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THE GRIMOIRE
(El Grimorio)

(If you are looking for a particular story in this book, you can find it by using Control f, and then filling in the title of the story.)

Part II

THE DEATH OF THE WATER
(La Muerte del Agua)

The heat had come traveling down the dusty roads and now sunlight was covering everything during the siesta. At the slightest movement we came in contact with it, since it was spreading out everywhere. (The nerve of its flabby creature!) If we could, we would have happily assassinated it with dozens of knives of ice, so that the clouds would carry it through the air and toss it in the sea. But since that was not possible, the best we could hope for was that it would get tired, and go and leave us in peace.

That's what I was thinking while I had to put up with it in the corner of the patio and was as quiet as the shrubs and bracken. I was the only one who was there, and the patio existed because I was looking at it. The other guests had all escaped to their rooms or the shady vestibule, forgetting about this part of the hotel, and my attention was preventing it from melting into nothingness. The patio that was golden and smoldering like a forge, was grateful to me for not ignoring it.

Thick climbing vines crawled up the walls and came to rest in delightful clusters of freshness. The colorful flower pots were like lamps that constantly gushed forth many leaves of dark green light. But these vegetal shadows were not able to darken the radiant reverberation of the sun.

And all the landscape in flames became even more vivid—as if someone had blown on it—when the hotel waiter walked onto the patio. The patio became even brighter under the gaze of these new eyes; the walls and the mosaics came to life, now not only in my consciousness, but also in that of another person; they were, therefore believable, not mere specters of a dream.

The waiter came with bare legs that were dripping with sweat. His feet were running over invisible embers, and his body was oppressed by the weight of the bucket full of water he was carrying. While I was playfully imagining a sprinkler, a violet colored wisteria, the moist snout of a greyhound, mirrors, rain, and all the things that can refresh the mind, I welcomed the presence of water with the anxious immobility of a root.

Meanwhile, the waiter was approaching, carrying the water contained in the bucket like a young maiden in her comfortable bed. When he reached the tubs, the waiter gazed like a thirsty animal into the tenderness of the water that should have been dreaming of the clear blue sky. And before I could stop him, he lifted the bucket and threw it against the wall. A soft wave of light, nicely rounded and mobile, attempted to create its fairy magic in the air. But it came in contact with the hard surface. The water shouted with

pain and then it was stunned, its bones shattered. Then, like a fish out of its pond, it trembled with pain and finally calmed down, with shivers that got smaller and smaller, until it shuddered one last time. Then it was inert, covered with leaves, with clods of dirt and garbage which was scattered around the border of the patio. Like a dead crocodile, it floated away, covered with the dirty froth of the river.

FANTOMAS SAVES A MAN
(Fantomás Salva al Hombre)

At the rear of the room in darkness, through a large glass window you can see the top of a cypress tree swaying over a starry sky. Somewhere there is a bell announcing the start of a new day. Suddenly, at the edge of the garden a head appears, and then the torso of a man who has climbed over the wall, and then begins to force the latch on the window. There is a dry crack of wood, and the glass raises up like a guillotine. The intruder slides into the room and, with a flashlight, he begins to inspect the bureau, the book shelf, the chairs, the pictures on the walls. Voices are heard in the distance, and then the sound of steps that are approaching. The intruder quickly hides behind a divan and he turns off the flashlight. A moment later the door opens; then two people come in and turn on the light. Hauffer, the owner of the house, is a potbellied academic in his fifties; Darcy, his guest, is a man with a lean body, and nervous hands.

Hauffer

This is my study, Darcy. It's a little different than the one I had when I was student, is it not?.

Darcy

Yes, you certainly have moved up in the world.

Hauffer

Go ahead and take a seat.

Darcy

No, I am going to have to leave right away. (*He pauses, and then says*) I only came so that you would not be deprived from showing me your progress. You are so proud of your professorship and your lodgings.

Hauffer

That is a strange thing to say!

Darcy

Do you think I didn't realize? All you have been talking about is how much you have earned, and how much you have spent... I arrive in the city, I see that you are giving a talk at the Metaphysical Society and I come to say hello, after not seeing you for fifteen years; right away you take me and bring me here, without asking me a single thing about my life, and my studies; nor did you say anything of your life, or your studies. Nothing. You only show me the marble of your little palace, your collections, your car, every corner of the building, with its history and its future... Anyway, it's a little offensive to a poor wretch like me... I went to greet a colleague and was trapped by a member of the bourgeoisie who is obsessed with his money.

Hauffer

Darcy, if I didn't know you...

Darcy

I know; you would say I envy you. No. We only envy what we might accomplish, what might have been ours, the triumph of some opportunity or other that has escaped us. But nothing that you have could ever have been mine. Nothing. It's not envy. Perhaps a bit of bitterness because of our different destiny: you becoming famous for ideas that you don't believe in, and I...

Hauffer

(Interrupting him) That's too much, Darcy. Why do you say I don't believe my ideas?

Darcy

Are you going to tell me that you, so satisfied with your life, so completely caught up in the pleasure of the moment, that you actually believe with profound conviction in the postulates of that pessimistic philosophy, that black humor, that you offer in your books? You could have expressed your pessimism in verse form, and I wouldn't criticize you. It is a rhetorical theme. And if the verses sounded good...! But now that you have insisted for so many years on emphasizing a form of reasoning that contradicts our human faith! Tell me: didn't life ever show you anything happy while you climbed on your pedestal, in book after book, with your face exposed like an open door? And you, thinking that the life you were describing was only failure, misery, stupidity! Every time you were happy, didn't you feel ungrateful for the experience of that happy life, while you were thinking these sinister thoughts? I would never believe your sincerity. You live on one side, and preach on the other. You may be able to fool an ignorant public. But not me.

The Intruder

(He jumps up and speaks out, pointing at Darcy) As for that guy, I would wring his neck!

Hauffer and Darcy

Help! Who are you? How has he gotten in here? Don't do anything to us.

The Intruder

Don't be frightened. Please, forgive, me. I should have introduced myself. I am Fantomas.

Darcy

A robber!

Fantomas

Me, a robber? Sir, I advise you to be careful what you say. I am not a robber. (*He proudly crosses his arms*) I am a killer.

Hauffer

A killer? (*Looking terrified, he plops down in a chair.*)

Fantomas

A killer. But life can play lots of dirty tricks on you! And I have come down in the world. To kill, and then not take a single coin from the corpse, is a guarantee of total loss. And always fleeing from the police! The way things are going, I will have to give up being a killer. First, I sold the laboratory where I made explosives and poisons. Then, I had to pawn my Colt and my knife. But what can you expect; one has to eat! In desperation I came here to rob, (I, a killer, to rob!) without ever knowing that this is the house of a teacher.

Hauffer

The house of a teacher? What teacher are you talking about?

Fantomas

You are our teacher, Mr. Hauffer. And, believe me, I didn't know that this house was yours.

Darcy

(*Sarcastic*) It is. He bought it for a hundred thousand pesos. Ask him for the details. Hauffer loves to give details.

Fantomas

Be quiet! (*To Hauffer*) When I saw you and realized my mistake, I decided to hide behind the divan, in spite of the shock, until you two would leave. But I couldn't control myself. I listened when this busybody was treating you like a hypocrite, and me like an ignoramus, then my blood started to boil.

Darcy

When did I ever treat you like an ignoramus? This is the first time I have seen you, sir!

Fantomas

You said only those who are ignorant would believe in the philosophy of Mr. Hauffer. And I believe in it. (*With anger*) And I am going to tell you something else: I think it's only those who are ignorant who would not understand it, do you hear? It's the most accurate philosophy since the time of Heraclitus.

He begins to concentrate, he slowly moves toward the picture window, and then turns around, taking on the attitude of a professor about to give a lecture to his students. Hauffer and Darcy sit down together, like two good students. While he is speaking, Fantomas makes his gestures to the rhythm of a "concert," as though his esoteric jargon seemed like music to him.

Fantomas

Man is an animal with sick nerves. His sickness consists of becoming nervous and wanting to divide chaos with theoretical slashes. He believes, more than anything, in the first slash he made that separated him from the rest. After that, he goes on converting all of his other thoughts into mincemeat. He hasn't left anything unscathed. He divides everything in two: body and soul; time and space; God and Devil; humanity and country; faith and intelligence... Man takes sides with one of these halves, which means that he also is divided in two and dies without glory, a victim of his twin myths. For that reason, the history of man is the repeated history of Cain and Abel. An animal acts, and with each act he bursts into a violent fusion of life and world; man, however, empties his life, like someone empties a pumpkin, and inside it he plays a game of opposing mirrors. Self-centered thought that multiplies his neurasthenia, like a kaleidoscope multiplies its objects. The real world escapes him. Man doesn't realize it, but the world that escapes from him is unique, eternal, indivisible, solid, and unchangeable. And in this single, unique self, man doesn't exist, because who is going to distinguish a man from a mandrake, or slime from a star, or a fish from mica? Man thinks he can classify things, but things are unclassifiable. Chaos is unequal, and logic is absurd. A is not equal to A; A is not different from B. Only the self is equal to the self, because it is unique. Inside the doors (the doors of the skull) each man lights his magic lantern and believes in the truth of the images that he himself projects on the wall. There, a prisoner in his obscure lunatic asylum, man continues dying and, nevertheless, considers himself immortal; he

shouts and gesticulates without anyone hearing him, without anyone obeying him, but nonetheless, considers himself free; he boasts that he is nothing less than the supreme purpose of life, because he feels proud that he is a creature that God created and thinks that he has been given the opportunity to walk like a king on the road that goes from the stone to God, but the stone and God are only images that he himself projects on the wall of his lunatic asylum, an asylum from which there is no exit. The life of man is not worth the effort of living it. He lacks the simple extraversion of the animal and, on the other hand, he suffers from all of its interrelated bad temperaments. There is no remedy for his sickness. Only death. The human species, the tumor of nature, the plague of the flower and the bird, is a useless observer. Remove the eyes of man from the universe, so that Life will not be ashamed of their deformity! (*The final figure of the "concert" stays in the air. But then it suddenly decomposes, and Fantomas advances, with humility, toward Hauffer.*) How is that, sir?

Hauffer

Horrible. You have just shown me my work, like the body of a beloved woman on an x-ray screen. Bones, shadows, mechanisms. It's horrible. Horrible as well as ridiculous. Nevertheless, all that you say is present in what I have written.

Fantomas

Thank you, Mr. Hauffer. (*To Darcy*) So then, is this not a marvelous theory?

Darcy

Perhaps. But it leaves me in the dark. To tell you the truth, Hauffer seems to me like a obscurantist, and you an obscurer. The magic lantern of a philosopher, and the dim lantern of a robber!

Fantomas

That is nonsense! Haven't I already told you I am not a robber? I am a killer.

Hauffer

My God!

Fantomas

Don't be unjust. If poverty has compelled me to turn to my homicidal methods, how else am I going to be able to find the money to change them, and continue my beneficial work?

Hauffer and Darcy

Beneficial?

Fantomas

Of course. Life is a curse for men. But they are cowards. So I must save their lives. (*Backing up to the picture window, dominating the audience*) With a single action I free them from their anxiety, which is a thinning of the nerves; from the clock and the tape measure; from the angel and the infidel, from failure and nightmares; from the tyrant and the microbe... With stabbings and pistol shots, with poisoned chocolates and poisonous bombs, I am carrying out a deadly crusade, freeing the human species from its intrinsic pain, curing the nature of the malign excrescence which is humanity.

Darcy

Foolish idiot! Do you really do all those things?

Fantomas

Yes, until a month ago! But how am I going to be able to continue now, without my little dagger that stopped the beating of a heart, like the finger of a child stops the pendulum of a clock? Or without my pistol, with its six serpents of death? (*He takes out a list of notes and reads*) the 15th of August, San Cristobal; the 20th of October, San Jose; the 3rd of December, Santa Juana...

Darcy

Saints?

Fantomas

I give them the name of a saint after I stab them. Because they are martyrs.

Hauffer

Oh!

Fantomas

While Professor Hauffer writes in books his invitation to death, I do what is within my humble grasp to save the reluctant. Oh, if we were only able to create a vast religious, educational, and political movement that would convince men of the necessity to die!

Darcy

Convince pigs of the advantages of hunger!

Fantomas

They would be convinced, they would have to be convinced... if we could establish a Death State. Why would they not be convinced if it is the State that is convincing them? Besides, the State is already doing much to advance our cause. The State declares a war,

and men are exterminated like cockroaches. The State diverts riches toward the minority, and the rest die, emaciated, without hope. The State ignores public health, and human flesh becomes filled with worms. The State maintains an organization of technicians and financiers specialized in destruction and sabotage. The State actually does this out of pure egotism of class; and people are convinced that this is patriotism, justice, prosperity, and science! But just think about the deadly effect of this power when the State plans for death, and organizes the life of society, based on the philosophy of Professor Hauffer.

Hauffer

But... if you will permit me, Mr. Fantomas... Doesn't this carry my ideas a bit beyond what is logical? Remember that in my philosophy there is room for ethics. Even though things look black, we can always explore the shadows, examine the dimensions of our home and, with our inner thoughts, fill the emptiness of our meaningless lives. To act as if there were no other eyes to examine the shadows, other than ours, is the ethics of the tragic hero.

Fantomas

(With respectful disagreement) The will to see in the darkness? Do you believe this idea of cats that see in the dark can really amount to something? Ah, Mr. Hauffer! The philosophers were always timid, and they needed some assistance. Just leave to us, the Torquemadas, the Cromwells, Napoleons, Lenins, and Hitlers, the task of spreading ideas around the world, like wolves in a flock of sheep.

Darcy

And what are your ideas for this Death State?

Fantomas

Above all, the abolition of policemen and firemen. *(Speaking excitedly)* A cult of fire, so that flames would spread from rooftop to rooftop and, on the night of Saint John, all cities would burn with the people inside them, in a sacred purification. Mass pilgrimages to the oceans, so that people go out floating on the waves while waiting for the bite of a shark. Wars with people seated opposite each other, in which each soldier guts himself with a knife; the country that wins is the one which is able to smile the most convincingly during the act of hara-kiri. People enter the jungle with their hand outstretched toward a poisonous snake, or bury their face in an ant hill, or offer their belly to the foot of an elephant and are buried in the unplowed fields, until they feel the prolific invasion of a bacillus, and their flesh on the way to becoming weeds. In the cities, fiestas of charity, with artificial fires of heroes that set off dynamite in their mouth, and carnivals in which men, women, and children, crash into each other enthusiastically in the streets, firing shots at each other, or stabbing each other with knives, in a solemn celebration of ladies and gentlemen, with watchful custodians that finish off the wounded with a merciful pistol shot...

Hauffer

Calm down, for God's sake! Don't get carried away, Mr. Fantomas. We are ready to believe you. You say you came here for money? Well, I will give you enough to travel to another country. (*He opens a drawer and takes out a wad of bills.*) Use your methods somewhere else. The farther away, the better.

Fantomas

Thank you, thank you, Professor. With this I will be able to continue my crusade. Good-bye. (*He moves toward the window, he throws his leg over the window sill, and is about to jump down on the other side, but stops and turns around.*) How ungrateful I am! I was about to leave without offering you my services! Professor, do you want me to save your life? I know a blow: like a flash, and then nothing!

Hauffer

No, no! What are you thinking?... (*Persuasively*) Do you understand, if I were to die, who is going to spread the truth?

Fantomas

Of course. How distracted I am! It hadn't occurred to me. (*Turning to Darcy, and not so politely*) And what about you?

Darcy

No thanks. I don't want you to save my life. I am very contented with the life I have. I know of no greater pleasure than life. Here's to life!

Fantomas

Bah! Neurasthenia. How disgusting! (*Again he throws his leg over the window sill, and is about to jump down.*)

Darcy

A moment! What about you, don't you want to die? I also know an infallible blow. The blow of a pistol bullet to the heart.

Fantomas

No. What, me die?, that's all we need! (*Now only his head and his hands are visible. He says with a grin*) What would become of Mr. Hauffer's philosophy, if I were to die? (*He disappears.*)

THE CRIME OF THE ATTIC
(El Crimen del Desván)

Detective Hackett knocked anxiously on the door of Sir Eugen's chalet. Maybe he was already late. Perhaps he had already been murdered.

When the servant finally opened the door, Hackett rushed inside, shouting at the top of his lungs. From different places came an old woman—Lady Malver, evidently—also a young boy with bulging eyes, and a gentleman who seemed to be constantly smiling.

“Where is Sir Eugen. Quickly, quickly! It's a matter of life or death!”

“In the attic, developing his photographs,” the servant was able to tell him.

Everyone hurried up the stairs; the men, climbing two steps at a time; Lady Malver, slowly, like a caterpillar.

The door to the attic was closed. They knocked.

“Sir Eugen, Sir Eugen! Are you there?”

On the other side of the door they heard a voice, trembling and anxious:

“Ah yes, come in, please!”

Hackett struggled with the door handle, but it had been locked.

“Open the door, Sir Eugen!”

Lady Malver finally arrived, out of breath.

“Eugen,” she said, weakly.

Inside the room they heard the door was being unlocked, then something sounding like panting, the noise of a body collapsing... and finally, silence.

Hackett tried again to open the door, and this time he succeeded. They all entered in a rush.

At first, they were unable to see anything. On one side there was the dim red light of a lamp. The darkness was smooth, dense, pinkish, and fleshy. Then, in the middle of the room they discovered (looking like the pit of a fruit!) the body of Sir Eugen, spread out on the floor. Someone turned on a light. After that, they could see that a knife was rising out of Sir Eugen's back, like a tiny wing.

Hackett looked around the room. There was no other exit. It was a hermetic world, like a peach, with a cadaver inside it. He tapped on the floor and the walls; he studied the position of the corpse, and the weapon...

After a moment, he went back to the door and locked it, putting away the key, and taking out his revolver.

“The murderer,” he said, looking at the others one by one, “is in here. The murderer was able to take advantage of the darkness to stab Sir Eugen.”

The others protested.

Hackett answered them, rejecting the idea that it was impossible. The wound was fresh. It was murder, not a suicide. There was no exit from the room, not even for a little capuchin monkey. Nor could the knife have been thrown from a distance, since the room had no mechanism that could have done that.

The upset old woman proposed timidly:

“And what if it was something supernatural? All those awful photographic plates, there under the red light... They look like they are made out of flabby, pallid flesh that has degenerated... Perhaps, when the light was turned on, the plates hid the secret... Perhaps they hid the murderer... In my opinion, it was a supernatural criminal.

“Supernatural?” the detective said sardonically, “There is nothing supernatural.”

Then, on hearing the words “there is nothing supernatural!” everyone, Lady Malver, and even the corpse, burst out with laughter, like a fountain with multiple streams of water. A raucous laughter, in unison, simultaneous, a single laughter issuing from six mouths, with a single coinciding rhythm. And, without ceasing to laugh, the figures of Hackett, Lady Malver, Sir Eugen, the servant, the boy with bulging eyes, and the man with the big smile, all started contracting like six pallid flames. After that, the figures moved toward each other, with the determination of will-o’-the-wisps, and merged into a single transparency. And from that mass emerged the strange figure of an imp. It was the house imp, who was a lover of detective novels.

Free, invisible, aerial, licentious, fraudulent, eccentric, the imp passed through the attic wall, went down the steps of the deserted mansion, and went to look for the shelves of detective novels. How he loved those morbid stories that men wrote! He especially enjoyed playing the lead role in one of those tales.

THE POLITICIAN (El Politico)

My first article was a failure. It must have been... let’s see... yes, I think scarcely three months since I became a journalist; but since I was a vivacious, likeable boy with good manners, the editor of the newspaper thought that, in spite of my lack of experience, I would be able to interview Doctor Olmedo, who at that time was Minister.

“Go ahead,” he told me, “and get what you can out of him. Above all, try to find out how the government will handle the next elections... And if there will be elections!”

I managed to get a letter of recommendation from a priest who was a distant relative, and I went.

The ruddy, fat sun was enjoying the siesta, shining over the small district of Palermo. I was so nervous I didn’t even feel the heat. It was no wonder. I was afraid of failing. What did I know about how to conduct an interview? To top it off, Doctor Olmedo had the reputation of being a stubborn man: “it would be necessary to use a corkscrew to get words out of him.”

A servant let me in, and because my eyes had been dazzled by the sun, the dark office seemed like a nocturnal aquarium. The light on the ferns in the garden outside, green and liquid, was entering through openings in the shutters. And out there, on the edge of the swimming pool—which I hadn’t noticed at first—Doctor Olmedo was panting.

I approached and, getting used to the darkness, was able to see his drowsy expression, sluggish and stupid. What despondency! I could see that my interview was not going to be a success! What information was I going to be able to get from this corpulent, pudgy animal, who was overcome by the siesta and the heat, whose lax flesh was draped over an easy chair?

He hardly moved in order to greet me, not because of a lack of courtesy, I thought, but because of fatigue and obesity, because of lying there half asleep. In recognition of my presence his nerves only were able to make him raise his hand slightly, and a weak smile appeared on his face. I informed him of the purpose of my visit, but I was going to have

to postpone my questions, because Doctor Olmedo was still only half awake. Once in a while a smile wandered over his beardless face like a piece of seaweed, or his arms, like slow-moving tentacles, moved off his belly and then brushed over the arms of the chair. And my efforts to get him to say something were all in vain. He lay there like a mollusk, lethargic, in the shadows of the corner. What political information was I going to be able to get from an octopus?

My timidity didn't help. And the time was passing... Should I make an excuse, and then leave? I began to understand how difficult journalism is; and like someone who is playing his last card, I asked the Secretary, one after the other, all of the questions from my list. I went through all of the difficult issues I needed to ask him about, like a farmer who is ploughing a field. And even more. Without caring about anything, I began to dig into the personal life of Doctor Olmedo and, like they were burning coals, I also brought up several rumors that people had mentioned.

Then, something terrible happened. With a visual explosion of broken configurations, his features dislocated and fell apart. For several seconds, his face was a monstrous sponge of flesh, without any recognizable trace. And then the mollusk was transformed into a big ugly bird. The strands of hair rose up, becoming a red comb, he gave a screech and flew over me, waving his arms, and mesmerizing me with his large, fanatical eyes. His hooked nose grazed my face and, fearing that his talons were going to claw me, I hurried to take refuge in the chair from which I had risen a moment ago. But the big ugly bird didn't pursue me. He stayed in the middle of his cage, defiant, looking furious, squawking out a nationalistic speech. A speech that he tried to base on documents and numbers; after that I saw him put on his glasses, remove some papers from his pocket, and begin a monotonous lecture. Now he seemed less offensive. His size grew smaller, he lost the appearance of a bird of prey, and was changed into a well fed, domesticated, grey parrot, that walked with small, balanced strides, repeating a solemn chatter from the top of his cage.

This was the moment to take advantage of his loquacity, and try to interrogate him.

“Did he want Pope Perico? (*when would elections be held?*) What was the name of his patron? (*does the government support a candidate?*)

Every answer that he gave was an evasion. And all his declarations had two opposite parts—a yes, and a no—that rapidly devoured each other without leaving a trace. On one occasion, however, it seemed like he was going to be sincere. He spoke with a tone of contrition, of desperation, like someone who was revealing the tribulations of his heart. And as I listened to him I trembled with surprise, because I noticed that his ears were growing longer and were covered with hairs; his eyes became soft, and his snout opened with a pitiful braying.

In spite of his sincere tone, he never told me anything. I thought about the editor, and the jokes of my colleagues at the newspaper. I took courage and finally I corralled him; right there, without waiting any longer, I hit him with the decisive question.

And, astonishingly, on hearing the question, the donkey disappeared and I saw only a cold fish, stubborn and stupid, that was pressing his useless eyes against the glass wall of the aquarium that his lack of comprehension had created between the two of us. Or else, he was purposely acting as if he did not understand me. And now, I could no longer continue asking questions like that. He wasn't even listening to me.

The rigid, frozen posture of a fish began to change when I talked about his colleagues and sharpened into an astute expression; above his despicable eyes his eyebrows rose and began to arch like two serpents, and he was also converted into a sinuous, crafty serpent that slid over the surface of things, curling up and spreading out.

I couldn't take any more. I pretended to be satisfied and said goodbye. Then, he asked me to say hello to my relative the priest, and accompanied me to the door. As he opened it, the light reflected on his face. It was a rather ordinary face. However, something in his eyes told me that the metamorphoses I had just seen were not the simple impressions of a myopic person in the shadows. The conflicts between religious and political dogmas that shook Dr. Olmedo, and the struggle between his affected piety and his rapacity, had embodied him with asymmetric appearance, like that of the ubiquitous and telluric god of Ptimaoka. His right eye opened in his face like a heavenly, ingenuous, and Eucharistic bubble; and the left eye pushed forward as though it was not enough to feel the emissions of light, and it wanted to stick the claws of its sight into everything in order to detach it and capture it. And when these two eyes, like the squint of a sun and a moon in a cloudy sky looked at me, I had a sort of mystical rapture when the veil of light was torn open, and behind it I saw the mystery, the mystery of a madness that was spreading its cobwebs in the air. I had no interest in the final things Dr. Olmedo was saying to me, nor in his figure which now seemed insignificant, but with the shape of these invisible cobwebs. They completely divided the person of Dr. Olmedo, and they became intertwined in a viscous mental environment. It was as if the expression on his face projected a network of intricate thoughts in the making. And I recognized some of the subtle threads of this tangle. Contradictions, absurdities... Above the level of the nose, the mouth, the eyes, and the wrinkles, there was another disgusting level of sharp-pointed ideas: "Jesuitism," "nationalism," "Catholicism," "irrationalism," "scholasticism," "spiritualism," and "authoritarianism"... I understood—because I had seen it—that Dr. Olmedo despised intelligence because it avoids superstitions but, nevertheless, wrongly used intelligence in order not to confess that he was superstitious. I also saw, so that nothing would hinder his contemplation of the supernatural, Olmedo wanted to delay life, to immobilize it, to control it, to subdue it, to hold it back, and push it down to a state of lethargy, and eventually death. I saw that this was not something that he wanted to do just for himself, but rather to impose it universally, and that as he trampled on other men in order to defend a limited view of religion, he was controlled by the most turbulent forms of life, because of his fear of scandals, and scandalous violence, because of caprices, fixed ideas, hate, and arrogance, because of intrigues, lies, ignorance, servility, and desire for power, because of cruelty, envy, and fanatic bad faith, he was blind—totally blind!—to any true understanding of the supernatural. I saw he believed he was part of a universal society, but I also saw that he was so grateful to God for having been born, that he believed the place he was born had been the most important place, and was even superior to all the others. I saw...

That was my first journalistic failure. On returning to the newspaper I had nothing to report, and nothing to write. But for the first time in my life I had felt a political emotion: I had seen that when a man thinks, he is nothing more than a slice of chaos.

THE ROAD (El Camino)

With my forehead pressed against the window, I gazed at the trees along my street that were golden in the light of the autumn sun. Every once in a while a leaf would fall; it would circle around and then land on top of the rest of the fallen leaves. It was a village Sunday, so peaceful, so quiet, that the unused light seemed to illuminate a vacant lot, and above all, the quietness of that breathless air gave me the impression of being curled up in a new refuge somewhere in the world, from which I could see the stars turn their backs and ignore me.

And, with a big surprise, that afternoon a man who was more tall and slender than most men came stumbling down the opposite sidewalk.

A man?

He was too quick, too broken-down to be a man. Saint Vitus dance without music. There was no music that could coincide with his uneven strides, the irregular waving of his arms, the listlessness of his body, and his sudden fluttering like a seagull...

When his top hat came off and fell to the ground on top of the leaves and he continued his impetuous march, I knew he was being moved by the power of his own wind.

So then I ran out into the street and picked up the hat, and I started running to catch up and give it back to him. He was already far away and, with his erratic movements, he kept on getting further.

Finally, I caught up with him. He was talking to himself without making sense.

“Here is your hat, sir” I told him, panting.

He took it from me and put it on.

(He hadn't slowed down, and he hadn't stopped talking...)

I started walking by his side, with great wonder, because I realized that that man was an angel. An empty angel. A tube in the form of a man, but more open and clear than a normal man. Through his hollow body there were souls traveling on their way to heaven. They entered through one side and came out through the other, entering and exiting, entering and exiting. Like a wind blowing from two different directions.

I looked around him. There in back of the angel with the top hat, waiting for their turn in a broad invisible trail, were still more souls. One after the other they passed through that tube on their journey to eternity. (As they reached the mouth of the angel, the souls took advantage of a brief resurrection to express their astonishment, or their feeling about the mystery, or a clever phrase that they hadn't been able to say at the time of their death.)

I walked for blocks and blocks, listening to the angel's monologue—the monologue of a chorus out of time—but I was finally exhausted and had to stop. I sat down at the edge of the curb. The angel kept on moving like a gust of wind, followed by his supernatural trail.

THE HANDS (Las Manos)

In the faculty building we were talking about the eccentricities of our new colleague, Cespedes, when someone near the window saw that he was already coming through the garden.

Everyone became silent, waiting expectantly. The door opened and for a moment the silver light of the afternoon flared up over the shoulders of Cespedes.

He greeted us with a nod of his head, and went to sign in. While he did that, we were able to see that both of his hands were covered with thorns.

He wrote a scribble without looking at any of us and immediately left.

Days later he turned up again without giving us time to stop talking. He went up to the desk and, when he picked up a pencil, we noticed that his hands were covered with blisters.

Another day—by now the faculty members had grown accustomed to keeping their eyes on his hands—we saw that they were covered with bites. He signed in the best he could, and then left again.

Cespedes was like the wind; if we tried to speak to him, he left us immediately.

A week went by. We knew he had taught his classes, but nobody knew where he was. He hadn't slept in his house.

Then, very early in the morning, a female student found him lying between the rhododendrons in the garden. He was dead, with no hands. Someone, or something, had torn them off.

It was discovered that Cespedes had been making an effort to find the archangel without wings, who is aware of all secrets. Perhaps Cespedes had been on the verge of catching him on several occasions. If that was so, the archangel must have gotten away each time. Probably, the first time the archangel created a patch of brambles, the second, a fire, and the third time, a beast with open jaws. Each time he drew himself into his own creations and attacked the hands of Cespedes until, because of the pain, he had to let him go. Maybe the last time Cespedes put up with the pain and never let go; then the archangel returned to his reign humiliated, with the hands of a man imbedded forever in his celestial back. Heaven knows!

INCIDENTS (Casos)

ANABEL AND THE ELVES (Anabel y los Duendes)

Every time the dead Anabel showed up in the world of the elves, all the little elves ran to play with her.

There was always one elf who threatened her.

“You can't hit me,” she told him.

“Anabel is right,” said an old elf once, who happened to be passing by. “In our world of elves, Anabel only exists as a shadow. You wouldn’t be able to hit her if you were in the world of the dead Anabel either, because there all of us elves would be shadows.”

“Oh!” the young elf replied, “but if everyone, Anabel and us, would go to the world of men while we were alive, we would all be equal, and then I could hit her.”

“No, not there either,” Anabel responded, “because in the world of the living, we don’t exist.”

Then the little elf continued playing with Anabel, but without touching her, like the image of a bird in the puddle where it is reflected.

THE CIGARETTE (El Cigarrillo)

The new tobacco vendor in the shop looked at him mockingly, as he sold him the pack of cigarettes.

Juan went back to his room, he stretched out on his bed in order to rest in the darkness, and he lit a cigarette in his mouth.

He was furious, feeling he had been swindled. But he couldn’t resist it. The cigarette was smoking with violence, and it let out frightening puffs of bits of a man converted into smoke.

Above the bed, his body was beginning to turn into ashes, while the room was filled with violet clouds.

THE GIFT OF YAHWEH (El Don de Jahveh)

Back in those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah went to talk to him.

“Put your house in order, because you are about to die.”

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord:

“Oh, Yahweh, remember that I have always done what is pleasing in your eyes.”

And he wept bitterly.

That same night Yahweh told Isaiah:

“Go back and tell Hezekiah I have heard his prayer, and I have seen his tears. He will die on the day that I have set for his death, but when that day arrives I will turn time back for heaven, and earth, and all that exists; I will put them all where they were fifteen years ago. In this way, it will add fifteen years to the life of Hezekiah.

When he heard this, Hezekiah wept again:

“What good does it do me, oh Yahweh, what good does it do to live for a second time, the same fifteen years that I have already lived, knowing every day what will happen to me the next day? And if, when you set everything back fifteen years, you also erase my memory of the life that I have lived, what good does it do me to relive it, if I don’t realize

it? I do not ask you for fifteen years; please give me at least fifteen days, but let them be new ones!”

Yahweh refused to do that.

THE EYES THAT WERE CLOSED (Los Ojos Cerrados)

The students were accustomed to the long pauses in the gaze of Professor Andert. He would close his eyes halfway, as if he wished to see something new happening in the dark room; and he stayed with his eyelids down while the conversation continued around him. In this way he traveled through the shadows. Then, on one of those travels, he died.

For a while his death went unnoticed.

Sunken into the easy chair, he seemed to be listening with his hands pressed together, as though he was praying with his head bowed...

Everyone was waiting for the moment when he would open his eyes again.

But he had already opened them... on the other side. His eyes had blossomed in his soul, like two orchids inside a dead tree. And all at once Andert's eyes saw the face of God, a face without eyes, because the eyes of God were those with which Anders had just discovered his blindness.

THE PACT (El Pacto)

Near the end of the sixteenth century, in Amaicha a young friar was reading in his tent about the lives of the saints.

“If only I could become a saint!” he exclaimed fervently.

He was fascinated by the mystery of what those saints must have seen with their eyes bathed in grace. What visions! Oh, if only I could have them!”

“I would give everything I have to become a saint,” he added.

And he heard a sly voice:

“Even your soul?”

At first the friar was frightened, but he immediately recovered and answered with conviction.

“Yes, also my soul.”

His face shone, and he was a new man; when he continued traveling to Tucumán, the Spanish soldiers spoke with surprise about the sudden pious disposition of the friar.

The years passed.

Friar Bartholomew was pure love, pure goodness. And his presence made people feel a shiver of fear and of charm: it was obvious that, in his vicinity, there was something happening that was tremendous, enormous, and powerful.

When people saw him, there was always someone who said:

“He is a saint.”

And then they talked about his sacrifices, and his miracles.

When he died in the cell of a Convent in Lima (they say the birds in the window sang *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*), the Devil took possession of his soul.

“I have permitted you to look out through the gates and see God in the distance,” said the Devil as they traveled to Hell. “Now it’s time for you to look at me.”

THE FLY (La Mosca)

Juan the soldier was taking a siesta in the shade of a tree in Campo de Mayo.

He dreamed that he was about to wake up, and he was about to pluck the flower of alertness that was ready to blossom, but then he could no longer do it. He was disturbed in the depths of his dream by the sound of a fly! It kept on buzzing, and was trying to get inside his head through the openings of his nose, his mouth, his ears, and his eyes...

Juan the soldier stayed in the same position, completely closed off from the fly, without moving, still protecting his dream. All he did was raise his arm and, taking a hatchet that he had left by his side, with a single blow he opened his head.

TABOO (Tabú)

The guardian angel whispered behind Fabian’s back:

“Be careful, Fabian! It is ordered that you will die whenever you pronounce the word: *zangolotino*.”

“Zangolotino?” Fabian asks with alarm.

And he dies.

THE STORIES OF SATAN (Los Cuentos de Satán)

God is with his only angel, Satan. There is nothing else in all that immensity.

Satan is lying at the feet of his Lord like a puppy. He dozes, yawns, and stretches... From time to time a horrible smile spreads over his face, he raises his head, and looks at God in the shadows.

God looks at the emptiness, and sighs... Oh, if He could only create at least one little star! But He couldn’t do that. What for? To have to battle with Satan, who is now so submissive and innocent at his feet? Satan has a bad nature, and God knows that if there were another place that existed somewhere, Satan would rise up from where he is now and, with his instincts awakened, he would leave forever and go out to destroy and corrupt.

“Satan, my child,” He says, smoothing his hair, “We are all alone here, and we are bored in this darkness. Wouldn’t you like to amuse me with one of those stories that you are able to invent?”

Then Satan sits up, and with his eyes full of malice, he tells God one of his stories. Stories of catastrophes and despicable acts, because that is all he is able to think about.

This time he tells a very long story, of a grain of dust inhabited by people who give birth to one another, and kill each another; and...

Satan finishes his tale, and he lays down and goes to sleep again at the feet of his Lord. (Of the story and all that had happened while it lasted, there is not even an echo.)

God pats Satan on the head, feeling sorry for his innocent evil, feeling sorry also for those imaginary people whom He would never dare to create, because He knows that Satan would make them suffer; He also feels sorry for Himself because He understands that so much compassion makes Him impotent.

THE TOWER (La Torre)

Solness wanted to construct the highest tower in the world on the top of which the green flag of our planet would wave during its rotations, in sight of the rest of the galaxy.

He would have to dig a very deep hole and place the foundation in the depths of the earth in order for it to support the weight.

With workers and tools, he began digging like a mole; and his ambition was pushing him toward the other side of the world. With each new level of depth he imagined that the top of the skyscraper would rise nearer to the stars; and from down there he could see the stars constantly dancing above the hole.

But in that dark recess, with the smell of firedamp and methane everyone died, shining like stars on the tip of that tower in reverse.

THE CATHEDRAL (La Catedral)

The anger of the god was instantaneous.

Men and all that man had constructed tore open like a great mass of holes. Even the velvet broke open like a fishing net.

Self-righteous humanity, and its civilization, then rose to the highest point of the sky, and stayed there for a moment, immense and clear like a mass of clouds, until a cyclone caught it and made it spin around the planet. Then came a flood that cleansed the air, and turned the dust into dust.

The earth was lightened. The god thought that the lizard, the banana tree, the running water were all improved. The only thing of man the god kept was the most humble, a cathedral that rolled over the grass, as though it was after a decapitation.

And that was when the cathedral began to dream.

After some time, it grew a beard of moss, eyelids of cobweb, and the forehead of a pale saint with mysteries under its skull.

The god often went for a walk at dusk, feeling sad and regretful. He stopped in front of the skull of the cathedral and sighed. The cathedral, lost in thought, was looking at the countryside with nostalgia, dreaming of men who build cathedrals.

THE SUICIDE (El Suicida)

Underneath the open Bible—where he had underlined in red the verse that would explain everything—he placed the letters: to his wife, to the judge, and to his friends. After that he drank the poison and went to bed.

Nothing. After an hour he got up and looked at the bottle. Yes, it was poison. He was quite certain! He increased the dose, and drank it again. He went back to bed. Another hour passed. He still didn't die. Then he fired his revolver against his temple. What kind of a joke was this? Someone—but who, and when?—had substituted water for the poison, and blank cartridges for the bullets. He fired the last four bullets against his temple. Still nothing. He closed the Bible, picked up the letters, and left his room while the owner of the hotel, the servants, and those who were curious, were all speaking with alarm about the sound of gunshots.

When he got home he found that his wife had been poisoned and his five children were lying on the floor, each one with a bullet hole in their temple.

He went into the kitchen to get a knife, then he uncovered his belly and began to stab himself. The blade sunk into the soft flesh and came right out again, but his flesh immediately recovered its smoothness, like the water after catching a fish.

He poured gasoline on his clothing, but the matches went out before he could set them on fire.

He ran out on the balcony and, before jumping off it, in the street below he could see a group of men and women who were bleeding from their stomachs after being stabbed, surrounded by the flames of the city which was burning.

THE GRIMOIRE (El Grimorio)

Finally! No more classes, no more exams... Free, finally free, from December until March!

As he left the Department of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of Buenos Aires, he felt like greeting the midday sun with cries of joy.

He restrained himself.

That would have been strange, no?... the sight of a Professor—a Professor of Ancient History—getting worked up there, on the staircase of Viamonte 430, like some student.

So instead of shouting, Rabinovich gave a sigh and started walking down the street, with his long vacation stretching out before him.

This academic year had been more difficult than ever. Courses. Conferences. A book about Flavius Josephus, that he had just finished. And before he had finished that book he had had to deal with a raft of problems and controversies caused by the unexpected discovery, in 1947, of some scrolls in caves near the Dead Sea. There was never any respite. When could a historian ever be satisfied with what he knows? Once again he found he would have to study! Always studying and studying...

There was no way to escape it. And the frustrating thing was that the more he worked, the more he felt the need to fill all the gaps. It was a matter of nerves. Yes, because his nerves were something he could not control.

He must take care of his health. He must not touch a sheet of paper. He should rest. Then, he should spend some time in the mountains of Cordoba... Yes, that's what he should do. What a great idea! The first thing he should do was go to the station in Retiro and find out what was the best time to catch a train to Cordoba.

He started out on Reconquista, went down to Leandro Alem, and then, as he looked at the front of the shops, he happened to see an old bookstore.

That was odd; he hadn't seen it before. He wasn't sure—after all, he had gone down this road only a few times—but he didn't remember seeing it. He went inside.

The bookshelves climbed up the walls all the way to the ceiling; they were so full they looked like they might collapse. In the middle were several tables with craters of paper; lava spilled out of them and fell on the floor in disorderly heaps. The tables were marked "one peso," "two pesos," "three pesos." Rabinovich hesitated. His desire to find something made him put his fingers underneath the heaps and feel for hidden openings. There was something sensuous, voluptuous, in that furtive caress. Books, leaflets, and parts of books. Unexpectedly, his hand yanked out a book. It was just that, on seeing this huge book, he had misjudged its weight; he had tensed the muscles of his arm and pulled as hard as he could. But it didn't weigh anything! The hefty volume had begun flying through the air like a bird. The cover was black; although it was rather dirty, it shined like it was new. He opened the tome in the middle and saw that it was a notebook without separate lines, the pages covered with letters. "My God!" exclaimed Rabinovich. "Are my eyes playing tricks on me?" Because he couldn't make heads nor tails of these letters. They were letters from the Latin alphabet, yes. But no separation, no capitals, and no punctuation. Was this a manuscript of some unknown language? Not likely. There weren't any languages that were unknown to Rabinovich. Besides, the consonants mostly came together in such a way that no human throat would be able to pronounce them. The excellent calligraphy seemed to be from the lower case Carolingian letters of the ninth century. The lack of separation between the letters made it look like it was even older. But Rabinovich could see that the fluidity of the writing was modern. He himself could have written like that. Yes. It was almost like his own writing. Almost? It was his own writing! Or at least, his own hand could have written it... if he had wished. He thumbed through the pages, and that way he found that the whole manuscript was a nonsensical collection of letters on something that was not paper. At any rate, not a type of paper that Rabinovich had ever seen. It was evidently of some material that was resistant to decay. And in fact, although the pages had been handled, they were still intact. Rabinovich tried to dig his thumbnail into a page, but was not able to; the page, as

light as a feather, was still as indestructible as marble. The ink that was so black seemed to be soaked in light. Some secret chemical, Rabinovich thought. He tried to find the title, or the name of the author. Not possible; the manuscript started right away with the body of writing. He studied the book while it was opened in the middle, looking at some parts of the text. Could there be a familiar sign that would indicate at least one word, and show the linguistic family it belonged to? No. The letters of our Latin alphabet spread out like a string of ants:

...ixkqrtvsajzultxvobgaretlspbqooocidhmfewgy...

As a child, Rabinovich had had the impression that when you closed a book, the letters came out of their niche and mixed together; then when you opened it, they formed a line so quickly that the eye saw them in the right order again. Now Rabinovich had the same impression, in reverse. And what if the book made sense when it was closed, but when you opened it, the terrified letters just jumbled together any old way? Rabinovich didn't believe in magic, of course. Why would he? So he looked for a plausible explanation. Could it be a cryptogram? Yes, perhaps there was some system in the strange way the letters were mixed in this jigsaw puzzle. A cryptogram based on the principle of substitution, that is, that each letter is replaced by another; or a mixed cryptogram, or that some letters were substituted and others rearranged... What a mess! Would it be worth the bother, Rabinovich wondered, to buy a notebook and rack one's brains? If it was a cryptogram, and that remained to be seen, you would have to sort the letters, and groups of letters, according to the frequency with which they appeared, you would have to calculate the proportion of vowels and consonants, and you would have to find some key word and the shape of the square where it was placed... A task for Edgar Allan Poe, but not for him. Beside the fact that not even Poe would have deciphered these pages, since it was clear that the author was not using any geometrical diagrams, nor was he leaving any space between one word and another. And in what language was it written? And what if it was written in several different languages? What if there were several different codes? And the possibility for mistakes! No, don't even think about it. With hundreds of good books to read, why waste your time with such nonsense? That would be crazy... What he ought to do is rest. He had already decided that. Sleep more. Eat more. And not touch a single sheet of paper. Rest, and go to Cordoba. Relax his nerves. Wasn't that his plan? The devil take this notebook!

He threw it away, and started toward the street. "However..." He turned around and looked back at the notebook from a distance. He went back and picked it up, and slowly began to examine it, unenthusiastically. However... what if it turned out that this was some important work in code, a sort of *Diary* of Samuel Pepys? Of course, it could be only a joke, like that of Balzac with his fake cryptogram in *La Physiologie du Mariage*.

He was attracted by the thought that some strange person might have wanted to write *against the norm*, with the sole purpose of *not* conjoining the letters in any of the words of worldwide literature. Jonathan Swift, in *Voyage to Laputa, Balnibardi, Luggnagg, Glubbudbrid and Japan*, in order to make fun had invented a combinative machine of all the words of a language. With so many changes, along with some absurdities, the machine produced the perfect phrases for a definitive encyclopedia. And where was it that Rabinovich had read that some English mathematicians had calculated the time in

which some monkeys striking the keys of a typewriter would, along with much nonsense and gibberish, be able to write nothing less than the complete works of Shakespeare? In effect, he thought that if someone created an automatic printer that would print line after line, and in each line a different combination of letters and signs of our language, it would be possible that in time it would write all that had been written, and was going to be written. So, what if some joker might have amused himself by composing only the lines that were absolutely unintelligible, like this automatic printer would write? A book in reverse, an anti-book, a sort of writing in gibberish, more radical than the Dadaism of Tristan Tzara, or the Lettrism of Isidore Isou. Letters without limits, letters-letters, like pure material...

Rabinovich was trying to decide whether he would keep the big book or not, when his eyes happened to fall on the first letters of the first page, and he noticed that the letters were separated. And he could read it. What a surprise! He could read it because the letters were... in Spanish! How could it be that a book written without rhyme or reason, or at any rate in some unknown language, would start out in Spanish? Well... perhaps the manuscript, although coming from some remote country, had an introduction in Spanish. For that country, Spanish would be a language as esoteric as Greek is for us. The fact is that Rabinovich was mystified. He was as mystified as if, on finding a mass of letters, the first thing he saw was an entire proverb. This is what Rabinovich read:

“Reader, my companion on this journey, how far will you follow me? The more you try to read me the more you will understand the history, mine and also yours. But you won’t get very far. Although you read and read, you will die before you finish this book. It’s good that you know that: because here you have a story that never ends. It’s my life. I am Joseph Cartaphilus, Battedeus, Juan d’Espera en Dios, Ahasuerus, Sieur de Montague, Israel Jobson, Hareach... These names do not tell you anything? They have given me many others. Perhaps this one will tell you more: I am the Wandering Jew.”

Jacob Rabinovich had the feeling that his eyes, while they were jumping like a cricket and looking over the lines, were leaving behind the useless letters (like when a man is walking while eating a bunch of grapes and throws away the skins, the stems, and the seeds). In fact, after reading “I am the Wandering Jew,” he wanted to go back and reread the group of names and found only a string of meaningless letters. There, where he had read words in Spanish, was now only this string of letters where the text had been:

...hgjxkoalcqsifduphmrzynuze...

Strange. Very strange. He looked for what had been the first letter. The “R.” It was like pressing the switch of an electric appliance. Suddenly, out of that “R,” came a glow of intelligence, and all became clear again, in separated words:

Reader, my companion on this journey...

Rabinovich understood, in a flash. Yes, it was necessary to keep on reading, without stopping, without going back, to keep reading and reading until one one’s eyes closed. Any book has a bit of magic. Isn’t it already magic how the hypnotic power of some pages makes us live the way they want us to? But the magical letters of this book of

moveable and capricious letters was from another world. Frightened by his discovery, Rabinovich squeezed the book with both hands as if it were a box full of flies (the kind of flies that feed on carrion), and he was afraid that they would escape.

He heard that someone was saying quietly behind him:

“Has the gentleman found something of interest?”

He turned around. It was the bookseller.

“Yes, it was from the table for three pesos,” he said showing him the big book, while giving him the money. “Is there any other book like this one?”

No, there wasn’t.

Rabinovich went away with the feeling that he had stolen a great treasure. There must be four hundred pages. He could read that many in six hours. Why then had the author said: “you won’t get very far. Although you read and read, you will die before you finish this book”?

Let’s suppose—Rabinovich thought, walking down the street—that it actually is the autobiography of the Wandering Jew, but how could he tell it with so few pages? Unless it was the first volume of a series. He looked at the final page. No, there was nothing indicating that the manuscript would continue. The writing went to the bottom of the page, filling it until the final space: ...aqkwlxdfoezivtpaa

He changed his mind and, instead of going to the station, he turned back and headed for his house. In the middle of the crowd of people he opened the book again and fixed his eyes on the first letter, the “R,” and the thread began to to expand. “Don’t lose the thread,” his teacher used to tell him. He always lost it, and now he lost it again. It was because while he was walking he changed the position of the book, or because someone bumped his arm, and when his eyes reached the last word of a line, he wasn’t able to go on reading the next line. Everything froze once more: ...xrtipkvujfuloprsmtiacsalug... Once again pandemonium, a pot of crickets, a totum revolutum (a total chaos)... Patience! Also, what a foolish thing to do, trying to walk down San Martin street while he was reading!

He closed the book and put it under his arm. He still couldn’t get the book out of his mind, however. He thought about the way the author—“I am the Wandering Jew,” he had said—was writing like a contemporary. The words seemed to be spoken by someone at his side. More: it was as though Rabinovich himself were saying them. In a way, it was better that way. Although, Rabinovich thought, it could be that the Wandering Jew had written his memories during different periods of his life. In that way, it would have been written in one single book, in the successive styles of literature. A museum, with a room for each way of writing. How interesting it would be to pass from one period to another and study the changes of phrasing, from the prose of Prince Don Juan Manuel, to that of Jorge Luis Borges! Just imagine the spectacle of seeing a sea of phrases rippling through the “currente calamo (Latin for “running pen”) of an immortal author! But no, in what Rabinovich had read he had not noticed any stylistic peculiarity, although he would have liked to... It was the prose that he, Rabinovich, could write. But wait a minute!, what if that was precisely what it was? Since the entire manuscript was supernatural, perhaps it also included this magic: for him, it was written in Spanish, for an Englishman it would be in English, for a Frenchman in French... He tried that. He opened the book to the first page and imagined the soul of an Englishman (Reader, my companion on this journey), and the soul of a Frenchman (Lecteur, companion de voyage). Yes, that was it.

He could read it in all the languages that he knew. And in Hebrew? No, unfortunately. The letters of the Latin alphabet only are read from left to right. He was not able to do that in the opposite direction, just like he couldn't make his blood flow the opposite way. While he wandered, the Wandering Jew had not thought in Hebrew. At any rate, it would not be possible to recognize the style of the period when the Wandering Jew was writing, because each reader would read it in his own way of speaking when it was translated. Were there as many different texts as there were readers? Could two people never read the same thing? "Okay, why worry about it?" Rabinovich said to himself. "Aren't all books like that? The language itself doesn't exist; only those who speak exist. And the same with a book; it's only a mass of symbols until someone starts to read it. It is the reader who gives the existence of a book to a complicated text.

He climbed up the stairs of the apartment house where he lived and locked himself in his room. It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon. He sat down in his easy chair and tried to think of the text that he knew now almost by memory, starting with "Reader, my companion on this journey." Then he continued. And, feeling like a child who has fallen off a bicycle several times, who suddenly sees he can ride it and keeps on pedaling in an unknown direction, forgetting he is on a bike while feeling the joy of balance and the speed with which he is traveling through an adventure, Rabinovich continued reading past the words he had seen before and started racing through all the symbols that cleared up like fog:

"I was born in the little town of Galilee, on the same day that Jesus was born. Our mothers were neighbors, and Jesus, as well as his brothers and sisters, were my childhood playmates. After I had grown up, I moved to Jerusalem, and soon after that Jesus came there to preach. I saw the way they judged him, condemned him, and crucified him. His life inspired a great myth; mine, a laughable legend. Nevertheless, my life was extraordinary, and I am going to tell you about it."

As it continued, the manuscript spoke ironically about the paradoxical fate of both Jesus and the Wandering Jew. Jesus, who was closely related to his country Judea, came to be the head of a religion that was not Jewish, and even anti-Jewish. The Wandering Jew, on the other hand, appeared to be the living incarnation of Judaism, even though he had never believed in the Torah.

"Because I came from a family of Gentiles in Galilee who were converted to Judaism by the fanatical power of the Maccabees, I was skeptical about religion ever since I was a child. Secretly, I mocked the aristocratic Sadducees, the Pharisees and their cult of the Law, and the Prophets, as well as many sects that flourished in the heat of the desert. One of these dissident sects was that of the Essenes. My father had become acquainted with them in Qumran, on the shores of the Dead Sea. And I knew some of the Essenes who traveled around freely, John the Baptist, for example. They were celibates, and ascetics. They practiced the rites of baptism and communion. Their leader was a Master of Righteousness who preached love, and talked about the end of the world, and also about the salvation of those who were worthy of God. During the Roman domination, one

of those Masters of Righteousness, “the chosen of God,” was stripped naked, flogged, and martyred; after that they waited for him to return from the dead and heap judgement on men. I scoffed at all of that. I scoffed at the idea that in each generation the sectarians tried to use the pretense of “the chosen of God” for a different living person, always with the hope they would find the true Master. I also scorned the exaggerations of Jesus, which were so similar to the apocalyptic literature of Judaism, and I foresaw that they would eventually use the same pretense with him.

A bird flew onto the balcony and began to warble. Rabinovich didn't pay any attention to it. He recognized an enemy in that bird. He already knew that something or someone would try to interrupt him. The world demands full attention. The world doesn't respect the right of anyone who shuts himself away. The world punishes the arrogant race of readers. It threatens, it distracts, it stretches out its tentacles and yanks the self-absorbed person outside of himself. Rabinovich didn't pay any attention. And the Wandering Jew continued explaining Christianity to him.

Speaking of Jesus, he said the idea of starting a new religion never entered his head. What he was doing was making an effort to maximize Jewish teachings: that the present world is only an insignificant transition to a future world; that the Messiah had arrived; and that God was His Father in Heaven... When Jesus was detained, his disciples were confused and discouraged, and they dispersed. But in the void that Jesus left behind, there was hope that he would return. The traditions spoke of the dead who came back. Why should Jesus not be one of those dead? The character of Jesus had fascinated them. Some people hallucinated and therefore believed they had seen him reappear. So the rebirth of faith in Jesus led people to the belief in his resurrection. The myth went from mouth to mouth. The Jews of the diaspora—uprooted from Palestine, influenced by foreign customs, weak in their religious understanding, and influenced by Greek philosophy or the pagan customs of the place where they were living—took the radical ideas of Jesus literally, or they interpreted them wrongly. Jesus was considered the Messiah who came to redeem, not just the oppressed Jews, but the entire human race. It was thought that the crucifixion was the will of God, and of Jesus, who wanted to wash away the original sin of Adam and save men from the evils of Satan. Jesus, the Messiah, was resurrected and went to heaven to sit at the right hand of God, His father. Thus, Jesus was identified with the Logos, and was deified. Jesus was expected to return at the Final Judgement and establish the Kingdom of Heaven. People prayed to Jesus just like they prayed to God, and eventually his mother, The Virgin Mary, who had conceived him with the help of the Holy Spirit, and would be seen as the intercessor to God.

Rabinovich smiled as he was reading about these Catholic superstitions. He smiled because the Wandering Jew must have also smiled when he described them. If only his students could read this book! In his classes he had often insinuated something similar to this, but he had never dared to say it as clearly as this.

Fifty years after Jesus' death—the manuscript continued—when they wrote about him, Jesus is no longer Jesus: he is Christ. He is seen from the point of view of a new religion that is careful in what it says, that tries to correct itself, and is filled with dogmas. The effort to write about Jesus signified a change; for those who had heard Jesus, why write about Him if they were already persuaded that the world could no longer wait to create

posterity? But Christians, who saw what the world was like, prudently decided to fill the gaps of a tradition that was becoming more and more broken so it wouldn't be forgotten. The epistles of Paul (who never knew Jesus) and the Gospels (compiled, on the basis of fragmented memories at the end of the first century, and at the beginning of the second by those who never knew Jesus, nor lived in Palestine, or wrote in its language, or had anything personal to say) documented the history of Christianity, but not that of Jesus. If we were to sort out everything that had been written about Christ by pagans, Jews, and Christians, there would not be a single drop of truth about Jesus. But still, how ennobling this vision of faith had become! It had invented a Jesus-Christ, a Messiah-Savior, a Man-God. "In contrast, those who wrote about me, although they too never told things as they had been, were eager to belittle me and defame me." They said he, the Wandering Jew, had mocked Jesus (some versions even added that he had struck him) when he was walking to Calvary, carrying the cross on his shoulder. "Go on, keep moving, walk, faster, faster, keep moving." And Jesus turned to him and said, "I am moving on, but you will wait for me until I return; I will rest, but you will keep traveling." And in fact God had condemned the Wandering Jew to travel through the world until the Final Judgement. That false accusation (and how false it was!; the good Jesus never spoke ill of anyone) has been preserved, along with many other variations. During the period of the Crusades, the thought of so many people wandering revived the memory of the Wandering Jew. In Italy, especially, the stories multiplied. From that came the first written versions. Soon the topic began to appear in other parts of Europe; for example in England, by Roger of Wendover, in his *Flores Historiarum* (1228).

The Wandering Jew took great pleasure in all the most imaginary details.

For instance, the supposition that he, a Jew, had converted to Christianity in order to placate Jesus when he comes back to straighten out these stories... (If the Jew, Jesus, returned, he would be the first to be surprised to encounter a Christian!)

The idea that he would never be able to spend more than three days in the same place, the three days that had passed between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. (But there never was a Resurrection!)

That he could never return to the same place. (On a planet the size of ours, how could it happen that someone traveling for centuries would not follow the same path?)

That, if he was locked up, he would have to continue walking around the walls of his cell. (What a pity that the legend didn't go on to mention the final consequences of this *perpetuum mobile*! How interesting it would have been, for example, to talk about the infinite possibilities of the movement of a body in a confined space!)

That every hundred years he would again go back to the age at which he had offended Jesus. (What poor imagination, that of folklore! The truth was more poetic; he grew old without ever ceasing to be more than thirty-three years old...)

Then, (and this was even more ridiculous!), he had decided to become a shoemaker in order to be able have enough shoes during all the time that he would need them...

"All this," Rabinovich thought, "is certainly unusual. The protagonist of a legend who is evaluating the legend himself, with a bibliography and everything!" The book seemed to be talking like a person, and Rabinovich could almost hear him breathing. Just like before when he heard the obvious laughter of the Wandering Jew, he now seemed to hear his voice full of sarcasm, as he referred to the variations introduced into the legend by the German Protestants. Because, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the things

written about the Wandering Jew were not anti-Semitic. Rather, they described him as a repentant sinner who was kind-hearted, quiet, and serious. But the Protestant Reform in Germany took advantage of this legend to persecute the Jews, as perverse followers of the Anti-Christ. One of these anti-Semitic pamphlets appeared in Danzig, in 1602: *Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus*. It was soon translated into French, English, Danish, Swiss, and Flemish... And it gave the image of the Wandering Jew, with a grey beard and hair that was tousled by the wind, who was unhappy, ragged, disagreeable, resentful, and complaining.

Two hours went by, and as he was about to turn a page, his eyes almost got off track. At least he had been able to keep track of the time! But he was going to have to be more careful about how he used his fingers.

Now—he continued reading—some writers began to wonder about all the things that the Jew must have seen in his travels and to indicate, as well as possible, when and where he appeared, using this to satirize the customs of each place, as in *The Wandering Jew Telling Fortunes to Englishmen* (1640) by E. Malone.

And even more (here Rabinovich noticed a tone of complacency, if not flattery): the Wandering Jew had become a citizen of the world who was refined, knowledgeable, cultured, impartial, and a master of History and Philosophy. His ubiquity was giving him a reputation of omniscience. (They even imagined that an angel carried the Wandering Jew on a tour through the sky, using all this as a pretext for a lesson in astronomy!) This occurred in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, when there was a great interest in history, and in journeys to distant places. In the *Mémoires du Juif Errant*, in 1777, for example, they tried to make him cultured, and well educated. In order to do that, the writers of the Enlightenment emptied his soul and filled it with their own ideas about the world. The romantics of the nineteenth century did the same thing, except that they loaded it with poignancy. Here the manuscripts compared *Le Juif Errant* (1844-45) of Eugène Sue with the anonymous *Historia completa y auténtica de Isaac Ahasverus, conocido con el nombre de El Judío Errante* (Madrid, 1845) and with *Chronicles selected from the originals of Cartaphilus, the Wandering Jew* (1858) of David Hoffman.

Then came the modernists who created literature, fantastic literature, with the theme of the Wandering Jew (Ruben Dario, et al).

Rabinovich heard a loud noise in the street, and he contracted like a tortoise into his shell of reading. He understood that this noise was another ploy of the world to make him go out on the balcony. Before it was a bird; now it was cars crashing into each other. There was angry shouting, and honking... Oh, the world. What would the next trick be? Maybe a fire in the apartment building? Or something else?

“This autobiography of mine,” the Wandering Jew went on, “tries to undo all of those accumulated falsehoods. Now is the time for the world to know the truth.” The truth is that it was wrong to associate the crucifixion of Jesus with the immortality of the Wandering Jew. They were similar events, perhaps also related, but just the same they were still different. Jesus, in the natural world; the Wandering Jew in the supernatural.

And so after this long preamble, the Wandering Jew began to tell how God had granted him immortality.

Without ceasing to read, Rabinovich adjusted the cushion and changed his posture. He was beginning to sympathize more and more with the Wandering Jew. He also imagined his face, his gestures, and his way of walking, all of them similar to Rabinovich himself.

The Wandering Jew, who denied the divinity of Jesus, said that he, on the other hand, did have some traces of divinity. Immortality wasn't the only thing. And the fact that he shared something with God was why he had the ability to write an endless magic book. The relations he had with Jesus were friendly, but he had never admired him. Ever since he was a child, Jesus seemed to him to be naïve, simple hearted, and very imaginative. But when Jesus began to preach, he couldn't help being scornful of his optimism. Jesus felt himself to be the herald of the Kingdom of God on earth, the nuncio of a new order that was just and joyful. It was necessary to prepare oneself morally to be worthy of the the time when God would come to banish Satan and his devils. And the way to prepare yourself was to love, and to love unceasingly. "I," the manuscript said, "was amused on hearing such enthusiasm, and the blind confidence Jesus had in the things he heard in the Synagogue of our little town in Galilee." He felt sorry for him when he saw him pass by with the cross on his shoulder. Sorry; that was all. It was sorrow for the futility of his sacrifice. No, Jesus was not "the man favored by God." God, the Wandering Jew said, never favored any man. And the manuscript went on:

"It was then that God ignited my immortality with one of His sparks. It was not a gift. Oh, no! He made me immortal, but in such a way that, instead of honoring me, men loathed me because of it. He made me immortal, but not insensitive to pain, so that I had to hide myself and flee in order to escape the persecution and the torments of Christians. Why did God choose me? Why me, a childhood friend of Jesus who felt sorry when he saw him suffer pointlessly? I don't know. Perhaps because only the agnostics seem intelligent enough for God to want to talk to them? Probably God did not intend to hurt me, but when he took interest in me, it made me hateful in the eyes of my brothers. Did He want a man like me to be a witness of all that men do so that at least someone would understand the sad state of humanity, and impossibility of the Kingdom of God on earth? Was he trying to justify Himself for his lack of attention to human affairs? Or did he want me to be a chronicler of those affairs? Did he want me, a Jew, to see the extinction of Judaism and prove that what they now call Judaism is something else, that the Israel of today has only a mythical relation with the one of the past? I don't know. And if I hope for something, it is not the return of Jesus—who cannot return—but the revelation of why God chose me as an immortal."

At that point Rabinovich had a minor distraction. As he turned the page, he noticed there were only a few more pages until the book ended. So soon? How could that be? Was the book going to end before the Wandering Jew would begin to talk about his trips around the world? It was a small distraction, but he almost raised his eyes from the text. He had a feeling of vertigo like someone who is hanging from somewhere up high, whose hands start to weaken, and is afraid he is going to fall. He desperately fixed his eyes on the letters. A little more, and the manuscript would become unintelligible once again. Frightened by the danger that he had just been in, he tried to concentrate. He had to force himself because he remembered that, at the beginning, the book had said he would die before he was able to finish it. And he was now about to finish it. Feeling afraid of dying, he still kept on reading determinedly, word after word. After a few moments he

reached the final page. Was the history of the Wandering Jew going to end here without being complete? Here is the final paragraph:

“Now, reader, be very careful. This book is eternal, like I am. Like me, it goes on with twists and turns. Just as soon as you finish these lines, open the book on the first page again, and keep your eyes on it. If you interrupt what you are doing here, what you have read will have been wasted.”

Rabinovich gathered his strength and his eyes quickly jumped from the last word of the manuscript to the first—like a tight-rope walker—and saw the same line which before had said : “Reader, my companion on this journey,” now said something different; now the Wandering Jew continued his narrative and described how everyone else was growing old, while he remained as young and active as always. He had tried to hide that by not being careful about how he was dressed, by slowing his steps while walking, and even whitening his hair; but people continued to talk about the youthful smoothness of his skin, and the sparkle in his eyes. For that reason, he had to change from one city to another. In the year 70, the Roman legions of Titus besieged and then destroyed the city of Jerusalem. “I was driven out like other Jews, including those who were Christians,” the manuscript continued. “I thought then that the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem was only a mere episode in Jewish history. As the years went by, I realized that it had also affected Christianity, because instead of establishing itself in Jerusalem, which was its natural center, it moved to Rome where it changed into an ambitious body which was violent and corrupt.” The Wandering Jew emigrated from Palestine, first to Babylon, and then to Egypt. In each place he was miraculously able to speak fluently in the native language.

A wave of interest began to wash over him, and it raised his spirits. Rabinovich kept on reading. Not long after that, however, someone rang the doorbell.

Without responding, Rabinovich held back a grimace of impatience, and fixed his eyes even more strongly on the words, fearful that if he didn't, the text would vanish. Another ring. And another. No, he would not open the door; he would not! He focused his eyes even more deeply into the words. He would not open. But he heard a noise; someone was sliding something under the door. A rustle of papers. Of course, it must be the mail. Dona Maria, the concierge, was bringing him the mail. Letters, but from whom? He was not able to avoid it, and he raised his eyes and looked toward the door. When he tried to read again the words were no longer there; only a jumble of nonsense. A bunch of scribbles that did not say anything. Now he would have to start again from the first letter. What bad luck! Well, there was no longer any choice. He got up and went to pick up the letters. Only they weren't letters; advertisements, a brochure, and a postcard... And for that he had lost his place?

On the other hand, maybe it was good that he was interrupted. Anyway, he wouldn't have been able to go on much longer. He was getting tired. He hadn't eaten, and he felt listless. Before becoming engrossed in the reading once more, it would be best to prepare himself for the long literary journey. Reading this book would be like reading a library of innumerable volumes. Yes, he must prepare himself. First of all, he had to eat. He needed to arrange his life so that he would be able to soldier on for many days, and then launch himself into the reading. And get a good night's sleep. The next day, with a fresh

start, he would open the book and, like someone who follows the tracks of a bird on the wet ground, he would follow the trail of the Wandering Jew.

He left the large book on the desk, and went out into the street. He smiled ironically on seeing the commercial advertisements about the celebration of Christmas. In front of a shop window where there was an exhibit of the Child and the Three Kings, his smile spread across his lips, as if it were the Wandering Jew that was smiling.

He needed something to eat; then he would begin to organize the things he would need for the task ahead. He bought a long list of things: bread, milk, chocolate bars, coffee, sandwiches, fried chicken, and fruit. In the pharmacy he bought aspirins in case he had a headache, a solution of boric acid to dry his eyes, and Benzedrine so that he wouldn't fall asleep. In the store he bought two thermoses: for the coffee, and for the soup.

He returned to his room loaded down with parcels. He distributed things so that he would be able to use them without stopping to read. He tried. Yes, it would work. He could move around the room and do what was needed without interrupting what he was reading. It wasn't difficult. Can't a blind man take care of himself? Using your eyes only to read is a kind of blindness, but not total. The difficult thing was not get distracted. He tried the most demanding things again. Perfect. He would have been able to open the door and take the mail from Dona Maria, all without missing a word. Then, do the most complicated things, with the delicacy of a sleepwalker.

He went to bed, turned off the light, and began to think about the strange thing that had happened to him. Thinking about the book gave him even more pleasure than reading it.

How long would he be able to read at a stretch? A day, two days? Supposing he was able to read for a whole week, where would he go with the Wandering Jew? Another thing: was the manuscript finished? If he, Rabinovich were able to read it numberless times, would he reach the point where it ended? What would happen then? Maybe the book would recover the form of a heterogeneous language. Or maybe it kept repeating itself like a phonograph disc. Then he had a sudden realization. Why hadn't he thought about this other possibility? What if the book was writing itself? That is, couldn't it be that the immortal Wandering Jew was supernaturally living inside the book and, wherever he was, was writing about his thoughts from a distance? Telecommunication, or perhaps tele-writing. In that case, what a great spectacle! A reader with extraordinary resistance and quickness in the art of reading would catch up with the Wandering Jew. The book, once it was read in all of its cycles, would be blank; and now the reader would see the new letters flourish, still fresh and damp, after emerging out of nothing. Like God is able to read everything that we human beings write.

Rabinovich went to sleep thinking about these ideas.

The next morning he ate a good breakfast, took another look at the things he had placed around the house, and sat down in his armchair. The chair was about to set off on a long, magical journey. Like a Time Machine. With his mind full of emotion, he said goodbye to the room. He opened the book and sank like a leech into that vein of feeling, starting once again with the first line. Rereading was hard. He recognized the phrases. He felt a temptation to jump past them. But he had to resign himself to read like a proofreader who is reading the draft of a printed article, word after word, even though he is not interested in what he is reading. However, in spite of this, he was greeted with another surprise: some of the words told him things he had not read the first time. After several hours he was completely immersed in the freshness of this revised narrative.

The Wandering Jew continued the account of his journeys. He imagined the satirical laughter when he spoke of the struggle between the Jewish Torah and the Christian idea of heresy, heresy coated with Hellenism and loaded with Romanism. The only cross that the Jew seemed to respect were those at the crossroads he passed through during his journey. Because, for him, each passing eventually led to an intersection of paths. But, at the same time, he did not seem to feel any respect for the Chosen People. Evidently, as he was traveling, he ceased to consider himself a Jew. When he spoke of the desperate struggle of the Hebrews in Babylon against the invading armies of Trajan in the year 115, he showed no sympathy whatsoever. He spoke of the Synagogues that were destroyed in Asia Minor, in Egypt, in China, and in Alexandria, with an irritating coldness. The Bar Kokhba Rebellion in Palestine, in the year 132, and its catastrophic defeat three years later, seemed to convince him that Judaism was completely eliminated. After that he referred to the Jews scattered through the world as if they were stubborn, unhappy and messianic custodians of a sectarian relic, of a national myth, of an extinct civilization. His comments on the formation of Jewish wisdom—the Mishnah, the Gemara, and the Talmud—indicated that the Wandering Jew was familiar with what happened in the Synagogues from the third century to the fifth; but it was evident that he laughed at the scholars of Judea (Tannaim) as well as those in Babylon (Amoraim). And not only did he laugh at the emptiness of Judaism—a mere repertoire of laws and commandments—but he also laughed at its flowery mysticism.

It also irritated Rabinovich that the Wandering Jew mocked both Christians and Jews and treated them like fools cut from the same cloth. By the time he reached this point of the narrative, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. And did that matter to the Wandering Jew? Not a bit. According to what he said, he was “making some scientific experiments.” He expressed his irony when he heard that Julian the Apostate intended to rebuild Jerusalem! When a servant of Theodosius told him that the Christians planned to abolish the patriarchy in Palestine, he shrugged his shoulders. Yes, the Wandering Jew had definitely ceased to be a Jew. Outside Judea, the religious power of the Jews had become lost among the forgotten minorities of the world. The Wandering Jew, also forgotten, did not feel himself to be member of the Jewish society. He traveled through Babylon, Persia, Syria, and to Mecca. Rabinovich read with disgust that the Wandering Jew (who had met Mohamed) summed up the Koran and the Bible with the cold courtesy of a collector of myths. Journeys through Italy, France, Germany, and Spain... He seemed to purposely try to avoid the great events of the world; didn't he almost miss out on the First Crusade?

By now Rabinovich's eyes were burning. Burning like two lighted candles. He had passed through the lines of letters as if they were catacombs. What fatigue! He had eaten without being distracted. He had also left the room without stopping to read. When he reached the place where the Wandering Jew was describing his unpleasant discussion with Maimonides, Rabinovich had to take another Benzedrine pill. But his exhaustion was so great that he was beginning to get discouraged. How long was this going to last? He wasn't able to look at the clock, only hear the rings. He had lost track of the time. He couldn't tell if it was day or night. Nor what day it was. He felt like the book was devouring him. He struggled against his discouragement, and his sleepiness. We have to struggle just to keep our heart beating, he thought. Tick-tock, tick-tock... If we get distracted, our heart would stop beating and we would die! So, for Rabinovich, the act of

reading was like a heart one must keep beating, word by word. How much he wanted to go to sleep! Sleepiness was becoming more burdensome, now that the Wandering Jew was breathing the rarefied air of the thirteenth century. Rarefied for him, Rabinovich, professor of ancient history; for him, Rabinovich, the Jew. He got more and more drowsy in this rarefied air. But he continued... for hours and hours... How many? He kept on, and on... with coffee, and Benzedrine...

He felt contaminated, and sick.

He couldn't keep going. He was desperate. The Wandering Jew was recalling the delightful conversation he had with Moses de Leon regarding the *Zohar*. He was talking about the Cabala, the combinations and permutations of letters, the series of symbols by which the "divine emissions" scaled up, the verbal lucubration of the universe. Rabinovich was sure that here, right here, was where the Wandering Jew was going to reveal the key to the magic alphabet that he had used in his manuscript. He made an effort. If he could only read five or ten more pages! But he couldn't do it; he couldn't. Now he was losing his strength, right on the threshold of the secret! At least one more page. But his eyes were closing. No, no! He forced himself to open them again but, alas, the light of the book had gone out. The meaningless flourishes stretched out, phantasmagorical, like garlands of scorched strands of hair, like charred cartridges after a display of fireworks. He uttered a curse. He slapped his forehead. He almost sobbed. Would he have to start all over again? He took a few staggering steps and fell into his bed, exhausted. His eyelids trembled painfully, but joyfully. How much time had he spent reading? Two days? Three days? That wasn't much. He would have gladly sold his soul to the Devil—like Faust—so that he could have kept on reading. Like Faust in reverse, in which the book mattered more than his life. Now he understood his mistake; he had tried to do a reading Marathon all by himself. He would try again. He would ask his friends to help, so that they could give him something to eat, take care of his eyes, administer drugs scientifically. With a doctor at his side. That is what you do when you're trying to break a record. And if he couldn't do it, maybe he should try to organize an international championship. A reader would get to 1492; another, to 1588...

He fell like a drop of lead into a well of velvet.

Before he lost consciousness he believed he, Rabinovich, was the Wandering Jew who was reading his own book; that with his eyes he was writing it and reading it at the same time; that he, in the end, was the protagonist, like in a detective novel—too perfect for anyone to even imagine it—where the assassin turned out to be... the reader himself

THE JOURNEY (El Viaje)

God had joined that young man with the land of Santiago del Estero: faded, timid, small with a profile of stone, but in reality soft, and about to fall apart like a clod of earth. Even the eyes, that were black without brightness or moisture, were expressionless in this earthy flesh. Under the cloudy sky it seemed like a little mountain of earth that a heavy rain would dissolve into mud.

One day they gave him a scholarship to go and study in the United States.

It would be the first time he had left Santiago.

His amazement on seeing the city of Buenos Aires was the first part of his amazing journey. And he was still going to see New York City! However, no one would have noticed his feelings; he was somber, motionless, and silent, as though he was made from sand. He had the determination of those who were poor; he was calm and collected.

In the United States embassy they asked him his name. Jacinto Lizarraga. His age? He said he was 20. His race? He knew nothing about races! "I don't know," he said. The clerk looked at the color of his skin and did not know what to write.

Lizarraga went to the seaport with his baggage, filled with emotion. There was an amazing number of ships. There were hoists and cranes coming and going, carrying their cargoes through the air. The gangway trembled over an oily strip of water. And the water pressing against the side of the dock soon began to stretch out, as the ship began to travel and started its journey!

And from that moment on, Lizarraga forgot about the boat and only paid attention to the water. He leaned on the rail, and as the sailors were moving noisily behind his back, he stared at the water with the watchful eyes of an otter. He saw the dark line of the Argentine coast, with the grim sight of the city of Buenos Aires. But he was filled with emotion at the sight of the Rio de la Plata with its dull grey waters, like the dry land of Santiago and, under the setting sun, golden and rosy like the naked skin of a Mestiza. Then, very early the next morning when he looked out, he saw the green water of the sea. For hours he contemplated its versatile surface. The blue sky up above, with its clouds and its seagulls, looked puny in comparison. The sky was hard... Only the water was fluid. Another day passed, and the water turned gray. Lizarraga kept his eyes on the waves: every once in a while one raised up and was filled with green glow, quick and agile, like a fish made of illuminated water. Until it began to rain; and seeing that the sea was unconcerned about the sky that reached down to touch it, and also unconcerned about the man, the boat, and God, he became concerned. But at midday the clouds broke open and in the distance, in the middle of the blue sea as blue as the jacket of a happy sailor, Lizarraga saw some green islands with palm trees standing on them. The boat sailed quietly between them and when it approached the Brazilian coast, the boat stopped, the anchor was dropped, and everything became quiet. Now the details were clearer; there were little houses squeezed around a church, or climbing up the side of a hill.

A blond sailor came and stood by Lizarraga and, while he smoked his pipe, he looked out at the view of the bay.

"Angra dos Reis, founded on the 6th of January in 1527," he said after a while. "We're going to be anchored here a few days. We have to load coffee, and the wharf is occupied by another boat. What do you say we take a swim? Tomorrow morning the barge will take the crew ashore."

Without being able to understand all of the sailor's English, but guessing what he meant, Lizarraga tried to put together a few English words and answered:

"I do not know how to swim. And I do not have a swimsuit."

The sailor chuckled:

"Even though you can't swim, the water here will make you float. The water is quiet and thick. Not even a suicidal person could drown here. And why do you need a swim suit? Dive in naked. Or with your underpants. What does it matter? And I can loan you some beach pants."

They dove in and swam toward the shore. Misery had eaten away everything, even the little bones of history. The view was colorful, but the people put out the light with their poor gray clothes, and each house looked like a tomb. Only the faces of the negroes were shining, but it was the shine of coffee and coal. Nature, not history.

Lizarraga and the sailor started walking. The sailor, red white and blue and carrying stars like a flag, was discourteous without realizing it, tossing coins at the impoverished children, laughing when they spoke to him in Portuguese. Lizarraga, silent and humble, like a vein in the soil of Santiago that had come out of the ground in Brazil and was astonished by the luxurious greenness of its vegetation, and the red ruts that downpours had made in the ground. After walking around for a while, they stopped among some banana trees, and through leaves they were able to see the sea shore; once again Lizarraga was surprised at the blue colors which, in Santiago, were exclusive gifts of the open air, but here they came down from the sky eagerly, so that the sky had become land, and the land had become sea.

On the beach there was a woman with a baby in her arms, two slender young girls, and a child with a bare bottom who ran into the sea when he saw it retreat, and then came back laughing, chased by the voracious mouth of a big wave.

The sailor went to the girls and began talking to them. They knew a little English and, since they were happy to have the chance to practice it, they accepted his friendly move. Lizarraga felt that his Spanish, although related to Portuguese, would isolate him from the girls like an indication of poverty, so he watched them in silence. The youngest was looking at the ocean wistfully. Then both of them went into a hollow in the beach and took off their clothes. The sailor, acting like he owned the sea, swam in the direction of the girls, sinking the prow of his tattooed body into the water. Lizarraga, feeling squalid and ugly, rushed into the water in order to hide himself. As he passed by the girls, he heard them laughing with the sailor; they were even laughing in English. He went out to where the waves were breaking. His feet were still able to touch the soft bottom, and his head rose out of the water. He did the only thing that he knew how to do; he plunged through the breaking wave and came out on the other side, floating silently like a stick of wood, far away from the girls, and free of the sailor. Little by little, he felt that the tension in his muscles was lessening. Now he was able to breathe normally, and the sea seemed to be breathing along with him, raising its immense chest of water, and then calming down. And it was exciting to be floating between those two immensities: the sea, and the sky. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the white shape of the moon rising; “on the other side of that heavenly sky,” he thought, “the bones of a great skeleton must be stretching out.” What a macabre idea! He almost started laughing, but restrained himself, since he was afraid that the weight of a smile on his face would make it sink under the water. And it did sink, because something like a tear covered it, and then entered into his open mouth. “Perhaps the tears of men are actually a hidden sea that has sunken into our eye sockets since the time we were fish, before the mammal, the bird, and the reptile,” he continued thinking. He rose up and down, up and down, caressed by the soft undulations of the sea, always looking up at the open sky. Ah, his body must have changed its position, because now he saw that clouds had begun to come out from behind the green waves. When the sun filled the whiteness of those that were highest, they seemed to be alive, and animated: “now they must be pushing me like the crack of a whip, all the way to Santiago!” he said to himself. And the top of the moon? It was still

there, but barely a little white cloud, vanishing in the distance. He closed his eyes. So many different sounds! The sounds of the sea, the sounds he was making himself. And he opened his eyes fearfully; he could no longer hear the shouts of the little boy with the bare bottom! The moon had disappeared, as though a blue wave had covered it, carrying it away to the bottom of the sky. He raised his head; there, far away, was the beach. The girls with the sailor were still there. The sea continued rising and falling, with the sound of its harsh breathing; Lizarraga was able to see the beach when he rose, then it disappeared from sight once more, and all that was around him was the sea and the sky. He lowered his legs and tried to stand up. But he then became frightened when his feet no longer were able to touch the bottom. He tried to swim toward the beach. Now then, how was it you were supposed to move when you swim?; arms and legs stretched out, then raise your arms and swing your legs, and splash your hands into the water. Yes, that was it. But he tried without being able to move forward; his arms and legs didn't seem to harmonize, and he got a cramp in his calf... Perhaps if he shouted... Perhaps if he yelled loud, really loud... He thought of how ridiculous that would sound on the beach, and the humiliation he would feel when he was rescued, with the sailor like a hero by the side of his mousy body... And the sea calmly lifted him (with the calmness of the hands of a conductor who was directing a barcarole during a concert) and when he was higher he could still make out the girls and the sailor. No, no... Why shout? His fatigue was winning out. Up, down; up, down; gently, slowly. And each time he rose, he looked at the coast like a spy. The sailor was standing up, looking like he was shouting. One of the girls (the one with the blue sea in her eyes) was motioning that he should come back. Lizarraga waved his arm, trying to signal that he was not able to... But how could they ever understand him? From the shore they must think he was happily floating on the tide, like a baby lying in a cradle. He waited for the next swell of the sea, and he saw that the sailor was shouting something again. He dropped down. And when he rose up again, all of them were leaving the beach. He was alone, for a long time. And his body was slowly dissolving in the sea like a lump of earth.

THE WALL (La Muralla)

The Dwarf sank his eyes into the wall. How thick, how soft! It wrapped around the four sides of the old building softly without squeezing; rather, it seemed to embrace the men who were walking through the patio with their hair cut short, and dressed in gray.

He noticed that the guards were watching him.

Were they suspicious?

The afternoon covered him like an immense wing. The light was an empty abyss! The clouds were offering their fluffy mattresses, but if you jumped over them they would tear apart like spider webs and your body would keep falling until it crashed into the hard, blue bottom of the sky. He dizzily lowered his vision, and huddled on the floor.

He was alone, always alone. Talk to the other prisoners? Do not even think about it: he was barely able to speak some broken Spanish. And even if he could speak, what would he say? They all knew it: he had killed someone. Why say anything?

Some bells were ringing (next to the prison was a church constructed by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century) and the Dwarf's heart was also beating. It was almost time! He got in line with the other men and went inside. After eating, he returned to his cell. As usual, a guard made sure the doors were locked. The lights were turned off. He waited for two hours. Then, in the silence of the night he started working. He made the blanket look like a body was sleeping under it. He crawled under the bed. He moved the floor mat. He removed a hook that was hidden between the springs of the mattress. He lifted up a piece of the floor. Not a sound! Yes, after five years he had learned how to work silently. He slipped through the hole. He felt around in the darkness and found his old clothes. He changed into them. He had let the guards get used to seeing him dirty, but not too much, or they would be suspicious. He picked up his tools, and a bag for removing the soil. Then he moved through the tunnel he had dug. What a pleasure it was to move like a snail, feeling the big shell of the building above his back! The tunnel was long now, and in each place he could imagine the walls, the rooms, and the corridors up above him. The other men had to work in the vegetable garden, or the workshops. He, on the other hand, was given inside jobs. And while he was coming and going, he was able to observe everything with the eyes of an architect. He moved along, smiling as he thought about the expression on the guard's face, if they found out. They weren't all that bad. They treated him better than anybody. Fools! Out of pity? Because he had the body of an eight-year-old boy? And what was bad about being a dwarf? He still had been more important than most normal men. And much happier, yes, definitely! A circus magician had picked him out, he couldn't remember how old he had been; what he did recall were the triumphant trips through Germany. That was the life! Hidden in baskets with a false bottom, under theater trap doors, or in the mouth of a talking crocodile of rubber and cardboard... They never showed him before an audience. The most they ever revealed was his head, like a human flower over a vase, inside a room of mirrors. Because he liked to deceive the public from his hideaways, but not make a spectacle of himself. The fatal moment was when his Jewish stepfather had to flee from Hitler's Germany and come to Argentina. And what a country Argentina was! Flat, open, and underpopulated. Through the windows on either side of the train, the round horizon was like a coin. And just knowing he would have to get off in that circle of flat land and walk around like a microbe exposed under the sun, made him feel ill. He closed his eyes, sickened by the Pampa. He would have gladly hidden in one of the magician's trunks. It was in Cordoba, in a vacation resort for retarded children, where they humiliated him for the first time. He complained and complained, but the impresario made him dress like a clown, and he was forced to walk around in front of the children spread out in the field like an infection in the grass. That same night he killed someone. Out of anger. Out of humiliation.

He continued moving through the tunnel, passing under a skylight where, on one side, he could see the patio illuminated by the moonlight and, on the other side, the blackness of a basement. He closed his eyes again. He didn't want to see the patio, and he didn't want to see the moon. Even the night air, that was like a balm for a wound the sun had opened, made him feel sick. When he looked up he felt stuck to the ground by his feet, hanging in space like a bat. He continued moving on. At one point the tunnel split in two. He had dug one of them two years ago but had to abandon it, because if he kept on, it would have ended up in the office of the Director. He kept moving through the other

one until he came to the point it stopped. He took out his tools and began digging. Once he had dug out a pile of earth, he would put it in the bag. After that he planned to pour it into the drain pipes and wash it through, little by little, until it came out of the window of the cell... Suddenly, he felt the earth collapse, and when he stuck out his hand, he felt a black emptiness that smelled like death. Where was he? His heart started beating so fast that it felt like his own body was collapsing inside of him; his entire body trembled like a catacomb. Could he have dug through a wall? How strange! He didn't remember any wall in this place. He calculated the distance. No. He was sure. According to his observations, he should be underneath the abandoned church. So what could this be? He used his belt to see if it touched anything, and heard the buckle hit the ground. Whatever it was, it couldn't be very deep. He let himself drop down on the other side. He couldn't see anything. Now at least he could walk standing up. He took a step. And another. If he only had some light! For the first time he needed light. With his hand, or his knees, or the soft bumps of his head, he had always been able to feel the edges of the tunnel he was digging. But now, on foot, he had lost contact. Where could he possibly be? He started walking with his arms extended. A wall. A wooden beam. He felt like shouting to see if the echo would help him measure the dimensions of this unexpected place. But what if someone heard it? He walked, and walked. For how long? One block? Two blocks? Could he be walking in a circle? He no longer even knew where the exit from his own tunnel was. It must be getting very late. He had always advanced like the minute hand of a watch; now on foot, he had lost his sense of time. The prudent thing would be to go back. Something told him, "Now or never." And he decided to climb upward, no matter where he came out. With a rag, he made a ball and threw it up at the ceiling. It struck something quickly. He dug some holes in the wall, so he could climb up to the top; once there, furiously and desperately, he began to dig and dig. His mouth was full of dirt. His hands ached. The dirt was moist, and it kept getting moister. He felt some roots. He also seemed to touch a worm. A blow from his pickaxe penetrated the surface, and clods of earth fell down all over his face. A breath of fresh air, smelling like mint. When he opened his eyes, he saw that he was coming out of the ground under the branches of a large bush. The foliage, strangely green at this hour, was intermixed with the soft light of the sky; silhouetted over the disc of the moon, each branch showed its thinness, each leaf its solitude. He peered out. The thick wall, bathed in the light of the moon, was just two paces behind him. On the horizon, the first light of dawn was showing. Careful now; up there in his look-out might be a sentry with a rifle on his shoulder. He calculated carefully. This time he would not fail. Finally, finally! He went back into the underground passage—the secret passage that the Jesuits must have constructed in the seventeenth century, between the Church and the houses next to the river—and he started digging again under the foundations of the wall. This was what he had always wanted, to connect his labyrinth with the outside wall, so that during the night, he could travel freely through the entire madhouse.

End of Part II