

Bisected by a precise blow of the spade, the slug writhed a moment longer: then it moved no more. All its glittering viscosity was left in its wake, for the split instead revealed a dry and compact surface, whose purplish-brown hue made it resemble the sliced end of a miniature bresaola. So, the animal needed to rid itself continuously of its slimy shame in order to maintain an inner purity, and fruit of this noble punishment was the metamorphosis of that foul ejection into splendidly iridescent shards.

Corrugated with parallel and regular grooves, its integument had a reddish color reminiscent of a bolete, a characteristic that distinguished the mollusk in question as a red slug, or rather, a French slug: stubbier and lighter than the local variety, with a silhouette closer to a whale's than to a serpent's, and with shorter horns less given to protrusion.

"Blech!" exclaimed the churl, spitting on the tiny cadaver but missing it by a few centimeters. Then he pulled back the spade and slid its blade between two fingers, as if to clean it of a slime that existed only in his mind. "Frensh slug!"—and once again there exploded forth a clot of saliva that, like the preceding gob, no benediction could have transformed into mother-of-pearl. "Cripes, be a nasty slug!" And finally he walked away.

I, too, walked away, only to come back a few hours later to witness the work of the ants, which, having completely covered the two stumps of the slug, sucked out its lifeblood, reducing the remains to a bundle of mummified fibers. I liked to think of those tiny creatures as the crew of the *Pequod* engaged in carving a cetacean, and from this thought took shape the irresistible image of a mammoth white slug riddled with scars, the slug of vengeance . . .

Too bad that my country fellow had nothing of Captain Ahab about him. Rather, he was characterized by a kind of formlessness, both in his corpulence, perennially enveloped in the same bluish coverall, and in his face, which was complicated by a scar running from the lashes of his left eye to his lip, by a vast birthmark colored the purplish tint of wine sediment, and by his many warts, whose protuberance was counterbalanced by the chasmic concavity of his smallpox ulcers. Markedly wrecked was his nose, knobby and spongelike as though due to a cirrhotic liver, and covered by a network of little dark veins. Unpleasantly teary were his eyes, with lids almost glued together by resin, apparently from chronic pinkeye: a phenomenon that, at the very least, granted him a pensive and concentrated air, like someone gazing with his mind's eye at metaphysical distances.

In my head, I called him the verdigris man, because of all his tasks—which included the tending of the vegetable garden and trees, the minimal upkeep of the house, the cutting of the grass, and the farming of chickens and rabbits—for a young boy, the preparing and the spraying of verdigris was the most enchanting. I would see him break up clumps of solid verdigris in a metal bin, and each one of those fragments held the sinister seduction of the colored chalks that proved fatal for Mimì, the “silly girl” from the nursery rhyme. Awful punishments awaited, were I to lay but a finger on one of those fragments; and yet, seeing as he handled

them with his bare hands, drawing from them a turquoise that not only tinted his skin but settled permanently under his fingernails, the possibilities were twofold: either the verdigris was not all that dangerous, or he truly was a monster. And it was to this second hypothesis that I ever confidently clung.

Because he loved me, that creature, and to be loved by a monster is the best possible protection from the horrific world. Sure, he besmirched himself with heinous acts such as the killing of slugs or the skinning of rabbits, whose gory pelts he hung on tree branches without any concern for my tender age; but I was intelligent enough to understand that, to a monster, some concessions must be made. My grandfather tried to confound me, rationalizing the slaughter of mollusks with the necessity of preserving the lettuce, and the sacrificing of rabbits with the deliciousness of my grandmother's stews. But I knew that these were excuses, that the monster killed with pomp and pleasure, and that this alone counted, the barbarous satisfaction he obtained as executioner. Besides, to qualify him as a monster would have sufficed those disgusting gobs of spit, for which my grandfather's specious dialectic could find no justification.

And then, was there any knowing when he had been born, or where? What he had done before he started working for us? If he had relatives? Had anyone ever entered his home, if a home it was, that unknown space on the other side of a little door of grayish wood? Had anyone ever seen him dressed in anything other than that coverall, the same one throughout the decades? Could anyone say they had ever seen him go grocery shopping, or have goods delivered? And what did he eat? He drank a lot, evidently, but was there a single person in the whole town who could attest to a bottle going through that little door? And, finally, I needed a monster, and this was the deciding factor. Moreover, did he not handle that terrible poison unscathed?

Once broken up in water, the verdigris formed a dense paste, similar to the one confectioners used to twist about at old-time fairs as though fighting with a python. It had to remain in this state for a few days to “breathe,” a verb that said all too much about the life of that thing. To this end, the bin was left dangerously open: I would go again and again into the woodshed to check on that mysterious respiratory activity, and as I contemplated the wondrous turquoise, I tried not to lean over it for fear of toxic exhalations, a fear validated by the little dead insects that bespeckled the color in continually increasing numbers.

When the time came, the man poured the paste into a large gritstone tub, whose presence meant the woodshed was occasionally called the laundry, with a transitivity that, while baffling for outsiders, signified for me the place’s metamorphic and magical nature. Having added a good deal of water into the tub, he “mashed” it, meaning he stirred it with a long stick until the liquid became uniform. “Ye see, Michelín, be like mashin’ p’lenta,” he said; then he spat *into* the tub and, machinelike, continued to stir. Was it only a habit, or did that spit contain the necessary enzymes for the operation’s success, like one of those secret ingredients on which every talented chef builds his fame? I never found out. Having obtained the desired result, his actions became incredibly quick: he needed to fill the tank before the mixture in the tub could “be breakin’”—that is, just as people mistakenly say in reference to mayonnaise, before the ingredients could separate. Then, after one final and more vigorous rotation of the stick, the artificer took a large copper tank and submerged it until full; he then closed the tank, securing the lid with two levers, and dried and wiped it with two different cloths so that the verdigris, as he had explained to me, wouldn’t ruin the copper’s shine; raising it high in the air, he shook it like the monstrous cocktail shaker of an even more monstrous barman,

after which he attached two leather belts for shoulder straps and, like a backpack from the First World War, effectively stuck it to his backside. Thus laden, he hopped two or three times to better position it; then, removing with alacrity a cap screwed onto the lid, he twisted into the top of the tank the nut of a rubber tube, which had a long metallic tip on the opposite end—it, too, made of copper and identical in shape to a pastry syringe, but for the ringlike handle farther down, which recalled the one on a Winchester. At this point, I had already taken a few steps back, because I knew what was about to happen next: with the tube's syringe pointed into the air, the officiant pulled the ring toward him, causing the verdigris to spurt outward, first reluctantly and in oversized drops, then, at last, as a robust spray. Unrepeatable oaths came from the mouth of that ogre until the spurt was to his liking: whereupon, with all that copper on his back reminding me of the deep-sea divers of the *Nautilus*, he turned toward me and pretended to spray me, making a "psssss" sound, but a second after that he had already forgotten about me and was fully absorbed in his task.

Two hours later, the entire vineyard was spotted with turquoise splotches, so thick and concentrated as to tint at times an entire leaf or a half-bunch of grapes. "An' another verd'gris done, so," grumbled my man as he reentered the woodshed-laundry to wash off his instrument and empty the tub, which retained on its surface a turquoise incrustation I felt it was a crime to remove, but which was, nonetheless, routinely eliminated with a metal spatula and yet more water.

The verdigris! For years, I was convinced that this wondrous name was the natural sum of the grayish copper of the tank and the green of the vineyard; instead, it related only to the copper itself, due to the color it assumes when oxidized or, as I would discover as an adult, when it becomes copper acetate.

Looking at the verdigris-spotted vineyard, I was one day seized by a burning question: how was it possible that the man's coverall—onto which I had just seen droplets trickle down off the leaves with my own two eyes—had not become over time a composition of stains, rays, galaxies of that same color? Dirt and rabbit blood, yes; rust, motor grease too, lime, plaster; but not verdigris. Of course, verdigris is applied twice a year, whereas he had to tend to the garden, the animals, and the house every day: and yet . . . and yet at the very least he must have had more than one coverall, something that my mind simply couldn't accept, since it implied an embarrassing level of frivolity for a being such as him: multiple coveralls, yet all of them identical, just like the shoes of those English lords who have twelve pairs made at a time . . . And who washed away the verdigris? Did he do it himself, or did some woman in the town?

The answer, as cruel destiny would have it, came not long after, as though the sorrowful facts that merged therein had been conjured by my own questioning.

It was the beginning of August, when the soon-to-ripen grapes required their second coating of verdigris. As usual, my grandparents were shut up in some part of the house. The gate opens, and I see him: he should be cutting across the lawn toward the woodshed, but instead he goes the long way around, hugging the wall behind the fir trees. However, when he comes out into the open in front of the hayloft, he can no longer hide—hide, I mean, the extraordinary novelty of his beige-khaki coverall, that chromatic point which is more precisely hazelnut, and which I've never heard described by grandmothers and aunts as anything other than "a nice noisette." Dressed in that way, he looks like an English soldier, and with that tank on his back he'd make a perfect mine clearer. But soon he realizes I'm there and he turns around.

“Michelín?”
“That’s me.”
“Nothin’ doin’, Michelín.”
“Why?”
“Now I make the verd’gris, righ’?”
“Yes.”
“Then I spray it on ’em grapes, righ’?”
“Right.”
“Righ’ a blast’d thing!”
“Why?”
“Am I t’ be sprayin’ the verd’gris, an’ meself all colored shite?”
“Really, it looks like a nice noisette to me . . .”
“Noisette me arse! Sure I spray the verd’gris, I do, but ’en?
When I be gettin’ home?”

He then explains to me: for two days, he has been desperately looking for his blue coveralls but he can’t remember where he put them. And yet his home is small, you couldn’t hide something in it if you tried . . . He therefore doesn’t know what to think . . . Actually, he knows all too well and is terrified at the thought, for it is something that, sooner or later, befell all his ancestors like a curse.

“Michelín, I’m losin’ me mem’ry, so.”

Coupled with a tear welling up in one of his half-closed eyes, this sentence leaves me dumbstruck. He, meanwhile, doesn’t give me time to respond and steals out of view, into the woodshed. For the first time, I don’t follow him, leaving him to prepare the verdigris on his own.

Ancestors . . . So that man wasn't simply a natural product of nature, an unwitting drop in the ocean of living matter: instead, he knew an age-old story in which he played a part, his vision of the world not stopping at direct experiences but extending in depth and perspective . . . On one hand, this idea vexed me, because a monster with a family tree was ridiculous; on the other, it captivated me, because it granted an opportunity to dwell on the concept of hereditary maladies, a very dear concept to me, it being at the intersection of the themes of degeneration, affliction, and curses. Each son more monstrous than his father, but more monstrous than them all was the earliest forefather, capable of infecting all the generations to come . . . A story biblical and gothic at the same time, Darwinian and Lombrosian: I could say as much even at my young age, since gothic novels had been my very first bread and butter, I had read the Bible as well as *On the Origin of Species*, and, in terms of Lombroso, my father had sufficiently educated me the time I mustered the courage to ask him why, whenever he met someone he considered an imbecile (in other words, ninety-nine percent of the human race), he'd walk away from the encounter muttering that name, the sound of which brought to my mind the image of a lumbering troll. I had even read *Of Mice and Men*, immediately bestowing on Lennie

the appearance of my rabbit farmer, and you could say that this completed the picture.

So, his hereditary malady was of an amnesic nature, and its discovery, or at least its confession, was linked to his unlocatable blue coveralls. Who could say how many other signs had already appeared to him before he decided to take that leap. Yes, a true leap, because sharing that secret with a young boy was, for that strong-limbed man, clearly tantamount to making a cry for help—no, more: to putting his life in that boy's hands. I told myself that if he had turned to me, he must truly be alone, although I was also flattered by the idea that he had intuited in me the most fraternal and congenial spirit in the whole town. Was I not perhaps a connoisseur of monsters, willing with every fiber of my being to make friends with them, to understand them, to love them?

The day after that conversation, he appeared once again in his blue coverall: apparently his amnesia hadn't lasted long. I ran over to congratulate him, but before I even reached him I realized how mistaken I was. He was paler than I had ever seen him, and against that pallor the purple of his birthmark and his web of veins stood out with graphic mercilessness. Most importantly, he didn't spit right after coming through the gate, a ritual that for years had obligated me to exit at a slant in order to avoid the patch of contaminated grass.

"Michélin," he said, with the voice of a man on the brink of tears.

"Yes?"

"Michélin—meself, wha's the name on me?"

I did not want to believe that his malady could have galloped at such a pace.

"Me name, blast it, wha' the blazes 'm I called?"

"Felice."

"Felís . . . me?"

“Yes, Felice.”

“Fancy tha’, an’ I thinkin’ me name were Danilo . . .”

“And why Danilo, exactly?”

“Oh ’cause o’ ’em posters all o’er, Danilo Goretti an’ his ban’, t’nigh’ at Bress de Béder an’ the morra at Germignaga.”

That near-chameleonlike passivity immediately gave me an idea. We needed to find something—something concrete and objective—that could remind him, when necessary, of a forgotten word or idea. Felice, felicity . . . but felicity was complex and abstract (if it existed at all). We needed something more obvious and immediate, something that would spark an automatic association through sound too, a play on words . . . Here, my experience as a boredom-fueled solver of old, yellowed crossword puzzles came to my aid with the most fitting item in the dictionary and in the entire vegetable kingdom: fleece. The “fleece flower,” just one example of the ineradicable knotweed species that plagued horticulturists like my monster more than anything. And so, without really thinking about what I was doing, I ran behind the larch, where there was an enormous quantity of knotweed, picked a stem, and brought it to him.

“Stick this to your wall next to your bed, so that when you wake up and you’ve forgotten your name, you can look at it and be reminded: it’s exactly how you say your own name, if you just remove the ‘e.’”

“A ‘e’ . . .”

“Yes. Fleece, Felís!”

“T’ guess this ’ere dirty weed be any use ye’d be wantin’ a sorc’ress . . .”

“So you pretend that the fleece is your sorceress. You ask her a question and she’ll answer you. She’ll answer only you. Only for you does her message carry any meaning.”

“A somethin’ jus’ for me, ye says?”

“Exactly, for you and you alone.”

“Cripes—fleeces!”

“In exchange, though, you have to promise me that you’ll stop killing slugs.”

“But they’re Frensh, ’em rott’n buggers o’ slugs.”

“I know, but they’re innocent little creatures all the same.”

“Inn’cent me arse, an’ all the lettuce they’re after eatin’!”

“Lettuce won’t help you, but the fleece will.”

And with this sentence uttered in bad faith, I obtained immunity for all those iridescently slimy gastropods. I obtained it for a week, until one morning, at my grandmother’s request, I went into the garden to pick some chicory. Everywhere, amid the heads of lettuce, languished the halved cadavers of red slugs. Two days earlier there had been a long storm, due to which the little creatures must have come out into the open in droves. But why that mass slaughter? Why so much fury, after our agreement? Some of them had been struck by the spade right where they were, so that along with their bodies, the heads of lettuce on which they crawled had likewise been chopped in two; others displayed imprecise wounds, as though, in his rage, Felice had lost his flawless aim.

I waited for him to show himself, quivering with indignation, but when he did appear he was more indignant than I.

“Bugger off ta hell wi’ yer fleeces!” he said, and he kept on walking toward the woodshed, without adding another word.

“But you promised! The slugs!” I shouted, as I ran after him.

“Ay, a promise . . . an’ ’f I were forgettin’ abou’ tha’ promise, me lad? Can be forgettin’ ev’rythin’, don’ ye know?” and he guffawed, showing his seven blackened teeth. So, he was even going to make a joke of it!

“You didn’t forget. You promised and you remembered!” I insisted.

“Ay, but tha’ stinkin’ weed were makin’ a cod outa me.”

“Why? You forgot your name again?”

“Know me name, don’ need a plant for tha’! ’Twere the jacks I weren’t findin’ no!”

“The jacks?”

“Woke th’ other day havin’ to take a piss, but a piss the like o’ . . . An’ like I says, am not knowin’ where’s the jacks! Go lookin’ ev’rywhere, an’ I seein’ yer fleece there ’tached to the wall an’ sayin’ help me, an’ takin’ ’way the ‘e’ an’ grabbin’ ’t off the wall an’ puttin’ it back like, but o’ the jacks not a peep out ’f it, an’ I searshin’ an’ searshin’ till I piss meself—blast’d feckin’ fil’!”

“But your toilet isn’t inside, you’ve got your outhouse! How have you managed since?”

He squinted his eyes, smiling with a knowing air: “Went on yeez’s lawn so—piss an’ shite!” and he laughed once more.

“Felice, try to understand: the fleece was for your name; for the bathroom you’ll need something else.”

“Oh blazes, an’ if t’morra I forgeh where the knife be I’m needin’ another whassit for me knife?”

“That’s right, for each thing its own helper.”

I didn’t know, with those words, what road I was setting out on.