Laces, worms, snakes. The fingers are suddenly still. They are near the prey but they do not tremble. It is within reach, but they don't seek to touch it. The crimson fingernails are the knives of a ritual slaughter, but they do not cut. The fly has been hypnotized. Or maybe it knows how to metamorphose itself, when the moment comes, into hollow air filled only with the trills of crickets, into a chameleon mist that will blow away, leaving only naked transparent emptiness between White Rabbit's open legs. The fly is not afraid. Its own love requires humiliation and it knows that all true violence is motionless, that all authentic chaos is a mirror held before order and clarity, that virtue is a summation of individual sins. White Rabbit lifts her open legs like a rabbit that moves one of its ears in order to hear better the step of the hunter and thereby reveals its hiding place. Her thighs tremble. The fly is prepared for the attack, for it knows that attack will finally bring peace, that it must inevitably become a victim, and it insists that its sacrifice be voluntary and free: they will devour me alive, but I shall have accepted death before they impose it. And so White Rabbit's vagina trembles, pulses while the whores chomp their peanuts and Elena sobs, and the spider fingers of Morgana enter and spread, rotate, vibrate, grind chocolate or coffee or meal or spume or oil or hops or sand or mud, mix the fruit of the ocean, slide in and out and from side to side and the whores moan and fall on their knees and with one hand over their mouths and the other in their crotches begin to masturbate beside the heap of shoes, beside forgotten forgetful sobbing Elena: flies swarm into the comb of rich honey, a coyote leaps upon the throat of a lamb, salamanders give birth to mandragons, and in the remote and secret lairs of the world women breed with wolves and men with hyenas that new races of creatures may be created which will never be known by the ants who live in the anthills of the cities: the whores cover their mouths and their cunts that the juices of their pleasure may not leak away, and

Brother Thomas, masturbating as fast as he can, shouts almost incoherently that the great labor of destruction requires all the strength and patience of life, and Rose Ass moans: "You promised, Ligeia, you promised! Did you want me to be no more than Raúl was? Dead one Sunday after having lived every Sunday buried in the pages of the newspaper, the gossip columns or the bullfight advertisements, or in the pages of his account books or his Missal? Did you want me to wear forever the shroud that I fled from, escaped from with you? Was that why we lived together?"

And luminous and patient, she who is mortally wounded, wounded by her own wounding, shows us the scar of her hurt, the tired, vitiated splendor of seasons long gone by, the damp, opaque heat of what Morgana's wet and glacially cold hand finds and draws forth from between White Rabbit's spread legs while the room becomes silent: a cross of wires and a blood-smeared little puppet, a tiny doll of thread and porcelain and hard crusts of bread with eyes of black fish eggs: she draws it forth and suspends it from one finger and moves it as we, her audience, stare, a little living pendulum the swinging of which makes our eyes roll, our shoulders tilt, the walls of the whorehouse room swing back and forth also. We stand with open mouths and narrowed lids, seeing, disbelieving, whores and Monks alike hypnotized by the tiny doll that has emerged from a phony labor in order to challenge and dismay our long-nailed hands, our anal copulation, our putrefying bodies swarmed over with clouds of black flies, our grotesquely smiling severed heads of bulls and wild boars, savage and stuporous, while the miniature figure of a man is carried high by the gigantic claw of an insane falcon and Morgana watches us and calmly makes the puppet sway back and forth, back and forth.

"Some show, eh?"

"Oy, Capitana, is this for real?"

"Oh, for God's sake, the bitch had it hidden somewhere."

"You're letting that gringa make a monkey of you. Of course it didn't happen."

The Capitana is the Capitana and merely peels and eats her

grapes. I, on the floor on my knees, listen to the whores' mockery: children of servitude, daughters of eternal serfdom, toilers and carriers, dwellers in the cabins of labor and the whorehouses of bitterness, how can you answer us except with venom, what weapon against us is left to you? How can you survive except by scurrility and vulgarity? How except with mocking obscenities can you hatchet the air and cut yourselves free from a world you detest and create a world you may be able to love? I hear them, their jokes, their curses, but I don't look at them. I stare at the rumpled bed with its carved posts and its huge pillows among which lies White Rabbit who says that she is Elizabeth who is known as Ligeia who is famed as Helen who is visited by men because she is known to be the prostitute of the temple who is adored as Holy Mary, Mother of our Savior. Morgana's hand is a white pigeon and you, White Rabbit Dragoness, are yourself alone and at your feet, which are our foreheads, lies the doll of wire and clay smeared with clots of blood and semen, and Brother Thomas is standing with an open mouth that for once has nothing to say, nothing to defend, while Jakob stares transfixed at the false fetus and Rose Ass who now is not Long Dong covers his eyes and turns away and only Boston Boy is unaffected, self-possessed, observing everything with the dispassionate calm of a touring Oriental potentate. Across the flat sky of the room the Capitana tosses the butt of her cigarette, the guiding star that will cross the courses of the planets swings into its trajectory and traces a curve to the chamber pot where the sun will consume the earth and the times of the sea will be put back.

Boston Boy seats himself on the floor next to the manikin. He throws several coppers down beside it. He sucks on his joint of marijuana and exhales a thick mouthful of smoke above the holy little infant. I stare at him with surprise. Son of a bitch, you can never be sure of anything with these Monks. Now he wraps the doll in toilet paper and hands it to Elena, who has been watching, waiting, crouching and hoping with an old desire that she has never forgotten. She accepts the small bundle. She holds it to her breasts and begins to croon to it. She looks at us with pride, with

hauteur. And you, Dragoness, standing now and feeling only curiosity, ask: "So you saved it, Elena?"

Elena the towel girl does not understand but smiles and goes on crooning.

"Protect it. Hide it. Don't let them chop off its head. Don't let them throw it out with the trash. Don't let them put it into their death ovens. Hold tight to your lost child."

"The statistics on those ovens are grossly exaggerated," says Boston Boy Franz.

"If there had been only one child alone, that would have been too many." Your voice is cold, Dragoness. You spread your arms.

Now both Judge Morgana and Elena the towel girl know what they must do. Elena covers the doll and holds it between her breasts as she hurries to fetch White Rabbit's clothing. Morgana goes to the trench coat and searches through its voluminous pockets for tubes and bottles of beauty creams and lotions. You stand rigid, White Rabbit Ligeia, like a statue, white-skinned Ligeia who, thanks to the debility of your will, still belongs neither to the angels nor to the damned; you wait, pale Mother Mary of the temple and the brothels, and allow Elena the forgotten forgetful one to put your stockings on you, to stroke her hands of burned stone the long smooth length of your legs.

"Don't let them force you into a taxi in the middle of the night, Elena. Don't let them take you to the factories where angels are made, don't let them abandon you in the black palace of Herod. Watch over what you yourself carry hidden. Watch over it, little Elena with your body of a grape, don't let them scratch it out of you, don't let them make it disappear, don't let them make it become invisible. Your child may be the last child ever to be born in all the world, Elena."

Morgana, fraud as a judge, as a maid not much better, with both hands dabs an astringent fluid pat pat pat on White Rabbit's face. Yes, you must use your beauty, enjoy and display it, my Pepsicoatl. And you, our patient looker-on, our observer who has followed us on our twisted journey through this long night and will, I trust,

continue with us until dawn breaks, you, my kind, my generous, my all-necessary reader, are you aware that the women of the great United States of America spend more each year on cosmetics than the entire national income of the Estados Unidos de . . . México? Elena snaps the yellow garters around your thighs, Dragoness White Rabbit, and Morgana anoints your slender neck with lotion. And your eyes are accusing, damning fingers as you look from Boston Boy to Rose Ass and say bitterly:

"Where are my children, damn you? And do you think that you've won now, simply because my children are dead? Do you think I'm all alone now, that my life ended with the lives of my babies? Shit! You're fools. You think it's so easy to destroy a woman's life. But the life of a woman doesn't let itself be destroyed except by the woman herself, and she must act from her marrow, her core. You outside her can't touch it. Haven't you seen them, imbeciles? Haven't you seen them this very night, selling pop in that little store, playing hopscotch in the dirt? Won't you see them again tomorrow, silent, half naked, rolling around in the dust beside the highways and the rice fields, on the land where battles are fought? They're the life of a woman, you idiots. Of all women."

Morgana's fingers work upon the blank white lime-washed skin and form a new face. Elena is fastening the garter belt with two copper hooks. Morgana offers lipsticks: flamenco pink, icy coral, skeletal smoke, lunatic livid. White Rabbit chooses a subdued red.

"You've been able to exhaust and destroy my sensations, to tire my touch, to offend my smell. But that was all. No more. Not my life. And today my senses hate and condemn you and my hatred is a long patient waiting that is far from its end. And just as long-lived as my hatred will be the love that sustains my hatred."

She caresses your cheeks, Dragoness. She prepares your lips. Elena offers you your panties with their copper-colored lace and you lift one leg and then the other, crying, "Becky, Becky, wait for me! I'm coming back now! I'll believe everything you taught me, even if it costs me the sanity it cost you. I'm coming back, Becky, Mamma. We'll settle our accounts with these damn men once and for all."

Morgana is finishing. The last touches: eyebrows, eyelids, the lips again. And now we know this woman who formerly was faceless. She raises her naked arms and fastens her hair at the back of her neck with a copper-rusted ribbon. Her naked arms, bronzed from the sun, then the tossing movement with both hands. That is how we always see her, her arms raised while she ties up her hair with a ribbon. Sometimes in profile, sometimes from behind, sometimes in front as if she were a turning statue with a wind-blown blue curtain for her grape-leaf garment. From in front, in profile, from behind, as Morgana slowly turns her, makes her drop her hands. We inspect Morgana's work. Kneeling, Elena looks on. "Yes, Becky," the woman with the new face says quietly, "the God of Israel exists and lives, though far from us. He is not merely one more fantasy created by these mock men who love women as if they were dreams and dreams as if they were women, who murder innocent children with abortions before birth and gas chambers after birth. No, Becky. God is real." She is a beautiful Jewess. A beautiful dark-skinned Jewess whose beaded sweat we can see on her temples, in her armpits, on her upper lip, at the division of her breasts. A dark-haired Jewess of black prolonged orgasms. The discovery of America. Land-ho. Bullshit. "I'll come home, Becky. I'll make one more voyage and come home." Elena covers her with the damp trench coat and her arms drop.

"Elenita," says the Capitana, "peel me a grape."

"When are you going to tell me the story of that monster of a bed, Capitana?"

"Get them out of here, *caifán*. With a little order and dignity, please. Who's paying, you? Gladiolo, make out his check and wait downstairs. When you go out, *caifán*, try not to attract the attention of every cop in the colonia. We have a little protection, but not very much. And God knows what would happen if anyone was to find out about this witches' Sabbath you and your . . . The dough, *caifán*, let's have the dough. That old bed? Bah, it came in handy, didn't it? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"But you've been here for years, Capitana. I know you know about it."

"Years, *caifán*, you said it. Long years and a few happy days."

"I believe you were here when the house first opened."

"Yeah. And I remember you, too. You were just a squirt kid who used to come in to have his horn sharpened every now and then. I remember, all right."

"Be careful with the step, Capitana."

"Always the gentleman, *caifán*. Thank you, I appreciate it. Look, please don't bring these werewolves of yours back again. It's indecent to have that many in one bed at the same time. The prestige of the house suffers."

"You heard the madam, werewolves. Move along. There's blood in the streets."

"I suppose you've forgotten how I was in the old days."

"Forget, Capitana? How could I? A sugar dumpling. A ripe mango. Just to look at you was enough to make a man . . ."

"Yeah, and today, a pot gut and double chins. But still lively, old man. And still smart."

"Tell me about that bed. I'm curious."

"Why not, if you want to know? I don't mind telling you. It's just that I hate to remember. I don't like to go back to anything. It hurts, you know. Not always. But often, too goddamn often. Well, the bed. When we moved in, the house was empty except for the patio, where there were canaries in cages, and for that big bedroom, where the bed was. We let the canaries die. Who cared about canaries? There wasn't another stick in the whole house. Oh, yes, the bead curtain that we still have between the bar and the living room. And a bottle of morphine tablets hidden away behind the bed. With a syringe and a needle or two. What do you think of that, eh? But I don't know. Maybe she was dying of cancer or something. The señora who owned the house, I mean. And yes, there was a painting, a portrait of that honest lady. The head of a woman, but her face was the face of a little girl. So, she had died and her son had sold the house and everything in it except the canaries in the cages and the big bed and the painting and the bead curtain, and you know who was the buyer and what business

began. They said that the son would be back to get the bed and the painting. He wanted them in memory of his mother. But he never showed. We didn't complain. Beds like that aren't made any more. It's given us damn good service. Hah, just imagine, that gentle girl-faced lady passed her entire life in that bed. Slept there, fucked there, gave birth there, dreamed there, finally died there, all alone at the last with her Sacred Heart of Jesus hanging on the wall and her memories watching her from the shadows. A decent, God-fearing, well-bred lady, as proper as white gloves. And now in less than half a lifetime, how many thousands of broads have spread their legs on that old bed. Shit, *caifán*, what can you be sure about in this mess we call life? That saintly lady has been rolling in her grave, I suppose, while we were rolling on her mattress. Thanks for coming tonight. It's good to see old friends sometimes. Come back again. It's your own home, you know, any time you want it. Open the door for him, Gladiolo. Those kids, though . . . keep them out in the pasture where they can kick up their heels as they please. In the barn . . ." The six Monks filed past her silently. She squeezed my arm and pulled my ear down to her lips. "Listen, *caifán*, come back all by yourself some evening. Don't forget your little mango. Shit, you can die crossing the goddamn street. Better to do it in bed, eh, fucking your fat old hot mama."

The door closes behind us and we are alone and exhausted. Once we are in the ancient Lincoln convertible, no one will speak. No one will know where we are going, why we are going there. I will know nothing except that I want to write what they have told me, that they have told me enough and more than enough, and to put it down on paper well, cleanly, truly, will be to face all the sand of an endless desert. I will betray them. I'll have to, for as my cousin Pepe Bianco shut up among his books in his place on Cerito in Buenos Aires puts it, every novel is a betrayal, an act of bad faith, an abuse of confidence. For at bottom we are most contented with what appears to be, with what goes on monotonously day after day and by its repetitiveness earns, and perhaps deserves, the name of reality. *I don't give a damn* in the drugstores on Broadway. *Fiche*

moi la paix in the cafés on the Boulevard St-Germain, *Andate a fare un culo* in the restaurants of Piazza Campitelli, *Me importa madre* in the supermarkets along Insurgentes, *Me importa un corno* in the movie houses of Lavallo, and who knows how the hell they say it but we can be sure that they say the same damn thing in the hotels of Mayakovsky Square, at the camp grounds of the Tatra, in the shops on Carnaby Street. So why do we wear ourselves to less than shadows writing books that say only that the reality that matters is a false one and that death awaits us unless we protect ourselves with lies, with appearances put on like wigs, with lunatic aspirations, the aspirant lunacy, to be precise, of a book. Truth bares its teeth at us from every side. Our lie isn't what threatens us. What threatens is truth, which waits as patient as a diamond and makes us drowsy and satisfied, conquers us with contentment so that it can overcome us as we were first overcome in the beginning of everything. If we were to let it, truth would annihilate us. For "truth" is the same as the beginning and the beginning was nothingness and nothingness is death and death is the enemy, so let us all lie together, or surely we shall all lie alone. Truth would like to offer us a vision of the beginning, of life before it learned to doubt, before it was contaminated by idea. And that vision is precisely the vision of the end: the other face of creation is apocalypse. And the "lies" we spinners of tales tell betray "the true" simply in order to hold away from us, from all of us, that day of judgment when the beginning and the end shall be one. Yet nevertheless literature pays its homage to original, mortal, entirely unacceptable might; we recognize it because we must if we are to control and limit it. Not to recognize it, not to limit it, is to open the door on the fanged wolf of assassinating purity. And if that happens, all of us end up very small brown turds, Daddy-oh and Big Mama, desiccated and scentless.

The Monks understand me. Sure, they understand. That's why bearded Boston Boy has his foot against the floorboard and we are whirling along Insurgentes like a projectile that knows it has a target. I would like to know what that target is, to learn if it is the one

I suspect. But we are all too tired. I look at their faces, carried beside and around my own in the illusory immobility of togetherness, and I see that I don't really know who they are or who they were a moment ago, much less who they may be an hour from now. April's night wind, Mexican wind of dust blown from the dry lake beds of the flat valley, twists and disfigures those young faces, and perhaps among them there is someone I have never known: may not this same wind, born of land that once was water, may it not whip the muffler worn by a German student who takes the 7:15 tram, toss the hair of a pair of young lovers on a Greek island of goats and pebbles, drift golden fog around the heads of the baroque statues of a Karlsbrücke, beneath the Tropic of Cancer throb the lost polyphony of a great requiem, dissipate the gaseous warmth of a Jewish block in Manhattan, touch closed the eyes of an old man seated in the sun on a bench in Mexico City's Alameda Park? I confess I don't know. There are many things I don't know. Ask me some other day. Maybe I'll be wiser then. Now, at this moment, seated within this night-hurting ancient Lincoln, I refuse to admit that if I should relax my will and my imagination, the six young faces and bodies traveling with me would be carried away into darkness like so many tiny sparks from a dying fire, that they, like the wind, the car, the night itself, are my creatures, and if I should cease to sustain them with my creative love, they would disappear in a whirl of transparent circles, vanish even from memory. Yes, I speak of loving you, my six Monks, for you *are* my six Monks, my six Monkkin, Monkkernels, Monkkites, Monkkings, Monkknights, Monkkittens, Monkknaves, and as with me you race through this April night at something near a hundred kilometers an hour, we see together my compatriots pushing their carts down the aisles of open supermarkets bright with light, buying canned goods that bombs may fall a little sooner on Peking, the world be saved a little sooner for freedom and Palmolive soap, standing before rotisseries that slowly turn with chickens under the arm that the helmeted Marines may cross the Rio Grande in the north and the Bío-Bío in the south and we ourselves become the last Viet-

namites; we see them emerging from Sears carrying a new aspirator that the world may become one wide field of burning napalm, see them climb into their Chryslers and Plymouths and Dodges that the universe may achieve the New Order of peace and tranquillity and decency sans all upsetting spectra, yellows, blacks, reds, and all unsettling specters like you, my Monkkeepers, my Monkkreatans, my Monkkristers, my Monkkillers. But now it isn't my wind I hear. I never huffed and puffed up a wind that wails like that, that blinks its red light and waves its gauntleted hand for us to pull over and stop in front of the illuminated glass box of the Comercial Mexicana, where pleasant families, we can see them from our car through glass and more glass, an aquarium of a market, pass along shoving their carts and baby carriages, carrying their wire baskets and their children drowning among bottles of catsup and heads of lettuce and boxes of Kleenex provided to wipe away their snot as they wail. And the boxes of Kleenex and the files of artichoke militia (dry beneath their scales, Pablo) suffocate with so many children heaped on top of them and the man in brown raises his goggles and swings off his stilled wheels and swaggers toward us on shining boots as he takes out his ticket book and his pencil and Boston Boy assumes an expression of innocence. Play it cool, now, Boston Boy. Just play it cool. The cop wants fifty pesos and that's all he wants. Viva the Emperor President seated upon the Great Pyramid. *Si haut que l'on soit placé, on n'est jamais plus haut que sur son cul*, quoth Cousin Michel, the Old Man of the Mountain.

"Ninety kilometers an hour, señor. At the very least. Don't give me that innocent look."

"No, no, Officer. I'm not innocent."

"So? You admit it?"

"Everything, Officer. I admit everything."

"Take it easy, young man. You're going to force me to haul you in."

"I've nothing to hide. I'll confess everything."

"And remember, the young ladies will have to go with you . . ."

"That makes no difference. I accept my responsibility. In reality I never wanted to find her. I was afraid."

"If you're planning on spending the night in the bust, you have every reason to be afraid."

"The truth is, I thought she was safe. They had told me that the musicians were going to be excepted, that they weren't going to touch them . . ."

"No one is safe in the *peni*, young man. No one."

"I tell you, she wasn't really in danger. There was no need for me to do anything. Why should I? The danger would have been to draw attention to her."

"In the *peni* they don't respect anyone. Not even grandmothers. Do you understand what I mean, young man?"

"Yes. In those places it's best to be invisible. If I had let anyone know I was looking for her, it would have been like pointing her out to them. They would have noticed her, while before they didn't. Do you see what I mean, Officer?"

"What I see is that on top of speeding and reckless driving, you're drunk. Polluted, if the young ladies will excuse the word. Stoned. Even your hands are shaking. Let me have a whiff of your breath."

"If I found her, I hurt her. Not to find her was a favor to her. To see her only from the distance. And I would have put myself in danger, too. Well, I accept that. But I would have lost the confidence of my superiors. Maybe I would even have lost my job. And it was my first assignment. I had studied to build and now, in the midst of all the destruction, I had been given an opportunity to build. What more could I ask?"

"Look, señor, don't try my patience."

"And one day she saw me and didn't recognize me or didn't want to recognize me, all she saw was my uniform. 'Let me pass,' she said. That was all she said."

"I don't think you have a very clear idea of Mexico City's *peni*, young man. Drug addicts and perverts. Not the best of company. And the cells are cold as tombs."

"Then what, Officer, if it had turned out that she hated me? What if she had rejected me? Wasn't it better for both of us to remain apart in our separate worlds united only by our memories,

Prague, the Karlsbrücke, that summer of concerts in the Wallenstein Gardens, the *Requiem*? The hope and the promise that we had been in those young days? Wouldn't that seem wiser, Officer, more rational?"

"They don't wear kid gloves in the *peni*, señor. They aren't exactly polite and well-mannered. Try to understand the situation you put me in. I don't *want* to force a night in the *peni* on anyone. But . . ."

"And escape? To try to escape?"

"Ah, just try it, young man, just try it. Plenty have tried and no one has made it yet."

"To end up, both of us, electrocuted on that damn fence, trapped by the dogs of the Hundenkommando, executed by a volley against the death wall? Or simply caught and shipped off to the ovens of Auschwitz?"

"Look, my friend. I'm trying to do you a favor. Stop speaking Chinese to me. Show a little more respect for authority."

"No, Officer, there was no way out. The only intelligent thing was to accept the situation and wait. She was one of the musicians and the musicians were safe. The war would end one day. Why risk our lives foolishly? And to top it all, she was pregnant."

"You're one of the lippy kind, aren't you, buster?"

"To top it all, she was pregnant."

"But lip won't help you now. Look, man, look . . ."

"She hadn't been faithful. She had promised to wait, that I should be the first. It wasn't my fault I couldn't return to her, Officer. Did I declare the war? I thought about trying to save her. I swear I did. I made plans, I thought about it night and day. But, in her condition, escape was out of the question. We would have had to wait until the child was born and leave it with someone. Then maybe we might be able to make it. And the war might end first and everything be forgotten and forgiven . . ."

"Christ, you people inside the car, isn't there a good God-fearing Mexican here who can explain the facts of life to this crazy gringo? You, señor, you with the mustache, you look like a Mexican, can't you tell this fool to shut up?"

"But they had to sing. They didn't know how to protect themselves. All they had to do was present a performance. Instead they presented mockery and a challenge. They were fools, Officer. Shouting, shouting *Libera me* . . ."

"You understand matters, señor. You don't want me to take you people to the station any more than I want to take you. But one good turn deserves another. And when you're dealing with a man who has authority on his side . . ."

"*Li-be-ra meeee!*"

"Señor, thank you, thank you. You understand things."

"And after that, what could I have done? They themselves had condemned themselves to death. They themselves, all alone, when they could have been safe. Who was I to try to intervene now? I, the young architect assigned to the camp, a minor functionary, a Sudeten at that, not even a German, maybe a man whose loyalty was none too sure, just a young man who knew how to do what he was ordered to do, was I going to go to the Commandant and beg that Hanna Werner be excepted from the shipment of the musicians to Auschwitz? I? I was going to beg that her newborn baby not be sent off to Treblinka? A baby who was not even my son? Doesn't that make you laugh? I was going to intervene? Lift my hand and condemn myself too without helping her, who was already condemned beyond hope? I? I could have been that crazy? Write that down, Officer. It's a good joke. Write it down to laugh over with your comrades."

"Look, young man, don't tempt me now."

"Write it down. I would cross the course of the stars, I would put back the times of the sea . . ."

"I tell you, there's no problem now. Don't let your foot get so heavy, that's all. Shake. We'll part friends."

And Jakob, immutable at the side of blond Boston Boy Franz Jellinek, looks at the cop and possibly says something that we cannot hear, something that is carried off into the night by the wind of the Valley of Mexico, jugular wind, wind of the palaces of the albinos, wind of the hunchbacks and the peacocks, while the man in brown walks back to his wheeled pony pocketing the fifty pesos

that was all he wanted in the first place and that I finally handed him, and now we have to rest, to unwind, to go home to my squatter's castle and have a drink and a smoke, but Boston Boy, wearier than any of us, lets his head drop forward upon the steering wheel and obviously is going to take us nowhere. Silently Jakob gets down and comes around the car and opens the door and shoves Boston Boy out of the way and starts the car and with a grinding of gears we move off while I look a last time at the parents with their children and their baby carriages and their market carts and I ask myself if a terrible mixup may not happen at any moment, any Sunday dinner, if the artichokes may not be given the breast to suck while the babies are boiled in oil. So we move away under the stars and the wind, and Morgana, coming back to life as if after a long sleep, yawns and asks White Rabbit if she remembers the games she and Javier used to play in the evenings after supper and Rose Ass says that he remembers, they played war games, made riddles, for example, about the tonnage of the British destroyers in the battle of the Río de la Plata, or quizzed each other: who is von Rundstedt, Ligeia, have you ever heard of him? Or Timoshenko or Gamelin or Wavell. Brother Thomas has quietly found a little placard among the confusion beneath our feet and with adhesive tape is affixing it to the side window, and the placard reads

FATE L'AMORE NON LA GUERRA

and Rose Ass throws a tube of toothpaste out on Avenida de la Paz, for we are on our way to San Angel now, and Morgana finds other tubes and bottles for him to throw away as he laughs, and everyone begins to sing popular songs: *Goodness hides behind its gates but even the President of the United States must sometimes stand naked. Là dove c'era l'erba ora c'è una cittàààà, I need a place to lie down*, and they comment, Bob Dylan, Celantano, Il ragazzo della Via Gluck, *It's all right, ma, I'm only bleeding. Yesterday*, they shout in chorus, cheerfully. And this morning, the morning that I shall write about some day, will be a waif dawn that does not know its name. Midnight has sounded and beyond the

alley that leads to my old house the crickets are trilling and Jakob swings off the Beltway and parks on a side street and we all get out with a feeling of reluctance. Brother Thomas will sing without words now, that sweet basso humming, that violent gentleness which is natural to those of us who live at the extremes of life in order that others may live in its golden midriff. Bearded Boston Boy will open the lid of the trunk and take out his now inert little bundle and once again conceal it under his long-skirted frock coat, his coat that flaps like the eyelashes of an English Romantic poet's most sensitive hero: and Ezekiel has told us that cities are the heads of Goliath but I say that David is the knight who wanders the plains of the world's streets, from David Rastignac to David Herzog, while Morgana our judge and White Rabbit my love who refuses to be my love walk arm in arm squeezing each other around the waist and Rose Ass, hopelessly tied to their apron strings, follows strumming his guitar and asking:

"Did we go together to Greece, Ligeia?"

He strums his guitar and accompanies Brother Thomas's humming and awaits White Rabbit's reply. But she has well learned the cunning cleverness of the Aztec mysteries and now is offering our judge a bribe, winking at her as we troop across the Beltway, saying, finally: "That I'll never reveal to anyone. It's my secret and I'm going to hold to it. What difference does it make now, anyhow? I've stopped lying. From now on my testimony will be very simple: just the truth."

"Does the witness swear that all she has said is not the truth?" Morgana asks, kissing White Rabbit's ear. "We shall overcome," sings Brother Thomas. White Rabbit nestles in Judge Morgana's arms: "No, it was true, in a way, God and Perry Mason willing."

Yes, we shall overcome . . . some day. What difference did it make now? Anything. And what he had never understood was that her lie was simply in answer to his lie. Joshua will fight the battle of Jericho and the children of the street will sleep wrapped in newspapers on sidewalks near the modern, indispensable Beltway that permits us to whirl from our residences in the Pedregal and

Coyoacán and San Angel to the center of town in fifteen minutes or better. He had loved her only because he could disguise her as other women. She had retorted to that insult in the same way. The lies they had told each other came together and added up to speak one lonely truth. The walls will come a-tumblin' down. And Juan Soriano has said that his father fought in the cavalry in the revolution precisely so that gentlemen of means might ride the wonderful Beltway in their Cadillacs. "The truth? What's the truth? I could just as well have told you that I was born right here in Mexico City, not in New York, the daughter of a family of immigrant Russian Jews. Is there anything so strange about that? There were many such immigrants and today they are bankers and movie producers and mathematicians and biologists and owners of department stores. And what's wrong with them for being those things? I could have told you that I was raised in Mexico City, not in New York. Therefore I admit that everything I have said is false, in a certain sense. The places and names were false. But not the people." We'll look over Jordan and what will we see? The lights of the San Angel Inn Restaurant, brothers. Fifty gleaming new and expensive very large and very small cars parked outside. And what shall we hear? Silver and glass tinkling against silver and glass, and the whirring wings of a covey of mariachi musicians. "Not the people, I didn't change them. My mother was exactly as I said she was . . . but in Colonia Hipódromo, or in the Bronx? And my father, too, but did he sell his sharp razors of excellent steel in a stall in La Merced Market or in a market in New York? What's truth . . . you pays your dream and you takes your reality. And Jake my brother was murdered not in Central Park but in the Parque España, killed not by Harlem Negroes but by some god-damn Mexican kid bastards." A band of angels will be comin' after me and after you also, brothers. A-comin' for to carry us along that long long trail that forever keeps winding into the land of our graves where if our dream boats ever come in we'll have it made for at least one more cup of coffee and one last piece of ass. So she fled also. And studied there, and they met. That much I believe is

probably true. "Do you believe me now?" Do we believe her, brothers? Why not? Liars are the easiest of all to believe.

White Rabbit continues speaking to our good judge, Morgana, but Boston Boy, moving in on her like a crab on a clam, kisses her dull red lips. Damn him, damn her, damn their kiss, damn the bitter envy I feel. The only answer fate permits us is such bitterness. Two young people, kissing in front of the prickly-pear hedge that walls my decayed garden. That's all. It's common enough. It happens all the time. Yet it makes me lose my virginal and precious cool for a moment during which I become Javier, Elizabeth, and Franz, and in their names surge with a deeper bitterness. Yonder damned kiss is a bird I shall never wing again. It's impossible. And neither will they, ever again, put their lips together quite that same way, in the street, young, hot with hostility they don't even pretend to conceal, exposing themselves most innocently to loss of freedom in the discovery of love, without the fear and anger we have learned to hide behind our boredom, our lack of curiosity: ahhh, so what, so what? So we have passed the line, brothers, and they have not even come to it yet, that's so what. And to have gone beyond everything is not to have gone at all. Except home again to this thick and bristly hedge whose secret entrances and exits I believe I know, gentle home sweet home, Eden subverted by outcast sons who prefer to march off across the deserts of the world armed with the jawbones of asses to being shut up in safety, who march forth wearing boots and return home on stretchers bleeding with the prodigal open wound of that subtle whore Malinche, traitoress mother who fucked the enemy that you and I, my compatriots, might some day be born. Or do you really think it would have been better if the Spaniards had been defeated and we had gone on living under the Aztec fascism? Who was Cuauhtémoc? Baldur von Schirach, brothers, leader of the Tenochtitlán Jugend. And wiser far than he, the Mexican women let it happen. Eternal bitterness in return for a lasting destiny that I have to admit we haven't quite found yet. But we shall, man. We shall.

So: we've returned and we cross my garden with its volcanoes

and mountains of trash and its lakes and seas of mud. We come to my make-believe castle, that elevated place of turrets, spires, battlements, and towers where we may besiege ourselves and be besieged, where we can stroll into the observatory and align our lives with the stars, my pyramid, my fortress, my basilica, in one word, my pad, which if you should happen to pass this way, mark it well, soul brother, is your pad too, any time, any time at all. We climb the corkscrew steel stairs, curled conch-shell listening post, sentinel always alert, and file into the enormous living room which at the moment is dark as Satan's asshole and equally as cold, yet docile and willing to greet us as we may greet it, to suit its shadows and colors and smells to the light and color and smells of whatever we may feel and be. And what do we do as we enter? Do we light the candles and build a fire in the fireplace and smoke and cough and hum and sit down on the old chairs and the dirty reed carpets and ask for a drink and paint our lips and scratch our balls and glance at our reflections in a mirror in the darkness? No, not quite. One of us who is a priest although he wears Ivy League garb and carries a black portfolio that ought to be carried by a lawyer or a traveling salesman moves forward and opens the portfolio and takes out and offers a small paper bag that contains desiccated dream. The Monks accept and put the bits of mushroom into their mouths and chew slowly, at the same time beginning one of their throbbing litanies, chanting with a single voice, *we are erring truth, we are the lonely crowd, we are the sacred tumult*. We, the black pigeon, the scarred face of the crippled child, the thorn crown. We the waiting sand and the salt wild earth. In the darkness they form a circle, clasping hands, a circle from which I am excluded, yet into which I feel drawn. Jakob, in the middle of the circle, cries harshly, loud above the beat of their chant:

"I, Jakob Werner, born in the year zero, condemn to death Franz Jellinek, born two thousand years ago."

I draw away from them, feeling alone and ironic. I know what they want. They want to transform my helpless room into four damp prison walls, into a charged electric fence. They would like to

heap its corners high with fresh-chopped hair and discarded dentures and spectacles and toothbrushes. They would like to change it into a wandering and endless gray labyrinth of cells and corridors and kennels and wooden bathtubs and hooks upon which hangs sweat-drenched clothing that tomorrow must be worn again. They would like to make it echo hollowly to the slap-crack of a rubber-hose lash, to the click-snap of padlocks. Their chant goes on and I begin to tremble. *We are the androgynous pages. We are the cherubs of innocence. We are the spell-cast virgins.* We are the rite and the lamb that is sacrificed. We are promise and the memory of promise. We are neither men nor women nor good nor evil nor body nor spirit nor essence nor accident nor real nor ideal nor consciousness nor instinct. Their voices are not loud, yet they seem to fill the room until it overflows with sound. They sway in the darkness, their hands locked, their weight balanced light on the balls of their feet, and the darkness sways with them and I must hold myself rigid to resist that beckoning movement, that movement that can never be described because it is forever unknown, even to itself, full of portent for them and senselessness and fear for me. I move away from them mentally, taking refuge in the thought that this is my dwelling and they, my guests, must vanish the moment I cease to envision them. I think of Gershon and Becky, of Raúl and Ofelia. It is their dwelling too, here they were born, here they died, here they lived their tired and repetitious lives that Javier and Elizabeth might be born and love and marry and hate. I think of them, but I find myself full of bitter doubt: why were they born after all? Why did they have to die? The Monks are moaning now: Medusa struggling for life again, the Furies giving vent to blood-red rivers of hatred. This is not their dwelling, nor have I ever known their parents. They are themselves alone. The different, the alien, the new, above all the new: that which has never been repeated because it has never existed before. And what their fecund chant is telling me is the cold counsel that our story is not the only story, that there is another and greater one in which ours seems less than a brief nightmare reserved for a few restless seconds in the eternal

sleep of death. Now I know that they are hunters on the scent of a prey who is myself. No words I can shout can stop them. No reason I can hold to can long withstand the destructiveness of their single incandescent intuition. Why did Becky go insane, I ask myself. Was it so that her daughter's insanity might merit the name of reason? Why did Raúl disappear? Was it so that Javier's flight might seem a march toward an encounter? I tell myself to keep thinking. Don't stop thinking. Don't hear them. Don't see them. Take out a match and light a candle. Carry it to the corner where the old trunk stands, dusty and cobwebbed, with its blackened brass locks and clasps. A vast old steamer trunk such as they don't make any more, a trunk large enough to pack the world itself in, as empty as space, with as many drawers as there are stars. I work the locks open one by one. Now, with my hand on the trunk, I can turn and face them again. I say to them quietly: "An old man ripe with wizardry sold me this trunk. A smiling old Jew who lived and kept shop near Tacuba and was forever putting his tongue into the gap of a missing front tooth." They face me. I point to the tattered, faded labels of the Lloyd-Triestino Line, the seals of the Greek customs. "He was an old Jew who dealt in forgotten junk and lost worlds, like this trunk. More than dealt, he was a collector." They have stopped their chant and are listening to me and watching me. It is I, not Medusa, who has been reborn. I swing the two halves of the trunk open. One side stacked with small drawers, the other a single vast compartment stuffed with clothing, bundles, boxes, a violin, the lean neck of a bass viol trailing a tangle of broken strings, a heap of coal-dusty top hats, you name it. The Monks approach me and I take out my first exhibit, a small net, like a woman's hairnet, for the mustache. With a grave flourish I present it to bearded Boston Boy and with a grave smile he dons it. Exhibit Two, the broken violin, I offer to Jakob of the Ivy League costume and the black portfolio. Then a torn and yellowed poster with the words CARBO LOVES TAYLOR. Rose Ass accepts it. A Currier and Ives print: the sleighs, snow, peaked rooftops of New England winter; this I give to pale White Rabbit. For Rose Ass, a 1928

Montgomery Ward catalogue. For Boston Boy again, the printed program of a concert in Prague's Wallenstein Gardens: "In 1856, Brahms found the title of his *German Requiem* in an old notebook that had belonged to Schumann, his teacher." Now a worn leather money pouch, as heavy as silver; I give it to dark Morgana and she empties it out into her hands, a cascade of small pebbles still wet from the sea, some brilliant as mirrors, some yellow as mustard, hemispheres of the hours of the deep, sculptured eggs, sepia moons, the playthings and the treasures of children and the poor. White Rabbit reaches to snatch the pebbles away from Morgana, who holds them against her breasts like jewels. And everyone is looking at Brother Thomas, for he has been given an old stereopticon and is staring through its lenses, inserting and withdrawing quickly the double-imaged cards that I remove from one of the drawers and hand to him. They crowd around and ask to have their turns to see those faded photographs that look as real as dead and half-remembered life: the castle of Hradcany in Prague, a teashop on Avenida Santa Fe in Buenos Aires, a path with a bench near a bridge in Central Park in New York, the lions that guard the agora of Delos, a nude by Modigliani, the body of assassinated Leon Trotsky laid out for burial, a still shot of Joan Crawford in *Grand Hotel*, another of John Garfield in *The Fallen Sparrow* (with Maureen O'Hara and Walter Slezak, Elizabeth), the entrance to the fortress of Terezin with its legend: *Arbeit Macht Frei*. They grab the stereopticon and pass it from hand to hand, on to the next, before the last has had a clear view. No one notices the portraits of the comic-opera monarchs I offer, Wilhelm and Franz Josef, or the lovely, hand-tinted photograph of La Belle Otero wearing a pair of Turkish slippers and nothing else. Now I come to the battered round tins of old motion-picture films upon which scribbled labels, stuck with glue that after all the years is still bad-smelling, show the titles: *Golem*, *Nosferatu*, *Der Blaue Engel*, *Vampyr*, *Das Rheingold*. I let the yellowed film slide between my fingers, a slow march of *Caligari*'s broken images, squares of brown and blue and yellow that in five acts relate the stories of authority

and its phantoms, of reason and its collapse, of crime and its pleasures, of the behavior that one finds in lunatic asylums and nightmares as if these were the only real settings appropriate to acts that in the street or the office go unnoticed, mere normality. I come to the garments. To one side I toss a turtle-neck sweater that is still damp, still smelling of salt air, a pair of corduroy pants with the ass worn thin, a woman's suit from the thirties, its jacket cut manishly and its blouse of piqué, a cocked tricorn hat, some wooden shoes, a leather Tyrolean vest, a brown uniform, an old greatcoat with a high hood, a striped gray coat, thin and cold, with the star of David shining in dull faded yellow on its breast. I come to the bottom of the heap, to the clothing that I want to offer them. The purple-red cloak of a Catholic cardinal for Brother Thomas, who puts it on and with finger across thumb gravely blesses us. A hood of black and scarlet for Rose Ass. Rich embroidered cloths, like medieval hangings, for pallid White Rabbit; a rain cape for Judge Morgana. A cope, also embroidered with a depiction of the Apocalypse, for Blond Boston Boy. And beneath everything, small and heavy, wrapped in red silk which I unwind layer by layer with less haste than uncertainty, for I'm not sure where he is now or who he is or what he may be up to, I'm not sure whether this is the beginning or the end of my show, a puppet dwarf which I lift at last and introduce to them, trying with one finger to hold his flaccid neck stiff. My six Monklins move back a step or two and shake their new costumes. I stick my fingers into the puppet's mouth and transform his expression of frustrated fury into an amiable smile. Yes, despite everything, he will condescend to visit with us. I turn his head a little and he looks back thoughtfully into the trunk, at the nest of tiny gravestones of tiny dolls with blond and black wigs, dressed in crinolines and boots and carrying whips, small dolls with little phal-luses of plaster, at the paintings which hang over them, sailboats entering a harbor, wheatfields under the sun. He nods approvingly and the Monks stare as I seat him upon my knee. The Monks stare and step back, except for Boston Boy Franz, who slowly kneels beside the single candle. I touch the mustache and beard of my little puppet, a scanty but carefully trimmed beard. They know

that he is about to speak and he does speak in a resonant baritone that has nothing to do with his deformed small body, from which one would expect shrillness. "You have shattered my repose, young man," he says gravely, accusingly to Boston Boy. "One has a right to rest occasionally. The landlord of the trunk assured me that it was a quiet and tranquil establishment."

"You must forgive us, sir," Boston Boy replies just as gravely. "We did not know that a tenant had moved into the trunk."

I remove the little man's gloves and make his courteous but inquisitive eyes pass around the room. I squeeze his diaphragm lightly, and he sighs.

"So we meet again, my young friend."

"Yes," says Boston Boy, nodding. The little man on my knee sighs again. His legs dance in the air as he stretches his small boots, protected by spats, as if he were trying to reach the floor.

"I was asking myself what had happened to you. I wondered what you and your friend had done with my dolls and my paintings."

"As you see for yourself, Herr Urs, they are still with you, there in the trunk. No one touched anything."

"Yes, so I have observed, and with a certain relief, I confess. Yet it is true that I was thinking of presenting everything to you, young sir, to you and your friend, as a remembrance of your neighbor, myself. But the attack came upon me too suddenly. I miscalculated and in the end did not have sufficient time. I had told myself: I shall present my works to these young gentlemen who are so polite, well-reared, and understanding. But it need not be done until the last moment. Then, when I lie upon my deathbed, it will be not less a gift but will become also an inheritance, and they will understand it as such. But I didn't have time. I miscalculated."

"It doesn't matter, Herr Urs. I have often dreamed of your dolls and paintings."

"Yes, my young friend, that would be only natural. Perhaps after so many years you see things clearly. Do you chance, perhaps, to recall what I said to you then?"

"Certainly, Herr Urs. You told us that you wanted to reproduce,

on canvas, the old buildings and the old streets, so that something would . . .”

“Yes, so that something would remain after they had been demolished and forgotten.”

“Exactly, sir. You also said that you painted each of your works twice. First when you looked upon your scene with the eyes of repose. The second time when your vision was exalted. And that between the two views, we could be sure, there existed a great abyss.”

“Indeed. And now as then, time must be left to decide the destiny of my work. It could not be judged then. Or even today. Heroism is comprehended only when its embittered enemies have disappeared. Then, finally, judgment can be made without prejudice. And I must confess, dear young friend, that as I repaired each little doll and painted each of my paintings, I felt myself heroic. I ceased to be poor and deformed and alone and became . . .”

“A small god, Herr Urs. A household god, one of the family.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you. I would never have ventured to put it quite so myself, but you are right. Let me tell you something. When I was very young, like all of us I was a believer. But the faith that I had sucked in with my mother’s milk merely returned to me a clear reflection of my deformity, for our faith is a mirror that reflects ourselves, it is a shadow we cast, one that follows us so persistently that we can escape it only by great effort. Faith makes us, therefore, place our reliance and even our very being upon the fundament of appearances, and takes its conviction not from the invisible but precisely from what is always seen. And for me, obviously, such dependency would have been fatal. For a time I consoled myself with the thought that perhaps I had been chosen for a miracle of transfiguration. But eventually I came to the end of my patience and decided to renounce entirely the possibility that some day I might be a guest at a wedding where there would be only water and I would turn it into wine. I abandoned my childhood faith, in exchange for knowledge. And I discovered then that knowledge is secret, that it has two faces, one of which, twisted and

deformed perhaps as my body or perhaps as strong and beautiful as my hands, has been kept hidden by what we call civilization since the very beginning of what we call civilization. That therefore knowledge asks questions that cannot be answered, for half of existence is denied it, unless it descends into the buried world where the truth of creation is yet to be found, even after so many centuries. It was a surprising discovery, young sir. It changed my whole life."

"A contagious discovery, Herr Urs. When Ulrich and I went to your room, we felt ourselves surrounded by something infectious that we could neither touch nor name."

"Freedom, young sir, simply courageous human freedom. The freedom of the committed and dedicated rebel, which someday will infect the entire world." My little man moved his fingers rapidly, delicately, as if he were playing a piano. "Full liberty induces sickness in us, of course, for we have always believed that we are healthy only when our liberty is limited."

"You weren't free, none of you, goddamn you!" Jakob shouts at Boston Boy or maybe at the manikin on my knee or maybe at myself, I am not sure which. "You were slaves! You were Germans, Germans! Phantoms hunting across the wasteland armed with the asinine jawbones of a sheep Volk!"

"Ach," the little man smiles sadly, "why are your friends always so raucous? Things are not quite so simple as he seems to think. I suggest that you avoid most firmly the road that he has chosen. One must keep in mind, after all, that there are certain risks which if we dare to hazard them lead to reward far greater than any wealth. I left my works hanging in the room where I died, my only gift to the world, the sum and meaning of all my days, yet without the slightest expectation that they would be greeted by applause. The idea of triumphant success was altogether foreign to me. Do you believe that I wanted to evangelize the world, tempt it, bribe it, convert it? Oh, no, no, never, my young friend. I never offered youth a change of soul, nor did I suggest to the cities of the desert that they abandon their obeisant servility. I believe, quite the con-

trary, that everything that survives feasts eventually, when the opportune moment comes, upon the fruits of its tenacity. My triumph was not, is not in the noisy world but far from it, alien and isolated. My freedom is precisely my isolation and my victory is to hold myself apart, identifying with no one and with nothing except, perhaps, nothingness itself. I am, so to speak, young sir, a dark star that wanders along through the darkness of space casting invisible light upon those who are far away and bathed in the stolid sun, contaminating them, infecting them, as you so aptly put it. If I should allow myself to be touched by other lives, to mix and fuse into their mass, I would instantly cease to be who I am. I can tempt only because no one can recognize me. I die the moment I am discovered moving through this emotional chaos with which men comfort themselves for their misery and console themselves for my apartness. For I have done what none of them has ever dared to do. And no one knows, nor will I tell, whether my punishment may not be my reward."

White Rabbit slowly advances in her glistening brocade robes, her hair mussed and her eyes vacant. As she passes Jakob, he stops and holds her. "No, Jeanne. Don't go near him."

My little man stretches out his beautiful hands. "She need not come near me. I laugh at distance, my friend." I make his small fingers caress the satin of his dressing gown. "Ah," he says softly to White Rabbit. "So we meet again."

"Jeanne. Jeanne." Jakob seems shaken by confusion. He searches for words while the little man on my knee polishes his tiny fingernails on the quilted silk lapels of his dressing gown. "Jeanne," Jakob says finally, "don't be afraid of your visions. Love your menstruation and your seizures, Jeanne, your orgasms give you life and health. I swear that, Jeanne. And they give life and health to me, too. Don't feel ashamed. Don't be afraid. Don't run away to that false world of words that can be mastered so easily. What is hard, Jeanne, is to master the real, damned, unfortunate world of horrible shame and silence and defeat et cetera."

White Rabbit advances and touches the blue pagoda and drag-

ons of Herr Urs von Schnepelbrücke's red dressing gown. She lets her fingers touch, and she stands motionless. Jakob does not dare move either. But he speaks to her, softly, earnestly: "Don't believe their lies, Jeanne. No poet is a prophet of torture. No philosophy proclaims the justice of murder. They speak of evil, Jeanne, so that we may see it before us and accept it as part of life so that we will corrupt ourselves with it, Jeanne, and in our isolation from each other it may overcome us. Jeanne, don't let yourself be defeated, my love. Neither your body nor your thought will be evil if you let yourself love, if you touch and let yourself be touched. He's afraid, Jeanne. Always remember that he is afraid. He doesn't want life to come near him. He wants to save himself alone. Alone and through the evidences of death that offer him his illusion of being . . ."

"My dear young sir!" Herr Urs says politely. "Everything is permitted, after all." Jeanne steps back from him with an expression of loathing and falls upon the floor twisted, strangled, vomiting out the testicles of goats and devils transformed into hairy worms. Jakob covers her vomit with one hand. "Yes," he replies to the little man on my knee, "all life is permitted. But not death. Not death!" Jeanne laughs and groans and her heart beats wildly and she trembles from head to foot. With a certain difficulty, my little man crosses his legs.

"Heresie, Treason, Wytchcrafte, Belial, True Libertee, Namon, Bludthyrstee, Homicide," cries White Rabbit, the tormented nun. She clutches her sumptuous robes and asks us to throw her into the river. She writhes on the floor murmuring "Fyre, Sulfure, Darkness, and a most Abominable Stink." Jakob holds her in his arms and makes himself part of her convulsion. He puts his lips to her clenched teeth and whispers, "No, Jeanne, not you and I. Your suffering will be a chance for greatness. You and I shall struggle against ourselves, Jeanne. We'll try and fail and try again and fail again, and go on to the end of all the ancient contradictions in order to live and repeal them, ridding ourselves of our old skin and exchanging it for the fresh new skin of the new contradictions, those that will await us then. We shall struggle alone, without

hurting others, neither faces nor crosses, neither heads nor tails, neither eagles nor suns."

"I fear that won't suffice, young man. No, it will never be enough. You will be forgiven much too easily. What I suggest is that you do what can never be forgiven. Only so do you make it worthwhile to humiliate yourself seeking redemption."

"A man doesn't need victims merely to abandon solitude," Jakob whispers in White Rabbit's ear. She murmurs the simple words of childhood: "Mother? Father? Papa? Juanita? Vacation? Vacation?" She points her finger at the little man on my knee. At seated blond Boston Boy. Now, her fist closing, at the window. By the movement of her body she begs the window to come nearer and offer her, though she has lost the strength to speak, an opportunity to flee. Jakob caresses her gently. "Don't give up, Jeanne. He says that his power is in his isolation, but he must have victims to escape solitude. Believe in me, Jeanne. Believe what I tell you. We shall oppose his collective violence with our individual violence. We shall make history with our lives so that he cannot make history with our deaths."

The little man laughs. "There will always be a power, an order, an enthusiasm that will permit me to win my converts. How foolish people are, with their drums and bands, their flags and parades. So raucous, so raucous. Bah, who needs a black shirt? It's enough to wear mere flannels. Caesar needs no disguise. He is Caesar, and he knows it. If he is mistaken for the plebe in the street, all the better. He can melt into the mass on the street, then, and invisibly attain what he seeks. And I shall be at his side."

"We will be fallen masters, but our own masters," Jakob whispers, turning White Rabbit's face tenderly between his hands. "Constant pain and great happiness we will have. I promise you only that." "But I don't feel anything, Jakob," she replies. "There are sores on my nipples but I don't feel them. I don't feel the fire burning my feet, or the nails in my palms . . ."

"Pah, promises, indeed," the little man chuckles. "From afar I shall tempt you to abandon every promise you have ever made. Come to me. I too am eternal."

"I hear music," Boston Boy interrupts.

"Be quiet, my young friend. Listen to it and enjoy it and keep quiet."

"I see light falling around us."

"Idiot, you see nothing of the kind. No one is talking to you."

"Herr Urs, you have told me of my temptations. My homeland. My blood, my imagination and my memory, even my love. Tell me . . . No, excuse me. That's the master of ceremonies' line."

"Fool, imbecile, you have no right to ask questions now. You have been condemned."

"I? And what of you, who infected me?"

"As he has infected every servile bellhop who stands in the lobby of every hotel awaiting his precious tip," pronounces Judge Morgana, advancing.

"As he has infected every teenage Fascist who stands, disguised as a Tyrolean youth or a Bavarian maiden, on the German frontier with a fistful of shuttlecocks that he throws at passing cars in order to preserve the memory of Germany's greatness and the hope that she will be great again, that the little map of Germany today will become once again the map of Germany's vast dream." Jakob holds White Rabbit tight in his arms. "Tell me," he says to her softly, "where was your home?"

"In Holland, sir. Father. John. Vacation. We will take the train and go on a long vacation."

"And you?" to Morgana.

"From beyond the Oder, sir. We had traveled south, also by train, to Czechoslovakia, and as I was getting down from the truck that took us to the fortress, I dropped my doll and its head broke. I remember I cried. Someone touched my head."

"And you?" to Rose Ass.

"Bratislava, on the Danube. I can hardly remember it. I was a child. The dogs were howling. It was cold. They undressed us and separated us and someone made a bitter joke, Arbeit Macht Kalt."

"And I? I the son of Hanna Werner who died in a gas chamber at Auschwitz in October 1944? I, her son Jakob, who at the age of two weeks was sent from Terezin to Treblinka? And you, the rest

of you, the chorus of the children's opera at Theresienstadt, didn't you admire the efficiency and dedication of your captors? Weren't you pleased by the excellent construction of your prisons? Didn't you feel warm and protected by your guards' fanatic attention to the least detail? Could you ever point accusingly to the slightest want of foresight, to the slightest frivolity in the treatment you received? My God, what did you want? To live in a cell built by Franz Jelinek was to be safer than on a Lufthansa flight."

"Bah!" snorts Herr Urs. "The ghetto has contaminated all of you. And the infection of the ghetto is real infection." His hands are out of my control now. They touch the keyboard of an invisible piano, trip off grotesque fluttering arpeggios, strike violent chords, tap a sentimental melody. "Neurosis was born in the ghetto. By fear out of ridicule." He stares at his fingernails and becomes silent. Tired-eyed White Rabbit, sitting now beside the fireplace, exhausted but serene, wrapped like a magician in her opulent robes, finally looks at him neither afraid nor attracted:

"No. You don't understand anything. The ghetto taught us that nothing ever ends. Nothing is ever resolved. Everything has to be lived and relived and relived, over and over, again and again."

"Yes. You may be right." The little man on my knee is becoming every moment softer, yet more rigid, between my supporting hands. "Just once, only once, my dear friends, I myself lost my calm patience and succumbed to the temptation to live life over again." I set him down on the floor and his legs double under him like rags. "Pride blinded me. Just once, to be sure, yet that was enough. Before that I had lived with true humility. But that one time, having flesh, I was weak. I wanted an immediate demonstration of my powers. I betrayed my role, which ought to have been one of simple, steadfast waiting. The role of pride so strong it could survive by itself alone, supported by no act, by nothing." I raise his arms over his head and make him walk, feebly, tottering, an infant of twelve or thirteen months, toward the trunk. "I decided to take the chance. To die simply that I might return to life on the third day and prove who I was, that there was at least one other Savior,

not merely one." I lead him to the trunk and wrap him in the red silk coverlet. "And on the third day, I did indeed rise. I came out of the refrigerator and took some pills and went back to my room and covered myself with my sheet, my face with a pillow. And waited. And now . . . Gute Nacht, meine Herren und Damen. Ich muss Caligari werden. Ich muss nach Hause gehen." I cover the yellow face of Herr Urs von Schnepelbrücke with a little cloak.

The only requiem is spoken by Boston Boy: "No man has a claim on eternity. Yet our every action demands no less." He turns and faces Jakob. "Wasn't I a man in spite of everything? If I was inhuman, nevertheless didn't I go on being a man? Whom do I harm today? The scar on my soul has healed. A soul of jelly, like Javier's, is far more guilty than mine. Forgive the great dreams, brothers, and punish the foolish little naps. Brothers, brothers, hasn't twenty years with a clean conscience been enough to earn forgiveness for what was at most a guilt of abstention, a submission to a temptation which I swear I never clearly understood?"

Judge Morgana laughs dryly. "Sure, man, sure. Go back. You'll be honored by the whole nation."

"Go back," says Rose Ass. "You'll be given a job at Krupp."

"Or at Farben," chimes Jakob.

"Or maybe in the Bundeswehr," says White Rabbit.

"Why even go so far?" booms Brother Thomas's bass. "Just head north to Laredo and cross the border. That's where the busy factories are today. You can get yourself a job making napalm or detergents that wipe away the color of the skin."

"On the contrary, he must go further," Jakob says. "Duty itself calls. More strategic hamlets are needed in Vietnam. The accused is efficient. He's careful. He executes orders with energy and precision. Such professionalism is invaluable. He is needed urgently in all the prisons and death rows and crematoriums that still must be built. In Cambodia. In Laos. In Peru. In the Congo. In Mexico. In Spain. In South Carolina. Oh, there is a world of building yet to be done. The labor of organizing isolation remains. To be concluded in his image and semblance. A great work, one that requires men of

dedication and responsibility. Before the end of the century the entire world must become one single vast concentration camp. Each individual citizen must become a black star wandering through black space, isolated and alone and giving off light, if at all, only invisibly. The accused faces a bounteous future indeed."

"What the hell do you know?" the accused, still on his knees, says angrily. "What track did I leave? I died, I disappeared, I changed my name. But I swear I looked for your mother's grave. I went back to Prague, and in those days that was to take a certain chance, believe me. I didn't find it. She was nameless. An anonymous victim in the mausoleum of all the anonymous victims."

"But you never thought of looking up Professor Maher, did you?" Jakob is rubbing White Rabbit's feet. "He lived in the same old house, you know, on the same street. All those years during the war he had hidden refugees among his flutes and oboes and helped them to escape. He saved many lives. And he never forgot the young man and the young woman who used to dine with him and afterward talk music and architecture. Professor Maher didn't try to play it safe during the occupation. He put his neck on the block, again and again and again. And he did it in your names, for your sakes, for the sake of the love he remembered between you."

"How can you know?" the accused repeats bitterly, standing. "How can you know anything? You were a child, a baby, you couldn't have talked with anyone. Who told you? That time was not your time. You can't know that time. It's forgotten, gone, lost forever."

"Shall I show you?" Jakob jumps to his feet and goes to the old trunk and begins to open its small drawers and to seize fistfuls of papers that had lain there, Dragoness, for years and years untouched by anyone. He threw the papers into the air, down on the floor. "It's all here, Franz. Nothing happened that was not carefully recorded. These papers remember. Here. And here. And here."

The Monks fall upon the papers. The oldest, the most recent. Those that have yellowed, those that still are freshly white. Wrin-

kled sheets, smooth ones. Perhaps they are searching now for the understanding that will allow them to depart in peace, according to someone's words. The testimonials of humiliation. The testaments of need and gratitude. The acts of birth and death of our eternally repeated readings. As if such an understanding were possible. As if the irrational were explicable. Have faith and don't be afraid, Dragoness. This envelope that White Rabbit, acting in your name, recovers from the floor and tears open as you did so long ago when you and Javier returned to Mexico, will explain nothing, even though she reads it aloud to us: *Esteemed señor: In regard to your communication of April 12, we find ourselves unfortunately obliged to inform you that for the moment we cannot publish your manuscript, which we are returning to you under separate cover. We remain, most sincerely yours . . .* And Professor Maher's letter to Jakob will always be no more than a mere succession of syllables, though Boston Boy the blond accused pronounces them as words: *She never loved any other man. And I can swear that no matter what he may have done or failed to do, he always loved her. He told me that, here in this very house, seated beside the desk where I now sit writing to you, and I know that he spoke the truth, I am an old man and can recognize truth. When I knew him he was a youth who loved this city, loved music and architecture, above all loved her. Old men are never deceived, Jakob. "Professor," he told me one night, "never worry about her. I'll always take care of her. Always. I'll never abandon her."* I believed him. You will read this when you are a man. I have given you your name and now I give you his. I do not know what happened to him. He was reported killed the very last day of the war, but there was a certain confusion and mystery about the report, his parents believed that it could have been a mistaken identification. At any rate, he never came back, so he may indeed be dead. If he is living, perhaps you will want to seek him out some day, perhaps your spirit will demand that kind of certainty, and perhaps you will be able to find him. Or maybe this letter will merely disturb and distract you. If so, please pardon an old man who loves everyone, loves everyone

very much . . . Nor will anything more enlightening be said by the forgotten pages of Javier's book, found crumbled in a drawer wrapped in pasteboard covers on which is inscribed, "Pandora's Box." Rose Ass reads: *The name of the name? Jason? Argonaut? Medea? Nature dies but its names remain, unchanged. Flower, bird, river, tree, harvest are always and forever the rose and the humming bird, the Nile, the spruce, the wheat or the cotton. Death in nature, nature's passing away, changes no names. But with men not so. The name of a man dies with him. He does not wish to repeat himself, and is willing to pay high for his singularity. But I would be a man who lives on giving names to what has preceded me and what is to follow. Jason. Argonaut. Medea. And this that everything should not need be learned over again, lived over again, from the beginning. Order and Progress? That slogan is neither human nor accurate. Man makes no progress. Every child born is a first creation. He must repeat everything for himself and for the world, all the ancient events, as if nothing had ever happened before his birth. He is the world's first infant, first child, first adolescent, first lover, first husband, first father, first artist, first soldier, first tyrant, first rebel, and finally the earth's first corpse . . . And now Brother Thomas comes upon an ancient, tattered, disintegrating folio which he pages through and begins to read aloud: "This was printed at Uppsala, in 1776, apparently. Listen: In 1703 a magician and charlatan who called himself Doctor Caligari sowed terror and death from village to village and fair to fair, through his obedient serving man, the Sleepwalker Caesar . . ."*

No, Dragoness, they signify nothing. Why should they? They are the letters written and the books written and read by a pair of young lovers who before the war found themselves on a slow ship of the Lloyd-Triestino Line, bound for Greece or for China via Saturn and Sirius, and had therefore light-years of time to kill. They diverted themselves through the long hours at sea, and put the sheets of paper away in the drawers of an empty world. And an old Jew near Tacuba sold me that world very cheaply. The police had

caught him peeping at adolescents in a public toilet. He was a voyeur, like you and like me. It was a temptation, he told me, that he could never resist. Now he was going to sell everything he owned and disappear. He was an expert at disappearances. He offered to sell me the cellos and the top hats, the sewing dummies, the funeral hearses, his entire great storeroom in that old palace on Tacuba behind a naked patio with a dry fountain, behind a soaring portal of ductile sinuous stone supported by two twined columns that rest upon the paws of a gigantic cat.

"I, Jakob Werner, born in the year zero, condemn to death Franz Jelinek, born two thousand years ago."

I am about to laugh, Dragoness. It seems to me that these six young Monks have contracted the very disease they want to cure. I can't be sure whether their theatrical enactments say anything true about anyone or are simply caricatures put on to put me on, caricature scenes entirely unrelated to the lives they purport to represent, yours, Javier's, Franz's. I am sure of nothing except that their trial of Franz has not convinced me of his guilt or of the justice of the punishment they intend to impose. And also that I am the Narrator, goddamn it, and I ought to hold their destinies in the palm of my hand, to make or break and arrange or change just as I please. Yes, I ought to. But my palm feels empty except for the sweat there. Now they are moving toward my door. I step calmly in front of them and without drama, holding fast to my cool, I tell them:

"Cats, you have not convinced me. Not at all."

But they either don't hear me or prefer to pretend that they don't hear me. They keep moving forward chanting another of their endless litanies: "He crossed the courses of the stars . . ." And I would like to jeer at them. To tell them to their faces that they have lied to me. Haven't they boasted that they play life's little game alone? That they accept the world as the world is, and that all of us are in one way or another guilty of everything that any one of us is guilty of? I would like to throw those words back at them, but all I can think of at this moment is Isabel . . . of

you, little Pussycat, locked in Javier's arms in a cheap motel on the road to Toluca.

"He put back the times of the sea . . ."

They come toward me slowly, shuffling, dancing, chanting, rolling their mushroom-clouded eyes. And I stand before them opposing their hallucinations with my uncertain sanity. Then forgive him, for God's sake, forgive him, keeping in mind that he also has loved and breathed and . . .

"He killed the fruit in its seed . . ."

But today he harms no one. He has been pardoned, time has pardoned him. Javier is ten times less a man, a hundred times more a criminal. He deserves punishment at least a thousand times more. Eh, Dragoness? Enough? Let's just say that this is a detective story and we have come to the moment when the rewards must be doled out and we do not have to reward sinners as if they were men of justice.

"He has corroded the child's mouth with the mother's milk, he has gone into heaven to defile it, he has descended into hell to deliver it from subjection . . ."

Isabel in a cold motel room with her absurd Proffy, whom she does not seem to find absurd. And White Rabbit is not mine, either. She will never be mine and she is the only desire I have felt this entire night. Shit, shit. That goddamn kiss. And the very convincing way she insulted her make-believe husband. She showed old habit there. Then Jakob, caressing her, holding her in his arms. The tenderness with which he protected her. The way he led her so gently to the fireplace. Jakob is my rival, that's clear enough.

"He bade the moon to shed poison . . ."

I can't tell them my doubt and misgiving. She, pale White Rabbit, may never be mine anyhow, but it's damn sure she will never be mine if I seem unsure of myself. So adiós, Franz. And after you make your departure, I'll tell them they were wrong. Not now. Now I shall shout with them that you must not be pardoned, for to pardon you would be to deny forgiveness of all meaning. Only later will I insist that you didn't deserve to die, that you have paid the price of whatever may have been your crime, paid with twenty-five

long years of decency and honesty. Javier and Elizabeth have maintained their hell, heaping more fuel to it day after day. Not you, Franz.

"He bade the air to fall in flame . . ."

No longer do I stand in their way. I stand against the wall. Let them pass, let them pass. The single candle has been blown out by someone and in the darkness I try to sense them, feel them, smell them. I would like to reach out my hand as White Rabbit goes by. Touch her and stop her and explain my doubt to her and insist: damn it, what did he do? And what difference does it make now to anyone? I shan't do it. I can't do it. The six Monks file out and start down the spiral stairs. I know her answer. What Franz did or didn't do doesn't matter, man, it's just that he is the old and we are the new, and the old must shake over out of the way. Yes, the cycle has ended and the new pyramid must be built upon the tired shell of the old. And Franz is that tired shell and so must die. What did he do? Much, little, nothing, it makes no difference. I would still like to know, though. Maybe it's written somewhere in one of the notebooks, on one of the scraps of paper that I haven't found yet in the drawers of the trunk. For there are so many of those little drawers. There are thousands. And now I don't have time.

I gave up the fight, Dragoness, and joined them. Not with much enthusiasm, that's true, yet with a certain feeble excitement that was enough to swing the balance. I wanted to say, with them, to hell with the old. To hell with my forties. Back to a memory of youth, if not back to youth. You would have done the same. Middle age is not bitching. It's merely a bitch. So I followed them down the stairs and across my half-assed garden and out into the alley and across the Beltway to the street where their old Lincoln was parked, and I stood as they gathered in a semicircle before the door and pointed to the six small black swastikas pasted there. Five of them bore large X crosses, like the crosses made on fighter planes to show the number of the enemy the pilot has downed. In turn, one by one, each of the Monks stepped forward and put a finger to one of the crossed-out swastikas and curtly explained it:

"Oberscharführer Heinrich Kruger. Organizer of the transporta-

tion of the three thousand Jews whose lives were taken in revenge for the murder of the Protector of Bohemia and Moravia."

"Ruby Richter, SS guard in charge of the women's baths at Auschwitz."

"Lieutenant Malaquias von Dehm. Participant in the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto."

"Lisbeth Fröhlich, trained nurse. The preparation of poisoned marmalade for the physically and mentally defective children sent to Treblinka."

"Lorenz Kemper. Factory machinist. The manufacture of cylinders for the gas known as Cyclon-B."

Who these people were, I don't know. You'll find out for me, Isabel. You will make Franz talk and tell you, and then you will tell me. You will help me fill out the file. But I do know that these people are dead, and I know who killed them. Maybe it would be better not to know who they were. Just to forget those hazy years, years of my childhood and adolescence that are fused together in a mosaic, still strangely unfaded, of movies and newspaper headlines and radio reports and crime stories and cracked phonograph records, the written and heard debris of which half our lives is composed. No, I want to know. So you will learn and tell me, Pussycat. I still have you, despite your insistence that you were psychoanalyzed in your nitwit mother's womb. Yes, I still have you. And somewhere out of sight a distant voice is singing, and far away out of sight on the other side of the fat round world, dawn is rising. Not so far, perhaps, after all, though I have no idea what time it is. The six Monks surround me and we gaze somberly at the swastikas on the door of the Lincoln, the five that bear X's, the one that remains unmarked. And I say to myself: Of sand water is born, and of water, fish.

"He found out the house of life and destroyed it."

Did he? Well, maybe he did, maybe he did.

His stand-in, blond Boston Boy, opens the trunk of the old car and quickly slips the bundle he has carried inside his coat into a nest of clothing and rags, a small bundle as alive as I am, moaning,

wriggling, resisting. He slams the lid down so that whatever the bundle is cannot escape, cannot attack him. And I had thought, unimaginative shell of the old that I am, that the contents of my prize steamer trunk were rather unusual. I haven't the slightest idea what Boston Boy is up to. Why should I? The irrational is not to be explained. I shrug. Everyone has relaxed now. The last act has ended. We return now to our real names, whatever they are, to our real being, whatever that is. Brother Thomas smiles and drags a match across his buttocks, across the embroidered silver eagle and serpent. His joint glows. And now we will take another trip, man. We're going to fly high, cats. High and far, swinging loose, swinging crazy, casting spells, shaking demons, rocking and twisting and always going, going, going, man, going. Let's hit it, man, let's split. The road is very long.

△ Elizabeth and Javier remained facing the wall of locust gods. They did not look at Franz. They looked at each other, into each other's eyes. Javier started to say something but Elizabeth closed his lips with her hand and they went on looking at each other. The sea took the light of the sun and reflected and filtered it and sent it back transformed to the sun. The sea of green and blue and violet stripes, colors of the water of life. It overpowers the land of hazy mountains that are like shoulders thrown up from the depth of the sea, pale and blue, that are the backbones of the tired old monster of the sea. And in the harbor of Rhodes, the ship is about to leave. Elena, wrapped in a black shawl, Elena, wrinkled and brown as a nut, but with shining eyes and teeth, stands among the women shouting up at the sky and now and again praying. The women weep, yet laugh between their sobs. Their men are sailing away from them today. Leaving the island to find work in Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, wherever laborers are needed. They will cease to be peasants and become servants and mechanics. Black-clad wives weep, old grandmothers, wrinkled and white-haired, thin-lipped, young cousins. All of them have their pictures taken in a group. They stop crying at once, smile for the photogra-

pher, curse the clumsy old woman who at that instant crosses in front of the camera. All of Rhodes laughs and cries and makes jokes and shouts farewells. Venders of sesame bread and meat pies. Old women wearing black turbans. Shrieking children. Whistles and shouts of stevedores loading and unloading. The jostling of the porters.

"Is Elena seeing a relative off?"

She weeps and shouts. She throws herself against the side of the ship. She tears off her shawl and kneels on the ground. Elizabeth waves to her, takes out her handkerchief and waves again. Elena sees them and raises her arms toward the sky, her knuckles knotted and brown. She spreads her fingers to send a long kiss with her eyes closed.

"Do you think she has come because of us?"

The hawsers are thrown off. Elizabeth says farewell to Rhodes without daring to cry, letting Elena and the women of the island weep in her stead. Voices surge from the brown and rocky earth that is beautiful only because of the sea, the sea across which the ship is now moving. Elena is lost in the crowd, weeping, shouting again and again, fainter and fainter.

△ So there we were, Dragoness, that last night which was also the first night, the six Monks, Isabel and myself, seated beneath the gray and green paint-flaking arcade in Cholula on brass chairs around two aluminum tables that belonged to an oyster bar which after darkness fell became a different kind of bar. The oysters lay still in their large jars of gray water. An alcohol-soaked worm hung suspended in my bottle of mescal. Only I was drinking. The others were taking a trip. They were floating, high, far away. "Groovy, groovy," repeated, every little while, the girl who another night had been Judge Morgana and another year, perhaps, had been a child taken south by train carrying a doll whose head broke. Near us stood a small group of musicians, slick-varnished straw hats, white shirts, drill trousers, playing their guitars and singing, out of tune, the corrido "Benjamín Argumedo." *Lo bajaron por la sierra, todo*

liado como un cohete. Near us also were women with narrow foreheads, small teeth set in thick gums, hair in short braids or up in a knot, prematurely old, shawl-wrapped women whose bellies were big with the next child while the last held to their hand or slept in their arms or rode behind wrapped in the shawl. The women passed on bare feet, gathered near the wall, stared at us and laughed silently as they exchanged their joking secrets and their secret jokes in voices that could not be heard, words thinly inflected, fused chains of inaudible syllables. *Tanto pelear y pelear con el máuser en la mano*. I looked impatiently toward the plaza. Toward the street that climbs to the basilica atop the great pyramid which is really seven pyramids nested one within the other. The plaza was empty. It belonged now only to Cholula's night-wandering dogs, some yellow, some black, all lost, listless, strengthless, hungry, scratching at their infestations of sores and fleas, crippled, emaciated. I looked, but not the Monks. They neither saw nor heard. They were flying high now. To their clothing they had pinned little tin badges, like the stars the sheriffs of the East wear. *Make Marijuana Legal. Baby Scratch My Back. LSD NOT LBJ. Abolish Reality*. They smoked their joints like black bats and did not see me as I looked toward the street to see if our friends had returned yet, while at the same time, good Mexican campaigner that I am, never say die and all that, under the table I stretched my foot, trying to touch the foot of the girl who another night was pale White Rabbit who was Jeanne Féry the nun who was Helen of Troy who was Mother Mary who was yourself, Dragoness. I reached for her with my toe but she paid me no attention. She and Jakob were holding hands. *Para acabar fusilados en el panteón de Durango*. I turned to you, beside me, Isabel, leaning against my shoulder with your eyes closed.

"Do you think they're going to show?"

You didn't answer me. The mariachi musicians went on playing and the dogs came to our table and looked at us with their large hopeful eyes, red and yellow eyes irritated and rheumy. And I drank my mescal and observed the faces of the six Monks and saw them as taking part in a masque, as wearing disguises the purpose

of which was to testify to the ultimate nature of true energy, the energy that changes things, that is never wasted although after exertion it may be lost for a time and then return because it has not really been lost but has simply passed over into the hands of someone else who some other day may perhaps give it back. Their clothing was dusty and spotted with mud and they smoked their marijuana and listened to the musicians playing for them on an April night.

"My head aches," you said, Pussycat.

"Are they going to show?"

"I don't know."

The six young Monks were smiling. For those passing us, their muddy clothing doubtless seemed another detail of their costumes, less obvious than their tin badges. *Abolish Reality*. Passers-by looked at us, at you and me and at the six Monks, and didn't suspect us of anything. Why should we be suspected? The six Monks were merely comical, and who was to know that their comedy was that of Laurel and Hardy, who made us laugh and feel surprise and sense the endless possibilities open to man when they dismembered an old car or smashed up a very proper suburban home. Soldiers were watching us, too, leaning their shaved necks back against the columns of the arcade. Pistols in belt, caps-a-cock, cheek or temple or throat lividly scarred by a knife gash, toothpicks between their teeth, watching us and smiling mockingly. And Jakob went on embracing the girl whom I have called White Rabbit, looking at me simply that I should be able to tell myself that what to me might have seemed predestined was to him and in reality his freedom, and that if he could discover, twenty-one years later, its consequences, and convert his aspiration into act, then all of us can be equally free. What he had done, he was telling me in short, that I could tell myself, was that he had acted in the name of all mankind. But as he embraced the girl called White Rabbit, I asked myself what is the line that separates the model from the mere case, at what point does revenge cease to be private and become free and public, carried out to give a meaning that will splash in

widening circles beyond the little pebble of existence that happens to be at its center, in this instance the life of Jakob Werner.

Bullshit, I told myself, cut it, drop it, dry up. You're merely jealous of his youth and the girl he holds in his arms. You're merely tired and irritated that it should have ended this way, without your having the guts to prevent a crime, a murder, which you did not approve, and at the same time without your having been accepted by the criminals as their comrade, as one of them. You neither prevented it nor participated in it. You merely served as their guide into a strange pyramid which has at its heart a wall painted with crickets. Their guide, not their mentor, all the long length of a lazaret where, thanks to our vital love of cruelty, the isolation lepers live can create the illusion that they are really alive.

"Will they show?" I said again to Isabel.

"I don't know. I doubt it. They were just sitting there, holding hands."

"What were they saying?"

"Betty was talking, not Javier. She was telling him that it didn't matter. That life had to go on."

The girl called White Rabbit withdrew her foot from mine and looked at me with amusement and scorn. Very slowly she kissed Jakob.

I stroked Isabel's hair. "If we leave right away, we can be in Veracruz by dawn."

"No. I don't want to see the sea now."

"Would you rather go back to Mexico City?"

"Yes." She stood up and opened her purse and looked for her comb, her lipstick, her mirror. "Yes. There's nothing left to do here. Let's go back. I'm exhausted."

And the faces of the six Monks observed us with mockery. The black-skinned face. The face veiled by the straw-colored hair of the youth wearing pink pants. The Gothic face, erect over the sharpness of the cheekbones, of the girl in black sweater, black pants, black boots, black everything. Jakob Werner's half-closed eyes. The divine pallid face without eyebrows and with orange lips, the face

of young Elizabeth of the eternally intolerable life that nevertheless is eternally worth being lived. The blond and bearded face of all agonies. They looked at me as I stood beside Isabel. The dark-skinned women with swollen bellies and bare feet looked, and the slobbering drowsy dogs, the sardonic-eyed soldiers.

"Yes, let's go back. I'm exhausted, too."

They all looked, smiled, crossed their arms. *Ya no vivan tan engreídos con este mundo traidor*. I picked up a fistful of peanuts and tossed them at the face of one of the musicians.

"Hey, you! Take it easy there."

He put down his guitar. A man with thick mustaches. He stepped over his guitar and with the movement of a black panther advanced toward our table.

"Knock it off, drunk. Knock it off fast. Show some respect for . . ."

I threw another handful of peanuts at his face and the soldiers leaning against the columns of the arcade straightened and put their hands to the butts of their pistols and the big-bellied women covered their children's heads with their shawls and stepped out of the way as the dogs ran off limping, one foot lifted, hanging in the air, or perhaps only the stump where a foot had been, their bare hides splotted with dry stains, and the soldiers took out their pistols and ran toward us along the arcade where the four musicians were preparing to jump us, beat the hell out of us.

Jakob stood up quickly and quietly and calmly removed a bloody knife from his portfolio.

△ You told me all this that afternoon, Dragoness, when they let you visit me.

These places are always far from the usual human walks, from towns and cities. They have to be far, otherwise they would lose their meaning. I don't know what you had to pay before they would let you in, what you had to do; I don't want to try to guess. But you had always said, Some day I'll tell you everything, and I had no reason to doubt your word.

Of course, they made you stay outside my door. Even there you

were running risk enough. Your voice reached me very feebly, very low, but then the walls of my room caught it and amplified it. That was why I didn't move nearer you. I stood facing the part of the wall that pretends to be a window and I caught your voice before it fled from everything, before it died.

You have to do much before you can understand what they say. This tightrope walking is my daily bread, which I eat to understand. As they have never lived, any life that can be called living, they know nothing, not even the secrets of this their place. They have created isolation and believe that four walls can contain it. But nothing is utterly isolated. Nothing, Dragoness.

They would be surprised if they lived here with me and discovered that the absolute silence of the first days is merely the announcement of a universe of sounds which at first are heard one by one, then fused into a pattern, an order. When one of us to his shame tells them, they laugh and say it is all imagination. Be it known it is evil: to live imprisoned. But gradually, almost imperceptibly, the screws tighten. They themselves begin to imagine what we imagine and then we are no longer alone: they also are living imprisoned. They know it and they know that it is contrary to the principle of authority that they themselves attempt to impose. And then they stop your food, Dragoness, so that you won't have pangs of indigestion. Or they stuff a viscous pap into you because they believe that your imagination is the result of your hunger, which sharpens it. Or they cover the floor with cotton mattresses to shut the sounds away.

So I tell them nothing. I play the mute idiot and keep all I hear to myself. All the voices that come through the stone. The panting of love-making, the shouts of a quarrel. The snapped commands, the fall of clods of earth. The volleys of rifle shots, the crack of a rubber-hose lash. The whining of animals and the crying of children. The night music of an eternal repose and the million footsteps that drag past. The moaning I hear every night when I put my ear to the floor to communicate somehow with someone who must be buried beneath the soles of my feet.

It makes me happy that you have come to see me. You are going

to tell me that you and Javier came out of the pyramid dragging the body behind you. The first thing you saw was the parked Lincoln. You left the body lying across the iron rails and took advantage of the sad Cholula night, as silent as falling dust, so dark there at the foot of the pyramid and the church, near the insane asylum, in order to get rid of your burden. You opened the trunk of the Lincoln and he dragged the body up. But inside the trunk you found something you couldn't have expected. It was something alive, wrapped up like a mummy, a little bundle that stirred and whimpered. You felt afraid. Behind those bandage-like wrappings there was life, perhaps there was even more than one life. Javier was also afraid but with him fear showed itself as action. He went back and got the body and dragged it to the car through the sad silent darkness, the darkness as secret as the deepest recesses of the earth. He took the body by the armpits and made you take it by the feet and between you, with difficulty, you raised it and dropped it into the trunk. Javier wanted to put down the lid at once. You hesitated. When the body of the dead man had fallen, you had heard a soft cry, one that for a moment you let yourself pretend you couldn't identify, it might have been the cry of a nun in the church on top of the hill pyramid, it might have been the cry of a patient in the nearby insane asylum, it might even have been only the cry of a cricket. But you knew all the time that the cry had come from within the trunk of the car. You reached beneath the dead body and took out the small living bundle and held it in your arms without knowing what it was. Javier wanted you to leave it there. He told you that it wasn't yours, that it wasn't any of your business, that he had better put the lid of the trunk down and both of you get the hell out. But you cradled the bundle in your arms and accepted it, accepted everything, knowing that whatever was within those tight wrappings was both yours and not yours, and that the world has many riddles and enigmas that must not be too closely looked into except at the risk of catastrophic destruction. And whom could you ask about it, anyhow? You began to run, Dragoness, not sure where you were going. You could have gone up the

steep road to the church, or down the street into Cholula. Or around the pyramid to the asylum. You chose the last, knowing that there would be doctors and nurses at the asylum. You ran to the wide gate of its spacious grounds and put down the bundle where it would be found. Then you went back to your husband, Dragoness, as you always go back to him, to Javier waiting beside the closed trunk inside which lay a new skin to rot in the stead of the skin you had saved from rotting. You will always know whom you have to care for and protect, Dragoness. And let no one say anything about fear.

Now you have to go. I think you have come a long way just to be with me these few minutes, for, as I said, these places are always far removed from civilization. I would like to believe that in order to reach me you had to call upon the influence of important acquaintances, to pay large bribes. Yet I also know that it's possible you may be locked up here too, just like me. For your parents were as infected, or at least as suspected of infection, as those of any of us. I shan't say that you have come from the contaminated soil of Nazareth to this earth where live the dead who resuscitate themselves, this palace of Our Lord Lazarus. Yes, Lazarus lives here too. He of the resurrections. He who has given his name to our dwelling place and also to the pyramid and also to the church atop the pyramid. If you stand on tiptoe at the window, sometimes, not always but sometimes, the pyramid and the church can be seen, or at least can seem to be seen.

It's time for you to go now, Dragoness. Caesar the Sleepwalker serves his immortal master well and if he should suspect I have listened to you he might murder me with a cold in the head, a touch of indigestion, perhaps a twinge of hunger. It's mealtime, Dragoness. The yellow dog is feeding on the bones of the masked child and will soon be finished with them. I can't recognize the face of the child, but I am sure it isn't laughing. Our children never laugh except when they wear comic masks, funny faces of sugar, sweet skeletons and death's heads that laugh for them. And death is the puppet theater where the sad eyes of our children look

and see their own faces on the white skull because they know that, long before their childhood ends, their heads will be white skulls too.

Go, Dragoness, go. The yellow dog is turning from the bones of the child. He is tied only by dirty rags that at any moment may break, and then . . . I know that his hunger is far from sated.

So long, Dragoness. Take it easy. Stay loose. And don't forget your ever lovin'

Freddy Lambert

Tonantzintla, March 1962

New York, October 1965

Paris, September 1966