

Elephant Memory

The hospital where he worked was the same one he had often accompanied his father to as a child: an old convent with a parish clock on the façade, a courtyard of rusty plane trees, patients in uniform wandering around at random, dizzy from tranquilizers, the porter's fat smile lifting his lips upwards as if he were about to fly: from time to time, metamorphosed into a ticket collector, that Jupiter with successive faces would appear at the corner of the ward with a plastic folder in his armpit, holding out an imperative and pleading piece of paper:

- The Society's small share, sir.

Damn psychiatrists organized in police stations, he always thought as he searched for the hundred escudos in the complication of his wallet, damn the Grand Orient of Psychiatry, the pompous labelers of suffering, the scumbags of the only sordid form of madness that consists of watching and persecuting the freedom of other people's madness defended by the Penal Code of treaties, damn the Art of Cataloguing Anguish, damn me, he concluded as he pocketed the printed rectangle, which I collaborate in, paying, with this, instead of scattering bombs in the buckets of dressings and in the drawers of doctors' desks to explode, in a triumphant atomic mushroom, one hundred and twenty-five years of Pinamaniesque idiocy. The intensely blue gaze of the gatekeeper, who watched without understanding a low tide of revolt that transcended him, enveloped him in the halo of a soothing medieval angel: one of the doctor's secret projects consisted of jumping foot to foot into Cimabue's paintings and dissolving himself in the faded ochres of an era not yet polluted by Formica tables and the prayer books of the Little Saint: to launch low dives like a partridge, disguised as a mediocre seraph, at the knees of virgins strangely identical to the women of Delvaux, mannequins of naked astonishment in stations where no one lives. An agonizing remnant of fury came to swirl in his mouth:

- Mr. Morgado, for the health of your family and mine, don't screw me over with the damn quotas for another year and tell the Society of Neurology and Psychiatry and related cerebellar amanuenses to put my money, rolled up and covered in Vaseline, in the place they know how, thank you very much and I said amen.

The doorman-collector listened to him respectfully (this guy must have been the sergeant's favorite PED in the army, the doctor discovered) reinventing Mendel's laws to suit his two-room intellect that served as a kitchen:

– It's obvious that the doctor is the doctor's son: one time his father threw the inspector out of the laboratory by the ears.

With his azimuth turned towards the score book and a Delvaux breast fading into the corner of his mind, the psychiatrist suddenly realized the admiration that his father's military prowess had spread, here and there, in the longing of certain grey bellies. Boys, his father called them. When his brother and he started playing hockey for Futebol Benfica twenty years ago, the coach, who had shared with his father Aljubarrotas golden years of beatings on the butt, took the whistle out of his mouth to warn them seriously:

– I hope they leave João, who when he played for Santos was beaten up. In 35, at the Gomes Pereira rink, there were three from Académica da Amadora for São José.

And he added softly with the sweetness of a grateful memory:

– Skull fracture, in the tone of voice in which intimate secrets of adolescent passion are revealed, kept in the drawer of memory that is dedicated to useless packaged items that give meaning to the past.

I belong irremediably to the class of meek people who take refuge in planks, he reflected as he signed his name in the book that the attendant handed him, a bald old man inhabited by the strange passion of beekeeping, a diver in a hammock stranded on a reef of insects, to the class of meek people who are lost and take refuge in planks, dreaming of the pen of their mother's womb, the only possible space in which to anchor the tachycardias of anguish. And he felt as if he had been expelled and far from a house whose address he had forgotten, because talking to his deaf mother seemed more useless to him than banging on a closed door to an empty room, despite the efforts of the sonotone through which she maintained with the outside world a distorted and confused contact made up of echoes of screams and enormous explanatory gestures of a poor clown. To communicate with this egg of silence, the son would start a kind of Zulu drumbeat with a rhythm of squeaks, jump on the carpet, distorting himself into rubber faces, clap his hands, grunt, and end up sinking exhausted into a fat sofa like a diabetic who is averse to dieting, and then, moved by a sunflower-like vegetal tropism, the mother would lift her innocent chin from her knitting and ask:

– Huh?, with needles suspended over the ball of yarn like a Chinese person stopping their chopsticks after an interrupted lunch.

Class of the meek lost, class of the meek lost, class of the meek lost, the steps repeated as he climbed them and the infirmary approached him like a urinal at a moving train station, led by a sacred cow who, in order to disarray the subordinates, removed the

false teeth in his mouth, as if he were rolling up his sleeves to increase the effectiveness of his insults. The image of his daughters, visited on Sundays in an almost furtive manner, like leave from the barracks, passed obliquely through his head in one of those beams of dusty light that attic shutters transform into a sad kind of joy. He used to take them to the circus in an attempt to communicate his admiration for the contortionists, intertwined like initials on a napkin and possessing the impalpable beauty common to the gauze breaths that announce the departure of planes in airports and to the girls in ruffled skirts and white boots tracing ellipses backwards on the skating rink at the Zoo, and he was disappointed by their strange interest in the equivocal ladies, with blond hair with gray roots, who trained melancholically obedient and uniformly hideous dogs, or in the six-year-old boy tearing up telephone directories to the easy laughter of budding bodyguards, the future Mozart of the truncheon. The skulls of those two tiny beings who shared his surname and extended the architecture of his features seemed as mysteriously opaque to him as the problems with taps at school, and he was astonished that beneath hair that had the same smell as his own, ideas different from those he had painstakingly stored away over years and years of hesitation and doubt were bubbling up. He was surprised that, in addition to tics and gestures, nature had not also taken care to transmit to them, as a bonus, the poems of Eliot that he knew by heart, the silhouette of Alves Barbosa cycling on the Penhas da Saúde, and the lessons he had already learned from suffering. And behind their smiles he discerned with alarm the shadow of future concerns, just as on his own face, if he looked closely, he perceived the presence of death in the morning beard.

He searched the key ring that opened the door to the infirmary (my side as a housekeeper, he murmured, my side as a steward on invented ships fighting with the rats for the biscuits in the hold), and entered a long corridor marked by thick tombstones behind which lay, on questionable bedspreads, women who had been transformed by too much medicine into sleepwalking, deceased infantas, convulsed by the Scorch of their ghosts. The head nurse, in her office as Dr. Mabuse, was replacing the false teeth in her gums with the majesty of Napoleon crowning himself: the molars, when they clashed, produced dull noises like plastic castanets, as if their articulations were a mechanical creation for the cultural edification of high school students or the visitors to the Ghost Castle at the Fair, where the smell of grilled sardines subtly combines with the colic groans of the merry-go-rounds. A pale twilight floated permanently in the corridor and the figures, illuminated by the disjointed ceiling lamps, acquired the texture of gaseous vertebrates of the rive-gauche God of the catechism, which he always imagined escaping from the penal colony of the

commandments to walk freely, in the city nights, the biblical hair of an eternal Ginsberg. Some old women, whom Napoleon's mouth castanets had awakened from their stone lethargy, were randomly shuffling from chair to chair like sleepy birds looking for a bush to anchor themselves in: the doctor tried in vain to decipher in the spirals of their wrinkles, which reminded him of the mysterious networks of cracks in Vermeer's paintings, youths with waxed moustaches, bandstands and processions, culturally nourished by Gervásio Lobato, by the advice of confessors and by the gelatinous dramas of Dr. Júlio Dantas, uniting fado singers and cardinals in rhyming marriages. The octogenarians fixed their discoloured glass eyes on him, hollow as fishless aquariums, where the tenuous slime of an idea condensed with difficulty in the murky water of misty memories. The head nurse, her incisors sparkling, herded that arthritic flock, driving them with both hands into a small room where the television had broken down in a hara-kiri that was in solidarity with the rickety chairs against the walls and the radio that emitted, with fortunately rare jerks, long phosphorescent howls of a lost dog on a Thursday night. The old women gradually calmed down like chickens rescued from chicken soup in the coop, once again at peace, chewing the chewing gum in their cheeks in long-winded ruminations under a pious oleograph in which the humidity had devoured the biscuits of the saints' halos, early vagabonds of a celestial Kathmandu. The consulting room consisted of a dilapidated cupboard stolen from the attic of a disillusioned scrapyards, two or three rickety maples with the lining protruding from the rips in the seats like hair through the holes in a beret, a contemporary marquise from the heroic and consumptive era of Dr. Sousa Martins, and a desk that housed in the cavity reserved for the legs an enormous wastepaper basket, a worm-eaten parturient afflicted by an excessive fetus. On top of a stained doily, a paper rose was stuck in its plastic vase like Captain Scott's distant flag in the ice of the South Pole. A nurse who looked like the Queen Maria II on the Campo de Ourique banknotes brought a woman who had arrived the day before and whom he had not yet noticed towards the psychiatrist, zigzagging with injections, her shirt floating around her body like the ghost of Charlotte Brontë floating in the darkness of an old house. The doctor read in the hospitalization report "paranoid schizophrenia; suicide attempt", quickly leafed through the Emergency Department medication and looked for a pad in the drawer while a sudden sun jovially adhered to the

frames. In the courtyard below, between the buildings of the 1st and 6th men's wards, a black man in knee-length trousers was masturbating frantically, leaning against a tree, watched with glee by a group of orderlies.

Ahead, near the 8th, two guys in white coats were lifting the hood of a Toyota to examine the workings of its oriental viscera. These yellow bastards started out as traveling ties, and now they are colonizing us with radios and

cars and one day they will make us the kamikazes of future Pearl Harbor; mules to kick the horns in Jerónimos in the summer, saying banzai, when weddings and baptisms follow one another at the frantic pace of a mystical machine gun. The patient (whoever comes here to give pills, take pills or visit the pill victims in a nazarene way is sick, the psychiatrist sentenced himself) pointed the pill-clouded eye sockets at his nose and said with tenacious determination:

– You bastard.

D. Maria II shrugged her shoulders in order to smooth over the edges of the insult:

– She's been doing this since she arrived. If he had seen the scene she caused there with her family, the doctor would have crossed himself. She's been calling us all sorts of things, long and short.

The doctor wrote on the pad: bastard, short, long, he made a line underneath as if he were doing a sum and added in capital letters Fuck. The nurse, who was looking over his shoulder, took a step back: bulletproof Catholic education, he supposed, measuring it. Bulletproof Catholic education and virgin by family tradition: his mother must have been praying to Saint Maria Goretti while she did it.

Charlotte Brontë, staggering on the edge of the chemical knockout, returned a nail where the nail polish was cracking to the window:

– Have you ever seen the sun outside, you bastard?

The psychiatrist scribbled Caralho + Bastard = Big Fuck, tore out the page and handed it to the nurse:

– Do you understand?, he asked. I learned this from my first needlework teacher, who, by the way, had the best clitoris in Lisbon.

The woman stiffened in respectful indignation:

– You are in a very good mood, but I have other doctors to see.

The man gave him, in a broad gesture, the urbi et orbi blessing that he had once heard on television:

– Go in peace, he spelled out with an Italian accent. And do not lose my papal message without having it read to the bishops, my beloved brothers. Sursum corda and Deo gratias or vice versa.

She closed the door carefully behind her and sat down again at her desk. Charlotte Brontë eyed him critically:

– I haven't decided yet if you're a nice or nasty bastard, but just in case, mother's pussy.

Mother's cunt, he mused, what an appropriate exclamation. He moved it around in his mouth with his tongue like a caramel, felt its color and warm taste, went back in time until he found it in pencil in the high school bathrooms among explanatory drawings, invitations and verses and the sickening memory of clandestine cigarettes.

bought loosely at the Papelaria Académica from a Greek goddess who swept the counter with her excess breasts, lingering on it with empty statuesque pupils. A thin, subordinate-looking lady was picking up knitwear in a dark corner, announced by a large sign in the window (Knitwear with Perfection and Speed), just as the posters pinned to the railings of the Zoo announce the animals' Latin names. It smelled persistently of Viarco pencils and humidity, and the ladies from the surrounding area with their purchases from the square wrapped in newspaper came to complain to the Hellenic breasts, in desolate murmurs, about their marital miseries populated by perverse manicurists and French cabaret girls who seduced their husbands by bending four, to the aphrodisiac rhythm of the Midnight Waltz, the expert nakedness of their hips.

The black man who was masturbating in the courtyard began, for the edification of the servants, disorderly orgasmic contortions of the hose on the loose. L'arroseur arrosé. Tireless, Charlotte Brontë returned to the charge:

– Listen, you idiot, do you know the owner of this place?

And after a pause intended to let the school panic of ignorance spread through the doctor, he patted him on the stomach:

– It is me.

The eyes that had been disdaining the psychiatrist suddenly became streaked with double-decimeter metric dashes:

– I don't know whether to fire him or appoint him director: it depends.

– Is it consonant?

– It is according to the opinion of my husband, the bronze lion tamer Marquis of Pombal Sebastião de Melo. We sell trained animals as statues, bearded stone reformers for fountains, unknown soldiers at home.

The man had stopped listening to her: his body maintained the obsequious curve of a question mark in the attentive appearance of a third officer on duty, his forehead, where all the geographical features of his face converged like passers-by for an epileptic lizard on the sidewalk, was crumpled with aseptic professional interest, the ballpoint pen awaited the stupid order of a definitive diagnosis, but on the stage of his brains the dizzying and confused images followed one another in which sleep lasted into the morning, fought off by the taste of toothpaste on the tongue and the false advertising freshness of shaving lotion, unmistakable signs of already instinctively struggling in the reality of everyday life, with no room for the somersault of a whim: his imaginary Zorro projects always dissolved, before they began, in the melancholic Pinocchio that inhabited him, to show the hesitation of the smile painted under the resigned line of his authentic mouth. The doorman who woke him up every day with stubborn knocks of the bell seemed to him like a Saint Bernard with a barrel around his neck, saving him in extremis from the snowstorm of a nightmare. And the water from the shower, as it ran down his shoulders, washed away from his skin the sweat of anguish and hopelessness

tenacious.

Ever since he had separated from his wife five months earlier, the doctor had been living alone in an apartment decorated with a mattress and a mute alarm clock that had been set to seven in the evening since birth, a congenital malformation that he liked because he hated clocks whose metal interiors beat with the tachycardia of an anxious little heart. The balcony looked out directly onto the Atlantic, over the casino roulette wheels, where elderly American women, tired of photographing the baroque tombs of kings, were thronging, showing off the skeletal freckles of their cleavage with the chilling audacity of renegade Quakers. Lying on the sheets without lowering the blinds, the psychiatrist felt his feet touch the darkness of the sea, different from the darkness of the land due to the rhythmic restlessness that agitated it. The factories of Barreiro introduced the muscular smoke of distant chimneys into the lilac of dawn. Gulls without a compass bumped into the sparrows in the plane trees and the swallows on the china facades, stupefied. A bottle of brandy lit up the empty kitchen with the votive lamp of a cirrhotic happiness. With clothes spread out on the floor, the doctor learned that loneliness has the sour taste of alcohol without friends, drunk from the bottle, leaning against the zinc of the sink. And he ended up concluding, as he replaced the cork with a slap, that he was like a camel stuffing his hump before crossing a long landscape of dunes, which he would have preferred never to see.

It was at times like these, when life becomes obsolete and fragile like the trinkets that great-aunts distribute throughout small rooms impregnated with the mixed odor of cat urine and restorative syrup, and from which they recreate the minuscule monumentality of the family past in the manner of Cuvier, creating terrifying dinosaurs from insignificant slivers of phalanges, that the memory of his daughters returned to his mind with the insistence of a refrain that he could not shake off, clinging to him like a sticky tape on a finger, and produced in his belly the intestinal tumult of twisting of the guts in which longing finds the strange escape of a message of gases. His daughters and the remorse of having escaped one night, suitcase in hand, as he descended the stairs of the house he had lived in for so long, becoming aware step by step that he was abandoning much more than a wife, two children and a complicated web of stormy but pleasant feelings, patiently kept separate. In today's era, divorce replaces the initiatory rite of first communion: the certainty of dawning the next day without the complicity of the toasts of shared breakfast (for you the crumb, for me the crust) terrified him in the hall. His wife's desolate eyes followed him down the stairs: they moved away from each other as they had come closer, thirteen years before, in one of those Augusts on the beach made of confused aspirations and anguished kisses, in the same turbulent and ardent ebb of the tide. Her body remained young and light despite the births, and her face maintained intact the purity of the cheekbones and the perfect nose of a

triumphant adolescence: next to that slender beauty of Giacometti with make-up he always felt clumsy and rough in his shell that was beginning to yellow from a dull autumn. There were times when it seemed unfair to him to touch her, as if the contact of his fingers would awaken in her an unreasonable suffering. And he would lose himself between her knees, drowning in love, stammering the words of tenderness in an invented dialect.

When did I get fucked?, the psychiatrist asked himself as Charlotte Brontë impassively continued her grandiose Lewis Carroll speech. Like someone who mindlessly puts their hand in their pocket looking for the tip of an answer, he plunged his arm into the drawer of his childhood, an inexhaustible bric-a-brac of surprises, a theme on which his later existence traced variations of dull monotony, and brought up by chance, clear in the hollow of his palm, him, a little boy squatting on the chamber pot in front of the wardrobe mirror where the sleeves of his coats hung in profile like Egyptian paintings proliferated in the abundance of soft vines of his father's Princes of Wales. A blond kid who alternately squirms and observes, he thought, giving a small nod to his wasted years, here is a reasonable summary of the previous chapters: they used to leave him like that for hours on end in his enamel Sèvres cup where he would play timid harp scales, chatting to himself the four or five words of a monosyllabic vocabulary filled with onomatopoeias and the squeaks of an abandoned marmoset, while downstairs the ant-like prong of the vacuum cleaner carnivorously sucked the edible fringes of the carpets handled by the caretaker's wife, whose autumnal appearance was accentuated by the discomfort of the gallstones. When did I get fucked?, asked the doctor to the boy who was gradually dissolving with his stutter and his mirror to give way to a shy teenager, with ink-stained fingers, leaning against a suitable corner to watch the indifferent and laughing passing of the high school girls whose socks shook him with confused but vehement desire drowned in solitary lemon teas in the neighboring bakery, ruminating in a notebook on sonnets à la Boccaccio policed by the strict censorship of his aunts' catechism of good manners. Between these two stages of incipient larvae, like a gallery of plaster busts, there were Sunday mornings in deserted museums marked by oil portraits of ugly men and stinking spittoons where coughs and voices echoed like in garages at night, rainy summers in spas immersed in unreal fogs from which silhouettes of wounded eucalyptus trees were barely born, and above all the opera arias on the radio listened to from his childhood bed, duets of sharp insults between a soprano with the lungs of a fishwife and a tenor who, unable to stand up to her, ended up treacherously strangling her with the noose of an endless C in his chest, giving the fear of the dark the dimension of Little Red Riding Hood written in a cello pencil. Grown-ups at that time possessed an undeniable authority endorsed by their cigarettes and their ailments, disturbing queens and jacks of a terrible deck whose places at the table were recognized by the location of the medicine packets: separated from them by the subtle political maneuver of giving me a bath while I never saw them naked, the psychiatrist was content with the role of almost an extra that they gave him, sitting on the floor of the room, playing the cube games that are accepted as

amusement of the vassals, longing for the providential flu that would divert the cosmic attention of those titans from the newspaper to themselves, suddenly transformed into a zeal for thermometers and injections. The father, preceded by the smell of brilliantine and pipe tobacco, the combination of which for many years represented for him the magical symbol of a secure virility, would enter the room with a syringe at the ready and, after cooling his buttocks with a damp cotton shaving brush, would introduce into his flesh a kind of liquid pain that solidified into a piercing stone: they would reward him with empty penicillin bottles from which a trail of therapeutic perfume would waft, just as from the closed attics, through the cracks in the door, the musty and lavender aroma of the dead past.

But he, he, he when did he get screwed? He quickly leafed through his childhood since the remote September of the forceps that had expelled him from the peace of the uterine aquarium like someone pulling a healthy tooth from the comfort of the gums, he lingered over the long months in Beira illuminated by his grandmother's leafy dressing gown, twilights on the veranda overlooking the mountains listening to the low smoldering of the monotonous fever of the drains, sloping fields marked by railway lines identical to protruding veins on the back of a hand, he skipped the boring, dialogue-free pages of some deaths of elderly cousins that the rheumatic had bent over with horseshoe bows, touching the gout spots on his knees with the strands of his white hair, and he prepared to explore, with a psychoanalytic magnifying glass in hand, the anguished vicissitudes of his sexual debut between a bottle of permanganate and a dubious bedspread that kept alive, next to the pillow, the footprint of the yeti from the sole of the previous client, too rushed to worry about the insignificant detail of shoes or prudish enough to keep his socks on that altar of metered gonorrhea, when Charlotte Brontë woke him up to the present reality of the hospital morning by shaking both folds of his coat with her hands while at the same time intertwining the thick, libertarian wool thread of the Marseillaise into the neighborhood crochet of the Alexandrine fado with the dexterous needles of an unexpected contralto. Her mouth, round as a napkin ring, showed in the background the trembling tear of her uvula swinging like a pendulum to the rhythm of her screams, her eyelids drooping over her perceptive pupils like theater curtains that had been mistakenly lowered in the middle of a wisely ironic Brecht. The nylon cords of the tendons in his neck were straining under his skin, and the doctor thought it was as if Fellini had suddenly entered one of those beautiful paralyzed Chekhov dramas in which gaseous seagulls wither away in suppressed pain behind the flickering flame of a smile, and that beyond the closed door the maids must have begun to stir with solicitous anxiety, imagining him hanging from the black elastic of a garter. Charlotte Brontë, satisfied, perched herself on the Marquise's throne as if she had returned of her own accord to the uncompromising pride of exile.

– You big fucking bastard, she said in the distracted tone of a fifty-year-old woman talking to her friends, counting the stitches she has knitted.

The psychiatrist hurried to take advantage of this favorable mood to sneak away to the trench of the dressing room. A nurse he valued and whose calm friendship had more than once soothed the destructive impulses of his tidal furies was peacefully preparing lunch medications by pouring tablets identical to Smarties into a tray full of plastic cups.

– Deolinda, he informed her, I'm hitting rock bottom.

She shook her face in a kindly turtle beak:

– Will this descent never end?

The doctor raised his cufflinks to the peeling limestone ceiling in a pathetic biblical plea, hoping that his voluntary theatricality would hide some of his true suffering:

– You find yourself (observe me well) fortunately for you and unfortunately for me in front of the greatest speleologist of depression: eight thousand meters of oceanic depth of sadness, blackness of gelatinous waters without life except for one or another repugnant sublunary monster with antennae, and all this without a bathyscaphe, without a diving suit, without oxygen, which obviously means that I am dying.

– Why don't you go home?, asked the nurse who had a practical sense of existence and the unshakable certainty that even though a straight line is not necessarily the shortest path between two points, it is at least the best way to untangle tortuous spirits.

The psychiatrist picked up the phone and asked them to call the hospital where a friend worked: it was time to grab onto anything, he decided.

– Because I don't know, because I can't, because I don't want to, because I lost the key, he declared to the nurse, knowing perfectly well that he was lying.

I lie and she knows that I lie and I know that she knows that I lie and she accepts it without anger or sarcasm, the doctor said. Every now and then we are lucky enough to come across someone like that, who loves us not in spite of our defects but with them, in a love that is both merciless and fraternal, the purity of rock crystal, the dawn of May, the red of Velázquez.

– Look, said the doctor, covering the mouthpiece with his sleeve, you can't imagine how grateful I am for you existing.

At that moment, the friend's voice came in a small voice over the phone, and he carefully formulated:

– Is it? (And he imagined a delicate pair of tweezers gently picking up something fragile and precious.)

– It's me, he answered quickly because he felt himself starting to get emotional. I'm hitting rock bottom, rock bottom, and I needed you.

In the silence of the phone, he guessed his friend was mentally unraveling it in his head.

your day's schedule:

- I can arrange a lunch, he announced finally, we would go together to one of those mangers you frequent and unburden yourself over a hamburger.

- At one in the Galleries, the psychiatrist decided, looking at the nurse who was leaving with the tray full of red, yellow and blue grains shaking in the plastic containers. And thank you.

- At one, confirmed the friend.

The doctor put the phone down quickly enough not to hear the sound of the receiver hanging up, a useless, painful noise that reminded him of bitter arguments fueled by spite and jealousy. He was adjusting the tie that Charlotte Brontë had messed up, looking for the bisector of the collars, when Napoleon with the false teeth, rattling hundreds of molars, came to tell him that he had been called from the Emergency Room. A half-naked girl came running out of the bathroom opposite, clutching a bundle of tattered newspapers:

- We have to tighten the screw on Nélia, said the Corso of the jaws. removable. You can't stand it. Just now you told me you wanted to see my blood running down the corridor of the infirmary.

- Your buttocks are full of lumps from the injections, the doctor argued. What can I do for you? Besides, don't you find the idea of your blood being spilled poetic? An end like Caesar, what more do you want?

And he added in a whisper of confidence:

- What does the head of violent deaths think? Maybe they'll name a hospital wing after him: after all, Miguel Bombarda died from a gunshot wound.

From afar, Nélia sent them the most obscene gesture of her elementary school display: some of the newspapers fell from her hands near a maid who was polishing the floor with a small machine similar to a schematic lawnmower, who devoured the news immediately with the purring appetite of a boa constrictor, coughed three or four times, sobbed, and froze against the wall in the spectacular agony of a cinematic King Kong. Napoleon rushed to throw slippers at her as if he were a sick child: the psychiatrist thought she would desperately try mouth-to-hole resuscitation, and turned his back, disgusted by this act of unnatural love.

- Is the polishing robot good in bed?, he asked the nurse who returned without smarties, holding the empty tray devoid of the trembling charm of the tablets.

- The more you know men, the more you appreciate them. household appliances, she replied. I live with a two-burner stove and we are happy. The only shame is the iron lung of the gas cylinder.

- In a mental asylum where are the lunatics?, the doctor insisted. Why do we drag ourselves here, those of us who still have daily exit permits, when every week there is a boat to Australia and there are boomerangs that never return?

to the starting point?

"I'm too old and you're too young," the nurse explained. "And boomerangs always end up coming back, even if it's on tiptoe at night, with an embarrassed little whistle."

Return, thought the psychiatrist, repeating the word with the slow pace of a peasant wrapping himself in a thoughtful shroud in the afternoon of a wheat field, return, open the door with the literary simplicity of the Gentle Miracle and inform with a smile – Am I here? Return like an uncle from America, a son of Brazil, a miracle worker from Fátima with victorious crutches on his shoulder, still illuminated by the vision of a celestial palm reader handling skillful biblical tricks on the stage of an oak tree? Return as he had returned years ago from the war in Africa, at six in the morning, for a month of furtive happiness in a slanted attic, making sure street by street, in the taxi, that nothing had changed in his absence, a black and white country of whitewashed walls and widows in black, of statues of regicides raising their carbonari arms in inhabited squares, in equal doses, of pensioners and pigeons, both of whom had already forgotten the joy of flight? The feeling of having lost the key, even though he kept it in the glove compartment of his car among oil-stained papers and tubes of sleeping pills, made him experience the unfettered anguish of absolute solitude: something he didn't know and that distorted his gestures prevented him from dialing the number that followed his name in the telephone book and calling for help from the woman he loved and who loved him. The cruelty of this impotence rose to his eyes in a fog of acid that was hard to suppress, like the turbulence of a burp. The nurse's fingers came to lightly touch his elbow:

– Maybe, she said, there are always boomerangs that don't come back.

And they manage to stay afloat anyway. And it seemed to the psychiatrist that he had just received a kind of final last rites.

As he went down the stairs to the bank, he could see in the distance, near the dim sacristy smelling of nail polish in the social workers' office, ugly and sad creatures in need of urgent assistance themselves, a group of medical propaganda representatives strategically hidden in the doorways of the neighbouring doors, ready to assault with a barrage of verbal and sometimes lethal words the unsuspecting Aesculapians within reach, innocent victims of their imposing sympathy. The psychiatrist compared them to car salesmen in their overly delicate and well-dressed loquacity, bastard brothers who had deviated, following an obscure chromosomal accident along the way, from the lineage of iodine headlights to ointments for rheumatism, without however losing their original tireless and helpful vivacity. He was astonished that these indebted beings, always on their toes with good manners, owners of obese briefcases that contained within them the secret capable of transforming rickety hunchbacks into triple jump champions, would shower him with the attention of the Three Wise Men bearing precious gifts of plastic calendars in favor of anti-syphilis condoms Donald, the public enemy number one of demographic growth, soft to the touch and with a crown of aphrodisiac hairs at the base, of chess games on cardboard discreetly praising in every house the merits of Einstein memory syrup (three flavors: strawberry, pineapple and sirloin steak), and of effervescent tablets that stopped diarrhea but freed the reins of heartburn, forcing those with intestinal problems to worry about their stomachs boiling, a diversionary tactic with which they profited from the quarts of Pedras water drunk at small therapeutic sips at the counters of the pastry shops. The doctors came out of their fierce grips staggering under the weight of leaflets and samples, dizzy from speeches bristling with chemical formulas, dosages and side effects, and several fell exhausted after thirty or forty meters, scattering the droplets of pills from their last breath. An indifferent employee swept their clinical remains into the common grave of a dented garbage can, muttering funeral ballads of a gravedigger.

Taking advantage of the protection of two policemen who were escorting a dignified old man with the face of a notary's assistant wrapped in the confused canvas of a straitjacket, the doctor safely passed through the threatening band of propagandists who were enticing him with the siren song of their unison smiles, unfolded like accordions on their obsequious cheeks: one of these mornings, he thought, they'll drown me in a bottle of tonsil antibiotic suspension the same way my father had, I never understood why, kept in the cupboard of the bookcase, the hunting trophy of a scolopendra corpse in a tube of alcohol, and they'll sell me to the Faculty, shriveled like an abortion, to appear in the display case of horrors at the Institute of Anatomy, a scientific butcher shop crossed by a Ghost Castle, with skeletons hanging from vertical irons like

withered carnations supporting their discouragement with pieces of cane, looking at each other with the empty eyes of soldiers in reserve.

Under the cover of the notary's assistant's bridesmaids, whose mustaches trembled with authoritarian shyness, the psychiatrist got through unscathed an alcoholic inpatient of his acquaintances who every morning insisted on telling him in detail about endless marital disputes in which arguments were replaced by extremely lively pitched battles with saucepans (Wow, I gave him a slap on the head, you little doctor, who spent eight days spitting out pomade), a skinny lady from the secretary's office who lived in a panic about her husband's sperm and used to anxiously question him about the comparative effectiveness of two hundred and twenty-seven different contraceptives, and a patient with a beard as big as Neptune's in Lagos who nurtured an enthusiastic admiration for him made up of vociferous eulogies, all kept at a respectful distance by the straightjacketed maids, communicating in each other's hairy ears their respective breaths of garlic. He passed the gum-depopulating dentist's office, fighting with a tenacious molar, and thought he was miraculously intact in the Emergency Room, whose frosted glass door waved like the finishing flag of a bicycle race, when a wicked finger imperiously touched him between the shoulder blades, prominent, triangular bones that attested by their shape to his past as an angel hidden beneath the fabric of his coat in a modest modesty of divine origins, like the well-born belch at the end of lunch as a benevolent social concession to a world of brambles.

– My dear, asked a voice behind him, what do you mean by the communist conspiracy?

The police, busy transporting the notary's assistant with the care of delivery boys carrying a strange piano that was constantly playing the sonatina riddled with wrong notes of his delusions of grandeur, vilely abandoned the doctor next to the archive where a short-sighted lady lived, with glasses as thick as paperweights, which magnified her eyes to the proportions of gigantic, shaggy insects surrounded by enormous eyelash-like legs, at the mercy of a short colleague adrift in the lake in the cheviot of his overcoat, with a Tyrolean hat stuck on his head like a cork in a bottleneck in the vain attempt to prevent the stormy escape of the carbonated bubbles of his ideas. The colleague brought the hand hook to the surface and instead of waving for help, he hung on to his tie like an impatient castaway mistakenly hugging a blue water snake with white spots that was falling apart on his wrist with the soft inertia of a shoelace. The psychiatrist thought that everyone that day wanted to separate him from one of the last gifts his wife had given him in a futile desire to improve his appearance as a provincial fiancé frozen in a stiff posture like a fairground photograph: since adolescence he had carried with him, glued to the asymmetry of his features, the false and sad look of family dead people in the photo albums.

portraits, of smiles diluted by the iodine of time. My love, he said to himself, feeling his tie, I know this doesn't help or relieve, but of the two of us, I was the one who didn't know how to fight: and he remembered long nights on the beach, the sheets torn apart, her tongue slowly tracing the contours of breasts illuminated by a network of veins in the first light of dawn, the poet Robert Desnos dying of typhus in a German prison camp, murmuring It's my most morning morning, John Cage's voice repeating Every something is an echo of nothing, and the way her body opened like a shell to receive him, vibrating like the leaves on the pine tree tops, shaken by an invisible and calm wind. The little fellow, with the feather of his Tyrolean hat oscillating like the needle of a Geiger counter finding ore, forced him to run aground on a corner of a wall, the sick man being held by the stubbornness of a tenacious shrimper. His limbs jumped in his overcoat, aimless Brownian movements like flies in the sunspot of a cellar, his sleeves multiplied in the dismayed gestures of a sacred orator:

– The guys are advancing, huh, the communists?

The week before, the doctor had seen him squatting down, searching for KGB microphones hidden under his desk, ready to transmit the decisive messages of his diagnoses to Moscow.

– They're moving forward, I assure you, bleated the colleague, spinning around in anxiety. And this gang, the troops, the common people, the church, no one is moving, they're scared shitless, they collaborate, they consent. As far as I'm concerned (and my wife knows) anyone who comes into my house will get shot in the horns with a shotgun. Olarila. Have you read the posters they put up in the hallway with the portrait of Marx, the economics hottie, dumping his whiskers on us?

And coming closer, confidentially:

– I'll admit that you're around there if you don't go along with the gang, but at least wash yourself, that's right, your father is a professor at the College. Tell me: do you see yourself eating at the table with a carpenter?

In my childhood, the psychiatrist thought, people fell into three strictly demarcated, non-miscible categories: the maids, gardeners and chauffeurs, who ate lunch in the kitchen and got up when they passed by; the seamstresses and housekeepers, who were entitled to a separate table and the consideration of a paper napkin; and the family, who occupied the dining room and watched over their muzhiks ("staff", as my grandmother called them) in a Christian way, offering them used clothes, uniforms and a distracted interest in the health of their children. There was also a fourth category, the "creatures", which included hairdressers, manicurists, typists and sergeants' stepdaughters, who hovered around the tribesmen, weaving a sinful web of magnetizing sideways glances around them. The "creatures" did not "marry": they "registered", they did not go to mass, they did not worry about the huge problem of converting

Russia: they devoted their demonic existences to pleasures that I barely understood in third-floor apartments without elevators, from where my uncles would sneak back, smiling with recovered youth, while the females of the clan, in the church, headed for communion with their eyes closed and tongues hanging out, chameleons ready to devour the mosquitoes in the hosts with mystical gluttony. Every now and then, in the middle of the meal, if the psychiatrist, then a boy, chewed with his mouth open or rested his elbows on the tablecloth, my grandfather would point the definitive index finger at him and prophesy cavernously:

– You'll end up in the cook's hands like the turkey.

And the tremendous silence that followed endorsed with its white seal the imminence of this catastrophe.

– Answer, ordered his colleague. Do you see yourself eating at the table with a carpenter? The doctor looked at him with the effort of someone adjusting the image of an out-of-focus microscope: from the top of a pyramid of prejudices, forty generations of the bourgeoisie were looking at him.

– Why not?, he said, challenging the gentlemen with pear-shaped bodies and the ladies with their abundant rounded busts who had laboriously crossed paths with each other, in complex crochet, hampered by the suspenders and the beards of their bodices, to produce, after a century of conjugal duties, a descendant capable of such unthinkable revolts as that of a false set of teeth that would jump out of the glass of water in which it smiled at night to bite its own owner.

The colleague took two steps back, astonished:

– Why not? Why not? Man, you are an anarchist, a marginal, you make deals with the East, you approve the handover of the Overseas Territories to the blacks.

What does this guy know about Africa, the psychiatrist wondered as the other, a baker from Aljubarrota with patriotism to the Legion, walked away shouting indignantly, promising to save him a street lamp, what does this fifty-year-old caramel know about the war in Africa where he neither died nor saw anyone die, what does this cretin of the post administrators who buried ice cubes in the anuses of blacks they didn't like know, what does this idiot know about the anguish of having to choose between senseless exile and the absurd stupidity of pointless gunshots, what does this animal know about napalm bombs, about pregnant girls beaten by the Pide, about mines blooming under the wheels of trucks in mushrooms of fire, about longing, fear, anger, loneliness, despair? As always when he remembered Angola, a rush of disordered memories rose from his guts to his head in the vehemence of his contained tears: the birth of his eldest daughter whispered over the radio to the detachment where he was stationed, the first golden apple of his sperm, long vigils in the improvised infirmary, bending over the agony of the wounded, leaving the sergeant exhausted to finish sewing the fabrics and finding outside a sudden expanse of unknown stars, with his voice repeating inside him

- This is not my country, this is not my country, this is not my country, the arrival on Wednesdays of the mail plane and the fresh food, the subtle and infinitely wise patience of the Luchazes, the sweat of malaria covering the kidneys with bands of sticky humidity, the woman coming from Lisbon with the baby with surprising green irises to travel with him to the bush, her almost mulatto mouth smiling edibly on the pillow. Magical names: Cuíto-Cuanavale, Zemza do Itombe, Narriquinha, Baixa do Cassanj covered by the tall eyelashes of sunflowers on mornings as clear as bones of light, Bailundos kicked to the farms of the north, São Paulo de Luanda imitating Areeiro leaning against the bay's mouth. What does this idiot know about Africa, the psychiatrist wondered, beyond the cynical and imbecile stubborn arguments of the Popular National Action and the seminar speeches of Salazar's mental boots, a virgin without a uterus disguised as a man, the son of two canons, a patient once explained to me, that I know that for twenty-seven months I lived in the anguish of barbed wire on behalf of the multinationals, I saw my wife almost die of falciparum, I watched the slow flow of the Dondo, I had a daughter in Malanj and the diamonds, I skirted the bare hills of Dala-Samba populated at the top by the clumps of palm trees of the tombs of the Jingas kings, I left and returned with the shell of a uniform imposed on my body, what do I know about Africa? The image of the woman waiting for him among the mango trees of Marimba full of bats awaiting dusk appeared to him in a violently physical lurch of longing like an exploding viscera. I love you so much that I don't know how to love you, I love your body so much and what in you is not your body that I don't understand why we lost each other if at every step I find you, if every time I kiss you I kiss more than the flesh you are made of, if our marriage withered away with youth like others with old age, if after you my solitude swells with your smell, with the enthusiasm of your projects and the roundness of your buttocks, if I suffocate with the tenderness I cannot speak of, here in this moment, love, I say goodbye and call you knowing that you will not come and wishing that you will come in the same way that, as Molero says, a blind man waits for the eyes he ordered by mail.

In the emergency room, the patients in their pajamas seemed to float in the light of the windows like submarine travelers between two waters, their movements slowed by the weight of tons of medicine. An old woman in a nightgown, resembling one of Rembrandt's final self-portraits, floated ten centimeters above her bench, like a stumbling bird losing the windy foam from its bones. Sleepy drunks, transformed by the dregs into broken seraphs, stumbled through the air: every night the police, the firefighters or the indignation of the family came to abandon, as if in a final dumping ground, those who tried in vain to jam the gears of the world by breaking the corner of the room, discovering strange invisible creatures hiding in the walls, threatening the neighbors with the bread knife or listening to the imperceptible whistle of the Martians who little by little dress up as office colleagues to reveal to the other galaxies the imminent arrival of the Anti-Christ. There were also those who showed up alone, starving, offering their buttocks to the syringe in exchange for a bed to sleep in, regular customers whom the doorman sent back, with an imperious arm extended towards the statue of Marshal Saldanha, to the trees of Campo de Santana, which the darkness confused into a haze of embraced bodies. Here, the doctor thought, the ultimate misery flows, the absolute solitude, what we cannot bear within ourselves, the most hidden and shameful of our feelings, what in others we call madness, which is after all ours and from which we protect ourselves by labeling it, by squeezing it with bars, by feeding it pills and drops so that it continues to exist, by granting it permission to go out at the weekend and by guiding it towards a "normality" that probably consists only of being stuffed while alive. When it is said, he considered with his hands in his pockets observing the seraphs of the grapevine, that psychiatrists are crazy, one is touching the heart of the truth without knowing it: in no specialty as in this one do we find beings with such corkscrew skulls, treating themselves through sleep cures imposed by persuasion or by force on those who seek them out to seek themselves and dragging the anxiety of their sadness from office to office, like a lame person carries his lame leg from straight to straight, in search of an impossible miracle. To dress people in diagnoses, to listen to them without hearing them, to stand outside them as if on the banks of a river whose currents, fish and the hollow rock from which it springs are unknown, to watch the whirlwind of the flood without getting your feet wet, to recommend a pill after every meal and a pill at night and to be satisfied with this scout's feat: what makes me belong to this sinister club, he mused, and suffer daily remorse for the weakness of my protests and my resigned nonconformity, and to the extent to which the certainty that the revolution is made from within does not work in me as an excuse, self-viatic to continue giving in? These were questions that he could not answer clearly and that left him confused and distressed within himself, bristling with questions, doubts,

scruples: when he had entered there at the beginning of his internship and they had taken him to visit the decrepit, hideous building of the hospital, of which he had only known the courtyard and the façade, he had thought of himself as a provincial mansion inhabited by Fellini's ghosts: propped up by walls dripping with sticky humidity, nearly naked feeble-minded people masturbated in rocking movements, turning their toothless mouths towards him with astonishment; men with shaved heads lay in the sun, begging or lighting cigarettes whose shrouds were pieces of newspaper blackened by spit; old men rotted on the rotten mattresses, empty of words, hollow of ideas, trembling vegetables lasting only; and there was the pen of

8. the infirmary and the people restrained by the irons, slow apes grinding out disjointed sentences, randomly running aground in the holes in the corral where they slept. And here I am, the doctor said, collaborating or not collaborating with the continuation of this, with the terrifying sick machine of Mental Health crushing in the egg the little seeds of freedom that are born within us in the clumsy form of a restless protest, agreeing through my silence, the salary I receive, the career they offer me: how can I resist from within, almost without help, the effective and soft inertia of institutional psychiatry, inventor of the great white line separating "normality" from "madness" through a complex and false network of symptoms, of psychiatry as gross alienation, as revenge of the castrated against the penis they do not have, as a real weapon of the bourgeoisie to which I belong by birth and which is so difficult to deny, hesitating as I hesitate between comfortable immobility and painful revolt, the price of which is paid dearly because if I have no parents who will come to the Wheel wanting to adopt me? The Party proposes to me the replacement of one faith by another faith, of one mythology by another mythology, and at this point I always remember Blondin's mother's phrase, "I don't have faith but I have so much hope", and I turn left at the last moment in the anxious expectation of finding brothers who will help me and whom I can help, for them, for myself and for the rest. And it is the rest, what is not listed out of modesty, that is important, like a kind of bet, a win-lose bet with a one in three hundred chance, of believing in Snow White and having real little dwarves appear from under the furniture to show us that it is still possible. It is possible here and abroad that the hospital walls are concentric and encompass the entire country all the way to the sea, to Cais das Colunas and its waves, tamed like a Portuguese river, master of gentle furies reflecting the color of the sky and stained by the greasy shadow of the clouds, my remorse, the poet calls it, my remorse for all of us.

Concentric walls, he repeated, a labyrinth of houses and streets, a steep and awkward descent of a woman in high heels into the horizontal expanse of the bar, walls so concentric that they never actually break, instead taking root in crochet in the carpet of the upper floor, a tiled Crete inhabited by window parrots and Chinese men in ties, busts of heroic regicides, fat pigeons and castrated cats, where the

lyricism disguises itself as a canary in a cane cage, releasing the trills of domestic sonnets. The Bertrand Almanac serves as the Bible, pets are chrome-plated bambis and porcelain puppies that nod yes, funerals are the consistent mass of the family.

He felt his tie again, checked the knot: my natural silk Samson hair, he murmured without smiling. One day I'll buy a freak bead necklace and a set of Indian bracelets and create a Katmandu just for myself, with Rabindranath Tagore and Jack Kerouac playing brisca with the Dalai Lama. He took a few steps towards the offices and saw the notary's assistant in the straightjacket sitting at a desk explaining to an invisible doctor that he had been robbed of the Milky Way. The policemen, standing, leaned over the railing of their belts to listen better, like neighbors watching a street scene from their balcony. One of them, notebook in hand, was taking notes with his tongue out on a children's app. The old woman levitating on the bench passed him, fluttering like an exhausted partridge: she smelled of stagnant urine, of loneliness and of abandonment without soap. The smells of misery, the doctor opined, the monotonous, shitty and tragic smells of hunger and misery. In the room reserved for treatments, the nurses were discussing, leaning against the stretcher, the dressing cart, the glass medicine cabinet, the curious events of the last General Workers' Assembly, during which the barber and one of the drivers had called each other son of a bitch, blind boy and fucking torch. One of them, with a syringe ready, was preparing to inject an alcoholic with a disdainful expression, holding his trousers at knee height in a patient waiting for a veteran of those adventures. His very thin legs disappeared under fringes of grey hair that surrounded his hanging, empty testicles and the crumpled rag of skin of his penis. A Mediterranean light haloed the balcony railings as if they were bathing in an aquarium illuminated by the intense lamp of an unreal spring.

– Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, respectable audience, said the psychiatrist. I heard that you called upstairs, worried as good mothers are, asking for the helpful services of a gravedigger. I am an employee of the funeral home A Primorosa da Ajuda (candles, candles and urns) and I have come to measure the coffin: I hope, because I joined the union and I hate my bosses, that the deceased has risen again and gone out to cheer for Blessed Luis Gonzaga.

The nurse with the syringe, with whom he used to have supper, when they were both on shift, with the cheesy shrimps that the servant bought in a beer shop in Martim Moniz, stuck the therapeutic banderilla in the drunk to calm his momentarily calm moods of a tide that is preparing to spring a jump, and passed a solemn bishop's cotton wool to chism the skin of his buttock, like a good student erasing the result of an easy exercise from the board.

too much for his acrobatic capabilities. The patient pulled the nastro belt up so violently that it broke and stood there staring in astonishment at the piece that fell from his hand, with the astonishment of an astronaut staring at a piece of lunar algae.

- You ruined the pasta for lunch, applauded the nurse, whose reserve of tenderness was hidden under a sarcasm too obvious to be genuine. The doctor had learned to respect him by watching the courage with which he fought the hospital's inhuman concentration camp machine with the means at his disposal. The nurse washed the syringe by pressing the plunger several times, placed it in the kettle heated by the narrow blue tulip of the gas burner and wiped his fingers on the torn towel hanging from a clamp: he did all this with the slow, methodical gestures of a fisherman for whom time is not divided into hours like a ruler into centimeters but has the continuous texture that gives life unexpected intensity and depth. He had been born by the sea, in the Algarve, and had lulled his hunger in childhood with Moorish winds, near Albufeira, where the ebb tide leaves the sweet smells of a diabetic on the beach. The alcoholic, forgotten, went out into the corridor dragging his shapeless sandals.

- Hannibal, said the psychiatrist to the nurse who was searching the pockets of his coat for matches like a dog searching for the spot where he had buried a precious bone, you called upstairs and promised that if I came here you would give me a strawberry lollipop. I was pissed off with you because I only like the peppermint ones. The nurse ended up finding the matches under the pile of circulars piled up on a white wooden table whose paint was crumbling in powdery patches of dandruff:

- We have an old-fashioned nuisance here, he said, scratching the sandpaper with unusual anger. The Holy Family wants to eat the Baby Jesus in a bad way. Only the mother's goat is worth a well-cooked quince poem. Hold on to the handrail, the three of them are waiting for you in the back office.

The doctor examined a wall calendar petrified in a very old March, when he still lived with his wife and daughters and a veil of joy lightly tinged each second: whenever he was called to the Bank, he would visit that March of yesteryear in a kind of disenchanting pilgrimage, and he tried unsuccessfully to reconstruct days of which he retained a memory of diffuse happiness diluted in a uniform feeling of well-being gilded by the oblique light of dead hopes. When he turned around, he noticed that the nurse was also looking at the calendar in which a blonde girl and a very fat black man were performing complicated operations naked.

- The woman or the month?, the psychiatrist asked him.

- The woman or the month what?, replied the nurse.

- That's what you're pointing your headlights at, the psychiatrist explained.

- Neither one nor the other, explained the nurse. I was just thinking about what we do here. Seriously. There may come a time when this

gaita changes and we can look at things with clear eyes. Where tailors are not obliged by decree to hide a man's balls in the width of his trousers.

And he began to clean already washed syringes with a fierce activity.

A cuckold from the Algarve, the doctor thought, you look like a neo-realist poet who changes the world with the verses he hides in a drawer. Or maybe you're a wise peasant from the estuary waiting for dusk to go fishing by lamp, with a lantern hidden in the boat's nets. And he remembered Praia da Rocha in August, when he had gotten married, the rocks carved by Henry Moore from successive ebb tides, the vast expanse of sand without footprints and how he and his wife had felt like Robinson Crusoe despite the cubic German tourists, the androgynous Englishwomen like castrated sopranos, the elderly American women covered in incredible hats and the smoked-lens glasses of the national pimps, Latin lovers with plastic combs in the back pocket of their trousers, prowling around buttocks in the manner of hyenas.

– Boss, he said to the nurse, we might live for this. But if we wait sitting down, damn it, we both will be damned.

He went to the cubicle at the back with the feeling that he had been unfair to the other man and the desire for him to understand that he had only offended the passive part of himself, the part of him that accepted things without fighting and against which he rebelled. Do I like myself or not like myself, he thought, to what extent do I accept myself and at what point does the censorship of my protest really begin? The policemen, now outside, had taken off their caps and seemed to the psychiatrist suddenly naked and harmless. One of them was carrying the notary's assistant's straitjacket in his arms, clutched to his chest like someone holding his nephew's jacket at the entrance to a gym class.

In the office, the family was preparing for the attack. The father and mother, standing, flanked their son's chair with the motionless hostility of stone dogs at a gate ready to bark out loud and angry complaints. The doctor walked silently around the desk and pulled out the glass ashtray, the hospital's stamped notebook, the Caixa's credentials and the book in which the patients were registered, like a chess player preparing the pieces for the start of the game. The baby Jesus, red-haired and with the air of a distressed bird, bravely pretended not to notice his presence, staring at the sad buildings on Gomes Freire through the open window, frowning his eyelids covered in transparent freckles.

"So what's up?" asked the doctor cheerfully, feeling his question like a referee's whistle that would start a bloody game. If I don't protect the boy, he thought quickly, glancing at the boy in a still-controlled panic, they'll tear him apart in two bites. The generation of cogitus interruptus, he thought. Damn, I need Umberto Eco's help.

The father pumped the front of his shirt:

– Sir Doctor, he said with the pomp of a declaration of war, your honor is aware that this bastard is on drugs.

And he rubbed his obsequious hands together as if he were talking to the head of the department. On his long-nailed little finger, next to his wedding ring, he wore an enormous black stone ring, and on his tie with golden branches was a coral pin depicting a Belenenses football player kicking a golden ball. He looked like a car with lots of accessories, blankets on the seats, trinkets, a stripe on the bonnet, the name *Tó Zé* painted on the door. According to his credentials, he was an employee of the Water Company (a clean employee at least, the psychiatrist decided) and his breath smelled of the shad soup from the day before.

It was time to change the color of the files, the doctor thought dreamily, pointing to three metal parallelepipeds that occupied the space between the door and the window with their hideous smoothness.

"A green like this would be enough to make an admiral die, don't you think?" he asked the boy who was still dazzled by the wonders of Avenida Gomes Freire, but whose lips were trembling like the belly of a terrified sparrow. Hold on tight, the doctor advised him mentally, hold on tight, you're a weakling and the ordeal hasn't even started yet. And he switched the position of the ashtray with the book in a strategic rock, muttering, "Hold on to your underwear, Dona Alzira, the NATO squadron is coming."

At that moment he heard an unexpected rustling on the blotter on his desk: his mother was emptying the contents of a paper bag full of various medicine packets under his surprised nose, and arching her body, clad in a plastic leopard coat, towards him, tense with furious indignation. The sentences came out of her mouth like the cannonballs from the tin cannonball that had been given to the psychiatrist when he was little, during one of his numerous bouts of angina:

– My son has to be committed immediately, she ordered in the tone of a reform school mayor, cosmically addressing the moral disorder of the Universe. Pills are what you see, he's repeating the fourth grade, he's disrespectful to his parents, he answers crookedly if he answers, the neighbor downstairs told me that they saw him in Rato with some wretched woman, I don't know if I'm explaining myself well, whoever wants to understand, let them understand. This was when he was sixteen, sir, in April, he was born by caesarean section, by a hair's breadth that I was even on a drip there. And we were raising him the good way, spending money, buying books, talking to him in soft words, being fed the whole time. Admit it: do you agree? And the doctor, who probably also has children, asks you about the files.

Pause to take a breath of air into the buoys of her breasts, between which lived an enamel heart with a photograph of her subordinate husband, younger but already profusely adorned with amulets, and another dive into the steaming waters of the

angry:

– A few weeks in hospital is what he needs to get back on his feet: I had a sister-in-law in the 3rd, I know the methods. A few weeks without going out, without meeting his gang, without pharmacies on hand to steal pills. It's a shame that no one puts an end to this: since Salazar died we've been going from disaster to disaster.

The doctor remembered many years before, when they had returned from an aunt's dinner, they had found a Pide agent in their father's office waiting for his brother, who presided over the Law Students' Association, and the fearful repulsion that the man, looking at the spines of his absent father's neurology treatises with the ease of a proprietor, had kindled in them. Only the youngest looked at the owl without hatred, astonished by the arrogant desecration of that shrine of pipes that one entered with the awareness of the almost sacred importance of the place, and he circled the apostate admiringly, sniffing his gestures. Suddenly the doctor felt like grabbing Our Lady's blond-painted head and banging it repeatedly, unhurriedly, deliberately, against the corner of the washstand to his left, beneath the oblique mirror that, seen from the desk, reflected a grey, blind patch of wall, as if the hexagonal surface that had so often brought him back to himself had been struck by some kind of cataract: it was disconcerting not to find, glued to the tinted glass pupil, the inquiring curve of her Chester cat smile.

– A hospital or a prison, said the harpy's husband in a pompous voice, stroking his monstrous tie pin, we can't handle it.

The woman shook her wrist like a chestnut seller, as if to sweep away the useless words: she was the one who led the operations and would not accept sharing of command. Granddaughter of a corporal in the Republican Guard, thought the psychiatrist, moral heir to her father's knack for beating the people.

"Doctor, be patient, but you have to resolve this now," she said, ruffling the false fur on her coat. "Do me a favor and keep it, because I don't want it in the house."

The kid started a movement that she cut off, pointing her furious finger at him:

– Don't interrupt me, you idiot, I'm talking to the doctor. And to the psychiatrist, definitively:

– Solve things as you see fit, but we won't get out of here with him.

The doctor advanced the pawn of a stapler on the desk tray. Service rosters, some with his name on them (our printed name no longer belongs to us, he thought, it becomes impersonal and alien, it loses the familiar intimacy of handwriting), impaled on rusting nails, decorated the walls.

- Hold the horses outside so I can talk to the boy, he said without looking at anyone, in a pale, dead man's tone. His friends avoided arguing with him at moments like that, when his tone became neutral and colorless and the blue of his eye sockets seemed to be emptied of light. And I want the door closed.

Closed doors, closed doors: the psychiatrist and his wife always left the one to their daughters' room open and sometimes, while they made love, the confused words of their dreams would mix with their moans in a braid of sounds that united them in such an intimate way that the certainty of never being able to separate seemed to soothe the fear of death, replacing it with a reassuring sensation of eternity: nothing would be different from what it was then, their daughters would never grow up and the night would stretch out in an enormous silence of tenderness, with the cat sprawled out asleep next to the radiator, clothes lying haphazardly on the chairs, and the faithful company of familiar objects. He thought about how the blanket on the bed was covered with white spots of sperm and vaginal cones, and how there were always traces of mascara on his wife's pillow, he thought about her indescribable expression when she came or when, sitting on him, she would cross her hands behind her neck and turn her body from side to side in order to feel his penis better, with her large breasts swaying gently on his narrow torso. GTS said to him without speaking, sitting at the hospital desk, recovering the Morse code through which they communicated without anyone else understanding, GTS to the end of the world, my love, now that we are already Pedro and Inês in the crypts of Alcobaça waiting for the miracle that will come. And he remembered, to avoid the imminent danger of tears, imagining that the hair of the stone infantas grew into their heads in dusty braids, and that he had written this in one of the notebooks of poems that he periodically destroyed like certain birds eat their children with sickening cruelty. He increasingly hated getting emotional: a sign that I was getting older, he realized, fulfilling his mother's phrase thrown into the air of the room with prophetic solemnity:

- With a temper like that you'll end up alone as a dog. And the framed portraits seemed to agree with him, nodding in yellowish agreement.

The Baby Jesus, who had not stopped staring at Botelho, glued to the window, glanced quickly at the doctor, who was returning from his inner story to the reason why he was there, grabbed the boy's hostility like someone jumping at the last second onto the running board of a moving tram:

- What do you have in the lollipop box?, he asked.

From the tingling in his nostrils he could tell that the boy was hesitating and threw his cards in, remembering the instructions for saving shipwrecked people from his childhood, posters posted in the beach changing room with men with moustaches and striped swimsuits swimming over five columns of tiny prose of warnings and prohibitions.

- Look, he said to the kid, I hate this as much as you do and this isn't bullshit.

cool cop at the police station. Even if your old men pointed a cannon at my horns you'd be stuck here, but it might be a good idea if you explained a little bit of what's going on: maybe the two of us together will understand some of this shit, maybe we won't, and neither of us has anything to lose by trying it out.

The redhead had returned to contemplating the window: he considered within himself what had been said to him and decided to remain silent. His pink eyelashes sparkled in the light, like the threads of spider web that hold together the rafters in attics.

- I need you to help me so I can help you, insisted the psychiatrist. Each one to his own side won't get us far and I'm speaking to you with clean hands. You're lonely and broke and your parents are out there wanting to stick you in here: damn it, the only thing I ask of you is that you collaborate with me to prevent that and don't just stand there like a startled ferret.

The Baby Jesus, with his mouth tight, continued to study Gomes Freire and the psychiatrist realized how stupid it would be to continue: he pulled back the stapler's handle, feeling the pleasant cold of the metal on his skin, rested his palms on the green blotter, and finally got up with the reluctance of a Lazarus awakened by an inopportune Christ. As he left, he ran his fingers through the boy's hair and his skull shrank into his shoulders like a turtle hurriedly hiding in its shell: there's not much that can be done for this guy and for me, thought the psychiatrist, we both find ourselves, albeit in different ways, at the bottom of the bottom, where no arm can reach, and as our lungs run out of oxygen, goodbye Maria. I just hope I don't drag anyone down this fall.

He opened the door suddenly and found the boy's parents leaning over the lock, peering childishly: they both stood up straight as quickly as they could, recovering the dignity of adults by force, and the doctor almost looked at them with a kind of pity, the same feeling that visited him every morning when he observed the bearded face in which he barely recognized himself, a worn-out caricature of himself. The nurse, having finished lunch, approached close to the wall, dragging the slippers-clogs he usually wore when on duty. The snoring close by of the alcoholic giving the injection resembled the rhythmic creaking of damp soles.

- You are going to take the boy home, said the psychiatrist to the redhead's parents. You are going to take your son home, quietly and calmly, and come back here on Monday for a long, quiet talk, because this is a subject for long and timely talks, without rushing. And take advantage of Sunday to look inside each other and the goldfinch in the cage, look deep inside each other and the goldfinch in the cage.

Minutes later he was in the hospital courtyard next to his small, dented, always dirty car, my tiny mobile bunker, my shelter.

Any day now, he decided, I'll really lose Transmontana and put a china swallow on the bonnet.

When he entered the restaurant, almost running because the clock in the neighboring garage was showing a quarter past one, his friend was already waiting for him on the other side of the glass door, examining the detective books that were piling up on a sort of rotating shelf made of wire, metal pine, fertilized by a manure of right-wing newspapers piled on the floor. The fox-faced waitress from the tobacconist's, protected by a wall of magazines, was practicing her schematic English for benevolent Camones with a middle-aged couple who were surprised by that strange slang, whose hazy recognition of the occasional word or two. The fox completed his speech with a large copy of Roberto de Feira's exemplary gestures, the others retorted to him in a grimacing Morse, and his friend, who had abandoned his books, watched fascinated by this frenetic ballet of beings who would remain irremediably strange despite their strenuous efforts to find each other in a common language. The psychiatrist desperately wished for an Esperanto that would abolish the external and internal distances that separate people, a verbal device capable of opening windows in the morning into the deep nights of each creature, just as certain poems by Ezra Pound suddenly show us the attics of ourselves in a dazzling revelation: the certainty of having found a traveling companion on a bench that at first seemed empty, and the joy of unexpected sharing. One of the things that brought him closest to his wife was precisely the fact that he could achieve this with her without even needing to dress himself up in phrases, the ability to understand each other at a glance, which had nothing to do with knowing each other, because it had been like that since the first time they met, they were both still very young and had been astonished by the strange hidden power of that miracle that had happened to no one else, a union so perfect and so profound that, he thought, if his daughters ever achieved it, it would have been worth it for him to have made them, and for them all the measles of life would find a reason. The eldest, in particular, frightened him: he feared the fragility of her untimely rages, her multiple fears, the tense and attentive green eyes on Cranach's face: because he had been at war in Africa he had never felt her move in her mother's womb and for months he had painted for her a portrait in the living room that they pointed to with their fingers, devoid of relief and thickness of flesh. In the fleeting kisses they exchanged there lived, as it were, a remnant of that mutual resentment, barely contained on the verge of tenderness.

The melancholic admiral who was dragging his pension along with him next to the restaurant's tobacco shop, dreaming of trembling Indians in the distance, opened the glass door to let two competent-looking men pass, both wearing glasses, one of whom said to the other:

- I left him with a clean slate, you know how I am. I trotted over to the guy's office and said straight away: if you bastard don't send me back to my section, you won't have a single piece of shit left. I just wanted you to see that piece of shit shitting himself.

What makes the admiral-porters, the doctor thought, exchange the sea for restaurants and hotels, with bridges reduced to the proportions of worn-out doormats, and extending their curved hands towards the tips like the elephant in the Garden stretches its trunk towards the keeper's bunch of carrots? Georges is watching my country of sailors sailing in the insipid waters of resigned subservience. On the sidewalk, the men with glasses waved to an empty taxi like castaways to an indifferent boat. The middle-aged couple tried, with the help of a grammar catechism, to exclaim in Zulu in which echoed, distorted, remote similarities to Linguaphone Portuguese such as My uncle's yard is bigger than your brother's pencil. The psychiatrist, who had taken advantage of the shipwrecked sailors' departure to enter the hall of the Galleries in profile, like the Egyptians in the History of Matoso, responded with an approximate salute to the admiral's indefinite bow and was surprised (as he always was) that the sailor did not deposit a drop of spit on his middle finger and raised it to study the direction of the wind, like the corsairs with their orbits blocked in the films of his childhood. He and I are middle-aged Sandokans, thought the doctor, whose adventure consists of deciphering the obituary page of the newspaper in the hope that the omission of our name guarantees that we are alive. And in the meantime we are breaking apart, by fractions, the hair, the appendix, the gallbladder, some teeth, like disassembled parcels. Outside the wind was moving the branches of the plane trees just as he had touched the boy's head in the hospital, and behind the Penitentiary a thick grey of threats was gathering. His friend touched him lightly on the elbow: he was tall, young, a little stooped, and his eyes had a serene, vegetal softness.

- My grandfather was there for a hell of a lot of months, the psychiatrist informed him, indicating with his chin the prison building and the cardboard wall along Marquês da Fronteira, now dark with the approaching rain. He was there for a hell of a lot of months after the Monsanto revolt, a monarchist troop, you know, until the end he signed the Debate. My father used to tell us how he would go to visit him with my grandmother at the hut and they would walk up the avenue in the summer, crushed by the heat, he dressed like a sailor like a barrel organ monkey, she with a hat and umbrella pushing her pregnant belly in front of her like Florentino the freight boy carried pianos around Benfica in a huge wheelbarrow. No, seriously, look at the picture: the blue-eyed German woman whose father committed suicide with two pistols sat at the desk behind her, and the boy, cramped in his carnival uniform, a duet on the way to a mustachioed captain who came down from the Fort with a wounded man on his back until he ran aground on the rifles of the Carbonari. You can't even make out their features in the oval photographs of that fiery time, and when we were born, Salazar had already transformed the country into a domesticated seminary.

- When I was at school, said the friend, the teacher, who smelled bad from her clubbed feet, told us to draw the animals in the zoo and I did the same.

Dog cemetery, do you remember what it's like? The Alto de São João of the poodles? Sometimes I get the idea that the whole of Portugal is a bit like that, the bad taste of nostalgia in diminutive and barking buried under lousy tombstones.

– To our Mondego, the eternal longing for your Leninha, declared the doctor.

– To the beloved Bijú of the owners who never forget him, Milú and Fernando, replied the friend.

– Now, said the psychiatrist, they replace the funerals of the mongrels with thanks to the Divine Holy Spirit or the Infant Jesus of Prague in the *Diário de Notícias*. Land of the sly: if King D. Pedro were to return to the world he would not find anyone in the entire kingdom to castrate. One is already born a Commercial Invalid and we reduce our ambitions to the first prize in the draw of the João de Deus League of the Blind, a sly Ford Capri on top of a truck blaring from loudspeakers.

The friend brushed his blond beard against the doctor's shoulder: he looked like an environmentalist who had generously granted the bourgeoisie the gift of a tie.

– Have you been writing?, he asked.

From month to month he would suddenly ask himself this terrifying question, because for the psychiatrist, handling words constituted a kind of secret shame, an obsession eternally postponed.

– As long as I don't do it, I can always believe that if I do it, I'll do it well, he explained, and make up for my many lame centipede legs, you see? But if I start a serious book and give birth to shit, what excuse do I have?

– You might not give birth to shit, argued the friend.

– I can also win the house of Christmas Eve without buying the magazine. Or be elected pope. Or score free kicks in a packed stadium. Let me know that after I die you will publish my unpublished works with an explanatory preface, So-and-So, As I Knew Him. You will call yourself Max Brod and you can call me Franz Kafka in the privacy of your bed.

They had left the admiral blowing his nose tumultuously into the candle in his handkerchief and had chosen the middle floor, which the doctor preferred because of the incubator-like hue of the light, with lamps hidden in brass tubes. People ate shoulder to shoulder like the apostles at the Last Supper, and on the other side of the horseshoes on the counters, the waiters were bustling about in a frenzy of insects, uniformed in white, led by a man in civilian clothes with his hands behind his back who reminded the psychiatrist of the building inspectors watching the workers' galley efforts with toothpicks in their teeth: he had never understood the reason for these authoritarian and silent creatures observing the work of others with the pupils of a sea bream, leaning against gigantic blue Mercedes. His friend leaned over to pick up the menu, which was placed on a metal rail over jars of mustard and various sauces (the beauty products of cooking, the doctor thought), opened it with cardinal's unction, and began to quietly read the names of the dishes on a small piece of paper.

fradesco: he had never allowed anyone to share in this voluptuous operation, while the psychiatrist was more interested in the prices, an inheritance from his parents' house where the soup multiplied, indefinitely, meal after meal, in a watery prodigy. One day, when he was already a man, a bottle of wine appeared on the table and his mother explained, sharing her clear eyes with her astonished offspring:

– Now, thank God, we can.

My old lady, he thought, my old lady, we never knew how to get along with each other: right from the moment you were born I almost killed you with eclampsia, I was taken away from you with irons, and from your perspective I have been stumbling through the years towards some final but certain misfortune. My eldest son is crazy, you would announce to visitors to excuse my (to you) bizarre behavior, my inexplicable melancholies, the verses I secretly secreted, cocoons of sonnets for a formless anguish. The grandmother, to whom I went on Sundays with my mind fixed on the maid's buttocks, and who lived in the shadow of the glory and decorations of two deceased generals, would warn me painfully at steak time:

– You kill your mother.

And do I kill you or do I kill myself, my old woman, who for so long seemed like my sister, small, pretty, fragile, a shepherdess of stained glass and the mist of Sardinia, whose schedule was divided between Proust and Paris-Match, a mother of male heirs who left you intact in the leanness of your hips and the fine wire of your bones? Perhaps I inherited from you the taste for silence, and the successive bellies did not allow you the space to love me as I needed, as I wanted, until when we realized our existence face to face, you my mother and I your son, it was too late for what, in my way of feeling, had not existed. The taste of silence and staring at each other like strangers separated by an impossible-to-abolish distance, what will you really think of me, of my unformulated desire to re-enter your womb for a long, dreamless mineral sleep, a stone-like pause in this race that terrifies me and that from the outside would seem to be imposed on me, a frantic trot of anguish towards the rest that does not exist. I kill myself, mother, without anyone or almost anyone noticing, swinging on the rope of a smile, crying inside, the humidity of a cave, the sweat of granite, the secret fog in which I hide. Silence even in the background music of the restaurant, Rennie's lozenge in the treble clef to help digestions that are swallowed in a hurry for ostriches that share pizzas against the clock, background music that always reminds me of flounders of spiny eagles wallowing in the sands of the score with their honeyed little eyes observing the aquarium protrudingly, the lull of resigned intestines. The friend finally managed to capture the interest of an employee who was vibrating with impatience, spurred on by multiple calls, like a horse stung by simultaneous and contradictory orders, shaking the thin mane of his hair.

distressed indecision.

– What do you choose?, he asked the doctor who was fighting for his meter of counter space with an enormous obese lady occupied by the pyramid of an enormous obese ice cream, baroque of crystallized fruits, with which he fought fiercely with great blows of the spoon: it was not clear which of the two would devour the other.

– Hamburger with rice, said the psychiatrist without looking at the missal of fish and meat in which Latin had given way to a French of casseroles dictated by the prima donna authority of the cook, pemican, oh pale face my brother, before entering the Prairie of Eternal Hunts.

– A hamburger and a leg of pork, his friend translated to the waiter, almost bursting with despair. Another minute, thought the doctor, and earthquake cracks will open up in his cheeks and he will disintegrate on the floor in a crash.

– Syncope of an old building, he said loudly, syncope of a Valmor Prize attacked by leprosy and woodworm.

The ice cream lady swerved towards him with the sideways glance of a stray dog ready for a fight, fearing that her rummaging through edible garbage was threatened: first the whipped cream and then the metaphysics, reflected the psychiatrist.

– What?, asked the friend.

– What what?, asked the doctor.

– You moved your mouth and I didn't hear a sound, said the friend. Like the devout women in churches.

– I was thinking that writing is a bit like doing artificial respiration

Moraes' dictionary, the 4th grade grammar and the remaining tombs of dead words, and I, sometimes full and sometimes empty of oxygen, dumbfounded with doubts.

In front of them, a cross-eyed girl, identical to a sparrow in heat, whispered confidential giggles to a forty-year-old man who was curled up like a shell to receive her bouncy guffaws. The psychiatrist would almost bet that the man had been a priest, given the lack of sharpness in his gestures and the soft curve of his lips, into which he inserted pieces of bread in a steady metronome rhythm, chewing slowly and slowly, like a camel. Dull, slow squint came from his eyelids, and the cross-eyed girl, amazed, nibbled on a piece of his ear with her rotten teeth, like a giraffe, extending its thick tongue over the bars towards the eucalyptus leaves.

A second employee, who looked like Harpo Marx, pushed the slices of roast pork and the hamburger onto the paper towels. With his fork in hand, the doctor felt like a calf tied to the manger that he shared with other calves, all imprisoned by the tyranny of their jobs, with no time for joy or hope. Work, the Sunday car ride along the inevitable triangle of Casa-Sintra-Cascais, work again, the car ride again, and so on until a funeral carriage catches us by surprise at the corner of the heart attack and ends the cycle at the final stop of Prazeres. Hurry up, please.

quickly, he prayed with his whole body to the God of his childhood, a bearded bogeyman, a close friend of his aunts, the landlord of the lame sacristan of Nelas, a divine pigeon fancier who owned the alms boxes and the Expedite Saints of the side altars, with whom he maintained the disillusioned relationship of lovers who expect little from each other. As no one answered him, he ate the only mushroom that decorated the hamburger and which resembled a molar yellowed from lack of toothpaste. From his friend's silence he could tell that he was waiting for the explanation of the morning phone call with his usual patience of a quiet tree.

– I've reached the bottom, said the psychiatrist, the mushroom still on his tongue, remembering that when he was little, in catechism, he had been warned that it was a horrible sin to speak before swallowing the host. The bottom of the bottom, you snitch. The bottom of the bottom of the bottom.

Next to the cross-eyed woman an elderly gentleman was reading the Selections while waiting for lunch: I Am John's Testicle. Why would a sixty-year-old man want testicles?

– I've reached the bottom of the pit, continued the psychiatrist, and I'm not sure I'll be able to get out of the mud I'm in. I'm not even sure there's a way out for me, you know? Sometimes I'd hear the patients talking and I'd think about how that guy or that girl would get themselves into the pit and I couldn't find a way to pull them out because of the short length of my arm. Like when, as a student, they showed us cancer patients in the wards clinging to the world by the navel of morphine. I'd think about the anguish of that guy or that girl, I'd get medicine and words of comfort from my astonishment, but I never thought I'd one day join the ranks because, damn it, I had strength. I had strength: I had a wife, I had daughters, the project of writing, concrete things, lifebuoys to keep me afloat. If I was feeling a little anxious at night, you know how it is, I would go to the girls' room, to that mess of children's stuff, watch them sleep, calm down: I felt supported, uh, supported and safe. And suddenly, fuck, my life turned upside down, here I am, a cockroach on my back, kicking and screaming, with no support. We, you know, I mean her and I, really liked each other, still really like each other, and the thing about this shit is that I can't stand up straight again, call her and say – Let's fight, because maybe I've lost the will to fight, my arms can't move, my voice can't speak, the tendons in my neck can't hold my head up. And fuck it, that's all I want. I think we both have failed because we don't know how to forgive, because we don't know how to be completely accepted, and in the meantime, in hurting and being hurt, our love (it's better to say it this way: our love) resists and grows without any breath to this day extinguishing it. It's as if I could only love her far away from her with so much desire, catano, to love her up close, body to body, as our struggle has been since we met. To give her what I haven't been able to give her until today and there is within me, frozen though it is but always breathing, a hidden seed that waits. What from the beginning

I wanted to give you, I want to give you, tenderness, you see, without selfishness, the daily routine without routine, the absolute surrender of a life in sharing, total, warm and simple like a chick in the hand, a small animal scared and trembling, ours.

He fell silent, his throat tight as the gentleman from the Selections, after folding a corner of the page before closing the magazine, poured the contents of a sugar packet, in cautious sips, into the jaundiced lemon tea. The obese lady had definitely overcome the ice cream and nodded lightly, feeling like a boa constrictor. Three short-sighted teenagers were conferring over their respective steaks, looking askance at a solitary redhead with a knife poised in the air like a stork's suspended leg, lost in indecipherable meditations.

– None of you can find a person like the other, said the friend, pushing the empty plate away with the back of his hand, none of you can find a person as much for the other as the other, as much in agreement with the other as the other, but you punish yourself and punish yourself with the guilt of an alcoholic, you got stuck in the idiocy of Estoril, you disappeared, no one sees you, you evaporated into thin air. I'm still waiting for you so we can finish the work on Acting-Out.

– I'm out of ideas, said the doctor.

– You are empty of everything, replied the friend. Why don't you put your horns against a wall now?

The psychiatrist remembered something his wife had said shortly before they parted. They were sitting on the red sofa in the living room, under an engraving of Bartholomew that he greatly appreciated, while the cat sought a warm space between their hips, and at this point she had turned her large, resolute brown eyes towards him and declared:

– I don't accept that, with or without me, you give up because I believe in you and I bet on you wholeheartedly.

And he remembered how it had stung and hurt him, and how he had chased the beast away to embrace the woman's narrow, dark body, repeating GTS, GTS, GTS, in anguished emotion: she had been the first person to love him entirely, with the enormous weight of his defects inside. And the first (and the only) person to encourage him to write, whatever the price for that seemingly pointless torture of putting a poem or a story on a square of paper. And I, he asked himself, what have I really done for you, in what have I really tried to help you? By opposing my selfishness to your love, my disinterest to your interest, my surrender to your fight?

– I'm a shithead asking for help, he said to his friend, so shitheaded that I can't even hold my pens. Once again asking for attention from others without giving anything in return. I cry tears like a crocodile kid that don't even help me and maybe it's only me I think about.

– Try being a man for a change, replied the friend, harpooning his brother Marx by the sleeve to ask him for a double coffee. Try being a man for a change.

a little bit: maybe you can hold on to the swing.

The doctor looked down and noticed that he hadn't touched his hamburger. The sight of the cold, curdled meat and sauce caused him to feel a kind of agonized dizziness that swirled from his guts to his mouth. He got off the stool as if from a suddenly overly mobile, difficult saddle, holding back his vomit with the help of his stomach muscles, his hands open in front of his mouth, in a daze. He managed to reach the washbasin and, bending forward, began to jerkily expel, in the sink closest to the door, the confused remains of the previous night's dinner and the morning's breakfast, whitish, gelatinous pieces that slid repulsively down the drain. When he managed to control himself enough to wash his mouth and palms, he saw in the mirror that his friend, behind him, was looking at him with his face hollowed out with pallor, still twisted by suffocation and cramps.

– Hey man, he said to the reflected image, the guardian angel of his anguish, motionless against a background of tiles, hey man, your cousin's cunt, a snotty old woman's ass, Father Inácio's balls, it really sucks to be a man. Isn't it?

The clouds that formed like a sleeping cap over the cardboard silhouette of the Penitentiary extended the dark shadow halfway across the Park as the doctor headed for the car that he had usually left parked—he couldn't remember exactly where—somewhere under the golden green of the plane trees that bordered the enormous central space that opened up to the river in a vastness without majesty. A group of gypsies squatted on the sidewalk and were shouting over the ownership of a decrepit wall clock, whose agonized pendulum swayed like an arm fallen from a stretcher, occasionally letting out an exhausted ticking of its last breath. It was not yet time for homosexuals to populate the spaces between the trees with their expectant silhouettes, caressed by cars that brushed languidly against them like large, greedy cats, driven by gentlemen who were aging like violets withering, in a hurt sweetness. The psychiatrist had had his first encounter there with a prostitute who occupied eight meters of limestone with great strides, majestic in fake pearls and terrifying glass rings, an enormous baker from Aljubarrota who had saved him with blows of a handbag from the siren smiles of a pair of transvestites squeezed into red satins, with army boots on their feet, sergeants rounding the precinct with carnival partygoers, in order to drag him authoritatively to a windowless room with engravings of drunken friars on the walls and a portrait of Cary Grant on the crochet oval of the dresser. Torn between shyness and desire, the doctor had watched in socks, hugging the clothes he didn't know where to put, the metamorphosis of that cheap Mata Hari into a being like the monster with Herculean breasts tearing up telephone directories in the circus that toured the beach in the summer, the mangy tigers of his misery of dull sequins. The woman had slipped into the sheets like a slice of ham between two halves of bread, and he, astonished, had come closer until he fearfully touched the bedspread like someone who feels the temperature of the swimming pool with their bunions, in a chilly ballet attitude. The tulip on the ceiling revealed the planisphere of unknown continents that the humidity had drawn on the limestone. The impatient cry – Is it for today, my dear?, threw him onto the bed with the unanswered vehemence of a well-timed kick, and the psychiatrist lost his virginity by penetrating, all of him, into a large hairy tunnel, burying his nose in the pillow strewn with hairpins like a Christmas tree of cotton flakes, to which patches of dandruff stuck, identical to large sheets of fat. Two days later, dripping a burning stearin into his underwear, he obtained, through the pharmacist's injections, the certainty that love is a dangerous disease that can be cured with a box of ampoules and warm permanganate washes in the maid's bidet, to steal the vehemence of passions from his mother's questioning curiosity.

But at that innocent hour of the afternoon the Park was populated only by young Japanese people greeting each other in the language of parakeets, to whom

the gypsies tried to force the wall clock with the determination of someone shoveling cornstarch down the throats of stubborn children, and the Japanese, surprised, stared at that strange warehouse of minutes whose pendulum hung from a small glass door like the thorn-encircled heart of the Christs on the prayer cards, as if they were observing, between curiosity and astonishment, an ancestor with features vaguely similar to those of the chrome UFOs that flashed luminous messages on their narrow wrists. The psychiatrist suddenly felt prehistoric next to these beings whose slanted eyes were Leica lenses and whose stomachs had been replaced by Datsun carburetors, forever free from the twists and turns of heartburn and gases that hesitated between a sigh and a belch: I don't know if it was borborygmus or sadness, he often thought when his chest swelled and the balloon of a piece of chewing gum without a gum reached his mouth, evaporating through his lips in a little whistle like a comet, and he attributed to comfort to the esophagus what in fact concerned the confusion of his anguish.

He found the car cramped by two enormous station wagons, ivory elephants used to support great-aunt books, reluctantly holding a ridiculous pamphlet: One of these days I'll buy a sixteen-wheeled truck and become a decisive person, the doctor decided, getting into the tiny car, its dashboard cluttered with unplayed cassettes and medicine packets that had long since passed their expiry date: he kept these useless items like others keep the bottle of stones from gallbladder surgery in a drawer, in the moving hope of marking the past of what life leaves behind on the margins of its course, and from time to time he ran his fingers over the medicines like Arabs caress their mysterious beads. I am a man of a certain age, he said aloud, as he always did when Lisbon, in a meditative gesture like a farmed lobster, tightened its pincers around the tendons of his neck, and houses, trees, squares and streets entered tumultuously into his head in the style of a painting by Soutine dancing a carnivorous and frenetic Charleston.

Turning the steering wheel from side to side like a rudder, he avoided the sleeping hippos in the stations, raising their lazy eyes from the asphalt river in the headlights, mammals manned by loquacious traveling salesmen who traveled the province on safaris in which the indigenous villages gave way to bandstands afflicted with rust psoriasis, around which old men with walking sticks spat authoritatively into their sheepskin boots, and he entered the sobbing ant trail of traffic, controlled from the back by the unsensual winks of the traffic light. The luminous green resembled the color of the irises of the eldest daughter when she smiled with pleasure under her disheveled blond hair, a tiny witch astride the wooden zebra broom of the merry-go-round during trips of exultant joy: the psychiatrist then thought she was much older than she really was, and he felt, leaning against the iron balustrade,

paying the waiter melancholically, an elderly gentleman stumbling in his drawers towards the near goal of prostate cancer and the last catheter, poor final pinwheels of anonymous destinies.

With the car engine stuttering to the indigestion-like jerks of a long row of bonnets, I would look for the dentist's office in the baroque Valmor Prizes on the street corners, the small Jerónimos that hid inside dynasties of retired colonels and amazing octogenarians: he didn't work on Friday afternoons and did his best to furnish the long, hollow tunnel of the weekends with small, marginal activities, just as his aunts occupied the comfortable space in the mornings, armed with rosaries, kind words and five-tostón coins, visiting what they proudly called "our poor little people", accommodating creatures who had not yet been assailed by the disturbing bogeyman of Communism with dangerous doubts about the virtue of the Saint. The doctor had accompanied them on a few occasions on these sinister raids (Don't get too close to them because of the illnesses) and he had a poignant memory of the smell of hunger and misery and of a paralytic crawling in the mud between the huts, his hand outstretched to his aunts who assured him, with a missal in hand, of the splendors of eternity on the essential condition that he scrupulously respected our family's silver.

On the way home, the psychiatrist was in turn catechized (The boy prays that there won't be a revolution, because these people are quite capable of killing us all), while they explained to him that God, being a conservative par excellence, ensured the balance of institutions by offering those who had not created galloping tuberculosis that spared them the daily drudgery of housework and the hot flashes of menopause, scarlet waves that reminded them of the shameful fact of having under their skirts the demands, present even if dying, of a sex. And it occurred to him that when he had started to masturbate, his mother, intrigued, had gone to show her husband a stain on her underwear, following which she had received a formal summons to appear at the office, the main altar of the house where his father endlessly studied strange diseases in German books with a pipe in his gums. Being called to the office was in itself the most solemn and terrible act of his childhood, and he entered the august place with his hands behind his back and his tongue already curled in apologies, with the resignation of a calf in the slaughterhouse. His father, who was writing on a board on his knees, slid a severe sideways glance towards him, like a black dress where the lace of the underskirt could be glimpsed, a kind of furtive understanding, and said in the beautiful deep voice with which he recited Antero's sonnets during his children's anginas, sitting on the edge of the bed, book in hand, solemnly as if he were performing an initiatory ritual:

– Be careful and wash yourself.

And it was the first time, the doctor thought, that he had been physically aware of

that his father had been young, and had confronted himself, looking at his thin, serious face, carved with bones, and the sharp eye sockets of a phosphorescent brown, with the distressing evidence of having to stumble in turn from metamorphosis to metamorphosis towards the perfect insect that he would never reach. I won't be able to I won't be able to I won't be able to he repeated himself, standing on the office carpet, staring at his father's Quaker silhouette, bent over the paper with the attention of an embroiderer. The future appeared to him in the form of a dark, greedy drain ready to suck his body through its rusty throat, a path of a tumble from sewer to sewer towards the intractable sea of old age, leaving on the sand of the ebb tide the teeth and hair of majestic decrepitudes. The mother's portrait smiled on the shelf with melancholic glows of a rose window as if the morning of her joy was barely making it through the pale stained glass of her lips: she too had not managed to do so, wavering indecisively between the basket and Eça and losing herself alone in a corner of the sofa in enigmatic meditations, and perhaps the same had happened to the others, the rest of the tribe, solitary even when not alone, irremediably separated by the infinity of despair. He saw his grandfather again on the veranda of the house in Nelas, on those afternoons in Beira when the twilight stretches over the mountains like lilac mists from a biblical film, observing the chestnut trees with the bitterness of an admiral on top of a sinking ship, he saw his grandmother pacing back and forth in the hallway, the fever of useless energy in which the flame burned, his uncles who had been plasticized by everyday life, the lukewarm resignation of the visits, the silence that suddenly covered the hum of conversations and during which people were agitated, terrified, prey to fears that could not be expressed. Who was capable, the psychiatrist asked himself, looking for a place for his car near the dentist's office and parking it in the back next to a leprous grocery store murdered in its rice and potatoes by a gigantic supermarket that offered astonished visitors already chewed American food, wrapped in the cellophane of Andy Williams' voice evaporating in seductive breaths from wisely distributed speakers, who was capable of offering himself the perfect profile of a Romanian gymnast motionless in the air in a rings exercise, releasing puffs of talcum powder from Tarzan's armpits? Maybe I'm dead, he thought, I'm certainly dead so nothing important can happen to me anymore, just gangrene eating away at my body from the inside, my head empty of ideas, and up above, on the surface, the soft hand of the wind stirring, searching, the tops of the cypresses, in a tremor of old newspaper pages that are crumpled.

In the corridor of the dentist's office, the buzzing of the drill hovered invisibly in the shadows, insistently like a blowtorch, searching for the lump of sugar in an unsuspecting molar. The employee, thin and pale like a hemophiliac countess, extended her transparent fingers to him from across the counter:

– Are you feeling better, doctor?

He belonged to the class of Portuguese people who transform life events

in a chilling succession of diminutives: the previous week the doctor had listened, crushed, to the detailed account of the flu of the employee's son, a perverse child who used to entertain himself with the PBX pegs, diverting the howls of pain from Lisbon abscesses to Boston or Nepal:

– He had a little pain in his tummy, I put the thermometer in his arm, the poor boy's eyes were so inflamed that I can't even imagine, he spent a week eating chicken soup, I even thought about calling the doctor's father, you never know at that age if the little brain is affected, now thank God he's recovered, I promised a candle to Saint Philomena, I left him sitting in his bed, quiet, playing receptionist, since he can't answer here he pretends to answer there, just now the engineer Godinho, that strong man, very nice and not offending, who spoke because his wisdom tooth was bothering him, was surprised not to hear my little Edgar, he was used to him, he even said to me, Oh Dona Delmira, so the boy?, God willing, next week the engineer will have him here, I said, it's not because he's my son, that would even look bad on me, but the doctor doesn't calculate the way he has with the headphones, in crescendo he certainly enters Marconi, my sister always repeats I've never seen him like Edgar Filipe, she calls him Edgar Filipe which is his name, Edgar from his father and Filipe from his godfather, I've never seen him like Edgar Filipe for the PBX, and it's true, my sister is married to an electrician and these things don't escape her, may Our Lady grant that the flu doesn't reach her little ears. I don't even want to think about it, I'm getting dizzy right away, I've been struggling, you see, the doctor from the Caixa warned me Madam, be careful with the pressure, there's nothing wrong with your kidneys but be careful with the pressure, so the doctor's appointment is scheduled for Friday.

This kind of filigree caravel talk, thought the psychiatrist, provokes in me the same admiring exaltation that crochet doilies and carousel paintings awaken in me, amulets of people dying in a landscape made up of cats on ground-floor windowsills and underground urinals. The river itself comes to sigh in the depths of the toilets with its unimportant asthma: after rounding Cape Bojador the sea has become irremediably fat and tame like the dogs at the gates, rubbing against our ankles with the irritating submission of the backs of castrated animals. Fearing a new description of health problems, the doctor disappeared into the cave in the waiting room like a crab threatened by a tenacious shrimp fish. There, a pile of missionary magazines piled up next to the wrought-iron lamp that spread a filtered light from a squinting eye socket, guaranteed him the innocent peace of a Zulu Lord's Prayer. Arranging his hips on the black leather sofa worn by the countless cavities that had preceded it, a stuffed horse shaped like a chair and perhaps capable of three or four stumbling kicks, he extracted from the pile of virtuous newspapers the remains of a weekly with a laughing half-caste nun on the cover and in which a Scottish priest narrated, in a long article illustrated by

photographs of zebras, the fruitful evangelization of a tribe of pygmies, two of whom, deacon M'Fulum and subdeacon T'Loclu, were preparing today in Rome the revolutionary thesis that established the exact height of Noah's Ark from the calculation of the average length of giraffes' necks: ethno-theology overturned the catechism. Soon a canon from Saudi Arabia would demonstrate that Adam was a camel, the serpent a pipe-line and God the Father a sheikh with Ray-Ban sunglasses commanding schools of angels and eunuchs from Paradise from his six-door Mercedes. For a moment the psychiatrist thought that the Aga Khan was in fact the incarnation of Jesus Christ, avenging himself for the troubles of Calvary by skiing down the Swiss mountains in the company of Miss Philipppines, and that the true saints were the tanned men who advertised packs of Rothman's King Size in virile attitudes of triumphal post-coitus. He compared himself to them in his mind, and the memory of the figure he glimpsed from time to time, by surprise, in the mirrors of the pastry shops, thin, fragile, and possessing a kind of unfinished grace, made him confront himself for the millionth time with the bitterness of his earthly origin, promised a future without glory. A constant pain twisted his jaw. He felt alone and helpless in the face of a senseless chess game whose rules he did not know. He urgently needed a nursery teacher to teach him how to walk, bending over to him the generous and ardent breasts of a Roman she-wolf contained by the soft-touch fabric of a pink bra. No one was waiting for him anywhere. No one cared particularly about him. And the leather sofa became his raft as a castaway adrift through the deserted city.

This dizzying certainty of emptiness that visited him more frequently in the morning hours, when he would painfully regroup around himself in the pasty and greasy movements of an explorer returning from stellar journeys to find himself, sluggish, in two meters of disheveled sheets, dissolved a little when he heard footsteps approaching in the corridor of the office, greeted by the voice of the hemophiliac (Good afternoon, Miss Edite, you have to wait a little in the room) leaving the cubicle in the murmur of tearful prayer of someone reciting the Koran from a crack in a mosque. Raising the chin of the pygmies illuminated by the exemplary spiritual journey of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, he came across a red-haired girl who had come to sit in the twin chair of his, on the opposite side of the lamp, and who, after a first appraising glance, brief and attentive like the tongue of a spotlight, rested her clear eyes on him in the wave of eyelashes with which the turtledoves nestle in the elbows of the statues. In the building opposite, a very fat woman was shaking out a rug among geraniums, while the upstairs neighbor, in an undershirt, was reading the sports newspaper on a canvas bench on the balcony. It was a quarter past two in the afternoon. The red-haired girl took a book from the Vampire collection marked with a subway ticket from her purse, crossed her legs like the blades of scissors overlapping each other, and the curve of her instep

hers resembled that of Degas's ballerinas suspended in gestures that were at once instantaneous and eternal, enveloped in the cotton vapor of the painter's tenderness: there are always those who are ecstatic when people fly.

– Hello, said the doctor in the tone in which Picasso must have addressed his dove. The red-haired girl's eyebrows converged until they formed the circumflex accent of the roof of a kiosk that the plane tree branches of her loose locks lightly touched:

“That was the time when toothaches talked,” she said. She had the kind of timbre you imagine Marlene Dietrich would have had in her youth.

– None of my teeth hurt because I wear false teeth, the doctor said. I'm just replacing them with shark fins so I can swallow the fish in my godmother's aquarium better.

– I'm here to murder the dentist, declared the red-haired girl. I just learned the recipe from Perry Mason.

When you were in high school you could certainly solve quadratic equations in a jiffy, thought the psychiatrist who was frightened by pragmatic women: your domain had always been that of confused and wandering dreams, with no table of logarithms to decode them, and you could barely come to terms with the idea of a geometric ordering of life, within which you felt disoriented like an ant without a compass. Hence your feeling of existing only in the past and of the days slipping backwards like old clocks, whose hands move backwards in search of the dead in the portraits, slowly illuminated by the resurrection of the hours. Your grandparents from Brazil stuck their yellow beards out of the album, balloon skirts puffed up in the drawers of photographs, distant cousins in leggings chatted in the living room, Mr. Barros e Castro recited Gomes Leal in a beautiful intonation. How old am I? he asked himself, periodically checking himself, which gave him a precarious understanding of external reality, a viscous substance in which his steps sank, perplexed, aimless. His daughters, his identity card and his place in the hospital still anchored him to everyday life, but by such fine threads he continued to hover, a furry little seed from breath to breath, hesitating. Since he had separated from his wife he had lost ground and meaning: his trousers were loose around his waist, his collars were missing buttons, he was gradually beginning to resemble an asocial bum in whose carefully trimmed beard one could detect the ashes of a decent past. Lately, looking at himself in the mirror, he felt that his own features were becoming uninhabited, the folds of his smile giving way to wrinkles of discouragement. His face was becoming more and more forehead-like: soon he would part his ear and cross his bald head with six or seven sticky strands of hairspray, in a ridiculous illusion of youth. He suddenly remembered his mother's wistful sigh:

– My children are so beautiful even at thirty.

And desperately wanting to return to the starting line, where promises of victory are not only permitted but necessarily desirable: the field of projects that never come to fruition was never a little like his homeland, his neighborhood, the house of which he knew by heart every nook and cranny, the rickety chairs, the insects, the intimate smells, the creaking boards.

"Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?" he asked the red-haired girl who was perfecting her criminal intentions through Perry Mason's mediocre deductions, lining up syllogisms of implacable stupidity in court.

The hemophiliac called him from the hallway: she hurriedly wrote down the telephone number on a piece of paper torn from the page of the missionary magazine where a group of cannibal sacristans were taking communion under guise with evident appetite (At seven? At seven-thirty? Does the hairdresser arrive at seven-thirty?) and headed for the dentist's office, imagining red thighs spread out on the sheets in the happy abandonment of after love, the freckled pubis, the smell of skin. She sat down on the torture chair, surrounded by dark instruments, drills, hooks, stilettos, irons, a gum on a plate, given over to the exciting task of imagining her apartment: cushions on the floor, books from the Readers' Circle on the shelves, trinkets of women only recovering their innocence through stuffed animals, photographs celebrating dead idylls, a friend with glasses and a bad complexion discussing the Left amidst the anti-bourgeois fumes of *Tres Vintes*. In his fits of misogyny, the doctor used to classify women according to the tobacco they smoked: the non-contraband Marlboro type read Gore Vidal, spent the summer in Ibiza, found Giscard d'Estaing and Prince Philippe very dull and intelligence a strange nuisance; the contraband Marlboro type was interested in design, bridge and Agatha Christie (in English), frequented the Muxaxo swimming pool and considered culture a vaguely amusing phenomenon when accompanied by a love of golf; the SG-Gigante type enjoyed Jean Ferrat, Truffaut and the *Nouvel Observateur*, voted Socialist and maintained relationships with men that were both emancipated and iconoclastic; the SG-Filter class had a Che Guevara poster on their bedroom wall, fed spiritually on Reich and interior design magazines, couldn't sleep without pills and camped out on the weekends at the Albufeira lagoon conspiring to create a Marxist studies centre; the Portuguese-Soft style didn't paint themselves, cut their nails short, studied Anti-Psychiatry and agonised over oblique passions for ugly protest singers, with unbuttoned Nazaré shirts and peremptory and schematic social notions; finally, the lumpen with the tobacco in their shrouds languished to the sound of Pink Floyd on battery-powered record players next to their friend's Suzuki, teenagers advertising Koni shock absorbers on the backs of their plastic jackets. On the fringes of this simplified taxonomy was the Boquilha group, menopausal women who owned boutiques, antique shops and restaurants in Alfama, and jingled with bracelets.

Moroccan women, straight from the efforts of beauty salons into the arms of men who were too young or too old, who tended to their melancholy and demands in duplexes in Campo de Ourique, flooded with the voice of Ferré and Rosa Ramalho's dolls, and where indirect lamps tinged their worn breasts with a modest and favorable shadow. You, he thought, referring to the woman, while the dentist, a sort of sarcastic Mephistopheles, shone a tremendous light from a boxing ring into her eyes, you, he thought, have always escaped the derision and irony with which I try to hide the tenderness that I am ashamed of and the affection that terrifies me, perhaps because from the beginning you realized that beneath the challenge, the aggressiveness, the arrogance, there was hidden a distressed plea, a blind man's cry, the piercing gaze of a deaf person who does not understand and tries in vain to decipher, on the lips of others, the soothing words he needs. You always came without me calling you, you always supported my suffering and my fear, we grew up side by side learning from each other the communion of shared isolation, like when I left, in the rain, for Angola, and your dry eyes said goodbye without speaking, dark stones holding inside as if a juice of love. And he remembered his body lying in bed on the afternoons in Marimba, under the enormous mango trees teeming with bats that waited for the night, hanging by their feet like carnivorous umbrellas (rat angels, a friend called them), and his eldest daughter, who was just starting to walk, stumbling toward them, clinging to the walls. We can't handle many challenges, the psychiatrist thought at the moment the dentist hooked the vacuum cleaner to the corner of his mouth, we can't handle many challenges and we almost always end up running away in terror at the first difficulty that appears, defeated without a fight, like skinny dogs that prowl the back of hotels at a slow trot, hungry for food. The sound of the drill approaching with the ferocity of a wasp woke him to the reality of the imminent pain when that tiny Black and Decker touched his jaw. The doctor held the arms of the chair with both hands, tightened his stomach muscles, closed his eyelids tightly, and just as he used to do when faced with suffering, anguish and insomnia, he began to imagine the sea.

The streets outside continued with one walk in the sun and another in the shade like cripples in mismatched shoes, and the doctor lingered at the door of the office, feeling his aching jaws to make sure he continued to exist from the eyes down: ever since he had seen in Africa the orbits of crocodiles drifting in the river, searching for the bodies they had lost, he had been afraid of letting go of himself to float, without the weight of intestines, around the blind people who play out of tune on street corners with their rheumatic accordions of Chopins from the pasodoble. This city that was his always offered him, through its avenues and squares, the infinitely variable face of a capricious lover that the trees darkened with the cone of shadow of melancholic remorse, and he would stumble upon the Neptunes of the lakes like a drunkard finds himself, coming out of a street lamp, with the fierce chin of a humorless policeman, culturally fed by the grammatical errors of the corporal of the police station. All the statues pointed their fingers towards the sea, inviting him to India or to a discreet suicide, depending on the state of mind and the level of desire for adventure in the childhood depot: the psychiatrist observed the tugboats-freighters pushing enormous oil-tankers, and he delegated to them the effort of body and spirit that he had given up making, sitting inside himself like the old Eskimos abandoned on the ice, emptied of feelings by the northern agony that inhabits them. Upon returning from the war, the doctor, meanwhile accustomed to the forest, the sunflower farms and the blacks' patient and eternal notion of time, in which the minutes, suddenly elastic, could last for entire weeks of peaceful expectation, had had to make a painful effort to adapt himself to the tiled buildings that made up his native huts. The paleness of their faces forced him to diagnose a collective anemia, and the accentless Portuguese seemed as devoid of charm as the daily routine of a clerk. Men cramped in cilices and ties agitated around him in bitter quarrels: the god Zumbi, lord of Destiny and Rain, had not crossed the equator, seduced by a continent where even death possessed the impetuous joy of a triumphant birth. Between the Angola he had lost and the Lisbon he had not regained, the doctor felt doubly orphaned, and this state of being left alone had continued painfully because so much had changed in his absence: the streets were turning into unexpected elbows, the television antennas were scaring the pigeons towards the river, forcing them to do a seagull's fado, unexpected wrinkles gave his aunts' mouths the expressions of disillusioned Montaignes, the multiplication of family events was pushing him back into the prehistory of the serial, of which he only knew the paleolithic accidents. Cousins he had abandoned in their shorts were muttering into their incipient beards a revolt that transcended him, they celebrated the dead who had been left to collect Treasury bonds to which they had transferred their childish appetite for accumulating bottle caps: in essence it was as if, through him, a Fr. Luís de Sousa in a blazer was being repeated.

So in his free afternoons he would ride his small, battered car and methodically check out the city, neighborhood by neighborhood and church by church, on pilgrimages that invariably ended at the Rocha do Conde de Óbidos, which he had left one day for the imposed adventure and with whom he maintained, despite everything, the respectful and masochistic intimacy that victims reserve for retired executioners. The dentist's office was located in an area of Lisbon as uncharacteristic as a hepatitis diet, where flower sellers would leave baskets of their dying spring flowers on the sidewalk, spreading an atmosphere of wakefulness in the air, reminding him of the night he had gone to dinner near São Jorge Castle, in a French restaurant where the price of the dishes meant he had to take heartburn tablets that the tenderness of the file mignon spared him. They were the popular saints and the city dressed up in a kind of mystical-profane carnival, identical to a naked woman sparkling with glass jewels: the breath of marches bubbled in the gutters, funereal notaries invaded Alfama with Dracula-like gestures. The square in front of the restaurant, suspended over the river like a zeppelin of low houses, twisted with cramps like in Cézanne's paintings, was populated by trees concentrating within themselves an immense quantity of darkness, shadows that the wind rustled like change in a pocket, coins made of branches and leaves pregnant with sleeping birds. Thin Englishmen, like exclamation marks without vehemence, disembarked from taxis whose engines purred like the calls of disgruntled trawlers. Between the meshes of noise, one could sense the concave texture of silence, the same silence that threateningly inhabited the fear of darkness inherited from childhood panics, and the psychiatrist, intrigued, searched for its origin from window to window until he found, on the ground floor, a wide-open door to an empty room, without engravings or curtains, furnished only by a coffin covered in black cloth, resting on two benches, and by a middle-aged woman with tears still on her cheeks, a creature from Battleship Potemkin, a tragic statue of grief.

Maybe this is life, thought the doctor, jumping over a basket of chrysanthemums to reach the car, drowned in corollas like the corpse of a commander, a dead man in the center and Saint Anthony around him, the core of sadness surrounded by the jovial pulp of grilled sardines and fireworks, and he thought that the toothache was awakening in him the pitiful images of Modas & Bordados that constituted the true depths of his soul: when he was distressed, bad taste, faith in the Lord of the Steps and the desire to be marsupialized in some lap reappeared, intact, genuine materials that persisted under the varnish of disdain. He started the engine to escape from his island of honeyed petals, from which he jumped like a dolphin from a lake in a hiccup of connecting rods, and went down to Martim Moniz spreading stems, identical to Botticelli's Venus redesigned by Cesário Verde: the Sentimento Dum Ocidental was a bit like his underwear, alexandrines' drawers never

naked, even for the ardent minutes of a furtive relationship.

Almirante Reis Avenue, eternally grey, rainy and sad in the July sun, alternately marked by street vendors and invalids, trotted towards the Tagus between two rows of decayed buildings, like a gentleman squeezed into new shoes for the tram stop. Alert industrialists placed smuggled clocks on the terraces to which the shoe shiners, squatting on wooden chamber pots, gave the unusual dimension of a nursery. In gigantic cafés like empty swimming pools, lonely unemployed people awaited the Last Judgement in front of immemorial gallons and tertiary toasts, frozen in waiting attitudes. Hairdressing salons inhabited by cockroaches offered housewives with their hair in short supply unexpected solutions, to which dusty haberdashery would give the finishing touch of lace bras, mosquito nets capable of rejuvenating twenty-five years of conjugal resignation with formidable erections. The psychiatrist liked the small crossroads that fed that majestic and slow river of additional hairdressers and suburban shoe shops, pushing a provincial universe towards the Baixa, pieces of Póvoa de Santo Adrião drifting through Lisbon, unexpected beer halls carpeted with lupins: he breathed better away from the big stores, from the competent shop assistants better dressed than he was, from the regicides on horseback gesticulating bronzed impetus. As a child, he would spend long hours at the coal mine next to his parents' house, where a dirty-faced titan would make briquettes and threaten his wife with monstrous beatings, and at lunch he would pick up his fork to listen to the dull echo of these energetic loves: if he could choose, he would undoubtedly barricade himself with comfortable quinane tables and plastic vases of roses, and, if he were ill, he would demand that the hospital oxygen be scented with garlic.

In Praça da Figueira, where the nearby existence of seagulls is beginning to be suspected by the restlessness of the sparrows, in the same way that the shadow of a smile announces an imminent reconciliation, his molar had completely stopped hurting, tamed by the dentist's maneuvers, who had reduced it to the mediocrity of anonymity: in that professional with the drill there was something of a school prefect, ready to soften the whims of the originals with a beating. D. João IV, a problematic hero, stared with hollow eyes at a row of balconies, representative offices representing mold, cold tobacco and humidity. One could guess at the non-functioning toilets behind every wall, commercial invalids in every hirsute adolescent, desperate menapases in the policewomen. The doctor reached Rua do Ouro, aseptic of money changers, as straight as the intentions of a virtuous canon, and headed for the parking lot by the river, where he had always spent his solitude, because he belonged to the class of people who only know how to suffer beyond their means. There, on a slatted bench, he had read Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus for afternoons on end to conjure up a distant lost love. The waves curled around his feet in a canine fraternity, and it was

as if he could wash away the injustices of the world from his ankles onwards.

He parked his car next to a German-registered trailer, in whose dirt one could decipher the thrills of adventure tempered by the domestic modesty of the polka-dot curtains, and rolled down the window to smell the muddy water where men and women, buried up to their knees, were filling rusty tins with bait. The reapers of the low tide, he said to himself, were herons created by fascism, wading birds of hunger and misery. Sophia Andresen's verses came to mind in a rumbling of battle-torn veins:

These people whose faces
are sometimes luminous
And other times rough

Now it reminds me of slaves Now
it reminds me of kings

It revives my taste For
fighting and combat Against
the serpent and the snake
The pig and the kite

The traffic lurched along behind him, pushed by the imperious sleeves of the traffic men perched on circus pedestals, tamers with the aerial gestures of dancers. Bird shops fluttered between food shops and drugstores with bunches of brooms hanging from the ceiling like hairy fruits, and some attic windows also rose vertically into the sky, blown by the feathers of the clothes drying from balcony to balcony, the wings of shirts fading against the cheeks of the facades. The massive building of the Arsenal was green with sea moss, nostalgic for impossible shipwrecks. Further away, a cemetery spread the white cloth of tombs like baby teeth over a line of trees and church spires: four in the afternoon swelled on the municipal clocks, whose chimes could be said to be contemporary with Fernão Lopes, calm as dead tragedies. The trains from Cais do Sodré were dragging the first players and the last tourists to Estoril, Norwegians with index fingers lost on the city map, and the streets and the river were beginning to converge in the same horizontal summer peace that the factories of Barreiro colored with worker-red smoke, anticipating the sunset. A cargo boat was sailing up the riverbank, chased by a crown of voracious seagulls, and the psychiatrist thought about how his daughters would appreciate being there with him at that moment, agitated in a shower of ecstatic questions. The desire to see them gradually mingled with the bodies of the harvesters on the bank, who called out to each other in shouts close to him.

distorted or muffled by the refraction of the air, reduced to flickering echoes that the wind shaped like veils of sounds, with the weight of Lisbon stuck to their backs like a hump of buildings, and the stray dogs sniffing in vain in the surroundings for the urine message of the ideal Pekingese. Their tiny faces bore the painful outline of their remorse, which on weekends they tried in vain to bribe with excessive permissibility and viscous tenderness, a lavish magician king with chocolates that were not demanded of him. Knowing that at night he would not be with them to kiss them goodbye, already heavy with the lassitude of sleep, that he would not tiptoe away their nightmares by whispering in their ears the words of love from the secret vocabulary common to Donald Duck and Snow White, that in the morning his absence from the couple's bed had become an accepted habit without surprise, made him guilty of the dreadful crime of abandoning them. All he could do during the week was keep an eye on them secretly like a spy, be the José Matias of two irretrievably lost Elisas, who followed paths divergent from his own, tiny fragments of his blood that he followed, torn apart, from an ever greater distance. His desertion must have disappointed and confused them, as they were still waiting for his return, his footsteps on the stairs, his open arms, his former laughter. His father's sentence spiraled through his head.

– The only thing I feel sorry for is your daughters.

charged with the restrained emotion with which one could guess in him the modesty of affection that he had only learned to know and admire after adolescence, and he found himself as base and malignant as a sick animal, reduced to the asphyxiating proportions of a present without a future. He had turned life into a straitjacket in which it was impossible for him to move, tied by the straps of self-disgust and the isolation that impregnated him with a bitter sadness without mornings. A clock somewhere struck half past four: if he drove fast enough he would be in time for school to leave, a liberating act par excellence, a victory of laughter over tired stupidity: something in him, coming from the most remote part of his memory, insisted on assuring him, contrary to the terrible official weight of the multiplication tables, that there is a blackboard somewhere, who knows if in the attic of the attic or in the basement of the basement, stating that two and two do not make four.

Hidden by the ice cream freezer purring like a polar bear against the window of a pastry shop, the psychiatrist, hunched over, peered at the school gate in the attitude of a red man waiting behind his rock for the arrival of the white scouts. He had left his faithful black horse three or four hundred metres above, near the Benfica woods and its obese turtledoves, falcons recycled by the need for urban survival that forces the Great Manitou to disguise himself as the Lord of the Steps, and had come crawling from plane tree to plane tree, watched with astonishment by the street vendors selling purses and shoelaces, warrior brothers whose warlike activity was limited to stumbling away from the approach of the police, pushing trays of scalps of useless trinkets ahead of them. Now, under the shelter of the chocolate Hellos, scanning the horizon of the street with the pupils of a myopic eagle, the doctor released into the prairie air the smoke signals of a nervous cigarette that translated, syllable by syllable, the extent of his anxiety.

In the building opposite the one where he was hiding, there lived among cats and dedicated photographs of bishops in vogue an elderly aunt, sheltered by her one-eyed maid, venerable squaws of the family tribe, visited at Christmas by excursions of incredulous relatives, surprised by their combative longevity. Secretly the psychiatrist could not forgive them for outliving the grandmother he had loved so much and whose memory still touched him: when he felt at his lowest ebb he would go to her house, enter the living room and shamelessly inform her:

– I come here to be petted.

And he would rest his head on her lap so that her fingers, touching the back of his neck, would soothe his unfounded rage and his eager desire for tenderness: since the age of sixteen, the only important changes he had noticed were the deaths of the three or four people who had felt constant affection for him, resistant to the twists and turns of his whims. His selfishness measured the pulse of the world according to the attention he received: he had only woken up to others too late, when most of them had turned their backs on him, bored by the stupidity of his arrogance and the disdainful sarcasm in which his shyness and fear crystallized. Devoid of generosity, tolerance and gentleness, he only cared about being cared about, making himself the sole theme of a monotonous symphony. He would even ask his friends how they managed to exist far from his egocentric orbit, that the novels and poems he wrote without writing them formed a kind of narcissistic extension with no connection to life, a hollow architecture of words, a design of sentences emptied of emotion. An ecstatic spectator of his own suffering, he planned to reformulate the past when he was incapable of fighting for the present. Cowardly and vain, he avoided looking himself in the eye, understanding his reality as a useless corpse, and beginning the anguished learning of being alive.

Curly of mothers his own age (a fact that continued to surprise him

(he had difficulty recognizing that he was getting older) began to gather at the school gates like hens, and the doctor thought about going up to his elderly aunt's floor, where, entrenched behind the portrait of the Cardinal Patriarch who looked like a rich clown, he would be able to watch the classes leave from an easy sniper's angle, shooting longing through the double barrels of his dark circles. But the blind eye of the maid, who would relentlessly pursue him from cat to cat and from bishop to bishop, probing his interior in the milky light of the waterfalls, forced him to give up his Oswald project: he knew he was too fragile to endure a silent interrogation balanced by the displays of joy from the old women, who would certainly insist on repeating to him for the millionth time the tormenting story of his birth, a purple child suffocating with secretions next to his mother with eclampsia. Resigned to the bakery trench, whose coffee machine whinnied steam through the impatient nostrils of an aluminum thoroughbred, he rested his elbows on the electric iceberg of the glacier like an Eskimo hugging his igloo, and continued to wait next to a legless beggar, lying on a blanket, who stretched out two fingers at the height of the other's knees.

Just like in Africa, he thought, exactly like in Africa, awaiting the miraculous arrival of dusk in Marimba's jango, while the clouds darkened Cambo and Baixa do Cassanj and filled with the echo of thunder. The arrival of dusk and the arrival of the mail that the column brought, your long, damp love letters. You, sick in Luanda, the girl far from both of you, and the soldier who committed suicide in Mangando, lay down in the ward, put his gun to his chin, said good night and there were pieces of teeth and bone embedded in the zinc of the ceiling, stains of blood, flesh, cartilage, the lower half of his face transformed into a horrible hole, he agonized for four hours in froglike jerks, stretched out on the infirmary table, the corporal holding the petromax that cast large, confused shadows on the walls. The barking of the goats in the darkness, skeletal dogs with bat ears, dawns of unknown stars, the chief of Dala and his sick twins, the people waiting for their appointment on the steps of the post shivering with malaria, paths destroyed by the violence of the rain. One time we were sitting after lunch near the wire, on that kind of tombstone with the battalions' shields painted on it, and suddenly a flashy American car covered in dust appeared on the Chiquita road with a bald man inside, a lone civilian, neither a PIDE, nor an administrator, nor a hunter, nor a member of the leprosy brigade, but a photographer, a photographer equipped with those tripod cameras from beaches and fairs, implausible in their archaic nature, offering to take pictures of everyone present, alone or in groups, to send to their families by letter, memories of the war, faded smiles of exile. There was no baby food in Malanj and our daughter returned to Portugal thin and pale, with the yellowish color of Angolan whites, rusty with

fever, a year sleeping on a palm-staff bed next to our barracks beds, I was doing an autopsy outdoors because of the smell when they called me because you had fainted, I found you exhausted on a chair made of barrel planks, I closed the door, I squatted down crying next to you repeating Until the end of the world, until the end of the world, until the end of the world, certain that nothing could separate us, like a wave towards the beach my body goes towards you, exclaimed Neruda and it was like that with us, and it is like that with me only I am not able to tell you or I will tell you if you are not there, I tell you alone dizzy with the love I have for you, we hurt each other so much, we hurt each other, we tried to kill each other inside each one, and despite this, underground and immense, the wave continues and as if towards the beach towards you the wheat of my body leans, ears of fingers that seek you, try to touch you, cling to your skin with strength of nails, your narrow legs squeeze my waist, I go up the stairs, I knock on the latch, I enter, the mattress still knows the shape of my sleep, I hang the clothes on the chair, like a wave towards the beach like a wave towards the beach like a wave towards the beach my body goes towards you.

Teresa, the maid, emerged from Grão Vasco Avenue, where the mulberry leaves transform the sun into a green aquarium lamp, sparkling with sieved reflections, so much so that people sometimes give the impression of floating in the light with the edgeless attitudes of fishes, and walked past him with her slow, sacred-cow pace, sweetened by her cruel smile. If Teresa couldn't get me, no one can, the doctor thought, leaning closer to the iceberg until he felt the smooth contact of the enamel on his belly: a little extra effort and he would cross the wall of the glacier, the cocoon in which human larvae run the risk of metamorphosing into cassata: being eaten with a spoon at a family dinner suddenly seemed like a pleasant fate. The beggar in the blanket, who was counting his profits, thought he could guess his intentions:

– If you're going to palm, take out the chichas here too. Vanilla so it doesn't fuck up my ulcer.

A lady who was leaving the bakery with a package hanging from each finger was terrified by the strange pair of criminals who were plotting a sinister ice cream robbery, and ran away towards Damaia, perhaps fearing that we would threaten her with candy guns. The beggar, who had an aesthete in him, looked with pleasure at the vastness of her thighs:

– First-rate tambourine. And
autobiographical:

– Before the accident I used to go to communion every Sunday. Girls from Arco do Cego for the price of a grape, the sluts are now worse than cod.

A commotion of children near the school gates announced to the psychiatrist that classes were over: the beggar stirred angrily in his blanket:

- Those bastards steal more from me than they give me.

And the doctor pondered whether this irritated phrase might not contain within itself the seeds of a universal truth, which led him to look at his partner with new respect: Rembrandt, for example, did not end up much more prosperous, and he is not exempt from encountering a Pascal in the water collector: Antônio Aleixo sold bonds, Camões wrote letters on the street for those who could not read, Gomes Leal composed alexandrines on the stamped paper of the notary where he worked. Dozens of Nobel Prize winners in blue jeans challenge the police at Maoist demonstrations: in these strange times, intelligence seems stupid and stupidity intelligent, and it becomes healthy to distrust both as a matter of prudence, just as, as a boy, he was advised to stay away from the overly friendly gentlemen who approach the boys at the school gates with a strange glint in their glasses.

The sidewalk was filled with students herded by their mothers who chased them home like the turkey sellers in Praça da Figueira on Christmas Eve, and the doctor thought with melancholy about how difficult it is to educate adults, who are so little aware of the vital importance of a stick of chewing gum or a box of plasticine, and so concerned with the idiotic trifle of good table manners, who love to write obscene messages on the marble of the urinals and detest harmless pencil marks on the living room wall. The beggar, who would certainly understand these and other musings, kept the prescription in his waistcoat pocket, safe from the students' rapacious claws, and pulled out a tuberculosis certificate to persuade the undecided taxpayers in his favor.

Then he saw his daughters in the middle of a group of girls in uniforms wearing checkered skirts, the straight blond hair of the eldest, the brown curls of the youngest, making their way one after the other towards Teresa, and his intestines, suddenly too big for his belly button, swelled with the mushrooms of tenderness. He wanted to run to them, take their hands and the three of them set off, like at the end of the Grand Meaulnes, on their way to glorious adventures. The future in panavision stretched out before him, real and unreal like a fairy tale carpeted with the voice of Paul Simon:

We were married on a rainy day
The sky was yellow
And the grass was gray

We signed the papers
And we drove away I
do it for y our love

The rooms were musty
And the pipes were old

All that winter we shared a cold
Drank all the orange juice That
we could hold
I do it for your love

Found a rug
In an old junk shop
And I brought it home to you
or Along the way the colors
ran The orange bled the blue

The sting of reason
The splash of tears
The northern and southern
hemispheres
Love emerges
And it disappears
I do it for your love I
do it for your love

Teresa placed a red and white cap on each of their heads, and the psychiatrist noticed that the youngest was carrying her favorite doll, a rag creature with eyes drawn randomly on the bald sphere of her face, and whose mouth opened in a pathetic froglike grimace: they slept together in bed and maintained complex family relationships that must have evolved according to the girl's mood and of which I was vaguely aware through occasional mysterious phrases that compelled me to perpetual exercises of imagination. The eldest, who was characterized by an anguished vision of existence, supported with inanimate objects Charlot's battle against the cogs of life, prematurely promised a victorious defeat. Twisted with love cramps, the doctor had the impression that he had taken out a dream insurance policy for them, paying the interest in the form of the gases from his colitis and the stalled projects he was languishing over: the hope that they would go further than he had animated him with the joy of a pioneer, believing that his daughters would perfect Papin's poor lunchbox of his desires, sneezing through the artisanal cracks with smoke-filled disappointments. Teresa said goodbye to a comrade in arms who was holding her own against the class aggression of a boy who seemed to be a manager, and walked with the girls towards the avenue, an aquarium of buildings trembling in the luminous shade of the trees.

The sting of reason

The splash of tears
The northern and southern
hemispheres
Love emerges
And it disappears
I do it for y our love I
do it for y our love

Bent over like the poet Chiado on his bronze bench, the doctor could have touched them when they almost brushed past him on their way home, their eyes fixed on an iron duck at the entrance to a tobacconist's, which for twenty-five tostões swayed and shook in an epileptic gallop. He coughed with emotion and the beggar, sarcastic, turned his shaggy skull bathed in a ferocious laugh towards him:

– Do they turn you on, you little rascal?

And for the second time that day the psychiatrist felt like vomiting himself, for a long time, until he was empty of all the shit he had.

The doctor parked his car in one of the little streets that lead out of the Jardim das Amoreiras, like the legs of an insect whose shell was made of grass and trees, and headed for the bar: he had two hours to spare before his analysis session and he thought that perhaps he would distract himself by observing others, especially the kind of others who look at themselves in the mirror from glasses of whiskey, six o'clock fish in their aquarium of alcohol, whose oxygen is the carbon dioxide from the bubbles in the water of the Castle. What do people who frequent bars, he wondered, do in the morning? And he thought that as the end of the night approached, the drinkers would evaporate into the thin atmosphere of smoke like the genie in Aladdin's lamp, until, with the arrival of a new twilight, they would regain their flesh, smiles and slow gestures like an anemone, the tentacles of their arms would stretch out for the first glass, the music would start playing again, the world would get back on track, and large faience birds would take flight from the Formica sky of sadness.

The stone arches above the garden had the exact curve of eyebrows astonished to find themselves there, next to the confusion of the anarchic anthill of the Mouse, and the psychiatrist had the feeling that it was as if a face from many centuries ago were examining, surprised and serious, the swings and the slide that were between the trees and that no child had ever seen use, abandoned like the merry-go-rounds of a defunct fair: he could not explain why, but the Amoreiras Garden always seemed to him to be something lonely and extremely melancholy, even in the summer, and this had been the case since the distant years when he would go there for an hour a week to receive drawing lessons from a fat man who lived on the second floor full of plastic model airplanes: my mother's worries, the doctor reflected, my mother's eternal worries about me, her permanent fear that one day she would see me collecting rags and bottles from the garbage cans, with a bag on my back, transformed into a factory worker in the misery. His mother had little faith in him as a grown-up and responsible individual: she took everything he did as a kind of game, and even in her son's relative professional stability she suspected the deceptive tranquility that precedes cataclysms. She used to say that she had accompanied the doctor to the Camões high school entrance exam, and that, when she looked out the living room window, she saw all the children leaning towards the subject, focused and attentive, with the exception of the psychiatrist, who, with his chin in the air, completely oblivious, was absent-mindedly studying the ceiling light.

– And from that example I immediately realized what his life was going to be like, concluded his mother with the triumphantly modest smile of the Bandarras with aim.

To find peace with his conscience, however, he tried to combat the inevitable by asking the school principal every year to put his son in a front desk, "right in front of the teacher", so that the doctor could forcibly drink the effluvia of the decomposition of polynomials, the classification of

insects and other notions of undeniable usefulness, instead of the verses she wrote secretly in her notebooks. The psychiatrist's course, full of adventures, had taken on the proportions of a stormy war for her, in which promises to Our Lady of Fátima alternated with punishments, sighs of pain, tragic prophecies and complaints to her aunts, desolate witnesses of so much unhappiness, who always believed themselves personally affected by the most insignificant family earthquake. Now, looking out the drawing teacher's second-floor window, the doctor remembered his spectacular failure in the practical anatomy test, in which he had been handed a slimy jar with the subclavian artery inside, painted red among a tangle of rotting tendons, how the formaldehyde from the cadavers irritated his eyelids and how, after weighing the four volumes of the Treatise on Bones and Muscles and Joints and Nerves and Vessels and Organs on the kitchen scales, he had declared to himself in front of those six and eight hundred kilos of compact science:

– Fuck me if I'm going to study this shit.

At that time he was struggling to compose a long, terrible poem inspired by Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and he believed that he had within him the broad strength of Claudel's *Great Odes* tempered by the restraint of T. S. Eliot: the absence of talent is a blessing, he realized; it's just that it takes a while to get used to it. And having assumed his condition as an ordinary man reduced to the rare partridge flights of occasional poetry, without the hump of immortality clinging to his back, he felt free to suffer without originality and exempt from surrounding his silences with the wall of taciturn intelligence that he associated with genius.

The psychiatrist walked around the Amoreiras Garden, close to the houses, to smell the smell of the sun on the facades, the brightness that the lime absorbed like the fruit drank the light. On a wall to which the remains of posters stuck like rags to a bald nape, he read something written in charcoal:

THE
PEOPLE
FREED
THE
COMRADE
HENRY
TENREY

And the acronym of the anarchists below, an ironic A in a circle. A blind man walking ahead of him tapped his cane on the sidewalk with a noise of indecisive castanets: a dead city, thought the doctor, a dead city in a tiled urn waiting without hope for those who will never come again: blind people, pensioners and

widows, and Salazar, who, God willing, did not die. There was a patient in his hospital, a very serious and restrained Alentejan, Mr. Joaquim, always wearing a floppy hat and impeccable overalls, who was in constant and direct communication with the former president of the council, whom he respectfully called "our teacher" and from whom he received secret orders for the conduct of public affairs. A republican guard in a remote village on the plains, he one day took up his shotgun against his fellow countrymen, intending to force them to build a prison in Caxias in accordance with the instructions that our teacher whispered in his ear. From time to time, the psychiatrist received letters from Mr. Joaquim's village, signed by the prior or the fire chief, asking them not to release that terrifying emissary of a ghost. One morning the doctor called Mr. Joaquim into his office and told him what the nurses did not have the courage to say:

– Mr. Joaquim, our teacher passed away more than three weeks ago. His photo was even published in the newspaper.

Mr. Joaquim went to the door to make sure no one was listening to them, went back inside, leaned over to the psychiatrist and informed him in a whisper:

– It was all a pretense, sir. He put someone who looked like him there and the Opposition took the bait: a quarter of an hour ago he appointed me Minister of Finance, you see. Our professor is giving them all the crap.

Salazar, you bastard who will never stop dying, he thought at the time, sitting at his desk, faced with Mr. Joaquim's obstinacy: how many Mr. Joaquims are willing to blindfold a former seminarian with the soul of an abbot's housekeeper, counting pennies in the pantry? Deep down, the doctor mused, walking around Jardim das Amoreiras, Salazar has exploded, but from his belly have emerged hundreds of little Salazars willing to continue his work with the unimaginative zeal of stupid disciples, hundreds of little Salazars equally castrated and perverse, running newspapers, organizing rallies, conspiring in the folds of their Dona Marias, shouting in praise of corporatism in Brazil. And this in a country where there are afternoons like this, perfect in color and light like a painting by Matisse, beautiful with the rigorous beauty of the Monastery of Alcobaça, in a country of black tomatoes that the Estado Novo wanted to hide under cassock skirts, oh Mendes Pinto: and with many Hail Marys and much pillorying we went after them and in less than a Creed we killed them all. He entered the bar with the spirit of someone who enters the humid shade of a trellis in the heat of the day, and before his pupils had gotten used to the semi-darkness of the establishment he could only make out, in a haze of darkness, vague glows of lamps and reflections of bottles or metals, like scattered lights of Lisbon seen from the sea on foggy nights. He stumbled towards the bar out of pure instinct, a short-sighted dog on the way to the bone he supposedly had, while little by little figures formed, the teeth of a smile floated nearby, an arm

holding a glass waved to his left, and a world of tables and chairs and some people appeared out of nowhere, gained volume and consistency, surrounded him, and it was as if the sun outside and the trees and the stone arches of the Jardim das Amoreiras were suddenly very far away, lost in the unreal dimension of the past.

– A beer, the doctor asked, looking around: he knew that the woman used to frequent that bar and was looking for something that would prolong her on the empty benches in the same way that a mattress hole announces the absence of a body, a sign of her passing, something that would allow him to reconstruct her next to him in living, smiling flesh, warm, complicit. A couple of heads together whispered in a corner, a gigantic man vigorously patted the resigned shoulder of a friend, turning his joints into fraternal mush.

Who will you come here with, the psychiatrist's burning jealousy asked himself, who will you talk about, who will you lie down with in beds I don't know, who will hold your hips in his hands? Who will occupy the place that was mine, that is still mine in me, a space of tenderness for my kisses, a smooth deck for the mast of my penis? Who will sail close-hauled in your belly? The taste of the beer reminded him of Portimão, the smell of a diabetic's breath from the sea at Praia da Rocha, ruffled by the feminine breath of the east, the first time they made love, in a hotel in the Algarve, married the day before, trembling with anguish and desire. They were very young then and were learning the paths of pleasure from each other, groping, newborn foals eagerly nodding at the teat, glued to each other in the enormous astonishment of discovering the true color of joy. When we were making out at your parents' house, the doctor said, faced with the ugly faces of the Chinese masks, I expected to hear your footsteps on the stairs, the sound of your high heels on the steps, and a rush of wind, a rage, a reverse urge to vomit grew inside me, the hunger for you that has always been in me and made me come back early from Montijo so we could lie down on the bedspread in the haste of someone who might die any minute, made me get sudden erections just thinking about your mouth, your voluptuous way of giving yourself, the curve of your cupped shoulders, your large, tender, soft breasts, made me chew and chew your tongue, wander over your neck, enter you in a single movement of a sword in its sheath, dazzled. I have never come across a body like yours, the doctor said as he poured the beer into the mug, so suited to my human and inhuman measurements, the authentic and the invented ones that are no less so for being so, I have never come across such a great and good capacity to meet another person, of absolute coincidence, of being understood without speaking and of understanding the silence and emotions and thoughts of others, that it has always been a miracle to me that we met on the beach where I met you, thin, dark, fragile, your ancient serious profile resting on your bent knees, the cigarette you smoked, the beer (just like this one) on the bench at your side, your perpetual animal-like attention, the

many silver rings on your fingers, my wife forever and my only wife, my lamp for the dark, portrait of my eyes, September sea, my love.

And why is it that I only know how to like, he asked himself, examining the bubbles of gas stuck to the glass wall, why is it that I only know how to say that I like through the little rounds of periphrases and metaphors and images, the concern to beautify, to put crochet fringes on feelings, to pour exaltation and anguish into the pindaric cadence of the fado menor, soul swaying, corny, like Correia de Oliveira in a samarra, if all this is clean, clear, direct, without the need for prettiness, dry like a Giacometti in an empty room and as simply eloquent as he is: laying words at the feet of a sculpture is equivalent to the useless flowers that are given to the dead or the dance of the rain around a full well: damn it to me and to the saccharine romanticism that runs through my veins, my eternal difficulty in uttering words as dry and precise as stones. He lifted his chin, took a sip and let the liquid run down his spine in a sulphuric stearin slowness that shook off the lassitude of his nerves, angry with himself and with the twisted members of the Women's Chronicle who had engraved themselves in his brain, the architect of his own pyre despite Van Gogh's warning: I have tried to express the terrible human passions with red and green. The brutal simplicity of the painter's phrase sent shivers down his spine, as it did, for example, when listening to Mozart's Requiem or Lester Young's saxophone in These Foolish Things, running along the music like wise fingers on a sleeping buttock.

He ordered another beer and called the waiter who was explaining to the friend of the very large man the reasons for his complaint against his son's French teacher, and dialed the number that the red-haired girl had given him and that he had noted on the torn page of the missions' newspaper: the bell rang nine or ten times in vain. He hung up and dialed again, on the assumption that there had been a needle error in the company's cables and that Marlene Dietrich's voice would now answer him through the black bakelite holes, tiny and clear as Pinocchio's cricket. Finally he handed the phone back to the waiter.

– Isn't your aunt here?, he asked with the ironic affection of the captains of alcohol ships preparing for the long night crossing.

– It may be that the congress of the Daughters of Mary could go on for a long time, suggested the gentleman who was climbing aboard the fourth gin and had begun to find the floors sloping.

– Or he is explaining circumcision in catechism class, added the friend who belonged to the class of those who do not like to be left behind and are anxiously trying to keep up with the rest.

– Or shit on me, said the doctor to the unused bottle of beer.

One of the advantages of bars, he thought, is that you can talk to the bottlenecks without the risk of getting into trouble or fighting: and suddenly, in the space of a second, he understood the drunks, not technically, at the expense of the explanations from outside to inside of Psychiatry, which were exaggeratedly right and therefore wrong, but with a gut understanding, made of the desire to escape that was his on so many occasions. The calm man's index finger touched him with unexpected delicacy on the shoulder:

- Little brother, we are alone on deck.

- But there are girls in diving suits waiting in Singapore, his friend added so that the platoon wouldn't escape him.

The calm man looked at him with the maj static contempt of gin:

- You say that this is a man's conversation. And

to the doctor, confidentially and fraternally:

- When we leave here, we'll go to Cova da Onça to drown our miseries in the swamp.

- Whores, his friend grumbled sulkily.

The big guy's pincers squeezed his elbow until it snapped:

- Less than your mother, my bardamerdas.

Addressing the empty tables, authoritatively:

- Anyone who talks bad about women in front of me is screwed.

His face twisted with threatening fury, looking for a target to point at, but apart from the couple absorbed in their corner, in a complicated game of butting and groping, and the dimly lit lamps, we found ourselves without passengers on the raft, condemned to each other's company as, thought the psychiatrist, on barbed wire in Africa: by the end of the commission they were already playing king with intonations of hatred in their throats, tingling slaps in their fingers, anger ready to shoot out of their uncocked mouths. Why is it that I continually remember hell, he wondered: because I haven't escaped from it yet or because I've replaced it with another kind of torture? He drank half of the beer like someone taking an unpleasant medicine and tore into as small pieces as he could the phone number of the red-haired girl, who at that time must have been telling her boyfriend about the fun she had had at the expense of some idiot in the dentist's waiting room: he imagined their laughter and with it in his ears he finished off what was left of the beer until there was a foamy slop left in the glass: fermented rye snail, put the little twigs of the drunkard in the sun and help me float because I can't swim. And he remembered a story that was part of the family heritage, that of a couple who were friends of his grandmother, the Fonsecas, in which the robust woman tyrannized her short husband: Mr. Fonseca, for example, would make a timid sound and she would immediately shout - Fonseca doesn't talk because Fonseca is stupid, Mr. Fonseca would go to light a cigarette and she would croak - Fonseca doesn't smoke, and so on. One afternoon, the grandmother was serving tea to a group of visitors and when she arrived, Mr. Fonseca asked, "Mr. Fonseca, green or black?" The woman

of Mr. Fonseca, attentive like a guard dog with a gallbladder, gurgled – Fonseca doesn't drink tea; and in the silence that followed an astonishing phenomenon occurred: Mr. Fonseca, until then and during forty years of conjugal dictatorship, meek, obedient and resigned, put his fist on the arm of the chair and announced in a voice muffled by his unhinged testicles:

– I want green, and I want black.

It's time, the doctor said, paying for the bottles and freeing himself from the embrace of the calm man who had meanwhile reached the stage of embraces, it's time to make a fucking jet come out of his balls that we can see. It was getting dark outside: perhaps that night the woman would come to that bar and not even notice the stone arches in the garden.

As usual, I'm going to be late for my analysis session, thought the psychiatrist, stopped at a red light, to whom he was currently placing full responsibility for all the misfortunes in the world, his own at the top of the list, of course. He was in the side lane of Avenida da República, behind a cargo van, and he was shaking with impatience as he watched the traffic that was running perpendicular to him, coming from Campo Pequeno, an irregular brick mosque, a cathedral of horns. Two very pretty girls walked past the car, chatting to each other, and the doctor followed the movement of their shoulder blades and thighs as they walked, the perfect harmony, like a bird in flight, of their gestures, the way one of them brushed her hair back with her hand: when I was younger, he remembered, I was sure that no woman would ever be interested in me, in my broad chin, in my thinness; I always felt shy and stuttered if someone looked at me, feeling myself blush, fighting the violent desire to disappear at a gallop: when I was fourteen or fifteen, they took me to the hundred on Rua do Mundo for the first time, I had never been to Bairro Alto at night, in that accumulation of narrow shadows and motionless figures, and I entered the house of pass at the same time curious and terrified, with the desire to pee from the exams hindering my walk. I sat down in a room of mirrors and chairs next to a woman in a slip who was crocheting and didn't even lift her chin from the needles, and in front of an elderly man who was waiting his turn with his briefcase on his knees (and the relief of the coffee with milk terms from lunch could be seen on the briefcase) and suddenly I saw myself multiplied to the point of nausea in the beveled mirrors, dozens of afflicted selves staring at each other in amazement of terror: of course my dick had shrunk in my underpants to the size it was when I got out of the cold shower, a harmonium of wrinkled skin capable at most of peeing obliquely, and I disappeared down the corridor at the humble trot of a chased dog towards the door where the boss, with varicose veins spilling out of her slippers, was arguing with a drunk soldier who had crossed the threshold with his boot covered in a jelly of vomit.

The light turned green and immediately the taxi behind him honked imperiously: why on earth are taxi drivers, he wondered, the most sour creatures in the world? And also faceless men, reduced to the back of their necks and shoulders planted like nails in the front seat, and occasionally to a pair of empty eyes in the little square of the rearview mirror, expressionless glass orbs like those of the animals in the waterwheels. Maybe driving around Lisbon all day long throws people into a kind of explosive epilepsy, maybe this city makes people angry and disgusted by those who have to travel around it in every direction, maybe the individual's nature is the murderous exaltation in fringes and we, the restrained ones, walk around here pretending to be kind when we don't have it. He laughed at the driver who responded with a gigantic cuff like two scouts making flag signals to each other, and turned right onto João XXI, where the beginning, on the left side, was

behind sooty buildings that he liked, with their canopies protruding like warts from precarious nests where ironing boards and domestic melancholies could be glimpsed. My friend Cesário, the psychiatrist said tenderly, last week I saw something that would bring Alexandrines of joy to your mouth: I was looking for a place to have dinner and, passing close to your illuminated bust on the verge of Stephanic grass where they had placed it, I came across an old woman in black sitting on the step of the statue with a basket at her feet, and then I understood the difference that goes between you and Eça and which is the same difference that separates the embrace of a stone virgin from the proximity of a living creature, torn from the solidity of the flesh of your verses.

He crossed a street of garages and workshops immersed in the darkness of finished work, with the yellow awning of a Brazilian bar at the end (The Portuguese are stupid, the Galician water carrier informed him of his mother's story, we came here to sell them their water) and parked next to a furniture store on the corner of Avenida Óscar Monteiro Torres and Rua Augusto Gil, displaying detestable dressers and oval oil paintings of flowers in carved frames. A pastel depicting a greyhound against a background of Velázquez's Infanta was in the window, and the dog seemed to smile the knowing smile that sometimes escapes a foolish painter and through which lack of talent mocks itself, without realizing it. For some time he looked in amazement at a phenomenal aluminum chandelier, thinking how bad taste required, in its own way, a considerable dose of imagination, and wishing to try lying down on a bed taken from Dr. Mabuse's nightmares on a night of digestive failure, to see what delirious metamorphoses his body would undergo, to the immense astonishment of the maid who had recently arrived from the provinces and whom his father had taken to visit the Zoo. This is the elephant, his father explained, and the maid looked at the animal in amazement, studying its legs, its head, its trunk; here is the rhinoceros, his father said, here is the hippopotamus, here is the gorilla, here is the ostrich, and the maid went from astonishment to astonishment, round eye sockets, open mouth, hands clasped, until they reached the giraffe's enclosure: there the girl's surprise reached its climax. For minutes, dazzled, she contemplated the long neck covered in spots and the head up there, until she approached the doctor's father and asked in a whisper:

– Sir, what is this person's name?

– It's the giraffe, they announced to him.

The maid chewed on the word for a long time, always observing the animal, and murmured in a sigh of ecstasy:

– Giraffe... What a well-placed name.

It was completely dark and in the darkness of a doorway the psychiatrist could make out a group of Cape Verdeans with smoked glasses arguing passionately, waving their light-colored shirt sleeves in broad gestures. One of them carried a battery-powered radio under one arm that suddenly spurted out a burst of very loud music like a flushing toilet discharging a mess of fusas.

There was a tavern a little further on, with a television set on a shelf near the ceiling, and the regulars, glasses in hand, turned their heads in unison towards the screen that shone upon them a fluorescent blue light of radioscopia, revealing the skeleton of their smiles: judging by the dialectical enthusiasm of the Cape Verdeans, the doctor guessed that they had strengthened their vociferous moods with the tonic of the red wine, whose presence could be sensed in every exclamation or laugh. From the neighboring ground floor, a fat lady watched the scene, very interested, spilling her breasts on the windowsill: she must be wearing the enamel portrait of Father Cruz around her neck, the psychiatrist bet as he climbed the stairs on his way to the analysis, she must have a plump dog called Benfica, a son who works as a banker and a granddaughter named Sónia Marisa with a plastic visor on the left lens of her glasses to distort her vision. Maybe, he added, ringing the doorbell, she'll be the maid of honor at the dentist's maid's wedding and they'll talk about income on Sunday afternoons while the couple listens to the story of the lottery bet on their knees.

Make things up, make things up, the guy's already peeled off, he warned himself on his way to the group room after the door opened with a sharp click of the lid: lately, in his opinion, he had been taking too many beatings from the analyst, just like when he was little they punished him for mistakes that in his opinion were none of his business, and a great resentment was growing in him against the other who seemed to take pleasure in destroying one by one the vapid (but necessary?) architectures of his chimeras: a guy is here like a tame ox in the slaughterhouse, the doctor reflected, taking pins in the bells of sadistic butchers, and if he holds on it's in the sole hope that later his meat will become more tender; a guy is here learning to live or to be tamed, castrated, brainless, transformed into a secular Saint for two thousand and something a month. What the hell is this, that I leave here twisted like an old man with rheumatism, lumbago, sciatica, parrot's beak and toothache, the soul of a mongrel whining on the way home, and yet I come back, I come back punctually every other day to receive more bullshit or total indifference and no answer to my concrete anxieties, no idea about how to get out of this pit or at least see a glimpse of open air up there, no gesture that shows me the direction of a certain tranquility, a certain peace, a certain harmony with myself: Freud, that Jewish whore who gave birth to you, is going to get fucked in the ass by your Oedipus. He opened the door to the group and instead of declaring Shit to everyone, he said Good afternoon and sat down, disciplined, in the only free chair in the room.

The group was complete: five women, three men (with him) and the group analyst sitting in his usual place, with his eyes closed, playing with his wristwatch resting on the arm of the chair: you bastard, thought the psychiatrist, you fucking bastard, in one of these sessions I'll kick you in the ass to see if you're alive and, as if he had understood, the psychoanalyst stood up to

he, the somnambulant and neutral eyelid that immediately turned to a painting on the wall of the room that approximately represented a village landscape: roofs of various colors, a church tower, a stormy sky: through the open window came, attenuated, the discussion of the Cape Verdeans in the street and the music on the radio that had now reached cruising intensity; through the curtains one could make out the outlines of the neighboring buildings, a sign that life went on outside that apparently watertight compartment, a repository of concentrated afflictions.

One of the women was talking about her father and how difficult it was for her to get close to him, and the doctor, who had heard the description dozens of times and found it particularly boring and monotonous, spent his time observing the walls that needed a new coat of paint, the black and white armchairs that looked like obese penguins, a table in the corner covered with a poor-quality red tablecloth, with a telephone and two tattered lists on top: this was where the therapist placed the envelopes for the fees, which contained numbers from 1 to 31 and circles in ballpoint pen representing the dates of the sessions. One of the men, whom he greatly liked, was dozing with his chin in his hand: this is like parliament today, thought the psychiatrist, who in turn felt invaded by a very light kind of drowsiness, a film of sluggish indifference that disturbed his attention. The woman who had been talking about her father suddenly fell silent and another woman began a long account of her son's suspected meningitis, which had not been confirmed after a lengthy via sacra by hospital benches and doctors with contradictory diagnoses, all concerned with disdainfully refuting the opinion of their previous colleague: the man who had been dozing woke up, stretched and asked her for a cigarette. To his right, an orphan-looking girl was sucking on tonsil lozenges, occasionally clicking her tongue: the corners of her mouth were drooping and bitter, like the eyebrows of very sad people.

I have been coming here for I don't know how many years, reflected the doctor, observing his fellow travelers, most of whom had begun to navigate the waters of analysis before him, and I still don't know you well or have learned to know you, to understand what you want from life, what you expect from it. There are times when I am away from here and I think about you and miss you, and then I ask myself what you mean to me and I don't know the answer because I still don't know most of the answers and I stumble from question to question like Galileo before he discovered that the Earth moved and found in that explanation the key to his questions. And he added: what explanation will I find one day, that the Holy Office will come to condemn it, and who will force me to give up my small individual conquests, painful victories of shit over the shit of which I am made? He took a cracked ashtray from the central table and lit a cigarette for himself: the smoke entered his lungs with the greed of air through an empty balloon and flooded his body with a kind of calm enthusiasm: the psychiatrist

he saw his first clandestine tobacco, stolen from his mother, sucked at the age of eleven through the bathroom window in a delight of great adventure. Chesterfield: his mother would light them at the end of lunch, next to the coffee machine tray, surrounded by her children and husband, and the doctor would watch the smoke that accumulated around the iron lamp on the ceiling, forming and undoing stretched blue clouds, transparent and slow like summer cirrus clouds. His father would tap his pipe on the silver ashtray with the inscription Smoke Flies Friendship Stays in the center, a great serenity would spread through the dining room, and the psychiatrist had the comforting certainty that no one among those present would ever die: sixteen pairs of clear eyes around the silver flowerpot, united by the similarity of their features and by a brief-long common past.

Some members of the group asked the girl about the details of her son's illness, and the doctor noticed that the analyst, who looked cataleptic, was using his fingernail to clean a stain on his red and black tie, with branches: this bastard, he thought, besides being ugly, dresses worse and worse: he doesn't even need socks with stars, here he is dressed in formal attire for a reception at a pastry shop on Avenue Paris, accompanied by the fat lady with plum-colored satins and a rabbit fox with psoriasis on her neck: deep down he wished the analyst would dress according to his own standards of elegance, which were debatable and vague when it came to him: one of his brothers used to tell him that he, a psychiatrist, looked like a photograph of a provincial groom, startled in a poorly tailored striped jacket. I dress up like Alice's White Rabbit and demand that those I care about put on the Mad Hatter's uniform: perhaps then we can all play croquet with the Queen of Hearts, cut the neck of the Everyday at one stroke, and leap through the looking-glass together. And then he said to himself: Your Majesty must not roar so loudly, but anyway, what is the light of a candle when it is extinguished?

The third man in the group, who wore glasses and looked like Emilio and the Detectives, explained that he would like his daughter to die so he could receive more attention from his wife, which provoked murmurs of varied indignation from the audience.

- Fuck, fuck, said the dozing man, fidgeting in his chair.

- Seriously, the first one insisted. There are moments when I feel like going over to the crib and pouring a pot of boiling coffee into it.

- Oh my, said the woman with meningitis, looking for her handkerchief in her purse.

There followed a silence which the psychiatrist took advantage of to light another cigarette, and the parricide took off his glasses and suggested quietly:

- Maybe we all want to kill the people we love.

The group analyst began to wind the clock and the doctor felt like Alice in the assembly of animals presided over by Dodo: what strange mechanics!

internal governs all this, he thought, and what underground thread unites disconnected phrases and gives them a meaning and density that escape me? Are we on the threshold of silence as in certain poems by Benn, in which the phrases acquire unsuspected weight and the meaning at once mysterious and obvious of dreams? Or could it be that like Alberti tonight I feel, mortally wounded, the words, and I feed on what in their interstices sparkles and pulsates? When the flesh turns into sound where is the flesh and where is the sound? And where is the key that makes it possible to decode this morse, to make it concrete and simple like hunger, or the urge to urinate, or the longing of a body?

He opened his mouth and said:

– I miss my wife.

One of the girls, who had not yet spoken, smiled at him kindly and this encouraged him to continue:

– I miss my wife and I can't tell her or anyone else except you.

– Why?, the group analyst asked unexpectedly, as if he were returning to the secret of a long journey through the ice of his own self. His voice opened up a pleasant space in front of him, where the psychiatrist felt like lying down.

– I don't know, he answered quickly, afraid that the receptiveness he had achieved would disappear and he would find himself faced with eight bored or hostile faces. I don't know or I do know, it depends, I think the love that others have for me and I have for them scares me a bit, and I'm afraid of living that to the end, completely, giving myself over to things and fighting for them while I have the strength, and when the strength runs out, finding more strength to continue the fight.

And he spoke of the immense love that had united his paternal grandfather and grandmother for almost fifty years, and of the way in which the older children and grandchildren had to stamp their feet on the floor to let them know when he had entered a room where they were alone. He saw them holding hands at the dining room table during family dinners, and of the way in which his grandfather would caress his wife and call her "my old lady," and put a deep, warm and indestructible tenderness into that call. She spoke of her grandfather's death and of the courage with which her grandmother had endured illness, agony and death, standing firm and with dry eyes, and her great suffering could be seen beneath her absolute tranquility, without sentimentality or lamentations of any kind, and how she had followed, straight and shaken, the urn of her husband to the grave, she had received with a polite smile the condolences of the officer who commanded the escort for her husband's military burial and, on her return home, she had distributed her father's personal objects to her children and had immediately organized her life in such a way that everything would remain as she and we knew her grandfather would have wanted, and at mealtime she sat at the head of the bed and we accepted this as a natural fact and that was how it remained until eighteen years later when she died in her turn and wanted to carry the photograph he had given her for their silver wedding anniversary in her coffin. And she spoke of what the priest had said to her.

He said at her funeral mass that it was We have all lost a mother, and the doctor thought a lot about this phrase he had said about his grandmother, whose lack of tenderness and harshness irritated him, and he ended up agreeing that it was true and that in thirty years of his life he had not known how to give that woman the value she really had, and that once again he had made a mistake in measuring people and now it was too late, as usual, to make amends.

– You can't wipe the past clean, but you can live better in the present and the future, and you're so scared of that, observed the smiling girl.

– At least as long as there is a need to continue to punish, added the analyst, who was intensely studying the nail on his left thumb, to which the complete works of Melanie Klein must have been glued, on microfilm.

The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair and searched his pocket for his third cigarette of the session: do I punish myself like this, he mused, and if I do, why the hell do I do it? And in the name of what nebulous and, for me, unattainable sin? Or do I simply do it because I am incapable of anything else and this is my peculiar way of feeling in the world, like an alcoholic has to drink to be sure he exists or a man has to fornicate to be sure he is a man? And we inevitably end up with the essential question, which lies behind all the others when all the others have moved away or have been moved away, and which is, if you will allow me, Who Am I? I ask myself and the answer is, obsessively, invariably, like this: Shit.

– Why do you hate yourself, asked the parricide.

– Maybe for the same reason that Uncle José used to ride into my grandfather's kitchen, replied the doctor.

And he told how his uncle José, whom he had never met, would spend months completely immobile, sitting by a window, without speaking to anyone, until he would suddenly get up, put a carnation in his tailcoat, mount his mare and begin a period of feverish business activity and cabarets, in between which he would trot, quixotic with decrepit joy, into the homes of his nephews and friends.

– Neither Uncle José knew why he rode among pots and pans and the screams of indignant cooks, nor I because I don't care, said the psychiatrist.

And he added softly, in the tone of someone completing some inner journey:

– My great-grandfather killed himself with two pistols when he discovered he had cancer.

– You are not your great-grandfather, explained the analyst, scratching his elbow, and this Guermantes of yours is just a Guermantes.

– Live among the dead so as not to live among the living, said the girl with the problems with her father. It sounds like a voice-over talking about a photo album.

– Why don't you look at us who are breathing?, asked the parricide.

– And for you as one who breathes, suggested the one with the smile. You are like the children in bed, afraid of the dark, pulling the blankets over their heads.

- What kind of cat makes these squares fall on me at one o'clock?, the doctor asked himself.

- The big guys are falling on the blind invalid, he complained with the biggest smile he could muster.

- Before the blind invalid, who is neither blind nor invalid, tries to fool the big guys and fool himself so that he can continue to have the advantage of being blind and invalid, replied the melancholic woman with the angina, very quickly. We don't buy into the siren song of your self-pity, and if you like to take it in the asshole of the soul, that's up to you, but don't force us to watch the show.

There was a great silence filled with the muffled noise of the traffic below, night traffic, the oblique gliding of a cat through the illuminated city: in a few minutes I'll be alone in the neon, thought the psychiatrist, pulling on his mule to choose a restaurant where to have dinner; and each of these bastards has someone waiting for them: this last observation made an enormous rage rise up inside him against the others, who were better defending themselves from the gelatinous octopus of depression.

- It's easy for a rooster to crow on a perch, he shouted in a circle, accompanying the shout of obscenities with both hands.

- One wants to kill his daughter, the other sends us to that part, protested one of the girls laughing. You are a bunch of dots inventing cardboard anxieties.

- Roof cats that instead of being in heat meow threats of sadness, have perfected the one for meningitis.

The analyst blew his nose noisily and put the ball of his handkerchief, without folding it, in his trouser pocket: it was as if he were watching the conversation with absolute indifference, given over to the passivity of vegetable ruminations: the inner self of this fat man, still young, was a complete enigma to the psychiatrist, although for years they had met three times a week in that room as neglected as the owner's appearance, with a sacristy curtain at the entrance and a ceiling brown with innumerable cigarettes, where much of his life was played out. He surreptitiously glanced at the watch of the sleepyhead next to him: a few more minutes and the analyst would rest his fingers on the arms of the chair and get up to end the session: go down the stairs, go out into the street, start again: climb up the well by force to the grassy landscape outside, wring out his wet clothes, leave: like when I arrived from Africa and didn't know what to do, and found myself in a very long corridor with no door, and had a pregnant wife and daughter and a vast tiredness in my bones rattling from too many bites. He mentally reviewed Zé do Telhado's tomb in Dala and Mr. Gaspar's house with a thatched roof amidst the tall trees where a huge tame monkey with a white snout was jumping around, tied by a leash to an iron post, he reviewed Corporal Pereira's death in the Unimog fire and the fantastic night-time fires: since they took me to Padua to make my first communion, the doctor thought, I've been around a long time.

- Sorry about the cardboard anxieties, said the girl who had moments

before he had laughed at him. I know you're a bit lazy.

The psychiatrist grazed her arm as the group analyst began to stand up, and gave her a sidelong glance from Calvary:

- My daughter, he assured me, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Alone in the night on Augusto Gil Street, sitting in his car with the engine off and the lights off, the psychiatrist rested his hands on the steering wheel and began to cry: he did his best not to make a sound, so that his shoulders shook like those of silent film actresses, hiding his curls and tears in the embrace of a bearded grandfather: Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, he said to himself, because he could find no other words within me than those, a kind of weak protest against the deep sadness that filled me. I felt very helpless and very alone and now I had no desire to call out for anyone because (I knew) there are crossings that can only be made alone, without help, even at the risk of sinking in one of those sleepless nights that turn us Pedro and Inês into a crypt in Alcobaça, lying in stone until the end of the world. And I remembered someone telling me that when she was a child her mother used to take her on visits at a time when people interacted with one another on tiptoe with excessive delicacy; and then she would enter stiff houses filled with large clocks and pianos with candlesticks where the music tends to tremble in the direction of the wind, she would listen to the lamentations of the ladies drowned by the damask of the curtains and the sighs of the dead in the portraits on the wall, and she would think: How sad this house must be at three o'clock in the afternoon. So that year after year she would pour alcohol from the pharmacies into the flower vases to drink it in secret and thus achieve a perpetual noon.

The night in the streets and squares that Friday seemed to the doctor like the nights he had spent in his childhood, when he would lie in bed and listen to the opera duets that would reach his bed in the form of terrifying arguments, his tenor father and soprano mother shouting insults at each other against the backdrop of a sinister orchestra that the darkness would amplify until one of them would hang the other with a C sharp noose, followed by the terrible silence of the tragedies that had taken place: someone was lying on the carpet in a puddle of eighth notes, murdered with flats, and a few black-clad conductors would soon be climbing the stairs carrying a coffin that looked like a double bass case, with a crucifix of two crossed batons on the top. The maids in crests and starched aprons were singing the Hunters' Chorus in a Beira accent in the dining room. The priest, dressed as Don José, appeared in a Spanish whirlwind of Daughters of Mary. And the German shepherd from the tannery sent out into the land the howls of the Baskerville hound revised by Saint-Saëns.

At night in Lisbon, one feels as if one is living in a Eugene Sûe novel with a page for the Tagus River, where Barão de Sabrosa Street is the faded ribbon marking the reading spot, despite the rooftops where television antennas bloom like Miró bushes. The psychiatrist, who never used a handkerchief, wiped his snot and tears with the green cloth he used to wipe the warm breath of a nativity scene cow from the car window, and turned on the lights (the illuminated display always seemed like a village to him).

alentejo at a party observed from afar) and started the engine of the small car whose work was transmitted to his body as if he too were a part of that soft vibrating machine. In a doorway right next to him a young girl was kissing a bald gentleman on the mouth: her kidneys had the sensual harmony of certain quick drawings by Stuart, and the doctor envied intensely the ugly little man who was caressing her, rolling his protuberant eyes like boiled sea bream: the yellow American car with green windows parked there undoubtedly belonged to him: the plastic skeleton hanging from the rear-view mirror was on the same wavelength as the ring he wore on his little finger, with a gold pound held by three silver teeth. If I married my washerwoman's daughter, perhaps I would be happy, the psychiatrist recited aloud, looking at the man who was making the boiling noises through his open mouth, the kind made by people with false teeth when drinking overly hot coffee: When I am his age, I will eat kisses like someone eating soup, and I will pick my gums at the end to extract the uncomfortable remains of tenderness from my molars; and perhaps a girl like this will be interested in my grace of lying.

Oh darkness darkness darkness: shapeless night here, dripping liquid from the houses, born at ground level, from the asphalt, from the lakes, from the boxwoods, from the still silence of the river, from the chests and chests of drawers in the corridors of the old houses, filled with the clothes of the dead: the doctor reached Defensores de Chaves and drove slowly in the foolish hope that time would pass very quickly and three blocks ahead he would find himself, forty and happy, in a house in Estoril, surrounded by pedigreed greyhounds, good bookbindings and blond children, because what he knew before him was a restless, agitated sadness, of which he could not make out the end, if there was one. I usually used to combat these states by sleeping from hotel to hotel (from the Rex to the Impala, from the Impala to the Penta, from the Penta to the Impala) and suffering in the morning the strange impact of waking up in an impersonal and strange room, approaching the window and seeing the usual city below, the usual traffic, the usual people, and me, stateless in my homeland, washing my armpits with a sample of Feno de Portugal soap, a gift from the management, and leaving the keys at the reception in a false vacation ease.

The psychiatrist walked around José Fontana Square, where for the first time, when he had come from high school, he had seen two dogs making love, chased by the remarkable puritanical rage of the chestnut seller who in the summer drove an ice cream tricycle, thus displaying the enviable malleability of national politicians; for seven years he had crossed the trees of that garden every day, populated in equal doses by pensioners and children, with the underground urinal under the bandstand guarded by a cerberus councilman, enjoying the oscillating vapors of a chronic drunkenness since dawn: the doctor always imagined him secretly married to the woman who sold ice cream chestnuts, to whom he would join in a

the sound of a windshield wiper as dusk approaches, mixing the burps of alcohol with the polar breath of vanilla, in the bridal chamber of the toilets decorated with explanatory drawings, just as the posters at first aid stations explain the ins and outs of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. An elderly homosexual, with his cheeks made up, walked between the benches, observing the students with the look of a sticky candy. And a dignified gentleman with a briefcase, sitting next to the fountain, was negotiating pornographic photographs with the missionary spirit of someone who, at the doors of churches, foists holy cards on children receiving their first communion.

When he arrived at Duque de Loulé, the illuminated advertisements for Chinese restaurants, cuneiform culinary characters for the use of the idiosyncrasies, made him hesitate, indecisive, tempted by the exotic names of the dishes, but he immediately thought that dining alone would make him feel even more alone, balancing without an umbrella on the wire of his distress in front of an indifferent public, so he parked the car lower down, almost touching a telephone booth just like the one whose picture he had seen weeks ago in a magazine, crammed with smiling bodies, with the caption: New World Record: Thirty-Six English Students In A Telephone Booth. The receiver resting on the cradle made him want to call his wife (I love you, I never stopped loving you, let's fight together for us) and so he almost galloped away and dashed down the stairs of Noite e Dia towards the snack bar in the basement, beating the doorman, who looked like his fourth grade teacher, in the act of pushing open the glass door at the entrance.

In the mangers with their long counters, a kind of Last Supper solidarity was established that helped the psychiatrist to remain standing from within, as if his left elbow and his right elbow worked like splints that held together the shattered bones of his despair and prevented them from scattering on the floor like pieces of mikado. He sat between a serious little boy prematurely dressed as a sad librarian and a couple in crisis, bristling with silent marital hatred, smoking angrily, their eyes fixed on the horizon of a contentious divorce, he asked the waiter for a quick steak and a glass of water, and stood watching the diners opposite, most of them girls who took turns at a nearby cabaret, motionless over their coffees like priests at petrified Eucharists. Their hands, with their enormous red nails, held contraband American cigarettes, with whose smoke they ritually incensed the cups, and the doctor amused himself by discovering on their faces, beneath the shoddy makeup and the false expressions learned from the Eden films, the wrinkles that childhoods of deprivation forever imprint on the corners of their mouths and the angles of their eyelids, indelible hieroglyphics of misery. When he was single, he sometimes frequented the prostitutes' bars located on the fringes of the Bairro Alto, in dark, crooked alleys like hollow eye sockets, to

hearing them invent moving virtuous adolescences like Corin Tellado, in front of lukewarm beers and imminent futures of shipwreck, with no survivors: Fucking capitalism, he thought, you haven't even forgotten these misfortunes; let's die and long live the bastard system, plus the world wars with which you resolve your crises of agony: lower the unemployment rate at the cost of millions of victims, shuffle the cards and start the game again, since, as the other one rhymes, after all what matters is not that there are people who are hungry because just like that there are still plenty of people who eat. He would sometimes accompany them in a taxi to the rooms where they lived without elevators, and he would be amazed by the furniture made of crates, the portraits in wire frames and the cardboard suitcases of clothes, lined with blue paper with little stars like the inside of the envelopes: these girls, the psychiatrist was surprised, have preserved intact the tastes and preferences of the provincial servants they must have been, despite the drugstore mascara and the insecticide-like perfumes with which they disguise themselves; there remains in them an atavistic authenticity that transcends me, who was brought up between seventh-day masses and good manners, and when they clean their pillowcases in the enamel washbasin and lie down on the bed to sleep, the ceiling light, hanging from the cord, without a lampshade, like an out-of-orbit eyeball, resembles the lamp in Guernica illuminating a devastated landscape. And here I am in mortal sin like someone who takes communion without having confessed. Chewing his steak, his chin on the plate, the doctor felt the tension of the couple on his left approaching the gaseous state of a furious argument, the high tide sweeping away from the sand of the past the debris of pleasant memories, the difficulties endured together, the illnesses of the children spied on in a sudden rush of concern.

The man was grinding the car keys, his nostrils wide open, crushing them in his trembling hands; the woman, with a smile of defiance on her lips, was banging her coffee spoon against her beer glass to the rhythm of a military drum: her profile, contracted like that of a cat preparing to leap, resembled that of the scowls of fountains embodied in stone rages. The boy librarian, on the other side, was explaining the plot of Cousin Basilio to the fat lady who was with him, with the dignified self-sufficiency of the extremely stupid: one could guess in him the Supreme Court judge or the president of a general meeting of a sports club, uttering pompous inanities with a deep air, and the psychiatrist felt for the creature the flow of sincere pity that he dedicated to those who were unaware of the existence of others, walled in by irremediable imbecility. Two foreigners came down the stairs and sat down next to the girls from the cabaret, who immediately began to move around like hunting dogs: a blonde with large breasts covered by a very tight sweater smiled at them cheekily and the doctor felt a fraternal erection strain in his trousers, while the foreigners whispered to each other about the strategy to follow: it was clear that they were swaying between the

embarrassment and desire, divided. The blonde took a half-meter long cigarette holder from her purse and asked one of them for a light, staring at him without taking her eyes off him: her chest grew in her tight sweater like a dove in heat, and the foreigner drew back, frightened by the carnivorous plant that threatened him; rummaging through his pockets he ended up finding a box of matches advertising an airline; a distressed flame wavered: you've just arrived, my sacristan, thought the doctor, starting the mousse and observing the foreigner's astonished face, you've just arrived and you're already going to cum like you never dreamed you could cum in your fucking life, like you've never cum in the aseptic coitus where you've been slacking off. And he remembered the exact moment before ejaculation, when his body, transformed into a wave that rises in successive waves of pleasure, each time stronger, heavier, denser, suddenly bursts in an explosion of foam the size of the world, in which pieces of us fly independently of us to every corner of the sheet, and we fall asleep, liquefied, in a colorless limpness, shipwrecked in joy due to tenderness. He thought of a weekend he had spent with his wife, after they had separated, in a small inn in Guincho, perched on the cliff against the wind, the seagulls and the slaps of sand at night, and of the room they had occupied, face to face with the sea, with a narrow balcony as if floating above the water. There, lying side by side on the mattress, they had loved each other with the wonder of rediscovering each other, pore by pore, in every caress, in every long kiss, in every journey of love: and once again it was he who had not had the courage to continue, who had given up, terrified, on fighting for both of them. Listen, the psychiatrist articulated within himself, scraping the mousse bowl, listen: you exist so deep within me, with such numerous, muscular, and violent roots that nothing, not even I, will ever be able to cut them; and when I manage to overcome my cowardice, my selfishness, this mud of shit that prevents me from giving you and giving myself, when I achieve that, when I truly achieve that, I will come back.

The blonde and one of the foreigners walked hand in hand towards Duque de Loulé, while the other was in turn being harassed by a small, skinny brunette with the appearance of a vinegar fly, expressing herself in broad gestures of frenetic commedia dell'arte. The quarreling couple left, huffing and puffing their resentment: they moved with the care of a processional float, so as not to spill a single drop of their mutual anger. The mother (or wife?) of the boy librarian asked for the bill. The waiters were chatting with the cook next to the coffee machine. The last one to leave turns off the light, thought the doctor, remembering his childhood fear of the dark. If I don't leave, I'll be screwed: there's no one left here but me.

Every night, at approximately that time, the psychiatrist would make the journey from the motorway and the Marginal to return to the small, unfurnished apartment where no one was waiting for him, perched on Monte Estoril in a building that was too luxurious for his shyness. The doorman's desk, in the enormous glass and metal lobby, with a lake, botanical garden plants and several stone slopes, had a panel of buttons through which a disembodied voice from the Last Judgment echoed its domestic orders across the various floors, with the divine sounds of a broken bucket or a garage at night. Mr. Ferreira, the owner of that tremendous voice, lived in the lower floors of the building, protected by a safe-style door that the architect must have thought was appropriate for this pretentious bunker setting: it was probably he who had painted the unforgettable greyhound in the furniture store, or designed the imaginative aluminum chandelier: these three remarkable lucubrations had a spark of common genius. No less remarkable, in fact, was Mr. Ferreira's living room, which the doctor sometimes used for urgent telephone calls, and where there was, among other lesser wonders (a student from Coimbra playing the guitar in china, a bust of Pope Pius XII with made-up eyes, a Bakelite donkey with plastic flowers in its saddlebags), a large wall tapestry depicting a pair of tigers with the good-natured air of the cows in the cheese triangles, having lunch with the disgust of vegetarians on a gazelle that looked like a skinny rabbit, staring at a horizon of holm oaks in the languid hope of a miracle. The doctor always remained with the receiver in his hand, forgetting about the call, examining in amazement such an amazing achievement. Mr. Ferreira's wife, who felt the instinctive sympathy for him that orphans arouse, came out of the kitchen drying her hands on her apron:

- The doctor really likes little tigers.

And he would stand next to the psychiatrist, head tilted, proudly contemplating his pets, until Mr. Ferreira appeared in his turn and uttered, in his famous divine voice, the phrase that summed up for him the climax of artistic admiration:

- Those bastards even seem to talk.

And in fact the doctor was waiting at any moment for one of the animals to turn its backwards eyes towards him and murmur "Oh Jesus" in a groan of distress.

Driving the car along the highway, paying attention to the volumes of shadow that the headlights successively discovered and devoured, trees torn from the darkness in a tragic unreality, tangled bushes, the winding and trembling strip of pavement, the psychiatrist thought that, except for Mr. Ferreira's tapestry, Estoril and he had nothing else that brought them together: he had been born in a poor maternity hospital and had grown up and lived forever, until he left home months before, in a poor neighborhood without the luxury of houses with swimming pools and international hotels. The Estrela Brilhante brewery was his Garrett bakery,

with the cakes replaced by pipis and lupins, and the ladies of the Red Cross by Carris drivers, who when they took off their peaked caps to wipe their foreheads with their handkerchiefs gave the impression of being naked. Downstairs from his parents lived Maria Feijóca, the owner of the coal factory, and in the house next door lived Dona Maria José, who dealt in shady contraband. He knew the merchants by name and the neighbors by nicknames, and his grandmothers greeted the saleswomen in the square with the greetings of chatelaines. Florentino, a legendary, perpetually drunk delivery boy, whose torn clothes fluttered around his body like loose feathers, would warn him whenever he came across him, with a familiarity increased tenfold by the red Your father is a close friend of mine, waving to him from the tavern on the street of the cemetery, that the sign On the Way Back Here I'll Wait for You gave death the subordinate importance of a pretext: the Martelo Agency (Why Does Your Excellency Insist on Living If for Five Hundred Escudos You Can Have a Beautiful Funeral?) displayed the urns and the little wax hands just above, strategically halfway between the grave and the glass. The doctor felt an immense tenderness for the Benfca of his childhood, transformed into Póvoa de Santo Adrião by the greed of the builders, the tenderness that one dedicates to an old friend disfigured by multiple scars and in whose face one searches in vain for the complicit features of yesteryear. When they knock down the Pires building, he said, thinking of the enormous old building opposite his parents' house, what magnetic north will I use to orient myself, I who have so few points of reference left and have so much difficulty in making new ones for myself? And he imagined himself adrift in the city, without a compass, lost in a labyrinth of alleys, because Estoril would forever remain a foreign island to which he felt incapable of adapting, far from the noises and smells of his native forest. From the apartment he could see Lisbon, and looking at the sprawling city he felt it at the same time distant and close, painfully distant and close, like his daughters, his wife, and the attic with a sloping roof where they lived (the Pátio das Cantigas, she called it), filled with prints, books, and children's untidy toys.

It reached Caxias with the waves crashing over the wall in vertical curtains. There was no moon and the river merged with the sea in the black space to its left, a gigantic deserted well of ship lights: the red street lamps of Monaco looked, behind the damp glass of the restaurant, like anaemic beacons in a storm: I had dinner here when I got married, thought the psychiatrist, and there has never been a miraculous dinner like this again: even the roast beef had a taste of surprise; at the end of the coffee I discovered that it was not necessary, for the first time, to take you home, and that shot a formidable joy into my gut, as if from that moment on my life as a man had begun, opened up despite the imminence of war in a vigorous perspective of hope. He remembered the car that his grandmother had lent them for their honeymoon and that had been the last one

her husband's car and her sluggish work from birth, she remembered the strange impression of the ring on her finger, the suit she had worn for the first time that afternoon and her pathetic care with the creases. I love you, he repeated aloud, gripping the steering wheel like a broken rudder, I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you, I love your body, your legs, your hands, your pathetic animal eyes: and it was like a blind man continuing to talk to a person who had tiptoed out of the room, a blind man shouting towards an empty chair, feeling the air, feeling with his nostrils a smell that was evaporating. If I go home now I'll fuck myself, he said, I don't feel up to facing the bathroom mirror and all that silence waiting for me, the bed closed in on itself like a sticky mussel. And he remembered the bottle of brandy in the kitchen and that he could always sit on the wooden bench on the veranda, glass in hand, watching the way the buildings tumbled down to the beach, dragging their terraces, their trees, their tortured gardens behind them: he would sometimes fall asleep in the open air, his head resting against the blind, with a boat leaving the harbour sailing past his tired eyelids, and in that way he would achieve some kind of peace, until a hint of purple light, mixed with sparrows, would wake him up and force him to stumble towards the mattress like a sleepwalking child taking his nighttime wee. And the bench on the veranda was covered in solidified bird droppings, which he would pick off with his fingernails and which tasted like the brown of childhood, secretly devoured during the brief absences of the cook, absolute dictator of that principality of saucepans.

There were few cars on the route and the psychiatrist had been driving slowly, on the right-hand side of the road, close to the pavement, ever since one morning the previous week a stray seagull had hit the windshield with a soft, feathery noise, and the doctor had seen it, already behind him, trembling on the asphalt in agony. The car following him had stopped next to the creature, and he, driving away, had noticed in the mirror that the driver had gotten out, heading towards the white mound on the asphalt, growing smaller in the distance. A wave of guilt and shame that he could not explain (guilt for what? shame for what?) swelled from his stomach to his mouth in a reflux of heartburn, and for no apparent reason a severe phrase from Chekhov came to mind: "Offer men men, do not offer yourself"; then the psychiatrist remembered The Seagull and the profound impression that reading the play had made on him, of the apparently gentle characters adrift in an apparently gentle and amusing setting (Chekhov sincerely considered himself a comedian) but laden with the terrifying anguish of life that only Fitzgerald perhaps later knew how to rediscover and that appears, at times, in Charlie Parker's saxophone, crucifying us suddenly in a desperate solo that sums up all the innocence and all the suffering of the world in the piercing breath of a note. Then the doctor thought: That seagull is me and the one who runs away from me is me too. And I don't even have the

courage needed to go back and help myself.

On the way up and down Estoril, as he passed the grey bulk of the Old Fort with its enormous and hideous metal fish suspended above the dancing couples (How long has it been since I was there?) the psychiatrist once again visualized the deserted apartment, the bathroom mirror and the kitchen bottle next to the metal jug, the only lifebuoys in the desolate silence of the house. Outside, at the entrance to the building, the dry leaves of the eucalyptus trees rustled constantly, blown by the high wind, with the sound of false teeth clashing against each other. The tenants' cars, almost all of them luxurious and large, pressed their noses against the wall like sullen children. In his mailbox, apart from the occasional forgotten brochure and the weekly CDS propaganda sheet that he hurriedly slipped into the landlady's locker without reading it, emphatically declaring, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," there was never a letter for him: he felt like García Márquez's colonel, inhabited by irremediable loneliness and the phosphorescent mushrooms in his gut, waiting for news that never arrived, that would never arrive, and slowly rotting in that useless wait fed by a thousand vague promises. So when the traffic light turned green in a sudden change of mood, he turned right and headed towards the Casino.

At the top of a sort of Eduardo VII Park in small stitch embroidered with hemophiliac palm trees whose branches creaked with protests of stubborn drawers, of Visconti hotels inhabited by Hitchcock characters and one-armed car park attendants, with hungry eyes hidden in the peaks of their caps like avid birds trapped in the furrowed net of their eyebrows, the Casino building resembled a large ugly ocean liner adorned among houses and trees, beaten by the waves of music from the Wonder-Bar, by the hoarse cries of the croupiers' seagulls and by the enormous silence of the maritime night around which rose a dense odor of cologne and poodle menstruation. The trains leaving for Lisbon from Tamariz station carried with them, on the empty seats, the verses of that Dylan Thomas you liked so much.

In the final direction of the elementary town I
advance for as long as forever is.

And the doctor imagined himself nodding in a deserted carriage, duplicated on the other side of the glass through houses, fragments of wall and lights of ships, to the rhythm of the words of the poet that his wife used to take with her to bed and with whom she maintained a silent and perfect dialogue that excluded him:

for the lovers
Who pays no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

Dylan Thomas was the guy I was most jealous of to this day, thought the psychiatrist, abandoning the car in the protective shade of a tourist bus, whose driver was explaining to an amazed taxi driver the intimate merits of French women of a certain age, capable of making intercourse as light and easily digestible as an asparagus soufflé. I desperately hated Dylan Thomas and the tumultuously convincing poems with which that fat red-haired drunkard traveled with you to interior countries to which I had no access, neighbors of the dreams of which faint echoes reached me through the loose words that you chewed in the ecstasy of a shipwrecked mermaid. I hated Dylan Thomas without you even knowing it, said the doctor, walking over the damp night grass towards the deck of the Casino and its crew, disguised as majestic grooms, exchanging ashtrays with slow gestures like vestals, I hated that dead rival who came from the fog of the northern islands with a thoughtful corsair's smile on his innocent cheeks, that Welsh bastard who burst the thick dikes of language with windy phrases full of bells and horsehair, that lover of foam, that ghost with freckles, that man who lived in a whiskey bottle like the collectors' boats, burning in his alcohol flame

with the painful grace of a refractory phoenix. Caitlin, said the psychiatrist, exchanging vague de Chirico smiles with the cabalistic doorman, Caitlin from New York I call you under the milk wood in this November of 1953 when I died, with an island fading in the landscape of my head surrounded by the voracious rage of the albatrosses, Caitlin one of these days I will go down to Tamariz and take an electric train to Wales where you will wait for me in front of a tea as sad as the color of your eyes, sitting in the room where nothing has changed, with a thick pub smoke separating you, solid, from the rush of my kisses. Caitlin, this distressed lighthouse bellow is my longing ox bellow searching for you, this modulated locomotive whistle the love song I am capable of, this noise of guts a moved start of tenderness, these steps on the stairs my heart reaching out to you: let's go back to the beginning, clean up our lives, start over, play crapaud in the evening, drink ginj a liqueur, leave the trash can outside, with the noise of a poor clown, amidst the astonishment of the neighbors and the cats, open a can of caviar and slowly eat the little grains of lead until, having become poachers' cartridges, we fire at each other in the fireworks of a final explosion, and that will be a little bit, Caitlin, our way of leaving.

In the lobby of the Casino, a group of Englishwomen who had disembarked from a bus as sumptuous as Clark Gable's living room, with its windows replaced by paintings by Van Eyck, were bubbling with measured enthusiasm from their pale mouths. A colonial colonel, wearing black velvet in a white tuxedo, shared his grey moustaches with two Indian women in saris, as enigmatic as queens of clubs, who glided across the floor as if they were hiding rubber wheels in the complexity of their skirts. Transparent Swedes with dark circles under their eyes from insomnia caused by long days of six months were supported by olive-coloured Mexicans from Elvas, whom John Wayne killed in film after film with the joy of an effective insecticide. Decrepit Polish countesses leaned toward each other like collapsed question marks: rouge floated around their wrinkles without sticking to their skin, pollen that attracted Senegalese insects with large globular eye sockets, on whose fingers dozens of papal rings glistened. From time to time, the thighs clad in black stockings of the French ballet, or the hugely open jaws of the Tibetan sword swallower, escaped through a gap in the restaurant curtains like jets of steam through cracks in a pan. A fado singer wrapped in a shawl was absent in a tragic meditation on Phaedra, holding a glass of ritual gin in both hands. Obese gentlemen, in unbuttoned waistcoats, either left the chamber pot with the relieved air of having returned from the confessional, or snored randomly on the sofas. Behind the windshield of the machines, hundreds of voracious piggy banks clinked, squeezing the excess from their stomachs into chrome bibs. Being here, thought the doctor, passing a wheelchair with a legless man inside, is like waking up suddenly in the middle of the night with the impression that the bed has shifted position in the middle of the night.

dark and finding ourselves in a different country, far from our familiar territorial waters, under this vertical white light of a boxing ring that acts as a revealer, showing us too many wrinkles in the mirrors, waking up suddenly in the middle of the night and plunging into a ridiculous nightmare populated by a restless crowd that seeks in the senseless agitation its reason for agitation: like me, added the psychiatrist, at the same time fleeing and searching in successive circles without purpose and without end, a headless dog but with two tails that chase and repel each other, moaning sadly with melancholic barks of a solitary person. I had replaced my strict existence with the poor hollow whirligigs of a delirious clerk spinning fictitious cardboard joys; I had transformed life into a plastic scenario, a schematic imitation of a reality too complex and demanding for my limited range of available feelings. And so, insignificant pierrot of a frustrated carnival, I was quickly consumed by a portable little flame of anguish.

The doctor exchanged two conto de réis notes for five hundred escudos chips and sat down at his favorite French stand, which was almost empty of players because the game was irregular. He could feel the frenzy of the roulette tables on his back, the slowness of which made him impatient, with the croupiers counting endless piles of chips and a huddle of gamblers around them, leaning towards the green cloth with the appetite of praying mantises. The psychiatrist particularly noticed a very tall, very thin Englishwoman, with a strapless dress hanging from the hanger at her collarbones, still glistening with sun cream, her skeletal hands dripping chips that she placed on the shoulders of the others in angular crane-like gestures. The croupier announced Small, the dealer collected the losing chips and doubled the winning ones: the doctor saw that the woman sitting to his left had written down three small ones in a row after two large ones, so he pushed five hundred into the Big area and waited. First, he told himself, he would feel around, following my mother's technique in the square: at least having seen her haggle over fruit so much would be of some use to me. And he smiled, imagining what his mother, a prudent and measured creature, would think if she had found him there risking sums that she considered exorbitant, going to bed late to arrive at the hospital even later the next day, speeding down the steep slope of certain ruin: tragic stories of fortunes evaporated at the Casino were told in gloomy tones in the family evenings, told in hollow tones by the tribe's aedos. Aunt Mané, a historic octogenarian whose smile opened a zigzagging path through paintings and dried creams, had lost the house silver in baccarat and used a pawn order instead of an identity card.

– Little one, said the croupier, putting down the dice cup and immediately engaging in a whispered conversation with the inspector, their heads gently inclined like apostles at the Last Supper: Jesus and St. John sharing the delights of the Holy Spirit. The payer removed the doctor's card with a deft maneuver of his tongue.

chameleon hunting an unwary fly. The woman conscientiously noted the Little One, she was fat and blonde, already worn out, and wore a faux fur coat on her soft shoulders: her profile resembled that of Lavoisier in the oval portrait of the

Physics book from the 4th year of high school, and threw two hundred and fifty escudos at a time with the furious determination of someone who obstinately loses. On the opposite side of the table, a scratchy old woman stubbornly threw twenty escudos at the aces in the hope of a miracle. Two guys with the air of prosperous construction foremen hesitated with matches in their teeth: the chewing gum of the natives of Tomar, thought the psychiatrist, betting again on the Big, cuttlefish with paint, burnt yellow Mercedes Diesel and Vila Mélite on the facade of the house. The woman with the plastic leopard abstained. A 12 came up, a 13, a 14, a 12, an 18: the construction foremen each put five thousand escudos on the Small. A red-haired boy emerged from behind the doctor's neck and threw five hundred on the Big: I'm already screwed, thought the psychiatrist for no apparent reason other than a warning tightening in his esophagus. He reached for his money and was about to fish it out when the croupier lifted his chin and said, Small with cruel indifference. Croupiers and analysts, damn you.

- I say goodbye to you and like a teenager I stumble with tenderness for you, the doctor murmured to the card that the payer was bringing him, arranging it next to the ones he had piled up in front of him, if this mess keeps up like this I'll soon be taking off my socks to put them on the aces, winning a Formula One jersey and committing suicide by swallowing an excessive dose of hundred-pound slices. The fat woman snuggled into the chair and her thigh touched the doctor's, who followed her Big's guess out of gratitude: he had felt less alone since a fold of someone else's flesh was pressing against his knee. The contractors moved to the Small, the red-haired boy, resentful, walked away, grumbling: there was always a redhead in Camões' classes, the psychiatrist recalled, a redhead, a buffoon and a bespectacled one in the front rows; the bum was the worst at gymnastics, the one with glasses was the best at geography and the redhead was the teachers' favourite victim to take revenge for the anonymous pranks: pissing in the wastepaper basket, barking in the middle of reading The Lusiads, swearing in chalk on the blackboard; at the end of the second term, their parents, also redheads, moved them to private schools perhaps reserved for redheads where pornographic photographs were freely lent, athletic black men sodomising bitches, priests in cassocks masturbating in the confessional, homosexuals without rough edges giving themselves over to blurred orgies. The fat woman smiled at him: she was missing an incisor on top and had the pale gums of Vasco da Gama on the fortieth day of vitamin deficiency.

- Great, proclaimed the croupier, who was laughing respectfully at some joke made by the inspector.

It's curious how the graces of superiors always have humor, the doctor realized, repeating the surprised phrase of one of his brothers who was astonished by the flattery as an incomprehensible phenomenon: the payer leaned over to the

croupier who repeated the anecdote of the boss, who gravely approved with a solemn smile, adjusting the angle of his collars:

- Is it or isn't it, Meireles?

Meireles, who was exchanging tokens with a hunchback, raised his eyebrows without looking up from his work, with the knowing grimace with which the psychiatrist's aunts responded, while counting the stitches of the knitting, to their nephews' questions. Have I grown, have I really grown, the psychiatrist wondered, responding with his knee to the pressure of the woman with the plastic leopard on her hip, assessing him sideways with a slow, knowing eyelid, have I really grown or have I remained a frightened kid squatting in the room among gigantic grown-ups who accuse me, staring at me in silence with horrible hostility, or coughing lightly, covered with two fingers, their resigned disapproval? Give me time, he asked that circle of Easter Island idols who were chasing him with a fiercely disillusioned love, give me time and I will be exactly what you want, as you want me, serious, composed, consistent, adult, helpful, friendly, stuffed, slightly ambitious, sinisterly cheerful, darkly naive and definitely dead, give me time, give me time

Just give me time
time to recall them before
I shall speak out. Give
me time
team.

When I was a boy
I kept a book
to which from time
to time,
I added pressed flowers
until, after a time,
I had a good collection. But the
sea which no one tends
is also a garden
when the sun strikes it
and the waves
are awakened.

I have seen it
and so have you
when it puts all flowers
to shame.

Time, the doctor repeated, I urgently need time to dress myself with courage, to paste all my yesterdays into the photo album (Who'd think to find you in a photograph, perfectly quiet in the arrested chaff), to arrange the features of my face, to check the position of my nose in the mirror, and to set out on the day that begins with the solid determination of a winner. Time to wait for you outside the ministry, to go up the stairs with you, to put the key in the door and to stumble, embracing you, without turning on the light, to the bed dimly lit by the phosphorescent hands of the electric alarm clock, disturbed by the excess of clothing and the sobs of tenderness, relearning the Braille of passion. The fat woman placed her very long, dark red nails on his arm: her wrist, identical to that of a dried-up lizard, was adorned with a filigree bracelet, with an enormous medal of Our Lady of Fatima clinking against an ivory fig, and the psychiatrist felt as if he were about to be devoured by a tertiary reptile whose jaws the blood from the lipstick clearly revealed monstrous murderous intentions. The dinosaur's eyes fixed him with the false intensity of the mascara, under the eyebrows plucked to the thickness of a strip of thread, and its chest rose and fell with a gill-like cadence, giving its multiple necklaces the swaying of the kidneys of anchored boats. The fingers crawled spider-like up the doctor's sleeve, lightly pinching his thumb, while his thigh completely absorbed his and a sharp heel pressed against his foot, tearing off his heel in a malevolent caress. The hunchback, sitting on the left, was noisily sucking on throat lozenges, spreading the air with the aroma of asthmatic inhalations: if I closed my eyelids tightly for a second I could easily imagine myself in Marcel Proust's room, hidden behind the pile of handwritten notebooks of the Recherche du Temps Perdu: c'est trop bête, that's how he used to describe what he wrote, je peux pas continuer, c'est trop bête. Dear Uncle Proust: the wallpaper, the fireplace, the iron bed, your difficult and courageous death: but I was actually sitting at a gaming table at the Casino, and loneliness was eating away at me like a painful acid: the idea of an empty house terrified me, the idea of going back to sleep on the balcony made me groan with anticipated lumbago. With my soul in a panic, I threw the last chip to the Grand: if I win, I'll go straight to Monte, get under the covers and masturbate thinking about you until I fall asleep (a recipe for relative success); if I lose, I'll invite this elderly boa constrictor to a modest orgy, in keeping with her plastic coat and my threadbare jeans, and in keeping with the end of a difficult month: I honestly didn't know which of these two catastrophes to choose, divided with equal horror between isolation and the snake. A sumptuous Spanish woman rubbed her magnificent buttocks against him, an embroidered pillow for happier heads: the lean period would undoubtedly be his perpetual destiny and he would adapt to it in a bovine resignation: a park bench somewhere patiently awaited his old age.

melancholically idle, and it could well be that on Wednesdays her younger brother would give her dinner at his house, accompanying the roast meat with advice and reprimands.

– Mom always said you'd never have any sense.

And probably not only would he never have any sense, but (even more seriously) he would not achieve the kind of happiness that the absence of this strange attribute brings with it, a ballast without which one flies to the pleasant heights of a fun madness, without hassle, without worries, without plans, at the mercy of adolescence assumed as a state of mind, as a vocation or as destiny. – Mother always said.

Mother always said everything. And it seemed to me that the inspector was gradually acquiring her prophetic look, his eyelids bruised, his forehead wrinkled, the lit cigarette spiraling at the end of his arm in ellipses of surrender:

– What can you expect from this boy?

Nothing, he said loudly in a kind of anger that startled the duck, at the exact moment when the croupier put down the glass, raised his chin, looked around, tightened the noose around his neck and informed

- Small

dictating a definitive sentence without his knowledge.

"Are you really sure you're a doctor?" the snake asked, eyeing his shaved jeans, his worn-out sweater, and the careless mess of his hair with suspicion. They were both in the psychiatrist's small car (I don't know if I can fit in this thing), next to the impressive tourist bus that was taking back its load of old American women in evening dresses, with glasses suspended from their necks by silver threads like babies' pacifiers, accompanied by ruddy-faced men who looked like the Hemingway in the final portraits.

- I don't usually distrust people, but you never know, she added, examining the professional ID that the other man was handing her, and I'm starting to get my share of scams. If you believe, you believe and then you'll get the idea: give me your ID, hey, pretty girl, and you'll be stuck on the road watching the world go by. Excuse me, it's none of your business, the sinner pays the price, as the priests say, and it never hurts to be careful. I have a cousin on my father's side who's a nurse in São José, in Service One, Carregosa, do you know him? Short, strong, bald, a bit of a stutterer, crazy about Atlético? He wears the emblem over his lab coat, he played for the juniors, his wife got stuck, she only says "raisparta" "raisparta"? Forgive my caution, sir, but Mendes always told me: Dóri (my name is Dóri) be careful with strangers, it's better to be safe than sorry, I even heard that from a lady who had her breasts removed at the cancer institute, she used to get stretchers, now she gets IV balloons, she's almost as bad as Mendes, poor guy, who after the revolution had to emigrate to Brazil, what can I do? He left me a sweet letter assuring me that he would send me to be with him, that he had never loved anyone as much as he loved me, it was just a matter of months until he got his life together and that was it, mulatto women don't even look at them, they smell bad. Sooner or later I'll take the boat to Rio de Janeiro. He's a doctor of finance and economics, and he won't dry up without getting a job. I've never seen him as competent as Mendes. He works like a dog, the wretch, despite his weak lungs. And then there's more to it than that, it's his delicacy, his manners, his way of treating a woman. Guess what you want. He never hit me. Almost every week he brought me flowers, jewelry, dinners at Comodoro, movies. Of course, I told him, "My son, there's no need for so much luxury," but Mendes knew I was getting a kick out of it. He didn't care. He was a saint on the altar. I can see him with his sideburns very well groomed (I gave him a filchaive for Christmas), his pink and black shirt impeccable, his nail polish shining.

Pause.

- Why don't you put on a natural silk tie, a pied-de-pule jacket, and some hairspray? I've never seen a doctor so poorly dressed, so mechanical. Doctors must have representation, right? Who wants to deal with a slovenly, slovenly psychiatrist? When I go to the cashier, I demand respect and seriousness. You can tell by the look on people's faces whether they're competent or not.

No, you don't think so, the specialists, as they should be, wear vests, have silver beaded beadlets, houses with chandeliers, golden taps that are like fish squirting water, you go in there and you notice the money that quinine is walking around at the time of death, tell me what do you do today and in life without money, without money I feel like I'm dying, it's my gasoline, you get it, take my crocodile wallet away from me and I'll be completely lost, I'm used to luxuries, what do you want, maybe you won't believe it but my father was a veterinary professor in Lamego.

She took a contraband Camel out of a hideous cardboard purse that looked like an alligator and lit it with a Bakelite lighter that looked like a turtle. The psychiatrist noticed that her shoes, with their incredibly high heels, needed half-soles, and that large, unpolished creases were streaking the leather on the instep: sales at the Plaza de Chile, he diagnosed. The roots of her blond locks were growing grey where the parting was, and powder tried unsuccessfully to mask the multiple deep wrinkles around her eyes and along her soft cheeks, which hung from her chin in sagging curtains of flesh. She must have carried photographs of her grandchildren (Andreia Milena, Paulo Alexandre, Sónia Filipa) in her purse.

"Next week I'll be thirty-five," she informed him cheekily. "If you promise to put on a tuxedo and take me out to dinner at a decent restaurant as far away from Caracóis da Esperança as possible, I'll invite you: ever since Mendes left, I've had an empty heart."

And feeling my shoulder:

- I'm a very affectionate person, my dear, I can't live without love. You probably don't earn much, huh, doctors are skinning you, if you got ready, did your hair, bought a little suit on Avenida de Roma maybe you'd look good, although for me, money, looks, don't matter at all, it's feelings that interest me, the beauty of the soul, right? A man who treats me well, takes me for a walk in Sintra on Sundays and that's enough for me to be happy as a canary. I'm very happy, you know?, very calm, very homely. As for me, my son, I belong to the love and a cabin type, my bubble bath, my leg waxing, an open account at the bakery, I don't ask for anything more. Do you have two hundred escudos that you can lend me for a taxi to Lisbon, what trains? With me, holy patience, you certainly have two hundred escudos. You must earn well. You are a gentleman. I can't stand sweets that aren't gentlemen. Look at those slobes always with their dicks in their mouths, damn them. Excuse me for talking to you like this, but I'm honest. I'm not a stutterer. I know what I'm saying. Good or bad, nothing. And then I like you. I can give you a lot of pleasure if you like me, understand me, pay my rent. What I want is to dedicate myself to someone who takes me to the movies and to the café, pays my rent, treats me properly, likes my basset hound, accepts me. We could both be happy, you and I, don't you think? When are you going to slip me the two hundred balls? Are you afraid that this is just idle talk? Oh, son, I'm passionate about you.

At first glance, there's nothing to be done, I like you, let me put on my glasses to observe you better, to love you even more.

First he took out a pencil case, pushed it back into the back of his desk (Poça, these are the ones from far away) and extracted from a jumble of tissues, tram tickets and crumpled documents a pair of lenses as thick as a kaleidoscope, behind which the pupils disappeared, dissolved in the thickness of the glass: the psychiatrist felt as if he were being examined by a poor-quality microscope.

– Oh, son, but you're so young, the diopters exclaimed in surprise, you're about my age, thirty-three, thirty-four at most, right? I'd bet two hundred and fifty bucks that you're thirty-four, I'm never wrong about years, if it were like that with the lottery I would have opened a boutique in Areeiro more than a hundred years ago, Mendes swore to me on his brother's bones that are underground that he would put me in Penha de França and then the communists would come and rob us, screwing everything up, the project went down the drain but if you think I gave up you're more mistaken than a husband, Dóri here is stubborn as hell, in love and business I'm a guard dog, I won't let go, I have sharp teeth. By the way, look how much you have in the bank, not more than a hundred thousand, confess to Dóri, if you wanted we could open a hair salon, Dóri Salon would be cool, don't you think, bright letters outside, decency, rich clientele, handpicked employees, background music, velvet chairs, something like in the movies, I would stay at the cashier because my strength is commerce, I spent ten years at Mendes's capelista and I never caused a loss to Havaneza in Arroios, it closed because it had to close, businesses wear out, you see, it's like men's dicks, yours must be all worn out my friend but Dóri composes, you just have to know how to play the one-string guitar, and then Havaneza's suppliers put their nails in like a mug and I happened to meet Leal, a guy who sang on the radio you probably know, he was on or off to go on television, he dedicated beautiful songs to me, romantic kind, even I cried, you see, the impression of a handsome young man that didn't go away, they even invited him to be in a photo novel for Crónica, the story of an engineer, the son of a countess, who likes his mother's maid who turns out to be the granddaughter of a marquis and didn't know it, the marquis lived in Campo de Ourique in a wheelchair, I insisted with him, Oh Leal, you accept me, you accept me, the hole you're in, you're all down and you look like an engineer, but the boy was proud and he was screwed over because of that, even if it were a film, he replied, even if it were a film, I would think about it as long as they let me take a nap, an Indian film, he had that mania for Indian films, whoever wanted to find him had to look for him at the exit of Aviz, he looked like Arturo de Cordoba and Tony de Matos, the same voice, the same well-combed curls, the waist so thin, he did weights and dumbbells on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Ateneu, in Caxias and on the beach it was a raid on the little ones, Mendes accepted the thing, forgave me, he knew about my

He had a temper and forgave me, Leal married the owner of a goldsmith's shop in Amadora, a dirty bitch who didn't even have breasts, the widow of a sailor who sucked a few shit while smuggling radios, he would probably give his wife's pussy door to door, I took sleeping pills for a month, I could only sigh, I even lost my taste for soap operas, Mendes made me linden tea, poor thing, he gave me good-natured advice, oh Dóri, if the heart doctor lets me I'll go to the gym at the Ateneu, I suffered from angina pectoris, poor thing, climbing the stairs was a disaster, I would start panting straight away, I don't know how many times he would get on top of me, oh Dóri, leave it alone, you have your little Richie here, Mendes' name was Reinaldo, Reinaldo da Conceição Mendes but I called him Richie because he liked it, I lost five pounds kilos with unhappiness, oh I know that if I caught the ramelosa I would break her horn with my teeth, a cuckold's snatch, hot-headed whore, this October a blessed aneurysm burst, I paid for a thanksgiving mass at Beato, I was left with my pussy jumping for the rest of my life, the priest latinating at the altar and I saying on my knees Little do you know what you pray for, my scoundrel, long live Benfica who is no longer here who screwed me.

The doctor reached the riverbank and returned to Monte Estoril: there was a nightclub at the foot of the hill where he would not run much risk of bumping into people who knew him: he was ashamed to be seen in the company of that overly noisy woman, at least twice his age, fighting against decrepitude and poverty through an absurd performance that was at once ridiculous and touching, which made him feel ashamed of his shame: deep down they were no different from each other, and in a certain sense their frantic struggles were similar: they were both fleeing the same unbearable solitude, and both, for lack of means and courage, abandoned themselves without a fight to the anguish of dawn like terrified owls. The doctor remembered a phrase by Scott Fitzgerald, a distressed crew member of the boat they were on, left ashore on a previous voyage, his heart exhausted and fueled by the bitter oxygen of alcohol: in the darkest night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning. He reached out his hand and stroked the dinosaur's neck with sincere tenderness: hello, my old lady, let's cross this darkness together, his thumb declared, moving up and down along her neck, let's cross this darkness together, the only way out is through the bottom, as Pavia informed us before embracing his train, the only way out is through the bottom and perhaps by supporting each other we will get there, Brueghel's blind men groping, you and I, through this corridor full of childhood fears and the wolves that inhabit insomnia with threats.

- Ah ah, exclaimed Dory with a smile of triumph, cheeky, huh?

And he squeezed my testicles with his nutcracker fingers until I screamed in pain.

The boîte must have been at the end of its journey that night: the only inhabitants

apart from the one-eyed waiter who served us a gin and a plastic plate of popcorn with obvious bad manners, and the girl with the records who was reading Uncle Scrooge in her sound cage, a music box figure bent over like a fetus, there were two sleepy men leaning against the counter, their equine noses buried in baskets of grapefruit, and who stared at the tertiary woman, who was swaying her gigantic hips in front of me, with the distracted attention given to an uninteresting ruin. The ceiling lights, pulsing softly to the rhythm of a tango, illuminated the Pindaric stage of my execution: iron chairs from a café terrace, a switched-off television on a high shelf, the shells and circular footprints of glasses on the tabletops: he died in poverty, explained the reading books about deceased poets, skeletal bearded men suspended in thoughtful attitudes, probably meditating on what to do next, or making precious alexandrines in their heads. Dori, who was returning at dawn to a young maid gilded by the solid marriage promises of a soldier cousin, asked for a sausage sandwich with lard, from which she offered the doctor, in a sudden turn of delicacy, the first bite: she chewed with her mouth open like the cement trucks, and they danced, sweetly exchanging pieces of crust (Quick porridge, you're so sweet), like shipwrecked people fraternally sharing the rations of the raft. The one-eyed man elbowed the horses of the bagasse and the three of them remained watching them in motionless stupefaction, astonished by the amazing scene of an aging adolescent in the arms of a Paleolithic whale with a large frilled mane. Fuck, the terrified doctor thought, inhaling the war-gas-like scent of 14 that was released in lethal coils from the back of the woman's neck, what would I do if I were in my place?

It's five in the morning and I swear I don't miss you. Dóri is inside sleeping on her back, her arms outstretched, crucified on the sheets, and her false teeth, detached from the roof of her mouth, move forward and backward to the rhythm of her breathing in a damp, suction-like noise. We both drink the brandy from the kitchen from the leaf jug, sitting naked on the bed that the war gas has made uninhabitable by charring even the printed sheets of the pillowcases. I listen to her long-winded confidences, I wipe away her confused crying that tattooed my elbow with a mascara bush, I pull the blanket up to her neck like a pious shroud over a broken body, and I come out onto the balcony to pick up the hardened droppings of the birds. It's cold, the houses and trees are slowly emerging from the darkness, the sea is a towel that is becoming clearer and clearer, but I don't think about you. I swear I don't think about you. I feel good, happy, free, content, I hear the last train down there, I can guess the seagulls waking up, I breathe the peace of the city in the distance, I break out into a happy smile and I feel like singing. If I had a telephone and you called me now, you would carefully place the receiver against your ear in a shell-like expectation: through the Bakelite coils, coming from miles away, from this concrete balcony suspended over the end of the night, you would have, together with the echo of my silence, the victorious echo of my silence, the muffled piano of the waves. Tomorrow I will start life all over again, I will be the serious and responsible adult that my mother wishes and my family awaits, I will arrive on time at the infirmary, punctual and serious, I will comb my hair to reassure the patients, I will trim my vocabulary of pointed obscenities. Maybe, my love, I'll buy a tiger tapestry like Mr. Ferreira's: you might think it's stupid, but I need something to help me exist.