

MAD TOY

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. . . . Roberto Arlt

Translated and introduced by

Michele McKay Aynesworth

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To Naomi, Dan, Rowena, Max, and Ray

Y si se delata a Roberto Arlt?

Rosa de cobre *is not a Rose*,
is not a Kiss,
en la Máquina polifacética de Arlt—

Grabador de fuegos artificiales,
Fleurs de la banalité moderne
("I am not Hamlet nor was meant to be"),

Paralelepípedos
rascando cielos,
Phantasmagoría en cobre y zinc.

—“¿Qué hiciste de mi vida?”
preguntan, inocentes,
Siete Chiflados buscando Autor—

Títeres ahorcados
Soldados de plomo
Juguetes rabiosos
A-Luzinados.

Michele: “¿Y si se delata al Inventor?”

Arlt: “Yo no tengo la culpa.”

And If I Accuse Roberto Arlt?

Copper rose is not a Rose,
is not a Kiss,
in Arlt's many-sided Machine—

Recorder of fireworks,
Fleurs de la banalité moderne
("I am not Hamlet nor was meant to be"),

Parallelepiped
scraping the skies,
Phantasmagoria in zinc.

"What did you do with my life?"
ask Seven Stooges
seeking their Author—

Hanged puppets
Tin soldiers
Mad toys
sans Sight—

Michele: "And if I accuse the Inventor?"

Arlt: "It's not my fault."

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INTRODUCTION

To be alive is the first condition for aspiring to immortality.—Roberto Arlt,
“Parallel Lives of Ponson du Terrail and Edgar Wallace”

A classic is a book that lives.—James T. Farrell, *Studs Lonigan*

Roberto Arlt, loved by many in Argentina for his tragicomic, punch-in-the-jaw writing during the 1920s and 1930s, is widely recognized today as a forerunner of Latin American “boom” and “post-boom” novelists such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. His fast-paced, innovative style, fascination with popular culture, and fusion of fantasy with social realism helped pave the way for these later writers of magical realism and postmodern prose. Eminent Latin American authors, including Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Juan Carlos Onetti, have sung his praises.¹

That there are now two English translations of Arlt’s second novel (*The Seven Madmen*, 1984 and 1998) indicates his growing popularity in the English-speaking world. The time is overdue for Anglophones to have access to his first novel, *El juguete rabioso*, which I have translated as *Mad Toy*.² Since *El juguete rabioso* first appeared in 1926, the numerous Spanish-language editions (two in 1993 alone), not to mention stage and film adaptations, have given proof of its enduring popularity among Arlt fans.

To understand the world of this novel, it is helpful to know something about Buenos Aires, and to understand the city there is no

better place to begin than with Roberto Arlt. Born in 1900, dead at forty-two, Arlt captured the dizzying currents of popular culture as wave upon wave of immigrants swept over the Latin American capital in the early decades of the twentieth century. This period was as exciting and turbulent in Buenos Aires as it was in New York. Electricity, subways, telephones, radio, and a grand central railway station connecting Buenos Aires to the provinces—these were all recent novelties of life. The first skyscraper rose over the port in 1920. Foreigners and their languages were pouring into the city at an alarming rate.

Arlt's attitude toward this social upheaval was mixed. Standing at the crossroads of cultural trends in Buenos Aires in the 1920s, he claimed allegiance to the social realists of "Boedo" but also rubbed elbows with the more elite stylists of "Florida," including Borges and Ricardo Güiraldes, to whom *Mad Toy* is dedicated. It was at Güiraldes's suggestion that Arlt changed his title from a straightforward expression of disgust—*Vida puerca* (Life's a bitch)—to an ambiguous, poetically playful phrase more in line with the literary leanings of the Florida camp—*El juguete rabioso*.

Like the futurists, Arlt was stimulated by newness and speed and variety and contributed his own avant-garde imagery to representations of the new age; at the same time he became obsessed by the question of what happens to the outsider, the down-and-outer, the anxious human being caught up in the turmoil.

In Arlt's *Aguafuertes* (Etchings), a newspaper column published in *El Mundo* over a fifteen-year period, he presented images of daily life in the city, painting La Boca or Corrientes Street in words. The love and care that he could lavish on a written passage are everywhere evident in these vignettes, as they are in the more lyrical moments of *Mad Toy*. But Arlt's expressed aim was to shock his readers. In the aggressive tradition of the futurists, he was a "criminal" writer whose style at times evokes Hunter Thompson's outlaw journalism or Charles Bukowski's parodies of pulp fiction. Arlt dedicated himself to bad writing (see "A Note on the Translation"). He saw himself as a *máquina polifacética*, a many-sided machine that was not affected by narrow notions of linguistic and aesthetic purity. He

scorned established models such as poet Leopoldo Lugones, head of the Argentine Writers' Society, and reveled instead in the cacophony of voices typical of the urban landscape he knew. Arlt's novels, short stories, and plays reflect the influence on his urban humor of the traditional *sainete*,³ which featured a mélange of immigrant dialects, grotesque characters, and physical farce.

His style—or anti-style—was also influenced by reading European writers in bad Spanish translations. The breezy relish with which *Mad Toy* is written—a dash of romance, a hint of allegory, a dose of irony—recalls the parodic attitude of Ponson du Terrail in the serialized Rocambole stories that Arlt and Silvio Astier, the novel's main character, loved so much.

Mad Toy presents a kaleidoscope of color, tone, and mood, now lyrical, now ironic, now earthy, now reportorial, now heroic, now hardboiled. Language varies from the relatively cultured idiom of the narrator to the dialects and street slang of the novel's many colorful characters, including Silvio, the narrator's younger self. The levels of consciousness also shift, as when in chapter 4 the narrator finds himself recalling his younger self remembering a moment when his pulp hero Rocambole, on his way to prison, was reliving the good old days.

Arlt confessed that he toyed with his characters, using them to study his own desires. Indeed, in some crucial aspects his life parallels that of Silvio. In Arlt's mixed immigrant family, his father spoke German, his mother, Italian. He grew up in a neighborhood called Flores in the city of Buenos Aires, the cultural capital of Latin America in those days. Expelled from school on several occasions, he finally dropped out but continued to read avidly. His favorite authors included an eclectic range of Europeans, among whom figured Miguel de Cervantes, Francisco Quevedo, Benito Pérez Galdós, Pío Baroja, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ponson du Terrail, Jules Verne, Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, Paul Verlaine, Anatole France, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maxim Gorky, Leonid Andreyev, Feodor Dostoyevsky, and Leo Tolstoy.

Arlt did not get along well with his father—a figure notable

for his absence in *Mad Toy*. At age fifteen, while his father Karl sought his fortune in the northern province of Misiones, Roberto lived with his mother Ekatherine and his sister Lila. Like her namesake in the novel, Lila was studious; she managed to earn a teaching degree before she succumbed to tuberculosis at a young age.

Arlt dreamed of getting rich by patenting a process to rubberize stockings, but, like Silvio Astier, he also tried his hand at more practical jobs. One of them was selling butcher paper, though, according to his friend Nalé Roxlo, Arlt preferred to fill up the great sheets of paper with “outlandish fantasies.” Finally, Arlt enrolled in the Navy Mechanics School but was soon dismissed, seemingly without reason. It was at this critical juncture that he dedicated himself to writing, a decision that entailed, among other things, the need for a mentor (Arlt and Borré, 11–21).

The quest of Arlt’s protagonist for a mentor in *Mad Toy* may explain the book’s title; too often Silvio serves only as a plaything for his would-be mentors, providing them with a temporary diversion before being tossed aside. That Arlt’s own mentor should have been Ricardo Güiraldes is remarkable, not just because the older writer belonged to the style-conscious Florida group but also because he was a potential rival. It happened that two novels about adolescent apprenticeship appeared in 1926: Arlt’s *El juguete rabioso* and Güiraldes’s *Don Segundo Sombra*. The latter work, a nostalgic novel of the pampas, proved to be more popular with critics and overshadowed Arlt’s novelistic debut for many years.

Mad Toy is a promiscuous interaction of genres in the best tradition of the novel. It is pulp fiction, a realist novel, a picaresque serial, an open-ended postmodern detective story, an expressionist drama, a memoir, and a *Künstlerroman*—the story of an artist-hero’s apprenticeship.

As a portrait of the artist as a young man, the book foregrounds the ecstasy of adolescent dreams against the chaotic background of Buenos Aires in the early 1900s. It is in young Silvio’s repeated attempts to bridge the gap between his exuberant imagination and the sordid reality around him that the heart of the story lies. *Mad Toy*’s four chapters present four episodes in the life of Silvio Drodman As-

tier at, respectively, the ages of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen (although the latter is not stated). The novel's structure echoes that of the serial novels that make up—along with Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist*, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, technical manuals on electronics, and novels by Dostoyevsky—a prized part of the young man's reading.

Silvio's formative experiences reach us via the often ironic narration of his older and wiser self. The contrast between the cultured armchair wisdom of the narrator and the impulsive naïveté of young Silvio gives depth and texture to what might otherwise seem a simple tale. When the adolescent finds himself in the same room with a young homosexual, for example, it is the voice of the narrator that cues us to look beyond the stereotypical responses dramatized in the scene. José González Castillo's 1914 play *Los invertidos* (The perverts) provides a glimpse of the cultural clichés relating to homosexuality in early twentieth-century Argentina. Suicide was the ultimate end to be expected for homosexuals, who were duty bound to recognize their vice and abnormality; accordingly, in Castillo's play the wife shoots her husband's homosexual lover, then hands the gun to her husband so he can do the honorable thing and kill himself. In Arlt's scene, however, the narrator writes ironically of young Silvio's feelings when confronted with a gay roommate: "I didn't manage to tell him in that moment all the grand, precious, and noble things that were in me." This hint of mockery in Arlt's rendering of the scene is borne out in contextual clues relating to, among other things, Silvio's insecurity about his identity and the gay adolescent's contrastingly strong sense of who he is and where his destiny lies.

Mad Toy is also at times a kind of "mean streets" detective story à la Chandler or Hammett—not a whodunit, in this case, but a combination of why-did-he-do-it and what's-he-gonna-do-next. The mostly unobtrusive narrator tends to leave the story unexplained, leaving it to his readers to interpret the clues. What, for example, does one make of the Andalusian cobbler and the farcical horse tender named Rengo, who contribute to Silvio's literary education with thrilling tales of outlaws and underworld crime? Is it significant that both are lame, or that neither speaks "proper" Spanish?

As Silvio pursues his destiny, the more mature voice of his older self narrates the quest with gentle irony. Inspired by pulp stories of derring-do, the young adventurer strikes out with a sense of romantic purpose to invent himself and inevitably trips over reality. The result is a tragicomic tale set in the badlands of adolescence, where acts of theft and betrayal become metaphors for creativity. Crime and artistic creation in fact overlap in Silvio's attempts to affirm his existence and make the culture of his parents' adopted land his own. His efforts echo the ongoing struggle of immigrants everywhere to stake their claim in a new land.

Buenos Aires was rich in the early part of the twentieth century: rich in pesos, rich in immigrants, rich in languages, rich in culture. But to a boy like Silvio, this opulence could seem overwhelming, a Babylonian nightmare. Growing up in the working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, he is forced to move from one place to another as chance and poverty dictate. He must negotiate a fiercely competitive urban maze, bombarded at every turn by the babble of voices, the glut of narratives, the petty meanness of others. In a sense he is a plaything of the city. Primarily through his nocturnal, underworld adventures, he comes to know the madness and inhumanity—the poverty, privation, and cruel exploitation—that flourish amid the chaos. Arlt's use of an episodic structure is ideal for conveying the fragmented nature of these experiences.

The urban drama that compelled Arlt to write is still quite real; the struggles of outsiders for power and recognition never seem to lose their relevance. These battles, though narrated with irony and humor in *Mad Toy*, are fought on a turf that seems particularly familiar today. The young antihero, a school dropout and the son of immigrants, attempts to “be someone” by forming a gang and invading a school library; obsessed by weapons, he builds a reputation as an explosives expert. Later, he confronts a young homosexual who is himself engaged in a desperate struggle with society. For both of these adolescents, the greatest challenge is to be more than just a plaything to those in positions of power.

The public scenes that Silvio witnesses are given particular flavor by the sounds of foreign voices. Part of the novel's charm, in

fact, lies in Arlt's use of ethnic dialect and characters. Between the old Andalusian cobbler whose thick accent opens the story and the marketplace Napoleon whose low comedy tales of Garlic Head and the Englishman leaven the last episode, *Mad Toy* parades a carnival of Neapolitans and Spaniards, Jews and Turks, fat Alsatian landlords and French *cocottes*.

Added to this cornucopia of characters, manna for a would-be writer, are the many written and oral narratives that fill Silvio's world. As in the case of *Madame Bovary* or *Don Quixote*, these stories provide the young man with an imaginary wardrobe of costumes to try on in his search for identity. Because he is a school dropout, however, Silvio's literary inventory amounts to a bewildering mix of pulp serial novels, oral tales, proverbs, mysteries, the Bible, "dirty picture books," European literature, engineering manuals, songs, newspaper articles, and popular science magazines. The roles he rehearses are accordingly incongruous: "I was convinced that a great destiny lay ahead of me. I could be an engineer like Edison, a general like Napoleon, a poet like Baudelaire, a devil like Rocambole."

Boredom, curiosity, and a desire for fame also motivate the future writer. His sense of destiny grows as he responds to various tramps, prophets, muses, and doubles—visions of himself—and pays due heed to the portentous paraphernalia of barking dogs, knocking at gates, maimed puppets, and sinister milieux.

We see Silvio's budding narrative creativity at work in his fantasies, daydreams, and theatrical role-playing, which often come to us as interior monologue: "I seek a poem I cannot find, the poem of a body where desperation has suddenly peopled the flesh with a thousand giant mouths. . . ." Like Socrates in the *Symposium* or Baudelaire in *The Flowers of Evil*, Silvio gradually learns "to savor beauty in all its forms." In the course of his adventures, he is faced daily with sordid reality, swept up in a tide of grotesque characters. But even as a slow-burning rage against that harsh world grows inside him, the young protagonist develops a more playful approach to life. He increasingly views people and himself with the detached eye of a writer; he learns to invent where reality does not serve his purpose and to

live his life as though he were creating the script for a play. “Life is sweet,” he tells a friend. “Just imagine the grand scenery, imagine the cities across the sea. The females that would follow us; we’d be rich Romeos cruising the cities across the sea.”

It gradually becomes apparent that *Mad Toy*, as memoir, is the culmination of Silvio’s literary apprenticeship, just as it was for Arlt. The book may serve as a learning experience for the reader as well. But there should be a warning posted at the outset: “Let those who enter here without a sense of humor beware.” Arlt’s comic transgressions are the primary means by which he attempts to educate readers to the tricks of the storytelling trade. The humorous incongruities that arise at critical moments in Silvio’s life sound a discordant note warning readers to think twice about what they have just read.

In his *Aguafuertes*, Arlt takes numerous swipes at the petit bourgeois sentimentalizing purveyed by romantic novels and Hollywood films. With a novel such as *Mad Toy*, brimming with fantasy and romance yet pulling the rug out from under the protagonist—and the reader—at every turn, it seems clear that Arlt’s purpose is not just to tell a good story. Along the way, he also illustrates the uses of fantasy and humor. Fantasy, transforming the sordid into the beautiful, makes life seem sweeter; humor, exposing the illusions of fantasy, makes wisdom tolerable.

—Michele McKay Aynesworth

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

Translation from one language into another . . . is like looking at Flemish tapestries on the wrong side; for though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that make them indistinct, and they do not show with the smoothness and brightness of the right side; [but] a man may employ himself in ways worse and less profitable to himself. —Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

I have taken great pains to preserve Arlt's anti-style and polyglot idiom, as these are essential aspects of his reputation as an "outlaw" writer. Idiosyncracies of paragraphing (although I have resisted Arlt's tendency to make every sentence a paragraph), punctuation, and sentence structure have been maintained insofar as possible. Even the fastidious rendering of the expletive *mierda* as *m*— in the original has been respected as indicative of contemporary mores, and has thus been translated as *sb*—.

I have also carried over idiosyncracies such as Arlt's tendency to leave off the word "street" after names like South America and Bolivia, as in the first sentence of the novel:

At the age of fourteen I was initiated into the thrilling literature of outlaws and bandits by an old Andalusian cobbler whose shoe repair shop stood next to a green-and-white-fronted hardware store in the entryway of an ancient house on Rivadavia Street between the corners of South America and Bolivia.

The result is disorienting to the reader, who will feel some of the confusion that immigrants to Buenos Aires must have experienced as they tried to find their way through the labyrinthine streets of this sprawling city. The mythical realism of the first sentence in fact recalls the famous opening to *Don Quixote*, a work much admired by Arlt:

In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old buckler, a lean hack, and a greyhound for coursing.

In deciding how to render unwieldy sentences like the first one, I have followed the lead of prominent translators and theorists by celebrating the strangeness of Arlt's novel rather than trying to reduce its stunning chords and discords to modern English plain-song. My translation of Arlt's first sentence requires the reader to adjust to the otherness, not just of Arlt's prose, but of his imagination.

I have used as my source the 1926 original edition of *El juguete rabioso*, which was available to me in the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin. Roberto Piglia, one of the foremost Argentine authorities on Arlt, was my model for this choice. His 1993 edition is, to my knowledge, the only one to return to the original as its source. I have also followed Piglia by including as an appendix "The Neighborhood Poet," the chapter that was left out of the originally published novel. For those who see the novel as the story of a future writer, the Piglia model has special importance, for it preserves references to Silvio's early efforts to write that are lost in subsequent editions. In the 1926 text, for example, chapter 2 begins with a passage in which the mother, torn by guilt at having to insist that Silvio go to work, refers to his writing and wishes that he could one day publish something:

"I would so much rather you had the time to write."

"For all that's worth."

"The day Lila graduates and you publish something . . ."

In subsequent editions, the first line becomes “I would so much rather you could study,” and the mention of Silvio’s publishing something is omitted. “The Neighborhood Poet” not only contains a similar reference to the young narrator’s efforts to write; it casts a parodic light on the relationship between the complacent older mentor-poet and the naive young prose writer.

I have also maintained Arlt’s original scene divisions, which he denoted with a curious alternation of dingbats and spaces. These scene markers may function rhythmically, somewhat like Emily Dickinson’s dashes, or like cinematic montage; in any event, I have left them as they were.

Another way in which I have tried to capture the spirit of Arlt’s original is by emulating his lyricism. His eccentric punctuation and sentence structure often have the effect of spacing the parts of a sentence like musical phrases. Thus my method of translating certain passages was to copy them first as poetic verses, then to seek phrases in English of similar rhythmic coherence. The sentence in which Silvio describes Don Miguel in chapter 2 provides a good example. Here it is broken into poetic segments, first in Spanish, then in English:

La mortecina claridad de la candela
iluminaba el perfil de su rostro,
de larga nariz rojiza,
aplanada frente estriada de arrugas,
y cráneo mondo,
con vestigio de pelos grises
encima de las orejas.

The dying light of the candle
shone on his face:
the large strawberry nose,
the flat, wrinkled brow,
the bare head
with wisps of gray
straggling over his ears.

There are many passages of prose poetry in this novel, and it is my hope that the English translation echoes the grace of the Spanish original.

Throughout the novel I was challenged by Arlt's varieties of tone and diction. Beside the fact that Spanish is generally more formal than English, I had to deal with variations within the novel. In particular, the narrator's tone, though not devoid of colloquialisms, was much more elevated than that of his younger self. In order to convey that difference of tone in English, I occasionally used more formal, Latinate words when translating the narrator's discourse.

My decision to keep a few Spanish or Argentine words, such as *che*, arose from my desire to retain as much as possible the atmosphere of the original text. In particular, I wanted to maintain a sense of place. Arlt carefully located his story in a precise urban setting, the barrios of Buenos Aires, and an important part of that setting is the language of the neighborhoods. *Che*, for example, is a term of familiar address popular in Argentina and largely untranslatable ("hey" doesn't carry the same intimacy, nor is it used with the same frequency). Thus, I felt it was just as well to leave the term as a marker of the Argentine context of the novel. Other terms carried over include titles such as *Señor* and an occasional expression in *lunfardo*, the colorful underworld slang of Buenos Aires. The titles signify a concern for status that is ingrained in the Spanish language. Distinctions such as *Señor* vs. *che* are important to understanding social ambitions and humor in the novel. At one point, for example, the narrator asks himself, "Would I ever rise above my lowly rung on the social ladder? Could I become a *Señor* one day and stop being the boy who takes any job that comes along?" This desire to be a *Señor* is not just a question of becoming a "mister" or a "gentleman" (words that have lost much of their force in English), but of being a Someone with status and power. Another case where titles become important is the scene in chapter 2 with *Don* Miguel, *Don* Gaetano, and *Doña* María. The recurring titles of respect, *Don* and *Doña*, contrast comically with the lowlife farce enacted by these characters.

I decided to keep two *lunfardo* terms in chapter 1—*ranín* (sharper, fox) and *bulín* (bedroom), both of which are defined in

the endnotes. The word *ranín* is referred to as a “little bit of Gypsy lingo” by one of the juvenile band as they sit around a café table planning a robbery: “He was a *ranín* that Tenardhier—and that little bit of Gypsy lingo is terrific.” As for *bulín*, it has no satisfactory equivalent in English. “Come on in, guys—welcome to my *bulín*” is the way Lucio invites the gang into his bedroom after they have committed their first robbery. The naughty nuances of the underworld term *bulín* would be lost in English translations such as “Welcome to my bedroom” or “Welcome to my pad.”

Pad is not bad—but smacks of fifties beatnik slang, whereas I have sought out U.S. slang of the twenties and thirties for this translation, again in the interests of preserving the original flavor. Thus, words like *flatfoot*, gleaned from U.S. novels of the period—*The Dain Curse* by Dashiell Hammett, *Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell—will crop up occasionally as variants on more familiar slang words, such as *cop*.

Faithfulness to Arlt’s language did not come easily, for he revelled in mixing Hispanicisms (*cerilla* rather than the Argentine word *fósforo* for “match”), Argentine idioms and slang, unorthodox diction and syntax, elevated poetic prose, foreign terms, technical scientific language, immigrant dialects, and serial romance archaisms. One explanation for this polyglot anarchy is the social environment in which Arlt grew up. The largely self-taught, working-class immigrants read whatever came to hand—cheap Spanish translations of Dostoyevsky and other European writers, popular science magazines, serial novels, and whatever books were available in the local public library.

Although I felt it necessary to correct Arlt’s use of *herbero* (esophagus) to mean *hierba* (grass), I have tried overall to respect the “hasty writing” on which he prided himself. “Grammar is like boxing,” he wrote in one of his newspaper columns. You can follow the “grammar” of punches you’ve been taught by a teacher of the European style, but to make a great fight, you have to throw punches from every angle. Similarly, “the people who, like ours, are undergoing continuous changes, draw upon words from all angles, words that set teachers’ teeth on edge.” In the same article, Arlt defends

the right to use foreign terms such as *sandwich* instead of a stilted equivalent in Spanish (“El idioma de los Argentinos,” 142–43).

El juguete rabioso is peppered with foreign words and phrases, and I have generally retained them. In all cases the context is clear, but the presence of strange words suggests the confusion that prevailed in Buenos Aires in that period of intense immigration. In this translation the two English phrases in the text—“Kiss Me” and “the struggle for life”—lose their status as foreign terms, of course, although I specify in the first case that the song title “Kiss Me” appeared in English on the café’s blackboard.

Respecting young Silvio’s fondness for technical scientific terms did not pose a problem; I simply used the cognate *hexagonal* (rather than choosing the word *six-sided*), for example, when he describes the mold he used to build his cannon. However, rendering the old Andalusian cobbler’s brand of immigrant dialect at the very beginning of the novel proved to be devilishly difficult. In order not to be unduly annoying in the first pages, I decided to use a mild version of corrupted English and add the explanatory phrase “in his thick Andalusian accent” for anyone still in doubt. But I found myself adding dialect on occasion to make up for the many times when I could not convey the humor or color of the original—particularly, to compensate for the poverty of English slang vis-à-vis Argentine *lunfardo*. Thus, the domestic farce of the Naidaths in chapter 3 and the family feud of the Gaetanos in chapter 2 have been spiced up with a dash of Yiddish and a hint of Italian American dialect.

Arlt’s serial-romance archaisms provided the occasion for some entertaining translating. One such moment in the novel is the narrator’s presumably tongue-in-cheek imitation of the romantic style, complete with syntactic inversion, as he recalls the moment when young Silvio is about to tell Enrique the story of his cannon: “Sonada aventura fue la de mi cañón y grato me es recordarla.” I faithfully rendered this pearl in English as “A resounding adventure was that of my cannon, and happy am I to recall it.”

Although I went to great lengths to preserve the colorful slang of the novel’s criminal—or would-be criminal—class, either by finding equivalents in U.S. argot of the period or by retaining the origi-

nal word in *lunfardo* and defining it in the endnotes, I did not feel obliged to retain the quotation marks and footnotes that often accompany such terms in the original. Arlt was taken to task by Argentine critic David Viñas for holding the people's language at a safe distance by means of such typographical tweezers (Gnutzmann 56–57), but a comparison of the excerpt “El rengo” published in *Proa* in March 1925 with the passage as it appears in *El juguete rabioso* in 1926 suggests strongly that someone else, Güiraldes most probably, was wielding the tweezers.

In the interests of readability I have put Silvio's thoughts in italics, and I have used endnotes to explain unfamiliar names and terms.

Finally, a word on why I chose to translate *El juguete rabioso*. Arlt himself said he preferred *Los siete locos* (*The Seven Madmen*) and felt that his first novel was primitive by comparison. It is true that the Spanish of the second novel is more refined; that the structure is more conventionally linear; that the psychology of his angst-ridden protagonist Erdosain is more consistent; and that the use of expressionist imagery is more systematic. But the “flaws” of *El juguete*—the chaotic language and generic ambiguity; open-ended, but self-reflexive picaresque structure; wildly unpredictable mood swings on the part of the adolescent protagonist; and general stylistic exuberance—are at the same time its virtues, virtues that are no doubt easier for postmodern readers to appreciate. It is no accident that Arlt turned to drama after his last novel, *El amor brujo*: the naive romanticism and comic energy of *El juguete* progressively gave way to theater of the absurd—stage plays such as *Saverio el cruel* (*Saverio the cruel*, 1936), in which cruelty, cynicism, and the weight of fatality predominate. But Silvio Drodman, Arlt's early autobiographical representation of himself, is not yet broken by life. He trips over obstacles . . . but keeps on going.

MAD TOY

To Ricardo Güiraldes: All those who can be near you will feel compelled to love you. They will prepare a banquet in your honor, and for lack of more beautiful gifts, will offer you words. And that is why I dedicate this book to you.

1. THE BAND OF THIEVES

At the age of fourteen I was initiated into the thrilling literature of outlaws and bandits by an old Andalusian cobbler whose shoe repair shop stood next to a green-and-white-fronted hardware store in the entryway of an ancient house on Rivadavia Street between the corners of South America and Bolivia.

The colorful title pages of serial novels featuring the adventures of Montbars the Pirate and Wenongo the Mohican decorated the front of that hole-in-the-wall shop.¹ The minute school let out, we boys would head over to admire the prints that hung there in the doorway, faded by the sun.

Sometimes we would venture in to buy half a pack of Barrilete cigarettes, and the man would reluctantly leave his stool to make the sale, grumbling the whole time.

He was stoop-shouldered, gaunt, and bushy-faced, and to top it off, a bit lame, a strange lameness: his foot was round like the hoof of a mule with its heel turned outward.

Every time I saw him, I remembered a proverb my mother liked to repeat: "Beware of those who are marked by God."

The words would begin to flow when he saw me, and while he held a battered half-boot amid the jumble of lasts and scrolls of leather, he would teach me the sour song of failure, sharing the lore of Spain's most famous bandits, or singing the praises of an extravagant customer who tipped him twenty centavos for polishing his shoes.

Hanging on greedily to the memory, he would grin obscenely, not hard enough to push his cheeks up, but enough to pucker one lip over his tar-black teeth.

The old buzzard took a liking to me, and for some five centavos would let me borrow the cheap serial novels he had acquired via lengthy subscriptions.

Handing me the life story of Diego Corrientes,² he would comment in his thick Andalusian accent:

“Thiz kid . . . Whadda kid! . . . Sweeter’n a roze, and the mountain guards, they got ’im. . . .”

The cobbler’s voice would tremble and grow hoarse:

“Sweeter’n a roze . . . If ’e didn’ have awful luck. . . .”

Then he would begin again: “Imagine it, son . . . He gave to the poor what ’e took from the rich, he had women on every ranch. . . . If ’e wuzn’t sweeter’n a roze . . .”

There, in that cramped, roof-bound place reeking of glue and leather, his voice triggered a dream of mountains, newly green. Gypsies danced in the gorges. . . . A whole landscape of voluptuous peaks filled my eyes as he spoke.

“Sweeter’n a roze . . . ,” and the cripple would vent his sadness with hammer blows to the sole supported on his knees by an iron slab.

Then, shrugging his shoulders as if to shake off an unwelcome thought, he would spit into a corner, sharpening his awl on the stone with quick movements.

After a while he would add with an air of self-importance:

“The sweetest part comes when you reach Doña Inezita and the tavern of Uncle Pezuña, you’ll see.” And noticing that I was going off with the book, he would raise his voice in warning:

“Careful, son, it costs money.” Then turning once more to his chores, he would drop his head, covered to the ears by a mouse-colored cap, poke around in a box with glue-begrimed fingers, and filling his mouth with nails, continue the toc . . . toc . . . toc . . . toc of his hammering.

In numerous installments, I devoured the tales of José María, Thunderbolt of Andalucía, or the adventures of Don Jaime Long-

beard³ and other picturesque and plausibly authentic rogues featured in the colored prints: ruddy-faced horsemen with black muttonchops, a rainbow-colored cordovan hat covering their little ponytails, and a wide-mouthed blunderbuss lodged in the saddle of their superbly decked-out colts. Usually they were holding out a yellow sack of money, magnanimously offering it to a widow who would be standing at the foot of a green knoll with a baby in her arms.

Then . . . I would dream of being a bandit who strangled lustful magistrates; I would right wrongs, protect widows, and be loved by fair maidens. . . .

My comrade-in-arms for the adventures of this first phase was Enrique Irzubeta.

This ne'er-do-well went by the edifying nickname of the Counterfeiter—a great example for beginners in how to establish a reputation and get a head start in the worthy art of gulling the innocent.

The fact that Enrique was only fourteen when he conned the owner of a candy factory is clear evidence that my friend's destiny had already been decided. But the gods are tricky by nature, and it doesn't surprise me a bit to learn as I write my memoirs that Enrique is now a guest in one of those state-run "hotels" for rogues and upstarts.

This is the true story:

A certain factory owner had announced a contest in order to stimulate sales, with prizes going to those who collected a complete set of flags from inside the candy wrappers.

The difficulty lay in finding the flag of Nicaragua, which was relatively scarce.

These absurd contests are, of course, exciting to young boys, who tally the results of their patient research in daily huddles.

Thus Enrique promised his buddies in the neighborhood—some apprentices in a carpenter's shop and the milkman's sons—that he would forge the Nicaraguan flag if someone would bring him a model.

In light of Irzubeta's reputation, response was cautious, but

Enrique generously offered hostages—two volumes of M. Guizot’s *History of France*—to guarantee his probity.⁴

And so the bargain was struck there on the street, a dead-end street with green-painted streetlamps at the corners, and long brick walls, and an occasional house. The blue curve of the sky stretched out over thatched fences in the distance, and the monotonous sound of endless sawing, or of cows bellowing in the dairy, only made the little street seem sadder.

Later I learned that Enrique, using India ink and blood, had reproduced the Nicaraguan flag so skillfully that no one could tell the original from the copy.

Days later Irzubeta was sporting a brand-new air gun, which he then sold to a used-clothing salesman on Reconquista Street. This happened in the days when fearless Bonnot and the ever-valiant Valet were terrorizing Paris.⁵

I had already read the forty-some-odd volumes written by Viscount Ponson du Terrail about the admirable Rocambole,⁶ adopted son of Mother Fipart, and I dreamed of becoming a bandit of the old school.

Well, one summer day, in the sordid neighborhood grocery store, I finally met Irzubeta.

The hot siesta hour weighed on the streets, and I was sitting on a cask of gaucho tea talking to Hipólito, who took advantage of his father’s naps to build bamboo airplanes. Hipólito wanted to be a pilot, but first, he said, he needed to solve the problem of “spontaneous stability.” Sometimes he would be wrestling with the thorny question of perpetual motion, and we would mull over possible solutions together.

With his elbows propped on pork-stained newspapers laid out between the cheese bin and the red poles of the cashier’s box, Hipólito would be all ears as he listened to my ideas.

“Clock parts make lousy propellers. Use a little ’lectric motor and put some dry cells in the fuselage.”

“Like submarines . . .”

“What submarines? The only danger is the current could burn up

your motor, but the plane'll fly smoother, and it'll be a while 'fore the batteries conk out."

"Hey, what if we hooked up the motor to a wireless telegraph? You should study that invention. Wouldn't it be sweet?"

At that moment Enrique came in.

"Che, Hipólito, Mamá says can you spare half a kilo of sugar, pay you later?"

"I can't; my old man told me till your bill is paid . . ."

Enrique frowned ever so slightly. "I'm surprised at you, Hipólito!"

Hipólito continued in soothing tones, "I wouldn't have any problem, you know that. . . . It's my old man." And pointing at me, happy to change the subject, he said to Enrique, "Say, you don't know Silvio, do you? He's the one who made the cannon."

Irzubeta's face lit up with respect. "So that was you, huh? Nice work. The boy who cleans the pens at the dairy told me it fired like a Krupp."⁸

While he was talking, I observed him.

He was tall and lean. Shiny black hair curled nobly over his round, bulging forehead, which was covered with freckles. He had eyes the color of tobacco, a bit slanted, and he wore a frayed brown suit altered to fit his body by hands that were not made for tailoring.

He leaned on the edge of the counter, resting his chin on his hand. He seemed to be thinking.

A resounding adventure was that of my cannon, and happy am I to recall it.

From some workers at the light and power plant I bought an iron tube and several pounds of lead to build what I called a culverin or "bombard." I proceeded as follows:

I inserted the iron tube in a hexagonal wooden mold lined with mud. The space between the two inner faces was filled with molten lead. After breaking the outside covering, I smoothed the base with a thick file, fastening the cannon by means of tin braces to a gun carriage made from the thickest boards of a kerosene keg.

My culverin was beautiful. I would load it with two-inch-wide projectiles in burlap bags filled with powder.

Caressing my small monster, I would think to myself, *This cannon can kill, this cannon can destroy*, and the conviction of having created an obedient and mortal danger drove me wild with joy.

The neighborhood boys examined it with astonishment and saw it as a sign of my intellectual superiority. After that, on our expeditions to steal fruit or seek buried treasure in the no-man's-land that lay beyond the Maldonado Stream in San José de Flores, I was in charge.

The day we fired the cannon was glorious. We did the test shot in a clump of retama bushes in a huge empty lot on Avellaneda Street just before you get to San Eduardo. A circle of boys surrounded me while I, faking excitement, loaded the mouth of the culverin. Then, to measure its ballistic power, we aimed it at the zinc water tank attached to the wall of a nearby carpentry shop.

Gripped by emotion, I lit the fuse; a small shadowy flame leap-frogged in the sun, and suddenly a terrible explosion enveloped us in a nauseating cloud of white smoke. For a brief moment we were overcome with wonder: it seemed to us in that instant that we had discovered a new continent, or had been turned into owners of the earth by some strange magic.

All at once someone yelled, "Beat it! The cops!"

There was no time to make a dignified exit. Two policemen, running as fast as they could, were advancing toward us. We hesitated . . . and suddenly, making prodigious leaps, we fled, abandoning the "bombard" to the enemy.

Enrique ended the conversation by telling me, "Che, if you need some scientific data, I have a collection of magazines at home called *Around the World* that I can let you borrow."

From that day to the night of the great danger, our friendship was like that of Orestes and Pylades.⁹



What a new, picturesque world I discovered at the Irzubetas!

Unforgettable people! Three males and two females, and the house run by the mother, a salt-and-pepper-colored woman with

little fish eyes and a large inquisitive nose, and the grandmother, deaf, bent, and sooty as a charred tree.

With the exception of one absent person, the local police officer, everyone in that small, quiet cave idled in sweet vagrancy, passing in lazy leisure from the novels of Dumas to the comforting sleep of their siestas and the friendly gossip of afternoons.¹⁰

The house was dark and dank, with a crummy little garden outside the living room. The sunlight only managed to filter through in the morning to a wide patio covered with greenish tiles.

The family's worries would start at the beginning of the month. Then they were busy arguing with creditors, outwitting the "Spanish scum," calming the irate plebes who shouted tactlessly at their front door just because they hadn't paid for goods naively handed over on credit.

The landlord of this cave was a fat Alsatian named Grenuillet. Rheumatic, seventyish, and neurasthenic, he had tried in vain to have the Irzubetas evicted, but they were related to venerable judges and other old-guard members of the conservative party, and hence could not be budged. These good-for-nothing tenants, knowing the landlord's son worked at the Casino, even had the breathtaking gall to send Enrique around for free tickets.

In the end the Alsatian got used to being paid by the Irzubetas whenever it suited them and resigned himself to await a change in politics.

Ah! And what delicious remarks, what Christian reflections could be heard from the congregation of fishwives who would meet in the local butcher shop to pass judgment on their neighbors.

The mother of a hideous girl, talking about one of the Irzubeta boys who had exposed himself to this damsel in a fit of lust, would say to another woman: "Listen to me, Señora, if I ever get my hands on him, he'll be wishing a train had hit him first."

Hipólito's mother, a fat woman with an extremely white face, and always expecting, would say as she took the butcher by the arm, "Take my advice, Don Segundo, don't let them buy on credit, even for laughs. I can't begin to tell you how deep they're into us."

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” the burly man would growl, brandishing a huge knife as he lanced his way around a lung.

Ah! And were they ever jolly, those Irzubetas. If you don’t think so, tell the baker who had the nerve to complain about how behind they were in their payments.

It was his bad luck to be wrangling with one of the daughters at the door when the police inspector happened by and overheard.

This officer, accustomed to resolve all disputes with his boot, and annoyed that the baker was trying to collect what was owed him, tossed him out on his ear. The lesson in manners was not lost, and many preferred not to collect. In short, the life of that family was more full of laughs than a vaudeville farce.

The young ladies, past twenty-six and without a boyfriend in sight, amused themselves with Chateaubriand and languished in the company of Lamartine and Cheburriez.¹¹ This led them to believe they were part of an intellectual elite, and consequently they referred to poor people as “riffraff.”

“Riffraff” they called the grocer who dared to demand payment for his beans; “riffraff,” the shopkeeper from whom they had filched a few meters of lace edging; “riffraff,” the butcher who raised Cain when he heard them mumble through closed shutters, “We’ll pay you next month for sure.”

The three brothers, hairy and thin, glorious bums, took frequent sunbaths during the day, and when the sun went down, suited up and went off to conquer hearts among the loose women at the edge of town.

The two old ladies, saintly and surly, would carp incessantly over trifles, or seated in a circle with the daughters in the ancient parlor, would peer through the curtains as they wove their gossip; and since they were descended from an officer who supposedly served in the army of Napoleon, many times in the half-light that idealized their bloodless faces I listened to them spinning imperialist myths, evoking the musty splendors of nobility, while on the solitary sidewalk the lamplighter, his pole crowned by a violet flame, would light the green gas lantern.

As they could not afford a maid, and as no maid would in any case

have been able to put up with the roguish vigor of the three hairy fauns and the bad humor of the peevish demoiselles and the whims of the toothy hags, Enrique became the errand boy on whom their crippled economic machine depended. So accustomed was he to ask for things on credit that his shamelessness in that regard was unparalleled: a bronze statue was more likely to blush than his fine face.

To while away the long hours of leisure, Irzubeta would make sketches, his talent and sensitivity only proving once again that there have always been rogues with artistic flair. I went there often, having nothing else to do, and if the worthy old women didn't like it, that was their hard luck.

From this friendship, from our long conversations about thieves and banditry, Enrique and I developed a singular urge to follow in the footsteps of Barabbas and to court immortality as notorious criminals.¹²

Graphic photographs accompanying Soiza Reilly's¹³ article on the French apaches who had found refuge in Buenos Aires would prompt Enrique to announce, "The president of the republic uses four apaches for bodyguards."¹⁴

I would laugh back: "Come on, you've got to be kidding."

"It's true, I tell you, and they're like this," and he would spread his arms as if he'd been crucified to give me an idea of the chest size of those archetypal villains.

I don't remember what subtleties and twisted reasoning we used to convince ourselves that robbery was a noble and beautiful act; but I do know that by tacit agreement we resolved to organize a thieves' club, of which we were temporarily the only members.

Later on we would see. . . . And in order to initiate ourselves in a suitable manner, we decided to begin our career by burglarizing empty houses. It happened like this:

During the afternoon siesta, when the streets were deserted, we would venture out, discreetly dressed, to roam the neighborhoods of Flores or Caballito.

Our working tools consisted of a monkey wrench, a screwdriver, and some newspapers to wrap up the loot.

Wherever a sign announced a place for rent, we would go and ask

to see it, our faces composed, our manners impeccable, looking for all the world like Cacus's little acolytes.¹⁵

Then, once we had been given the house keys, we would swing into action.

I still have not forgotten the thrill of opening those doors. We would enter violently, then run through the rooms in our lust for loot, sizing up at a glance the value of anything we could make off with.

If the house had electricity, we would seize the wiring, light fixtures and doorbells, lightbulbs and electric switches, chandeliers, lampshades, and batteries. From the bathtub we took the nickel-plated taps, from the sink, the bronze, and if we didn't carry off doors or windows, it was only to avoid looking like working stiff.

With a tense knot in our stomachs, driven by a painful kind of joy, we would work the speedy changes of stage magicians, laughing for no reason, trembling over nothing.

Cables would hang in tatters from the ceiling, ripped loose by our heavy-handed passage; pieces of plaster and mortar would litter the dusty floors; in the kitchen an endless trickle of water would be leaking from the lead pipes, and in just a few seconds we could have the dwelling ready for costly repairs.

Then Irzubeta or I would return the keys and disappear with rapid steps.

Our rendezvous was always in the back room of a plumber who was the spitting image of Cacaseno¹⁶—moonfaced, past his prime, complete with potbelly and horns (it being well known that he tolerated his wife's infidelities with the patience of a Franciscan friar).

When the plumber's situation was gently pointed out to him, he would answer, meek as any lamb, that his wife suffered from nerves; in the face of such scientific logic, there was no answer but silence.

However, when it came to protecting his interests, he was a hawk.

This bowlegged simpleton would meticulously inspect our bundle, weigh the cables, test the lightbulbs, sniff the pipes, and with maddening patience, figure and refigure, until finally he would offer us one-tenth the value of our booty.

If we argued or became indignant, the good fellow would raise

his bovine eyes, a crafty smile settling on his round face, and without giving us a chance to say anything, he would pat us heartily on the back and usher us to the door with all the grace in the world and the money in the palm of his hand.

But don't think we limited our derring-do to vacant houses. There was no one to match us when it came to the hunt! Our hands moved with heroic speed, our eyes like eagles'.

We kept a steady watch over other people's property, and with the deliberate swiftness of the falcon as it swoops down upon the innocent dove, we would seize what did not belong to us.

If we went into a coffeehouse and spotted a neglected fork or sugar bowl, as soon as the waiter's attention strayed we would pounce; there was no kitchen counter, no hidden recess, where we could not find something we deemed vital for our mutual welfare.

We showed no mercy to cup or plate, knife or billiard ball, and I remember well, one rainy night in a busy café, Enrique very prettily walked off with an overcoat, and I, on another night, carried off a gold-headed cane.

On the lookout for game, our eyes would rotate like balls or open wide as saucers, but the minute we sighted prey we were all smiles, carefree and glib, our fingers alert and eyes watchful so as not to botch the job like small-time pickpockets.

In the shops we exercised the same sure skill; the way we could trick the young asses who minded the stores while their bosses slept had to be seen to be believed.

On some pretext or other Enrique would decoy the shop assistants outside and start asking them for prices on items in the display window. If no one else was hanging around inside, quick as a wink I would open a glass case and fill my pockets with boxes of pencils and artists' inkwells. Once we managed to siphon money from a cash-box that had no alarm; another time, in a gun shop, we managed to swipe a dozen gold-plated penknives with mother-of-pearl handles.

When we weren't able to pull off any robberies, we despaired at our ineptitude and feared for our future.

We would spend such days roaming around in a dark mood until we found some way to redeem ourselves.

But when the business prospered and coins gave way to paper money, we would choose a rainy afternoon to go riding in an automobile. What luxury then to wander the streets of the city in pouring rain! Leaving the scurrying masses behind, we would stretch out on the soft cushions and light up a cigarette, imagining that we lived in Paris or in foggy London. We would dream in silence, our lips shaped in a condescending grin.

Later, in a swank teashop, we would drink chocolate mixed with vanilla until, satiated, we returned on the afternoon train, our energy redoubled by the surge of excitement that filled our voluptuous bodies, by the power all around us, with those iron voices shouting in our ears, “Go ahead, go ahead!”

One day I said to Enrique, “We have to form a band of really smart guys.”

“The trouble is,” argued Enrique, “there aren’t many like us.”

“No, you’re right; but there must be some.”

A few weeks after this conversation, thanks to Enrique, our fellowship was joined by an irritating pest named Lucio; he had a small body that was livid from too much masturbation and, to top it off, a face so brazen it made you laugh just to look at him.

Living with some pious old aunts who cared little or nothing about him, this pain-in-the-neck had only one passion, and that was telling the most ordinary things as if they were dreadful secrets. He would take great precautions, looking behind him and waving his arms like certain film stars acting the part of street urchins in barrios with high gray walls.

“A lot of good this guy will do us, he’s out of his mind,” I told Enrique; but as he brought the zeal of a neophyte to the new brotherhood, his unflagging enthusiasm, together with a gesture worthy of Rocambole, gave us hope.



Of course, we could not do without the obligatory rendezvous spot, and we named it, at Lucio’s suggestion (unanimously adopted), the “Club of the Midnight Horsemen.”¹⁷

Said clubhouse faced a latrine with filthy walls and peeling plaster at the back of Enrique's house. Dust clung to the wood in the narrow room, and from boards in the roof, long spiderwebs hung suspended. Scattered around in the corners lay heaps of disabled puppets, their paint long since faded. This was the legacy of a feckless puppeteer, a friend of the Irzubetas: various boxes of lead soldiers atrociously mutilated, stinking mounds of dirty clothes, drawers stuffed with old magazines and newspapers.

The door of the shack opened onto a dark patio, where on rainy days mud oozed from the cracked bricks.

"Che, is anyone here?"

Enrique closed the rickety window; we could see voluminous tin clouds rolling past its broken panes.

"They're inside gabbing."

We made ourselves as comfortable as possible. Lucio offered us Egyptian cigarettes, a great novelty to us, and nonchalantly proceeded to light a match on the sole of his shoe. Then he said, "We are going to read the Minutes of the Meeting."

The aforesaid club came fully equipped with Minutes of the Meeting (wherein the members' proposals were duly entered) and a cork stamp designed by Enrique: its rectangular surface bore the thrilling image of a heart pierced by three daggers.

The Minutes were recorded by each in turn, signed at the end of each session, and stamped at each heading.

They contained items such as these:

Lucio's Proposal. In order to rob in the future without needing a picklock, we should make wax imprints from the keys of all houses we visit.

Enrique's Proposal. We'll also make a plan of the house when we copy the keys. Said plans will be filed with the secret documents of the Order and must mention all peculiarities of the building for the greater ease of whoever must operate therein.

General Agreement of the Order. Member Enrique is officially designated as the Club's draftsman and counterfeiter.

Silvio's Proposal. In order to blow up a fortified area, take an egg,

remove the white and the yolk and inject the explosive using a syringe.

If the eggshell is destroyed by the nitroglycerine acids, make a jacket out of cellulose nitrate. No one will suspect that the innocent jacket carries an explosive charge.

Enrique's Proposal. The Club should have a library of scientific works so that the brotherhood may rob and kill according to modern industrial methods. Furthermore, after belonging to the Club for three months, each member is obliged to carry a Browning pistol, rubber gloves, and one hundred grams of chloroform. The Club's official chemist shall be Member Silvio.

Lucio's Proposal. All bullets must be poisoned with prussic acid and their toxic potency shall be tested by separating a dog from its tail with one shot. The dog must die within ten minutes.

"Hey, Silvio."

"What gives?" asked Enrique.

"I was just thinking. We ought to organize clubs in every town in Argentina."

"Forget it, Lucio," I interrupted. "The important thing is to get serious about what we're doing tomorrow and stop clowning around."

Lucio moved in closer with the bundle of dirty clothes he was using as an ottoman, and I went on:

"Training to be sneak thieves has this advantage: it teaches us self-control, which is what we need most for this job. On top of that, experiencing danger makes us more cautious."

Enrique cut in: "Hey, guys, let's quit making speeches and get down to something interesting. Right here behind the butcher shop"—a common wall divided the Irzubetas's property from that of the butcher—"this gringo parks his car every night and goes off to sleep in a room he rents in a big house on Zamudio Street. How about it, Silvio? We could make off with the magneto and the horn."

"Don't you know that's big-time stuff?"

"There's no danger, che. We jump over the wall. The butcher sleeps like a rock. We'll need to wear gloves, of course."

"What about the dog?"

“What’s the problem, if he knows me?”

“He’s bound to raise a ruckus.”

“What do you think, Silvio?”

“I don’t like it.”

“You realize we’ll get more than a hundred berries for the magneto.”

“It sounds good, but it’s risky.”

“Lucio? Are you in?”

“Putting on the pressure, huh? . . . Well, sure . . . just so long as I don’t rip my new ‘itsu.’”¹⁸

“What about you, Silvio?”

“I’ll sneak out as soon as my old lady’s asleep.”

“So what time do we meet?”

“Listen, Enrique, this deal’s no good.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like it. They’re going to suspect us. The back wall . . . The dog that doesn’t bark¹⁹ . . . If it’s that easy to get to, we’ll be easy to trace. . . . I don’t like it. You know I don’t turn my nose up at anything, but I don’t like it. It’s too nearby, and the cops have a good sense of smell.”

“OK, then, we don’t do it.”

We smiled as if we had just escaped from danger.

And so we lived those days of rare excitement, enjoying the fruits of our thievery. That money was special, and spoke to us in a private language.

The bills, with their colored pictures, seemed more significant, the nickel-based coins jingled merrily as we juggled them in our hands. It’s a fact, the money we acquired through trickery seemed more subtle and rare, the highest form of wealth. It seemed to whisper in our ears words of smiling praise and mischievous provocation. It was not the vile, hateful money that must be earned by hard work, but rather easy money, a silver disc with two gnomes’ legs and a dwarf’s beard, a clowning, dancing money whose smell carried us, like a good wine, to orgiastic heights.

Our eyes were free of worry, and I dare say a halo of pride and

courage adorned our brows. We basked in the knowledge that, had our deeds been known, we would have been hauled before a judge.

Sometimes, seated around the table in a coffee shop, we would start off like this:

“How would you face the judge?”

“I’d tell him about Darwin and Le Dantec,” Enrique would answer (Enrique was an atheist).²⁰

“You, Silvio?”

“Deny, always deny, even if they slit my throat.”

“What if they used the hose?”

We would look at one another in horror. We dreaded the “hose,” a rubber truncheon that left no trace on the victim’s skin, and thus was popular at the police station for speeding up confessions.

With scarcely contained rage I would give my answer: “They can’t break me; they’ll have to kill me first.”

As we uttered these pronouncements, the veins on our faces would swell, our eyes would fix on an illusory far-off slaughter, and our nostrils would expand, inhaling the smell of dust and blood.

“That’s why we have to poison the bullets,” Lucio would interject.

“And make bombs,” I continued. “Show no mercy. We have to terrorize the cops, blow them away. The minute they’re off guard, bullets . . . And as for the judges, send them mail bombs. . . .”

This was the drift of conversation as we sat around the table, solemnly enjoying our impunity before others, before people who didn’t know we were thieves; and a delicious horror clutched our hearts as we thought of how those new girls who were passing by would look at us if they knew that we, so young and so carefully turned out, were thieves. . . . Thieves!



Soon after that, Enrique, Lucio, and I met one midnight in a café to discuss a robbery we were planning.

Choosing an empty corner, we sat down at a table near the window.

As a light rain tapped on the windowpane, the orchestra unleashed the last wail of a jailhouse tango.

“Lucio, are you sure the guards are away?”

“Absolutely. It’s vacation, everyone’s gone.”

We were talking about nothing less than hitting a school library.

Enrique, pensive, leaned his cheek on one hand. The bill of his cap cast a shadow over his eyes.

I was uneasy.

Lucio was looking around with the satisfaction of a man for whom life is cozy. To convince me there was no danger, he pulled his brows down and told me confidentially for the tenth time, “I know the way. What’s to worry about? All we have to do is jump over the iron gate between the street and the patio. The guards sleep in a room off to one end on the third floor. The library’s on the second floor at the other end.”

“It’s a piece of cake, no doubt about it,” said Enrique. “It would be a sweet haul if we could get away with the encyclopedic dictionary.”

“And what are we going to carry twenty-eight volumes in? You’re nuts . . . or were you planning to hire a moving van?”

Several automobiles drove by with their tops down, and the high beam of their headlights falling on the trees threw long, shimmering stains onto the roadway. The waiter brought us coffee. The tables nearby remained empty, the musicians were chatting onstage, and from the billiard room came the sound of clicking heels, the enthusiastic response of kibitzers to a tricky shot.

“Want to play three-hand *tute*?”²¹

“Forget about *tute*.”

“It seems to be raining.”

“Even better,” said Enrique. “Montparnase and Tenardhier preferred nights like this. Tenardhier used to say: Worse things were done by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. That Tenardhier was a *ranim*—and that bit of Gypsy lingo is terrific.”²²

“Is it still raining?”

I looked out at the small square.

The rain was falling at a slant, and between two rows of trees the wind made it wave like a gray curtain.

Looking at the fresh green of branches and leaves lit up by the headlights' silvery beams, I felt—I saw grottoes, fairgrounds shaken on a summer night by the noise of people celebrating and red rockets going off into the blue and this uninvited vision made me sad.

My memory of that last unlucky night is still clear.

The musicians launched into a song listed in English on the blackboard as “Kiss Me.”

In that seedy atmosphere, the melody moved to a tragic, far-off beat. It seemed to be coming from a chorus of poor emigrants huddling on the deck of an ocean liner as the sun sank slowly into heavy green waters.

I remember how my attention was drawn to the Socratic profile of a violinist whose head was resplendently bald. Smoky-lensed glasses sat astride his nose, and I could tell how hard those cloudy eyes had to work by the way he was forced to crane his neck over the music stand.

Lucio asked me, “Are you still going with Leonor?”

“No, we broke up. She doesn't want to be my girlfriend anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Just because.”

Her image, added to the languor of the violins, invaded me with sudden violence. It was a call from my other voice to gaze on her serene, sweet face. Oh! how her smile, now far away, had made me ache in ecstasy, and sitting at the table, I poured my heart out to her, savoring a bitterness more delicious than any sensual pleasure:

*Ah! if I could have told you how much I loved you, with this “Kiss Me” music . . . persuaded you with this lament . . . then perhaps . . . but she loved me too. . . . Didn't you love me too, Leonor?*²³

“It's stopped raining. . . . Let's go.”

“Come on.”

Enrique threw some coins on the table and asked me, “Do you have your revolver?”

“Yes.”

“Sure it’ll work?”

“I tested it the other day. The bullet went through two planks.”

“If this comes off,” he added, “I’m buying a Browning; but just in case, I brought along some brass knuckles.”

“Are they worn down?”

“Not a bit, every knuckle packs a wallop.”

A policeman was heading our way over the grassy plaza. Lucio exclaimed, loud enough to be heard by the cop, “That geography teacher hates me, che, he hates me!”

We crossed the little square, and just as we found ourselves in front of the school wall, we noticed it was beginning to rain again.

A thick row of sycamore trees surrounded the corner building, making the darkness in the triangle seem even denser as the rain beat its private rhythm on the foliage.

Iron railings that connected the looming buildings flashed their sharp teeth.

Walking slowly, we peered into the shadows; then without saying a word I climbed up the bars, inserted a foot in one of the rings that linked every two lances, and, with a bound, landed on the patio, where I stayed a few seconds as I had fallen—in a crouch, touching the wet tiles with the tips of my fingers, so still not even my eyes moved.

“No one’s here,” whispered Enrique, who had just caught up with me.

“Maybe not, but why hasn’t Lucio come down?”

We listened to the measured clatter of horseshoes on the cobblestones, we heard another horse pass by, and finally the noise died away in the darkness.

Lucio’s head appeared above the iron spears. He lodged his foot on a crossbar, then dropped down so lightly that the sole of his shoe hardly made a sound on the tiles.

“Who was that, che?”

“A police inspector and a flatfoot. I acted like I was waiting for the streetcar.”

“Let’s put on our gloves.”

“Right, in all the excitement I forgot.”

“Now where do we go? This is darker than . . .”

“This way . . .”

Lucio acted as our guide, I took out my revolver, and the three of us headed for the patio underneath the second-floor terrace.

In the darkness we could vaguely make out a row of columns.

Suddenly I felt so superior to my fellow human beings that, giving Enrique’s arm a brotherly squeeze, I said, “We’re going very slowly.” Throwing caution to the winds, I made my boot heels echo, multiplying my footsteps as the sound rebounded from the building walls.

The certainty of absolute impunity soon infected my comrades with unshakable optimism, and we laughed so hard that a dog wandering in the dark street barked at us three times.

Jubilant that we could slap danger in the face, we would have liked a bold fanfare of trumpets and tambourines to wake people up, to show them how joy widens our souls when we break the law and enter smiling into sin.

Lucio, who was in the lead, turned around:

“I move we hold up the National Bank next.”

“Silvio, you can use your voltaic-arc gizmo to open the cash registers.”

“Bonnot must be applauding us from hell,” said Enrique.

“Long live the apaches Lacombe and Valet!” I exclaimed.

“Eureka!” yelled Lucio.

“What’s up?”

“That’s it!” He continued, as if to himself: “Didn’t I tell you, Lucio? They’ll have to erect a statue in your honor! . . . That’s it! You know what it is?”

We drew closer.

“Did you fellows notice? Enrique, did you notice the jewelry store right next to the Electra Cinema? Hey, I’m serious, don’t laugh. The john in the theater doesn’t have a roof. . . . I remember perfectly; from there we could climb to the roof of the jewelry store. We buy tickets one night, and before the show is over, we sneak out. We take a medicine dropper and squirt some chloroform through the hole in the lock.”

“Sure, it’s a cinch, Lucio. What a haul that will make! . . . And who’s going to suspect a bunch of kids? We’ll have to give this some thought.”

I lit a cigarette, and in the glow of the match I discovered a marble staircase.

We headed up the stairs.

When we got to the hall, Lucio shone his flashlight on the place, a narrow parallelogram, prolonged on one side by a dark passage-way. Nailed to the wooden frame of the door was an enameled plate whose letters solemnly announced: “Library.”

We drew nearer. The door was old and its tall panels, painted green, left a one-inch gap between the base and the floor.

With a lever, we could loosen the lock from its screws.

“Let’s go to the terrace first,” said Enrique. “The cornices are loaded with electric lightbulbs.”

We found a door that led to the second-floor terrace and went outside. Water was splashing on the tiles of the patio, and next to a high, tarred wall, a vivid flash of lightning revealed a wooden shed, its door ajar.

At odd moments a sudden ray of lightning would project an uneven line of bell towers and rooftops against a far-off, violet sky, and the tarred wall’s jail-bar face would cut out sinister strips of horizon.

We entered the shed. Lucio turned on his flashlight again.

In the corners of the cramped room were piled bags of sawdust, cleaning rags, new brushes, and brooms. In the center stood a large wicker basket.

“What could be in here?” Lucio lifted the lid.

“Lightbulbs.”

“Really?”

Greedily we bent toward the luminous circle projected by the flashlight. Shining in the sawdust lay the crystal globes of filament lamps.

“They’re not burned out, are they?”

“No, they would have thrown them away.” But to be sure, I looked over the filaments with care. They were intact.

We robbed in silence, eagerly filling our pockets, and since that

wasn't enough we grabbed a cloth sack and stuffed it, too. To keep the bulbs from clinking, Lucio filled the gaps with sawdust.

Irzubeta's trousers developed an enormous bulge around the belly, he had so many bulbs hidden there.

"Look, Enrique's pregnant."

We grinned at our joke.

Cautiously, we withdrew. The glassy pears tinkled like tiny, distant bells.

When we stopped in front of the library, Enrique said invitingly, "We'd better go in to look for books."

"And what do we open the door with?"

"I saw a crowbar in the shed."

"You know what we'll do? We'll wrap up the lightbulbs, and since Lucio's house is the closest, he can take them on ahead."

"Sh—!" protested the good-for-nothing, "I'm not leaving here alone. . . . I don't want to spend the night in the hoosegow."

Disgraceful portrait of a lousy low-life! The button of his collar had come undone, and his green tie dangled precariously over his torn shirtfront. Add to this image another: his cap on backward with the bill down over his neck, his pale, dirty face, his cuffs hanging down around his gloves, and behold, you have the shameless spectacle of that cheerful masturbator cum would-be burglar.

Enrique, who had finished packing his lightbulbs, went to get the crowbar.

Lucio grumbled, "What do you think of that? Enrique's a sharp operator, sending me out alone as bait."

"Oh, come on. It's only three blocks to your house. You could have gone and come back in five minutes."

"I don't like it."

"So what else is new? . . . You're always in a flap over something."

"And if I bump into a cop?"

"Run. What do you have legs for?"

Enrique came back in, shedding water like a dog.

"Now what?"

"Give it to me, you'll see."

I wrapped a handkerchief around the end of the crowbar, then

wedged it into the crack and began to push, first toward the floor, then away from it.

The door creaked and I stopped.

“Push a little harder,” mumbled Enrique.

I had another go at it, and the alarming sound came again.

“Here, let me do it.”

Enrique pushed so hard that the little noise exploded into a dry crack.

He stopped . . . and we froze . . . too stunned to move.

“What a brute!” protested Lucio.

We could hear our troubled breathing. Lucio made matters worse by accidentally turning off his flashlight, and we cowered there, afraid to make the slightest move, holding out our trembling hands in front of us.

Our eyes bored into the darkness as if listening, collecting the last lingering echoes. Our ears seemed to stretch as our senses sharpened, and we stood like statues, open-mouthed.

“What are we going to do?” murmured Lucio.

The fear broke.

I don’t know what inspired me to say to Lucio, “Take the revolver and go watch the entrance to the staircase. We’re going to work.”

“And who’s going to wrap up the bulbs?”

“Now you’re so concerned about the bulbs? . . . Go on, stop worrying.” And the prodigious bungler disappeared from sight after tossing my gun in the air and catching it on the way down like a Hollywood gangster.

Enrique warily opened the door to the library.

The smell of old paper filled the air, and by the light of the flashlight we saw a spider scurrying across the polished floor.

Tall, red-varnished bookcases rose to the ceiling, and the cone of light traveled over their dark interiors, revealing shelves laden with books.

Majestic display cases added an austere decorum to the somber room, and behind their glass panes, on leather, cloth, and paper spines, gleamed arabesques and gilded titles.

As Irzubeta approached the glass doors, they caught the light

and threw it back at him obliquely. His profile was like a bas-relief: sunken cheeks, staring eyes, black hair framing his skull before merging with the tendons at the back of his neck.

Looking back at me, he said, smiling:

“There’re some swell books here, you know?”

“Yeah, and easy to sell.”

“How long have we been here?”

“Half an hour, more or less.”

I sat down at a desk in the middle of the library, a few steps away from the door, and Enrique did likewise. We were tired. The silence of the dark room sank into our spirits, opening them to the great spaces of memory and care.

“Tell me, why did you break up with Leonor?”

“How do I know? Do you remember? She used to give me flowers.”

“So?”

“Then she wrote me some letters. Strange. When two people are in love, each one seems to guess what the other is thinking. One Sunday afternoon she went out to walk around the block. I don’t know why, but I did the same thing, only in the opposite direction, and when we met, without looking at me, she stretched out her arm and handed me a letter. She was wearing a tea-rose dress, and I remember that a lot of birds were singing in the trees.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Nothing very original. That we ought to wait—understand? That we ought to wait until we’re older.”

“Discreet.”

“And so serious, che! If you only knew. I was leaning against the iron gate. Night was falling. She was silent. . . . She would look at me in such a way . . . I wanted to cry. . . . And we didn’t say a word to each other. . . . What could we say?”

“That’s life,” said Enrique, “but let’s take a look at these books. Can you believe that Lucio? Sometimes he makes me sore as a boil. What a screwball!”

“Where would they keep the keys?”

“They’ve got to be in the drawer.”

We went through the desk and found them in a box of pens.

A lock squeaked briefly, and our search was under way.

We leafed through the books as we took them down, and Enrique, who knew a good deal about prices, would say: “This is valuable,” or “This isn’t worth anything.”

“*The Mountains of Gold.*”²⁴

“It’s out of print. You’ll get ten pesos for it anywhere.”

“*The Evolution of Matter* by Lebon. It has photographs.”

“That one’s mine,” said Enrique.

“Rouquete. *Organic and Inorganic Chemistry.*”

“Put it here with the others.”

“*Infinitesimal Calculus.*”

“That’s higher math. It must be valuable.”

“And this one?”

“What’s it called?”

“*Charles Baudelaire.* His life.”

“Here, let me see it.”

“It seems to be a biography—not worth anything.”

I opened the book at random.

“They’re poems.”

“What about?”

I read aloud:

I adore you as I do the vaulted night
Oh! vessel of sadness, Oh! taciturn white.²⁵

Leonor, I thought, *Leonor*.

And let us attack, though we crawl and squirm,
As, before a cadaver, a chorus of worms.²⁶

“Che, that’s beautiful, you know? I’m taking it home.”

“Okay, look, while I wrap up the books, you pack the bulbs.”

“What about the light?”

“Bring it here.”

I followed Enrique’s suggestion and set deftly to work, unconcerned about the danger, which had become familiar to me now. As we moved about in silence, our giant shadows crept over the ceiling

and across the floor of the room, distorted by the semidarkness in the corners.

Enrique sat at the desk paging through the books and putting them in order. I had just finished wrapping up the lightbulbs in a neat package when we recognized Lucio's footsteps in the hallway.

His face was twisted, and great beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Some guy's headed this way. . . . He just came in. . . . Put out the light."

Enrique looked at him in astonishment and automatically turned off his flashlight; I panicked and grabbed the crowbar that one of us, I don't remember who, had left near the desk. In the darkness, a ring of snow circled my head like a band of penance.

With hesitant steps, the unknown visitor climbed the stairs.

Fear suddenly reared its head and transfigured me.

I stopped being the adventurous young boy: my muscles tensed, my body became a grim statue overflowing with criminal instincts, a statue standing erect on rigid legs that were crouched in the awareness of danger.

"Who could it be?" asked Enrique.

Lucio answered with his elbow.

Now we could hear him coming closer, and his footsteps hammered in my ears like a painful echo of my throbbing heart.

I held the bar high over my head with both hands, erect, ready to strike . . . and as I listened, my senses identified the sounds with marvelous speed, pursuing them to their origins, defining by their nature the mental state of their source.

In a dizzy, semiconscious state, I was calculating:

He's coming near. . . . He's not thinking. . . . If he were thinking, he wouldn't step like that. . . . He's dragging his feet. . . . If he suspected, he wouldn't touch the floor with his heel. . . . His body would match his frame of mind. . . . Following the lead of ears on the alert for a noise and eyes on the lookout for a body, he would tiptoe. . . . But he's relaxed. . . . He doesn't know.

All at once a rough voice was singing there below, in the melancholy manner of drunks:

I curse the day I met you,
Ah, my Andalusian, ah, my girl of Seville.

The sleepy song broke off abruptly.

He suspects . . . No . . . But yes . . . No . . . Wait a minute—till I thought my heart would burst, it was pumping so fast.

As he reached the hallway, the stranger's hoarse strains came once again:

Ah, my Andalusian, ah, my girl of Seville.

"Enrique," I whispered, "Enrique . . ."

No one answered.

With the sharp stench of wine, the wind brought the sound of belching.

"He's drunk," Enrique confided in my ear. "If he comes in, we gag him."

The intruder wandered off, dragging his feet, and disappeared at the end of the corridor. He stopped at a turn, and we heard him fumbling with the spring latch of a door that he closed noisily behind him.

"That was close!"

"Hey, Lucio . . . why so quiet?"

"Joy, brother, joy."

"How did you spot him?"

"I was sitting down on the stairs, trying to see you here. All of a sudden—clank—I hear a noise, I stand up and see the iron gate opening. I tell you, it gave me the creeps, *voglio dire!*"²⁷

"What if the guy laid into us!"

"I'd waste him," said Enrique.

"So what do we do now?"

"What do we do? Get out of here, it's about time."

We went down on tiptoe, smiling. Lucio carried the lightbulbs. Enrique and I, two heavy bundles of books. I don't know why, in that dark stairway I thought of the bright sunlight and gave a low chuckle.

"What are you laughing about?" Enrique asked ill-humoredly.

“I don’t know.”

“Won’t we run into a cop?”

“No, there aren’t any between here and my house.”

“You said that before.”

“Especially not with this rain!”

“Cripes!”

“Hey, Enrique, what’s up?”

“I forgot to close the door to the library. Give me the flashlight.”

I handed it over, and with great strides, Irzubeta disappeared. We sat down to wait on a marble step.

I shivered in the cold darkness. Water was crashing furiously against the patio tiles. Involuntarily my eyelids shut and a far-off twilight slipped into my spirit. I saw my sweetheart’s pleading face, motionless next to the black poplar. And my inner voice, stubborn, insistent: *I did love you, Leonor! Ah! If you only knew how much I loved you!*

When Enrique arrived he was carrying some books under his arm.

“What’s that?”

“The *Geography* of Malte-Brun.²⁸ I’m keeping it for myself.”

“Did you close the door?”

“As well as I could.”

“Will it be okay?”

“No one knows anything.”

“What about that drunk? Do you think he locked the gate?”

Enrique’s intuition was accurate, and we left through the half-open gate.

A torrent of water was gushing between two curbs, and a relentless rain, its fury somewhat abated, fell fine and compact. In spite of our load, caution and fear sped us on.

“Nice haul.”

“Yeah, nice.”

“Say, Lucio, can we leave this at your house?”

“And what if the cops come snooping around?”

“Don’t worry; tomorrow we see a fence and unload everything.”

“How many bulbs are we carrying?”

“Thirty?”

“Nice haul,” Lucio repeated. “And what about the books?”

“I figured seventy pesos, more or less,” said Enrique.

“What time do you have, Lucio?”

“It must be three o’clock.”

“It’s late!”

No, it wasn’t late, but we were tired and nervous, and the shadows and the silence and the trees dripping on our chilled backs conspired to make the night seem endless, and Enrique said with a trace of nostalgia:

“Yes, it’s too late.”

Cold and weary, we were shaking as we entered Lucio’s house.

“Quiet, don’t wake up my old aunts.”

“Where do we put this?”

“Wait a minute.”

Slowly the door swung on its hinges. Lucio went into his room and turned on the light switch. “Come on in, guys—welcome to my *bulín*.”²⁹

The wardrobe in one corner, a small white wooden table, and a bed. At the head of the bed a Black Christ stretched out his twisted, holy arms, and in a frame, in an attitude of great pain, a silent film queen’s photograph stared at the ceiling.

Exhausted, we collapsed on the bed.

Our faces were drooping with sleep, the shadows under our eyes made deeper by weariness. Our eyes remained fixed on the white walls, now near, now far, as in the fantastic vision of a fever.

Lucio stowed our bundles in his closet, then sat on the edge of the table, cupping one knee thoughtfully between his hands.

“What about the geography book?”

The silence became a weight on our dampened spirits, on our livid faces, on our bruised, half-open hands.

I arose solemnly, without taking my eyes off the white wall. “Give me the revolver, I’m going.”

“I’m going with you,” said Irzubeta, rising from the bed, and in the darkness, we roamed the streets with hardened faces and slumping shoulders, not saying a word.



I had just finished taking off my clothes when I heard an urgent knocking at the gate, three fierce thumps that echoed in the night and gave me goose bumps.

The police have followed me. . . . The police . . . the police . . ., panted my soul.

Three more times the knocking sounded, howling now, faster, harder, angrier.

I took the gun and ran naked to the gate.

Just as I opened it, Enrique collapsed in my arms, sending some of his books rolling over the cobblestones.

“Shut it, shut it, they’re after me; shut it, Silvio,” he said in a hoarse voice. I dragged him in under the porch roof.

“What’s going on, Silvio, what is it?” yelled my mother, frightened, from her room.

“Nothing, be quiet . . . A cop going after Enrique because of a fight.”

In the silence of the night, the pursuers of justice knew fear worked in their favor; the shrill sound of a cop’s whistle echoed, and a horse galloped through the intersection. The terrible sound, multiplied, was repeated from several directions.

Like the coiled paper streamers of Carnival, the shrill police whistles crisscrossed in the air.

A neighbor opened his gate, we could hear people talking, and Enrique and I, shivering in the darkness of the porch, clung tightly to each other. Everywhere the nerve-wracking whistles lingered—threatening, multiple; we could hear the clanking of harnesses and frenzied galloping, the sudden halts on slippery paving stones and subsequent retreats, as the police pursued their sinister race to track down the criminal. And I held in my arms the object of this chase, his body trembling with fright next to mine, and an infinite compassion drew me toward the broken adolescent.

I dragged him to my rathole of a room. His teeth were clicking like castanets as he let himself fall into a chair, and his eyes, wide with fear, stared terrified at the pink lampshade.

Once more a horse crossed the street, but so slowly I thought for sure it would stop in front of my house. Then the cop put spurs to his horse, and the whistles, which had been tapering off, stopped altogether.

“Water, give me some water.”

I got him a pitcher and he drank eagerly. In his throat the water was singing. His chest rose and fell in a deep sigh. Then, without taking his eyes off the pink lampshade, he smiled with the strange and uncertain smile of one who awakens from a nightmare.

“Thanks, Silvio,” he said, and he was still smiling, his soul infinitely expansive with the miracle of his salvation.

“But how did it happen?”

“Listen. I was walking along the street. No one was around. When I turned at the corner of South America, I realized a flatfoot standing under the streetlamp was watching me. I stopped without thinking, and he shouted at me, “What’s that you’ve got there?”

“I don’t have to tell you, I ran like the devil. He was after me, but since he had on a cloak he couldn’t catch up. . . . I lost him. . . . Then I hear another one coming on horseback . . . and the whistle, this guy chasing me was blowing his whistle. So I hightailed it over here to your house.”

“You see? . . . All because you didn’t leave the books at Lucio’s house! What if they nabbed you? They’d herd us all to the pen. Say, where are the books? Not in the street, I hope.”

“No, they fell on the walkway.”

When we went to look for them, I had to explain to Mamá: “It’s not anything bad. It’s just that Enrique was playing pool with another guy and, without meaning to, he tore the felt. The owner wanted him to pay for it, and since he didn’t have any money, all hell broke loose.”



We’re at Enrique’s house.

A ray of red lightning penetrates the small window in the puppets’ cave.

Enrique is thinking in his corner, and a wide crease runs from his

hairline to his eyebrows. Lucio is smoking, leaning back on a pile of dirty clothes, and the smoke from the cigarette envelops his pale face in a fog. Over the latrine rises the melody of a waltz slowly beaten out on a neighbor's piano.

I'm sitting on the floor. A red and green soldier with no legs is watching me from his dilapidated cardboard house. I hear the disagreeable sound of Enrique's sisters squabbling outside.

"Well?"

Enrique raises his noble head and looks at Lucio.

"Well?"

I look at Enrique.

Lucio tries again: "So what do you think, Silvio?"

"There's no way. No more fooling around, or else we're going to slip up."

"Night before last we almost did, twice."

"Yeah, it can't be any plainer." And Lucio, for the tenth time, smugly rereads a newspaper clipping:

"Today at three in the morning Officer Manuel Carlés, on duty at the corner of Avellaneda and South America, surprised an individual with a suspicious attitude carrying a package under his arm. When told to halt, the unknown suspect started to run and disappeared into one of the vacant lots nearby. The thirty-eighth precinct has taken charge of the case."

"So the Club is finished?" asks Enrique.

"No. It's just freezing its activities for a while," Lucio replies. "It's not a good idea to work now that the police have got wind of us."

"Right; it would be stupid."

"What about the books?"

"How many are there?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Nine apiece . . . but don't forget to erase the school board seals."

"What about the bulbs?"

Lucio answers quickly: "Look, I don't want anything to do with the bulbs. Before I'd see a fence I'd throw 'em in the latrine."

"Yeah, you're right, it's dangerous now."

Irzubeta isn't saying anything.

“Are you sad, Enrique?”

A strange smile twists his mouth; he shrugs his shoulders, then vehemently, sitting up straight, he says: “You two are dropping out, of course, the rack is not for everyone, but I’m still in, even if I’m the only one left.”

On the wall of the puppets’ cave, the red ray of lightning flashes the youth’s gaunt profile.

2. WORKS AND DAYS

As a rise in rent loomed on our horizon, we relocated to another neighborhood, moving into an ominous hulk of a house on Basin Street in the heart of Floresta.

I no longer saw Lucio and Enrique, and a bitter misery darkened my days.

When I turned fifteen, my mother said to me late one afternoon, “Silvio, you have to go to work.”

Raising my eyes from the book I was reading, I looked at her resentfully. *Work*, I thought, *always work*. But I said nothing.

She was standing in front of the window. The blue light of evening fell on her white hair, on her yellow brow lined with wrinkles, and she looked at me sideways, half annoyed, half pitying, and I avoided meeting her eyes.

She persisted, sensing the aggression behind my silence.

“You must work, do you understand? You didn’t want to study. I can’t support you. You have to go to work.”

As she spoke she barely moved her lips, thin as two splints. Her small, stoop-shouldered torso was given shape by a black shawl, in the folds of which she hid her hands.

“You have to work, Silvio.”

“Work? At what? For the love of God. . . . What do you want me to do . . . invent a job? . . . You know I’ve looked.”

I shook with rage as I spoke—resentment at her hard words,

hatred of the world's indifference, of the endless daily misery, and at the same time a nameless pain: the certainty of my own uselessness.

But she insisted, as if those were the only words she knew.

"You have to work."

"Doing what? . . . Just tell me, what?"

Mechanically she approached the window, and with a nervous movement adjusted the folds of the curtain. As if it were hard to say.

"They're always advertising jobs in the *Press*. . . ."

"Sure, they want dishwashers, drudges. . . . You want me to be a dishwasher?"

"No, but you have to go to work. What little is left will allow Lila to finish her studies. Nothing else. What do you expect me to do?"

She pointed to a worn boot sticking out below the edge of her skirt and said, "Look at these boots. Lila has to go to the library every day to save money on books. What do you expect of me?"

Worry now filled her voice. A dark furrow cut across her forehead from the wrinkle between her eyebrows to the roots of her hair, and her lips were almost trembling.

"It's okay, Mamá, I'll go to work."

So much pain. The blue light fixed the monotony of our existence in my soul, where it fretted, obscene and silent.

From outside could be heard the sad round of a group of children:

The tower's under guard,
The tower's under guard,
I'll conquer it some day.

She sighed softly:

"I would so much rather that you had the time to write."

"For all that's worth."

"The day Lila graduates and you publish something . . ."

Her voice was soft, weakened by pain.

She had sat down next to the sewing machine, giving me her profile: beneath the fine line of her brow, a sad, white spark in the shadowy cavern of her eye . . . her poor hunched back . . . the blue light shining in her hair with a certain iceberg clarity.

“When I think . . .” she murmured.

“Are you sad, Mamá?”

“No,” she answered.

And then suddenly: “Do you want me to speak to Señor Naidath? You can learn to be a designer. Don’t you like the idea?”

“What difference does it make?”

“Well, anyway, they earn a lot of money.”

I felt impelled to get up, to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, to scream in her ear: *Don’t talk about money, Mamá, please! . . . Don’t talk . . . Be quiet!*

She understood my bitter silence, and her heart sank within her. Dumbstruck, she seemed to shrink, and yet she trembled at the rage still screaming from my eyes.

Don’t talk about money, Mamá, please! . . . Don’t talk . . . Be quiet!

Thus we remained, transfixed by pain. Outside, the circle of children kept singing their sad refrain:

The tower’s under guard,
The tower’s under guard,
I’ll conquer it some day.

I thought: *And that’s life, and when I’m grown and have a son, I’ll tell him, “You must go to work. I can’t support you.” That’s life.* A shiver ran down my spine as I sat in the chair.

Now, as I looked at her, observing her frail body, sorrow filled my heart.

I seemed to see her outside of time and space, on a dark, dry plain, with a sky so blue it was metallic. I was too small to walk, and she, whipped by the shadows and frantic with worry, was walking along the roadside, carrying me in her arms, warming my knees with her breast, holding my small body stretched out against her tiny frame, and she was begging for my sake, and while she was giving me her breast, the heat of a sob dried her mouth, and she took the bread from her hungering mouth for my mouth, the sleep from her nights, in order to attend to my cries, and with her eyes shining, with her body clothed in shameful rags, so small and so sad, she would open like a veil to shelter my dreams.

Poor Mamá! I would have liked to take her in my arms, to make her lay her white head on my breast, to ask forgiveness for my harsh words, and suddenly, in the prolonged silence, I said in a shaky voice:

“All right, I’ll go to work, Mamá.”

Softly: “That’s good, son, that’s good . . . ,” and once more the deep hurt sealed our lips.

Outside, above the rosy crest of a wall, a silver tetragram flashed in the azure blue.¹



Don Gaetano’s bookstore, or better said, his used-books store, at 800 Lavalle Street, consisted of an immense room, crammed to the ceiling with used books.

The place was wider and darker than the cave of Trophonius.² Wherever you looked there were books: books on boards laid across sawhorses, books on countertops, in corners, underneath tables, and in the basement.

A large entryway displayed to passersby what lay within the cavern, and on the street walls hung *Genevieve de Brabante*³ and *The Adventures of Musolino*, serial novels for crude imaginations. Across the street, a bell rang incessantly as people swarmed around a movie theater like bees in a hive.

At a counter near the door presided the wife of Don Gaetano, a fat, white woman with chestnut hair whose eyes were remarkable for their expression of green cruelty.

“Don Gaetano’s not in?” I asked.

The woman pointed to a hulking fellow in shirtsleeves who stood in the doorway watching people come and go. He was knotting a black tie around his bare neck, and the hair falling in ringlets over his disorderly brow let the tips of his ears show through. He was a good-looking sort, robust and dark-skinned, but underneath thick lashes, his large, shifty eyes watered and twitched suspiciously.

The man read my letter of recommendation, then handed it to his wife and stood looking me over.

A great crease traversed his brow, and his sedulous, ingratiating

manner hinted at a man who was suspicious and devious by nature, though he made a show of sugary goodness and hearty laughter.

“So you work in a bookstore before?”

“Yes, Don Gaetano.”

“And this other guy does a lotta business?”

“Quite a lot.”

“But he don’ got as many books as we got, I betcha.”

“Oh, of course not, nowhere near as many.”

Then to his wife: “Monsyoor’s not gonna work here any more?”

His wife replied in a harsh tone: “They’re all alike, these no-goods. They fill up their bellies an’ learn the job, then they go.”

As she leaned her chin on one hand, a patch of bare arm emerged from the green sleeve of her blouse. Her cruel eyes were glued to the street, with its heavy traffic. The bell of the movie house kept ringing, and a sunbeam reached down between two high walls to light up the dark face of Dardo Rocha’s house.⁴

“How much you wanna make?”

“I don’t know. . . . You know, Señor.”

“Well, now . . . I’m gonna give you one an’ a half pesos plus room an’ board, an’ you gonna live like a prince, that’s for sure.” The man bent his uncombed head. “There’s no schedule here. . . . The hardest work’s from eight to eleven at night. . . .”

“What? Eleven at night?”

“Whaddaya want, a boy like you’s gonna stay up till eleven just watchin’ the girls go by. An’ one more thing, you gotta be up at ten every morning.”

Remembering the deferential tone Don Gaetano used when speaking of the man who recommended me, I said, “That’s fine, but since I need the money, you’ll pay me every week.”

“Oh, so you don’t trust us?”

“That’s not it, Señora, but since my family needs things and we’re poor people . . . You understand . . .”

The woman shifted her offensive gaze to the street.

“Well,” continued Don Gaetano, “you gonna come to our apartment tomorrow at ten, it’s on Esmeralda Street”—and jotting down the address on a piece of paper, he handed it to me.

The woman did not answer when I said good-bye. Motionless, her cheek resting on her hand, her bare arm supported by book spines, her eyes fixed on the house of Dardo Rocha, she seemed to be the dark genie of the cavern of books.



At nine the next morning I showed up at the bookseller's house. It was raining, so as soon as I had pushed the buzzer, I took shelter in the vestibule.

An old bearded fellow, with a cap pulled down to his ears and his neck wrapped in a green muffler, opened the door.

"What you want?"

"I'm here to work. I'm new."

"Come on in."

I followed him up a dirty staircase that led to the second floor. When we reached the hallway, the man said, "Wait here."

Through the balcony window that faced the street, I could see a chocolate-colored store sign made of glazed iron. The drizzle slid slowly across its convex surface. In the distance, a chimney flanked by two tanks belched out great gauzy strips of smoke into space stitched by needles of rain.

There was a recurrent nervous ringing of the trolley bell, and between the car and the cables violet sparks were jumping; the crowing of a hoarse rooster seemed to come from nowhere.

A sudden sadness came over me when I saw how run-down the house was.

The door panes were bare of curtains, the shutters closed.

In a corner of the hall a forgotten crust of bread lay on the dust-covered floor; the smell of sour paste—the stench of long-damp filth—hung in the air.

"Miguel," yelled a harsh voice from somewhere inside.

"Coming, Señora."

"Is that coffee ready?"

The old man lifted his arms toward heaven, and closing his fists, crossed a wet patio to get to the kitchen.

“Miguel.”

“Señora.”

“Where are the shirts Eusebia brought?”

“In the small trunk, Señora.”

“Don Miguel,” said the man, slyly.

“Yes, Don Gaetano.”

“How’re things, Don Miguel?”

The old man shook his head, raising his eyes disconsolately to heaven.

He was thin, tall, long in the face, with a three-day beard on his sagging cheeks and the piteous expression of a runaway dog in his bleary eyes.

“Don Miguel.”

“Yes, Don Gaetano.”

“Go buy me an Avanti cigar.”

The old man started to walk off.

“Miguel.”

“Señora.”

“You get me half a kilo of sugar cubes, an’ make sure it’s weighed right.”

A door opened, and Don Gaetano came through, holding his crotch with both hands, a broken comb dangling from the curly hair above his brow.

“What’s the time?”

“I don’t know.”

He looked at the patio.

“It’s weather for pigs,” he murmured, and then began to comb his hair.

When Don Miguel returned with the sugar and the cigars, Don Gaetano said to him, “Gimme that basket, then you gonna take coffee to the shop.” Putting on a greasy felt hat, he took the basket from the old man and, giving it to me, said, “Let’s go to the market.”

“The market?”

He answered before I could finish the question: “I’m gonna give

you some advice, Silvio. Don't make me say things two time. You shop the market, you know what you gonna eat."

Crestfallen, I followed him out, carrying the basket. Beet red, and embarrassingly big, it knocked against my knees with a creaking noise that made the pain of being poor all the more grotesque.

"Is the market far?"

"No, it's right over here on Carlos Pellegrini Street"—and observing my sad face he added, "You seem ashamed to carry the basket. The honest man is not ashamed, long as he got a job."

A foppish fellow, barely grazed by the basket, gave me an angry look as I passed by; a red-cheeked doorman, dressed since early morning in his splendid gold-trimmed livery, sneered derisively, and a little street urchin delivered the coup de grâce with an "accidental" kick to the rear end of the absurdly oversized basket.

Oh, irony! And I was the one who had dreamed of being a great bandit like Rocambole and a poetic genius like Baudelaire!

I was thinking.

And in order to live, is it necessary to suffer like this? . . . All this . . . having to walk past sumptuous display windows carrying a basket. . . .

We spent almost the whole morning fooling around in the River Plate Market.

A fine fellow, Don Gaetano!

In order to buy a head of cabbage or a slice of pumpkin or a handful of lettuce, he would go up and down the stalls haggling over a few centavos in stormy exchanges with the vendors, trading insults in a dialect I did not understand.

What a character! He acted the part of a country bumpkin, a farmhand who plays dumb and ends up joking about it when he sees he can't fool anyone.

On the lookout for bargains, he would mix with floor-scrubbers and kitchen maids in order to stick his nose into things that couldn't have interested him, putting on a clownish act, and when he got to the fishermen's tin counters, he would study the gills of hake and mackerel, eat shrimp, and without buying so much as a shellfish, pass on to the tripe sellers, and from there to the poultry vendors, where

he would sniff the merchandise and finger it suspiciously before buying anything. If the vendors became impatient, he would bellow that he did not intend to be tricked, that he knew very well they were thieves, but that they were mistaken if they took him for an idiot just because he was so simple.

His simplicity was buffoonery, his sly stupidity a rogue's prowess.

Here is how he went about his business:

Selecting a head of cabbage or cauliflower with exasperating patience, he would appear to be satisfied and ask for a price, but suddenly he would spot another that seemed riper or bigger, and this would be the pretext for a quarrel between the vendor and Don Gaetano, both bent on robbing the other, on gouging their fellow man, even if it were only for one centavo.

His bad faith was amazing. He would never pay the asking price, only his final offer. Once I had put the food in the basket, Don Gaetano would step back from the counter, sink his thumbs into his vest pockets, draw out his money and count it and recount it, and disdainfully throw it on the counter as if he were doing the merchant a favor, hurriedly moving off afterward.

If the vendor yelled at him, he would reply:

"Estate buono.⁵ Don' get yourself in a stew."

Ever on the move and visually greedy, he would go into ecstasy at the sight of produce because of the money it represented.

He would approach the pork vendors to ask the price of sausage, covetously peruse the pink pigs' heads, turn them slowly under the impassive gaze of the potbellied merchants in their white aprons, scratch himself behind one ear, look lustfully at the rib roasts hanging from iron hooks, the columns of sliced bacon, and as if solving a problem that was taxing his brain, head for another stall to pilfer a round of cheese or count the number of asparagus shoots in a bundle, dirty his hands among the artichokes and turnips, eat pumpkin seeds, or examine the eggs against the light and revel in the bricks of moist, solid, yellow butter, still smelling of whey.

At approximately two in the afternoon we had lunch: Don Miguel eating on a kerosene container, myself on the edge of a table

littered with books, the fat wife in the kitchen, and Don Gaetano at the counter.



At eleven that night we left the cave.

Don Miguel and the fat woman walked in the middle of the lamp-lit street with the basket, the coffee things banging around inside, Don Gaetano, his hands buried in his pockets, his hat pushed back on his head and a lock of hair dangling over his eyes, and I, behind them, was thinking how long my first day had been.

We went upstairs, and as soon as we were in the hall, Don Gaetano asked me, “You bring a mattress, boy?”

“No, I didn’t. Why?”

“You got a little bed here, but you don’ got a mattress.”

“And there’s nothing for cover?”

Don Gaetano looked around, then opened the door to the dining room; on the table was a baize protector—green, heavy, and shaggy.

Doña María had already headed for bed when Don Gaetano took the baize cloth by one end and, throwing it over my shoulder ill-humoredly, said, “*Estate buono.*” And without answering when I said good night, he closed the door in my face.

I stood bewildered, looking at the old man, who expressed his indignation with a muted curse: “Ah! *Dío Fetente!*”⁶ Then he started off, and I followed.

The cubicle assigned to the underfed old man, whom I called *Dío Fetente* from then on, was an absurd triangle just under the roof, with a round window that looked sadly out over the electric lamp on Esmeralda Street. Gusts of wind found their way through cracks in the windowpane, causing the yellow tongue of the candle on the wall to dip and dance.

Near the wall was a folding cot, two crossed sticks with a sheet of canvas nailed to the crossbars.

Dío Fetente went out on the terrace to urinate, then sat down on a box, took off his cap and boots, arranged his muffler neatly around the back of his neck, and having prepared to face the night cold,

carefully ensconced himself in the folding bed, pulling the covers—some burlap sacks stuffed with worn-out rags—up to his beard.

The dying light of the candle shone on his face: the large strawberry nose, the flat, wrinkled brow, the bare head with wisps of gray straggling over his ears. To protect himself from the draft, Dío Fetente reached out to pick up his cap and push it down over his ears, then took a cigar butt out of his pocket, lit it, blew out long mouthfuls of smoke, and clasping his hands behind his neck, lay watching me somberly.

I began to explore my bed. Many must have suffered in it, judging by the shape it was in. The springs, having broken through the wire mesh, rose in the air like fantastic corkscrews; the clamps on the bedrails had been replaced by wire.

However, I wasn't expecting to spend the night in ecstasy, so after testing its steadiness, I took off my boots, imitating Dío Fetente, wrapped them in newspaper to make a pillow, covered myself with the green baize cloth, and falling into the treacherous bed, resolved to sleep.

Without question, it was a bed for the super-poor, a ghetto cast-off, the trickiest piece of furniture I've ever met with.

My back sank into the springs. It seemed as if their ends were trying to gouge the flesh between my ribs: the rigid steel mesh would sink inconsiderately in one place, while in another, thanks to the marvels of elasticity, promontories would arise, and at each movement the bed would make terrific noises, creaking and squawking like an uncoiled gearbox. I couldn't find a comfortable position, the coarse nap of the table cover scratched my throat, the edge of a boot was making my neck numb, the spiral springs were pinching my flesh.

“Say, Dío Fetente!”

The old man looked like a tortoise as his small head emerged from its burlap shell.

“Say, Don Silvio.”

“How is it they haven't thrown this wretched bed out with the garbage?”

The venerable old fellow, rolling his eyes, answered me with a

deep sigh, thus calling on God as his witness to all the iniquities of man.

“Hey, Dío Fetente, isn’t there another bed? . . . I can’t sleep here.”

“This house is hell, Don Silvio . . . , hell.” And lowering his voice, fearful of being overheard, he added: “This is . . . the wife . . . the food . . . Ah, *Dío Fetente*, what a house!”

The old man turned out the light, and I thought, *There’s no question I’m going from bad to worse.*

Now I lay listening to the sound of the rain falling on the zinc roof. Suddenly I became aware of muffled sobbing. It was the old man who was crying, crying from hurt and hunger. And that was my first day.

Sometimes at night. — There are faces of fair maids who wound with a sweet sword. They go on their way, leaving us to languish, our souls dark and lonely, as after a fiesta.

Rare incarnations . . . They are gone and we know no more of them, and yet they were with us one night, gazing raptly into our unmoving eyes . . . and we, wounded by their sweet swords, imagine what the love of those women would be like, with those looks that bore into one’s flesh. Grim desert of the spirit, outlandish luxury, harsh and compelling.

We imagine how they would tilt their head toward us so that their lips would be open to the sky, how they would let themselves swoon from desire, with not even a hint on their beautiful faces to spoil the golden moment; we imagine them tearing at the laces of their corsets with their own hands. . . .

Faces . . . faces of fair damsels ripe for the torments of ecstasy, faces that cause a sudden languorous burning in the gut, faces devoid of any lust that might undo a fleeting idyll. How they come to fill our nights!

I have spent hours letting my eyes feast on the vision of a fair maid who, during the day, left the longing for love in my bones.

Slowly I would consider her charms, charms that were ashamed to be so alluring, her mouth just made for lingering kisses; I would see her willing body cling to the flesh that called for her undoing,

and, relishing the delight of her giving in, the magnificent smallness of her vulnerable parts, my eyes on her face, on the body so young for torment and maternity, I would reach out an arm toward my poor flesh; punishing it, I would let it come to joy.

At that moment Don Gaetano returned from an outing and walked toward the kitchen. He frowned in my direction, but said nothing, and I bent over the jar of paste as I repaired a book, thinking: there's going to be a storm.

With brief intermissions, the couple were sure to quarrel.

The white, immobile wife, leaning on her elbow at the counter, her hands wrapped in the folds of her triangular green shawl, would follow the movements of her husband with cruel eyes.

In the tiny kitchen, Don Miguel would be washing dishes in a big, greasy tub, the ends of his muffer brushing against its edges. He wore a red-and-blue-checked apron tied to his waist with a string, to protect him from flying water.

Knowing what was coming, as I passed by he would turn his head, and without taking his hairy arms out of the tub, he would raise his eyes to the ceiling and tip his head toward the target, as if to say:

"Dío Fetente, what a house!"

I have to clarify that the kitchen, the place for our socializing, was a recess of the cavern, hidden from view behind the bookshelves right across from a stinking latrine.

On a dirty board, stacked next to leftover vegetables, were small pieces of meat and potatoes that Don Miguel would use to prepare the meager midday fare. Whatever was spared from our voracious appetites was served up at night in the form of a peculiar stew. And Dío Fetente was the genie and wizard of this stinking kitchen cave. There we cursed our fate; there Don Gaetano would take refuge at times to brood somberly over the pitfalls of marriage.

The hatred brewing in his wife finally boiled over.

It didn't take much to set her off.

Suddenly she would swell with a somber fury, leave her post at the counter, and dragging her slippers on the tiles, her hands twisted

in her shawl, lips pursed and eyelids unblinking, she would go after her husband.

I remember the scene that morning:

As usual, Don Gaetano acted as if he didn't see her, even though she was three steps away from him. I watched him bend his head over a book, pretending to read the title.

The woman had stopped dead in her tracks. Only her lips were trembling, the way leaves tremble.

Then she said, her voice hardened into a terrible monotone, "I was beautiful. What you done with my life?"

On her brow, strands of hair quivered as if a wind were passing.

A sudden dread shook Don Gaetano's body.

With a desperation that nearly choked her, she hurled these heavy, nitrous words at her husband:

"I was the one who raise you up. . . . Who was your mother? . . . Just a *bagazza*⁷ who went aroun' with all the men! What you done with my life?"

"You gonna shut up, María!" Don Gaetano replied in a cavernous voice.

"Sure, who stop you from going hungry and put clothes on your back? Me . . . *strunzo*⁸ . . . I am the one," and the hand of the woman rose as if to top her Italian insults with a slap in the face.

Don Gaetano stepped back, shaking.

With bitterness carried on a niter-laden sob, she repeated, "What you done with my life . . . pig? I was in my house like a carnation in a pot, and I didn't have to marry you, *strunzo*. . . ."

The woman's lips twisted convulsively, as if she were chewing on a terrible, gummy hatred.

I went out to chase the curious away from the storefront.

"Let them stay, Silvio," she called imperiously, "they gonna learn who is this good-for-nothing." Her green eyes grew round, making it seem as if her face were coming closer, as at the bottom of a screen, and she continued, a shade paler:

"If I was different, if I slept aroun' like a cat, I'd be living much better . . . far away from a slob like you." She took a rest and stopped talking.

Now Don Gaetano was waiting on a gentleman with an overcoat and great gold glasses riding on a narrow nose that had turned red from the cold.

Excited by her husband's indifference—for the man must have been accustomed to these scenes, preferring insults to the loss of his benefits—the wife began to shout:

“Don’ believe him, Señor, can’t you see he’s a thieving Napolitano?”

The old gentleman turned around in astonishment to look at the Fury, and she continued: “You gonna pay twenty peso for a book that cost four.” And since Don Gaetano still had his back to her, she screamed till she was red in the face, “That’s right! You’re nothing but a thief, a thief!” And she spit out her spite and disgust.

Adjusting his glasses, the old gentleman said, “I’ll come back another day,” and left indignantly.

Doña María grabbed a book and abruptly threw it at Don Gaetano’s head, then another and another.

Don Gaetano seemed to be drowning in fury. Suddenly he took off his black tie and hurled it in his wife’s face; then he stopped as if he had been hit on the head and ran outside, his eyes popping from their sockets. He planted himself in the middle of the sidewalk like a madman, gesticulating in her direction to get the attention of passersby, jerking his bare head, and pointing with outstretched arms as he shouted in a voice transformed by rage:

“Bitch! . . . Bitch! . . . Perfect bitch!”

Satisfied, she came over to me: “You see what he’s like. He’s no good . . . the bum! I tell you, sometime I think I’m gonna leave,” and going back to the counter, she crossed her arms, remaining aloof, her cruel gaze fixed on the street.

Suddenly:

“Silvio.”

“Señora.”

“How many days he owes you?”

“Three, counting today, Señora.”

“Here”—and holding out the money to me she added, “Don’

trust him, he's gonna cheat you. . . . He's already cheat the insurance company; if I want, he's gonna end up in jail."

I went to the kitchen.

"What do you make of this, Miguel? . . ."

"Hell, Don Silvio. What a life! *Dío Fetente!*"

And the old man, threatening the heavens with his fist, let out a long sigh, then bent his head over the platter and went on peeling potatoes.

"But what's going to come of these dogfights?"

"I don't know. . . . They don't have children. . . . He's not up to it. . . ."

"Miguel."

"Yes, Señora."

"Don' make dinner; today we not gonna eat. Anybody don' like that can move."

That was the crowning blow. A few tears ran down the ruins of the starving old man's face. Minutes went by.

"Silvio."

"Señora."

"Here's fifty centavos, you take it. You can fin' something to eat aroun' here." And wrapping her arms in the folds of the green shawl, she resumed her habitual fierce pose. On her livid cheeks two white tears slid slowly toward the corners of her mouth.

"Señora . . ."

She looked at me, and without moving her face, smiling with a strange, convulsive smile, she said, "Go on, an' be back by five."



Taking advantage of my afternoon off, I decided to go see Señor Vicente Timoteo Souza, to whom I had been recommended by a stranger specializing in occult sciences.

I rang the doorbell and stood looking in at the marble staircase. Its red carpet, held in place by bronze rods, was soaked in sunlight that came pouring through the glass panes of the heavy iron door.

The porter, dressed in black, came down the stairs with perfect sangfroid.

“What do you want?”

“Is Señor Souza in?”

“Who are you?”

“Astier.”

“As . . .”

“Astier. Silvio Astier.”

“Wait here, I’ll go see”—and after examining me from head to foot, he disappeared behind long, pale-yellow curtains.

I waited impatiently, anxiously, knowing that a decision by that grand Señor, Timoteo Souza, could change the fate of my unhappy youth.

Once again the heavy door opened part way, and solemnly the porter announced: “Señor Souza says to return in half an hour.”

“Thank you . . . Thank you . . . I’ll come back later.” I left, feeling lightheaded.

I went into a café near the house and, sitting down at a table, ordered a drink. *Undoubtedly*, I thought, *if Señor Souza receives me, it’s to give me the job he promised.*

No, I continued, *I have no reason to think ill of Souza. . . . Who knows all the work he must have that kept him from seeing me.*

Ah, Señor Timoteo Souza!

I was introduced to him one winter morning by a theosophist named Demetrio, who was trying to do me a favor.

We were in the hall, seated around an ornately carved table, as Señor Souza held forth, his closely shaven cheeks and lively, bespectacled eyes shining brightly. I remember he was wearing a velvety *déshabillé* with mother-of-pearl frog-and-braid trim and nutria cuffs on his trousers, colorful touches that added to his pose as the money baron, who amuses himself by stooping now and again to converse with some poor devil.

He was commenting on my probable psychology: “Cowlicks, headstrong character . . . , skull flat in the occiput, rational temperament . . . ; fluttery pulse, romantic disposition . . .”

Turning to the impassive theosophist, Señor Souza said, “I’m going to make a doctor out of this guttersnipe. What do you think, Demetrio?”

The theosophist, without batting an eyelash:

“Fine . . . although any man can be useful to humanity, however insignificant his social status.”

“Ha, ha; always the philosopher.” And Señor Souza, turning to me, said, “We shall see . . . Astier, my friend, write down what occurs to you at this moment.”

I hesitated; then, using an expensive gold pen he handed me with a deferential air, I wrote: “Lime boils when you pour water on it.”

“Bit of an anarchist, eh? Watch out for your brain, little friend. . . . Take care, because you’re going to have a *surmenage* when you’re between twenty and twenty-two years old.”

Since I didn’t know what he was talking about, I asked, “What’s a *surmenage*?”

“It’s a temporary fit of madness.”

I turned pale. Even today when I remember this, I feel embarrassed.

“It’s just a saying,” he amended. “It’s a good idea to control our feelings.” And he continued, “Our friend Demetrio has told me you’ve invented all sorts of things.”

The sun penetrated the windowpanes with sudden radiance, and an unbidden memory made me so sad that I hesitated before answering, but finally in a bitter voice I did: “Yes, some little things . . . a signal flare . . . an automatic star counter. . . .”

“Theory . . . dreams . . . ,” he interrupted, rubbing his hands. “I know Ricaldoni, and with all his inventions he’s still a humble physics teacher. If you want to get rich, you have to invent simple, practical things.”

I felt as though I had been laminated, pressed into layers of pain.

He continued: “Do you know who patented the game of diabolo?” A bored Swiss student, waiting out the winter in his room. He earned a pile of money, just like that Yankee who invented the pencil with an eraser on the end.”

He stopped talking, and taking out a case with a ruby rosette on the back, he offered us cigarettes made with blond tobacco.

The theosophist declined with a slight move of his head, I ac-

cepted. Señor Souza continued: "Speaking of other things. Our friend here has told me you need a job."

"Yes, Señor, a job where I can advance, because where I am . . ."

"Yes . . . yes . . . I know, you're with an Italian shop owner. . . . I know . . . a specimen. . . . All right, all right . . . I think that won't be difficult. Write me a letter, frankly laying out the peculiarities of your character, and you may be sure that I can help you. When I promise a thing, I follow through."

He gave a perfunctory nod as he rose from the armchair.

"Friend Demetrio . . . a great pleasure. . . . Come see me soon, I want to show you some paintings. Young Astier, I await your letter." Smiling, he added, "No trying to fool me, now."

Back on the street, I said enthusiastically to the theosophist, "What a good man Señor Souza is . . . and all because of you. . . . Thanks."

"We'll see . . . we'll see."

I let go of the memory in order to ask the waiter what time it was.

"Ten minutes till two."

What will Señor Souza have decided?

In the two-month interval I had written to him frequently, emphasizing the precarious nature of my situation, and after long silences and short typewritten notes that he didn't bother to sign, the rich man deigned to receive me.

He's bound to give me a job, maybe at city hall or with the government. If he did, what a surprise for Mamá! And remembering her, as I sat there in that café with swarms of flies buzzing around the pyramids of sweet rolls, sudden tenderness brought tears to my eyes.

I threw away my cigarette, and paying for what I had eaten, I made my way back to Souza's house.

My heart was pounding violently as I rang the bell.

I immediately took my finger off the button, thinking: *I can't let him think I'm impatient, he might get angry.*

What timidity there was in that circumspect ring! It seemed as if by pressing the bell I was saying, "Excuse me for bothering you, Señor Souza . . . but I need a job. . . ."

The door opened.

I stuttered, “The Señor . . .”

“Come in.”

I tiptoed up the stairs after the servant. Even though the streets were dry, at the threshold I wiped the soles of my boots on the mud scraper so as not to leave any dirt in the house.

We stopped in the vestibule. It was dark.

The servant started arranging some flowers in a glass vase on the table.

A door opened, and Señor Souza appeared, dressed to go out; through the lenses of his spectacles his eyes glittered.

“Who are you?” he yelled harshly.

Disconcerted, I replied: “But, Señor, I’m Astier. . . .”

“I don’t know you, Señor; and don’t bother me any more with your impertinent letters. Juan, see this gentleman to the door.” Then, turning around, he closed the door with a bang.

And sadder than ever, under the sun’s fierce glare, I headed back down the road to the cave.



One afternoon, after they had insulted each other to the point of hoarseness, the wife of Don Gaetano, seeing that he was not going to abandon the premises as he had on other occasions, decided to do so herself.

She went out to Esmeralda Street and returned to the apartment carrying a white bundle. Then, to hurt her husband, who was humming a dance-hall ditty in an insulting manner at the cavern door, she headed to the kitchen and summoned Dío Fetente and me. Pale with rage, she commanded:

“Take out this table, Silvio.” Her eyes were greener than ever, her cheeks two crimson stains. Unconcerned about getting her skirt dirty in those dank, narrow quarters, she bent over to pack the household goods she intended to take with her.

Trying not to get grease on myself, I removed the table, a grimy board with four rotten legs where the wretched Dío Fetente prepared his grotesque concoctions.

The woman said, "Turn up the legs."

I could see what was coming—she wanted to use this worthless piece of furniture as a handbarrow.

I wasn't wrong.

Dío Fetente took a broom and swept a mass of spiderwebs off the underside of the table. After covering the boards with a dish towel, the wife deposited her white bundle and the pots filled with plates, knives, and forks, wired the Primus heater to one of the table legs, and turning red from so much exertion, said, seeing we were almost done:

"That dog can go eat in a flophouse."

As he finished up the packing, Dío Fetente, bent over the table, looked like an animal with a cap on, and I, my hands on my hips, was trying to figure out how Don Gaetano would be able to pay our meager wages.

"You take hold of the front end."

Dío Fetente, resigned, took one side of the table and I took the other.

"Go slow," the cruel woman shouted.

Knocking over some books, we passed in front of Don Gaetano.

"Go on, you bitch . . . Go on," he thundered.

She gritted her teeth furiously.

"Thief! . . . The judge gonna be here tomorrow?" And between two threatening gestures, we walked out.

It was seven in the evening, and Lavalle Street was at its Babylonian best.¹⁰ The coffeehouses were crammed with customers, the elegant idle stood around in the lobbies of theaters and movie houses, and the display windows of clothing stores, where legs sheathed in fine stockings hung from nickel-plated bars, the show windows of orthopedic shops and jewelry stores exhibited in their opulence the cunning of all those businessmen who pandered to the lust of the wealthy with smart merchandise.

The pedestrians gave us a wide berth, if only to avoid being smeared by the filth we were carrying.

Ashamed, I imagined the clown I must appear; to crown my suffering, the dishes and silverware were making an outrageous racket,

as if to protest their own disgrace. I could look at no one, I felt so humiliated, and, like the fat, cruel woman blocking our way, I had to endure the taunts of delighted onlookers.

Several cabs moved slowly along beside us, the drivers offering their services, but Doña María, deaf to them all, walked on in front of the table, the legs of which gleamed in the light of display windows as we passed by. At last the cab drivers gave up the chase.

Occasionally the bearded face of Dío Fetente would turn toward me above his green muffler. Fat drops of sweat ran down his dirty cheeks, and in his pitiful eyes shone a perfect canine desperation.

At Plaza Lavalle we put down our cargo and rested. Doña María scrupulously inspected her things and secured the lids of the pots and pans with the four corners of the dish towel.

Bootblacks and newspaper vendors made a circle around us, but the watchful presence of a policeman warded off possible complications, and once again we took to the street. Doña María was going to the house of a sister who lived at the corner of Callao and Viamonte.

From time to time she would turn her pale face to look back at me, a slight smile curling her white lip as she asked, "You are tired, Silvio?" And her smile would ease my shame; it was almost a caress that softened the spectacle of her cruelty. "You are tired, Silvio?"

"No, Señora." And she, turning to smile with a strange smile that reminded me of Enrique Irzubeta's smile when he was slipping through the fingers of the police, continued on at a brisk pace.

Now we moved through empty, dimly lit streets lined by stately sycamore trees and tall buildings with beautiful façades and curtained, stained-glass windows.

We passed near a lighted balcony.

A boy and girl were talking in the half-light; from the orange room came the sound of a piano.

Envy and grief choked my heart.

I thought.

I thought that I would never be like them. . . . *I'll never live in a beautiful house and have an aristocratic girlfriend.*

Envy and grief choked my heart.

“We gonna be there in a minute,” said the wife.

A deep sigh filled our breasts.

When Don Gaetano saw us enter the cave, he raised his arms and cried happily: “We gonna eat at the hotel, boys! . . . How you like that, eh Don Miguel? We gonna go later. Close the door, close the door, *strunzo*.”

A wonderfully childish smile transformed the dirty face of Dío Fetente.

Sometimes at night. — I would think of the poets and how their beauty made the world tremble, and my heart would fill with pain, like a mouth with a scream.

I would think of the parties they had, festivals in city parks lit by solar torches in flowering gardens, and my poverty would fall from my hands.

Now I do not have nor can I find words to ask for mercy.

Stark and ugly as a bare knee is my soul.

I seek a poem I cannot find, the poem of a body where despair has suddenly peopled the flesh with a thousand giant mouths, two thousand shouting lips.

I can hear distant voices, brilliant fireworks, but I am here alone, held down in my world of misery, as if by nine stakes.



Third floor, apartment 4, Charcas 1600. That was the address where I was supposed to deliver the package of books.

Those luxurious apartment buildings are strange. Their harmonious friezes and sumptuous cornices, so complex and haughty, their large, spacious windows protected by rippled glass panes, convey images of luxury and power to the poor devils outside; inside, the polar gloom of their deep and lonely entrance halls repels those who love open skies adorned with cloud Valhallas.

I approached the doorman, an athletic specimen in blue livery who was reading a magazine with a superior air.

Like Cerberus, he looked me over from head to foot; then, satis-

fied that I was not a common thief, he exercised an indulgence arising no doubt from his haughty blue cap with its gold braid over the bill and let me in, saying merely, "The elevator on the left."

When I walked out of the iron cage, I found myself in a dark, low-ceilinged hall.

A burnished lamp shed its dying light over gleaming tiles.

The door of the apartment had only one panel, without glass panes, and its small, round bronze lock made it seem like the door to a monumental safe.

I rang, and a black-skirted maid in a white apron led me to a small room with blue wallpaper overrun by tasteless pale gold flowers. The blue light filtering through gauzy moiré curtains reminded me of a hospital. A piano, playthings, bronze knickknacks, flower vases, I was taking it all in when a sublimely subtle perfume announced her presence. A side door opened, and I found myself looking at a woman with a childlike face, thin curly hair covering her cheeks, and a generous décolleté. A velvety, cherry-colored robe reached just to her small gold and white slippers.

"Qu'y a t-il, Fanny?"

"Quelques livres pour Monsieur. . . ."

"Do we have to pay?"

"They've already been paid for."

"Qui. . . ."

"C'est bien. Donne le pourboire au garçon."

When the maid tried to hand me some coins from a tray, I refused, saying "I don't accept tips from anyone."

Coldly the maid withdrew her hand, but the courtesan, who must have understood my gesture, said, "Très bien, très bien, et tu ne reçois pas ceci?" And before I could dodge, or better said, receive her gift in all its splendor, the laughing woman kissed me on the mouth, and I saw her, even as she was disappearing, laughing like a child through the half-closed door.



Awake, Dío Fetente starts to get dressed—in other words, to put on his boots. Sitting on the edge of his cot, dirty and unshaven, he looks around with a bored air. He reaches out to pick up his cap and put it on his head, pulling it down over his ears; next he examines his feet, which are sheathed in shaggy red socks; and then, sinking his little finger in his ear, he shakes it rapidly, making a disagreeable noise. Finally he makes up his mind and puts on his boots. Hunched forward, he slouches toward the door of the little room, turns back, looks at the floor, and discovering a cigar butt, picks it up, blows off the dust, and lights it. He goes out.

I hear him dragging his feet over the stone slabs on the terrace. I let myself go. I think—no, I don't think; to be more precise, a sweet nostalgia wells up from inside me, a suffering sweeter than a lover's doubt. And I remember the woman who tipped me with a kiss.

Shapeless desires overwhelm me like a vague mist, transforming my whole being into something airy, winged, impersonal. From time to time the memory of a fragrance, of the whiteness of a breast, passes through me from head to foot, and I know that if I should find myself again in her presence I would be overcome by love; I think that it would not matter to me that she has been possessed by many men and that if I should find myself again in her presence, in that same blue room, I would kneel down on the carpet and put my head on her lap, and for the sheer joy of possessing her and loving her, I would do the sweetest and most shameful things.

And as my desire unfolds, I imagine the clothes the courtesan wears to show off her beauty, the lovely hats she puts on to highlight her glamour, and I picture her next to her bed in a state of seminudity more stunning than nakedness.

And though my desire for a woman grows slowly, I play and replay the scenes and foresee the happiness a love of that sort would bring me, complete with riches and glory; I imagine the feelings that would course through me if, from one day to the next, I should awake in that bedroom a rich man, with my young lover standing half-naked next to the bed, putting on her stockings the way they do in dirty picture books.

And suddenly my whole body, my poor man's poor body, cries

out to the Lord of Heaven: *And I, I, Lord, will I never have a girlfriend as pretty as the one in the dirty picture books!*



A feeling of disgust began to infuse my life in that cave, filling me with rage at the people around me who spewed forth a steady stream of greed and savagery. The hatred that curled their fat lips was catching, and sometimes I could sense a red mist moving slowly inside my skull.

A terrible fatigue was crushing my arms. There were times when I wanted to sleep two days and two nights running. I felt as though my soul was being polluted, as if the leprosy of those people was cracking through the skin of my spirit to carve out its dark caverns there. I went to bed angry, I awoke sullen. Despair stretched my veins, and I could feel a new strength growing in my bones, under my skin. I would fester for hours in this painful state of withdrawal. One night, in a fit, Doña María ordered me to clean the latrine because it was filthy. And I obeyed without saying a word. I think I wanted motivation for the sinister purpose taking shape inside me.

Another night as I was going out, Don Gaetano, laughing, put one hand on my stomach and another on my chest to be sure I wasn't trying to steal his books. I could neither be offended nor smile. It was necessary, yes, that's it, it was necessary that my life, the life that a woman's belly had nourished for nine arduous months, should suffer the full range of outrage, humiliation, and anguish.

That's when I started going deaf. For months I lost all perception of sounds. A sharp silence that took the shape of a knife cut across the voices in my ears.

I wasn't thinking. My mind was dulled by a concave rancor, a rancor whose secretions grew wider and more impenetrable with every passing day.

They gave me a bell, a cowbell. And it was amusing—my God!—to watch a lout my size performing such a humble task. I would park myself at the door of the cavern during the hours of heaviest traffic, and I would ring the bell to call people's attention, to make people's

heads turn, so that people would know that here books were sold, lovely books . . . and that the noble stories and lofty beauties had to be bought from the sly man or from the fat, pale woman.

Many eyes stripped me slowly. I saw women's faces that I will never forget. I saw smiles that even now scream their taunts at my eyes. . . .

Ah! Of course I was tired . . . , but isn't it written: "You will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow"?¹¹

And I mopped the floor, begging the pardon of delicious mesdemoiselles when I had to scrub the spot occupied by their tiny little feet, and I went shopping with the enormous basket; I ran errands. . . . It's even possible that if they had spit in my face I would have quietly wiped it off with the back of my hand.

The darkness closing over me grew gradually denser. I lost all memory of the shapes of faces I had loved in tearful recollection; I had the notion that my days were separated by wide spaces of time . . . and my eyes were too dry to mourn.

Then I repeated words that, until now, had little meaning in my life.

You will suffer, I told myself, *you will suffer . . . suffer . . . suffer . . .*

You will suffer . . . suffer . . .

You will suffer . . . And the words would tumble from my lips.

And so I matured during that long, hellish winter.



One mid-winter night, just after Don Gaetano had rolled down the metal shutter, Doña María remembered she had left a bundle of dirty clothes in the kitchen. So she said to me, "Hey, Silvio, come on, we gonna go get it."

Don Gaetano turned on the lights, and I followed his wife back through the small door in the roll-down shutter. I remember that night down to the last detail.

The laundry was on a chair in the middle of the kitchen. Doña María, turning her back to me, seized the bundle by its cloth ear. As I shifted my gaze, I noticed some coals glowing in the brazier. And in

the brief instant when Doña María started to walk away, I thought, *This is it . . .*, and without hesitating, I grabbed a coal and tossed it at the papers piled up against some shelves loaded with books.

Don Gaetano turned off the electricity, and we found ourselves once more in the street.

Doña María surveyed the starry sky.

“Nice night . . . It’s gonna freeze. . . .” I also looked up.

“Yes, it’s a nice night.”



While Dío Fetente slept, I sat up in bed watching the white circle of light that came through the bull’s-eye window from the street and imprinted itself on the wall. . . .

In the darkness I smiled, liberated . . . free . . . finally free, thanks to the feeling of manhood my gesture had given me. I thought—or rather, I didn’t think, I made a chain of delicious sensations.

This is the time for cocottes.

A conviviality cool as a glass of wine made me fraternize with everything on earth in those wakeful hours.

This is the time for sweet little girls . . . and poets . . . , but what a fool I am . . . and yet, I would kiss your feet, Life, I would kiss your feet.

Life, Life, how lovely you are, Life. . . . Ah! But you don’t know? I’m the boy . . . the working stiff . . . yes, Don Gaetano’s . . . and yet I love all the beautiful things of earth. . . . I want to be handsome and clever . . . to wear splendid uniforms . . . and be reserved. . . . Life, how lovely you are, Life . . . how lovely. . . . Oh God, how lovely you are.

I found pleasure in smiling slowly. I made a V with two fingers to buttress my tensed cheek muscles. Below on Esmeralda Street the honking of automobile horns stretched out in a hoarse proclamation of joy.

Then I leaned my head on my shoulder and closed my eyes, thinking:

Who will paint the sleeping worker who smiles as he dreams because he has burned down his master’s den of thieves?

Slowly, my drunken exuberance subsided. An irrational soberness took its place, the kind of seriousness displayed by people of

good taste in any public situation. I had an urge to laugh at my sudden paternal grimness. But as seriousness is a form of hypocrisy, the comedy of “conscience” must be played out in sordid privacy, and I said to myself:

You, the accused . . . You are scum . . . an arsonist. You are carrying baggage for a lifetime of remorse. You are going to be interrogated by the police and the judges and the devil. . . . It's time to get serious. . . . You don't understand that you'd better get serious . . . because you're about to be tossed in the slammer.

But my seriousness didn't convince me. It sounded too hollow, like an empty milk can. No, I couldn't take that sort of mystification seriously. I was now a free man, and what does seriousness have to do with freedom? I was now free, I could do whatever I felt like doing . . . kill myself if I wanted to . . . but that was ridiculous . . . and I . . . I needed to do something serious that was fine and beautiful: to adore Life. And I repeated:

Yes, Life. . . . You are lovely, life. . . . Do you know it? From now on I will adore all the beautiful things of Earth. . . . That's right . . . I will adore trees, and houses, and skies. . . . I will adore everything that belongs to you. . . . Besides . . . tell me, Life, am I not an intelligent fellow? Did you ever know anyone like me?

Then I fell asleep.



The first one to enter the bookstore that morning was Don Gaetano. I followed close behind. Everything was just as we had left it: the air, moldy and damp, and there at the back, on the books' leather spines, a spot of sunshine that filtered through the skylight.

I went to the kitchen. The burning coal, still wet from the puddle of water made by Dio Fetente when he washed the dishes, had expired.

It was the last day I worked there.

3. MAD TOY

After washing the dishes, closing the doors, and opening the shutters, I went back to bed because it was cold.

The bricks in the adobe wall outside were turning red under the sun's slanting rays.

My mother was sewing in another room and my sister was doing her homework. I settled down to read. On a chair next to the headboard I had the following books: *Virgin and Mother* by Luis de Val,¹ *Electrical Engineering* by Bahía, and the *Antichrist* by Nietzsche. *Virgin and Mother*, four volumes of eighteen hundred pages each, had been loaned to me by a neighbor who took in ironing.

Now comfortably settled in, I eyed *Virgin and Mother* with distaste. Today I was clearly not in the mood to read a potboiler, so I picked up *Electrical Engineering* and began to study the theory of rotating magnetic fields.

I read slowly and with satisfaction. Having absorbed the complicated explanation of multiphase currents, I thought:

A well-rounded intelligence is able to savor beauty in all its forms—and the names of Ferranti and Siemens Halske² rang sweetly in my ears.

I thought: *I too will be able to say one day before a congress of engineers, "Yes, gentlemen . . . the electromagnetic currents generated by the sun can be utilized and condensed." Fantastic! First condensed, then utilized! The devil, how could the sun's electromagnetic currents be utilized?*

I knew by way of scientific reports appearing in several magazines

that Tesla, the wizard of electricity, had conceived the idea of a beam condenser.

And so I daydreamed on until nightfall, when I heard the voice of Señora Rebecca Naidath, my mother's friend, in the next room.

"So, Frau Drodman, how's by you?³ And how's my little *shiksa*?"

I raised my head from the book to listen.

Señora Rebecca was of the Jewish faith. Her soul was mean because her body was small. She walked like a seal and she pried into things like an eagle. . . . I detested her because of certain bad turns she had done me.

"Where's Silvio? I have to talk by him."

In a Hail Mary, she was in my room.

"Hello! How are you, Frau, what's new?"

"You know mechanics, Silvio?"

"Yes . . . I know a thing or two. Mamá, didn't you show her the letter from Ricaldoni?"

Ricaldoni had in fact congratulated me on some absurd mechanical gadgets I had concocted during my hours of leisure.

Señora Rebecca said, "Sure, I saw it, I saw it. Here"—and handing me a newspaper, her grime-rimmed finger pointing to an ad, she commented, "My husband said I should tell you about it. So read."

With her hands on her hips she thrust her bosom toward me. The bare feathers on her black hat hung down at a pathetic angle. Her sardonic black eyes were watching my face, and every so often a hand would rise from her hip to scratch the curve of her nose.

I read: *Seeking apprentice aviation mechanics. Direct inquiries to the Military School of Aviation. Palomar de Caseros.*

"Cripes, what good news, Frau, thanks very much. . . . But I wonder if I have time to get there today?"

"Sure. You take the train to La Paternal, you tell the conductor you want off at La Paternal, then you take the 88. Right at the door it leaves you."

"Yes, it's better if you go today, Silvio," said my mother, smiling hopefully. "Put on your blue tie. It's ironed, and I mended the lining."

I was in my room in a flash, and as I was dressing, I could hear

Señora Naidath whining about a quarrel she'd had with her husband.

"Would you believe it, Frau Drodman! He comes home smelling of schnapps, not a little bit *schikker*. Maximito isn't there, off to Quilmes he's gone for a painting job. Me, I'm in the kitchen. I go out, and he says to me, showing me his fist like this: 'Make with the dinner, fast . . . Again your good-for-nothing *schlep* of a son doesn't show up for work. Why is this?'

"What a life, Frau, what a life. To the kitchen I run and quick, I light the stove. I'm thinking, better Maximito should not come home, or some hoo-ha there's going to be, and shaking all over I am, Frau.

"*Oy vay!* Fast as I can, I bring out the frying pan with liver and eggs fried in butter. Because oil he doesn't like. You should have seen him, Frau, his eyes popping open, his *schmoz* all wrinkled up, and he says to me: 'Bitch, this is rotten,' and the eggs are fresh, Frau, they're fresh. Wham! He only throws the pan, and everything in it, at the wall.

"What a life, Frau, what a life! . . . Eggs and butter all over the bed. To the door I run, and up he jumps and throws the dishes on the floor. What a life. Even my beautiful soup tureen, you remember, Frau? He even breaks my beautiful soup tureen.

"Well I don't mind telling you I'm scared, and when I leave, here he comes, bam, bam, beating his chest, like the ape he is. . . . *Ay-yay-yay!* And he shouts at me, Frau, things that never have I heard shouted at me: 'You stinking sow,' he says, 'I want to wash my hands in your blood!'"

I could hear Señora Naidath sigh deeply.

I got a kick out of the woman's tribulations. As I knotted my tie I imagined her smiling hulk of a husband, a gray-haired Pole with a nose like a cockatoo, yelling at Doña Rebecca.

Señor Josiah Naidath was more generous than a Cossack leader during the time of Sobieski.⁴ A strange Hebrew. He loathed Jews to the point of exasperation, and his grotesque anti-Semitism would find release in a fabulous torrent of obscenity. Naturally, his anger was not aimed at anyone in particular.

He had been gulled many times by friends on the make, but he wouldn't admit it, and in his house, to the chagrin of Señora Rebecca, fat German immigrants and adventurers with a shady past could always be found stuffing themselves with sauerkraut and wieners and laughing in great guffaws, while their inexpressive blue eyes missed nothing.

The Jew would shelter them until they found work, making use of the contacts he had as a painter and a Freemason. Some of them robbed him; one protégé, a watchman, disappeared overnight from a house undergoing renovation, taking ladders, planks, and paint along for good measure.

When news reached Señor Naidath that the scoundrel had absconded, he screamed to high heaven. He was like a raging god, Thor in a fury . . . , but he did nothing.

His wife was the prototype of the sordid, penny-pinching Jew.

I remember, when my sister was younger, she went to visit them one day. Eyeing their lovely fruit-laden tree, she naturally desired one of the ripe plums, and timidly asked for one.

But Señora Rebecca admonished her:

“My little *shiksa* . . . if it's plums you're after, you can buy all you want at the market.”

“Have some tea, Señora Naidath.”

The woman continued her tale of woe:

“So then he yells at me, and all the neighbors can hear, Frau; he yells at me, ‘Butcher's daughter, Jew, Jewish sow, defender of your son.’ As if he wasn't Jewish, as if Maximito wasn't his son.”

Indeed, Señora Naidath and her twit of a son connived to cheat the Mason and spend his money on frivolous purchases. For Señor Naidath, who was aware of this conspiracy, the mere mention of it was enough to send him through the roof.

The focus of their quarrels was a twenty-eight-year-old layabout, who was ashamed to be Jewish and ashamed to work as a painter.

To camouflage his status as a worker, Maximito would dress like a gentleman, affecting spectacles and rubbing his hands with glycerine each night before going to bed.

Some juicy tales of Maximito's mischief had reached my ears.

Once he secretly collected money owed his father by an innkeeper. He would have been some twenty years old at the time, and fancying himself a musician, he invested the money in a magnificent golden harp. At his mother's suggestion, Maximito explained that he had won some money in the lottery; Señor Naidath said nothing, but eyed the harp suspiciously, and the culprits shook like Adam and Eve in paradise under Jehovah's stern gaze.

Days went by. Meanwhile Maximito played his harp and the old woman rejoiced. Such things are not unheard of. Señora Rebecca told her friends that Maximito had great talent as a harpist, and after admiring the harp in a corner of the dining room, they would agree.

Despite his generosity, however, Señor Josiah was not always oblivious, and he soon caught on to the ruse by which the magnanimous Maximito had come into possession of the harp.

In this instance Señor Naidath, whose strength was frightening, rose to the occasion, and, as the psalmist recommends, he spoke little and labored much.

It was Saturday, but Señor Josiah was unimpressed by the law of Moses. By way of prologue, his foot connected twice with his wife's behind, then he seized Maximito by the collar, and after dusting him off, escorted him to the street. As for the neighbors, who were standing around in their shirtsleeves and enjoying themselves immensely as they watched the fracas, he went to the window of the dining room and hurled the harp in their direction.

Such incidents make life more agreeable, and for this reason people said of him: "Ah! Señor Naidath . . . He's a good man."

Having spruced myself up as well as I could, I headed for the door.

"Well, then, good-bye, Frau, regards to your husband and to Maximito."

My mother interrupted: "Aren't you even going to say thank you?"

"I already did."

The Hebrew woman raised her envious little eyes from the slices

of buttered bread and extended limp hands toward me. It was clear she was already wishing I would fail.



As night was falling, I arrived in Palomar.

When I asked for directions, an old man, sitting on a bundle and smoking under the station's green streetlamp, waved his arm vaguely as if to show me the way through the twilight.

I could see I was dealing with fatal indifference; knowing about as much as before I'd asked, I thanked him and started off, not wanting to abuse his reticence.

Then the old fellow shouted after me:

"Say, kid, don't you have some spare change?"

I'd had no intention of giving him anything, but then I reflected rapidly that, if God existed, He could help me in my undertaking just as I could help the old man; not without hidden pain, I approached to give him a coin. Then the tramp became more explicit. He got up and pointed with his shaky arm stretched out in the darkness:

"Look, kid . . . Keep straight ahead, and on your left you'll see the officers' club."

I walked.

The wind was rustling the dry leaves of the eucalyptus trees; it howled and whistled as it rubbed up against their trunks, or fretted the telegraph cables high above.

Crossing the muddy road, feeling my way cautiously to the left along a wire fence, and, when the ground was hard enough to allow it, moving rapidly, I arrived at the building the old man had called the officers' club.

I stopped, uncertain. Should I call out? There was no soldier guarding the door behind the railing of the chalet.

I went up three steps, and boldly—so I thought at the time—entered a narrow wooden passageway. The whole building was made of wood, and I stopped before the door of an oblong room, in the center of which was a table.

Around it were three officers, one lying on a sofa next to the side-

board, another leaning on his elbows at the table, and a third with his feet in the air, his chair tipped back to lean against the wall. They were carrying on a half-hearted conversation, facing five bottles of varying hues.

“What do you want?”

“I’m here about the ad.”

“The positions have been filled.”

Supremely calm, with a serenity that came from my bad luck, I objected: “Gosh, that’s too bad because I’m something of an inventor, I would have been like a fish in water.”

“And what have you invented? Come on in, sit down,” said a captain as he rose from the sofa.

I answered without turning a hair: “An automatic signaling device for shooting stars and a typewriter that takes dictation. I have here a letter of congratulations from Ricaldoni, the physicist.”

This got the attention of the three bored officers.

“Well, then,” said one of the lieutenants, looking me over from head to foot, “have a seat. Tell us about your famous inventions. What did you call them again?”

“Automatic signaling device for shooting stars, Señor.”

I leaned my arms on the table and gazed searchingly, or so I fancied, at their hard expressions and inquisitive eyes, their leathery faces marking them as rulers of men as they observed me half-curiously, half-mockingly. In the instant before speaking, I thought of the heroes in my favorite books—especially of Rocambole who, wearing his visored cap and a twisted smile on his rogue’s mouth, appeared before my eyes, spurring me on to glib speech and a heroic pose.

Comforted, and confident that I could not possibly go wrong, I said:

“Gentlemen—you are of course aware that selenium is a conductor of electricity when light hits it; in the dark it acts as an insulator.

“The signaling device would consist simply of a selenium cell connected to an electromagnet. A star passing across the selenium would trigger a signal, since the light of the meteor, concentrated by a concave lens, would turn the selenium into a conductor.”

“Okay, fine. Now what about the typewriter?”

“The idea is this. In a telephone, sound is converted into an electromagnetic wave.

“If we use a galvanometer to measure the electrical intensity produced by each vowel and consonant, we can calculate the number of ampere turns necessary to create a magnetic keyboard corresponding to the electrical intensity of each sound.”

The lieutenant’s frown grew more pronounced.

“The idea’s not bad, but you aren’t taking into account how difficult it is to create electromagnets that can respond to such small variations in electrical current, let alone the variations in voice timbre, or residual magnetism; another serious problem, perhaps the worst, is how to make the currents distribute themselves among the corresponding electromagnets. But you have Ricaldoni’s letter there?”

The lieutenant bent over it; then, passing it on to another officer, he said:

“You see? Ricaldoni points out the same difficulties I did. In theory, your idea is quite interesting. I know Ricaldoni. He was my professor. The man is extremely knowledgeable.”

“Yes, short and fat, very fat.”

“Would you like some vermouth?” asked the captain, smiling.

“Thank you very much, but no, Señor. I don’t drink.”

“Do you know anything about mechanics?”

“Something, yes. Kinetics . . . dynamics . . . steam engines and explosion motors; and I know about crude oil engines. Also, I’ve studied the chemistry of explosives, an interesting subject.”

“Also. And what do you know about explosives?”

“Ask me something,” I replied with a smile.

“All right. What are percussion caps?”

This was looking like an exam, and I took the plunge, answering as expertly as I could:

“Captain Cundill, in his *Dictionary of Explosives*, says that percussion caps are the metallic salts of a hypothetical acid called hydrogenous fulminate. They can be simple or double.”

“Okay, how about this: a double fulminate.”

“Copper fulminate, which consists of green crystals produced by boiling fulminating mercury, which is simple, with water and copper.”

“It’s amazing how much this boy knows. How old are you?”

“Sixteen, Señor.”

“Sixteen?”

“You see, captain? This boy has a bright future ahead of him. What do you say we talk to Captain Márquez? It would be a shame if he couldn’t enroll.”

“Undoubtedly.” And the officer from the corps of engineers turned to me: “But where the devil have you learned all these things?”

“Anywhere and everywhere, Señor. For example, I’m walking down the street and I look in a machine shop and there’s a machine I’ve never seen before. I stop, and I tell myself as I study the different parts I’m looking at: this must function like so, and it must be used for such and such. After I’ve arrived at my conclusions, I go into the shop and ask, and believe me, Señor, I’m rarely wrong. Besides, I have a fair-sized library, and if I’m not studying mechanics, I’m studying literature.”

“What,” interrupted the captain, “literature, too?”

“Yes, Señor, and I have the best authors: Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Pío Baroja.”⁵

“Say, this guy wouldn’t be an anarchist, would he?”

“No, Captain. I’m not an anarchist. But I like to study, to read.”

“And what does your father think about all this?”

“My father killed himself when I was little.”

Suddenly they became quiet, looking at me, looking at one another.

Outside the wind was whistling, and I could feel them eyeing me intently.

The captain stood up and I followed suit.

“Look, little friend, I congratulate you. Come back tomorrow. Tonight I’ll try to see Captain Márquez because you deserve it. This is what the Argentine army needs. Young people who want to study.”

“Thank you, Señor.”

“Tomorrow, if you want to see me, I’ll be happy to receive you. Ask for Captain Bossi.”

Full of joy, I said good-bye.

Now I was navigating the darkness, leaping over fences, trembling with the surge of feeling that raced through me.

More than ever I was convinced that a great destiny lay ahead of me. I could be an engineer like Edison, a general like Napoleon, a poet like Baudelaire, a devil like Rocambole.

Seventh heaven. Thanks to the praise of men, I have spent nights in such bliss that my blood, joyously alive, would rush to my heart, and I felt I was traveling around the earth, carried by my crowd of joys like a symbol of youth.



I think there were thirty of us chosen to be apprentice airplane mechanics from among two hundred applicants.

It was a gray morning. The field stretched out into the distance, harsh and forbidding. From its gray-green monotony there issued a nameless reproach.

Accompanied by a sergeant we went to the closed hangars, and in the barracks, donned work clothes.

It was misting, and in spite of that, a corporal took us to a pasture located behind the canteen for a workout.

It wasn’t hard. Obeying the commanders’ voices, I allowed the indifference of the flat expanse to enter into me. This hypnotized my body, leaving the pain to work independently.

I was thinking: *If she could see me now, what would she say?*

Sweetly, like a shadow on a moonlit wall, I saw her pleading face in the dusk of a certain far-off evening, the young girl standing motionless next to the black poplar tree.

“Let’s see if you can move, recruit,” shouted the corporal.

When it was time for mess, we splashed our way through the mud toward the stinking cauldrons. Beneath the pots, green firewood was smoking. We crowded together, holding out our tin plates to the cook.

The man would sink his ladle into the offal, plunge a trident into

a second pot, and then we would go our separate ways to wolf down the food.

As I ate, I remembered Don Gaetano and his cruel wife. And I sensed immense spaces of time lying dormant between my silent yesterday and my dubious present.

I thought: *Now that everything has changed, who am I under this baggy uniform?*

Sitting near the barracks, I watched the rain falling, off and on, and with my plate on my knees, I couldn't take my eyes off the horizon. Its arc was troubled in spots, smooth as a band of metal in others, and so pitilessly leonine that its icy majesty at sunset cut straight to the bone.

Some apprentices were bunched together in the yard laughing, while others, washing their feet, bent over the horses' watering trough.

I said to myself: *So that's life, always complaining about what was.* How slowly those threads of water were making their way to the ground. And the same was true of life. I set my plate down on the ground and let my troubled thoughts take flight.

Would I ever rise above my lowly rung on the social ladder? Could I become a Señor one day and stop being the boy who takes any job that comes along?

A lieutenant passed by and I stood at attention. . . . Then I let myself go, crumpling up in a corner, as my hurt reached new depths.

Wouldn't I end my days as one of those men who wear dirty collars and mended shirts, a wine-colored suit and enormous boots, because their feet have grown calluses and bunions from so much walking—walking from door to door asking for work to make ends meet?

A shiver shook my soul. What to do, what could I do to triumph, to have money, lots of money? I was surely not going to come across a handbag lying in the street with ten thousand pesos in it. So what to do? And not knowing whether I could murder anyone, even if I had a rich relative to kill and to answer for, I understood that I would never resign myself to the miserable life that most people take for granted.

The certainty that this craving for distinction would be with me wherever I went shot through me suddenly, and I said to myself: *It doesn't matter that I don't have a suit or money or anything*, and almost embarrassed, I confessed: *What I want is to be admired by others, praised by others. What's it to me if I'm a good-for-nothing Bohemian! It doesn't matter . . . But this mediocre life . . . To be forgotten when you die, that, yes, is horrible. Ah, if only my inventions could be successful! Nonetheless, one day I will die, and the trains will keep on running and people will still go to the theater, and I will be dead, very dead . . . dead for the rest of my life.*

I was trembling, and the hair on my arms stood on end. As I faced the horizon, where clouds sailed by like ships, I felt the chill of eternal death. Seizing my plate, I hurried to the watering trough.

Ah, if only I could discover something so I would never die; to live, if only five hundred years!

The corporal in charge of the training drills called my name.

"Drodman, Captain Márquez wants you."⁶

"Right away, Señor First Corporal."

During the workout I had sought permission, via a sergeant, to see Captain Márquez. I was working on a trench mortar whose projectiles would destroy more men than shrapnel could, and I wanted his advice.

Aware of my vocation, Captain Márquez was used to listening to me, and while I talked and drew diagrams on the blackboard, he would watch me from behind the lenses of his glasses with a smile that was part curiosity, part mockery, and part indulgence.

I left the plate in the dishes bin and quickly made my way to the officers' quarters.

He was in his room. Next to the wall was a field cot, a stand with magazines and books about military science, and, nailed to the wall, a blackboard with its little chalk drawer nailed at an angle.

The captain said to me, "Well, well. Let's see how this trench cannon works. Draw it."

I took a piece of chalk and made a sketch.

I began. "As you know, Captain, the trouble with high calibers is the weight and size of the piece."

“Fine. And so?”

“What I have in mind is a cannon like this: the high-caliber projectile would have a hole in the center, and instead of being placed in a cannon tube, it would be introduced onto the iron bar like a ring on a finger, ending up tightly wedged in the chamber where the cartridge would explode.

“The advantage of my system is that, without adding any weight to the cannon, the caliber of the projectile and the explosive charge it could pack would be greatly increased.”

“I understand . . . That’s fine . . . But you should know this: the thickness, diameter, and length of the cannon are calculated in accordance with the caliber of the projectiles, their weight, and the kind of powder used.

“In other words, as the powder ignites, gas pressure builds, driving the projectile forward in the cannon, so that by the time it reaches the mouth, the explosive has spent its maximum energy.

“In your invention the exact opposite occurs.

“The explosion takes place, the projectile slides along the bar, and the gases, rather than continuing to exert pressure, escape into the air; in other words, if the explosion has to keep going for a second, you reduce it to a tenth or a thousandth part. That’s the reverse. The greater the diameter, the less the uniformity and the greater the resistance, unless you have discovered something new in ballistics, which is pretty hard to do.”

He finished, adding: “You must study, study a great deal, if you want to make something of yourself.”

I was thinking, without daring to say so, *How can I study, if I have to learn a trade to make a living?*

He continued: “Study a lot of math; what you lack is the basics. Discipline your thinking, apply it to the study of these little practical things, and then your projects will be successful.”

“Do you think so, Captain?”

“Yes, Astier. Unquestionably, you have potential, but study; you believe that just because you think, you’ve done all there is to do. Thinking is only the beginning.”

And I walked out of there, moved by gratitude toward this man

who was serious and sad, and who, in spite of military discipline, had the grace to encourage me.



It was two in the afternoon on my fourth day at the Military Aviation School.

I was drinking gaucho tea with a red-haired recruit named Walter, who was telling me with moving enthusiasm about his German father's ranch in the province of Buenos Aires.

He said, with his mouth full of bread, "Every winter we butcher three pigs for the house. The rest are sold. And in the afternoon when it got cold, I would go in the house and cut myself a piece of bread and then go off in the Ford. . . ."

"Drodman, over here," shouted the sergeant.

Standing in front of the barracks, he looked at me with unaccustomed seriousness.

"At your command, Sergeant."

"Put on your civvies and turn in your uniform, you're out."

I looked at him, on the alert.

"Out?"

"Yes, out."

"Out, Sergeant?" I was shaking all over.

He gave me a pitying look. Being from a small town, he was used to dealing straight with people, and had only received his aviation diploma a few days earlier.

"But I haven't done anything wrong, Sergeant, you know I haven't."

"Of course I know it . . . But what can I do Captain Márquez's orders."

"Captain Márquez? But that's absurd . . . Captain Márquez can't have given that order. . . . There must be some mistake."

"Silvio Drodman Astier is the name I was given. . . . I believe there's no other Drodman Astier but you here, correct? Therefore it's you, there's no two ways about it."

"But this isn't fair, Sergeant."

The man frowned and confided in a low voice: "What do you

expect me to do? Of course it's not right. . . . I think, no, I don't know . . . It seems the captain has someone who's been recommended to him. . . . That's what they said, I don't know if it's true, and since your bunch haven't been signed up yet, well, they take people out and put them in to suit themselves. If you were already enlisted, they couldn't do it, but since you're not signed up, you'll just have to take it."

I pleaded, "What about you, Sergeant, can't you do anything?"

"What am I supposed to do about it, friend? What am I supposed to do? I'm no different from you, the things I've seen. . . ."

The man felt sorry for me.

I thanked him and walked away with tears in my eyes.

Inside, I was told: "The order is from Captain Márquez."

"And I can't see him."

"He's not in."

"And Captain Bossi?"

"Captain Bossi's not here either."

I started walking back to the station. The trunks of eucalyptus trees lining the road were stained a lugubrious red by the winter sun.

Suddenly I saw the school's director on the path ahead of me.

He was a chubby fellow with a farmhand's fat cheeks and red face. The wind was blowing the cape on his shoulders, and, leafing through a ledger, he was making a brief statement to the group of officers gathered around him in a circle.

No doubt he had heard what happened, for the lieutenant colonel raised his head from his papers, looked around for me, and seeing me, shouted angrily, "Look here, friend, Captain Márquez told me about you. You belong in a technical institute. We don't need smart people here, just dumb brutes who can work."



Now I walked the streets of Buenos Aires with those shouted words engraved in my soul.

"When Mamá finds out!" Involuntarily, I imagined her saying to me in tired tones, "Silvio . . . you can't have any feelings for us. . . . You don't do any work. . . . You don't want to do anything.

“Look at the shoes I have on, look at Lila’s dresses, all of them with patches. What can you be thinking, Silvio, not to work?”

I felt the heat of a fever rising within me; I smelled like sweat, I had the sensation that my face had become hardened with pain, deformed by pain, a very deep, clamorous pain.

I wandered in a daze, without a plan. At times a paralyzing rage poured through me, and I wanted to scream, to strike out at this appallingly deaf city . . . and then suddenly everything inside broke, everything cried out to me that I was completely useless.

What will become of me?

At that moment my body was weighing down my soul like a suit that was too big and wet.

What will become of me?

When I go home, maybe Mamá won’t say anything. With resignation, she will open the yellow trunk. I’ll take out the mattress and she’ll put clean sheets on the bed and won’t say anything. Lila will look at me in silent reproach:

“What have you done, Silvio?” And she won’t say another word.

What will become of me?

Ab! You must wallow in life’s filth,⁷ know what it means to eat liver that the butcher has set aside for cat food and go to bed early so as not to use up the lamp oil!

Once again Mamá’s face appeared before me, slack with frown lines from her old hurt; I thought of my sister who never complained, who grew pale as she bent over her books studying, submitting to her bitter destiny, and my heart sank into my shoes. I felt an urge to stop people passing by, to seize them by their coat sleeves and explain, *They threw me out of the army for no reason, do you understand? I thought I would be able to work . . . to work on engines and repair airplanes . . . and they’ve sent me away . . . for no reason.*

I was talking to myself: *Lila, oh, you people don’t know her, Lila is my sister; I thought, I knew that we would be able to go to the movies some day; instead of eating liver, we would eat vegetable soup, we would go out on Sundays, I would take her to Palermo. But now . . .*

Don’t you see what an injustice this is? Tell me, people, don’t you agree it’s a terrible injustice?

I'm not a boy. I'm sixteen years old. Why have they thrown me out? I was going to work like anyone else, and now. . . . What will Mamá say? What will Lila say? If you only knew her. She's serious: at the Teachers' School she gets the highest grades. With what I was going to make, we would have eaten better at home. And now what am I going to do? . . .



Night now on Lavalle Street. I stopped in front of a sign near the Palace of Justice:

“Furnished Rooms, One Peso.”

I entered the foyer, which was dimly lit by an electric bulb, and paid at a wooden enclosure. The owner, a fat man wearing shirt-sleeves in spite of the cold, led me to a patio covered with large green flower pots, and pointing me out to his employee, shouted: “Felix, put him in 24.”

I looked up. The patio was the bottom of a cube whose sides were formed by the walls of five floors of rooms with curtained windows. Lighted walls could be seen through some of the windows, others were dark, and from I don't know where came the racket of women, muffled giggles, and the banging of pots and pans.

We went up a spiral staircase. The servant, a pockmarked waif in a blue apron, led the way, the scraggly feathers of his duster sweeping the floor as he dragged it along.

At last we arrived. The passageway, like the hall below, was dimly lit.

The boy opened the door and turned on the light. I said to him, “Wake me up at five in the morning, don't forget.”

“Sure, see you tomorrow.”

Exhausted by pain and the thousand thoughts that had been whirling in my head, I sank into bed.

The room: two iron beds with blue bedspreads sporting white tassels, a sink of varnished iron, and a little table of fake mahogany. In one corner a wardrobe mirror reflected the paneled door.

An acrid perfume floated in the air contained by the four white walls.

I turned my head to the wall. Using a pencil, some sleeper had made an obscene drawing.

I thought to myself, "Perhaps tomorrow I will go to Europe . . .," and covering my head with the pillow, worn out, I went to sleep. It was an extremely heavy sleep, from whose depths glided this hallucination:

On an asphalt plain, stains of violet-colored oil gleamed sadly under a burlap sky. At the zenith, another patch of height was pure blue. Scattered everywhere, cubes of Portland cement rose from the landscape.

Some were as small as dice; others, tall and spacious as skyscrapers. Suddenly, from the horizon, a horribly skinny arm stretched up toward the zenith. It was as yellow as a broomstick, and the squared-off fingers were extended together.

I drew back, terrified, but the horribly skinny arm reached out, and trying to escape it, I grew smaller, I ran into the cement cubes, I hid behind them; peering out, I exposed my face at one edge, and the thin-as-a-broomstick arm, with its stiff fingers, was there above my head, touching the zenith.

At the horizon the light had dimmed, and the line was now as thin as the edge of a sword.

That's where the face appeared.

There was a piece of bulky forehead, a hairy eyebrow, and then part of a jaw. Beneath the wrinkled eyelid was the eye, the eye of a madman. Its round pupil floated in a pulsating sea of white. The eyelid made a sad wink.

"Señor, hey, say something, Señor . . ."

I leaped up.

"You went to sleep in your clothes, Señor."

I turned a stern face on the person who had addressed me.

"Yes, of course."

The young man backed off a little. "Since we're going to be roommates tonight, I took the liberty of waking you up. Are you angry?"

"No, why?" I rubbed my eyes, then got up and sat on the edge of the bed. I observed him:

The brim of a bowler hat cast a shadow over his brow. The look in those eyes was false; even his skin reflected their velvety splendor. He had a scar between his lip and his chin, and his full, too-red lips were smiling in that white face. The tight fit of his overcoat revealed the shape of his small body.

I asked him abruptly, "What time is it?"

He looked urgently at his gold watch.

"Ten forty-five."

Drowsy, I hesitated. I found myself looking sadly at my dull boots. The stitches of a repair job had given way, leaving a patch of sock visible through the crack.

Meanwhile the young man hung his hat on a rack and tossed his leather gloves on a chair in a gesture of fatigue. I looked at him once more out of the corner of my eye, but quickly looked away when I saw he was observing me.

He was impeccably dressed, and from his stiff, starched collar to his patent leather boots with cream-colored spats, you could see he was rolling in money.

Nevertheless, the thought occurred to me: *He must have dirty feet.*

Smiling a deceitful smile, he turned away, and a lock of his hair fell over his cheek and covered his earlobe. In a soft voice, looking me over without appearing to, he said, "You seem pretty tired."

"Yes, a little."

He took off the overcoat, whose silk lining shone at the folds. A certain greasy fragrance issued from his black clothing, and suddenly uneasy, I considered him; then, without thinking what I was saying, I asked:

"Your clothes are dirty, aren't they?"

He understood me in a flash, but he softened his reply: "Did I hurt you by waking you up like that?"

"No, why should you hurt me?"

"Well, it upsets some people. In my boarding school I had a friend who would have an epileptic fit if I woke him suddenly."

"Too sensitive."

"Like a woman, isn't that what you mean, boy?"

"So your friend was oversensitive? But, che, do me a favor and

open that door, I'm suffocating. Let a little air in. It smells like dirty laundry in here."

The intruder made a slight frown. . . . He started for the door, but before he got there some photographs fell from his coat pocket.

Hurriedly, he bent to pick them up, and I walked over near him so I could see: they were snapshots of men and women in different sexual positions.

The stranger's face turned purple. He stuttered:

"I don't know how they got there, they belong to a friend."

I didn't answer him.

Standing beside him, I was looking with fierce determination at one of the pictures. He was saying I don't know what. I wasn't listening. I was in a trance, looking at a terrible photograph. A woman lying prone before a shameless roughneck with a visored cap and a black band around his belly.

I turned to look at the young blade.

Now he was pale, his eyes wide and hungry, and on his blackened lids there hung a shiny tear. His hand touched my arm.

"Let me stay here, don't throw me out."

"Then, Señor . . . then, che . . . you're . . ."

Dragging me, he pushed me down on the bed, then sat at my feet.

"Yes, I am, I don't care."

His hand rested on my knee.

"I don't care."

His young voice was deep and bitter.

"Yes, I'm like that. . . . I don't care." His voice trembled with pain and fear. Then his hand seized mine and placed it at his throat so he could press it with his chin. He spoke in very low tones, almost a whisper.

"Oh, if only I had been born a woman! Why is life like this?"

The veins in my head were throbbing dangerously.

He asked, "What's your name?"

"Silvio."

"Tell me, Silvio, don't you despise me? . . . But no . . . Your face doesn't show it. . . . How old are you?"

Hoarse, I answered, "Sixteen . . . but you're trembling."

"Yes . . . You want . . . You want, come on . . ."

Suddenly I saw him, yes, I saw him. . . . His face was flushed, his lips smiling. . . . His eyes, too, were smiling crazily . . . and quick as a wink he dropped his clothes, leaving the tail of a dirty shirt waving over the band of flesh left exposed on his thighs by long women's stockings.

Slowly, as on a moonlit wall, I saw the pleading face of the young girl standing motionless next to the black iron railing. A cold thought—if *she knew what I am doing right now*—crossed my life.

I would always remember that moment.

I stepped back timidly, and looking at him, I said slowly: "Get away from me."

"What?"

Lower still, I repeated, "Get away."

"But . . ."

"Get away, you animal. What have you done with your life? . . . with your life? . . ."

"No . . . don't be like that."

"Animal . . . what have you done with your life?" I didn't manage to tell him in that moment all the grand, precious, and noble things that were in me, and that instinctively rejected his hurt.

The young dandy drew away. He bared his teeth, showing his spirit, then buried himself in the sheets, and while I crawled into bed fully dressed, he sang a children's song, his arms behind his head:

Rice and milk, milk and rice,
It's so nice to be wed.

I looked at him sideways, then said, without any anger, but rather with a serenity that surprised me:

"If you don't shut up I'll break your nose."

"What?"

"I said I'll break your nose."

Then he turned his face to the wall. A horrible anguish hung in the confined space. I could feel the persistence of his ghastly

thoughts as they crossed the silence. And all I could see of him was the triangle of black hair that outlined the back of his head, and then the white roundness of his neck, where no tendons showed.

He wasn't moving, but the intensity of his thoughts was crushing. . . . He was imitating me . . . and I, dumbfounded, fell into a funk that matched his own, not moving a muscle. From time to time I looked at him out of the corner of one eye.

Suddenly his bedspread moved and exposed his shoulders, milky shoulders that rose above the neatly tailored arc of his cambric shirt. . . .

The pleading scream of a woman exploded in the hall outside my room:

"No . . . no . . . please . . ." and the muffled crash of a body against the wall caused my soul to arc in primal terror. I hesitated, then jumped up and opened the door just as the one across the hall was closing.

I leaned against the door frame. Not a sound came from the neighboring room. I went back in, leaving the door open, and without looking at the other person, turned off the light and lay down. . . .

In me there was now a powerful certainty. I lit a cigarette and said to my fellow lodger:

"Che, who taught you this nonsense?"

"I don't want to talk to you. . . . You're mean. . . ."

I laughed, then continued solemnly:

"Seriously, che, do you know you're weird? What a weirdo! What does your family say about you? And this place? Have you looked at this place?"

"You're mean."

"And you're a saint, right?"

"No, but I follow my destiny . . . because I wasn't always this way, you know? I wasn't like this before. . . ."

"So who made you like this?"

"My teacher, because Papa is rich. When I finished fourth grade, they found a teacher to coach me for the National School. He

seemed to be a serious person. He wore a beard, a pointed, blond beard, and glasses. His eyes were almost blue-green. I'm telling you all this because . . .”

“Well?”

“I wasn't like this before . . . but he made me this way. . . . Later, after he left, I would go to his house looking for him. I was fourteen. He lived in an apartment on Juncal Street. He was smart. Imagine, he had a library as big as these four walls. He was also a devil, but how he loved me! I would go to his house, and the houseboy would take me to his bedroom. . . . Can you imagine, he bought me a complete set of silk clothes with fancy stitchery. I would dress up like a woman.”

“What was his name?”

“Why do you want to know his name? He taught in two departments at the National School and he ended up hanging himself.”

“He hanged himself?”

“That's right; he hanged himself in the restroom of a coffee-shop . . . but what a dope you are. . . . Ha, ha . . . Don't believe me . . . It's all lies . . . Isn't it a pretty tale?”

Irritated, I said, “Hey, look, leave me alone; I'm going to sleep.”

“Don't be mean, listen to me. . . . You keep changing . . . Don't go believing what I just said. . . . I told you the unvarnished truth. . . . That's right . . . The teacher's name was Prospero.”

“And you've been this way ever since?”

“What was I supposed to do about it?”

“What do you mean, what were you supposed to do? Why don't you go to some doctor . . . some specialist in nervous diseases? Anyway, why are you so dirty?”

“It's the fashion, a lot of them like dirty clothes.”

“You're completely perverted.”

“I know, you're right . . . I'm crazy . . . but so what? . . . Look . . . sometimes at night I'm in my room, and believe it or not, it's like a gust of wind. . . . I get a whiff of rented rooms. . . . I see the light turned on, and then I can't . . . it's like some wind is dragging me, and I go out . . . and see the owners of those rented rooms.”

“Why the owners?”

“Well, naturally, cruising is a sad business: we have an arrangement with two or three owners and as soon as a young boy shows up who’s worth the trouble, they give us a ring.”

After a long silence, his voice became quieter and more serious. He seemed to be talking to himself, pouring his heart out:

“Why wasn’t I born a woman? . . . Instead of being a pervert . . . that’s it, a pervert . . . I would have been the young lady in my house, and married a good man, and I would have taken care of him . . . and loved him . . . instead of . . . like this . . . jumping in and out of one bed and another, and the harassment . . . those bums in soft hats and patent leather shoes who recognize you and follow you . . . and take everything you have, even your stockings.

“Oh! if I could find someone who would love me forever and ever.”

“You’re crazy! You still have such dreams?”

“What do you know! . . . I have a friend who’s been living for three years with an employee at the Mortgage Bank . . . and how he loves him. . . .”

“But that’s bestiality.”

“What do you know? . . . If I could, I’d give all my money to be a woman . . . just a poor woman . . . and I wouldn’t mind getting pregnant and washing clothes as long as he loved me . . . and was working for me. . . .”

I was speechless, listening to him.

Who was this poor human being who uttered such new and terrible words? . . . Who asked for nothing more than a little love?

I went over to caress his forehead.

“Don’t touch me,” he cried, “don’t touch me. It breaks my heart. Get away.”

Now I was in my bed, not moving, fearful that any noise I made would be the death of him.

Time passed slowly, and my conscience, shaken from its moorings by wonder and fatigue, gathered in that space the silent suffering of humanity.

It seemed to me I could still hear the sound of his words. . . . In

the blackness, his twisted face was the very picture of anguish as his parched mouth called out in the darkness:

“And I wouldn’t mind getting pregnant and washing clothes as long as he loved me and was working for me.”

Getting pregnant! How soft that word sounded on his lips!

Getting pregnant.

And that whole miserable body would become deformed, but “she,” glorying in her profound love, would walk among the crowds seeing only the face of the one to whom she had given herself so completely.

Human suffering! How many sad words were yet hidden in the belly of man!

The noise of a door slamming violently woke me up. Quickly, I lit the lamp. The young man had disappeared, leaving no trace.

Near the edge of the table lay two five-peso bills, laid out neatly. I took them greedily. In the mirror, I could see my pale face, the whites of my eyes laced by blood, and strands of hair hanging down over my forehead.

A woman’s voice was pleading softly in the corridor, “Hurry, for God’s sake . . . or they’ll find out.”

The ringing of an electric bell sounded distinctly.

I opened the window that looked out over the patio. The wet air made me shiver. It was still night, but downstairs in the patio the light was shining in a doorway where two men were busy at work.

I left.

Once in the street, I could relax. In a bar where almost all the tables were taken by newspaper vendors and cabdrivers, I had some coffee. The clock that hung above a childish country scene struck five.

I suddenly remembered that everyone there had a home. I saw my sister’s face, and, in despair, I took to the streets again.

Once more, I felt my spirit dragged down by the trials of life, by sights I didn’t want to see or remember. Gritting my teeth, I walked along the dark sidewalks, past streets whose shops were boarded up and shuttered.

Behind those doors was money. The shop owners would be sleeping peacefully in their luxurious bedrooms, and there I was like a dog, roaming the city by guess and by God.

Trembling with hatred, I lit a cigarette and maliciously threw the burning match on a human mass that was curled up asleep in a doorway. A small flame skimmed along the rags and tatters. In a trice the wretch was upright, formless as darkness, and threatening me with his enormous fist. I hit the road.



In a secondhand store on Ninth of July Avenue I bought a revolver and loaded it with five bullets, then caught a streetcar and headed for the docks.

In hopes of realizing my dream of going to Europe, I went racing up the rope ladders of great ocean liners and offered myself for any kind of work in exchange for passage. To locate the ship's officers, I crossed through hallways and entered narrow cabins with sextants hanging from the walls and crammed with suitcases. The uniformed men would turn brusquely when I spoke to them, then shoo me away with an impatient gesture as soon as they understood what I wanted.

Above the bridge I saw the sea touching the slope of the sky and the sails of far-off boats.

I walked in a trance, dazed by the constant bustle, the screeching of cranes, the whistles and calls of the workers unloading large containers.

I had the feeling that I was far, far from home, so remote that even if I changed my mind, I could never return.

When I stopped to offer my services to the bargemen, they made fun of me, sometimes appearing from smoky kitchens to answer me, their faces so brutish that I fled without another word. I walked along the edge of the docks, my eyes fixed on the greasy, violet waters that were licking the granite with a guttural noise. I was tired. The sight of great slanted smokestacks, the unwinding of chains, the shouts at every maneuver, the solitude of slender masts—my atten-

tion divided now between a face that showed itself at a porthole and a weight suspended by a crane above my head—that noisy crisscross of voices, whistles, and booming crashes made me feel so small in the face of life that I no longer dared to hope.

A metallic quaking shook the air near the shore.

From streets shaded by high warehouse walls, I would cross into the terrible brightness of the sun, sometimes a shove throwing me to one side, the many-colored ship flags curling in the breeze; farther down, between the black wall and the red hull of a ship, the caulkers were hammering incessantly, and that gigantic show of power and wealth, of merchandise piled up in pyramids and animals kicking violently as they dangled in mid-air, made me drunk with anguish.

And I reached the inevitable conclusion.

It's hopeless, I have to kill myself.

I had vaguely foreseen it.

Already in other situations the drama of mourning at a suicide's wake had seduced me with its prestige.

I envied the cadavers whose coffins were surrounded by beautiful women, and my masculinity was painfully tested by the sight of them, sobbing as they bent over the deceased.

At those moments I would have liked to occupy the sumptuous bed of the dead, like them to be covered with flowers and made beautiful by the soft light of candles, to gather the tears of grieving maidens on my eyes and forehead.

It wasn't the first time I had had these thoughts, but in that instant I was struck by a certainty:

I don't have to die . . . but I have to kill myself, and before I could think twice, the absurdity of this idea took violent possession of me.

I don't have to die, no. . . . No . . . I can't die . . . , but I have to kill myself.

Where did this irrational certainty, which has since guided all my actions, come from?

My mind became free of any secondary feelings; I was only a beating heart, a clear eye open to the inner calm.

I don't have to die, but I have to kill myself.

The idea came to me as clear as crystal, and my senses, faced with its unshakable logic, were in complete agreement.

I don't have to die. . . . I can't die. . . . But I have to kill myself.

I headed toward a warehouse. Not far away a team of workers was unloading bags from a van, leaving a carpet of yellow corn on the pavement.

I thought, *It has to be here*, and as I took out the revolver, I suddenly realized, *Not the temple, that would ruin my face; the heart.*

Unshakable certainty guided the movements of my arm.

Where is my heart? I wondered.

The dull knocking inside identified its position.

I examined the cylinder. There were five bullets. Then I held the gun against my jacket.

A mild dizziness made my knees wobble, and I leaned against the shed.

My eyes remained fixed on the carpet of yellow corn, and I squeezed the trigger slowly, thinking . . . *I don't have to die*—and the hammer fell. . . . But in that brief interval that separated the hammer from the percussion cap, I felt my spirit spread out in the darkness of space.

I fell to the ground.



When I woke up in my own bedroom, a sunbeam was projecting the shape of the valance onto the white wall.

Seated at the edge of the bed was my mother, bending over me.

Her wet lashes and the wrinkles on her face, her sunken cheeks, seemed carved from a block of tortured marble.

Her voice was trembling: “Why did you do this? . . . Oh, why didn't you tell me everything? Why did you do it, Silvio?”

I looked at her. Her face, a terrible figure of compassion and remorse, broke my heart.

“Why didn't you come home? . . . I wouldn't have said anything. It's fate, Silvio. What would have become of me if the revolver had fired? You would be here now, with your poor cold little face. . . .

Oh, Silvio, Silvio!” and across the red circle under her eye a heavy tear rolled slowly down.

I felt night falling in my soul and laid my head on her lap. I expected to wake up in jail, as I could clearly make out in the mist of memory a circle of uniformed men waving their arms above me.

4. JUDAS ISCARIOT

Monti was noble and energetic, feisty as a pirate, lean as Don Quixote. His penetrating gaze took nothing away from the snide curl of his slender lips, over which the silky threads of a black moustache cast their shadow. When he got angry, his cheeks turned red and his lower lip shook all the way down to his excuse for a chin.

His paper business occupied three rooms that he rented from a Jewish furrier. The front office was separated from the landlord's fetid apartment by a hallway that was always overrun by grimy, red-headed kids.

The first room was a combination office space and display area for deluxe paper. Its windows looked out on Rivadavia Street, and from the sidewalk passersby could see, lined up to face them in a pine-wood setting, reams of paper—salmon, green, blue, and red—rolls of impermeable paper, grainy and stiff, blocks of silk paper and so-called waxed paper, cubes of labels with multicolored flowers, stacks of rustic paper decorated with flowers and embossed with pale vases.

On the bluish wall hung a print of the Gulf of Naples. The lacquered blue of its still sea gleamed against a dark coastline, punctuated by little white squares—the houses.

There, when he was in a good mood, Monti would sing in a voice that was clear and true, "*A mare chiaro che se de una puesta.*"¹

I enjoyed listening to him, for he sang with feeling, clearly remembering the places and the dreams of his Neapolitan boyhood.

When Monti hired me on commission, he handed me a sample

book, where the paper was classed by kind and by price, and said simply: "So, now to sell. Every kilo of paper is worth three centavos in commission."

A hard rule to begin with!

I remember that for a week I walked six hours a day, in vain. Improbable as it seems, I walked forty-five leagues without selling a kilo of paper. Desperate, I would go into produce stalls, into shops and dry goods stores; I haunted the markets, I waited patiently outside pharmacies and butcher shops, but all for nothing.

Some would tell me as politely as possible to go to hell, others would say to come back next week, or "I already have a regular salesman," and still others would pay no attention to me at all, or else express the opinion that what I was selling was too expensive, too common, or, on rare occasions, too elegant.

At noon, back in Monti's office, I would collapse wordlessly against a column formed by reams of paper, numbed by fatigue and hopelessness.

Another salesman, a sixteen-year-old loafer named Mario who was tall as a poplar tree and all arms and legs, made fun of my futile efforts.

What a buffoon he was! He looked like a telegraph pole with a fantastic forest of curly hair topping off his tiny head. He would come striding into the office with a red leather bag tucked under one arm, then throw the bag in a corner and doff his hat, a round bowler that was so oily you could use it to grease an axle. He could sell like the devil, and was eternally cheerful.

Leafing through a grimy notebook, he would read aloud the long list of orders he had taken, and then he would laugh, opening his baby whale of a mouth to expose the red depths of his throat and two rows of protruding teeth. Pretending to laugh so hard his stomach hurt, he would take hold of it with both hands.

Over the pigeonholes of his desk, Monti would be watching us with his sardonic grin. He would put a hand on his forehead or rub his eyes as if trying to erase his worries, and then he would say, "What the devil, there's no need to get discouraged. You want to be an inventor and you don't know how to sell a kilo of paper."

Later he would continue, “You have to keep at it. Any business is like that. Until they know you they won’t deal with you. They’ll tell you they have what they need. It doesn’t matter. You have to go back until the owner gets used to seeing you and ends up buying. And always be polite, because that’s the way it is.” Changing the subject, he would finish up: “Come back this afternoon and have some coffee. We’ll talk awhile.”



One night I went into a pharmacy on Rojas Street and got the druggist, a bilious, pockmarked fellow, to take a look at my samples. It seemed to me an angel had spoken when at last he said, “Send me five kilos of assorted silk paper, twenty kilos of special machine-cut paper. Also I need twenty thousand envelopes, in sets of five thousand, stamped ‘Boric Acid,’ ‘Calcinated Magnesium,’ ‘Cream of Tartar,’ and ‘Logwood Soap.’ And be sure the paper’s here Monday, bright and early.”

Quivering with joy, I wrote down the order. After taking my leave of the pharmacist with a reverent bow, I wandered the streets in a daze. It was my first sale. I had earned fifteen pesos in commission.

I found myself in Caballito and decided to venture into the market, a place that always reminded me of the markets in Carolina Invernizio’s novels.² An obese, cow-faced sausage vendor, whom I had pestered several times before, shouted out to me as he poised his butcher knife high above a slab of bacon: “Che, send me two hundred kilos special cut, but make sure it comes early in the morning and bill it at thirty-one.”

I had earned four pesos, in spite of knocking off a centavo per kilo.

Infinite joy, astonishing Dionysian joy, made my spirit rise to the heights of heaven . . . and then, comparing my drunkenness with that of D’Annunzio’s heroes,³ who were scorned by my boss for their grand airs, I thought to myself, *Monti is an idiot*.



Suddenly I felt someone squeezing my arm; I turned around quickly and found myself face to face with Lucio, the famous Lucio who was once a member of the Club of the Midnight Horsemen.

We greeted each other effusively. I hadn't seen him since that frightening night, and now here he was standing in front of me with a grin on his face and looking all around him as usual. I noticed he was well dressed, sporting elegant shoes, imitation gold rings on his fingers, and a pale stone tacked to his tie.

He had grown; he was a coarse lout disguised as a dandy. To complement his loudmouth-turned-gentleman face, he wore a fedora hat pulled down comically as far as his eyebrows. He affected an amber cigarette holder, and after the first hellos he invited me to have a "bock" in a nearby beer parlor like a man who knows how to treat his friends.

After chugging down his beer, friend Lucio asked in a hoarse voice, "So what line are you in?"

"What about you? . . . You've become a dandy, a somebody."

A smile twisted his lips.

"I've made some adjustments."

"Then you're doing well. . . . You've made great progress . . . but I haven't got your kind of luck, I'm a paper man. . . . I sell paper."

"So! You work for some company in particular?"

"Sure, I work for a fellow named Monti who lives in Flores."

"Earn a lot?"

"A lot, no, but enough to live on."

"So you've turned over a new leaf?"

"Naturally."

"I work, too."

"Oh, you work!"

"Sure, I work, and I bet you can't guess what I do."

"No, no idea."

"I'm a police investigator."

"You . . . an investigator? You!"

"That's right, why?"

"Oh, nothing. So you're an investigator?"

"What's so strange about that?"

“Nothing . . . nothing at all . . . You always had your whims . . . ever since you were a kid.”

“Think you’re pretty smart . . . but look, Silvio, a guy’s got to go straight; that’s life, Darwin’s ‘struggle for life.’”

“A scholar now! And does that pay your rent?”

“It’s anarchist lingo—I know what I’m talking about. So you’ve decided to go straight, too, you’re working and doing fine.”

“I get by. I sell paper.”

“Then you’ve gone straight?”

“So it seems.”

“Fine. Another beer, waiter . . . Make that two more, sorry, che.”

“So how’s this inspecting job?”

“Don’t ask, Silvio—professional secrets, you know. Not to change the subject, but do you remember Enrique?”

“Enrique Irzubeta?”

“Sure.”

“I only know that after we broke up—you remember?”

“How can I forget!”

“After we broke up I learned that Grenuillet managed to get them evicted, and they went to live in Villa del Parque, but I never saw Enrique again.”

“That’s right; Enrique went to work for a car dealer in Azul. You know where he is now?”

“In Azul, of course, don’t kid me.”

“No, he’s not in Azul, he’s in jail.”

“In jail?”

“As sure as I’m here, he’s in jail.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing, che: *the struggle for life* . . . that’s an expression I picked up from a Spanish baker who liked to make explosives. You don’t make explosives? Don’t get mad; you were nuts about dynamite. . . .”

Annoyed by his tricky questions, I looked at him squarely.

“Are you planning to arrest me?”

“No, man, why would I do that? Can’t you take a joke?”

“I think you’re trying to drag something out of me.”

“What gives you that idea, che? Didn’t you turn over a new leaf?”

“Okay. So what were you saying about Enrique?”

“I’m getting there. Between us, it was a coup, a really fine stunt.

“I don’t remember now if it was at a Chevrolet dealership or a Buick place, but Enrique was working there and had somehow gained their confidence. . . . Let’s face it, he was always a master at taking people in. He worked in the office, doing I don’t know what. Anyway, he stole a check and forged it quick as he could—5,953 pesos. Can you believe it!

“The morning he’s planning to cash it, the owner gives him 2,100 pesos to deposit in the same bank. This guy is crazy enough to pocket the money, go to the garage, take out a car, and drive calmly to the bank, where he presents the check—and now get this, the bank cashes the forged check.”

“They cashed it!”

“It’s amazing. Can you imagine what a good forgery it must have been? Well, he always had talent. Do you remember when he made that counterfeit flag of Nicaragua?”

“Sure, he was good even then . . . but go on.”

“Well, they paid him . . . and if you think he wasn’t nervous, you’re wrong. He drives off in the car and at an intersection two blocks from the market he plows into a sulky. . . . He was lucky, the shaft just broke his arm, a little closer to the middle and he’d have been skewered. They take him to a clinic since he’s lost consciousness. By a fluke the car dealer finds out about the accident right away and heads for the clinic like a bat out of hell. He asks the doctor for Enrique’s clothes, since there has to be either money or a deposit slip. . . . Imagine his shock when he finds 8,053 pesos. As soon as Enrique shows signs of life, the guy asks him about the money and he doesn’t know what to say; so they go to the bank and pretty soon the whole story comes out.”

“Colossal.”

“Incredible. I read all about it in the *Citizen*, a local newspaper.”

“And he’s in jail now?”

“In the can, as he used to say . . . but guess how long his sentence is. He’s a minor, and his folks know people in high places.”

“Funny: our friend Enrique has a great future ahead of him.”

“Enviably. They didn’t call him the Counterfeiter for nothing.”

We grew silent. I was remembering Enrique. I seemed to be back there with him, in the puppets’ cave. On the red wall a sunbeam flashed the proud adolescent’s gaunt profile.

In a hoarse voice, Lucio commented, “Che, it’s the struggle for life. Some go straight and others take the plunge. That’s life . . . but I have to leave, it’s my shift. . . . If you want to see me, here’s my address”—and he handed me a card.

When, after his elaborate good-bye, I found myself far away, walking the lamplit streets, his hoarse voice still echoed in my ears: “The struggle for life, che. . . . Some go straight and others take the plunge. . . . That’s life!”



I now approached the store owners with the confidence of an expert salesman, and with the assurance that my frustrations were over, as I had now “sold something” already, I quickly acquired a modest clientele composed of some vendors at the fair, pharmacists to whom I would talk about picric acid and this and that, booksellers, and two or three grocers—the least profitable and the most cunning when it came to making a deal.

In order not to waste time, I had divided the neighborhoods of Caballito, Flores, Vélez Sársfield, and Villa Crespo into zones that I covered systematically once a week.

I would rise early and begin the daily round with great strides. When I look back on those days, I see a vast, brilliant sky stretching over horizons of small, whitewashed houses, factories with red walls, and, decorating the borders, jets of greenery, cypresses and fruit trees, surrounding the cemetery’s white domes.

My memory of those flat streets on the outskirts of Buenos Aires—wretched and dirty, sun-drenched, with garbage bins at the gates, and big-bellied women, uncombed and squalid, talking in their doorways and calling to their dogs or their children under the arc of a clean, clear sky—remains cool, tall, and beautiful.

My eyes eagerly drank in the peace, the infinite ecstasy of that heavenly blue space.

Flames of hope and illusion warmed my spirit, and the inspiration growing inside me was so joyously pure that I couldn't put it into words.

And the more the heavenly dome enchanted me, the more sordid were the streets where I did business. I remember . . .

Those grocery stores, those butcher shops on the edge of town!

In the darkness a sunbeam would highlight the black-red flesh of animals hung on hooks and ropes near the tin counters. The floor would be covered with sawdust, with the smell of suet in the air and black swarms of flies boiling on pieces of yellow fat, while the impassive butcher sawed away on the bones or hacked at the chops with the back of his knife . . . and outside . . . outside was the morning sky, quiet and exquisite, letting the infinite sweetness of spring fall from its blueness.

As I walked I was concerned only with the space, smooth as a piece of sky-blue china in its azure bounds, deep as a gulf at the zenith, a prodigious sea, high and still as could be, where my eyes seemed to see islands, seaports, marble cities surrounded by green woods, and ships with flowered masts slipping past sirens' songs toward the fairytale cities of joy.

And so I walked, shivering with a delicious violence.

I seemed to hear the sounds of an all-night party. Overhead, fire-crackers were spilling their stars in green cascades; down below, the potbellies of earthly wits shook with laughter, and monkeys played juggling games while goddesses laughed at the sound of a toad's flute.

With those jubilant noises singing in my ears, those visions floating before my eyes, I covered great distances without even noticing.

I would go to the markets and talk to the merchants, either to make a sale or to wrangle with disgruntled clients, unhappy about the paper they had received. They would reach under the counter and pull out strips of paper that would have made nice streamers, and say: "Just what do you expect me to wrap with these?"

"Well, you can't expect every cutting to be as big as a sail. There's room for everything in God's vineyard."

Unsatisfied by this specious reasoning, the merchants would then

call their colleagues as witnesses and swear never to buy another kilo of paper from me.

I would pretend to be indignant, utter a few unchristian words, then dart behind the counter and hunt around until I came up with sheets of paper that, with a little good will, could make a shroud for a cow.

“And this? . . . Why don’t you hold up this one? You people think I’m going to pick out each sheet for you. Why don’t you buy the special cut?”

Thus did I cross swords with the fine citizens who traded in meat and fish, stupid, pushy people who loved a good scrap.

On spring mornings I also enjoyed a good ramble down streets trimmed with tram lines and merchants’ awnings. I liked the spectacle of the large, dimly lit stores, the cool dairy stalls stocked with huge piles of butter on the shelves, shops with colorful show windows and women seated behind slim bolts of cloth at the counters; and the smell of paint in the hardware stores, and the smell of kerosene in the grocery stores, became mixed in my sensory palette with the sweet scent of a wondrous joy, a universal, perfumed fiesta, whose future narrator would be me.

On glorious October mornings I have felt powerful, as all-containing as a god.

If I grew tired and wandered into a café to have a drink, the shadows and the decorations in the place would start me dreaming of an ineffable Alhambra, and I would see the country gardens of far-off Andalusia, I would see plots of land rising at the foot of the sierra, and lining the bottom of sunken arroyos, the ribbon of silver streams. I would hear a woman singing to the sound of a guitar, and in my memory the old Andalusian cobbler would reappear, saying, “Jozé, if he wuzn’t sweeter’n a rroze.”

Love, piety, gratitude toward life, toward books, and toward the world would send an electrical charge through the blue sinew of my soul.

It wasn’t me, but the god inside me, a god fashioned from pieces of mountain, forest, sky, and memory.

When I had sold enough paper, I would head back, and since it

was a long trek on foot, I found pleasure in absurd dreams, such as that I had inherited seventy million pesos, things of that sort. My chimeras would vanish as soon as I walked into the office, and Monti would announce indignantly:

“The butcher on Remedios Street sent back the cuttings.”

“Why?”

“How should I know! . . . He said he didn’t like them.”

“Then may his knife slip and chop off a thumb.”

The sense of failure produced by that dirty package of paper left lying on the dark patio, its strings retied, its edges caked with mud, the surface stained with blood and grease from the butcher’s fat, unfeeling hands, is indescribable.

This kind of thing happened too often.

Trying to prevent a recurrence, I made it a habit to warn the buyer, “Look: these cuttings are the leftovers from regular paper. If you want I’ll send you the special cut, that’s eight centavos more per kilo, but there’s no waste.”

“No problem, che,” the slaughterer would say, “send the cuttings.”

But when the paper was delivered, he would insist on having a few centavos per kilo shaved off, or else he would return the pieces that were badly torn. Those two or three kilos meant good-bye to my profit; or worse, he wouldn’t pay at all, which meant a total loss. . . .

Sometimes Monti and I would burst out laughing over something really funny that had happened—it was either that, or weep with rage.

One of our clients was a pork vendor who made the impossible demand that deliveries be made to his house at a day and time to be set by him; another would send back the merchandise and insult the driver if he didn’t fork over a legal receipt—an unnecessary frill; and still a third wouldn’t pay for the paper until a week after he had started using it.

The Turks who traded at the market fairs were a breed apart.

If I asked them for news of Al Motamid, they would pretend

not to understand, or they would shrug their shoulders, trimming a piece of lung for some brazen busybody's cat.

To sell them anything meant a morning lost, just for the privilege of sending a miserable twenty-five-kilo bundle incredible distances through unknown suburban streets for a measly seventy-five centavos profit.

As evening fell, the driver, a sullen, dirty-faced man, would return with his tired horse and the paper that had gone undelivered and say, "This was not delivered," adding as he threw down the package in disgust, "because the butcher was at the slaughterhouse and his wife said she didn't know anything about it and wouldn't take it. The other guy doesn't live at this address, there's a shoe factory there. And nobody could tell me a thing about this street."

We would talk ourselves hoarse, cursing the kind of riffraff who didn't recognize formalities or commitments of any sort.

Sometimes Mario and I would take an order from the same person, who would then send the paper back, saying he had got a better price from yet a third vendor. When excuses were lacking, they would usually invent them; there were even those who had the cheek to say they hadn't ordered anything at all.

When I thought I had earned sixty pesos for the week, I would end up with only twenty-five or thirty.

And oh, the petty little retailers! The shopkeepers and the druggists! Such fastidiousness, wanting this information and that trial examination!

To buy a trifling thousand envelopes labeled "Magnesium" or "Boric Acid," they had to see them over and over, paper samples and print type had to be left, and finally they would say, "I don't know, come back next week."

I've often thought one could write about the subject: the phylogeny and psychology of the retail merchant, the man who stands behind the counter wearing a cap, his face pale, his eyes cold as laminated steel.

Because it isn't enough just to show off one's goods!

A mercurial subtlety is required to sell. One must choose one's

words and ideas carefully, flatter adroitly, chatter about things one neither thinks nor believes in, wax enthusiastic over trifles, score a point with a deprecatory gesture, be acutely interested in things one doesn't give a damn about, be many sided, flexible, and amusing, accept the smallest gewgaw with grace, not lift an eyebrow or take it personally if some gross remark is made, and suffer, suffer patiently—the waste of time, the sour, ill-tempered faces, the rude, annoying rebuffs—suffer in order to earn a few centavos, because “that's life.”

If one were alone in this dedication . . . but it's a fact that on the very spot where we have touted the advantages of doing business with us, many other salesmen have stood, offering the same products with a different pitch, a circumstance that can only favor the buyer.

What makes one man choose another from among many for their mutual gain?

It's not exaggerating to say that between the buyer and the seller ties of both a material and a spiritual character have been forged, an unconscious or feigned relationship based on shared ideas—economic, political, religious, and even social. Except in cases of overwhelming need, the selling of anything, be it only a packet of needles, entails more complexity than Newton's binomial theorem.

And even that's not the end of it!

One must, in addition, learn to swallow the insolence of the petty bourgeois.

Merchants are, as a rule, crafty finaglers, people of poor background who've made their money by dint of painful sacrifices, robberies beyond the reach of the law, and tricks that no one notices or that everyone tolerates.

The habit of lying has taken root among this rabble. Accustomed to handling capital, whether great or small, they are ennobled by credit, which gives them a patent of honorability. They behave, accordingly, like military officers; used to treating their subordinates rudely, they do the same with strangers obliged to solicit their business in order to make a living.

Armed with words that hurt to the quick, these despotic sharpsters sit behind office peepholes counting up their profits; how their

vulgar mugs twitch as they answer with killer instincts, “You’ve got to be kidding, son, we only buy from big companies.”

Nevertheless, one takes it, one smiles and shakes hands . . . because “that’s life.”



Occasionally, having finished my rounds, I would stop by at the market fair in Flores to chew the fat with the cart attendant.

This fair was like many others.

At the end of a street lined with whitewashed houses and flooded by an ocean of sunlight, it rose unexpectedly.

The wind carried a sour smell of vegetables, and the stands’ awnings threw shadows over the tin counters set up in the middle of the street, parallel with the sidewalk.

I can still see it, clear as a picture.

There are two rows.

One is made up of meat and dairy vendors, the other of fruit and vegetable stands. The column stretches out in gaudy, exuberant colors, with bearded men in shirtsleeves standing next to baskets full of garden produce.

The row begins with the fishmongers’ stalls. Yellow-ochre baskets are stained by the red of shrimp, the blue of mackerel, the chocolate of mussels, the leaden pallor of snails, and the zinc-white of hake.

Dogs patrol for offal, while the vendors, their arms bare and hairy, an apron over their chests, will grab a fish by the tail, open it up with a pass of the knife, sink their nails to the backbone to strip the guts, and after giving it a sharp whack, split it in half to fill a customer’s order.

Farther along, the tripe women are scraping yellowish entrails on their tin counters, or hanging enormous red livers on hooks.

Ten times comes the monotonous cry, “Fresh mackereellll . . . fresh, lady.”

Another voice yells, “Right here . . . The best is over here. Come see.”

Pieces of ice covered with red sawdust melt slowly in the shade over packed fish.

“Rengo?” I would ask at the first stand I came to.⁴

With their hands on their hips, the dirty aprons ballooning over their bellies, the vendors would yell in their shrill, nasal voices: “Hey, Rengo, over here, Rengo.” And since they admired him, they would laugh heartily as they called, but Rengo, recognizing me from a distance, would move slowly with his slight limp, milking his popularity for all it was worth. Meeting a housemaid he knew standing by one of the stalls, he would touch the brim of his hat with the tip of his whip.

He’d stop to talk, always smiling, exposing his crooked teeth with an eternally roguish smile; then suddenly he’d leave, winking slyly at the butcher boys who were making obscene gestures at him with their fingers.

“Rengo . . . che, Rengo . . . c’mon,” would come a cry from somewhere else.

The lazy rounder would turn his angular face to one side, telling us to wait, and then elbow his way through the clutch of women crowding around the stalls. The females who didn’t know him, the grumbling, greedy old women, the bilious, miserly young women, the lymphatic, presumptuous cows, would look with sour suspicion, with ill-disguised repulsion, at that triangular face reddened by the sun, bronzed by shamelessness.

He was a licentious do-nothing who enjoyed taking advantage of the females huddled together by feeling their behinds.

“Rengo . . . c’mon, Rengo.”

Rengo enjoyed his popularity. Moreover, as with all important figures in history, he liked being around women, exchanging greetings with them, bathing in that atmosphere of joking and vulgarity that is immediately established between lowly merchants and double-chinned gossips.

When he talked dirty, his red face would shine as if they had rubbed salt pork over it, and the circle of women selling tripe and vegetables and eggs would delight in the filth his cocky jokes spewed over them.

They would call out:

“Rengo . . . c’mere, Rengo.” And all the lusty butchers, stout sons

of Naples, all the hairy filth that deal and haggle to make a living, all the riffraff, thin and fat, crooked and cunning, the sellers of fish and fruit, the tripe and dairy women, all the money-hungry lowlifes took pleasure in the nerve of Rengo, in the underhanded knavery of Rengo, and the Olympian Rengo, brazen and fun loving, like a symbol of free trade, would strut down the walkway strewn with stems, cabbages, and orange peels, with these obscene lyrics on his lips: "O how sweet to have it on the house."

He was a worthy goof-off. He had belonged to the noble rank of cart tenders since the day a horse fell on him, leaving him with a lame leg. He always wore the same outfit, namely, green flannel trousers, black suspenders, and a toreador jacket.

A red kerchief adorned his neck, and, over his brow, a greasy, wide-brimmed hat cast its shadow. Instead of boots, he sported rope-soled *alpargatas* made of violet-colored cloth and decorated with pink arabesques.

Carrying a whip that never left his hand, he would oversee the line of carts, hobbling from one end to the other to calm the horses that were savagely biting one another out of sheer boredom.

In addition to being a cart tender, Rengo was also an experienced thief, pimp, and habitual gambler. In essence, he was an extremely affable rogue from whom one could expect any kind of favor, as well as a measure of mischief.

He said he had trained to be a jockey and that his game leg had resulted when some friends, out of envy, had frightened his horse at one of the trials, but I think he never got past raking muck out of the stables.

True, he knew more names and distinguishing traits of horses than a church lady knows of the saints and martyrs. His memory was the *Who's Who* of equine nobility. If he spoke of minutes and seconds, you thought you were listening to an astronomer; if he spoke of himself and of the loss the country had suffered by losing a jockey like him, you felt close to tears.

What a fake!

If I went to see him, he would walk away from the stands, where he would be conversing with some choice "chickens," and nudging

me with one elbow, would begin by saying, “Pass me a cigarette . . .”; and heading for the row of carts, we would look for the one that had the best top on it so we could sit in comfort and shoot the breeze.

He would say: “Ya know, I pulled a good’un on ol’ Solomon the Turk. He left a leg o’ mutton in his buggy, so I called the Kid”—his protégé—“an’ I said, ‘Get it to our room, on the double.’”

Or he would say: “The other day this ol’ gal comes up. She was movin’ to another house, not much stuff at all. And there I was, without a centavo. . . . One peso, I tell her, and grab the fishmonger’s cart.

“Brother, what a hustle! When I got back it was nine-fifteen and that jade sweatin’ fit to drop. I dried her off good, but the ol’ Spaniard musta got wind of it ’cause today and yestiddy he’s come boomerangin’ around fifty times to see if his buggy was still here. Next trip I’ll swipe the tripe lady’s cart.”

Noticing my smile he added:

“Che, a man’s gotta live, ya know. A tenner for the room. Sunday I make a domino bet on His Majesty, Little Basque, and Adoration . . . and His Majesty took me to the cleaners.”⁵ But then, seeing two bums who were sneaking around a buggy at the end of the line, he screamed to high heaven:

“Hey, sons of a great bitch, whadda ya think y’re doin’?” And brandishing his whip in the air, he went racing over to the buggy. After checking the harnesses, he came back, grumbling, “That’ll fix me good if they go snitchin’ reins or carryin’ off buggy parts on me.”

I usually spent rainy mornings in his company.

Under the hood of a buggy, Rengo would improvise fantastic armchairs using boxes and bags. His whereabouts were never in doubt, since clouds of smoke would be billowing up from under the canvas arc where he sat. To amuse himself, he would hold the handle of his whip as if it were a guitar, lower his eyelids, suck energetically on his cigarette, and in a roguish voice, sometimes swollen with rage, sometimes aching with lust, he would sing:

I have an extra bedroom, pimp-o,⁶
Where it’s eleven early,⁷

And I rented it for her:
And I rented it for her
So she could do tricks on her own.

With his hat pulled down over his ears, his cigarette smoking under his nostrils, and his open shirt exposing his suntanned chest, Rengo looked like a thief, and sometimes he would say to me, “Che, Rubio,⁸ can’tcha just see me takin’ a ‘five-finger discount?’”

Or he would recount in low tones, between long puffs on his cigarette, tales from the boondocks, recalling his childhood in Caballito.

Weaving in and out of these memories of rapine and robbery, muggings in broad daylight, were the names of Garlic Head, the Englishman, and the two Arévalo brothers.

Rengo was saying nostalgically, “Yes, I remember! I was a kid. They was always hangin’ out at the corner of Méndez de Andés and Bella Vista, leanin’ against the window of this ol’ Spaniard’s grocery store. The guy was a dope. His wife slep’ around, and he had two daughters workin’ in a cathouse. Do I remember! They was always there, soakin’ up sun and buggin’ everyone that walked by.

“If a hick wearin’ a straw hat come by, one of ’em would yell: ‘Who gobbled up the drumstick?’

“‘The dumb hick,’ would come the answer.

“If they wasn’t comical turkeys! As quick as ya gotcher back up, they’d haul off and bash the livin’ moses out of ya. I remember. It was one o’clock in the mornin’. Here comes this Turk. I’d taken an ol’ jade to the French blacksmith ’cross from the bar. It happened ’fore ya could wink an eye. The Turk’s straw hat flew out in the street, he tried to take out his gun, and wham, the Englishman pasted his mush and took him out. Arévalo copped the crate, and Garlic Head took the chest. When Johnny Law come flatfootin’ over, there’s just the panama and the Turk, who’s cryin’, with his mug rearranged.

“The meanest of all’s Arévalo. He was tall, dark, and one-eyed. Had some notches on his gun, the last one for a corp’ral. There was a price on his head already.

“They nabbed him along with some other johnnies and janes in

a café that was just b'fore San Eduardo Street. They frisked him, but he was clean. The corp'ral puts him in chains and takes him away. Well, it's dark and they's almost at Bogota Street, when Arévalo slips out a jackknife he's got stashed in his undershirt in some tissue paper an' buries it in th' guy's heart clear up to th' handle.

“He falls in a heap, and Arévalo goes tearin' off. He went an' hid in the house of his sister who took in ironin', but they hooked him the next day. They say he died o' consumption after the way they beat him with the hose.”

Such were Rengo's stories. Monotonous, dark, and cruel. He would finish his tales before it was time for the market fair to de-camp, and then invite me: “Say, Rubio, wanna help me collect scraps?”

“Let's go.”

With his bag on his shoulder, Rengo would make the rounds of the stands, and before he could ask, the traders would call to him: “Over here, Rengo, take this.” And he would collect fat and bones with meat on them; the produce vendors, if they didn't give him cabbage, would give him potatoes or onions; the dairy women, a little butter; the tripe ladies, a plug of liver; and Rengo would be jolly, his hat angled over one ear, the whip on his back and the bag in his hand, promenading before the stalls like a king. Even the meanest and the stingiest did not dare deny him a leftover because they knew he could hurt them one way or another.

When he was through he would say, “Let's go have some grub at my place.”

“No, they're waiting for me at home.”

“Don't be a sap, we'll have steak and French fries. Afterward I'll give ya the six-string to play, and there's some wine, a little San Juan brew that strikes twelve early. I bought myself a demijohn, 'cause if ya don't spend your jack, it's wasted at the track.”

I knew very well why Rengo insisted on having lunch with me. He would be asking my advice about his inventions; because, yes, Rengo, with all his boondoggling, fancied himself an inventor. Rengo, who said himself he grew up “neath the horses' legs,” spent his siesta time devising inventive ways to rob his fellow man. I re-

member one day, as I was explaining to him the wonders of electroplating, Rengo was so impressed that for days he tried to persuade me we should set up a factory to make counterfeit money. When I asked him where he'd get the capital, he replied, "I know someone who's got dough. If ya want me to, I'll introduce ya and we'll make a deal."

"So are we going, or not?"

"Let's go."

Suddenly Rengo looked carefully in all directions, only to yell in a piercing voice: "Kiiiiid!"

The Kid, who was mixing it up with some other bums of his ilk, reappeared.

He wasn't ten years old, and less than four feet tall, but his wretched life as a vagabond had carved indelible wrinkles on his rhomboid Mongol's face.

He had a flat nose, thick lips, and a mass of hair; his ears disappeared among its dense, curly wool. The picture of this boy, dirty and aboriginal, was completed by the black billowy shirt of a Basque herdsman and trousers that stopped at his ankles.

Rengo commanded him imperiously: "Here, take this."

The Kid threw the bag on his shoulder and set off.

He was servant, cook, waiter, and assistant to Rengo, who had taken him in as one takes home an animal, and in exchange for his services, clothed and fed him. The Kid was a faithful servant to his master.

"Get this," he was telling me. "The other day at one o' the stands this dame lets five pesos fall out of 'er purse. The Kid covers 'em with his foot, then picks 'em up.

"We go home and there's not even a cinder of coal.

"Go try an' get some on credit."

"Don't need to," answers the crazy kid, and peels off the fiver."

"Cripes, that's not bad."

"And from there to muggin'. Besides, ya know what he does?"

"Tell me."

"Can ya beat it? . . . One afternoon I see 'im headin' out. 'Where ya goin'?' I ask.

“To church.”

“Yeah, an’ I’m gettin’ married—to church?”

“Get a load o’ this,” he says, and he starts tellin’ me how he’d seen the tail end of a peso stickin’ outta the alms box on the entrance wall.

“Seems they’d tried to squeeze it in, and he got it out with a pin. An’ then he made himself a hook from a pin to go fishin’ for all the other pesos that was in there. Can ya beat that? . . .”

Rengo laughs. If I have my doubts that the Kid invented the fish-hook, I do believe the Kid did the fishing, but I don’t say anything. Slapping him on the back, I exclaim: “Oh, Rengo, Rengo! . . .”

And Rengo laughs with a laugh that twists his lips, exposing his teeth.



Sometimes at night. — *Mercy, who will have mercy upon us.*

Who will have mercy upon us, on this earth. Miserable wretches, we have no God before whom we can bow down, and all our poor life weeps.

Before whom shall I bow down? To whom shall I speak of my thorns and brambles, of this aching that began in the heat of the afternoon, and that still dwells within me?

How small we are, and our mother earth refused to take us in her arms; behold us now, bitter and broken by impotence.

Why do we hear nothing from our God?

Oh, if only He would come some evening and gently embrace us, with His hands on both sides of our forehead.

What more could we ask of Him? We would go away with His smile in our eyes and tears hanging from our lashes.



One day, at two in the afternoon, my sister came to tell me someone was at the door to see me.

I was surprised to find Rengo standing there, decked out more elegantly than usual: he had replaced his red neckerchief with a modest cloth collar, and his flowery slippers with a new pair of boots.

“Hello! You here?”

“Busy, Rubio?”

“No, why?”

“C’mon out, we gotta talk.”

“Sure, wait here a minute.” As quick as I could, I put on a collar, grabbed my hat, and left. Needless to say, I immediately suspected something, and though I had no idea what Rengo was up to, I resolved to be on my guard.

Once we were on the street, I could see he had something important to say since he kept looking at me sideways, but I reined in my curiosity, uttering only an encouraging, “So?”

“You ain’t been by the market in days,” he commented.

“Well . . . I was busy. . . . How about you?”

Rengo turned to look at me. As we strolled along a shaded sidewalk, he started making remarks about how hot it was; then he talked about being poor, about the hardships of his daily routine; he also told me some reins had been stolen on his watch that week, and when that subject petered out, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk and grabbing me by the arm, he suddenly hit me with this question:

“Say, Rubio, can I trust ya or not?”

“You brought me here to ask me that?”

“Well, can I, or not?”

“Look, Rengo, tell me, don’t you have faith in me?”

“Sure . . . sure, I do . . . but can I tell ya somethin’?”

“Of course, man.”

“Okay, then, let’s go in there, we’ll have a drink,” and Rengo walked over to the bar in the general store and asked the dishwasher for a bottle of beer. We sat down at a table in the darkest corner, and after having our drink, Rengo said, like someone unloading a great weight:

“I gotta ask ya for some advice, Rubio. Y’re very ‘scientific.’ But please, che . . . I’m askin’ ya, Rubio . . .”

I interrupted him: “Look, Rengo, hang on a minute. I don’t know what you want to say to me, but I can tell you right now I know how to keep a secret. I don’t ask questions and I don’t blab.”

Rengo put his hat down on the chair. He was still hedging, his

uncertainty reflected in the slight movement of jaw muscles on his feral profile. Passion burned in his eyes. Finally, fixing me with a fiery look, he explained:

“It’s a swell dodge, Rubio. Ten grand, minimum.”

I eyed him with the cold disdain that comes of learning a secret we can profit by, and I answered, hoping to inspire confidence, “I don’t know what this is all about, but that’s not a whole lot of money.”

Rengo’s jaw dropped slowly: “You think it’s not a lot . . . Ten grand mi-ni-mum, Rubio . . . mi-ni-mum.”

“Split two ways,” I persisted.

“Three,” he replied.

“Worse and worse.”

“But the third’s my woman.” And without preamble, he took out a key, a small battered key, and putting it on the table, left it lying there. I didn’t touch it.

Concentrating, I looked him in the eyes. He was smiling as if his soul had been stretched by a mad joy. At times he would turn pale; he drank two glasses of beer, one after the other, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and said in a voice that didn’t seem his:

“It’s a sweet life!”

Without taking my eyes off him, I said, “Yes, life is sweet, Rengo. It’s sweet. Just imagine the grand scenery, imagine the cities across the sea. The females that would follow us; we’d be rich Romeos cruising the cities across the sea.”

“Do ya dance, Rubio?”

“No, I don’t know how.”

“They say guys that can do the tango marry millionairesses over there . . . an’ I’m goin’, Rubio, I’m goin’.”

“And the jack?”

He gave me a hard look, then joy softened his expression, and a wave of kindness spread over his hawk face.

“If ya knew how I’ve busted my ass on this, Rubio. Ya see that key? It goes to a strongbox.” He put his hand in his pocket and came out with another, larger key, and went on: “This opens the room

where the safe is. It just took me a night, Rubio, I filed the sh— out of it. Worked like a damn slave, no joke.”

“She gave them to you?”

“Right. Did the first one over a month ago, the other one, day b’fore yestiddy. Then I wait for ya till hell freezes over, an’ ya don’t show.”

“And now?”

“Wanna go in with me? We’ll go fifty-fifty. It’s ten grand, Rubio. He stashed it in his safe yestiddy.”

“How do you know?”

“He went to the bank. She saw ’im bring back a whoppin’ big bundle, an’ she saw the color o’ the bills.”

“And I get half?”

“Right, we can split two ways, are ya game?”

I sat up abruptly, pretending I was all for it.

“Congratulations, Rengo, you had a brainstorm.”

“Think so, Rubio?”

“A master criminal couldn’t have come up with a better plan. No break-in. A clean job.”

“That’s the truth, ain’t it? . . .”

“Clean, brother. We’ll hide the woman.”

“No sweat, I rented a room that’s got a basement; I’ll sneak ’er down there, then later dress ’er up like a man an’ head north.”

“Shall we leave, Rengo?”

“Sure, let’s go. . . .”

The dome formed over our heads by the sycamore trees protected us from the burning sun. Rengo, smoke spiraling from the cigarette planted between his lips, was lost in thought.

“Who’s the owner of the house?” I asked.

“An engineer.”

“Ah, an engineer!”

“Right. But let’s hear it, Rubio, y’re in, right?”

“Why not? . . . Sure, fella . . . I’m fed up with this paper beat.

“Always the same: busting your guts for nothing. Say, Rengo, does this life make any sense? We work to eat and eat to work. No

lousy parties, no jack, no joy, and every day the same, Rengo. It gives me a pain.”

“That’s exac’yly it, Rubio, ya see the way it is . . . so y’re in?”

“Right.”

“Then we hit tonight.”

“So fast?”

“Sure. He goes out every night. To ’is club.”

“Is he married?”

“No, he’s a loner.”

“Far from here?”

“No. A block this side o’ Nazca. On Bogota Street. If ya want, we can go take a look at the house.”

“Does it have many floors?”

“Naw, it’s low, an’ there’s a yard in front. All the doors open onto the veranda. There’s a piece o’ land runs the whole length.”

“What about her?”

“She’s the maid.”

“And who does the cooking?”

“The cook.”

“So he’s got dough.”

“Wait’ll ya see the house! It’s got every kind o’ furniture ya can imagine!”

“So what time do we strike?”

“Eleven.”

“Will she be alone?”

“Right. The cook goes home when supper’s over.”

“Are you sure this is safe?”

“Sure, I’m sure. The streetlight’s half a block away. She’ll leave the door open, we head straight to the study, grab the berries, divvy ’em up on the spot, an’ I go off with her to the hideout.”

“What about the cops?”

“The cops . . . the cops nab guys with a record. I’m a cart tender. Anyway, we’ll use gloves.”

“Can I give you a word of advice, Rengo?”

“Two.”

“Okay, listen. The first thing is we’d better not be seen around

there today. Some neighbor might spot us and get us busted. Besides, what's the point, if you know where the house is. Second: what time does this engineer leave the house?"

"Nine-thirty or ten, but we'll keep a lookout."

"It'll take ten minutes to open the safe."

"Not even that, we tested the key."

"Congratulations. . . . So we move at eleven."

"Right."

"Where do you want to meet?"

"It don't matter."

"But we have to be careful. I'll be at the Orchids restaurant at ten-thirty. You go in, but don't say hello or anything. Sit at another table, and at eleven we'll leave, I'll follow. You enter the house and then I'll go in. After that, it's every man for himself."

"That way we don't look suspicious. Good thinkin' . . . You carry a heater?"

"No."

Abruptly the gun flashed in his hand, and before I could stop him, he had it in my pocket.

"I got another one."

"We don't need it."

"Ya never know what's gonna happen."

"Could you kill someone?"

"I . . . what a question, sure I could!"

"Hah!"

Some people passing by forced us to stop talking. Joy, filtering down from the blue sky, turned to sadness in my guilty soul. Remembering a question I hadn't asked, I said:

"And how will she know we're going tonight?"

"I'll give 'er the sign by 'phone."

"The engineer's not home during the day?"

"Nope. If ya want, I can call 'er now."

"From where?"

"From this drugstore right here." Rengo went in to buy aspirin and came out a few minutes later. He'd given the signal to his woman.

“You were banking on me to do this, weren’t you?” I asked, suspecting a set-up.

“Sure, Rubio.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“And now we’re ready to move.”

“All set.”

“Do you have gloves?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll use socks, they’re just as good.”

We stopped talking.

We spent the afternoon walking aimlessly, lost in our separate thoughts.

I remember we went to watch some lawn bowling.

We had something to drink, but the world was spinning around us like the sidewalk in front of a drunk.

Images that had long been dormant rose up like clouds in my consciousness, the brilliant sun was hurting my eyes, a great sleepiness overpowered me, and from time to time I would talk rapidly without bothering to make sense.

Rengo was listening to me distractedly.

Suddenly a sly thought branched off in my spirit, I felt it advancing in the warmth of my guts like an icy stream, till it reached my heart: *What if I turned him in?*

Fearful that he had caught my thought, I looked up, startled, at Rengo. In the shade of the tree, his sleepy eyes were focused on the balls scattered over the field.

It was a somber scene, just right for hatching savage schemes.

The breadth of Nazca Street tapered away in the distance. The green painted wood of the caretaker’s room leaned against the tarred wall of a high-rise, and over the rest of the property strips of gravel extended in parallel lines.

Here and there were iron tables.

Again I thought: *What if I turned him in?*

With his chin resting on his chest and his hat pushed forward

over his brow, Rengo had gone to sleep. A ray of sun fell on his leg, highlighting the sizable grease spots on his trousers.

Suddenly disgusted, I seized him by the arm and yelled, "Rengo!"

"Huh . . . oh . . . what's up?"

"Let's go, Rengo."

"Go where?"

"Home. I have to get my clothes ready. Tonight we do the job, tomorrow we split."

"Okay, sure, let's go."



Once alone, I was prey to many fears. I saw my existence stretched out to embrace all human beings. Infamy spread my life among theirs until each one of them could touch me with a finger. And I, never would I belong to myself again.

Because if I do this I'll ruin the life of the finest man I've known, I said to myself.

If I do this I damn myself forever.

And I'll be alone, and I'll be like Judas Iscariot.

I'll bear a scar for the rest of my life.

Every day I'll bear this scar! . . . And I saw myself oozing among the spaces of inner life like a painful thought, shameful even to me.

After that it would be useless to pretend I was a nobody. The memory would haunt me like a rotten tooth, and its stench would sour all the smells of the earth; but the more I tried to distance myself from the deed, the more its infamy attracted me.

Why not? . . . In that case I'll have a secret, a dirty, repulsive secret that will drive me to seek the dark origin of my roots. And when I have nothing to do, and I am sad, thinking of Rengo I'll ask myself: "Why was I such a rat?" And curious spiritual horizons will open within me as I search for the answer.

Besides, I could profit from this deal.

The truth is, I had to confess, I'm a low-down scoundrel who's half-crazy; but Rocambole was no less: he murdered people. . . . I don't. For a few francs he lied under oath and got "Papa" Nicolo hanged. He strangled

old lady Fripart, who loved him like a mother. . . . Captain Williams, who made him a rich marquis, be killed. Is there anyone he didn't betray? . . .

Suddenly, with striking clarity, I remembered this passage:

Rocambole forgot for a moment his physical aches and pains. The prisoner, his back covered with welts left by the bailiff's truncheon, was in a trance: parading before his eyes he seemed to see, like a dizzying whirlwind, Paris, the Champs-Élysées, the Boulevard of the Italians, that whole world of blinding light and deafening noise in the heart of which he had once lived.

I thought to myself: *What about me? Will I be like that? Won't I live a life as flashy and free as Rocambole's someday?* And the words I had said before to Rengo sounded again in my ears, but as if they came from another mouth:

"Yes, life is sweet, Rengo. It's sweet. Just imagine the grand scenery, imagine the cities across the sea. The females that would follow us; we'd be rich Romeos cruising the cities across the sea."

Slowly another voice crescendoed in my ear: *Rat . . . you rat.*

My mouth twisted. I remembered an idiot who lived near my house and was constantly whining, "It's not my fault."

Rat . . . you rat.

"It's not my fault."

Ah! Rat . . . rat . . .

I don't care . . . and I'll be beautiful like Judas Iscariot. I'll carry a pain for the rest of my life . . . a pain. . . . Despair will open my eyes to great spiritual horizons . . . but cut the comedy! . . . don't I have a right? . . . what about me? . . . and I'll be beautiful like Judas Iscariot . . . and I'll bear a wound for the rest of my life . . . but . . . ah! life is sweet, Rengo . . . sweet . . . and I . . . I'm going to sink you, Rengo . . . cut your throat . . . double-cross you . . . yes, you . . . so savvy . . . always a step ahead of everyone else . . . I'm going to sink you . . . yes, you, Rengo . . . and then . . . then I'll be beautiful like Judas Iscariot . . . and I'll be in pain . . . in pain. . . . Swine!



A great stain of gold hung on the horizon. From it storm clouds rose in tin plumes, surrounded by whirling, orange-colored veils.

I raised my head, and almost straight above me, among layered clouds, I saw a star shining weakly. It was like a splash of water shivering in a wedge of blue porcelain.

I found myself in the neighborhood worked by Rengo.

Thick foliage of acacia and privet shaded the walkways. The street was quiet, romantically bourgeois, with painted iron railings bordering the yards, little fountains asleep among the shrubs, and some crumbling plaster statues. The strains of a piano could be heard in the evening hush, and I found myself hanging on the sounds like a dewdrop on a young shoot. An invisible rosebush exuded a perfume so strong it had me reeling as I read the brass plate:

ARSENIO VITRI—ENGINEER.

It was the only such sign for a three-block stretch.

As in other yards, the flowered garden extended the length of the living room, stopped at the tiled pathway that led to a glass door, then continued along the wall of the next house, forming a right angle. Above, a glass cupola sheltered the balcony from rain.

I stopped and rang the bell.

The glass panel opened and, framed in the doorway, I saw a wall-eyed, bushy-browed mulatto woman who asked me curtly what I wanted.

When I asked if the engineer was at home, she said she would see, but then asked who I was and what I wanted. I explained patiently that my name was Fernán González,⁹ and that I was a draftsman.

She came back in a friendlier mood and let me in. We passed several closed doors before she abruptly opened the door to a study. To the left of a green-shaded lamp I saw a gray head bent over a desk. The man looked at me, I said something polite, and he beckoned me in, saying, "I'll be with you in a moment, Señor."

I observed him. He was young in spite of his gray hair.

A sad weariness showed in his face: a deep frown, heavy bags under his eyes making triangles with his lids, and slightly drooping lips that matched the angle of his head, which now, as he bent over a piece of paper, rested in the palm of his hand.

Blueprints and sketches of luxurious buildings decorated the walls; my gaze fastened on a bookcase filled with books, and I had just managed to read the title *Water Law* when Señor Vitri asked me, “How can I help you, Señor?”

Lowering my voice I answered:

“Excuse me, Señor, but before anything else, are we alone?”

“I suppose so.”

“May I ask a possibly indiscreet question? You’re not married, are you?”

“No.”

He was looking at me seriously now, and his stern face gradually took on a hardened look that became graver still.

Leaning back in the chair, he had tilted his head back; his gray eyes were giving me a cold appraisal—focusing on the knot of my tie, then stopping at my own eyes. It seemed that, fixed in their own orbit, his were waiting to discover something out of the ordinary in me.

I realized I had to speak plainly.

“Señor, I’ve come to warn you, you’re going to be robbed tonight.”

I thought I would surprise him, but I was wrong.

“Ah! yes . . . and how do you know that?”

“Because the thief invited me to be in on it. I know you’ve withdrawn a hefty sum from the bank and you have it put away in your safe.”

“That’s true. . . .”

“The thief has the safe key, as well as the key to the room it’s in.”

“Did you see it?” And taking a key holder out of his pocket, he showed me one with large wards.

“Is it this one?”

“No, it’s the other one,” and I pointed to one that was identical to the one Rengo had shown me.

“Who are these thieves?”

“The leader is a cart tender named Rengo, and your maid is his accomplice.”

“I figured as much.”

“She took your keys one night, and Rengo made copies on the spot.”

“And what’s your role in this business?”

“I . . . I’ve been invited to the party just because Rengo knows me. He came to my house and asked me if I’d go along.”

“When did you see him?”

“Around two this afternoon.”

“And before that, you weren’t in on this fellow’s plans?”

“Not his plans, no. I got to know Rengo because I sell paper to the market vendors.”

“Then you were his friend. . . . These secrets are entrusted only to friends.”

I turned red.

“Not so much a friend, no . . . but his psychology always interested me.”

“Nothing more?”

“No, why?”

“I was telling you . . . but what time were you going to come tonight?”

“We planned to keep watch till you left for your club, and then your maid would let us in.”

“Good set-up. What’s the address of this fellow named Rengo?”

“Condarco 1375.”

“Fine. All will be arranged. And your address?”

“Caracas 824.”

“Well, then, come tonight at ten. By then everything will be under guard. Your name is Fernán González.”

“No, I changed my name in case your maid had learned from Rengo that I might be in on the deal. My name is Silvio Astier.”

The engineer pressed a button and his eyes wandered around the room; moments later the maid appeared.

Nothing showed on Arsenio Vitri’s face.

“Gabriela, the Señor will come tomorrow morning to pick up these designs.” He pointed to some papers rolled up on a chair. “Give them to him even if I’m not here.”

Then he rose and shook my hand coldly; I left, escorted by the maid.



Rengo was arrested at nine-thirty that night. He lived in a wooden attic, in a modest house. The police who were waiting for him learned from the Kid that Rengo had come, “fished around in his gear, and legged it.” Since they had no idea where he was likely to be, they descended upon his landlady unannounced, flashed their badges, and climbed the steep stairs that led to Rengo’s room. At first glance, they saw nothing helpful. However, absurdly and inexplicably, in sight of anyone who came in, they discovered the two keys hanging on a nail: one to Vitrio’s safe, the other to his office. In a kerosene container, along with some old rags, they found a revolver and, almost hidden at the bottom, newspaper clippings. They told the story of a robbery that had gone unsolved.

Since the clippings all had to do with the same crime, Rengo’s role in the affair was, quite rightly, taken for granted. They arrested the Kid as a precaution; that is, they sent him under escort to the local police station.

The attic room also contained a white pine table, in the drawer of which they found a watchmaker’s lathe and a set of sharp files, some of which had recently been used.

Having seized all the evidence they could find, the police called again on the landlady.

She was an old hag, insolent and greedy. In spite of the black scarf she kept wrapped around her head with the ends tied neatly under her chin, locks of white wool stuck out over her brow, and her jaw moved with incredible speed when she talked. Her statement shed little light on Rengo. She had known him for three months. He paid on time and worked in the mornings.

Asked about the thief’s visitors, she was vague, but she did remember that “last Sunday a colored woman came at three in the afternoon and left with Antonio at six.”

Discarding any possibility of complicity, they ordered her to be absolutely discreet, and the old lady promised she would, fearing

what would happen if she didn't. The two policemen returned to the attic to wait; the engineer had explicitly asked that the arrest not take place at his home so Rengo's sentence would be lighter. Maybe he also guessed that I'd played a bigger part in Rengo's plans than I'd let on.

The flatfoots figured he wouldn't show up—that he'd be eating in some restaurant on the outskirts and getting drunk to work up his courage—but they were wrong.

Rengo had been winning money with his domino bets. After he left me, he had gone back to his room, only to go out again later to a brothel he knew. Then he went to a leather shop and bought a suitcase just before closing time.

After that, he headed home with no inkling of what lay in store for him. He went up the stairs humming a tango, its notes counterpointed by the banging of his suitcase against the steps.

When he opened the door, he put his bag on the floor.

Then he put a hand in his pocket to take out his matchbox, and in that instant one cop shoved him from the front and another grabbed him by one arm.

There's no doubt Rengo knew what it was all about, for with a desperate effort, he managed to shake free.

The city's finest, in pursuit, tripped over his suitcase, and one of them went rolling down the stairs alongside his revolver, which went off.

The loud noise filled the residents of the house with fear; it was wrongly thought that the shot had been fired by Rengo, who had not yet managed to put the door to the street behind him.

It was then that a terrible thing happened.

The son of the old lady, a butcher by trade, got wind of events and went racing after Rengo with his cane.

He caught up with him after thirty paces. Rengo was running, dragging his bum leg. Suddenly, the cane came down on his arm; when he turned his head, the stick struck a ringing blow to his noggin.

Dizzied by the blow, he put up one hand to defend himself, but a cop who had just come on the scene put out a leg to trip him, and

another stroke of the cane to his shoulder finished him off. When they put him in chains, Rengo let out a wrenching cry:

“*Ay, mamita!*”

Then another blow silenced him, and he soon disappeared from view down the dark street, the cops on each side furiously yanking the chains that bound his wrists as they marched along.



When I arrived at Arsenio Vitri’s house, Gabriela was no longer there.

She had been arrested shortly after I left.

A police officer, primed for the occasion, questioned her in the presence of the engineer. The mulatto denied everything at first, but when the officer lied and said Rengo had already been arrested, she burst into tears.

Witnesses to the scene would never forget it.

The dark woman, cornered, looked all around her with glowing eyes, like a wild animal preparing to attack.

She was shaking violently; but when it was repeated that Rengo had been taken and was going to suffer for her sake, she began to cry softly, with a sorrow so exquisite that the frown of those present became more pronounced. . . . Abruptly she raised her arms, her fingers stopped at the twist in her hair, she yanked out an ornamental comb, and shaking her hair out over her back, she said, clasping her hands and gazing at the onlookers as if she were insane:

“Yes, it’s true. . . . It’s true. . . . Let’s go. . . . Take me to Antonio.”

They escorted her to the police station in a wagon.

Arsenio Vitri received me in his office. He was pale, and his eyes avoided mine as he said, “Sit down.”

Suddenly, in an iron voice he asked, “How much do I owe you for your services?” The question caught me off guard.

“What?”

“Yes, how much . . . because you can only be paid.”

Then I understood the contempt he was hurling at me.

Feeling the blood leave my face, I stood up: “Of course, I can only be paid. You can keep your money, I didn’t ask for it. Good-bye.”

“No, come back, sit down. . . . Tell me, why did you do it?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why did you betray your friend? And for no reason. Aren’t you ashamed to have so little dignity at your age?”

Blushing to the roots of my hair, I answered: “That’s true. . . . There are times in life when we need to be pigs, to wallow in filth till it seeps inside us, to do some vile deed, I don’t know . . . to destroy a man’s life forever . . . and having done that, we can go calmly on our way.”

Vitri was not looking at my face now. His eyes were fixed on the knot of my tie, and his face took on a seriousness that faded into something even more terrible.

I went on: “You have insulted me, but I don’t care.”

“I could have helped you,” he murmured.

“You could have paid me once, but not now. Because I’m at peace, I feel—in spite of every filthy thing I’ve done—better than you.” And suddenly angry, I began to shout:

“Who are you? . . . Informing on Rengo still seems like something I did in a dream.”

He answered in a subdued voice: “Why are you like that, then?”

A feeling of weariness swept over me, and I let myself sink into the chair.

“Why? God knows. I won’t be able to forget Rengo’s face in a thousand years. What will become of him? God knows; but Rengo’s memory will always be part of my life, it will live in me like the memory of a lost child. He can come and spit in my face and I won’t say a word.”

A vast sadness passed through my life. I would remember that moment forever after.

“Yes, that’s it,” stammered the engineer, and suddenly getting up, with his bright eyes focused on the knot of my tie, he murmured as if he were talking in his sleep: “You’ve spoken the truth. That’s

it. We obey a brutal law that's inside us. That's it. We obey the law of the jungle. That's it; but who told you it's a law? Where did you learn that?"

I answered.

"It's like a world that has suddenly descended upon us."

"But did you have any idea that one day you'd become another Judas?"

"No. But I'm calm now. I'll go through life like a dead person. That's how I see life, as an enormous yellow desert."

"How can you be so nonchalant about all this?"

"Why shouldn't I be? Life is so vast. A minute ago it seemed that what I had done was foreseen ten thousand years ago; then suddenly I believed the world was breaking into two halves, that everything was turning a purer color, and that we human beings were not so wretched after all."

A childish smile appeared on Vitri's face. "Do you think so?" he asked.

"Yes, some day that will happen. . . . It will happen, and people will go through the streets asking one another: Is it true? Is it?"

"Tell me, have you ever been ill?"

I understood what he was driving at, and smiling, I went on: "No . . . I know what you're thinking . . . but listen to me . . . I'm not crazy. One thing is certain, though . . . I know that life will always be extraordinarily beautiful for me. I don't know whether other people will experience the force of life as I do, but inside of me there is joy, a full, unconscious kind of joy."

With sudden clarity, I saw the motives behind my actions, and went on: "I'm not perverse, I'm curious—curious to know that enormous force that lies within me. . . ."

"Go on . . . go on . . ."

"Everything surprises me. Sometimes I have the feeling that it's just an hour since I arrived on earth, and everything is flaming new, fresh, beautiful. And then I want to hug people in the street, I want to stop in the middle of the sidewalk to tell them: 'But why do you people walk around with such long faces? When Life is sweet, so sweet'. . . . Don't you agree?"

“Yes . . .”

“And knowing that life is sweet fills me with joy, as if flowers were growing everywhere . . . making me want to kneel down and thank God for having made us.”

“You believe in God?”

“I believe that God is the joy of living. If you only knew! Sometimes I think my soul is as big as the church in Flores . . . and it makes me want to laugh, to go out in the street and throw friendly punches at people.”

“Go on.”

“You aren’t getting bored?”

“No, don’t stop.”

“The problem is, you can’t tell people these things. They’ll think you’re crazy. And I say to myself: What can I do with this life inside me? I’d like to give it . . . to make a present of it . . . to go up to people and tell them: You need to be joyful! You know? You have to play at being pirates . . . to build cities of marble. . . to laugh . . . to set off firecrackers.”

Arsenio Vitri stood and smiled, saying, “That’s all very well, but one has to work. How can I be of use to you?”

I thought for a second and answered, “Look; I’d like to go south . . . to Neuquén . . . where there are glaciers and clouds . . . and tall mountains. . . I’d like to see the mountains. . .”

“Fine, I’ll help you find a job in Comodoro;¹⁰ but leave me now because I have to work. I’ll write to you soon. . . Ah! and don’t lose your joy; your joy is very refreshing”—and his hand shook mine vigorously. I tripped over a chair . . . and kept on going.

APPENDIX: THE NEIGHBORHOOD POET

In May 1925, Arlt's "El poeta parroquial" (The neighborhood poet) appeared in *Proa*, an avant-garde magazine edited by Ricardo Güiraldes (author of *Don Segundo Sombra: Shadows on the Pampas*) and Jorge Luis Borges. It was presented, along with a chapter called "El rengo," as an excerpt from the soon-to-be-published *El juguete rabioso*. Ironically, however, when the novel came out the following year, "El poeta parroquial" had been excised, possibly because it satirizes a real poet, a certain Felix Visillac whose "boring evenings of poetry" Arlt had attended for a while (Borré 28, 105). I include the excerpt here as a fascinating glimpse at what was *not* said in the novel; Arlt, like Silvio, ended up as a writer, making it perhaps too risky to parody a poet-as-mentor in the first book he submitted for publication. The fragment also contains a rare reference to the first-person narrator's efforts to write, although, as in chapter 2 of the novel, someone else supplies us with this information. It is Silvio's mother who refers to his writing in "Works and Days"; here, the narrator's friend Juan answers laconically, "He does," when asked by the poet if neither of the boys writes.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD POET

Juan burst out laughing.

"I'm a fish out of water with these things. . . . Say, want to go see a poet with me? He's published two or three books, and since

I'm the secretary of a library, I'm supposed to keep it supplied with books. That's why I visit all the writers. You want to come? We can go tonight."

"What's his name?"

"Alejandro Villac. He wrote *The Cave of the Muses* and *The Velvet Collar*."

"How's his poetry?"

"I haven't read any of it. Some of his poems have come out in *Faces and Places*."

"Ah! If he's in *Faces and Places*, then he must be a good poet."

"And he got his picture in *Home Magazine*."

"He got his picture in *Home Magazine*?" I repeated, astonished. "Well, then, he's no run-of-the-mill poet. If *Home Magazine* ran his picture . . . gee whiz . . . to get your poetry in *Faces and Places* and your picture in *Home Magazine* . . . Let's go tonight." Then, seized by a sudden doubt: "But, do you think he'll see us? . . . I mean, if you have your picture in *Home Magazine*!"

"Of course he'll see us. I have a letter of introduction from the librarian. So just come look me up tonight. Oh! Hang on a minute, and I'll get *Electra* and the *Ciudad Morta* for you."¹

Afterward, I wasn't thinking about the books, or about the job, or about the sincere generosity of Juan the Magnificent; I was thinking excitedly about the man who wrote *The Cave of the Muses*, the poet who got published in *Faces and Places* and whose photograph was gloriously displayed in the pages of the *Home Magazine*.

The poet lived three blocks from Rivadavia Street in a dirt alley with gas streetlights, uneven sidewalks, ancient trees, and houses adorned with small but pleasant gardens; in other words, in one of those many suburban streets that can recall for us a field of dreams, and that constitute the charm of the Flores neighborhood.

Since Juan didn't know exactly where the author of *The Cave of the Muses* lived, we stopped to ask directions of a young girl who was out leaning on a post in her yard.

"You're looking for the house of the poet, right? — Señor Villac."

"Yes, Señorita; the one whose picture came out in *Home Magazine*."

“Then it’s the same person. You see that house that’s white in front?”

“The one with the fallen tree?”

“No, the other one; the one just before you get to the corner; it has an iron grille.”

“Oh, right.”

“That’s where Señor Villac lives.”

“Thanks very much,” we said, and moved on.

Juan was grinning sardonically. Why? I still don’t know. He always had that kind of grin, tinged with disbelief and sorrow.

I felt very excited; I could clearly feel the blood pulsing through my veins. And why shouldn’t I? In a few minutes I would be facing the poet whose picture had appeared in *Home Magazine*, and I hustled to come up with some remark, something subtle but memorable, that would ingratiate me with the bard.

I fretted: “Will he let us in?”

As we had by now reached the door, Juan’s answer consisted of clapping his hands together in a lusty manner that struck me as irreverent. What would the poet think? Only a bill collector in a bad mood would call in such a fashion. We could hear the sliding of soles on tiles, and in the dark, the maid bumped into a flower pot. Then we could make out a white shape, to whose questions Juan responded by handing over the letter of introduction.

While we waited, we heard the sound of plates in the dining room.

“Come in; el Señor will be with you right away. He’s finishing his dinner. This way. Have a seat.”

We were left alone in the parlor.

Near the curtained window, a piano, covered by a white cloth. At each corner of the room, thin columns supported copper pots with begonias growing in them, their leaves striped by wine-colored veins. About the desk were several framed photographs, and on a piece of paper that had been left lying in poetic abandon, we could see that the beginning of a poem had been written. Piles of sheet music lay strewn carelessly over a pink stool. There were also small paintings, and delicate knickknacks hanging from the chandelier at-

tested to the domestic virtues of a diligent wife. Through the glass panes of a mahogany bookcase, leather-backed bindings with gold-lettered titles duplicated the prestigious treasures within.

Examining the photographs, I remarked, "Look. It's a picture of Usandivaras, and it's signed."

Juan replied mockingly: "Usandivaras is a lowlife who writes purple Pampa verse . . . like Betinotti, but with much less talent."

"What about this one . . . José M. Braña."

"His rhythm is too heavy. You can hear the hoofbeats."

We heard footsteps coming down the hall. When the laureate who published in *Faces and Places* appeared, we rose excitedly.

Tall, with a romantic mane of hair, aquiline nose, curly mustache, and black eyes.

We introduced ourselves, and he cordially gestured toward the armchairs.

"Have a seat, boys. . . . So you've been sent by the Florencio Sánchez library?"

"Yes, Señor Villac, so if it won't . . ."

"No, not at all, I'd be delighted . . . Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He went to the hall, then returned almost at once.

"We eat rather late because the office, so much to do . . ."

"Of course."

"Exactly, the demands of life . . .," and talking as he sipped his cup of coffee, with a charming simplicity, the poet said:

"These requests are a pleasure. They do not fail to stimulate the honored laborer. I have received a number of a similar nature, and I always try to comply. Don't trouble yourself, young man. . . . It's fine right there," and he placed his cup on the tray. "As I was saying, last week I received a letter from an Argentine woman residing in London. Just imagine, the *Times* was asking her for information on my work, which had been praised in Argentine newspapers."

"You wrote *The Velvet Collar* and *The Cave of the Muses*, Señor?"

"And another book, as well; it was the first. It's called *On My Gardens*. Of course, it's flawed, I was only nineteen then. . . ."

"I understand you've come under the scrutiny of the critics."

“Yes, I have no complaints about that. *The Cave of the Muses*, in particular, has been well received. . . . One critic said that I combine the simplicity of Evaristo Carriego² and the patriotism of Guido Spano . . . and I don’t complain. . . . I do what I can,” and with a grand gesture, he pushed the hair back from his temples.

“And you boys, you don’t write?”

“He does,” said Juan.

“Prose or poetry?”

“Prose.”

“Delighted, delighted . . . If you need a recommendation . . . bring me something to read. . . . If you want to visit me on Sunday mornings, we could go for a little walk to Olivera Park. I often write there. Nature is such a help!”

“How could it be otherwise! Thanks; we’ll take you up on your invitation.”

Juan, seeing that the conversation was lagging, feigned ignorance and asked:

“If I’m not mistaken, Señor Villac, I’ve read one of your sonnets in a local Italian newspaper. Do you write in Italian also?”

“No, it’s possible they translated it, though; there would be nothing surprising about that.”

Juan insisted: “Anyway, I’m going to see if I can find that issue, and I’ll send it to you. A beautiful language, don’t you think, Señor Villac?”

“Yes, indeed; sonorous, grandiloquent . . .”

Innocently, I asked, “Who moves you more, Señor Villac, Carducci or D’Annunzio?”³

“For a novelist, Manzoni . . . right? He’s got more life, don’t you agree? He reminds me of Ricardo Gutiérrez.”⁴

“Yes, that’s true; more life,” repeated Juan, looking at me in astonishment.

“Moreover, Carducci . . . what can I say . . . sincerely . . . few poets please me as much as Evaristo Carriego—that simplicity, the emotion when he tells of the little seamstress who went wrong . . . those sonnets . . . perhaps it’s because I write sonnets, and ‘the sonnet is a lyre of golden strings,’ ‘a box . . .’”

“Certainly,” Juan observed, impassively, “certainly, I’ve noticed that the critics regard you highly as a sonneteer.”

“‘A box of enchantments,’ I wrote last time in *Faces and Places* . . . and I was not mistaken. Our century favors the sonnet, just as I indicated in an ess—— . . .”

The entrance of the maid, carrying *The Cave* and other books in a package, interrupted his flow, and unfortunately we were not to know what the man whose picture appeared in *Home Magazine* had indicated in his essay.

To avoid being discourteous, we rose, and accompanied as far as the threshold, we said our effusive good-byes to the sonneteer. I promised to return.

When we passed by the house of our informant, the girl was still in the doorway. In a shy voice, she asked, “Did you find the Señor?”

“Yes, thank you, Señorita.”

“Isn’t he talented?”

“Oh!,” answered Juan, “beastly talented. Just imagine, even the *Times* wants to know who he is.”

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges: “Among the young poets, I read Nicolás Olivari, Carlos Mastronardi, Francisco Luis Bernardez, Norah Lange, and Leopoldo Marechal. For prose, Roberto Arlt stands out. Also Eduardo Mallea. I don’t read any of the others” (interview in *La Literatura Argentina* [Buenos Aires], June 10, 1929, 14–15; cited in Borré 133).

Julio Cortázar: “In my youth, I read him passionately. . . .” On rereading Arlt forty years later in order to write a preface to Arlt’s *Complete Works*, Cortázar is delighted to discover that his reaction to Arlt has not changed: “I find with a surprise that approaches the miraculous [that] Arlt is still the same writer . . . [and] I realize how many Argentine writers who once seemed to me as worthy as Arlt—Güiraldes, Girondo, Borges, and Macedonio Fernández—have vanished like smoke from my memory. To re-read them . . . left me feeling empty and sad, with no desire to try again” (preface to *Obra completa*, iii–iv).

Juan Carlos Onetti: “If ever anyone from these shores could be called a literary genius, his name was Roberto Arlt. . . . I am talking about art and of a great and strange artist. . . . I am talking about a writer who understood better than anyone else the city in which he was born. More deeply, perhaps, than those who wrote the immortal tangos. I am talking about a novelist who will be famous in time . . . and who, unbelievably, is almost unknown in the world today” (“Semblanza de un genio rioplatense,” 376).

- 2 My translation is based on the original edition of *El juguete rabioso* published in 1926 by Editorial Latina.
- 3 The *sainete* had its roots in farce but evolved as a “realist” depiction of

urban life in Buenos Aires, focusing on the tragicomedy of uprooted immigrants. It has been compared with European “grotesque” theater, which found a receptive soil in Argentina in the 1920s. Alternating between comedy and tragedy, these genres typically end on a tragic note.

CHAPTER 1: THE BAND OF THIEVES

- 1 Montbars the Pirate and Wenongo the Mohican were the heroes of serial novels of the kind popular in the early twentieth century in Buenos Aires (Prieto 52).
- 2 In Rita Gnutzmann’s Spanish edition of *El juguete rabioso*, she suggests that Arlt here recalls the adventure books of his childhood: “In one of the *Spanish Aguafuertes*, Arlt the journalist, touring the region between Cádiz and Barbate in 1935, exclaimed: ‘These are the lands of José María el Tempranillo and the bandit Diego Corrientes’” (Gnutzmann 13).
- 3 José María and Don Jaime Longbeard: Toward the end of the novel Silvio remembers the Andalusian cobbler describing “Jozé,” rather than Diego Corrientes as “sweeter’n a rroze”; one hero was evidently as sweet as another.
- 4 François Guizot (1787–1874) was a French historian and politician whose conservative rule as minister under King Louis-Philippe provoked the Revolution of 1848 and the fall of the monarchy.
- 5 Valet Bonnot was a French anarchist who in 1911 and 1912 led a daring band of thieves—one of the first gangs to use an automobile for their getaways.
- 6 Rocambole was a literary character favored by both Arlt and Silvio—a dashing bandit, the protagonist of serial novels published in the nineteenth century, and encountered later in Spanish translations such as the *Colección intriga* in Argentina. The author of these stories, Ponsón du Terrail (Viscount Pierre Alexis, 1829–1871), was the most popular writer of newspaper serials in France. His swashbuckling protagonist’s fantastic adventures gave rise to the adjective “rocambolesque.” The name Silvio’s gang chooses for itself, “El Club de los Caballeros de la Media Noche” (The club of the midnight horsemen), echoes the title of a Rocambole novel: *Los caballeros del claro de luna* (The moonlight horsemen). The preface to that novel presents the premise in these terms:

A long series of crimes, initiated by Viscount Andrea Filipone and continued by his disciple Rocambole, constitutes the “Dra-

mas of Paris.” These two outlaws are surrounded by a host of accomplices. Against them are ranged those who serve justice, goodness, and truth, such as Bacará, Countess of Artoff, the incarnation of these virtues. After many moving incidents, the triumph of good seems sure when, with the “genius of Evil” and his henchmen dead, Bacará manages to prove the guilt of Rocambole and banish him to jail. But . . .

here begin the “New Dramas of Paris.” (5)

- 7 *Che* is a term of informal address popular in Argentina.
- 8 Alfred Krupp (1812–1887) became known as the “cannon king”; the heavy cannon that bears his name has a tube cast in solid steel.
- 9 Orestes, at the urging of his sister Electra, avenges their father’s death by killing their mother and her lover; Pylades, archetype of the faithful friend, later marries Electra.
- 10 Both Alexandre Dumas, father, and Alexandre Dumas, son, were popular nineteenth-century writers. With the help of collaborators, the father wrote highly romantic tales such as *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His son is known for his tragedy *Camille*.
- 11 Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Cheburlietz [*sic*] all were Romantic writers in nineteenth-century France. Arlt particularly attacked Cherbuliez in a scathing newspaper article, saying his novel *The Count of Kostia* was typical of the kind of novels read at the turn of the century. Carelessly translated, these novels about nobles appealed to the South American bourgeoisie: “Those who devoured these courses in the spirit of the ‘boudoir’ were [bored] women . . . new Mmes Bovary imagining carriages coming down mountain paths. . .” (“Vía crucis de las exquisitas almas solitarias,” 237–38).
- 12 During Passover, the mob demanded that Pontius Pilate release Barabbas, a thief, rather than Jesus.
- 13 Juan José de Soiza Reilly was an early mentor of Arlt’s. When still an adolescent, Arlt experienced the thrill of seeing his own name in print beneath the title of a pretentious story called “Jehová,” densely laden with six-syllable words. It was published in Soiza Reilly’s *Revista popular* (Popular magazine) under the heading “Modern and Ultramodern Prose.” Here is how Arlt describes Soiza Reilly and himself on the day the fledgling writer first went to see the “great man” at the age of sixteen:

The poorly dressed young man enters, experiencing great emotion. He is about to speak to the author of *The Soul of Dogs and Figures and Men of Italy and France*. Soiza Reilly is, in that moment, famous among young writers. His chronicles of Paris (the Paris of sixteen-year-olds that does not exist), of Verlaine, have shaken the soul of poets in short breeches and reformers of the world who still don't have their credentials. . . . [He is] the man who saw D'Annunzio. . . .

I have never forgotten Soiza Reilly. He was the first generous soul to give me great joy during my adolescence.

Two months later the magazine published by Soiza Reilly went bankrupt. But I know, if I continued to write, it was because in that article nailed to the wall of my room, I saw an invisible promise of success in the large headline "Modern and Ultramodern Prose," which the older writer had added as an ironic tribute for the young man who thought that, the more difficult the vocabulary, the more artistic was the prose. . . . ("Este es Soiza Reilly," 63–66)

- 14 *Apaches* was a slang term for gangsters and gunmen.
- 15 A thief in Roman mythology, Cacus was the son of Vulcan and stole cattle from Hercules.
- 16 A simpleton, by allusion to the character of this name in the novel *Bertoldo, Bertoldino y Cacaseno* by Della Croce.
- 17 Lucio's suggestion for the club's name is no doubt the "gesture worthy of Rocambole" mentioned by the narrator in the previous sentence.
- 18 A translation of *jetra* or *traje*, meaning "suit." This is an example of *vesre*, a playful aspect of Argentine slang based on the reversal of syllables in a word.
- 19 By using the phrase "the dog that doesn't bark," Silvio alludes to Sherlock Homes, one of the heroes in Silvio's imaginary museum. In Doyle's story "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," the fact that the dog doesn't bark reveals who committed the crime: the dog's master.
- 20 Félix Alexandre Le Dantec (1869–1917) was a French biologist who supported the Lamarckian notion of functional assimilation. He himself characterized his work as scientific atheism. The allusion to Darwin, famous for his theory of evolution and the survival of the fittest,

is followed up in chapter 4 on two occasions: when Lucio repeats his motto—"the struggle for life"—several times in a conversation with Silvio, and when the engineer, in his effort to understand the latter's behavior, refers to the "law of the jungle."

- 21 *Tute* refers to a card game in which the object is to obtain all four kings or jacks.
- 22 *Ranún* (sharper, fox) is etymologically related to the word *rana* (frog), which is underworld slang for a clever and mischievous person. The Genovese ending "ún" adds, according to Arlt, a nuance of joviality ("Divertido origen de la palabra 'squenun,'" 43). Enrique's mention of "Montparnase and Tenardhier" refers to Montparnasse and Thénardier, who are members of the Patron Minette gang in Victor Hugo's *Les misérables*.
- 23 The name of Silvio's sweetheart, Leonor (Eleonora), is suggestive of Poe's "long lost Leonor." See Gnutzmann 27–28 regarding Arlt's familiarity with Poe.
- 24 *The Mountains of Gold* (1897), an early work by Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938), was written in the *modernista* style. It is interesting to note that the word used to describe *The Mountains of Gold*—*agotado*—means not only "out of print," but also "exhausted." Lugones represented the literary establishment that the generation of Borges and Arlt rebelled against. He was the first chairman of the Argentine Society of Writers, an organization that Arlt satirized as a museum artifact in his essay "Sociedad literaria, artículo de museo."
- 25 "I adore you as I do the vaulted night": The quotation begins with the first two lines in poem 24 from Baudelaire's "Spleen et idéal": "Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne, / O vase de tristesse, ô grande taciturne." This ten-line poem is addressed to a beautiful woman whom the speaker cherishes all the more because of her indifference to him. The Spanish translation of the opening couplet is faithful to the original except for the substitution of "white" for "great" (ô grande taciturne).
- 26 "And let us attack": Quoted from the seventh and eighth lines of Baudelaire's poem: "Je m'avance à l'attaque, et je grimpe aux assauts, / Comme après un cadavre un chœur de vermissieux." These lines are rendered somewhat more freely in Arlt's original 1926 novel, with a change from "I attack" to "We attack"; this change is nothing, however, compared to the curious shift in later editions from "worms" to "Gypsies" in the second line.

- 27 *Voglio dire* (Ital.) means “I want to tell you.” Such non-Spanish expressions are typical of much slang used in Argentina at the time.
- 28 Konrad Malte-Brun (1775–1826), the Danish geographer who lived in France, wrote a *Universal Geography* and founded the Société de Géographie in 1821.
- 29 *Bulín*, underworld slang for “bedroom,” particularly implies a room for sexual activities.

CHAPTER 2: WORKS AND DAYS

The title of this chapter, “Works and Days,” echoes that of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod. His *Works and Days*, full of didactic advice for farmers, praises the noble work of rural life.

- 1 The Spanish *tetragrama* (tetragram) is a four-line musical staff used in Gregorian chants. Gnutzmann (63) takes the word as a metaphor for telegraph cables. Another meaning is also possible because the word *tetragramaton* (also rendered as *tetragram* in English) denotes a word of four letters, usually taken to be the letters for God (a four-letter name in Hebrew and Spanish). Arlt’s early short work “Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires” is an example of his interest in the occult.
- 2 Trophonius: “The mythical builder of the original temple of Apollo at Delphi, who after his death was worshipped as a god, and had an oracle in a cave in Boeotia, which was said to affect those who entered with such awe that they never smiled again” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
- 3 Genevieve de Brabante was a medieval heroine of German folklore. In the cosmopolitan city of Buenos Aires, European literature was available in cheap translations.
- 4 Governor of the province of Buenos Aires and founder of La Plata, its capital, Dardo Rocha (1838–1921) had a beautiful house in Buenos Aires that was given to him by his friends. His reputation for honesty—his face appeared on the provincial bonds issued to state workers in lieu of money in 2001—makes a stark contrast to the ethic prevailing across the street in “Trophonius’s cave.”
- 5 In this context *estate buono* (Ital.) means “take it easy.”
- 6 *Dío Fetente*: Stinking God (Ital.).
- 7 *Bagazza* translates as “prostitute” (Ital. *bagascia*).
- 8 *Strunzo* (Ital. *stronzo*) is a scatological obscenity.
- 9 *Diablo* is a toy; it consists of two top-like cones joined at the vertices. The toy is made to rotate on a string by means of sticks that are raised

and lowered until finally the toy is launched in the air and then retrieved on the string.

- 10 To appreciate fully Arlt's comparison of the luxuries of Buenos Aires to those of Babylon, see Revelation 18:11–16: "Those who weep most after God burns the sinful city are the merchants."
- 11 "You will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow": The curse put on Adam and his heirs, the human race, for disobeying God's order not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:19).

CHAPTER 3: MAD TOY

- 1 Luis de Val, the Spanish novelist of the late nineteenth century, was known for his sentimental serial novels in which good always triumphs over evil.
- 2 I have followed the convention of later editions and corrected Siemans Nalsue to Siemens Halske. The German Werner von Siemens (1816–1892) was a nineteenth-century electrical engineer, inventor, and industrialist. He and his partner Johann Georg Halske (1814–1890), among other accomplishments, designed Europe's first extensive telegraph network.
- 3 Silvio's mother's maiden name is Drodman. Women in Argentina go by their maiden names even after marriage. The use of the German title for "Mrs." in this passage, together with the name Drodman, implies that Silvio's mother is of German descent.
- 4 Jan Sobieski was a seventeenth-century Polish king. Arlt's mention of the Cossacks' generosity may be in reference to their social structure, which was grounded in equality and communal living. However, they were fierce fighters whose 1648 insurrection included the slaughter of Jews and Catholics.
- 5 Pío Baroja (1872–1956) was a Spanish writer of the Generation of '98. The trilogy *The Struggle for Life* is among the better known of his more than seventy novels. Like Arlt's, Baroja's style has been characterized as hasty but lively (*El pequeño Larousse*).
- 6 Silvio's full surname is Drodman Astier, in keeping with the Spanish tradition of using both maternal and paternal surnames.
- 7 This is the only time that the words in Arlt's original title, *Vida puerca* (literally, "a pig's life"), occur in the novel.

CHAPTER 4: JUDAS ISCARIOT

- 1 A mix of Spanish and corrupt Italian, this line could mean, “What a sunset you get by a clear sea.”
- 2 The following exchange between Arlt and his former teacher illustrates the importance of the Italian writer Carolina Invernizzio’s romances in Arlt’s boyhood:

Arlt: If in theory I imagined I was a pirate, in practice I was an inventor. . . . Once I set my house on fire in that pursuit.

Teacher: Instead of paying attention in class, you always had a book on your lap. They were books by Salgari or Carolina Invernizzio. Do you remember when I took away your copy of *The Daughter of the Assassin*?

(*Aguafuertes*, “El viejo maestro” 1930; cited in Gnutzmann 26)

- 3 Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938) was a precursor of avant-garde innovation, a swashbuckling dandy and aesthete. In a 1937 *Aguafuerte*, “The Great Oblivion That’s Befallen D’Annunzio” (“El gran olvido que cubre a D’Annunzio”), Arlt writes that twenty years before “his inhuman, cynical assertions, his golden words gave him a glaring prominence in Europe. He was the perfect charlatan” (209), for he kept his young readers’ attention on art rather than on the reality of war and misery.
- 4 *Rengo* is the nickname for a lame person.
- 5 Domino bet (*una redoblona*): A series of bets in horse racing in which the winnings on each successive horse are placed on the next race.
- 6 *Pimp-o*: An approximation of Argentine word-play. The original word used is *shofica*, an inversion of *cafisbio* (underworld slang for “pimp”).
- 7 “Where it’s eleven early”: The number eleven is associated in Argentine slang with the idea of two legs; presumably they are up in the air in Rengo’s ditty.
- 8 *Rubio* is the nickname for someone who is blond.
- 9 Aden Hayes cites two precedents in Spanish history for the name Fernán González, both of which, he points out, are antisocial and antitraditional: “The famous medieval hero who fought against the old order to establish a new kingdom in Castile”; and the Infante de Carrión, “traitor to his king, to the Cid, and to his wife” (39).
- 10 Whereas the province of Neuquén contains some of the highest peaks in the Andes Mountains, Comodoro Rivadavia is an industrial city with

an oil refinery on the Atlantic coast. Situated at the foot of an “arid, dusty hill called Chenque,” its streets “full of traffic and commercial activity,” it is the “most important city . . . in Patagonia” (*La Guía Pirelli*, 333).

APPENDIX: THE NEIGHBORHOOD POET

- 1 A popular Greek tragedy, *Electra* was dramatized by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. *Città Morta* [*sic*] is an allusion to D’Annunzio’s 1902 tragedy, *Città Morta*.
- 2 Evaristo Carriego (1883–1912) was an Argentine poet who portrayed life on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.
- 3 An Italian writer and patriot, Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907) received the 1906 Nobel Prize for Literature. The official poet of unified Italy, he attempted to merge the romantic ballad with classical verse traditions.
- 4 Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) was an Italian writer and a model of Romanticism.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Argentina in 1900, Roberto Arlt wrote numerous novels, stories, and plays, as well as a celebrated newspaper column, before his death in 1942. He contributed daily "etchings" (*aguafuertes*) to the newspaper *El mundo* beginning in 1928 and published four novels: *El juguete rabioso* (1926), *Los siete locos* (1929; translated as *The Seven Madmen* in 1984 and 1998), *Los lanzallamas* (1931), and *El amor brujo* (1932). Anthologies of his short stories and novellas include *El jorobadito* (1933), *El criador de gorilas* (1941), *Un viaje terrible* (1941), and *Cuentos completos* (1996). Among the numerous plays he wrote during the last decade of his life figure *Trescientos millones* (1932), *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (published in 1952), *Saverio el cruel*, *El fabricante de fantasmas*, and *La isla desierta* (all published in 1950), and *Africa* and *La fiesta del hierro* (both published in 1980).

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