

enology of Roundness” in *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard) Maw and mouth, womb and tomb, hut and house, these are our spaces. And the hero of the round is, of course, the slain god, he of endless vegetative vitality. Borne on the wind from what other world we know not, consumed (like little Jens in Dinesen’s “The Dreaming Child”) by recollections of other fathers and other mansions, buried, harrowed and harvested, sacked and cellared, swallowed at last, he never fails us with the multiplicity of his members.

## Line

At the end of Borges’ fascinating Euclidean fiction “Death and the Compass,” the Parisian mobster Red Scharlach shoots and kills the detective Eric Lönnrot. “Red Red” kills “Red Line-red.” Or, through a punning on the Indo-European roots and a more attractive arrangement of word order: “Red Red” meets “Red-line Red-line.” The assassination comes after an illusory rhombic chase and the simple animadversions of Lönnrot’s assistant, Treviranus, the Christian, whose trinitarian principles determine his plainness.

Therefore the universe is not, according to Borges, in essence a quaternity, though he will not require us to sacrifice Jung’s mandalas. Nor is it a trinity, though we may preserve the endless ingenuity of the Council of Nicaea. Least of all is it a duality, that most unsuppressible of heresies against which most recently Levi-Strauss has arrayed whole galaxies of symphonic myth. No, the universe is a line, itself illusory, showing at its two ends the mirror images of a single entity which has been separated temporarily for we know not what purpose, most easily rejoined by a bullet. The assassin with his gun is the hero of the line.

## Selections from the Assassin’s Memoirs, or a Shard of the History of the World Since World War II

[Patterns]

I killed him in Barcelona just after the war. I detected his afterimage by a fountain under a plane tree on the Ramblas. Later, I saw the stain

of his shadow against the pediment of the great Colombo, where in a moment of bravado he had posed for his photograph. Presently he strolled among the stalls of the famous glass-domed market, where heaps of plucked fruit and the mournful eyes of eviscerated fish pressed upon him his mortality. He returned resignedly to his hotel near Los Caracoles and waited for me on the balcony . . . .

I killed him aboard a small freighter south of Salonika. He said, looking through his binoculars at the ruins of Diana Trinominata, that the present gods had retired three quarters of the spectrum, to the last squib. Fear no westering tints, he said. Only alabaster now, sky-blue, midnight, and the silver lances of the moon. But his blood was red. . . .

I killed him in Alexandria where a beautiful prostitute vainly lowered her eyes for him. The lids were silver, and the irises, touched perhaps with belladonna, violet. He turned away. I sprinkled in his retina a seeding of golden crystals. . . .

These were the war-wounded, the seekers of perpetual seedlessness. But in the early sixties all changed. I imagined a comically obscene business card. *Mortimer Amoretti: Specialist in Copulatory Assassinations*. Emblem: hawk rampant, tongue outstretched. In short, my masters shifted their attention to the opposite type: the sensualist, the broadcaster. At the time I found this change puzzling, but then I did not yet understand the essence of my masters' moderation, did not understand how the world, ever yawing between languor and appetency, would, were it not for our constant and adaptable vigilance, crash upon one rock or the other.

I killed him in Oslo in an endless June dusk behind the hairy logs of Ibsen's old study cohabiting under evergreens. I killed him in a flowered hotel room in Paris, where he was enfolded in the laminous ambience of his whore—perfume, perspiration, love's lubricants. In the sinking ripeness of Venice, under Paola's saccharine radiance, his blood confused the famous mosaic. Even in Bursa, once as brutal as the mountains that serrate its sunrises, I found him among panderers in poppied sleep. . . . Port Said, drunk, his hands spilling small coin. *I am the great sower*, he cried. His seeds stippled the sea. Naked divers made furrows for his plantings. A bumboat vendor tossed up a wet necklace of clay beads. The colors were not fast. His shirt grew iridescent. *Joseph I am*, he cried. *These are the fat years*. But I, winter's falcon, cooled that fevered blood. . . .

[A New Quarry]

. . . midsummer, a special caveat from my masters: *Many aliases: Major Rumford, Ivan Broderick, also recently known as the Holy Man of Nehrud* . . . I have forgotten the other aliases, but the concluding phrases of

the dispatch are clear in the memory: *Mensur scar. Devilishly clever. Will know that he is pursued. Careless of life.* Romance in high places, I thought. He has always cared. Even when life ought to have seemed a tasteless pit, he would not spit it out. That self-garrotting in an Athenian cul-de-sac was not suicide. The device was laid for me. . . .

I found his hotel. From its high terrace he had looked down, I knew, at the subcontinent creeping forward, affronting sea. He had seen foolish man, tempted by the alluvial richness of the delta, succumbing to disease and flood. On the far bank of the river he had seen the refugee camp writhing in the dust like a stricken serpent. And what had he felt—the same revulsion as I? No. A deep inscrutable sympathy. I thought I knew the whole array, from the icy death-wisher to the feverish seed-bearer. But here, as my masters had forewarned, was a specimen that fell outside our normal taxonomy, one far more dangerous than the merely sterile or erotic. But how would I pursue this quarry for whom a whole new set of intuitions was needed? I felt what I had not felt in years, fear, fear confirmed when presently the manager spoke to me. He was a small Eurasian with beautiful skin that darkened, as though iodined, under the flanks of the nose and in the partially eclipsed canthi of the eyes. “I am sorry you have missed the major, sir, but he has left a message for you. He wishes you to know that he is in the refugee camp.”

“As the Holy Man of Nehrud?”

“No, sir. As one sufferer among ten thousand.”

I did not sleep until the voices of night finally restored equanimity with wise imperatives. *Avoid literary commonplaces like: who is the hunter, who the hunted? You are the hawk, always. Abolish fear of death, for according to his nature he cannot kill.* . . .

[In the Serpent’s Belly]

. . . down the swarming summer air, then, I stooped on my prey. But in that shadowless world even my accipiter’s eye was deceived in all sizes—the river as wide as the sea between the pillars of Hercules, the sinuous thing beside it huger than the ones he had wrestled, impervious to my talons, its skin a tough motley of canvas, hides, pelts, and the like lashed to a tortuous skeleton of uprights and cross-members. And all within writhed the wretched refugees, indigestible gobbets of Islam cast up from the East. So I folded my pennoned metaphor, walked the igneous dust, and entered through a portiere made of knots of hemp.

. . . lost in the labyrinthine gloom but not long, his track easy to discover, the glister of his tears everywhere: on the swollen belly of a rickety child sucking feverishly at the teat of one of the huge hairless cows allowed to wander freely and befoul the earthen floor, on the withered breast of a

young mother who compounded of grain and spit short stay of her infant's starvation, on the flanks of an old man where a hundred suppurating sores opened like mouths begging for food. Inward, ever inward led his lachrymose trail until at last I found his cubicle and entered it through a baffle of hanging flaps. It contained only a cloth-covered straw mat and a clay pot. On the canvas walls he had painted mandalas with rich dyes in intricate unbroken lines like the calligraphies of Hejaz or the convolutions of intestines. I sat at the foot of his mat facing the entry, hand on my gun, following with my eye each sliding shadow that approached. But he with the scar in the corner of his mouth did not enter. My head grew muzzy. I seemed to hear a sound as of yeasty churning. And suddenly I realized what was happening. There in the bowels of the beast gastric fluids were slowly converting me into pulpy aliment while he waited nearby for my fingerprints to fade, my face to soften like hot suet, and my bones to jelly. Then he would invite those cavernous mouths to feast on my flesh. I was furious. *Come, Holy Man of Nehrud! Come with your friends and eat me!* Even as the echo of my shout faded, the shadows outside the walls thickened. A murmur went up. And now, I thought, I will force him to come for me. I took aim at a tall shadow. But it was late afternoon and a breeze had sprung up so that the walls swayed and the slant sunlight splayed the image confusingly over the undulant surface of the canvas. I fired three times in rapid succession, once in the center of the shadow and once to each side, but there was no scream. The figure did not fall. Instead, it drifted away up and to the left, like a puppet in a shadow show hoisted into the flies. I fired at another shadow and another, but they, too, only drifted away. So I thought in my bewilderment that the canvas was only a theatrical scrim and the images bodiless illusions—all contrived by him to keep me occupied until the serpent's maw crushed me. I leapt up with a roar, burst through the flaps of his cubicle, and ran out shouting. Had I met in the corridors of the labyrinth any hapless soul—man, woman, or child—I would have fired. And not out of vengeance, but just to see again the reassuring red of blood. But everyone kept to his cubicle.

At last I arrived at an exit where a portiere hung black knots against the gold setting of the sun. There stood a great hairless cow masticating hay with a circular grinding motion of its jaw. I shot it between the eyes, which presently glazed over stupidly. The front legs buckled at the knees. The animal slumped down on its neck. And finally when the slow news of death reached the hindquarters, it tumbled into the dust. Blood streamed from its mouth. I watched for a moment, then stepped over the beast and out into the breeze that coursed down the river.

So I had no chance in that labyrinth. I had been foolish ever to enter

his element: darkness, stench, starvation, and pity. I began to hate him. In my waking dreams I saw him sitting shrewdly in those deep bowels. No, not shrewd, because he was actually enamored of those foul recesses where man walks at the edge of his humanity. I searched for a means to draw him out. . . .

[Cherchez la femme]

. . . late July. I saw her standing as he had left her, just beyond the lanterns of the hotel terrace in the vestibule of night—pale sari, honey-dark swath of flesh at the midriff, black hair. She was slight. But he had opened her—lips full and eyes tunneled by pain and ecstasy. She looked at me knowingly. The manager ceremoniously escorted her to a table—a lady of high station. But the hungry eyes and the prominent nodes of the spine revealed that she desired to sacrifice everything for him. Later, when the manager had made unctuous introduction, I said, *shall I take you to him?* And how glad I was of that obscene doe-eyed nodding, that voluptuous pity, for it shattered her severe beauty which otherwise, that one time in all my dutiful history, might have undermined my resolve. Then how pleasant to ride in a cool cream Jaguar under the tropic sun out across the river. Minutes later she and I, arm in arm, lowly escort and high lady, walked inward and inward down the track of his compassion into the very maw of that immense suffering. I left her in his cubicle. *Will you not wait for his thanks?* I shook my head. *I cannot.* In fact, already the moist air had begun to soften me with its gummy mastication. *Tell him that I will watch and wait outside, knowing that he will not keep your fabled beauty confined here forever.* I did, however, stay near the cubicle for a while on the off chance that I might catch him there. While I waited, I breathed slowly, wary of the frenzy that had led to the shameful episode of the cow, the only creature I had ever destroyed other than on explicit orders of my masters. And I knew, too, that only luck had saved me from other indiscriminate killing. He did not come of course. Still, as I wound my way out of the maze I allowed myself a moment of self-congratulation. I had thought of burying a small explosive in the straw mat, the instrument of a fiery *liebestod*—a double destruction authorized by a dispatch from my masters which explicitly added her to the official roll of those to be executed. But the explosive seemed to me not perfectly predictable, and in view of my wild shadow-shooting and my regrettable bovicide, I wanted to redeem myself with a twin immolation of absolute precision.

. . . and daily I circled, memorizing every fold in that motley integument, counting the knots of every crude portiere in every entry. Meanwhile the dust-bearded sun of August burned in the southern sky, and still my

pair of pity-pricked hearts twined within and did not seek the light. Round and round I walked until one day the sky wheeled vertiginously and made a looping scrawl of thin cloud. The sunrays curled like disturbed smoke. Heat stroke. In the hospital the swart doctor, officious, American-trained, pronounced the falling sickness. I laughed. A chart traced the return of feeling: thigh, knee, calf, foot. *I am the anti-Socrates, doctor.* He did not laugh. Avoid death and resurrection in the early fall of the subcontinent. Ether, sweat, and the ripeness of the moribund thickened the air like the flies that now swarmed, now contentedly rode the slow blades of the ceiling fan. I must be still yet a while longer, they said. I smiled. *I must arise now and be about my masters' business . . . .*

They were gone from the camp, as I had suspected. Even they could not sustain their saintly ministry entirely in that stifling gloom. They craved a freshet of air in other quarters of the city, stippled as autumn advanced by the flickering and feckless joys of the children of the world. But I knew that their dutiful compassion would soon drive them back into the labyrinth. Therefore quickly I cast wide the net of my intuitions. . . .

It was the sight of a cake that plucked my eye and sent me diving down the last hours of that long hunt. The cake, honeygold, lay in a small pan on a brazier in a crowded street. Hot oil bubbled richly around it, while its ancient vendor called out in an incantatory voice addressed more to the sky than to the throng of potential buyers. I contracted for it. I received it upon a wide leaf whose green was deepened immediately by the seepage of oil. Yes, they had eaten a cake here. I shared with my sweethearts its sweetness. . . .

. . . a little stone arch, a diminutive Indian elephant caparisoned with beads and topped by a precarious rider's box, an aviary of raucous birds, a cage of monkeys, a balloon man—the perfect site for a lovers' sabbath. And for a while I was content to stroll this amiable world of the maimed. The elephant man had a left eye like a March puddle, a whorled winking of cloudy sky. The balloon man was trundle-legged with a rolling gait that rode his colorful globes skyward and then earthward, like fruits in contention between gods and men. The most memorable of all was the old woman without a spine who crouched over the pavement by the fountain. From her fingers slipped tiny streams of colored sand, which slowly formed, like the spillings of a broken hour glass, time's concentric design. As I watched her, I began to wonder if my masters would some day turn their attention to the deformed. No, they never would, I concluded, because their practice of precise adjustment had nothing to do with immodest eugenical schemes. In fact, it was a mark of their great wisdom that the old woman should live out her cribbed days in the soft leisure of time's advance, whereas the disturbers of balance must die.

I searched systematically until I found them under the banyan tree by the swan lake. But it was nothing so neat as a mensur scar that the image in the placid water revealed. It was a deep-rooted cicatrix joining mouth and eye, emblem of morbid empathy. She leaned upon his shoulder so that the black of her hair seemed to touch the scar like the soothing shadow of a velvet drug. Then a swan disturbed the image, slowly sailing through the banyan roots. We shared its stately passage. We raised our eyes and acknowledged each other. I called to them. *I am almost sorry to see it end, my friends.* They did not rise to flee. They did not answer, but I knew that fear had not frozen them, and I thought we should exchange farewells. *You have been the very best of all my career.* Still they did not speak. Their silence piqued me. *Did you think it could end otherwise? You the androgynous pit and I the fallen fruit of autumn?* They continued to lean against each other as though they made an inviolable image of unity. That angered me. *Did you think that you would prevail? You the two-headed fate and I the talismanless captain you ate?* They did not move, did not speak. *I have other instructive metaphors for the obstinate—webs, magnets, maelstroms. What will you?* They clung together, serenely speechless. And so I thought, let them die there, unenlightened. I aimed carefully and fired twice. . . .

#### [Canonization]

So I have killed the sterile and the sowers. I have killed the too kind. I lean against the earth's precession and she turns more evenly down new invagrant ways. Yes. Our network of agents has greatly expanded. Our speed and efficiency are vastly improved. Who would have expected this fine bustle of activity to sweeten my advancing age and cap my career? I had often been lonely and cynical. But now my taxonomies of quarry, with only minor revision, are official. My reports are canonical. And even these more personal notes can be released, I am told, quite soon, when opposition to the program of my masters has become negligible.

## Void

Senda del Monte Carmelo espíritu de perfección. nada • nada • nada • nada • nada • nada • y aun en el monte nada