CONTENTS

Comic Strips	9
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance	16
The Covers of Urania	24
They Shot Me and I'm Dead	39
The Horror of Playgrounds	45
Eight Writers	53
The Black Arrow	82
Jigsawed Greens	96
War Songs	107
And I Am Thy Daemon	117
Down There	125

from *Eurydice Had a Dog*

The Soccer Balls of Mr. Kurz	135
Eurydice Had a Dog	157

Letting It Bleed: A Translator's Afterword	195

COMIC STRIPS

When he learned that he was going to become a father, Professor —— shut himself for a long while in his study to get his thoughts in order. In the midst of so many looming uncertainties, he came out of that room with one thing certain: the comics, the dear comic strips from his childhood had to be stored away for safekeeping.

For thirty years that beloved bundle of treasures had occupied one of the highest shelves of his vast library, a position that, while banishing those pages to the unreachable heights of the science fiction series Urania and the tales of monsters, nevertheless exalted them to an eminence before which all the other books—the "real" books, the "serious" books—had to bow down. The professor knew, of course, that the nobility of his library resided in the products of sixteenth-century printing presses and in his baroque folios, in the volumes of Antonio Zatta's *Parnaso* and in the beauty of his Bodonis, that its academic pinnacles found name and substance in critical and national editions; he had known for some time that this immense family had grown with the Silvestri and Sonzogno imprints, the Medusa and Struzzi series, and that it had been refined by the Oxford blues and the brick-yellow of his Belles Lettres, by the human abundance of the Pléiade and Ricciardi collections, and by the defunct rigor of the

Lerici catalogue. But he knew, too, that without that initial foundation his library—and therefore his life—would have been like a great fruit with no stalk; as if, plucked from that original life-giving tree, all those learned writings would have been destined to shrivel up and wither away. Pascoli and his poetics of the inner child had nothing to do with it, the professor irritably declared to himself, it was rather a question of proper sequence, of material justification: you won't be the owner of a bed if you have never slept in a crib, if you haven't been rocked in a cradle. Similarly, you won't absorb Columella or Malebranche if you haven't absorbed Collodi's *Pinocchio* or Salgari's pirates. In his house in the country, he still had all of his old childhood beds, lined up in the same room like an allegory of the ages of man—and should he not have conserved as sacred the first works he'd read? Were they not perhaps a document—proof!—of his childhood and, at the same time, of his anguished struggle to never leave that childhood behind, while the world, seemingly out for blood, had been plotting all along to tear it away from him, bludgeoning him with fears, with horrendous itches, with ambiguous intellectual conquests (*The Epic Reawakening*! *The Way of Man*!), blindly doling out blows? Deeply, he felt that if life is corruption and abjuration, then it must be highly moral to counter its general ruin with the opposing process of redemption, of affectionate disinterment.

And so it had been with those comic books of his, jealously safeguarded as his most valuable possessions. How many times, upon hearing someone his age express perplexed ignorance over the fate of their old comics, had he felt an invaluable sense of triumph and reward for not having

squandered, for not having caved—like the others—to the humiliating blackmail of growing up at the cost of betrayal!

Now, though, a baby was on the way. High up there, his comics would be out of reach and even out of sight for the future critter; but, even so, a few feminine words had been enough to alarm him: "Just think, someday your old comics will be good for Filippuccio." *Will* be good? They had been, they were good—he would have liked to protest—retaining their goodness like an everlasting luminescence. But he did not speak, for right away he had to obey an even stronger impulse to climb up there and retrieve them, those blessed things so unexpectedly ensnared. After redescending with the entire stack, he blew on them to remove the majority of the dust; then he undid the twine that bound them together, and once again the relics spread out before his emotional eyes.

He considered them closely. Every *Tintin*; each of the original editions of *Cocco Bill*; countless issues of *The Phantom*, just a couple of issues of *Mandrake the Magician*; a few issues of *Nembo Kid*, a few of *Jeff Hawke*, the first three years of *Linus*, that first *Mickeyneid*, that first *Donaldduckyssey*, two issues of *Creepy*, and still more, still a few more loosed relics. As always happened on such occasions, an imperceptible pause spent lingering on a given cover was all it took for him to succumb to the urge to pick the book up; and having picked it up, to start to reread; and having started to reread, to devour it from cover to cover. In this manner he reread *Cigars of the Pharaoh*, then *The Cossack Cocco Bill*, then *The Seven Crystal Balls*; after which—more than two hours had passed—he shook himself back to life with a doleful shudder,

heaved a deep sigh, and spoke to himself as follows: "These are a crystallization of my dreams, the only not-sad glimmer in my life; they are documents, fossils of an age that entreats me to pay it homage; they are little cadavers that refuse to die; they are such that *I alone* know what they are. And all this should be 'used'? It should go back to being something 'current,' tomorrow? Current! These monstrous coagulations, these superhuman concentrations of my melancholy, these monuments of my solitude, these SACRED things are to end up in the hands of a little critter (loved, no doubt—my own flesh and blood, even), a *slobbering* critter who will scribble on them with obscene crayons, with even more obscene *pens*? They are imbued with my own sequels and re-elaborations, entities such as these, they compartmentalize unrepeatable days, such vignettes (beloved squares, adored rectangles, emblems of my room, insignias of my bed), yes, yes, they are *history*, musealized and annotated *laudatissima historia*, they are a *docta collectio* (codified, catalogued) meriting scientific discipline, distance, the love owed to the classics (Tacitus, Proust, Guicciardini—Soldino, Geppo, Eega Beeva), and they are, and they are tradition, and they are religion. And they are emotion. Enough. I handle them with care, *I* who possessed them, touching them with imaginary gloves, turning their pages with mental tweezers as if they were invaluable papyruses—*I* who was their master—and now others are to establish with them a *practical* relationship of immediate gratification, reify them in such a way? No, it's too late for that. One can no longer have fun with what is cloaked in an aura, one cannot carnally commingle with our object of worship, nor put it under examination when there is only

room left for contemplation. Forgive me, future Filippuccio, but if, among your future comics (you, homologous to them, and they, organic to you), I were to slip in these ancient ones of mine, you would not recognize the categorial difference, the inherent transcendency, the axiological superiority; approaching one of them—this wondrous *Cocco Bill in Canada*, for example—you wouldn't whisper to yourself, 'Behold, *that* comic has at last come back to us!' (and has returned *thus*, unchanged and perfect), you wouldn't predispose your whole being to taking a gluttonous and at the same time painful gulp, no: you would say, brutally, 'Huh, a comic, let's see what it's about, let's see if it tickles our fancy.' But the holy scriptures, Filippo, do not tolerate the criticism of modern men, nor indeed will it be tolerated by me, their priest. Not only doodles and tears, Filippo, are blasphemous affronts, so, too, is indifference, the glance that clumps together and knows no hierarchy, the adiaphorous passivity of the profaner. I close my eyes and I see you, quick little ghost, looking, rummaging, finding, flipping through the pages, I see you toss this worn *Phantom* into a corner after just a couple of pages—you, fruit of my loins, not falling madly in love with the Phantom! I saw you: you gave a huff, you weren't impressed! You seek comfort—and find it—in other books that mean nothing to me, stuff that is yours and yours alone, and so I hereby officially allot them to you, let those be your dreams, and if from that jumble you're one day able to extract the gold that I've extracted from my comics, then my compliments to you: life always starts from scratch, it's not as though you'd want to inherit Daddy's emotions, Daddy's memories, Daddy's consciousness, and just insert

it all into your little brain like a transplant, would you? So go ahead and get started, for I'm wrapping up, I'll now take what's necessary and pack it away, burying it in the basement, shielding it from the contamination of your impish spirit (to not love the black grilles of Tintin's cars! to be hard-hearted before the power of kryptonite! forever blind to the dialectic that sparkles between Dick Tracy and Fearless Fosdick!), you won't even know that my comics all lie in this trunk, you won't even be able to look for them, never shall I hear you ask me to show them to you for just a second . . . 'a second'! Like liquidating an entire civilization with a single glance! I *am* the cowboy Cocco Bill, understand? So if you don't dedicate your childhood to Cocco Bill—and you certainly won't—then it will be as though you renounced your father, as though at the dinner table one evening you were to turn to your mother and, pointing with your pudding-smeared spoon, ask her, 'Mommy, who's this man eating with us?' Cocco Bill is who I am! Captain Haddock is who I am! Wellington Wimpy! Ellsworth! Brainiac! Is that enough for you? That halfwit Jimmy Olsen, yes, him too! This is your father! Answer me one question: Chamomile tea—who consumed it? What about mountains of hamburgers? Or—need I even ask—kumquats? But you don't know anything, not a thing. What do you know about issue no. 7 of the comic supplement of *Il Giorno*, that little booklet published in the first few days of July 1962? It was titled *Kamumilla Kokobì*, and now I've said everything that needs to be said. *Kamumilla Kokobì . . .* Something more or less like the *Iliad . . .* Ah, enough, enough, it hurts too much to talk about these things—comic strips, what comic strips? You're not even born yet and your father

is bringing all this to a close, *finis*, the topic's exhausted, to be all aflutter in such a manner is simply not okay, end of discussion; one grows up alone, lives alone, dies alone, we'll try to meet each other on other planes, we'll play chess, go to the movies together, I'll teach you to use Vinavil glue, someday I'll give you a book by Stevenson as a present. But these comics, Filippo, cannot be shared, they are the flower of my childhood, you see, and they are, therefore, my essence: if you take them away from me, you kill me; take away the *Divine Comedy*, take away *Moby-Dick*, even take away Aulus Gellius, all of the Loeb Library—you want the Battaglia too? You want *Rerum Italicarum scriptores*, the Ramusio? But don't ask for *Kamumilla Kokobì*, don't ever ask for it, don't ever so much as smile at the holy names, I'll snuff out that smile here and now by hiding my treasure, for you'll admit that if I didn't, I'd be forced to live out the humiliation of subterfuge, think long and hard about that humiliation, a university professor who locks himself in the bathroom to reread a *Tintin* without his son knowing! And in my study, too, I would hide—'Daddy, what are you doing?' 'I'm working on the critical edition of Castiglione's Latin eclogues, off you go, I need to concentrate.' But no, Daddy's brain is jerking off to Jeff Hawke's metallic beetles, if you stretch your neck you'll see the pages of *Jeff Hawke* poking out of the eclogues, no, please don't condemn me to all that, one day if you like I'll give you a seven-hour lesson on jerking off but that's enough for now, let me close the book on all this, if you can see me from the *antemundia* where you currently dwell, then look, look, I'm closing the book, you see? Book closed."