

ending with her unbridled passion for that pederast. Every night. For two hours. With me tied to those filthy rags and the thing going on. Until their passion reaches its climax.

Then she kills me. Yes, I am assassinated. Just before, there's the final monologue in which she says, among other things, that she is cutting my life short as an act of mercy. And also to add impetus to nature, to help it along, she coolly claims. Some critics mentioned historical determinism, added to man's freedom to accelerate the process. But there is a lot of rationalization on Tania's part, I believe. What she really wants is to enjoy without hindrance the pleasures of the flesh.

She mixes poison into my medicine. The poison slowly annihilates my forces, while Tania continues her monologue. And I move my lips, without uttering a sound. There were some attempts to interpret my silent words in this scene. Including a theory that transfers to the audience the responsibility of filling that blank. Tania ends her monologue and I go on moving my lips. Some people stand on their chairs, trying to catch my words. And I die. Silence.

Then the curtain falls and the applause starts up. There is a standing ovation and shouts of "bravo," "bravo." Some days, especially on Saturdays, there are as many as five curtain calls. And they do not stop applauding. This has been going on for more than two years already.

The show is terrible: grotesque, vulgar, and obvious; at some moments even lapsing into semi-literacy. The show is, mostly, pathological. But the public likes it. It's on every night, except Mondays.

Translated by Marilia Yoshimasu and John Batki

GUSTAVO SAINZ / MEXICO

Self-Portrait with Friends

I, for example, misanthropic, sullen, hunchbacked, prone to rot, innocuous exhibitionist, immodest, always disagreeable or discourteous or gray or timid according to the dullness of the metaphor, a sometime erotomaniac, and as if that weren't enough, a Mexican to boot, sleep badly and very little for the past few months, in fetal positions, under heavy covers, white or striped sheets, an electric blanket or in the open air,

according to the weather, but of course, always embracing my wife, afloat on the river of dreams.

Up at six in the morning, soaping myself. Rosita soaping herself under the hot unrepeatable water of the shower. Done with breakfast and dressing by seven. In a taxi by twenty past seven. In the cinema by seven-thirty: supervisory work, singular, compromised, mysterious, seemingly not so. And going on out, one hundred minutes later, buying the papers, returning to the apartment by taxi or on foot, and reading the newspaper, answering the telephone while Rosita prepares lunch or comes and goes to and from her ballet class. Or wasting my time in front of the typewriter, dying a little beside Claudius the God, Count Belisarius, Jvlian, Pedro Martinez or M. Martereau, on General Gordon's last campaign, with the guerrillas in Viet Nam, or in a hospital in Natchez, next to the dreadful redeemer Lazarus Morell. Or on the other hand,

going to the cinema in the afternoon and returning with an aching head due to the badly focused image and the comments of the people in the row behind me, so often bothersome. Just imagine, Gabriel going to the movies in the afternoon and walking, subject to the bourgeois Flaubertian sickness consisting in detecting stupidity without being able to bear with it. Of all the pains of understanding, says Unamuno, this is the hardest. This trait of not discovering anything but the idiocies, the cretinism of others, could it not be a sickness of our arrogant vision? Or lack of charity, of love towards the fellow man, of humanity, after all . . .

And we start to walk back home always following a trail which will take us past several bookstores, and that's because I find pleasure in discovering new books on shelves I know far to well, I caress, I ponder, I read the book jackets, stray paragraphs, chapter beginnings, sentences, I sniff, I open at random, I dip into them, I consider the quality of the printing and the taste of the edition

and for days and days the possibility of buying it is a torment . . . I gather the money and no matter what the time is, even better if there's a storm raging, Rosita and I go out under an umbrella, we arrive at the bookstore, we buy the book, inexplicably we ask for it to be wrapped, and no sooner are we past the door than we break open the wrapping, start to leaf through it again, start to handle it, and return home happy, as if we'd won something in a contest, we who detest contests and hierarchies. We began to read again. Rosita digs into *A New Life*, by Malamud, and I enjoy the *Posthumous Memories of Blas Cubas*. And as anyone can see, with that sort of life (no drugs or alcohol, radio or idiot box, no parties, a great many books, books in industrial quantities and few friends,

and above all with an overweening, neurotic, overwhelming desire to work on my new novel or to write letters, which is like writing small novels), we don't need money once the expenses are covered for rent, maid, light, gas,

telephone, clothes once in a while, books of course, but our friends sell them to us at discount rates, or on credit, or they give them to us, anyone can easily see, I say, why I won't accept bureaucratic work no matter how well paid. Literature before my monetary equilibrium but in rhythm with marital well-being. To live, not in the imitation of Christ, but rather, as far as is possible, like William, Henry, J. P., John, Alain, Malcolm, James, Marcel, Blaise, Thomas or Azorin. The secret of such men, I sometimes think, lies in the fact that they are enormously methodical and persevering: the mornings for writing, the afternoons for reading, days for walking, speaking little and watching everything, besides, quotable quote from Julio Camba, "there are years when one just doesn't feel like working."

We go on walking homeward, we arrive, I make a note of the book acquired (I love order), and pour forth my enthusiasm over *Madmen, Dwarfs, Negroes and Court Children in the XVI and XVII Centuries*, by Jose Moreno Villa, while Rosita cries out with joy, as Philip Roth probably stated, I'm through with Malamud! casts her glance over the shelves, is dilatory in deciding, and takes out Lucretius, Book I, *On the Nature of Things*, and pages, many pages later, after eleven or twelve at night, we go to bed, sometimes spreadeagled, sometimes, as I've said, tenderly united in a complaisant embrace. I quote Emilio Prados: "the night remains fleshless, throbbing, alive."

and at two in the morning, voices. Someone touches the window, tapping softly on the glass. I get up, surprised (we live on the third floor). I open the curtains, and instead of pitch black sky, unexpectedly, there is the head of an adolescent. I can't hear anything through the glass, but the Holofernic mouth moves, makes sounds, and I understand although I don't want to understand, it's asking me to open the window. Rosita wakes up. We go into the living room, and are alarmed at the fact that there's a human pyramid lifting that idiot up to our room. I pick up the phone in the dark. I dial zero six. The police, I explain, my voice broken and very soft. Dial such-and-such a number, I'm told, and they add a thousand numbers I can't set down because I can't see and which I quickly forget. I hang up without resignation.

Open up, the adolescent voice yells, and the human pyramid crumbles. I see police caps. We peer from behind the curtain, and make out police vans, uniforms, police badges. And suddenly we're distracted by our female neighbor who undresses in the half-light and makes gestures in front of a mirror. Voices, doors slamming, sharply. Sudden silence and surprise: a tiny fear which crawls through the body and becomes lodged in the throat. The idiot who asked to come in is hanging from the window, swaying. We run, I open and take him by the arms, am hardly able to hold him, he's heavy and repeats incessantly that the cops have taken all the others, damn

it. The naked neighbor notices us and puts out the light. I haul the guy in, he scratches the wall. We turn on the lights, Rosita gives him sugar. We heard several of them climbing onto the roof, we say. And the damn fool explains (more or less): I don't know a soul, I came to the party with a friend, and suddenly the cops arrived; there was a fat guy who kept saying, the cops, the cops, every time the bell rang, and the last time we opened, it really was the cops. And he's dying of fright, he trembles, his voice breaks, he asks permission and makes a phone call, he checks his clothes, all over plaster and dirt, he brushes himself off, and I never thought I'd be a trapeze artist, he says as he leaves, man-fly, man-spider, and he leaves still shaking. Rosita hasn't wasted time: she read. Parenthesis: she reads in taxis, in the bathroom, while she's cooking, going to the market and between one conversation and the next. She's probably reading right now. Close parenthesis. I flick the switch, and it's dark. Well, said another way, I turn off the lights. Groping in the dark, we reach the bed and lie down. There are voices on the roof and I look at the time: four o'clock: one lighted hand at twelve and the other at four. If I woke up at six and heard those voices again, I think, I'd believe they'd been going on all night. And I stay awake, of course, but softly embrace Rosita, who is already asleep, and lull myself into thinking that the noises downstairs have vanished. . . .

The phone rings at ten: some damn fool dialing a wrong number. Wrong number, I say, I sigh, I grunt, I mutter, and I get up. Jesus, ten o'clock, says Rosita.

After the bath I go out for the Sunday papers for the funnies. I return and the building smells of tequila and lemon. The owner of the apartment where the scandal took place comes in at the same time, he bumps into the concierge, retreats, crosses his hands, and states that someone informed the police that people were dancing naked in the patio, fortunately, there was a congressman at the party who saved them and they were set free. But damn the luck: after leaving the police headquarters, they went to a restaurant, and there was a raid on homosexuals, and they landed in jail again, but the congressman pulled a few strings again and how awful, I say

as I'm sure Bruce Jay Friedman once exclaimed

and an architect reported us, the neighbor goes on, a son of a bitch we were going to pump full of lead last night, but he got away, only because the worst always get away, but for sure today he's going to get beaten up, the goddamn stoolie. I leave the concierge listening to the rest of the complaints and go upstairs. I read the papers, file away the book reviews and clip out articles on urban planning, demographic growth and black humor, like one which says that a Brazilian, 55 years old, took an overdose of vitamins and raped fourteen girls. I tell Julio about this, during the meal, and then Nacho and Gabriel. We go to the University's cine-club, and under the

influence of *Nosferatu* we find Jorge Ayala, Cuauhtémoc, Genaro, Margarita and Agustín, Beatriz and Luis Velo, Mario Solórzano and Laura, and we go back all of us in one car, ten in an R8, fourteen in a Rambler, twelve in a Valiant, nine in a Volkswagen. . . . And during the trip, with Rosita on my knees, I make plans, calculations, adjustments, I improvise, I invent, I go over tales or anecdotes I've lived through, I invent at times, as I do before a typewriter, Olivetti 82. Have you read *Gazapo*?

At Gisela's, Menelao is trying to fix the record player when Mr. Medallas arrives, overflowing with children who run about, yell and trip over the tubes spread out on the floor. "Get the hell out of here, you damn brats!" shouts Menelao. But they take them out onto the street soon enough, and Gisela's father puts them into the rear of the cab. Menelao helps Aunt Evangeline to walk, almost carrying her to get her into the taxi. Afterwards he lets Mrs. Mochatea get in, then Mr. Medallas, Gisela's father, and her, who with noticeable tremors sits on Menelao's knees, who in turn settles down quickly, seeking a comfortable position. Nobody protests, and they get going. The kids shout and laugh, and houses, people and trees start leaving the car behind, faster all the time, and the Catholic aunt recites:

"I believe in God the Father, maker of Heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; in Jesus Christ, His only son, and in the Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified. . . ." Menelao is sitting in front, by the window. Gisela settles on his knees and asks him if she weighs a lot, and he says no, but soon after his pants get wet at the crotch. He tells her this, very low, and she laughs knowingly.

When they arrive at the party, Menelao disappears for over an hour and then shows up, wearing a change of clothes and with his hair out of place. Gisela runs towards him.

"Where were you?" she stammers. "You leave me here alone, I loathe you, I hate you, some guy grabbed my skirt, thank God nothing happened, what a creep, I was worried to death you weren't coming, and then I thought something had happened to you. . . ."

"Let me say something, okay?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, but it's just that *bang*, suddenly you'd gone."

"D'you really hate me?"

"No."

"You just said you did hate me."

"Yes, but no. I'm asking you where were you."

Menelao condescends and tells her everything.

"He just went out to get combed and came back," someone says.

He runs his hand through his hair, bringing it forward. Gisela's father says something along the same lines.

"Damn it, he went straight to the barber's and came running right back."

Menelao rubs his eyes, which are full of dust.

It's said that during the trip he ejaculated because he was carrying Gisela on his knees. It seems he dirtied his pants and the truss. He didn't have a Kleenex on him, and went into a public bathroom, a filthy place, without even a washbasin, full of flies and ads for the prevention of venereal diseases. So then he ducked out in search of a bar or a cheap joint, and once in the street (so he dares say) he crossed in front of a big, luxurious house, saw two servants, and heard them say "Really, I don't expect them until tomorrow night." So, he walked resolutely up to them.

"Are my aunt and uncle home?" he asked.

"And who are you?" one of the servants inquired.

"That's just what I was about to ask you . . ." said Menelao.

"How long have you been working here?"

"Oh, for about two months. So what?"

"I've got to get to the bathroom. I'm your bosses' nephew."

"Well then, you know they're not around, they always go off to Valle del Bravo and don't return until much later . . ."

"Yes, I know, but that doesn't stop them from being my relatives . . ."

"No, I guess not."

"So, why don't you let him in?" one of them said.

And the other one:

"Sure, do what you want, if you're sure . . ." and she let Menelao in, while he repeated he was a nephew of the owners and climbed the first set of stairs he came across with an air of certainty. "I sure hope it's okay . . ." he was able to make out one of the servants' voices.

And he found the strange bedrooms very comfortable, and had the luck of finding, besides, clothes almost made to measure for him. He dropped the stinking pants and the truss into a wicker basket, and took a bath. He had just finished dressing when first the bell, and then the sound of the front door caused him to start. He heard a man asking after the owners, and one of the maids, the one who had let him in, answering that they weren't in, as was their habit, but that he could speak to the nephew.

"Felipin?" the man asked.

The maid said she didn't know his name, because she was new to the house, and that neither did her friend, who was there on a visit.

Menelao finished dressing, and with caricaturesque stealth started to climb down the stairs. But the unknown man caught sight of him, "Felipin!" he wheezed out, offering his open arms. "Don't you remember me?" And as soon as he could he grabbed him by the shoulders.

"No," whispered Menelao, completely at his mercy.

"Of course, you were just a kid! I'm your godfather! How you've grown! I

know you since you were two years old. D'you remember how we used to go off fishing to Zihuatanejo, and to play tennis? You rascal! D'you remember . . .”

And in the same enthusiastic manner he went on saying things to which Menelao kept answering yes, yes, until the maids announced the arrival of the masters.

(The owners, of course.)

The one who opened the door to let Menelao in took off down the street. He, on the other hand, took advantage of a slight lack of attention on the fat man's part to free himself, and pretend to walk towards the garage where a Caravell towing an outboard was going in, and actually running, running desperately, faster all the time, until he was able to make sure that nobody was following him.

“You just got combed and came here right away,” someone said, when he arrived at the party: it seems it was Gisela. He smiled his Terry-Thomas smile, and raised one hand to his head, to run the hair down forward again. Then she noticed the different clothes, the new shirt, the unknown trousers, the significant look, and asked to know the whole story, when his words were already bursting forth, dripping saliva, automatically.

And now I free the typewriter from the written page. Mechanically. A movement to which I'm condemned ever since, let's put it this way, I embraced a literary career. I get up and peer into the bedroom: Rosita is reading, lost to the world. I wander around for a while, I drink Coke; it's been over six years that I haven't touched a drop of water, only Coke, five or six bottles a day, stone cold, even though *Fact* (volume one, issue six) asserts that Coke can cause tooth decay, headaches, acne, nephritis, nausea, delirium, heart disease, emotional disturbances, constipation, insomnia, indigestion, diarrhea and mutated offspring.

The telephone squawks, and it's Patricia, our wellbeloved Patricia, radiant nymphet, irredeemed, who keeps asking questions about eroticism, literature and today's corruption, a conversation so prolonged that it flattens my ears and makes them feel hot. Just think of this, Patricia,

I read *Pedro Paramo* when I was in tenth grade, during classes, sometimes, and after them. In the classroom I used to hide it with a chemistry book while I pretended to follow the lecture. Have I mentioned that I no longer underline, or mark, or mistreat books? I had a pencil in my hand, the master called out my name, and due to the confusion of getting up without dropping Juan Rulfo's novel, I marked a paragraph on alogenes. I was a terrible student, and soon came back to normal, but not to my reading: I started to rub out the pencil mark on the chemistry text, which was suddenly grabbed out of my hands. This book is mine, said one damn fool to another, I know it because of this mark, right? and pointed precisely to the one I'd just made. And it's chemistry, he said to the teacher. The class had

just finished, and there was some disorder in the group. D'you remember I'd told you one of my books had been stolen? Well, Sainz had it. It's this one, the chemistry, I can tell by the scratch, look, this one, I made it in front of him, isn't that true? And yes, teacher, the other one said, I'm a witness. I stayed in my place, stunned, until the teacher said: Did you steal the book? I don't need to, I answered quickly, people keep giving my father books, he doesn't even buy them. This fellow says the book is his, and he can say whatever he wants, the book is mine, you can ask my father. It doesn't have your name anywhere on it. I don't stain my books, or mark them, or get them dirty, just look at all my books, they're like new, right? and look at his books, they're all beat up. . . . What do you say to all this? he asked the boy. He stole it just after I'd bought it. And the teacher said, well, I'll keep the book myself until the whole thing clears up. And as an aside: you say they give them to your father, right? Yes, sir. Then why don't we give the book to this boy, and you can get your father to give you another, and he smiled, with a wretched little smile, and come, he said, come with me to the Dean's office, I'm going to give you a rubdown with the lie detector.

"Thief!" the other one yelled.

And I was overtaken with fear. My father really did get free copies of all the textbooks, but I remembered that, of all things, the chemistry book was not among them. It was out of print at the beginning of the year, and we had to get it in a bookstore. Besides, there couldn't be a lie detector within the school grounds, perhaps outside. What were they calling a lie detector? And what if they asked whether I masturbated? Did they give your father *this* book?

We reached the office. The chemistry instructor terrified me even more by scolding me, and went off to finish his duties. It was twenty past eleven, and I opened up *Pedro Paramo*. I was on page 66, where he says:

"I wanted to tell her that life had brought us together, roping us in and placing us beside each other. We were so much alone here that we were the only ones. And somehow or another we had to populate."

The chemistry instructor came back. Let's go. Where? To the lie detector, it's four blocks away, he said, and gave me a knock on the head. Did you steal the book or didn't you? I've told you already that my father gets the books free, why should I want to steal it . . .

I was pissing on myself with fright

. . . we started to walk down Naples street, and turned into Liverpool. I was brainwashing myself. I couldn't be scared of the lie detector. My luck depended on the stupidity of the interrogator, and if I had an imbecile, I was safe, so there. We got to a car. It was three-thirty in the afternoon. I had to piss. Where d'you live? The chemistry guy asked. In Colonia del Valle. That's too bad, I'm heading for Lindavista, here you are, and he gave

me the book, put your name on all of them, and don't bring this one to class for a couple of weeks, d'you have enough money for the bus? Yes sir. He gave me a pat on the head, and got into his car.

Months later, at the end of the school year, I finished up with an average of twenty percent for his course. I worked like a dog for days and days before the finals, and I got thirty percent. I only lived in order to read Ellery Queen, Raymond Chandler, Isaac Asimov, and to draw interplanetary comic strips. The idea of having to study chemistry during the holidays, of not being able to get into college, suffocated me. But the teacher showed himself as lenient as ever, he passed me, quite sure that there would never be any further meeting between chemistry and myself. How grateful I am, Patricia. The conversation is too prolonged, and it flattens my ears. So long, Patricia, I've got to get to sleep. Rosita puts down her book. Again darkness and insomnia.

Have I quoted Octavio Paz?

Thrown on the bed, I plead for the sleep of the beast, for the sleep of the mummy.

Or as Pessoa says, disguised as Alvaro de Campos:

“ . . . we conquer the world before leaving our bed,
we awake and it turns opaque,
we go out on the street and it becomes foreign . . . ”

A friend calls next morning. He's also a writer, and they've bought his novel, which is to be translated into Romanian, Italian, and French. Wow! I'm so delighted I can hardly write. Besides, downstairs, in Nacho Mendez's apartment, Matilde and Mario Patron are singing (rehearsing). Rosita begins to read J. S. LeFanu's *Best Ghost Stories*. So far this morning, she's already finished Howard Daniel's *Devils, Monsters and Nightmares*, and yesterday she was done with both volumes of the marvelous Lucretius. All this in spite of the fact that we get up at six and doggedly follow our routine: bathroom splashings, breakfast, the movies, the newspapers, the return home.

You can't make money writing, of course, and I write, but I want too many things, Grosz' *Ecce Homo*; a volume on Picasso put out by Alianza Editorial; a movie camera, a tape recorder. And please forgive me: this paragraph is a trick I've used in order to drag in a little reminiscence. Fortunately for all concerned, it's over right now, as soon as I've announced that the last time I played a tape recorder was in 1961.

I could have bought one, but I preferred to buy some clothes: a vest, two very conservative suits. I went to Jacobo's store and ran into Nacho.

The tailors took my measurements.

A girl, Greta, had lent me her tape recorder, and now was offering to sell it at a good price. As I'd spent my money on clothes, I got Nacho interested,

and asked him to come around to listen to it. But it's got to be today, he said, Jacobo and I are leaving tomorrow for Acapulco. Okay, I said, and I invited them over to the apartment. Shit, no light. So we loaded the tape recorder into a Renault and took it over to Greta's.

But what the hell, we had no idea of the time, and it was after twelve. Her family was fast asleep, and perhaps because of that, just to get her mad, we said

serenade

and Nacho and Jacobo went to get their guitars. We removed the bulb from the streetdoor lamp and plugged the tape recorder into it. I can imagine your reaction: you awoke just when the second song was ending: contradictory ideas, a fuss, questions, curiosity. You peered out. Then, pleased, you lit your bedside lamp.

The next day I picked Greta up: we had breakfast in front of the school, at El Panuco; after, we walked over to my mother's apartment, where we put the tape recorder away. I spoke before arriving. Mother was having a bath, and was just about to leave: she wouldn't be home till very late.

With nothing much to do, and on our way to the apartment, we stopped at the post office: Ernesto Sabato had sent me a copy of *Of Heroes and Tombs*, from Santos Lugares; there was a letter from Jorge Gaitan Duran (may he rest in peace); another, from Ismael Vinas, giving me his brother's address in Venezuela, at last.

We got to the apartment.

Think of Menelao and Gisela in Gazapo.

I put a tape on the recorder: on one side there was a conference given by Carlos Fuentes on the Presidential Succession in the United States; on the other, last night's serenade, but Greta didn't know that.

And then, Nacho was singing with a bit of static in the background, but stirred and stirringly . . .

It's almost no use speaking about you: you kept asking yourself with increasing anxiety how I was going to declare my intentions. Your Botticellian face reminded me of an Emil Nolde.

It was necessary for the whole thing to be beautiful, beautiful and unexpected.

Because, absolutely taken aback, naively surprised, you were allowing me to undress you.

I paraphrased Vinicius de Moraes: beauty was fundamental. Your fresh mouth (never damp!) was also extremely adequate. Returning from lust, while you were bathing, I put the tape recorder on to its slowest speed, I rubbed out the aphrodisiac serenade, and set everything up to record our own voices.

I took pictures of you while you dressed, sometimes by surprise, so that you seem sheltered behind a wall of modesty and your gestures have nothing to do with your body.

Then again the anxious desire, and the possession well completed. I confessed: I'd spent my money on clothes, I couldn't buy the tape recorder off you. So what, you said. Nothing mattered very much to you at the time .

But we agreed to go together to pick up my suits.

There were many mirrors in the store, and I loaded the camera again to take pictures of you there, infinitely reflected, facing yourself, or in front of trees or people, on Juarez Avenue.

I tried on my suits, a coat of black antelope, and a kid leather wrap. We joked: boar cloth or chick skin. Will you buy them for me? I said, like an idiot, and it's just that your family has always had lots of money.

Hugo, the salesman, and Luisa, the girl at the cash register, insisted we take the whole thing,

ah, but we were going to the movies, and out to dinner before that. I didn't even want to take the suits which were ready, and we agreed to come back later in the afternoon. So long. We walked towards Bucareli Street, to the Gran Taquito, which at that time was known as the Michoacana, and no longer exists. We hurried, and hardly made it to the Paseo Cinema: *A Plein Soleil*.

You were speaking, and you were speaking about your family. They controlled your phone calls, they took you to school and came to pick you up, they were unbearable.

If they had followed us, they'd be able to reconstruct the whole episode with no difficulty: there was a tape in the apartment with our conversation, next to three rolls of undeveloped film, over one hundred photos, many of them showing you naked.

When we left the movies, we started walking fast. The traffic was heavy, and far away we could see a column of smoke. It seemed as though we were walking within a photograph, the city in 1961. See the Fine Arts Museum, the Del Prado Hotel, the statue of General Zuazua with his rag sword.

We were holding hands once again.

On Luis Moya Street everything was chaos and we could make out the sirens of ambulances or firemen. We tried to figure it out: it must be the Alameda Cinema, no, it was in the Calvin Bakery, no, it must be a Chinese cafe in Dolores, no, the bar in front of Jacobo's store. But it was Jacobo's store.

What a great sight a fire is! I went up to the hysterical cashier; nobody had got burned. No sooner had she told me than an ambulance swallowed her up. A counter, saved from the fire, was being looted by the crowd.

The street, jammed with people, was creating a traffic jam all over Independencia, from San Juan de Letran to Balderas.

A fireman was swearing.

I took as many pictures as I could. There were as many people as in a football stadium or the bullring at Cuatro Caminos. When the fire died down, the warm Greta and I went to a newspaper office. I invented a recommendation, and got to the office of a bald dwarf who ordered the film developed and dismissed me. In exchange for the material, I asked that my name appear in the paper. I'd never published anything in a newspaper.

We went back to the apartment for the tape recorder. I was sorry I hadn't picked up the suits, it wasn't that the money would be lost, no, it's just that I liked them.

And because we were tired, or excited, or afraid, or just because, we made love again.

Then, an inferno: we couldn't find the tops of the rubbers anywhere, and my mother would notice our activities, there would be a scandal. We had no money, and we left carrying the tape recorder, too nervous, ready to climb into a bus.

We got into one.

Greta realized that she had her dress on the wrong way out, and the tribulations started again.

We went back to the apartment. She wanted to call home, but after thinking it over, she decided to defy her parents once and for all. She wouldn't spend the night at home.

We had dinner, and watched television to the end of all the programs: at that time, I could still put up with television.

At about two in the morning, Mother chased us out. She wanted to get some sleep. We went out into the night city, breathable.

I can see it well: we strolled up and down the Paseo de la Reforma until dawn, always with the worry about the lost clothes and money, thinking about Nacho and Jacobo, so removed from the disaster.

We came back in a bus that left us on the very lively center of Bucareli, dirty with sweat and nerves, tired. Dawn was breaking, and the scene was very animated, the names of newspapers resounded in the morning air, we saw little boys wrapped in their coarse blankets, we saw foggy beggars.

We bought a copy of *Novedades*. On the first page of the third section, big, very impressive, were the photos of the fire, bearing my name.

Jacobo will see them in Acapulco, said Greta.

We could make out the silhouette of a fireman among the smoke which seemed to rise from the paper. It was cold.

I'm in the apartment of Rio Po again, wrapped in books, shelves, and pictures of authors. Rosita reads in silence. Jorge calls: we'll be seeing Robert Flaherty's films in the cinema school. Did you know they've brought *Metropolis* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*? Yes, I answer. I'm going to present them.

It's useless to try playing those games.

Polo calls, do I have Jorge Luis Borges' *Introduccion a la literatura inglesa*? I say I don't. *The Waning of the Middle Ages, One-Dimensional Man*? No to that, too.

And I go out for them. I get a big discount, of course, and I enjoy credit *ad nauseam* in almost every bookstore.

I drop in on Carlos, in the gallery of the Del Prado Hotel. He greets me with surprise. How many *Gazapos* d'you think I've sold today, man? I look at him askance, I don't want to seem surprised. Fifteen, he states. And twelve yesterday. And that's in spite of the fact that my bookstore is mainly for tourists. And damn it, that's enough to keep me happy all day. There's no literature possible without readers.

I go back home, and it's time to eat. Nacho comes up, our great neighbor, and pof, Frank Harris jumps on the table, and we swallow him up alive. We spend over two hours talking of his lives and loves. With the stew, we change him for Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, our favorite hero. Then we speak of our affinities with the characters of decadent films. I think I'm a fatalist, I say, like the character in *Fuego fatuo*, and that I have no fighting spirit, like *Mickey One*. Which is why I hold among my favorites such films as *Citizen Kane*, *Dios y el diablo en la tierra del sol*, *Salvatore Giuliano*, *Let's Make Love*, *La fortaleza escondida* and *Singing in the Rain*, all of them films which affront my diminished vitality, my parceled vision.

Later, and like a stinking dessert, we speak of the Cultural Revolution in China, and other crises of supreme importance which worry us and irritate us: the war crimes in Viet Nam, the New Left, the menacing Black Power. Rosita gets up and reads *The Fire Next Time* in silence, until she comes to this: "There's a bill coming up which North America isn't prepared to pay . . . a vengeance which truly does not depend and cannot be prevented . . . by any police or armies: it's a historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance."

Ah, but we belong to a sentimental race, to a crowd of adolescents castrated by the volcanic city, vile consumers who ignore no causes but whose help is always inefficient. Pity. I write no urgent propaganda, neither do I sign manifestos. I'd like to believe I contribute in some other way, by writing, for instance, on behalf of a new age of enlightenment.

It pains me, though, to watch an army marching, or the University pentathlon waffling about. It's a frustrated wrath, a pain born of society.

Or else, when football or the bulls distract people from political problems, from their education, from the simplest lines of reasoning . . .

"Here is cold, green ire, and its tail of blades and cut glass . . ."

Octavio Paz, says Rosita, identifying the origin of the last line, in *El cántaro roto*. Nacho says goodbye, and makes a hundred jokes, one after the other, and leaves us gasping with laughter.

The telephone is our perpetual enemy.

It rings again when I'm ready to write, petrified in front of the blank page.

Call the lady, says some guy, mad as hell. What lady? What do you mean, what lady? My wife! But what number did you want? Who are you? Excuse me, but what number did you dial? What are you doing in my house? This is Mr. Saldana's house. I am Mr. Saldana, and I demand that you put me in touch at once with my wife. But she's not in. Who is in? Nobody. And who are you? I'm the guy from the moving company. What moving company? Well, the one they called for the move!

And I hang up, feeling half devilish with laughter, half sorry for the poor guy.

Fernando calls, and I confuse him with the neurotic husband.

I tell him about the incident, and from that we go on to something else, when we remember the humorism in one of Losey's films.

How Fernando carries on and on!

After Otaola, who as soon as I meet opens cages, loosens hundreds of words, wraps us all in them, turns us inside out, tickles us with them, sets us free, opens more cages and more words pour forth, crackling, biting, seemingly harmless but incisive, cold or comically cruel.

Fernando is the ablest conversationalist.

What a marvelous story writer he'd be if only he'd change the telephone for a typewriter and a blank page.

I am at his mercy for forty minutes and he finally lets me loose, feeling groggy. I hang up, and disconnect the phone. Rosita gets ready to go to school.

I spend the whole afternoon alone. I write bibliographical notes, I make a summary of a novel and I read, I wander all over the house. When I write, I try to regain what is condemned. A great novelist, says Vargas Llosa, is the gravedigger of an era. To want to be a writer is to accept feeding on cadavers and carrion. To be half vampire and half crow, to incur fetishism and necrophilia.

My mind plans my novel and Rosita leads my body by the hand. On the way back, we run into Gabriel Carreaga and we invite him home, we, who so detest visits. We discuss the ideas of Robbe-Grillet, those affirmations where it is admitted that anything that tends to lessen the writer's understanding favors the eclosion of the work. Alcoholism, grief, drugs, mystic passions, madness, according to Robbe-Grillet, have so filled the fictionalized biographies of artists, that it seems perfectly natural to see in them the essential needs of their tragic condition, or to see, at any rate, a conflict between conscience and creativity.

In Nacho's apartment, the Tamba Trio, Sonia, Matilde, Nadia, Mario Patron. I close all the windows and start to leaf through a book. Gabriel reads my new novel, still fresh from writing, smoothing his hair. Rosita, in the bedroom, designs some skirts, gets caught up with some new ideas, cuts her own clothes.

The whirring of the sewing machine.

Gabriel gets up and plays a record by the Rolling Stones.

Shit, I'm almost sorry that Curtius should have found this quotation from Stevenson before I did: "Every book is, in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning; they find private messages, assurances of love and expressions of gratitude, dropped for them in every corner. The public is but a generous patron who defrays the postage. Yet though the letter is directed to all, we have an old and kindly custom of addressing it on the outside to one. Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends?"

Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends?

Translated by John C. Murchison

KIJIMA HAJIME / JAPAN

A Tale Told by the Scorched Tree

This is a tale which has survived out of the depths of time, of bygone ages when monkeys still were more powerful than dogs.

The queen of the monkeys had great wisdom. In all the forest none was wiser than she.

The queen would have liked to be the mother of simian princes and princesses. But she could not bear the thought that she might by some misfortune have a child less beautiful than herself, and so it was that she had none.

Thus, since nature had failed her, she had no other hope left to her save artifice. So she sent out a decree to all the painters in the monkey kingdom. She commanded them to paint a likeness of herself as one unsurpassed among her kind. To stir the painters to do their utmost, she had it made known that a prize would be given to the artist whose work pleased her best.

"I myself without a doubt am the most beautiful simian being in the world"—this, the artists understood well enough, was the queen's thought. Being able to guess correctly her desire, all of them set to work with a will and began to create upon their canvasses the likeness of a monkey of surpassing beauty.