

FURY

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*When you look into a pool of water or a mirror, the one
you see there is not you, and it is not human.*

The words of an Angan speaker from
Papua New Guinea, reported by Roy Wagner.

*To whom does that body we would have loved infinitely belong?
Salvador Elizondo, Farabeuf.*

*One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted,
One need not be a House;
The Brain has Corridors surpassing
Material Place.
“LXIX” Emily Dickinson*

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I

The Notion of the Body

Soldier One and Soldier Two met by a dead body whose open eyes reflected not the leaden wartime sky but a light that gave a sense of blackness.

Soldier One and Soldier Two had approached the corpse, one to see if it belonged to a dead colleague, the other to check if his shot had hit its mark. The child's body glowed with the light that comes with death and the face was damp with the mist of all the evaporated blood. The heat of the bullet between the open eyes had instantly formed a scab around the hole.

Soldier One and Soldier Two, still stupefied by the scene (as though it was the first death either of them had been involved in or witnessed), turned to look at each other, while the muzzles of their guns pointed in the same direction as their eyes, ready to fire.

Surrounded by dead friends and enemies, Soldier One and Soldier Two had no idea how to communicate the threat adequately. They were horrified. And the fear that one of them saw was seen by the other. That gaze, with death so close at hand, was communion. Without exchanging so much as a word, Soldier Two gave himself up as the other's prisoner in order to escape from the battlefield, and it was only once they had left and were standing on the lookout point from which the child had been shot that they began to talk.

Who were they? It was months since either of them had last remembered that information. Orders had taken away their personal will and, without it, they had both become killers, killing themselves at the same time.

The moon was waning, and under that crescent of light Soldier One and Soldier Two spoke their real names (I'm Lázaro; I'm Juan) and decided to desert.

They had to speak to the body before it would surrender. They said: Don't worry, just relax that jaw and stop frowning, it's all over. But the boy was still at war and the rigor clenched the bones of his hand into a fist. Let us dress you in white, little one, they said, loosen that fist. It was hours before they managed to get the boy's body to relax enough to show its palm. What they saw there were hundreds of lines tracing out the horses that are said to indicate an early death. The lines of one hand had been worn away by contact with his weapon and the other had hundreds of creases formed by holding on to nothingness, leading to the supposition that dying in that way had long been his fate.

They had to sing to him to get the fists to open. They were specialists in recovering the fallen men and knew that death is the only thing worth surrendering to. And so, they sung the boy a lullaby to help him do just that. First the child's brow smoothed and they were able to remove the bullet. His fists opened, he stopped clenching his jaws, and when he finally relaxed his whole body they dressed him in a white shirt.

Then they took him away.

One of the men said that the sight of the boy had moved him so deeply that if it hadn't been for the hole, he'd have kissed his forehead.

When he was just one of the hordes of the war—like the times when he was walking at full tilt across the busiest street in the city and other humans brushed against his clothing, leaving a wake of their presence smelling of mouths, alcohol and other unexpected things—he felt as if he were part of a machine, that he was a tiny cog, like all the others. And even though thinking that made him feel insignificant, he also had the sensation that he was part of a whole. Maybe feeling this is God, he thought, but the first time his body was united with someone else's he had that same sensation, the sensation of boiling up next to another body until the two formed a single brew. The sweat helped, the mutual smearing of liquids when one entered the other or sometimes vice versa; because, in his case, he preferred bodies of his own sex. That was his great secret. He'd enlisted to clear his name, although no one knew just what he'd done wrong. His parents had always suspected, the way he moved one hand, the innate swinging of his hips made it clear he was an effeminate boy.

One day his father left, without him or his mother even noticing the absence for a while. The man was never around or his return was always well overdue. He was a travelling salesman in yarns. Not such badly paid work in those days when yarns were essential but weren't available in remote towns; and a female clientele suited his womanizing father down to the ground.

The mother said to her son: It's your fault he left. Deep down he knows that you want to be a girl. And, having had enough of her accusations, he replied with hurtful words: You're the guilty one, you're ugly, you never satisfied him in bed, you didn't give him what he deserved. And so the bitterness and resentment grew with daily contact. Feathers flew and slaps resounded. He hit her too, more than once.

But even so, mother and son were inseparable. Circumstances demanded it, because when the war started the situation worsened. A woman alone was easy prey and bandidos were going around carrying off widows and single women. They hassled the married ones too, but there was a certain code of honor in battle between the men that made the wives slightly less accessible. And that was linked to another

reason for joining up, because a soldier was something “bigger than a man.” And the crew cut fooled people who didn’t know him. He tied his hands and hips with an imaginary thread, worked at roughening his voice, standing up straighter, and ridiculing the men he had most in common with. His mother wasn’t proud of him, she said: Stay, child. Better we die together, don’t leave me here alone. But bitterness was already a dense, impenetrable mass of a monster. He told her that he’d be back, set a cold kiss on her forehead, and went off to fight a war in which he had no idea who or what he was defending, or why.

Lázaro explained all that in the tumbledown building from which the child had been killed, while Juan, listening in astonishment, recalled, for the first time in many years, his own life.

Passing themselves off as two brothers, a pair of muleteers, Lázaro and Juan rode through the desert, away from anyone who might recognize them. Their male clothing never gave an inkling of what they did at night, or in daylight hours when they found some convenient, solitary spot. Not even the bird that came to hover everyday at the opening to the cave where they lived, watching them one astride the other, as if they were galloping, had discovered anything contrary to the laws of nature. Their cries scarcely travelled any distance and, tinged in the yellow light of the sun, the bird sunk its beak into the hanging fruit. The white pulp had ripened well around the wounds left by the sun on those rare desert fruits, there was a particular flavor in the small folds of flesh separating parts that were rotten from the healthy; the sweet taste of ripeness made them all the more exquisite.

The bird's slender tongue protruded from its beak like a pistil. Tiny droplets of juice dampened its breast and, having had its fill, it flew high enough to be able to view the splendor of the sun on the empty road.

The sun stirred the animals.

Cicadas chirped, a frog liberated the air trapped in its bulbous neck, a trickle of water murmured a moist psalm, horses shook themselves to scare off the flies and then moved in search of shade.

It was during those days of sun and fruit that Juan and Lázaro bought an old cart from a farmer, who told them it was the size of two coffins.

An elderly trader they came across in the middle of the road, standing next to a mule that had died of thirst, told them the story of a man from a nearby town who had sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for “the whole truth.” He sprang onto the cart and began his tale without further ado: That man had been obsessed by the idea that his son had in fact been fathered by a neighbor. Before signing the contract, the Devil had told him that lies sometimes made life less burdensome but the man, thinking that was the kind of thing the Devil, in his infinite evil, would say, and assuming that the truth would free him of his obsession, decided to hurry along the signing the contract. Are you certain? asked the Devil, who was a very elegantly dressed man with a hat and shiny black shoes that never got dirty. I don’t need your soul, he said, I already have many disciples who came to me of their own free will; I don’t understand why you’d want to hand over half your life to me for a piece of foolishness. But if you insist, sign here with your blood and the deal is done.

The man signed as if the act would bring him a great fortune. At heart he didn’t really believe the other was the Devil. Perhaps he signed the contract with such good grace because he doubted the efficacy of that well-dressed man who’d appeared at the crossroads, doubted that he was in fact who he claimed to be.

Killing himself laughing, the Devil handed him a gold coin and told him never to sell it as it would bring him luck.

Then he whispered “the whole truth” in his ear: the young boy wasn’t his son and the woman wasn’t his wife. He wasn’t even a man; he was a dog. He’d been a poor, maddened creature cursed with bad dreams, even when he was awake. His visions had made him regress to a savage state; he growled during the day and howled at night.

When the man remembered his true body, he also remembered his suffering and became himself again. He was naked, chained in a cage. Another man was looking into his eyes and saw the exact moment when a spark of understanding appeared in the animal’s.

He was a sensation seeker, said the trader. A curious person who'd gone to take a look at the wild man. And he paid dearly for his curiosity because, when he looked into his eyes, the curse fell on him too, and after living almost his whole life on two legs, he too found himself running on all fours until the chain made the bones in his neck crack.

The trader finished off his story with a totally unrelated comment. Laughing to himself, he said: It's ridiculous the way people always believe the Devil wears elegant clothes.

With a cry of, this is where I get off, the trader gave Juan and Lázaro a gold coin, informing them that it was very old and would bring good luck. Then he jumped from the cart.

Just like in the story, they said. And, killing himself laughing, the trader walked away, disappearing into nowhere.

Do you remember that boy you killed?

Juan made no response.

Juan, I'm talking to you.

You're drunk, Lázaro. Leave me in peace

Well, I remember, Juan. You got him right between the eyes...

Oh shut up, you drunken sod.

Do you want to know what he was called?

Shut it! You're drunk, just shut up or you'll feel my fist in your face.

Lázaro crooned some incomprehensible song. His lips were sticking together and a thick film of white spittle was drying at the corners of his mouth.

He joined up for the love of a woman—or that's what he told us—but one day I saw him eying my dick...

In a flash, a fist smashed into his mouth and a soft groan, more like a prayer, crept unwillingly from his body.

I told you to shut it. Look what you've made me do, look what's happened...

Bloodstained spittle trickled from Lázaro's mouth and quickly soaked into the earth. Juan snuggled up against him and, holding his head so he wouldn't swallow, whispered:

You're a drunken sod and I hate you.

Lázaro's turned his eyes up as if he were trying to see into the darkness inside his skull. Juan was afraid; he shook him until the pupils returned to the center of his eyeballs, focused and then he felt Lázaro's eyes turn to him with a glass-sharp gaze.

We're damned. You and me are damned for what we've done.

On hearing those words, Lázaro closed his eyes again and fell asleep.

I wish you'd to tell me about yourself, Juan. Tell me something to help me sleep. Something about when you were a boy, about the person you were before the war, thought Lázaro as he stared at the other.

What are you looking at? asked Juan. Go to sleep.

I've got a bad feeling, like God's looking down on us. Haven't you ever asked yourself, Juan? Maybe it's true that we're sinning, and what's going to happen after this war will be even worse. I've had enough of killing, the taste of meat makes me sick. I feel like our flesh understands the fear of the animals we hunt, thought Lázaro, his eyes still fixed on Juan.

What's wrong with you, Lázaro? Stop looking at me that way, you don't let me get any rest.

Juan turned over, showing a back covered in scratches, scars, and rope marks. He stood up, blew out the candle. When he finally fell asleep, Lázaro was still awake.

That night, Lázaro had the sensation of being a child again, in the darkness of the cave it was impossible to see your hands. He felt as though he'd shrunk, was very small, that if he tried to get to his feet, his bones would be unable to bear the weight of his body and he'd fall.

I've got a bad feeling, Juan, a bad feeling, he murmured. Juan had been his only audience for a long time. Even when he talked to himself, the listener bore that name.

The night stretched out and he was shrinking. I'm going to disappear, he said. A sense of relief replaced his fright. And then he realized that for a few moments he'd forgotten about Juan, and a terrible feeling of guilt, a weight, began to sour the air in his lungs. I can't leave without him, I can't just vanish, he told himself again, and so the night passed. One vision followed another: Juan's body turned into a dying animal, Juan's body was a huge mass, Juan's body mingled with the darkness of the cave and the weight of his flesh made the air heavy.

The ambulant trader told them about a girl who was in the habit of throwing herself on women and biting them, and her saliva awakened the desire for other women. He told them that the first time she bit a woman, her victim said she'd felt how her heart was changing: she was following the long tresses, guided by a scent that only she could smell. She was like a dog lost among women until one took her hand and led her away. Once, an elderly blind lady carried her off and didn't bring her that day.

When she returned, the girl said that, despite her blindness, the lady could find her way around perfectly: she'd taken her to a bedroom where the blankets were edged with very fine needle lace, unbuttoned her blouse and started to bite and suck her breasts until a clear milk oozed from them and ran down her stomach to her crotch.

The blind lady kneaded her breasts, took the milk in her hands and filled her eyes with it, moaning all the while. The girl said that, almost in a flash, the woman turned into a man and took an erect penis from under her skirt, and that this man thrust the penis between her legs and, when he entered her, she clearly felt the moment when she conceived.

She returned pregnant and when she told her story, her family took her deep into the desert and abandoned her there so she would never come back to shame them.

Where do you get those stories from? Juan asked the trader, who had appeared out of nowhere that day and, without even the excuse of a dead mule, had sprung onto the cart; he seemed to have been waiting for them at the same spot in the road.

A little bird told me them, he said with a laugh.

After the idea of death had returned to Juan's mind, irritated by the violent course his thoughts were taking, he found Lázaro and said: I wish you were a woman, Lázaro. That way I'd feel like a regular man. Then he moved away to stare into the fire, thinking about the men who, in his mind, lived there and were—had to be—human scars. Lázaro said nothing. Sometimes he'd pass whole days in silence, but on this occasion he finally opened his mouth to say: I dreamed of my father, Juan, and this time he didn't beat me. He was crouching in the corner of a house, like a scared child. I went to him to discover what the problem was, but when I managed to tug his hands from his face he looked at me as if he'd seen the Devil. He screamed, and his scream was shrill. Words issued from his foaming mouth. I don't remember the rest of the dream but I've got the feeling that something is wrong. I'm really afraid. I've never been this afraid, not even in the war.

Suddenly another voice interrupted Lázaro.

There was the trader again, at the entrance to the cave, holding a lantern. Hello, boys, he said. I've been looking for you.

Juan always had his fists at the ready when he was frightened. The trader said: I've come to tell you a story. It's the story of a man who sold yarn in the mountains and, while on his rounds, he fucked a few widows. There are lots of single women around here and all the men are away at war. Or they were, isn't that right? Allow me to tell you this pretty story.

The trader came into the cave and, in his fright, Juan moved to punch him but the trader's body instantly vanished into the shadows.

Lázaro's eyelids drooped and when he opened them again he saw Juan still staring into the flames. He was counting the men who lived in the firelight. When he noticed that Lázaro had woken, he said: You were having a nightmare, I couldn't sleep for your screams. I'll never be able to get a moment's rest until you're dead. Isn't that so?

He rubbed his hands. They were stained black.

What happened to your hands? asked Lázaro.

I was fiddling with the ashes, he replied.

Afterwards, their dicks looked at one other with those small eyes oozing their white fluid. And they looked at each other with their upper eyes too, their dark, almond-shaped eyes.

If only we were a single man, Juan said in a drunken slur, we'd be more macho than anyone else; even the way we are, we put fear into the hearts of the other recruits. Lázaro laughed. Darling, he said, from a bird's eye view you really are a young lady. And he walked off, swinging his naked hips. Juan caught up with him, turned him around, and slapped his face. Don't ever say that again, Lázaro. You might find it hard to believe, but we're men. Well, what difference does it make whether we're sods, men or women: nobody cares, for god's sake; we're nobody, Juan, answered Lázaro as he mounted his horse.

Juan watched him go, his right hand throbbing from the blow.

He'll come back, he told himself. He can't go very far.

But by the time the light was fading, Lázaro still hadn't returned.

The next day, under a sun so strong that it bleached the color from the wings of the birds, an insistent anxiety was drilling in Juan's head. He mounted his horse and set out, riding across the plain until the mountains began to turn blue and the cold was cutting him to the bone.

A small herd of wild horses brought the smell of grass and an animal scent to his nostrils. Lázaro's horse was galloping behind them. Juan managed to lasso it.

Where did Lázaro go, beast? he asked, but there was no reply. He was afraid to approach the town, was afraid of bandidos, and, deep down, was afraid of all men.

He didn't initially call out, but after saying Lázaro's name, the shout left his mouth and was carried on the wind to a goatherd. She followed the desperate cry and found Juan still mounted on his horse. Who are you looking for? My brother. Is he a man about this tall with a scar on his face? Yes, that must be him. Juan felt as if he were going to topple from his horse and die there and then. The girl said: We found a man like that.

Is he alive? he asked. And she said: Follow me.

They've found us, Juan, said Lázaro.

Someone told them that two men had come here; someone told them that since we were both men and enemies, we'd decided to team up. They say we're rebels, that we're planning to form a new squadron, that we're plotting. I galloped off when they saw me, but they know we're here, Juan. We have to leave.

Lázaro tried to get to his feet but an invisible force pushed his head towards the ground. He was lying down and the fire of the clay stove reached out, casting its light on him.

Juan didn't know if Lázaro's story was true or the product of his fevered imagination.

We found him lying in the road this morning, said the goatherd. My mother brought him here. She pointed to a corner of the room where a hunched woman was staring into the fire. Your brother was very nearly dead, it was so cold last night. We didn't know what to do, but you don't leave a good soul to die alone in the middle of nowhere.

The girl approached to press a damp cloth to Lázaro's lips. Your brother's burning up with fever, boy. Take him with you, we can't be responsible for him. We don't want any more dead men in this house.

Juan strapped Lázaro to his horse and offered his thanks. The old woman turned to him just at the moment when one log fell on another, making a few embers fly into the air. The fire grew stronger, filling the old woman's toothless mouth with light. Juan believed she was smiling, but it could just as well have been the gesture of someone whose features were set in a permanent scream. The old woman raised her hand. Her deeply lined palm reached out from the corner in what might have been a farewell, but the hand stayed there, static, the gesture unfinished.

Juan said thank you once more, checked that Lázaro was firmly strapped to the horse, and galloped back to their hideaway.

Tell me who you saw, Lázaro. Who's found us? Where were they?

Lázaro wasn't looking at anyone, his eyes were turned up and his tongue was coated in a pale substance. Please, tell me, Lázaro. Who did you meet that night?

Lázaro, please, answer me, I'm begging you, look at me, say something, anything.

Flies were swarming around the cuts in the fruit.

Lázaro, I'm frightened. Can you try a little harder? You can't leave me here alone.

Do you remember when we were going to kill each other? Your gun was pointed at my chest and mine was pointed at yours. I swear I was going to kill you, but I was afraid. As frightened as I am now. You can't leave me, do you hear? You're all I have, Lázaro.

Juan squeezed the juice of a fly-bitten fruit into Lázaro's mouth. It ran over his tongue, darkening for a few seconds the white paste that was thickening due to his feverish thirst. He was burning up: Juan could feel the heat when put his hand close to Lázaro's body. You're going to die on me, he said. And then what am I going to do?

The idea of death grew within him like something akin to the long desert horizon. A great, black, cubic space, something his eyes were incapable of measuring. He didn't understand how all that sorrow could fit inside him. It was as though, in order to take in so much suffering, his body had turned itself inside out. He felt as if his whole being had inverted, that his internal organs were exposed. That his body and his sorrow comprised everything, except what he was before Lázaro's death.

The flies buzzed around the cuts in the fruit, they flew into things, their sticky feet started to land on the body of the sick man.

Juan kneeled over Lázaro again.

Please, listen to me, you have to hold out a little longer. I can't go for help if they're looking for us and, anyway, I wouldn't have any idea who to ask. We're alone, we don't know anyone. Please, Lázaro, hold out a little longer. Tell me something, go on, tell me something so you won't fall asleep.

The flies came closer to Juan's face, mistaking his tears for water, they collided with the wounded hands of those two men, with the bodies of the horses, with other flies.

Juan, said Lázaro.

A few disjointed words began to emerge from his lips. Somewhere water was dripping.

Juan, Lázaro said again. I'm so afraid, Juan. They're coming for us, the dark shadows are coming for us.

And that was how Lázaro used his last breath: They're coming for us, the dark shadows are coming for us. Hold me, I'm frightened. Who's that woman? Are the shadows after her too? Juan, they're after me, it's cold.

The flies confused the white area between his eyelids with the bruises on the fruit.

It was a shame it died while I was feeding it...

My mother's telling that story again, thought Lázaro. She was talking about the puppies they rescued. His mother fed them goat's milk from her little finger. Poor little creatures, she said to her friends (they were sitting around her, their backs turned to Lázaro), I thought I could save them even if they were crawling with maggots. Everyone said it wasn't worth the effort.

But they were with me for five days, five days those puppies lasted. People said: There was a reason why the bitch abandoned them. But I really did believe I was going to save them, At night I soaked pieces of bread, gave them more milk. I filled small bowls with hot water and lay them beside the puppies so they'd think their mother was there. And though to tell the truth we never have milk in the house, you have to do the best you can for the little ones. Isn't that so, Lázaro?

Lázaro had the sensation that something wasn't quite right.

Isn't that so, Lázaro? You have to do the best you can. Lázaro, are you listening to me? Lázaro?

Lázaro couldn't see his mother properly. It was as if a drop of milk had entered each of his eyes, a white mist was spreading across his irises.

Aren't I right, child, that a drop of the milk of a woman who's just given birth can return the sight to the blind? Child? Lázaro, are you listening to me?

The women sitting around his mother turned to look at Lázaro. They had no eyes. They opened their mouths and had no teeth.

Lázaro, are you listening to me?

Hold out Lázaro. Don't leave me here.

Lázaro remembered a man, a man who was pointing a gun at his chest, a man who was looking at him in horror. Who was that man? What was he doing there?

Mother, said Lázaro, I can't see you. I can only see a man. Who is he, Mother?

Everything I know of you comes from your stories about other people. You've never said: This happened to me. You tell an anecdote about someone else, never mentioning yourself. But I recognize you in all those stories. When you talk to me, I feel that you've always been a shadow in your own life, like a spy observing all the people in your life before me. And they are ghosts. People you loved, people I'll never know.

You've never told me your first memory, but I feel I really know the things you only talk about to me. You're good at telling things, Juan. I always believe whatever you say. And if I haven't wanted to tell you much about myself either, it's just a matter of following your lead, and maybe that's why we've been happy, if happiness was what sprung up between us in those days of hunger and war. These last years we've been wandering in search of paths where there was no revolution besides the one we had in our heads, and in the end the best place for us was the desert. But war reached here too. Maybe love isn't enough, Juan: it can't win out over death, for instance. Whose side am I on now? In the squad we were always arguing about who suited us best. When I met you, I still didn't know which country I belonged to, didn't know what true justice was, didn't even know how the damn war had started. Now I don't know if it's finished or when we were supposed to have won it. We've been real men because we've always been fighting. Isn't that what real men are supposed to do? We've done that part. And so far we've won through, because we're not dead. But I can't take any more. I'm begging you to go away and leave me here. I'm not going to get better. Take a good look at me, I know you can see that what's coming next is my death. I'm not sad, Juan. I swear to you that there's no need for that. I was happy, even though I came from a line where everyone died bemoaning their fate. I had a companion in this world during the times when the smoke of war was in our eyes, it's damaged our heads, our brains no longer allow us to imagine the future. I don't need a brain, Juan, I swear to you I don't. I feel that I'm getting lighter. Soon I'll be gone and I want you to know that, in spite of the suffering, life has been good to me. You've

been good to me. Go away and leave me here. Take the road to Las Ánimas, over there, where you can see the dam, and go straight on, don't stop. There used to be a dry stone wall alongside the road. Follow it. At some point, you'll come to my mother's house. Break the lock, if it's still there. Things here die more peacefully, but metal rusts fast. All you'll need is a long nail and a rock. I don't think anyone will have been inside because the house is cursed and they're all scared of it. If anyone ever dared to break the lock, my mother would stick it back together with her dead-woman's spit. They'd have taken to their heels before discovering the treasure in there. I know my mother hid that coin somewhere, Juan. Maybe under the altar to the Virgin or in a hole. Smash all her statues of saints if you have to, because the coin might be inside one of them. And when you find it, put it in your pocket and leave. I can't go on any longer, I'm tired, so tired. My mother kept that coin for my future bride, that was what she used to tell me. The old lady always wanted a grandson and she wanted the mother of that nonexistent child to treasure a gold coin for her whole life. The old girl didn't even sell it when she had nothing to eat.

Take it, Juan, you're my wife.

Juan watched Lázaro's mouth moving but no words came out. He was struggling to speak, there was sweat on his brow. The light of the candle glistened in those droplets, the flame moved about as if it had bones. Lázaro's temperature was way too high. Hold out a little longer, said Juan, tomorrow we'll ride off together and we'll find something. He tried to dampen the dry lips with a bitter prickly pear, but Lázaro's white tongue went limp and his eyes turned inwards.

When Lázaro dies, Juan flies into a rage, hammering his fists against the rock. After a few minutes of this, with his knuckles raw, it occurs to him that he might need them to fight someone. If Lázaro died with the truth on his lips, he would, and it was a serious mistake to have left those knuckles on the rock. If what Lázaro said before his death were correct, he'd have to fight. The two enemy bands would unite with the sole intention of torturing him. Once the dog is dead, the mange is gone, as the saying goes. He imagines them tying the top half of his body to the torso of a horse, with the bottom half on a crazed mule, dying to run off to sate its hunger on the sparse blades of green grass in the shade of the rocks. He imagines fire on the soles of his feet, stone slabs cracking his ribs, blunt knives clumsily amputating parts of him. A penis hitting the ground with the dull thud of an ailing bird falling from the nest. Juan decides that he has to go away. For better or worse, he has to go.

That decided, his mind turns to practical matters.

As if nothing he does is real, or is a macabre dance, he wraps Lázaro in a blanket. So the animals won't get to his body too soon, he tells himself. He counts the coins, packs his things, and takes enough water to see him through the journey without stopping. There's the sound of dripping coming from somewhere. He carries an oil lamp to the back of the cave, where Lázaro had stowed their knapsacks. Time to put everything on the fire, to cover his tracks. He finds a couple of flour sacks he hasn't seen before. Inside are papers, some odds and ends, a few envelopes.

Make a choice, Juan, throw the sacks on the fire or look inside them.

Juan knows that in those sacks Lázaro kept what remained of life before he became a soldier, before he became a deserter. A life in which Juan doesn't yet figure. Curiosity gets the better of him, practicality vanishes. Hurry, Juan, he tells himself, but the voice in his mind is tuneless music; there are too many questions inside his head. Who did Lázaro love before me? Would there be some trace of him or them in the sacks? Was he thinking of someone else while he was with me? He's trying to soothe one pain with another. He's trying to hate Lázaro, to sink himself into bitterness, he tries to make himself believe that he'd already been abandoned before Lázaro's death. He still feels that he deserves everything he's suffering, even if it happens outside his own body. Like those hares he used to slit open from the neck to tail, and that would then curl open on contact with the fire. Juan still feels that his body, like theirs, has been turned inside out. If he were to find some indication in the sacks that Lázaro wasn't who he said he was, then he'd be free and everything would return to its proper place. He'd just leave them there and ride off thinking: I've been wasting my time.

Juan opens one of the sacks.

There are some photos. A few letters. A map. The damp atmosphere of the cave has made the photos to stick together, it isn't easy to separate them.

Further back, the dripping finally stops, that water will be suspended in the darkness for eons; centuries, millions of years after Juan and Lázaro, it will be turned to stone.

Hearing the sound of water dripping, a bird flies into the cave, guided by the light from the lantern Juan is holding. Its wings flap so quickly, so close to him, that Juan starts in surprise and the photographs fall onto his muddy boots. He doesn't pick them up. He looks at the letters but doesn't read them. He doesn't know how. He's ashamed to think that Lázaro had known. How did he learn? Who was Lázaro before becoming his Lázaro? His shame ebbs away and he hurriedly gathers up the photos. The one on his left boot shows a woman sitting on a couch, the backcloth of a sky behind her. Juan peels a second photo from the first: the same woman, this time with a child on her lap. A man dressed in a suit but wearing sandals stands with a hand resting on the seated woman's shoulder. His face can't be seen: not because the damp has blurred it; someone has scratched out the image with a coin or their fingernail.

Questions are lining up. It's hard for Juan to decide if the child in the photo is Lázaro. He's plump, barefoot, and dressed in a smock with a lace collar. It isn't Lázaro's scarred, bearded face with those questioning eyes. What's the point of life if you're always afraid of yourself? he'd once asked. Juan had mocked him (Lázaro, what kind of dumb question is that?), but he was unable to sleep for asking himself the very same question. Lázaro never minded having, as he put it, a woman inside him. He delighted in being himself in the cave, dancing to the music of dripping water and making a strange sound by clicking his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

Which one was Lázaro in that photograph? Had he at sometime fathered a child and loved a woman? Juan didn't believe it. Anyway, Lázaro could just as easily be the woman: not the child, not the man with the scratched-out face. Neither of them, it wasn't possible.

On the ground to one side of his boot, Juan sees another photo. He quickly stoops to pick it up.

He sees the same man, but with his face intact. The child has grown and the woman isn't in the shot. The man reminds him of someone. Who? It isn't Lázaro, but if not, where does he know him from?

The heavy hand on the child's shoulder makes him lean slightly to his left. That stance, something the photographer couldn't have foreseen at the moment of clicking the shutter, is what helps him to recognize the child as Lázaro. Whenever someone made him feel uncomfortable, his body would try distance itself from them, and so would tilt to one side. Juan had always thought it was a childhood gesture. And here was the proof: on the back of the photo, in fading but beautiful cursive writing, it said that Lázaro was six years old.

My father used to sell yarns around the place where you were born, Lázaro had once said to Juan. Imagine if my father had known you when you were a child, before I came along. Imagine if my father had sold your mother threads to sew your clothes. That was the only time Lázaro had mentioned his father. He'd been drunk and was playfully passing his hands over the fire as he spoke. He moved them so quickly that the flow of air prevented those hands from getting burnt. Look, Juan, I'm a wizard, he said. The firelight glowed at his feet, casting flickering shadows onto the walls of the cave.

When Lázaro was a child, his mother used to lead him by the hand to the cemetery and the sand would burn his legs, each step sending up sizzling sparks that scorched his calves and thighs.

The desert stretched out alongside the dead, and in the cemetery there was nothing more than stones and a few blades of grass; only the earth took nourishment from the corpses. Lázaro and his mother brought flowers. Just a few, but still quite fresh. And that particular day some men were singing dirges in their own language as they wove the palm fronds of the only awning that offered shade in the cemetery. They didn't turn to watch Lázaro and his mother enter because there was no gate; the cemetery was in fact just a collection of crosses with no fence, capable of expanding on all sides, but small, as the town had always been.

The men never looked at them, they kept their faces close to the palm fronds, as if they were smelling them. Their hats were pulled down over their ears, and only their black hands emerging from the sleeves of their long white smocks were visible, with fingers braiding, braiding very quickly.

The mother went to the shade of the awning. She was tall, or that's how Lázaro used to remember her, she almost reached the sky and even higher up were the men, who went on singing their dirges. Lázaro never understood what they were singing because he hadn't learned his mother's native tongue. She walked along, very serious, listening carefully, and stopped at the grave of Cástula, the girl who'd died a young woman.

Lázaro lowered his eyes because his legs were stinging and he thought it must be ants. And then came the silence. The desert silence, crossing the whole plain unhindered. Lázaro looked up in search of the men on the awning but they'd gone. There was no one there except for his mother, talking to the flowers, and to Cástula.

He said: Mom, I looked up and couldn't see the men who were singing.

Silence followed, not even the wind made any noise.

His mother spoke: I'll tell you something, but don't be startled, Lazarito.

Those men you saw were the dead constructing a shadow.

When they left the cemetery it was already dark. Lázaro couldn't remember if they had gone there at the *siriama*, when the sun went down and the sky was tinged with lilac, or if they had spent hours singing to Cástula that afternoon.

His mother used to like singing to the girl.

Cástula and his mother had never, as far was known, been close. Everyone in town, including his mother, said that Cástula was mad, and they were afraid of her. Years after the day at the cemetery and the dead men, Lázaro heard rumors that his mother had made a promise to that girl who, despite her youth, looked like an old woman. The promise was that if she—the girl—agreed to keep a secret and died before his mother, she'd go to sing to her every day. Nobody ever knew what that secret was because Cástula took it with her to the grave. Lázaro was by then looking for a reason to leave his mother and when the rumor reached his ears, something told him that he'd been handed it on a plate, his perfect excuse. He decided to solve the mystery as there was no doubt that whatever Cástula had been hiding concerned him: he was almost the only thing his mother had any association with.

Predictable by nature, everlastingly naive, his mother had secreted a few letters in the false back of a drawer. Lázaro read them. For several years, he and his mother had been taught to read and write by a very old foreign woman who had come to live in the desert on some strange, personal mission. His mother paid her for the lessons with food and water. And that was how Lázaro was able to read the letters. They were short, unsigned, and not easily understood:

Yesterday I saw Vicente. He was walking along holding the hand of a young girl, and he kissed her as if she were a woman. I think they live in Boca de Perro. He isn't dead, he hasn't gone to the war, the swine just walked out on you.

I can't do what you ask because it's against God's will. If you want him dead so badly, come here and kill him yourself. A few coins are no exchange for an eternity in hell.

*I believe they had a child. I'll write his address below. I can't do any more for you.
Don't write to me again. Think about what you're planning, Sara. God has his
punishments.*

The only thing he'd have preferred not to experience was the thirst that plagued him before his death. It made him think of when he'd arrived in Boca de Perro and hurried in search of water; he knocked, kicked, begged, but no one in the town opened their door to him. The thirst made his mind circle around the same ideas: when people die you have to wait nine days before burying them so their souls recover from the fright and leave their bodies, so they don't get confused and lose themselves. Nine days, that's the exact length of time.

Thirst always reminded him of the war. He began talking to himself: you have to put all the bodies in a pit as quickly as possible. It has to be done almost immediately.

He recalled the pits in the desert that can't be seen because they are full. Full of people, bones the air sometimes unearths and animals chew to clean their teeth.

I killed men too. And women. And children. I wanted honor. I wanted to eat. I wanted to find my father, Lázaro tells himself. They'd said that he was a soldier and had gone to fight in the war, but one day I found some letters, and in them a woman called Cástula told my mother that he'd had never enlisted: he was living with another family in a town called Boca de Perro, far from where I was born. By the time I found that out, it was already too late: I'd joined the army. But I decided that before I died in a war that changed its name but never ended, I had to see that man my mother never forgot.

Boca de Perro was a miserable, dusty town full of ailing people. After a long, hot journey, I managed to finally get there, but was very thirsty, so the first thing I did was to look for water. Everyone had warned me not to taste the water in that town because it was cursed and whoever drank it would never leave. A pack of lies, right? Old people will make anything up just for the fun of it. I was parched, but there wasn't a single tree looking more or less alive to indicate that there was water nearby. Then I spotted a garden in the middle of a plot of land that was just dust, a garden with roses and mango trees. I ran towards it to pick some fruit, tried to climb a tree from a barrel cactus fence, but that plant uses its spines for protection and when I was almost there, the branch I was on broke and I fell onto them. A girl dashed out from the house with a garden and instead of scolding, she looked at me in pity and pulled the spines from my body while I ate a mango, a few prickly pears, and drank a lot of water. She was very pretty, like those northern girls with their wide-set eyes and thick lashes. Her long, jet-black hair was braided. What are you doing here, child? I didn't understand why the young woman would talk as if she were older than me. Before I could reply, I heard a child crying and she immediately went back into the house. She returned with him in her arms and, covering herself with a shawl, began to feed him. He was old to be still at the breast. I listened to his snuffling, the way he stopped sucking so as not to choke on the milk; I watched damp stains begin to appear on his mother's dress. His father's there inside, she said with a fearful look, nervously covering herself. The way I was watching made her nervous, but I've never liked women, I was just looking at a child, envious of how he was being treated. I got down to business: I'm looking for a man, maybe you know him, he's called Vicente Barrera. He lives here, said the young woman. I wasn't expecting that. My knees turned to jelly. I asked her to let me see my father, but without saying that he was my father. She replied: That's not possible, what do you want with him? You've heard what they say around here, haven't you? But I want you to get one thing clear right away: my husband isn't a circus animal, boy, so do me the favor of leaving. Then she took the child from her breast and went on: Look what you've done, my milk's

souring. Go now. But I didn't. I lied to that woman, saying that Vicente had been a close friend of my father, that I wanted to hear a story to remember him by, and so I'd come so far to find him. They were friends in the other war. A little perplexed, the girl looked at me and, with a thoughtful expression, said: So Vicente really was a soldier. I didn't understand what she was talking about and just nodded. Then I told her that my father had left my mother and me to fight and that I'd scarcely known him, but wanted to hear about him. I shed a few tears, and they weren't feigned, because deep down I'd believed that story, even though I was there, staring the truth in the face, and my father was a son of a bitch who'd left us for another woman. The girl's heart softened and she said: My husband may not be in any state to tell you anything. I asked why and she replied: Come inside and see for yourself.

There, in a dark room constructed of earth and mule dung, was my father. We crept in, so as not to wake him, I guess. The girl lit a candle. A flame is the only thing that doesn't hurt his eyes, she said. And then I recognized the old man: the graying hair, the scarred face, the rigid, stick-dry body. His hands and feet were bound. Why do you keep him tied up? I shouted at the girl. She responded with a sob: He's mad.

The old man opened his eyes. He saw me and began to growl like a rabid animal. He foamed at the mouth, bit his tongue and bloodstained spittle drooled from his mouth. So I left without saying a word. I didn't spit in his face, didn't make demands on him. I said: Thanks for the fruit and the water, ma'am. And then I turned as she locked the door, crying and saying in an almost inaudible voice: My milk's going to sour, my milk's going to sour.