

Translated Works of Horacio Quiroga

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Solitiare // El solitario

Kassim was a sickly man, a jeweler by profession, perhaps it was best that his shop was not thriving. He worked for the largest households given his specialty for mounting precious stones. There were few hands like his for delicate jobs. With a bit more dedication and ability, he would have been rich. But at thirty-five he remained in the same place, accustomed to the workshop by the window.

Kassim, gangly with a bloodless face covered by a patchy black beard, had an extraordinarily beautiful and passionate wife. The young woman, taken in from the streets, had aspired for a higher society given her striking beauty. She held the men off until she was twenty, tempting men and neighbors with her body. Sufficiently frightened by his persistence and look, she nervously accepted Kassim.

Gone were her dreams of luxury. Her husband, while skilled — an artist even —, completely lacked the character necessary to amass a fortune. As a result, while the jeweler worked hunched over his tweezers, she, resting on her elbows on the windowsill, kept a slow and heavy glance over her husband before abruptly returning her gaze through the windows out to the street daydreaming of the passersby who could have been her husband.

Whenever Kassim made any money, it was all for her. He worked on Sundays to provide some sort of supplemental income. When María wanted a jewel — which she did passionately and endlessly — he worked throughout the night. The cough accompanied by a sharp pain would come later; for now, all he noticed was her radiant smile. Slowly the daily routine turned into a true love for the menial tasks of a jeweler. He took a great passion in the delicate intimacies of mounting a fine gem. But when the work finished, he fell back into the deception of his marriage. She would try on the jewel, pausing to gaze at herself in front of the mirror before taking it off, leaving it on the table, and returning to her room. Kassim got up to listen to her sobs. He found her in bed inconsolable.

“I do everything I can for you” he would say sadly.

Her sobs only increased with his excuses, and the jeweler would slowly resign himself to his workbench.

This became such a common occurrence that Kassim eventually stopped bothering to console her. Console her? For what? It was no use. None of this prevented Kassim from working well into the night to create a better piece.

He was an indecisive man, irresolute and quiet. His wife’s glances were soon replaced by a stern fixation that hung over their silent tranquility.

“And you call yourself a man? You?”

Kassim, hovered over his mounts, worked his fingers endlessly.

“You’re not happy with me, María” he said after a while.

“Happy! What gives you the right to talk about happy? Who could ever be happy with you?... Not even the last woman alive...You fool” she said with a nervous smile before leaving.

Kassim worked that night until three in the morning. His wife awoke with new diamonds which she considered for a moment with her lips shut.

“Hmm...It’s not breathtaking. When did you make it?”

“Tuesday,” he looked over her with faded tenderness, “while you slept...”

“Oh, you could have come to bed...They are huge, these shiny ones.”

The voluptuous rocks that Kassim mounted were his passion. He continued with the work in a crazed hunger to finish once and for all. Finished, Kassim fastened the jewel and ran with her to the mirror. Soon came the sobbing.

“All of them, every husband, down to the last one, would sacrifice anything to flatter their wives! And you...you...I do not even have a single miserable dress to wear.”

There is a certain amount of respect that a woman can have for a man before she becomes capable of saying nearly anything.

Such seemed to be the case with Kassim’s wife whose passion for sparkling jewels outweighed any respect she may have once had for her husband. One afternoon, putting away his jewelry, Kassim noticed that he was missing a broach — five thousand pesos of jewels. He looked again in his boxes.

“You haven’t seen my broach, have you, María? I left it here.”

“Yes, I saw it.”

“Where is it?” he said puzzled.

“Here.”

His wife, her eyes bright and her mouth teasing a smile, stood up with the broach pinned to her chest.

“It fits you well” Kassim said after a while. “Hold onto it for me.”

María laughed.

“Oh no, it’s mine.”

“A joke, I presume?”

“Yes, a joke. Of course. How much it pains you that it might be mine.... I’ll give it to you tomorrow. Tonight, I’m going to the theater with it.”

Something grew quiet.

“You can’t...Someone could see you. They might lose trust in me.”

“Oh!” she said before slamming the door.

Home from the theater, she placed the jewel on the nightstand. Kassim got up and put the broach away in his workshop, locking the door behind him. Coming back into the room, his wife was seated on the bed.

“So, you’re afraid I’m going to steal it? You think that I’m a thief?”

“Don’t look at it that way...You’ve been a bit reckless is all.”

“Ah! But they trust you with it! You! You? But when your wife asks for a bit of flattery and wants a... you call me a thief! Pathetic!”

She eventually fell asleep; but not Kassim.

Sometime later, Kassim received an order to mount the most dazzling solitaire diamond that had even passed before his hands.

“Look, María. What a stone. I’ve never seen one like it.”

His wife said nothing; but Kassim felt her sigh deeply over the diamond.

“An admirable blue...” he continued, “it will cost nine or ten thousand pesos.”

“A ring?!” María murmured at last.

“No, it’s for men...a breastpin.”

Working at a rhythmic pace on the diamond, Kassim could feel his wife’s burning resentment and restrained frustration peering over his shoulder. Ten times a day she would interrupt his work to inspect herself with the diamond in front of the mirror. Then she would try it on with different dresses.

“If you would please mind...” Kassim said, finally finding the courage, “...it is a very urgent order.”

He waited for a response in vain; his wife opened the balcony windows.

“María, they might see you!”

“Take it! Here is your precious stone.”

The solitaire, thrown violently, rolled along the floor.

Kassim, livid, picked up the diamond examining its quality before glaring up at his wife.

“Well, why are you looking at me like that? Did I do something to your stone?”

“No” Kassim replied. He resumed his work at once even though his hands shook embarrassingly.

After a while he got up to check on his wife in her room, he found her in a nervous crisis. The young woman had gone crazy, her eyes jumping out of their sockets.

“Give me the diamond. Give it to me. We can run away. It’s for me! Give it to me!”

“María” he stammered, trying to snap her out of it.

“Ah!” she moaned hysterically. “You are a thief, miserable bastard. You stole my life, thief, thief! You didn’t think I wasn’t going to get you back?! You cheat! Ahh!” she said bringing both her hands to her neck. But when Kassim began to leave, she jumped off the bed and fell, managing to catch him by the boot.

“I don’t care! The diamond, give it to me! I don’t want anything else but that! It’s mine, Kassim. You miserable bastard!”

Kassim helped her to her feet, livid.

“You are sick, María. We can talk later...lay down.”

“My diamond!”

“Okay, we will see if it’s possible...lay down.”

“Give it to me.”

The nervous breakdown came back.

Kassim returned to work on the solitaire. His hands worked with surgical precision on the piece that he had only a few hours to finish.

María got up to eat, and Kassim had the same discussion as always. After dinner, his wife looked at him directly,

“It’s a fake, Kassim” she said.

“Oh” Kassim replied, smiling sarcastically.

“I promise you it’s a fake” she insisted.

Kassim smiled again, consoling her with the slow tenderness of his hand before getting up and returning to work. His wife, her head propped between her arms, kept looking at him.

“You aren’t going to say anything else...” she murmured. And with a deep nausea brought on by her gooey, flabby, and lifeless blob that was her husband, she returned to her room.

She didn’t sleep well. She awoke, already into the afternoon, and saw light in the workshop; her husband was still working. An hour later Kassim heard a shriek behind him.

“Give it to me!”

“It’s for you; it just needs a bit more time, María” he repeated before getting up. But his wife, after her nightmarish screams, would quickly return to sleep.

At two in the morning, Kassim finished; the diamond shined firm and resolute within its mount. With silent steps he went to the bedroom and lit the oil lamp. María slept with her back to him, the blinding whiteness of her nightgown which matched the sheets.

He went to the workshop and came back. He considered for a minute her half-revealed breast. With a pale smile he pushed aside what was left of her unbuttoned nightgown.

She didn’t move.

There wasn’t much light. Kassim’s face quickly took on a chiseled appearance as he held the solitaire over the curves of her bare breast, he plunged the pin deeply and perpendicularly into his wife’s heart.

There was a quick shutter of the eyes, followed by a slow fall of the eyelids. The fingers extended out. That was it,

The diamond, moving with the convulsions of her wounded chest, seemed to be slipping from its mount. Kassim waited a moment; when the solitaire finally rested, he called it a day, shutting the door behind him without making a sound.

Advertisements

REPORT THIS ADPRIVACY

By Stephen Mc. November 9, 2021, 730 Words Leave a comment

El hombre muerto // The Dead Man

The man and his machete had just finished pruning the fifth row in the banana field. They had two rows to go, but since the field was all chircas and mallows, the task ahead was not a matter of concern. The man, consequently, cast a satisfied glance over his trimmed bushes and crossed over the wired fence to lay down in the field.

But as he lowered the barbed wire to cross, his left foot slipped on the post's rotting wood and the machete escaped from his grip. As he fell, the man had the faraway yet distinct impression that he had not seen the machete fall flat on the ground.

He was already laying on the ground, more towards his right side, precisely as he had wanted. His mouth, which had just been as open as possible, shut again. He was exactly as he wanted to be, his knees bent and his right hand over his chest. But behind his forearm and immediately below his belt, the machete's handle and half of the blade protruded from his shirt, the rest was not visible.

The man tried, in vain, to move his head. He gazed out the corner of his eye to the machete's handle, still damp from his sweaty palms. He comprehended the blade's depth and trajectory into his belly, and acquired, coldly, mathematically, and inexorably, the certainty that his existence was about to come to its end.

Death. Over the course of life, one constantly thinks that one day, after years, months, weeks, and days of preparation, we will reach death's door. It is a law of life, known and accepted; just as we tend to allow ourselves to be carried whimsically by our imagination toward that moment, supreme above all others, when we exhale our final breath.

But between the present moment and that final breath, such dreams, distractions, hopes, and dramas do we imagine of our life. Oh, what still remains untouched for us in this vigorous life before its exclusion from human existence. Such is the comfort, pleasure, and reason for these deadly digressions. Death is so far away, and so unforeseen what we have yet to live.

Yet...Not even two seconds have passed: the sun is at the same exact height, the shade has not moved a millimeter. Suddenly, all these digressions come together for the man strewn on the ground: he is dying.

Dead. He could be considered dead in his comfortable position. But the man opens his eyes and stares. How much time has passed? What cataclysm has fallen over the world? What natural disaster emanates this horrible event?

He will die. Cold, fateful, and inevitable, he will die.

The man resists – so unforeseen is this horror! He ponders: it's a nightmare; that's it! What has changed? Nothing. He looks: was this not his banana field? Does he not come every morning to prune it? Who knows it as well as he? He can see the banana field perfectly, well-trimmed, and the wide naked leaves turn up to the sun. There they are, so close, frayed by the wind. But now they are still...It is the midday calm; soon it will be noon.

Between the banana trees, up high, the man sees from the hard floor the red-tiled roof of his house. To the left, he spies the hills and the cinnamon-colored canopy. He cannot see anything else but knows perfectly well that behind him is the path to the new port; and that in the direction of his head, down there, in the heart of the valley lies the Paraná; quiet like a lake. Everything, everything exactly as it has always been; the burning sun, the vibrating and lonely air, the still banana trees, the wiring around the thick tall posts that he will soon have to change.

Dead! How is it possible? Is this not just another day where he has left his house at dawn with the machete in his hand? Is that not there, just four meters from him, his horse, his Malacara, slowly sniffing the barbed wire?

But, yes! Someone whistles...he can't see, his back is to the path; but he can feel the horse's steps across the tiny bridge...It is the boy who goes every morning to the new port at 11:30. And always whistling. It is a long fifteen feet from the rotted post almost touching his boots to the hill that separates the banana field from the path. He can be sure of the distance since it was him who measured the distance while raising the fence.

What is happening? Is this not a normal day just like any other in Los Misiones, on his hill, his pasture, his sparse trees? Without a doubt! Cut grass, ant hills, silence, the scorching sun...

Nothing, nothing has changed. Only he is different. For two minutes now, neither he, nor his lively personality have anything to do with the pasture that he had labored over with his hoe for the last five straight months. Nor with the banana field, the work of his hands alone. Nor with his family. They had been abruptly, yet naturally, ripped by the work of a glossy banana leaf and a machete in his belly. For two minutes now...he is dying.

The man, tired and strewn across on the grass on his right side, resists persistently in admitting the reality of a phenomenon of this magnitude in the face of the normal and monotonous feature of everything before him. He knows the time perfectly: 11:30...The daily boy is about to cross the bridge.

But it cannot be that he slipped...! The machete's handle (that he will need to change soon because of its increased wear) was perfectly forced between his right hand and the barbed wire. After ten years in the jungle, he knows well how to handle a machete. He is simply exhausted from the morning's work and is taking his usual rest.

Proof...? He himself planted the grass touching the corner of his mouth; chunks of sweet earth one meter apart from the other. This is his banana field; and that is his horse, neighing carefully around the barbed wire. He sees him perfectly; he knows that

he won't dare to cross the barbed wire, because he is lying close to the foot of the post. He distinguishes it clearly; and sees the dark strands of sweat on his haunches and legs. The sun sets, the calm is immense, not even a banana thread moves. Every day, like today, he has seen the same things.

...So tired, but he rests alone. They should have passed through minutes ago...and at a quarter until noon, from up yonder, from the red-roofed house, his wife and kids will come his way to retrieve him for lunch. He always hears, before the other voices, the voice of his youngest son as he tries to jump from his mother's arms, "Papá! Papá!

Is that it? Yes, he hears it! It is time. He hears perfectly his young son's voice...

What a nightmare...! It is nothing more than one of those days, trivial like all the rest, of course it is! Excessive light, yellowed shadows, the silent oven heat broiling over flesh, his motionless horse sweats as he stands before the prohibited field.

...So tired, so very tired, but nothing more. How many times, at midday like now, had he crossed this pasture returning home that was just a bonnet when he arrived, and that before had been virgin soil! He would return then, tired as normal, with his machete hanging from his left hand, in small steps.

He can still move away in his mind, if he wants. If he wants he can abandon his body in an instant and see from his self-constructed dam the trivial landscape as always: the rigid grass between the volcanic gravel; the banana plantation and its red sand; the barbed wire fence that appears smaller as it slopes down toward the road. Further along he can even see the pasture, the work of his hands alone. And at the foot of a rotting post, leaning on his right-side and with legs curled up, exactly the same as every day, he can see himself, like a small sunny bundle in the grass...resting because he is so tired...

But the horse, streaked with sweat and cautiously still behind the corner of the barbed-wire fence, also sees the man on the ground and does not dare to graze in the plantation, despite the desire. Up ahead the voices are getting closer – "Papá! Papá!" -, for a long, long time the horse keeps his ears on the motionless bundle; and, calm at last, he decides to graze between the post and the lying man...finally at rest.

By Stephen Mc.March 23, 20201,486 Words1 Comment

For a Night of Insomnia // Para noche de insomnia

We were all surprised by the tragic news; and we remained terrified when a child brought us – quickly—details of his death. Even though we had noticed for a long while friend signs of imbalance in our friend, we never thought it would ever arrive at such an extreme. He had carried out the most chilling suicide without leaving a memento for his friends. Once we had him in our presence, we looked away, captive to a horrified compassion.

On that humid and cloudy night, our impressions became much stronger. The sky was an awesome shade of purple and a stiff cloud cover expanded over the horizon.

We carried the cadaver in a carriage, standing close together from a growing fear. Night came upon us; and from a poorly latched door came a river of blood that left a red trail along our path.

It continued spilling over our legs, and the last yellow daylights shone brightly upon his violet face in pale spotlights. His head shook from one side to the other. With every bump on the pavement, his eyelids would open and he looked at us with his glassy, hard, and cloudy eyes.

Our clothes were soaked in blood, and on the hands of each one of us that supported his neck, slid a cold and viscous mucus that at each jolt bubbled at his lips.

I am not sure what caused it, but I do not believe that ever in my life had I ever felt a similar impression. From the slightest touch of his rigid body, I felt a chill throughout my entire body. Strange superstitious ideas entered my head. My eyes took on a hypnotic gaze staring at him, and in the horror of my imagination, it seemed that he opened his mouth in a frightening face, digging his gaze into me and throwing himself on top of me, covering me with cold and coagulated blood.

My hair stood on end, and I was not even able to let out an anguished cry, yet convulsed and delirious I threw myself backward.

In that moment the deceased escaped from between our knees and fell to the floor of the carriage in complete nightfall, in the darkness, we grabbed each other's hands, shaking from top to bottom, without daring to look at one another.

All of those old ideas from when you are a kid, absurd beliefs, took shape within us. We lifted our feet up to the seats, unconsciously, out of horror, while on the floor of the carriage, the deceased jolted from one side to the other.

After a while, our feet began to grow cold. It was an icy cold that came from the bottom and made its way through the whole body, as if death was contagiously

clinging to us. We did not dare move. From time to time we would lean toward the floor, and would stay staring into the darkness, with our eyes aghast, believing to see the deceased sit up with his delirious look, laughing, looking at us, putting death into each one of us, laughing, putting his face close to ours, in the darkness we could see his eyes shine, and he laughed, we were frozen, dead, dead, in that carriage that led us through damp streets...

We found ourselves again in the parlor, all of us together, seated in rows. The coffin had been placed in the middle of the parlor and the deceased's clothes had not been changed given that his limbs were too stiff. His head was gently elevated with his nose and mouth stuffed with cotton.

Seeing him again, a tremble filled our bodies and we looked at each other shamefully. The parlor was filled with people walking about constantly, and this distracted us a bit. From time to time, one by one, we observed the deceased, bloated and green stretched out in the coffin.

After half an hour, I felt someone touch me and I turned around. My friends were numb. From where we were, the deceased was staring at us. His eyes were wide open, opaque, terrifyingly fixed upon us. Fatality had taken us into its gaze, without realizing it, as if united to death, to the deceased who did not want to let us go. The four of us turned yellow, immobile before the face that three steps ahead of us hazed upon us, always upon us!

It was four in the morning and we were completely alone. Instantly the fear came back and took us into its spell.

First a trembling stupor, then a deep and desolate desperation, and finally an inconceivable cowardice for our age, a precise feeling of something horrifying about to happen.

Outside, the street was covered in fog, and the dog's bark stretched out into a sad howl. Those who have stood guard over a body and suddenly realized they were alone with the cadaver, stirred, as we were, heard a dog cry, heard an owl shout in early dawn after a night of death, alone with the body, would understand our feeling; already seduced by fear, and with the occasional terrible doubt about the horrifying death of our friend.

We were alone, as I said: and soon, a deafening sound, like a rushed mumble echoed throughout the parlor. Rising from the coffin where the deceased lay, there, three steps ahead, we saw him well, his torso rising and falling despite the cotton plugs, horribly livid, staring at us firmly, standing up slowly, supporting himself on the edge of the coffin, while our hairs stood on end, our foreheads covered in sweat, while the mumbling got louder and louder and a strange laugh rang out, subhuman, as if vomiting, guttural, and epileptic, and we got up panicked and took off running, terrorized, crazed in terror, chased closely by the laughs, and the steps of that ghostly resurrection.

When I arrived home, I opened the door, and pulled back the sheets, always fleeing, I saw death, stretched out in the bed, yellowed from the morning sun, dead along with my three frozen friends, all laid out in bed, frozen and dead...

By Stephen Mc.October 27, 20171,026 WordsLeave a comment

Juan Darién

Juan Darién

Juan Darien

Herein lies the tale of a tiger who was raised and educated among men, and whose name was Juan Darien. For four years he attended school dressed in pants and a long sleeve shirt, and completed all his assignments correctly even though he was a tiger of the jungle. But these misperceptions can be attributed to his human appearance, as it is told in the following lines.

Once, at the beginning of fall, smallpox passed through a town of a faraway country and killed many people. Brothers lost little sisters, and children just beginning to walk were left without a mother or father. Mothers likewise lost their children, and a poor young widow carried out the task of burying her young child, her only child. Once home, she sat and thought about her little boy. She murmured,

“God should have had more compassion with me, yet he took my child. There will be angels in heaven, but my child will never know them. The only one he knows is me, my poor son!”

Seated in the recess of her house, she stared into the distance beyond a small fence where the jungle could be seen.

However, there were many ferocious animals that howl in the jungle as the sun sets and the sun rises. The poor woman, still seated, began to distinguish a small and shivering object in the darkness that came in through the door like a cat that hardly had the energy to walk. The woman bent down and lifted in her arms a tiger only a few days old whose eyes had yet to open. The wretched pup purred contently upon feeling the touch of her hands because he was no longer alone. The mother held that tiny enemy of man in the air for a while, she could have so easily exterminated that defenseless beast. But she remained lost in thought in front of the helpless pup who came from who knows where and whose mother had surely died. Without thinking well in what she was doing, she wrapped the child in her arms and brought him to her chest. The little tiger, feeling the heat of her chest, sought a comfortable position, purred calmly and slept with his neck rested upon the maternal breast.

The woman, always thoughtful, went into the house. And for the rest of the night, hearing the kitten’s cries for hunger and seeing how he searched for her breast with closed eyes, she felt a pain in her heart that in the eyes of the supreme law of the universe, that one life is forever equivalent to another...

She fed the tiger with her mother's milk.

The kitten was saved, and the mother had found a great comfort to her pain. So real was her comfort that she foresaw the moment that the village would come and take her child, for they would surely kill the little beast if it ever came to be known that she nurtured a wild animal with her breast. What to do? The kitten, soft and loving, huddled to her chest and there was no doubt that he was now her child.

Mother and child lived like this until on a rainy night, a man running by the woman's house heard a rough cry — the hoarse whimper of beasts that, even when newborn, send chills into the spine of men. The man froze and knocked on the door while searching for his revolver. The mother, hearing his steps, frantically hid the little tiger in the garden. But her good luck so had it that when she opened the door to the backyard, there before her was a tame, old, and wise snake that stood in her way. The unlucky woman was about to scream when the snake spoke to her.

"Do not be afraid, dear" he told her. "Your maternal love allowed you to save a life of the Universe, where all lives hold the same value. But men will never understand and will want to murder your child. Do not be afraid, go peacefully. From this moment on your son will have the human form; they will never recognize him for what he is. Shape his heart, teach him to be good like you, and he will never know that he is not a man. Unless...unless a mother amongst men sees his true nature; unless a mother does not demand that he return to his fellow kin everything that you have given him, your son will always be worthy of your love. Go calmly, mother, and go quickly, for the man is about to break down your door."

The mother believed the snake, for in all of man's religions the serpent knows the mysteries of life that inhabit the world. Opening the door, the man furiously pushed his way into the house with the revolver in his hand and searched every corner without finding a thing. After he left, she shakingly opened the lid where she had hid the little tiger that had rested on her chest. In his place she saw a small child sleeping peacefully. Overcome with happiness, she silently sobbed over the fate of the savage turned into man; tears of gratitude that twelve years later this same child would pay with blood.

Time passed. The child needed a name: she gave him the name of Juan Darien. He needed food, clothes, shoes: the mother worked day and night to give him everything. She was still very young and could have remarried, if she desired; but the endearing love of her child was enough, love that she returned with all of her heart.

Juan Darien was, truly, worthy of being loved: noble, good, generous like no one else. He had a particular deep veneration for his mother. He never lied. Could it be because his true nature lied in being a wild animal? It is possible; it is unknown the influence of a saintly woman's mother's milk over a pure newborn soul.

Yet so was Juan Darien. And he went to school with children his age, who often made fun of him for his shyness and rough, dry hair. Juan Darien was not very smart, but he made up for his lack of intellect with a great passion for study.

As life has it, Juan's mother died when he was about to turn ten years old. Juan Darien suffered unspeakable pain, until time healed his wounds. Yet from then on he was a sad child whose only desire was to endlessly improve himself.

There is something that must be admitted: Juan Darien was not loved in the town. Inhabitants of cities closed off to the outside world from their forested walls did not like children who were generous and studied with all of their heart. He was, after all, the best student in his class. These combined factors foresaw the events prophesied by the serpent.

The town was preparing to celebrate its grand festival, and fireworks were arriving from distant cities. The school and the children were up for a review and an inspector was said to be on his way to observe the class. When the inspector arrived, the teacher decided to give her lesson to her best student: Juan Darien. Juan was the most advanced student; but with the pressure of the review, he began to stutter and his tongue froze uttering a strange sound. The inspector observed the student extensively, and immediately asked the teacher in a low voice,

"Who is that boy?" "Where is he from?"

"His name is Juan Darien" responded the teacher. "He was raised by a woman who died, no one knows where he came from."

"He is strange. Very strange." the inspector muttered observing his rough hair and the green twinkle in his eyes even when in shadow.

The inspector knew that there were things in the world more strange than things that could never be invented. At the same time, he knew that questions could never uncover whether or not the child had once been what he feared, a wild beast. Yet just as there are men who, in certain mental states, could remember things that had happened to their grandparents, it was possible that under a hypnotic suggestion, Juan Darien could remember his life as an animal. And to all the children who read this and do not know of what I speak, ask an adult.

The inspector got up on the podium and began,

"Well, child. I would now like for one of you to describe the jungle. You were all practically raised there and know it well. How is the jungle? What happens there? This is what I want to know. Let's see, you" he said pointing to a random child. "Come up here and tell us what you have seen."

The young boy got up and even though he was afraid, he spoke in detail. He said that the jungle has enormous trees, upwardly creeping plants, and all types of flowers. When he finished, another child came up, then another. Even though all knew the jungle well, they all gave the same answers because the boys and most men never tell what they have seen, only what they have read. Finally the inspector spoke up and said,

"Now it is Juan Darien's turn."

Juan Darien said more or less the same as everyone else. But the inspector, putting his hand on his shoulder said,

"No, no. I want you to think hard on what you have seen. Close your eyes."

Juan Darien closed his eyes.

“Good.” The inspector went on, “tell me what you see.”

Juan Darien, with his eyes closed, delayed a minute to respond.

“I don’t see anything” he finally said.

“You will. Let’s say that it is three in the morning, right before dawn. We have just finished eating...you are in the jungle, in the darkness... In front of us is a stream... What do you see?”

Juan Darien stayed silent. The classroom and the jungle outside the window fell into a great silence. Suddenly, Juan Darien began to shake and with a soft voice, as if he were dreaming, said,

“I see the rocks underneath and the snapping twigs... and the ground... and the leaves that stick to the rocks...”

“Hold on” the inspector interrupted. “The rocks and the leaves that you see, where are they?”

The inspector asked this because Juan Darien was effectively “seeing” what he saw when he was still an animal who went to drink after having eaten. He saw that the rocks that a tiger or panther could see would be down close to the river, at the same level as their eyes as they lap at the water. He repeated,

“Where are the rocks?”

And Juan Darien, his eyes still closed, responded:

“Next to the ground... they are touching my ears... and the leaves move in the wind... I can feel the warmth of the mud on...”

Juan Darien paused.

“Where?” The inspector asked in a firm voice. “Where do you feel the warmth of the water?”

“On my whiskers” Juan said in a raspy voice, opening his eyes in fear.

Dusk was settling in, and through the window shadow was beginning to consume the nearby jungle.

The students did not comprehend the danger of this exchange; but they likewise did not laugh at Juan Darien’s absurd claim to have a moustache of long whiskers, he didn’t even have stubble. They did not laugh because Juan’s face was pale and anxious.

Class ended. The inspector was not a bad man; but, like all men who live close to the jungle, he hated tigers with a blinding anger. Which is why he said to the teacher,

“We need to kill Juan Darien. He is a wild beast from the jungle, possibly a tiger. If we do not kill him, he will sooner or later kill us all. He has not yet awoken the beast inside him, but one day he will and he will devour us all, even more so given that we allow him to live amongst us. We should, well, kill him. The problem is that we cannot kill him as long as he looks human, we would not be able to prove he was a tiger. He looks like a man, and we must always be careful when dealing with men. I know a beast tamer in the city. We can call him and he will find a way to return Juan Darien to his real form. And even though he will not be a tiger, people will believe us

and we can toss him back into the jungle. We will call the tamer soon, before Juan Darien can escape.

But Juan Darien was thinking about everything but escaping, because he did not realize there was a plot against him. How could anyone think he was not a man when all he had ever done was love his fellow man and dangerous animals?

Yet the town began to talk and Juan Darien began to suffer the consequences. No one would speak to him, they would step widely to avoid him as he passed, and followed him at night from afar.

“What did I do? Why are they treating me this way?” Juan Darien asked himself.

Not only did people run from him, the children would yell at him,

“Get out of here! Go back to where you came from! Leave!”

Even adults, the most distinguished people in town, were infuriated by his presence. Who knows what may have happened if the tamer had not arrived the very same night as the town festival. Juan Darien was at home, preparing the awful soup he always ate when he heard the shouts of the people marching toward his door. He hardly had time to see what the commotion was all about when they grabbed him and dragged him to the tamer’s house.

“Here he is!” they yelled, tossing him to the ground. “This one is a tiger. We want nothing to do with tigers. Shed his disguise and let’s kill it.”

The children, his classmates, the people he cared about most, along with the elders, yelled:

“He is a tiger. Juan Darien will devour us all! Die Juan Darien!”

Juan Darien protested and cried as blows rained down upon him; a creature of twelve years old. But in that moment the crowd retreated and the tamer, with large leather boots, a red frock hat, and a whip in his hand, stood above Juan Darien. The tamer looked him over closely, and squeezed the handle of the whip.

“Ah!” He exclaimed. “I know you well! You can trick everyone else, but not me! I see you, tiger child! I can see your stripes under your shirt! Take off his shirt and bring me my hunting dogs! Now we will see if the dogs see you as man or as beast.”

The crowd quickly ripped off his clothes and threw Juan Darien into the cage meant to tame wild beasts.

“Bring out the dogs, quickly!” The tamer shouted. “And pray to your jungle gods, Juan Darien.”

Just then four fierce dogs were thrust into the cage.

The hunting dogs always recognized the smell of a tiger. And if they were to smell the naked body of Juan Darien, they would surely tear him to pieces, their eyes seeing the devilish stripes beneath his skin.

Yet the dogs saw nothing else than Juan Darien, the same child who had cared for dangerous animals. Sniffing him, the dogs began to wag their tails.

“Sick ‘em! It is a tiger! Get it! Get it!” The crowd yelled at the dogs. The dogs rabidly barked and jumped around the cage, unsure of what to attack.

The test had failed.

“Very well” Said the tamer. “Those dogs are stupid anyway, obedient to more dominant animals. They don’t recognize him. But I see you, Juan Darien and soon, they will all see too.”

The tamer entered the cage and pulled out his whip.

“Tiger” he shouted. “You are before a man, and you are a beast. I see your stripes, under your stolen skin. Show them to me!”

A ferocious crack whipped across Juan Darien’s body. The poor naked creature let out a cry of pain while the infuriated crowd cheered for more.

“Show us your stripes!” They shouted.

His pitiful cries went on into the night . And I hope that all children who read or listen to this story never martyr anyone like this.

“Please.” Juan Darien pleaded. “I’m dying.”

“Show us your stripes!” They responded.

Finally his cries stopped. In the back of the cage, cornered and tamed, was the small blood-striped body of a child who had once been Juan Darien. He was still alive, and was able to walk as they pulled him out of the cage; but full of suffering like no one had ever felt before.

Pulling him out of the cage and pushing him into the middle of the street, they banished him from the town. He kept falling, but behind him were men, women, and children, picking him up and pushing him out.

“Get out of here, Juan Darien. Go back to the jungle, child and spirit of a tiger! Leave!”

Those who were too far away to hit or shove him, threw rocks.

Juan Darien collapsed and looking for a support to stand, touched a young child. And his cruel destiny had it that a mother, standing outside her house with a young child in her arms, misinterpreted his reach for help as hunger.

“He tried to steal my child!” She screamed. “He has the claws to kill him. He is a tiger! Kill him now, before he kills all of our children.”

And so it was said. The prophecy of the serpent had been realized; Juan Darien would die when a humanly mother demanded the life and soul of a man raised by another woman.

The infuriated masses needed no other excuse. Twenty arms armed with rocks began to raise up ready to crush Juan Darien when the tamer yelled out his orders in a hoarse voice: “mark him with stripes from the fire! Burn him in the fireworks!”

The sun had begun to set, and it was pure night by the time they arrived at the plaza. In the center of the plaza they had built a bonfire equipped with all of the great fireworks. They tied Juan Darien to the highest point in the center of the pile, and lit the wick from a good distance back. The string of the wick began to dance and hiss like a snake before igniting the pile. Behind the fireworks of flashing stars and colorful dancing wheels, Juan Darien was being sacrificed.

“It is your last day as a man, Juan Darien” they all shouted. “Show us your stripes.”

“Forgive me” the creature shouted, twisting among the sparks and clouds of smoke. The yellow, green, and red wheels spun dizzily, some to the right and others to the left. The streams of sparks jetted out in a halo and in the middle, burned by the sparks all over his body, Juan Darien flailed wildly.

“Show us your stripes” they roared from below.

“Forgive me! I am only a man!” the poor creature had time to yell. Through the wall of smoke and fire, his body could be seen convulsively wringing itself out. His shouts began to turn into growls and his body began to change form. The crowd, with a cheer of victory, finally saw the black fatal stripes of a tiger begin to emerge from under his human skin.

The horrible act of cruelty had come to an end; they got what they had wanted. Yet instead of an innocent creature blamed for all of mankind’s problems, there on the platform was the whimpering body of an agonized tiger.

The last of the fireworks were dying down. As the sparks on one last wheel came to a stop, the rope tied to his wrists (no, the paws of a tiger; Juan Darien was no more) and body, fell forcefully to the ground. The crowd dragged him to the edge of the jungle, abandoning him so that the jackals could devour his carcass.

Yet the tiger was not dead. The cool night returned his senses to him, and dragging himself through the grip of horrible torments, he was able to find solace in the jungle. An entire month was spent recuperating in his den in the thick of the jungle, waiting with a somber patience that only a beast can exhibit, the recuperation of his injuries. Finally his injuries healed and scarred, besides one, a deep burn on his side that would not close that he bandaged with enormous leaves.

Juan had conserved three human aspects of his former self: a living memory of the past, the use of his hands, and his ability to speak. Yet in everything else, absolutely everything, he was a beast that could not be distinguished from any other tiger.

When his energy finally returned to him, he called out to his fellow tigers to meet that night in front of the bushes that bordered between the crops and the jungle. The tigers silently walked into the town as night fell. They climbed into the trees surrounding the town and waited motionlessly. He watched as disheveled women and exhausted workers passed underneath him, unsuspecting of his presence, until he finally saw a man with red leather boots walking along the path.

The tiger did not disturb a single branch as he prepared to jump. He leapt onto the tamer knocking him unconscious. Picking him up by the belt with his teeth, he carried the tamer to the jungle without without hurting him.

There, at the foot of immense reeds that hid their presence, the tigers of the jungle moved in the darkness, their eyes shining like lights darting from one side to the other. The tamer laid there in the middle, unconscious still. The tiger took the time to address his brothers.

“Brothers: I lived for twelve years among men, for I was a man. And I am a tiger. Perhaps what I plan to do will erase the stain of my humanity. Brothers: tonight I break the last bond that ties me to my past.”

Taking the man in his teeth, unconscious still, Juan climbed into the tallest tree above the bamboo and tied the man between two reeds. He then lit the dried leaves aflame, and soon the sky was alight with crisp crackling flames. The tigers reeled before the fire. But the tiger told them: “be not afraid, brothers”, and they were appeased. They lay on their bellies with their paws crossed in front of them to watch.

The bed of leaves burned like an incredible tower of flames. The reeds burst like bombs and its gases danced in thin arrows of color. The flames rose in sharp and deafening blasts. On the border of the bed of reeds, where the fire had not yet reached, the reeds began to weaken and bend from the intense heat.

The man, now touched by flame, had awoken. He saw below him the red eyes of the tigers staring at him, and he understood.

“Please forgive me”. He howled writhing in pain. “I am sorry for everything”.

No one answered. The man felt abandoned by God, and shouted with what remained of his soul, “I am sorry, Juan Darien”.

Hearing his name, Juan Darien lept up and said coldly, “there is no one here by the name Juan Darien. I know no Juan Darien. That is a man’s name, and here are only beasts”.

The tiger returning to his kin and the man, seemingly confused, asked, “who among you is Juan Darien?”

No one responded.

The flames were beginning to hug the night sky. Between the thin stripes of lights that twisted against a burning wall of reeds, the burnt black body could be seen among a cloud of smoke.

“I will be quick, brothers” said the tiger. “I still have one thing left to do”.

And so he walked into the town anew, unaware that his brothers were behind him. He came to a sad and dying garden, he jumped over the fence, and passing many crosses and headstones, and stood before a plot of land without any decoration where the woman he called mother for eight years was buried. He fell to his knees like a man and remained there silently.

“Mother” he finally murmured in a tender voice. “Of all mankind, only you knew that all life is sacred in the universe. Only you understood that man and beast are only different in spirit. You taught me to love, to understand, and to forgive. Mother, I know that you can hear me. I will always be your son no matter what happens. Goodbye, mother”.

And seeing the ardent eyes of his brothers who watched him from behind gated fence, he reunited with his family.

The warm night wind brought with it, from the shadows of the night, the crackling of a shot.

“It came from the jungle” said the tiger. “It is men. They are hunting, killing, decapitating.”

Turning toward the town, illuminated by the burning jungle, he shouted, “people without redemption, now it is my turn!”

Returning one last time to the grave where he just finished praying, he tore the bandage off his wound and below his mother's name and with his own blood, he wrote on the cross in giant letters, JUAN DARIEN.

"Now we may rest in peace". Alongside his brothers, he let out a challenging roar to the terrified town.

"To the jungle. And forever as a tiger!"

By Stephen Mc. February 3, 2017 4,334 Words 1 Comment

The Suicidal Shipmates “Los buques suicidantes”

There are only a few things more terrible to encounter in the sea than an abandoned ship. The danger is minimal by day, but by night the ships sink into darkness without the slightest warning: the crash sways the ship from one side to the other.

These abandoned ships navigate the open seas either by *a* or by *b* from the current, or the wind if the sails are deployed. The seas wander similarly, whimsically altering their course.

More than a few of the steamships that never returned to port, even when the seas were calm, have surely stumbled upon one of these silent ships that travel by their own accord. There is always the possibility of discovering one at any minute. Luck has it that the current usually swirls them up in the Sargasso sea. The boats finally come to a rest, here or there, forever frozen in this liquid desert. In this state they remain until they slowly begin to crumble. But more arrive every day, taking their silent place, so that the silent and gloomy desert is always haunted.

The principal motive for these abandoned ships are, without a doubt, storms and fires that send these black skeletons wandering adrift. But there remain singular cases, one of which was the *Maria Margarita*, which set sail from New York on August 24th, 1903 and that on the morning of the 26th was encountered by a corvette ship. The *Maria Margarita* showed no signs of life. Four hours later and without a response, a group of men were sent over on a small boat and boarded the *Maria Margarita*. There was no one on board. The mariner's shirts were still drying over the bow. The kitchen stove was still lit. A sewing machine had the needle poised over a stitch, as if it had been abandoned only a moment before. There was not the slightest sign of a fight or panic, everything was in perfect order. Yet everyone was gone. What had happened?

The night that I discovered all of this we were all together on the deck. We were headed to Europe and the captain told us his stories of life at sea. All absolutely true, of this we can be sure.

The feminine audience, won over by the suggestion of the living seas, heard a crackling noise. The nervous women unknowingly lent themselves to the restless hoarse voice of the mariners on the bow. A very young and recently married woman dared to speak, “Could it have been eagles?”

The captain smiled kindly,

“What's that, miss? Eagles that carried off an entire crew?”

Everyone including the young woman began to laugh, albeit nervously.

Luckily, a fellow passenger knew a bit about this situation. We all gazed at him in curiosity. He had been an excellent passenger during the trip, admired for his wallet, his risks, and the fact that he spoke little.

“Ah! Yes, please. Tell us, sir.” Begged the young woman who suggested it had been eagles.

“I am without prejudice or bias” the discreet man confirmed. He spoke briefly, “In the Northern Sea, like the captain’s *Maria Magdalena*, we once found a sailboat. Our course — we also traveled with sails — carried us directly to their side. The singular appearance of abandonment, which cannot be mistaken with a ship, called our attention and we slowed down in order to observe them more carefully. We finally sent out a small vessel but no one was on board and everything was in perfect order. But the last diary entry was dated four days earlier, so we found no real reason for concern. We even laughed a bit about the disappearances we had heard so much about.

Eight of our men stayed on board to help govern the new ship. We continued our travel cautiously. By nightfall we had made up ground on our journey. We returned to the vessel the following day, but saw no one on board. Sending the small vessel out again, the new men searched the ship in vain: everyone had disappeared. Not a single object was out of place. The sea was absolutely calm as it extended out over the horizon. A pot of potatoes were left boiling in the kitchen.

As you will come to understand, the superstitious fears in all the men reached its peak. After a long debate, six men were brave enough to enter the abyss and I was among them. As soon as we boarded, my new shipmates decided to drink to wash away their fears. They were seated in a circle and when the time came most of us began to sing.

It was noon and already past the midday siesta. At four the breeze subsided and the sails went limp. One of us peaked overboard at the oily sea. All of us were now pacing the ship, without the desire to converse. One of us sat on a rolled up rope and dried his shirt in order to patch it up. He sewed in concentrated silence. All of a sudden the man sprang up and let out a long whistle. The other ship had returned. He looked out at them with puzzled eyes, as if surprised at their return, before sitting back down to resume his work. A moment later, he threw down the shirt, drew close to the side boards and plunged himself into the water. Hearing the sound, the others turned their heads marked with confused looks and furrowed brows. They brushed off the instance a moment later and returned to their communal apathy.

A moment later another began to stretch, he rubbed his eyes while he walked and plunged himself into the water. Half an hour went by, the sun was beginning to set. I suddenly felt a man touching my shoulder,

“What time is it?”

“Five” I responded. The old man who had asked me the question looked at me distrustfully, with his hands in his pockets while leaning against a wall in front of me.

He distractedly stared at my pants for a while. Finally he took the plunge into the water.

The three remaining men rushed over quickly and inspected the dissipating waves. They sat on the guardrail slowly whistling into the vanishing horizon. One came down and laid down on the deck, exhausted. The other two disappeared, one after the other. By six, the last man (he stood up, arranged his clothing), parted his hair in the front, he walked half asleep to the edge and plunged into the water.

So now I was left alone, staring like an idiot over the desert sea. Everyone, without knowing what they were doing, had sunk themselves into the sea, captured in a deadly sleepwalk that hung about the ship. When one threw himself into the water the others followed, momentarily hesitant, as if they remembered something only to forget it a moment later. This is how everyone disappeared, and I suppose that the same had happened the day before, and to the other mariners, and the other ships. That is all.”

We all paused staring at the strange man with explicit curiosity.

“You never felt anything?” My cabin mate asked him.

“Sure; a great indifference and determination toward the same idea, but nothing more. I’m not sure why I didn’t feel anything more. I assume that the motive is this: instead of exhausting myself in a distressed defense at all costs against what I felt, as everyone should have done, even the mariners without realizing it, I sincerely accepted my hypnotic death, as if I were already dead. Something very similar had undoubtedly happened to the guards of that famous brigade who night after night plunged themselves into the water.

As his commentary was a bit complicated, no one said a word. A little later our narrator retired to his cabin. The captain followed him with his eyes.

“A phony.” he murmured.

“On the contrary” said a sickly shipmate, who was on his way to die in his homeland. “If he were a phony, he wouldn’t have stopped thinking the way he did, and he too would have plunged himself into the water.”

By Stephen Mc. September 25, 2016 1,368 Words [Leave a comment](#)

El Hijo / The Son

El Hijo

The Son

It's a rough summer morning in Misiones, with all the sun, heat and tranquility that the season can provide. Mother Nature, open to the skies, seems proud of herself.

Like the sun, the heat, and the tranquil atmosphere, the father opens his heart to nature.

"Be careful, little one." He says to his son, summarizing in one phrase all of the observations of what could go wrong, and his son understanding perfectly.

"Yes, papa." Responds the young child, while picking up the shotgun and filling his shirt pockets with cartridges, buttoning them closed carefully.

"Come back at lunchtime." The father adds.

"Yes, papa." The boy repeats.

He balances the shotgun in his hand, smiles at his father, kisses him on the head and leaves.

His father follows him a bit with his eyes and goes back to his daily chores, gleaming with joy over his young one.

He knows that his son, taught from the youngest age proper habit and precaution when dealing in danger, can handle a firearm and hunt whatever he wishes. Even though he is very tall for his age, he's only thirteen. And judging by his pure blue eyes, still sparkling with infantile joy, he looks even younger.

The father doesn't even have to raise his head from his chores to follow his son's path: already across the reddened path and walking upright to the forest past the opening in the grass field.

In order to hunt in the forest—a game hunt—one needs more patience than his young son can muster. After crossing the island of trees, the boy will follow the line of cactuses towards the marshland, looking for doves, toucans, or any kind of heron, like those that his friend Juan had discovered a few days back.

Now alone, the father smirks recalling the passion for hunting that young children share. At times they would hunt a *yacu-toro* or—if lucky— a *surucua* and return triumphant. Juan to his ranch with his nine millimeter firearm that had been given to him, and his son to the plateau with his huge, sixteen caliber, white powder, four lock Saint-Etienne shotgun.

The father had been the same. At thirteen he would have given his life for a shotgun. His son, at the same age, now had one—; and his father smiled.

Nevertheless, it is not easy for a widowed father, who without any other faith or hope in life other than his son, to educate his son like he had been taught, free in his limited range of knowledge, confident in his tiny feet and hands since four years old, conscious of the immensity of certain dangers and the scarcity of his own strengths.

This father had fought hard against what he sees as his own selfishness. It's so easy for a child to miscalculate, put a foot in an empty hole and one loses a son.

Danger can always linger for a man despite his age; but the threat diminished since at an early age he learned to count on nothing besides his own abilities.

This is how the father had raised his son. And to achieve it he had to resist not only his heart, but his moral torments as well; because this father, of weak stomach and poor eyesight, has for some time suffered from hallucinations.

He has seen, in painfully clear visions, memories of a happiness that should have remained in the void where he has locked himself. The image of his own son has not escaped his torment. He had once seen him rolling, covered in blood, from hammering a *parabellum* bullet in the vice in his workshop; he had felt this despite that his son was only polishing his belt buckle.

Horrible things...But today, with the burning summer day full of life, the love of which his son seems to have inherited, the father feels happy, calm and sure of the future.

In that moment, not far off, he hears a loud boom.

"The Saint Etienne" the father thinks recognizing the detonation. Two fewer doves in the forest.

Without paying any more attention to the menial event, the man distracts himself with his work.

The sun, already very high, continues to rise. Wherever one looks—rocks, earth, trees—, the air, congested like an oven, vibrates with heat. A deep humming sound fills the entire body and saturates the atmosphere for as far as the eyes can see, a time that harnesses all tropical life.

The father takes a look at his wristwatch: twelve. And lifts his eyes out over the forest.

His son should already be back. In the mutual trust that the two give to one another—the father of silvery sideburns and the child of thirteen—there were never any lies. When his son said, "yes, papa", he did what he was told. He said he would be back before twelve, and the father had smiled watching him leave.

But he hasn't come back.

The father returns to his chores, struggling to concentrate on his work. It's so easy, so easy to lose track of time when inside the forest, sitting a bit on the ground while resting motionless.

Suddenly, the midday sun, the tropical humming, and the beating of father's heart stop in rhythm at the thought: his son, motionless...

Time has passed; twelve thirty. The father leaves his workshop, and resting his hand on the metal bench, the explosion of a *parabellum* bullet rushes from the depth of his memory, and instantly, for the first time in the last three hours, realizes that he has not heard a sound after the blast if the Saint-Etienne. He has not heard gravel stirring under familiar steps. His son hasn't returned, and nature stands guard at the edge of the forest, awaiting him.

Oh, how the calm character and young confidence of the boy's education is not enough to scare away the fatal ghost that the hallucinating father sees rising from the edge of the forest. Distraction, forgetfulness, fortuitous tardiness: none of these minute motives that could have delayed the arrival of his son could fit into the father's heart.

A shot, he had heard one single shot, and a long time ago at that. Since then the father has not heard a single noise, has not seen a single bird, not a single person has walked through the opening in the grass field to announce that at the wire fence...a great disaster.

Distracted and without a machete, the father sets out. He cuts through the grass field, enters into the forest, follows the line of cactus without finding the slightest trace of his son.

Nature continues to stand still. And when the father had gone over all of the familiar hunting paths and had explored the marshlands in vain, he knew with certainty that each step forward would bring him, relentlessly and brutally, to the body of his son.

He could only blame himself, poor thing. There was only the cold reality, terrible and consuming: his son had died crossing a...

But where, in what field? There are so many fences, and the forest is so, so, muddy. God, so muddy. If one is not careful crossing the fences with the shotgun in their hand...

The father's shout is stifled. He saw something rise into the air, oh, no, no it's not his son...He turns to one direction, then the other, then the other.

Nothing could be gained by seeing the complexion of the man's skin and the anguish in his eyes. The father still hasn't called out to his son. Even though his heart yearns to shout, his mouth remains shut. He knows well that the simple act of pronouncing his name, calling out to him loudly, would be a confession of his death.

"*Chiquito*" he let out quickly. And if the voice of a principled was capable of crying, we would cover our ears with compassion from the anguish in his voice.

No one nor nothing responded. Down the sun-reddened paths, the father, who has aged ten years by now, went searching for his newly-dead son.

"*Hijito mio!*"..."*Chiquito mio*"...he clamored to his son in diminutives that rose from the depths of his soul.

Once before, in the throngs of happiness and peace, this father suffered the hallucination of his son rolling on the ground, his head opened by a chrome nickel bullet. Now, in every shadowed corner of the forest, he sees sparkling wires, and at the base of a post, with the discharged shotgun as his side, he sees his son.

"Sonny"... "my boy!"

Even the forces that bring a father to hallucinate the most awful of nightmares have their limits. The father feels his senses leaving him when he quickly sees his son stepping out from a side path.

From fifty meters, it was enough for the boy of thirteen to see his father's expression, without a machete and in the forest, to make him hurry his steps with his eyes wet.

"Son" the man murmured. Exhausted, the man drops himself into the bright white sand, his hands clasped around his son's legs.

The young one, with his legs hugged tightly, stands up, and understanding the pain of his father, caresses his head slowly.

"Poor, papa".

More time has passed. It's already close to three. Now together, father and son undertake the walk back to the house.

"Why didn't you use the sun to keep track of time?" The father says first.

"I did, papa...but when I was headed back I saw the *garzas* that Juan caught and went after them.

"What you put me through, son!"

"*pia pia*" the boy murmurs back.

After a long silence, the father asks,

"And the *garzas*, did you kill any?"

"No".

Considering everything, a minute detail. Under the red hot sky, passing through the grass field, the man returns to his house with his son, on whose shoulders, almost even with his father's, he carries the joyful arm of his father. He returns covered in sweat, and even broken in body and spirit, smiles with joy.....

Yet he smiles a hallucinated happiness...For this father walks alone. He has encountered no one, his arm supported by nothing but air. Because behind him, at the foot of a post and with his legs raised, tangled in barbed-wire, his loved son lies face down to the sun, dead since ten that morning.

By Stephen Mc. September 5, 2015 1,764 Words 16 Comments

La Insolación / Sunstroke

Old, the puppy, went out through the door and crossed the patio with a slow and upright gait. He stopped at the edge of the field, stretched out on the hill, his eyes half-closed, wiggled his nose, and laid down calmly. He looked out at the monotonous plains of Chaco that switched between fields and hills, hills and fields colorless besides the cream white of the grass and the black of the bush. Some two hundred meters out, the hill cut off the horizon on all three sides by the corn fields. Towards the west, the fields widened and extended out into the valley, framed by the inescapable shadowed line in the distance.

At this early hour, the boundary, glared over by the midday light took on a calm clarity. There was not a single cloud or gust of wind. Under the calm of the golden sky, the fields gave off an invigorating freshness that brought out the hopeful spirit against the certainty of another dry day, melancholy for better paying work.

Milk, the puppy's father, took his turn crossing the patio and laid down next to him with a lazy moan of comfort. There they remained without moving, it was still too early to be bothered by flies.

Old, who looked a while at the edge of the hill, observed,
"It's a cool morning."

Milk followed the puppy's eyes and remained with his eyes fixed on the view, blinking with a distracted stare. After a moment, he said,

"There are two falcons in that tree over there."

Their eyes turned indifferently towards a passing ox, and continued their customary stare of the land.

Meanwhile, the east began to take on shades of purple and the horizon had already lost its morning clarity. Milk crossed his front paws and felt a twinge of pain. He looked at his paws without moving them, deciding finally to sniff them. He had pulled out a thorn the day before and, remembering what he had suffered, licked his sick digit.

"I couldn't walk." He exclaimed, in short.

Old did not know what he was talking about. Milk added,

"There are so many thorns."

This time Old understood. He repeated in agreement after a long pause,

"There are so many thorns."

They both again fell silent, pleased.

The sun came out and in the first bathe of light the wild roosters filled the pure air with the noisy trumpet of their caw. The dogs, tanned by the angled sun, drooped

their eyelids, softening their lashes with effeminate blinks. One by one the pack grew with the arrival of the other members: Dick, the quiet favorite; Prince, whose upper lip, split by a badger, exposed his teeth; and Isondu', a native name. The five fox-terriers, splayed and dead from comfort, slept.

After an hour, they raised their heads; for on the far side of the odd two-story ranch—the bottom floor was made from mud and the second made from wood, with hallways and cottage railings— they could sense the steps of their master coming down the stairs. Mister Jones, with a towel around his shoulders stood for a moment at the edge of the ranch and looked toward the sun, already overhead. He still had a look of death, his lip twitching after his veiled night of whisky was put off longer than usual.

While bathing, the dogs drew closer and sniffed his boots, lazily wagging their tails. Like trained animals, the dogs recognized the smallest indication of drunkenness in their master. They slowly spread out again to lie down under the sun. But the growing heat made them quickly abandon the spot for the shade of the balconies.

The day went along the same as any other that month; dry, limp, with fourteen hours of scorching sun that seemed to melt the sky and that in an instant cracked the damp ground in pale scabs. Mister Jones went over to the chacra, looked at his work from the day before and went back to the ranch. The whole morning he did nothing. He ate lunch and laid down for a siesta.

The peones went back to the plow around two despite the scorching sun, because, well, weeds grow endlessly in the cotton fields. Behind them came the dogs, who loved farming ever since last winter when they learned to battle falcons for the white worms exposed from freshly-tilled earth. Each one laid down under a cotton plant, their panting accompanied by the dull thuds of the hoe.

All the meanwhile the heat grew. In the silent pasture and the blinding sun, the air vibrated on all sides, hurting the eyes. With the same silence as their house work the peones, wrapped to their ears in loose bandanas, supported the oven hot air expelled from freshly-tilled earth. The dogs moved plants every once in a while in search of fresh shade. They laid down for a while but fatigue soon made them sit on their haunches in order to breathe deeper.

A small bleak plain of clay shimmered in front of them, where no one had ever attempted to plow. There, the puppy all of a sudden saw Mister Jones sitting on a log, looking at them fiercely. Old got up onto his paws wagging his tail. The others got up also, but with their hackles on high alert.

“It’s the Master!” The puppy exclaimed, surprised by the attitude of the others.

“No, no that’s not him.” Replied Dick.

The four dogs stood together growling quietly, without taking their eyes off Mister Jones who remained still, staring at them. The puppy, incredulous, began to walk over when Prince showed him his teeth.

“No, it’s not him. It’s Death.”

The puppy raised his hackles and slunk back to the group.

“Is the Master dead?” He asked anxiously. The others, without responding, began to bark furiously, with a relentless attitude of fearful attack. Without moving, Mister Jones faded into the shivering air.

Hearing the howls, the peones looked out over the horizon but saw nothing. They turned their heads to see if any horses had made their way over to the field before returning to their work.

The fox-terriers walked back to the ranch. The puppy, still frightened, ran ahead and fell back in short nervous trots and learned from the behavior of the others that when something is about to die, Death first let’s itself be seen.

“But how do you know that who we saw wasn’t the Master?” He asked.

“Because it wasn’t him.” They told him harshly.

Death will come and with it: a change of owner, misery, beatings, all we’re upon them! They spent the rest of the evening at their Master’s side, somber and alert. They growled at the slightest noise without knowing where it came from. Mister Jones felt safe with his restless guardians.

Finally, the sun sank behind the black line of palms above the riverbed, and in the calm of the silver night, the dogs positioned themselves around the ranch, where in the top floor Mister Jones recommenced his hidden abuse. At midnight they heard his steps and the thud of his two boots on the floorboards before the light came on. The dogs could then feel the change of owner closing in on them. Alone, at the foot of the sleeping house, they began to cry. They poured out their dry convulsive cries in a chorus of desolate howling behind the sustained cry of Prince while the others began to howl anew. The puppy barked. The night went along and the four aged dogs, under the light of the moon, their snouts extended and arched up in howls—well loved and taken care of by their Master they were about to lose— continued crying in their domesticated misery.

The next morning Mister Jones was still himself, tying the mules to the plow and working until nine. But, nonetheless, he remained unsatisfied. Besides in his fields, he had never been one to follow the lead. The blades were dull and with the quick steps of the mule, the plow began to jump. He brought it back and sharpened the grille, but a bolt that he noticed as flawed when he bought the machine broke when he put it back into place. He sent a peon over to the nearest sawmill, telling him to take the horse, a good animal, just a bit sun worn. Mister Jones raised his head to the melting midday sun and insisted that he not gallop the horse for even a moment. He quickly ate lunch and got on. The dogs, whom so far that morning had not left their Master’s side for one second, stayed in the corral.

He regretted the siesta, overwhelmed by light and silence. The boundaries were cloudy from the sun-scorched earth. Around the ranch the stone-white earth, blinding from the timely sun, seemed to lose form in a trembling boil, that put the fluttering of the fox-terriers to sleep.

“He hasn’t come back.” Milk said.

Old, hearing “come back”, lifted his ears up over his eyes. This time, the puppy, incited from the invocation, stood up and barked, searching what for. He soon gave up and joined the group in their defensive fly hunt.

“He’s not coming back.” Isondru added.

“There was a lizard under that stump.” Prince finally remembered.

A chicken, her beak open and wings extended away from her body, crossed the patio incandescently with her heavy trot from the heat. Prince followed her stalkingly with his eyes, and then leapt up

“Here he comes!” He yelled.

To the north of the patio came only the horse who the worker had been riding. The dogs arched their backs and stood on their toes, barking with restrained fury at the Death that drew closer. The animal walked with its head down, apparently indecisive about which path to follow. As soon as she passed the front of the ranch, she took a few steps toward the well, disappearing with each step under the exposed light.

Mister Jones came down; he didn’t look tired. He was getting ready to get back on the plow when he unexpectedly saw the worker atop the horse. Despite his order, he had to have galloped the horse to return at this hour. He blamed him with all rational logic, a point at which the worker responded with evasive reasoning. As soon as he had concluded his mission and was free, the poor horse, whose midsection was covered in lashes, shook her lowered head and fell to her side. Mister Jones, with the whip still in his hand, sent the peon back to the field, to prevent whipping him if he continued hearing the Jesuit pleadings of the peon.

But the dogs remained content. Death, looking for the Master, had fused with the horse. They all felt happy, free from worry, and as a result got up and followed behind the peon to the chacra when they heard Mister Jones yelling at him, still far away, asking for the screw. There was no screw: the country store was closed, the manager was asleep, and so on. Mister Jones, without responding, took off his summer hat and left in search of the tool. He withstood the heat like a laborer, and the stroll was incredibly alleviating his bad mood.

The dogs followed him but stopped in the shade of the first locust tree; it was too hot. From there, firm in their steps, their brows constrained and attentive, they watched him walk into the distance. Finally, the fear of loneliness got to them and they trotted sluggishly after him.

Mister Jones got his screw and headed back to the ranch. To shorten the long distance back, and avoid the dusty curve of the trail, he marched in a straight line to the chacra. He arrived at the stream and entered the fertile hayfields of Saladito that had grown dry and sprouted out covering the whole horizon in hay, without ever having been burned. The arched bushels that crested at the height of his chest twisted themselves together into a solid block. The grave task of crossing them was difficult at this hour even on a cool day. Mister Jones dared to cross it anyway, swimming between the resilient and pollen-filled straw from flooded clayfields, he was drowned by fatigue and acres of nitrate-filled steam.

At last he emerged and paused at the edge of the field, but it was impossible to stay still under the sun and the exhaustion. He began to walk again. The burning heat that had grown incessantly for the last three days added to the suffocating of decomposing time. The sky was white and he couldn't feel a single gust of wind. He needed air, but his distressed heartbeat did not allow him to take a breath.

Mister Jones convinced himself that he had overstepped his limits. For some time his inner ears throbbed with the beating of his arteries. He could feel it in the air, as if the inside of his head was pushing his skull outward. He looked up and down over the grazing field. He sped up his pace to get it over with once and for all... and then suddenly came to his senses and found himself on a distant field: unaware, he had walked close to a hundred meters. He looked behind him again and his head fell into another spell of vertigo.

Meanwhile, the dogs followed behind him, trotting with their tongues hanging out. At times, unable to breathe, they stopped in the shade of an *espartillo*; they rested while their panting increased before returning to the tormenting sun. At last, with the house in sight, they sped up their trot.

It was in that moment when Old, who was in front, saw Mister Jones behind the fence of the house, dressed in white, headed towards them. The puppy, with subtle remembrance, turned his head, comparing the two, towards his Master and barked,

“Death, Death.”

The others had seen him too, and barked with their hackles on end. They watched him flow through the fence, but immediately believed their eyes deceived them; he stopped a few hundred meters from them, looked over the group with his celestial eyes and continued forward.

“The Master shouldn't walk so fast.” Said Prince.

“He's going to run into him.” They all howled.

In fact, the other after a brief hesitation advanced, but not directly at them like before, but rather in oblique lines and in utter confusion, yet that would take him directly into an encounter with Mister Jones. The dogs understood then that everything had already come to its end, because their Master continued walking in his consistent steps without noticing anything. Mister Jones stopped, turned, and collapsed.

The peones saw him fall and carried him quickly over to the ranch, but all the water proved useless; he died before making it back. Mister Moore, his half-brother, came from Buenos Aires, stayed an hour at the chacra and without four days sold everything, returning immediately down south. The Indians shared the dogs who returned immediately to being skinny and mangy dogs, who go out stealthily every night to steal ears of corn from the far off fields.

By Stephen Mc. September 2, 2015 2,572 Words Leave a comment

El almohadón de plumas / The Feather Pillow

Their honeymoon had been one long shiver. Blonde, angelic, and shy, her husband's hard character had frozen her childish dreams of what it meant to be a bride. Nonetheless, she loved him dearly. At times, with a slight malaise when returning from a night together on the street, she gave a furtive glance at Jordan's tall stature, silent yet for an hour. He, for his part, loved her profoundly without letting it be seen.

For three months—they had been married in April—they lived a special kind of joy.

Without a doubt she would have wished less severity in their rigid heaven of love, more expansive feeling with cautious tenderness, but the indifferent countenance of her husband always restrained her desires.

The house in which they lived had little effect on her shivers. The whiteness of the silent patio—friezes, columns, and marble statues—produced an autumnal impression of an enchanted palace. Inside, the shining glacier of stucco, the tall walls without the slightest feature affirmed the sensation of bleak coldness. Walking back and forth between the rooms, footsteps echoed throughout the whole house, as if its long neglect heightened the resonating sound.

In this strange love nest Alicia spent the whole autumn. However, she had thrown a veil over her old dreams, and still lived in the hostile house as if asleep, without wanting to think about anything until her husband came home.

It was not strange then that she grew thin. She came down with a slight attack of influenza that dragged on insidiously for days and days; Alicia never seemed to recover. Finally one day she managed to make it to the garden supported against the arm of her husband. She looked indifferently from one side to the other. Suddenly and with profound tenderness, Jordan slowly passed his hand over her head, and Alicia instantly broke down into tears, throwing her arms around his neck. She cried incessantly, releasing her silent fears, heightening her sobs from Jordan's slightest attempts at affection. Then her cries ceased, and she stood awhile with her head hidden against his neck, unmoving, wordless.

That was the last day that Alicia was able to raise herself up. The following morning she awoke faint and without spirit. Jordan's doctor examined her with total attention and ordered her to stay in bed and get her rest.

"I don't know," he told Jordan outside in the street in quieted voice. "She has a debilitating weakness that I cannot explain. And without vomiting...I have no idea...If she wakes up tomorrow in the same condition as today, call me immediately."

The following day Alicia continued to get worse. The doctor returned. Anemia was diagnosed, completely unexplainable. Alicia stopped fainting but she continued to move visibly towards death. All day long the lights were kept on in the profoundly silent room. Hours would pass without the slightest sound. Alicia slept. Jordan lived in the living room, its lights also lit. He walked back and forth between the far away walls for hours without stopping, insatiable in his perseverance. The carpet drowned out his steps. From time to time he would enter the room and continue his silent pacing along the side of the bed, pausing a moment at each end to look at his wife.

Before long Alicia began to have, at first, confusing and floating visions that later seemed to bring her back down to the ground. The young girl, with her eyes excessively open, did nothing but look back and forth at the carpet to both sides of her bedhead. One night she suddenly transfixed her gaze. After a moment she opened her mouth to scream, and her nostrils and lips pearly in sweat.

“Jordan! Jordan!” she yelled, rigid with fear, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

Jordan ran into the room. Upon seeing him, Alicia let out a shriek of horror.

“Its me, Alicia, its me.”

Alicia looked at him with empty and fleeting eyes. She looked at the carpet, returned her gaze to him and after a long pause of frightened confrontation, she grew calm. She smiled and took the hand of her husband between her own and caressed it for half an hour, trembling.

Among her most enduring hallucinations was an anthropoid ape on the rug, resting upon its knuckles with its eyes fixed onto hers.

The doctors returned in vain. There in front of them was a finished life, bleeding out day by day, hour by hour, without even knowing why. In her last doctor visit Alicia laid in a stupor while they took her pulse, passing her limp wrist between themselves. They observed her silently for a while and returned to the dining room.

“Pst...” One of the doctors shrugged in discouragement, “It is a very serious case...There is little we can do.”

“This is all that I needed” Jordan exploded, drumming his fingers briskly over the table.

Alicia was fading away in a sub delirious state from the anemia, worse in the afternoon but that always let up in the early hours. During the day her sickness never advanced, but each morning she woke up livid, in and out of consciousness. Only at night did life seem to leave her in new waves of blood. Always upon waking she had the sensation of a thousand kilos on top of her pinning her to the bed. By the third day this sinking sensation never left her. She could barely move her head. She didn’t want anyone to touch the bed, not to even fluff her pillow. Her twilight terrors came now in the form of monsters dragging themselves toward the bed and climbing up her quilt arduously.

Later she lost consciousness. In her final two days she rambled incessantly in a low voice. All the lights remained mournfully on in the room and in the living room. In the

agonizing silence of the house, one could not hear more than the delirious monotone mumbling coming from the bed and the quiet thuds of Jordan's eternal footsteps.

At last, Alicia died. The servant, returning alone to the room after stripping the bed, looked at the pillow for a moment in surprise.

"Señor!" She called out to Jordan in a low voice. "There are stains on the pillow that look like blood."

Jordan came over quickly and bent over the bed. Indeed, on the pillow cover, on both sides of the dent where Alicia's head rested, little dark stains could be seen.

"They look like bites." Murmured the servant after a moment of immobile observation.

"Hold it up to the light" Jordan told her.

The servant lifted it up but immediately let it fall and stood looking down at it, pale and shaking. Without knowing why, Jordan felt his hair stand up.

"What is it?" he murmured with a rough voice.

"It's heavy." She said slowly, still shaking.

Jordan lifted it up; it was extraordinarily heavy. They brought it with them and over the dining room table Jordan gashed open the pillow cover. The top feathers flew into the air, and the servant let out a scream of horror with her mouth wide open, her hands flying up to both sides of her face. Over the sheets, between the feathers, slowly moved its hairy legs, it was a monstrous animal, a slimy and living ball. It was so swollen that its mouth was barely pronounceable.

Night after night, since Alicia had fallen into bed, it would stealthily apply its mouth—it's trunk, more like it—to her temples, sucking her blood. The bite was barely perceptible. The daily fluffing of the pillow without a doubt had slowed its progress at first, but ever since the young woman stopped moving the sucking went at a dizzying speed. In five days and five nights, Alicia was emptied.

The parasites that live on birds, usually very small, manage to grow to an enormous size under certain conditions. Human blood seemed to be to them particularly favorable, and it's not unusual to find them on feather pillows.

By Stephen Mc.June 20, 20141,362 Words17 Comments

A la deriva / Adrift

The man stepped on something faintly soft and white, and immediately he felt the bite on his foot. He jumped forward cursing and turned around to see the yaracacusú coiled around itself, ready for another attack.

The man cast a quick glance at his foot, where two droplets of blood were swelling arduously, and drew his machete from his belt. The viper saw the threat and hid his head in the middle of his coiled spiral but the machete fell with the dull spine of the blade, separating the snake's vertebrae.

The man knelt down to examine the bite, rubbed off the drops of blood and thought for a moment. A dull pain spread from the two violet punctures and began to invade his whole foot. Hurriedly, he tied his bandana around his ankle and hobbled along the trail towards his ranch.

The pain in his foot spread with a sensation of flesh bulging out from his taunt skin, and suddenly—like thunder—pain irradiated out from the wound to the middle of his calf. He had difficulty moving his foot; a metallic dryness seized his throat, followed by a burning thirst, he let out another curse.

He finally arrived at his ranch and threw himself atop the wheel of his trepiche. The two violet dots now vanished in the monstrous swelling of his entire foot. His skin appeared to grow thin and tense to the point of bursting. He wanted to call to his woman but his voice broke in a coarse cry and was pulled back into his dry throat. The thirst devoured his voice

“Dorotea!” He managed to throw out in a powerful cry. “Give me brandy!”

She ran over with a full glass that the man slurped up in three gulps. But he tasted nothing.

“I asked for brandy, not water.” He bellowed again. “Give me brandy.”

“But that is brandy, Paulino.” She protested, frightened.

“No, you gave me water! I want brandy!”

The woman ran back, returning with the demijohn bottle. The man drank glass after glass but felt nothing in his throat.

“Well, this is bad.” He murmured to himself looking at his foot, already bruised in a gangrenous luster. Over the bandana-knotted limb, flesh flowed like a monstrous blood sausage.

The blinding pain continued expanding in flashes of pain that reached his groin. The atrocious thirst in his throat seemed to grow warm as he breathed. When he attempted to sit up, he was seized by a fulminant urge to vomit; for half a minute he vomited with his head rested against the wooden wheel.

But the man did not want to die, and made his way down to the coast where he climbed into his canoe. He sat in the stern and began to paddle towards the center of the Paraná. There, the current of the river, which runs six miles an hour in the vicinity of the Iguazu, would take him to Tacurú-Pucú in less than five hours.

The man, with somber energy, managed to arrive exactly in the middle of the river; but once there his sleeping hands dropped the paddle back into the canoe, and after vomiting again—with blood this time—he crooked his head to look at the sun that had already begun to set behind the high hills.

His whole leg, until the middle of his thigh, had already become a deformed and hard block bursting the stitching of his pants. The man cut the bandage and opened his pants with his knife; the underside of his leg overflowed in large swollen lurid blotches that throbbed in pain. The man thought that he could no longer reach Tacurú-Pucú by himself, and decided to ask for help from his friend Alves, even though it had been a long while since they could be called friends.

The current of the river now rushed over to the Brazilian coast, and the man easily docked his canoe. He dragged himself up the trail that ran up the slope; but after twenty meters, exhausted, he stayed there flat on his stomach.

“Alves!” He yelled with as much force as he could, and he listened in vain. “Compadre Alves! Don’t deny me this favor.” He exclaimed again, lifting his head from the ground. In the silence of the jungle not even a whisper was heard. The man found the courage and strength to climb back into his canoe, and the current, scooping him up again, took him rapidly adrift.

The Paraná ran down into the depths of an immense canyon whose walls, more than a hundred meters high, mournfully boxed in the river. From the river banks, lined with black spires of basalt, rose the forest, black as well. In front of him, behind the banks of the river, the eternal melancholy wall of the forest went on forever; in those depths the swirling river rushed in violent, incessant waves of muddy water. The landscape is unforgiving, yet in him reigned the silence of death. As dusk approached, without fail, the calm and somber beauty of the forest formed a unique majesty.

The sun had already gone down when the man, laying half conscious in the back of his canoe, came down with a violent chill. Suddenly, and with astonishment, he slowly raised his heavy head—he felt better. His leg barely hurt, his thirst diminished, and his chest, feeling freed, opened in a slow breath.

The venom began to leave him; he had no doubt. He felt fairly well and even though he did not have the energy to move his hand, he counted on the dewfall to recuperate him completely. He calculated that in less than three hours he would be in Tacurú-Pucú.

His condition improved, and with it came a somnolence full of memories. He felt nothing in his thigh nor in his belly. Does his compadre Goana still live in Tacurú-Pucú? Perhaps he might also see his ex-employer, and the buyer of all the men’s production, Mr. Dougald.

Would he arrive soon? The western sky opened into a golden screen, and the river took on the same color. Onto the darkened Paraguayan coast, the mountain dropped over the river a faint freshness in penetrating aura of orange blossoms and wild honey. A pair of guacamayos flew high over head, gliding silently towards Paraguay.

Down there, on the golden river, the canoe drifted rapidly, twisting itself around at times caught in the bubbling swirling water. The man that went with the river felt better with each passing moment and thought in the meanwhile about how long it had been since he last saw his old partner Dougald. Three years? No, not that long. Two years and nine months? Close. Eight and a half months? That was it, surely.

Suddenly the man felt frozen up to his chest. What could it be?

And his breathing as well...

He had met the man who bought Dougald's lumber, Lorenzo Cubilla, on a holy Friday. Was it a Friday? Yes. Or maybe a Thursday.

The man slowly stretched his fingers.

"A Thursday..."

And he stopped breathing.

By Stephen Mc. February 21, 2014 1,195 Words 3 Comments

La gallina degollada / The Decapitated Chicken

[[

All day long the four idiot sons of the Mazzini-Ferraz marriage sat on the bench beside the patio. Their tongues dangled out between their lips, their eyes stared vacantly, and their mouths hung open as they turned their heads.

The mud patio was closed to the west by a wall of bricks. The bench was parallel to the wall, about five feet away, and there they sat motionless with their eyes fixed on the bricks. As the sun set and began to hide itself behind the wall, the idiots rejoiced. The blinding light called their attention at first, little by little their eyes lit up; at last they laughed stupidly, congested with the same anxious hilarity, they looked at the sun with bestial joy as if it were a meal.

Other times, aligned on the bench, they spent whole hours humming in imitation of the electric trolley-line. The loud noises dried their inertia and they would run around the patio biting their tongues and mooing. Yet they were almost always stuck in a somber lethargy of idiocy, they spent the whole day seated on the bench with their legs hanging down motionless, their pants soaked in saliva.

The oldest child was twelve and the youngest eight. In their dirty and disheveled appearance the absolute lack of maternal care could easily be noticed.

The four idiot sons, without a doubt, had once been the joy of their parent's lives. After three months of marriage, Mazzini and Berta were beginning to familiarize themselves with the love of a man and woman and husband and wife toward a more vital future: a son. What speaks more of the love between two young lovers than the honored consecration of love, freed from the vile egoism of a mutual love without end; and what could be worse for that same love than to be without any possible hope of renewal?

At least this is how the Mazzini-Berta household felt, and when their first son arrived after fourteen months of marriage; they believed their happiness was complete. The child grew up beautiful and radiant until he reached a year and a half. But one night, in the twentieth month he shook with terrible convulsions, the next morning he no longer recognized his parents. The doctor examined him with professional care that was visibly looking for the cause of such a horrible disease hidden in the lives of the parents.

After a few days the paralyzed limbs of the child recovered their movement; but the intelligence, the soul, even instinct itself had left him entirely. The child stayed profoundly a bubbling idiot, limp, dead to the world on the knees of his mother.

“Son, my beloved son.” She sobbed over the frightful ruin of her firstborn child.

The father, destroyed, accompanied the doctor outside.

“I feel I can say this to you: I believe his is a lost cause. He could get better. Educate yourself on all that his idiocy will allow him, but no further.”

“Yes...Yes” Mazzini agreed. “But tell me, do you think it is hereditary, that...?”

“As far as paternal heredity is concerned, I already told you what I thought when I first saw the boy. In respect to the mother, there is a lung that cannot breathe well. I don’t see anything else but it does breathe a bit rough. Have her examined thoroughly.”

With his heart destroyed with remorse, Mazzini doubled his love for his son, the little idiot child was now paying for the excesses of his grandfather. Likewise, he had to console, to relentlessly hold Berta, wounded by the most profound failure of a young marriage.

Naturally, the marriage put all of their love into the hope for another child. And so a son was born, his health and gleaming smile resurrected their extinguished future. Yet after eighteen months the convulsions that took the firstborn child began to repeat themselves, and the following morning their second child awoke an idiot.

This time the parents fell into complete despair. It had been their blood, their love that was cursed! It had been their love above everything else. He was 28 and she was 22, yet all their passionate tenderness had not succeeded in creating a single atom of an ordinary existence. They no longer asked for beauty or intelligence, as they had with the first born; “just a son, a son like any other.”

Yet this second disaster sprouted new flames of a dying love, an insane longing to redeem, once and for all, the sanctity of their love. Twins were born, and bit by bit the history of the two older sons began to repeat itself.

Yet behind their immense bitterness Mazzini and Berta maintained a great compassion for their four sons. They pulled from oblivion their deepest animal instincts, not from their souls, more as instinct itself now abandoned. The twins could not swallow, move about or even sit up. Finally they learned to walk, yet they crashed against everything, not even realizing the obstacles existed. When they were bathed they moaned until their faces flushed with blood. They came alive only to eat or when they saw brilliant colors or heard the clap of thunder. In these moments they laughed with radiant bestial frenzy, their tongues flying about as rivers of saliva ran from their mouths. They learned, in time, certain imitative faculties; but could grasp nothing more.

With the twins, the deadly line of descent had seemed to reach its conclusion. After three years, Mazzini and Berta were seized by a burning desire for a new child, trusting that the time elapsed between births would placate the disease.

Their desires would not be fulfilled. And in this burning longing, and its lack of fulfillment, the pair grew bitter. Up until this moment each one had taken responsibility for their own part of the misery of their sons; but the hopelessness of redemption for the four idiot sons born to them finally created an imperious necessity to blame the other, which is the specific patrimony of inferior hearts.

It began with the change of pronouns: *your* sons. Behind the insult laid an insidious atmosphere of blame and guilt.

"It seems to me..." Mazzini said one night as he entered to wash his hands, "that we should clean the boys more often."

Berta continued reading as if she had heard nothing.

"It's the first time..." she replied at once, "that I've seen you fret over the state of your sons."

Mazzini turned his head a bit toward her with a forced smile.

"It was our boys last time I checked."

"Fine, our boys. Is that what you want to hear?" She said raising her eyebrows.

This time Mazzini expressed himself clearly.

"You're not going to say that I'm to blame, are you?"

"Oh, no" Berta said smiling, her skin pale, "But neither am I, I imagine... Well, that's all I needed." She murmured.

"What is all you needed?!"

"Well, that if anyone is to blame here it isn't me, remember that. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Her husband gazed at her a moment with a raging desire to insult her.

"Let's drop it." He articulated at last, drying his hands.

"As you wish, but if you want to say..."

"Berta!"

"As you wish."

That was the first fight, and many were to follow. Yet in their inevitable reconciliations their souls united with doubled fury and a yearning for a new child.

From this, a girl was born. They lived in anguish for two years with a cautious eye of distress over the child, always expecting another disaster.

Yet nothing happened. So naturally, the parents began to place all their love and contentment onto their daughter, who took advantage of their indulgence to grow spoiled and ill-behaved.

Even though in the later years Berta continued to care for her sons, the birth of Bertita made her forget almost completely her four sons. The mere thought of them horrified her, as if they had been some atrocious act she had been forced to perform. Even Mazzini treated them in such a way, just to a lesser degree. Even through all of this, peace had not yet reached their hearts. The animosity of the four rotten progeny and a fear of losing their loved Bertita let loose the daughter's lack of discipline. The bile had accumulated long enough to the point where the venom in the viscera could spill from the slightest touch. Since the first poisoned dispute, all respect had been lost between the pair; and if there is one thing which a man feels with cruel intention, once begun, is the complete humiliation of another person. Before, they had shared a mutual fault for their ill begotten kin; now that success had arrived, each one attributed the success to themselves and felt with more certainty the infamy of having their four idiot sons forced upon them by the other.

With this prevailing attitude, there was no possible cure for the four idiot sons. The servant dressed them, gave them food, laid them down, all with visible brutality. They almost never bathed. They spent the whole day sitting in the patio, void of any motherly love.

Bertita turned four years old and that night, as a result of the sweets that her parents were incapable of denying her, their young child came down with a chill and a fever. The fear of seeing her die or remain in a state of stupor opened once again that eternal wound.

They did not speak for three hours and the motive was, as usual, the loud, strong steps of Mazzini.

“My God. Can’t you walk more slowly? How many times...?”

“Fine, I forgot is all. I’ll stop. I don’t do it on purpose.”

She smiled disdainfully,

“No, no, I don’t think that of you.”

“Nor would I ever believed you capable of it...you disease ridden viper!”

“What?! What did you say?”

“Nothing!”

“I heard something. Look, I don’t know what you said but I promise you that I would prefer to have anything than a father like yours.”

Mazzini turned pale.

“At last!” He murmured between his clenched teeth. “At last, you viper, you’ve said what you’ve wanted to all along.”

“Ah, a viper, yes. But I’m the one who had healthy parents. Hear that? Healthy! It wasn’t my father who died of delirium! I would have had children like the rest of the world. Those are your sons, all four of them.

Mazzini exploded as he talked.

You diseased viper! That’s what I called you, what I wanted to tell you. Ask him, ask the doctor who has more blame for the meningitis of your sons; my father or your rotten lung, you viper.”

They went on like this with each confrontation more violent than the last until a moan from Bertita sealed their lips. By early in the morning her indigestion had disappeared, and as it inevitably occurs with all young marriages that have felt an intense love at one time or another, their reconciliation arrived, and was all the more effusive from the infamy of their offenses.

A splendid day dawned and as Berta got up she spat out blood. The emotions from the terrible night before were, without a doubt, responsible for her condition. Mazzini took her in his arms for a long while as she wept desperately, neither one dared to utter a word.

At ten the decided they would go into town after having lunch. Time was running short; they ordered their servant to slaughter one of the chickens.

The brilliant day pulled the four idiots onto their bench. As the servant decapitated and bled the chicken parsimoniously (Berta had learned from her mother this trick to

conserve the freshness of the meat), she thought she felt something breathing behind her. She turned and saw the four idiots, their shoulders stuck one to the other as they looked stupefied upon the operation. Red...Red...

“Señora! The boys are in the kitchen.”

Berta rushed in. She never wanted them stepping foot in the kitchen. Even in these times of full forgiveness, forgetfulness, and reconquered happiness could she avoid such a horrid sight! Because, naturally, with an intensified rapture of love for her husband and daughter, the more irritated her humor became towards the monsters.

“Well get them out, Maria. Throw them out! Throw them out, I tell you.” The four simple-minded beasts, brutally shoved, returned to their bench.

After lunch everyone left. Maria, the servant, left for Buenos Aires and the happy couple and Bertita went for a walk around the neighborhood. As the sun began to set the family returned home; but Berta stayed outside a moment to say hello to the neighbors who lived across the street. Their daughter quickly escaped into the house.

Meanwhile, the four idiots had not moved all day from their bench. The sun had already begun to move toward the wall, hiding itself from view; and yet they continued to sit, staring at the bricks, more inert than ever.

Suddenly something broke between their gaze and the blank wall. Their sister, exhausted after five hours of paternal love, wanted to see something on her own account. She paused and thoughtfully watched the crest of the sun dip behind the wall. She wanted to climb up, of this there was no doubt. At last she decided upon a chair missing a seat, but still she could not see over the wall. She then went back and picked up a kerosene bucket and placed it vertically on the chair, and with this she triumphed.

The four idiots looked at her indifferently. They watched as their sister succeeded patiently in gaining her equilibrium and how on her tiptoes she was able to support herself with her neck out over the edge of the wall, her hands straining to keep her up. They watched her search everywhere for a place to rest her toes and climb higher.

The gaze of the idiots became animated; the same insistent look came over all their pupils. They did not take their eyes off their sister as a growing sensation of bestial gluttony came into every line of their faces. Slowly they advanced toward the wall. The little girl had managed to secure her foot onto the wall and was about to straddle the wall, and surely fall to the other side, but felt herself seized by a leg. Below her, eight eyes pierced into hers and filled her with fear.

“Get off me, let go of me!” She cried shaking them off her leg. Yet she was captive.

“Momma! Momma! Momma, Poppa!” She cried imperiously.

She even tried to jump over the edge of the wall but was pulled back, and fell.

“Momma. Ay, mom...” She couldn’t make another sound. One of the boys squeezed her neck, parting her curls back as if they were feathers and the other three dragged her along by one leg towards the kitchen where this morning the chicken had bled out, the life draining from her second by second.

Mazzini, in the frontyard, thought he heard his daughter’s voice.

“I think she is calling you” he said to Berta.

They tried to listen, quietly, but heard nothing more. A moment later they said goodbye to their neighbors and as Berta went to hang up her hat, Mazzini headed back to the patio.

“Bertita”

No one responded.

“Bertita!” He said with a raised tone already full of despair.

The silence was a funeral for his already tormented soul, so much so that his spine froze with a feeling of horror.

“Sweetie! Sweetie” He yelled running desperately towards the back of the house. Walking past the kitchen he saw a sea of blood covering the floor. Violently, he shoved open the half-closed door and let out a scream of horror.

Berta, who had run upon hearing the anguished cry of Mazzini responded with a scream of her own. Rushing into the kitchen, Mazzini, blue as death, held her back saying,

“Don’t go in there. Don’t go in there”.

Berta managed to see the blood washed floor. She could only throw her arms atop her head and throwing herself against her husband, she let out a ragged sigh.

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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