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Celebration toward the Northwest translated by Cathy Tebbetts

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from CELEBRATION TOWARD THE NORTHWEST

Chapter I

Dingo's whip cracked dryly like a flash of black lightning. It had been raining since dawn and it was nearly six-thirty already, three days before Ash Wednesday. The water matted down the old horse's mane and the puppetman's cart murmured its ten thousand complaints. Smiles of masks and wigs, yawns of trick dogs, and long, very long voiceless wailings.

Dingo felt it all from the driver's seat like a tickling on the back of his neck. Behind him, inside the kaleidoscope-colored wagon, lay his old trunk of masks, the mute who played the drum, and the three trick dogs, all asleep under the tick-trickling of the rain.

They had just entered the district of Artamila at the height of Lent that hung over the defenseless earth. Artamila was none too thankful for their arrival, its ground and sky were hostile to living creatures. The district consisted of three villages, each sullen and distant from one another: Upper, Lower, and Central Artamilla. In this last one—also referred to as Big Artamila—were the town hall and the parish church. Dingo looked out over the deep valley of Lower Artamila, the most wretched of the three villages. He had fled from there when he was still a boy, following a troupe of travelling play-actors. Dingo's real name was Domingo. He had been born on a Sunday and he tried to make his whole life a continuous holiday. Now, after the passing of years, or hours—who could tell the difference?—his own play-actor's wagon was stopped right on the edge of the steep hill, over that wide road that descended, like inevitable fate, toward the first of the three villages. It was an abrupt and violent road, not meant for leisurely travel.

He forced himself to look; his eyes would have preferred to retreat into the back of his head. Dingo looked at the valley again after not having seen it for so long. It seemed so deep, pimpled with gray rocks. How deep, with its shacks made nearly indistinguishable by dirty fingers of hunger. There again were the oak woods on the slope, the proud tapered green poplars. In groups, yet each drawn up in arrogant solitude, like men. Those men of Artamila, their dark skin and big hands. Dingo sat quietly in the driver's seat of his wagon with

his arm raised, as if warding off disaster. Dingo's eyes were wide-set, as if he travelled through the world peering out from his temples in order to avoid facing life squarely. Drops of rain clinked like frozen sparks from the edges of his waterproof cape and the axles of the wagonwheels. Dingo spit and flicked at the horse with his whip.

He heard every groan of each piece of the wooden wagon. He had started downward with a strong urge to pass on through Artamila, to pass through it in one breath like a swordslice of contempt; he felt his bile rise at the thought of old unforgotten insults. Flee from there, climb again toward the top of the facing hill on the other side of the valley and leave the red puddle of Artamila behind forever, beneath its rains and relentless skies. Red with mud, the wheels shrieked through their patches, each in a different tone, with a different complaint, thoughtlessly yoked together like a human couple. Right then Dingo felt as though he wore those wheels nailed to the sides of his own body.

The dogs began to bark, falling all over each other inside the wagon, and for a moment Dingo delightedly imagined the smiles of his masks loosing their stiffness under the wigs.

Lightning lit up the earth, only to pass hurriedly through Artamila where the people weren't the kind for dramas in verse. Once on the other side, as soon as he reached the distant blue mountain, Dingo would be able to resume his holiday. He did pantomimes of ten characters. He, one man, with ten different masks, ten voices, and ten different ways of thinking. The mute's drum would resound again, like a prayer in a cave. The mute and the three dogs, their ribcages trembling beneath the whip, waiting for the blow and the bread on the other side of Dingo's laughter, Dingo the play-actor. Dingo knew perfectly well that his wretched companions would die on him. Perhaps one by one in the gutters or against the lampposts at the side of the road. On that day, he and his ten ghosts would travel alone through the world, earning their bread and invaluable wine.

What a day that would be when alone, with his trunk full of gilt ribbons that he had robbed from country chapels, he would continue along the road with his ten voices and his ten reasons to live. He supposed they would allow him to go on always, always, with the right to ten deaths, one by one.

And that was how the whipped wagon, an enormous seven-colored laugh stained underneath with mud, hauled along its burlesques and old hurts.

It is possible that Dingo saw the boy who appeared suddenly around the bend. He was a skinny, hopeless little creature, unexpected, slow, very much in contrast to Dingo. Certainly, though, he could not have avoided knocking him down. He ran over him by accident, his whole life a poor and faded painting.

The clouds were very dark above their heads. He braked as best he could, straining with the whining of the wagon. Mud spattered into his beard, as if seeking the mouth that swore. Dingo felt a tender, fresh crunch of bones through the wheels.

Then silence fell over them. It was as if a wide, open hand had descended from the sky, pressing him hard against the land from which he wished to flee. He had known it. There were voices in the valley that had warned him, "You won't pass through Artamila." He had just run over one of the waifs that brought food to the pastor. Some feet away lay the small open basket, its silent desolation scattered under the falling of the rain.

Everything that had shouted before – wind, axles, dogs – was now silent, piercing him with a hundred steel-sharpened eyes. Jumping down, Dingo sank into the mud up to his ankles, cursing. He looked at the boy. He was a gray child with a single rope sandal; he was already very still, as if caught by surprise.

Dingo couldn't help but to shout at him with his whip raised high. But his curses died in his throat. He stooped down, hushed, drilled by eyes, by silence, by the distant haughtiness of the poplars that watched him from their slope. Dingo tried to talk to the still, skinny little face. The rain kept on falling, indifferent. Softly, he touched the shining hairs on the child's forehead, his eyelashes, his closed lips. In that instant, Dingo thought he saw the clouds reflected in the child's eyes. But they crossed overhead and moved slowly away towards other lands.

It was still another half an hour to the village. The dogs and the mute appeared at the windows. Their wet nostrils trembled and they stared at him with their yellow, glassy eyes. Dingo put both his hands under the child's back. He locked his wide fingers together in the muck and lifted the small body that felt as if it would break in two. He felt the skin. Sticky coldness. The dogs began to howl. Dingo looked at them, shrunken.

"He's broken," he started to say.

But the mute, with a thread of saliva hanging from the corner of his

mouth, didn't understand him. The child's eyes were now definitely black.

Against his will, Dingo looked down and across at the other end of the town. Far away there, at the beginning of the upward slope of the mountain, was a square of reddish earth outlined by a cracked wall. It was the Northwest Graveyard, where the men of Artamila hid their dead amongst the fallen crosses. At one time someone had planted twelve poplars in a line against the wall. They had grown into a black and empty smile, like the teeth of a comb.

Dingo hesitated. He could still leave the boy on the ground and gallop on through the town without stopping until he reached a land that didn't oppress him, a land without rotted dreams, without blood of its own. Get there, perhaps, before the next sunrise. The mute and the dogs had jumped out of the wagon and stood around him expectantly.

Then the mute had an attack of fright. He was a poor imbecile, his soul corrupted by pantomimes. He uttered a hoarse noise and began to wave his arms around, only the whites of his eyes showing, "Boy – dead," he said, "dead . . . They'll hang you and they'll . . ." The idiot suddenly jerked, arms open, and fell to the ground. He had lifted the drum from his neck and when he fell it let out a resonant poom! – as if it kept the voice of its owner hidden in its hollowness.

Undoubtedly it was the drum that startled the old horse. But Dingo was ready to believe in the malicious spirit of Artamila, the spirit that had embittered his childhood, the spirit which, that very morning when he had again stepped onto its territory, grimaced a perverse welcome.

He was cold. He pressed the small, bloodied body against his own. Maybe it was that vicious spirit that made the cart and crazed horse go hurtling downward. Dingo did not even have time to shout anything. He saw his wagon moving again, without brakes or driver this time, with the loosened awning trembling dangerously and the red curtains waving a desperate good-bye. The steep road ended in the central square of lower Artamila. The wagon didn't stop. It wouldn't stop until it reached the very heart of the village which was encircled by gray houses and high hills. Dingo saw it disappear into the ravine, disjointed, swallowed up into the gullet of the valley. He remained still among the dogs, his beard matted from the rain and his boots sunk in mud.

He stayed like that for a short time, resisting. But he shook off his hesitancy. Artamila was waiting below, as deep and as black as he remembered it in his soul.

The sky had grown darker when he began his descent with the boy in his arms. The three dogs followed him and, some paces behind, the mute, with his drum around his neck, stumbled along with a serious expression like a bird of bad omen. They walked in a line, like the poplars. Under the rain. Without light.

There was the village square that Dingo knew so well. Circular, red as blood, its hard, rough dirt firmly packed.

The actor paused at the edge of the village in the same fearful pose as all the houses huddled together around it. There was something tragic there, as in all hearts. He was in the very center of Artamila, in the deepest part of the valley. How the wind used to speak to Dingo up there on top of the hills! Almost as if he were an equal. But now he was sunk in reality, without a mask. There, again, as if time had never passed. Swallowed by that earth, naked, completely alone. His holiday had died from a single blow.

He looked upwards and was almost sorry for his desire for freedom. The disdainful mountains had grown larger. There he was, a man with ten lies who could do very little right now. His ten ways of thinking tumbled away and he remained, like a black tree, whipped by the cold. He used to go burying in those same woods every afternoon of his childhood. He remembered those times as a child, edging around the trees, maybe limping because he had stepped on a thorn. How useless it all was after all. Those who fled, those who stayed, those who painted their faces. Oh, if only then, when he was young and barefoot, a colorful wagon would have rolled into his life! If the ground would only open beneath him now. His body, his face, his mouth, were caked with red mud. He was thirsty. Perhaps the child he carried was himself. How could he avoid his own burial? . . . Nobody. Nobody can. "The children who don't die, where are they?" So there was his countryside. Unchangeable and hard, surrounding all his masks, ridiculing their seven colors.

The wagon had turned over in the center of the square, overturned and broken. One of the wheels had cracked. The horse was on the ground, legs folded, maybe crippled, his foaming lips shiny from the rain. The animal's eyes looked at him like moons, perhaps crying silently. The little boy felt heavier and heavier in Sonny's arms.

A clamor, like crows in flight, arose from the windows of the wagon. Dingo realized that the village children had jumped aboard what remained of his roving home. "All the children of Artamila who appear around the sharp corners of the town, barefoot, beltless, and hushed." Even with his eyes closed, Dingo saw them running, appearing from around the workers' shacks. The children of Artamila, under the moon with their long shadows and short names. Just like he had turned those same corners, feeling the fire of the earth calling out from far away, entangled in the treetops, the false echo of some bell heard a year ago when they took him to Communion at the parish church. The church was in Central Artamila, eight kilometers from his village and the children of Lower Artamila grew up without bells. Dingo stared at the face of his departed child. The same. All the same. Almost thirty years had passed and they were the same children with the same footsteps and the same thirst. The same wretched houses, the same plowed earth under the skies, the same death in the Northwest. Thirty years, for what? . . . "The children of Artamila, children without toys who laugh behind their hands and go down to the river to drown kittens." When he was very little, Dingo had made a mask by smearing clay onto his face until the sun had dried it and by nighttime it fell off in pieces.

Now, a whirlwind of colors had come crashing into the lives of the children of Artamila, smashed to pieces in the heart of their town. They had come closer to him, little by little, one by one. They had been thinking, in the silence of the village, about taking that big, incarnate wheel. They watched it turning, turning, in the direction of the river, toward the ghosts of drowned dogs and cats. In the middle of a turn, it broke, falling over on its axle, but it kept turning, turning slower and slower.

"I have no choice," thought Dingo, "I have no choice but to find Juan Medinao . . ."

Just like thirty years ago.

Chapter II

His name was Juan Medinao, just like his father and his father's father. His grandfather's loan sharking of the past had made Juan Medinao nearly absolute master of Lower Artamila. From his earliest memories he had realized that he was the lord and master of something that he hadn't earned. Although the house and the land seemed vast to him, the house especially impressed him. He called it the House of the Juans. It was ugly; three large lumps of nearly garnet-colored earth and a flagstone patio on the center. At sunset the windows were red, and at dawn, navy blue. It was situated a distance from town, as if it had taken a long step back from the village, and squarely faced the Northwest Graveyard. From the window of his bedroom, Juan Medinao could watch every funeral.

That Lent Sunday evening, Juan Medinao was praying. Since childhood he had known that these were days of atonement and holy vindication. Perhaps his supplications were an inventory, an account and balance of the everyday humiliations to which his heart was exposed. It was almost dark, the flames were dying in the fireplace, his hands were entwined like roots.

Night had entered his house and rain fell incessantly against the balcony. When it rained like that, Juan Medinao felt the lash of water against all the windows, almost physically, like a desolate drumroll.

He heard them calling him. The human voice that drilled through the thin walls fell upon him. They called again. Everyone in the house, down to the lowliest servant, knew that Juan Medinao prayed at that hour and that he was not to be disturbed. They were insistent. His heart swelled with anger. He shouted and hurled a shoe at the door.

"Open the door, Juan Medinao," they said, "it's the mayor who's calling you. He's here with a guard from the military post."

He saw the shoe on the floor with its mouth gaping, deformed. He felt terribly alien from the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It was as if the whole room were spitting him toward God. He got up and slid open the bolt on the door. A maid was there, her hands hidden under her apron.

"I'm coming," he said.

He immediately regretted his tone of voice. He tried to make up for it explaining softly, "You interrupted me. I was surrounded by angels."

The girl turned her head and, covering her mouth, ran down the stairs. Young girls found Juan Medinao either frightening or comical.

He descended the staircase slowly. The entrance hall was dark.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

The men were black stains and their faces, less dark, seemed to float in the air. The guard explained that they had arrested a play-actor for having cut Pedro Cruz’s son in two. It had been an accident and his wagon was in pieces in the middle of the town square. The clown was asking to see Juan Medinao.

“What does he want of me?”

The mayor and the guard did not answer.

“I’ll go.”

He walked to the window. He peered through the glass and saw only blackness. That window looked out onto the central patio of the house and Juan imagined the shine of the wide flagstone under the storm. Suddenly he remembered that his house had electricity. Maybe he had forgotten because his childhood had been lived in red brilliancy. Even the walls missed the big, trembling silhouettes, growing and shrinking to the beat of footsteps that came and went. Juan felt for the lightswitch and flipped it on. Then the men appeared clearer and smaller, squinting their eyes from the sudden light.

Juan went to get his coat. As he put it on he noticed that his shirt was badly torn over his heart. His coat, too, was dirty and frayed. A lock of hair hung down over his forehead. He had a very large, disproportionate head. Looking at him, it seemed as if it would topple over onto his shoulders. On the other hand, his body was rickety, his chest sunken in and his legs bowed.

They went downstairs in silence. On the patio the raindrops stuck like pins between the flagstones. They opened the big wooden door which creaked from the humidity, and left for town.

The jail was right on the town square in an old barn with a window way up high. From the center of the square arose the din of children mixed with the smell of freshly tilled earth. Usually, the village breeding pig was kept in the jail. Next to the door, the reflection from the guards’ tricornered hats under the rain was almost exotic. They opened the door and he was given permission to order.

By the light of the lantern he saw the man. He was older than himself, aged, with wide-set eyes that held a professional and mature

gaze. Juan Medinao's heart stopped for a moment.

"Hello, Juan Medinao," said the clown, "I'm Dingo, the one who stole those silver coins from your . . ."

Dingo. Yes, it was him; his eyes were like arms spread on a cross. It was Dingo, the traitor of hopes and dreams. A flash from his childhood made him speechless, suppressing any protest or greeting. It was Dingo, little Dingo, the forestkeeper's son who had a cat with red stripes on its back that made it look like it had been grilled. Together they had saved and buried the coins at the foot of a solitary poplar, at the edge of that road that could take one far, far away. The two of them were going to escape from the village with the green of spring, when it seemed they could no longer tolerate their tormented, rotten childhood lives. His memory was crystal clear. He remembered the countryside in his mind's eye: that arduous morning when he discovered the betrayal. His whole soul trembled, feeling frighteningly like a child. In that fire-land where a shadow was too much luxury. And there was the shadow of the poplar, stretching straight on the ground, eternally marking the flight of the hypocritical friend, the thief, the lying traveller. They had wanted to journey to the sea together but he remained alone with his unquenchable thirst, next to the lost and hard shadow. That morning, his anxious hands had raked through the stirred-up earth and he didn't even find a letter, not even a teasing letter that would have moistened his dry desolation. Dingo had left, thirty years ago already, with a troupe of comedians and trick dogs. And he, Juan, remained in the middle of the black-stain people who moved as if they were flying in circles over his legacy in a floating, grim flight of a rapacious bird. In the center of hate and hunger remained Juan Medinao, heir, master of Lower Artamila, with his crucified God and his oversized head that was the object of the other boys' teasing. He stayed there forever, on the exasperated land, within the dreams of its trees, rocks, road. With a sky that searched for the bite of the peaks, and their enormous disdain of life, remained Juan Medinao, without the only boy who never teased him about his big head nor threw in his face, like clods of dirt, the fact that his brothers were starving. When he was just twelve and everything was hostile towards him—from his father to the very earth—Dingo betrayed him, too. Dingo, who told lies and wove images of impossible flight. It was so pleasant to listen to Dingo talk about escaping! Flee from the earth, from the

men, the sky, and oneself! Dingo, the vagabond, the liar, the thief, the merciful . . .

"I killed the boy, I couldn't help it," he was explaining, after thirty years, with the same expression, the same voice, "And I lost my wagon and my horse. I don't have a cent. It's the honest truth. Listen, Juan Medinao, if you even remember me, help me out of this mess and lend me something to start over again."

Silver coins. Juan Medinao couldn't remember if there had been thirty like the price of Christ or more than forty, like his age. Silver coins. He thought, "Now we don't even use silver coins. Everything's so far away."

Suddenly, he jumped at Dingo, embracing him like a leaden cross. It was an attempt at friendly cordiality or, perhaps, a desire to crush him with all the rancor of his childhood memories. Thirty years didn't mean anything. Dingo, surprised by the gesture, stopped talking.

Juan Medinao hugged him with the same desolate friendship of his early years.

"Dingo," he said, "I would have recognized you even if I were dead."

When he left the jail, Juan Medinao looked like he had been crying. A servant awaited him outside with a black umbrella. The mute was there, leaning against the wet wall with his hands sunk in the pockets of his jacket and trembling from fright and cold.

"Take him home," he said to the servant.

As for the dogs, there was no way to get rid of them. They barked and whined sorrowfully, scratching at the door. Dingo observed the scene, standing on the straw bed and peering out through the little window. He had a smile on his lips, half mischevious and half sad. The three men continued on up the street. The umbrella had a broken rib and looked like an old crow with a broken wing that it held over their heads.

Juan Medinao stopped when he arrived at the square.

"Go on home," he told the servant, "and give him something to eat and let him sleep in the stable."

The servant did not answer. He simply handed over the umbrella and, followed by the mute, continued on his way home. Juan Medinao stood, indecisive. Pedro Cruz was one of his shepherds. As master, he should go to the child's wake, and thus give a good example of piety. He didn't know which one was Pedro Cruz's shack.

In the square the children were yelling, fighting for the colorful rags and golden ribbons that Dingo pinned on to old priests' robes, pretending to be a devout choirboy. Tough little fists defended a ribbon or some little piece of cloth. And over there, farther away, the fallen wheel was, miraculously, still turning. One child jumped down, trailing a long yellow tail. The small, bare feet left no footprints of noise on the broken wood. The trunk, its lid unfastened and gaping, displayed its weightless treasures. There was so much laughter painted on the box! There was only one mask that cried. It was a white mask, painted with green moles that pointed toward the ground and a blue mouth. Inside the wagon a little girl with burlap hair pressed it to her face and peered out of the window. The night was dark and yet Juan Medinao observed it all in detail: the colors, the quick footsteps, the eager little hands. The children were dragging the costumes in the mud. They didn't know anything about Lent, a time when Juan Medinao prayed and pounded his chest in his bedroom. Lent, that made him protect those who teased him about his big head and stole his childhood savings, Lent, that made him go to the wake of the shepherd's boy. They knew nothing about Lent, nor about him. The rain continued to whip everything without mercy for the colors. Without pity for that long green feather, that beautiful green feather that was being dragged through the mud. The rain was spoiling Dingo's holiday, leaving everything soaked and ruined. All the masks had tears running down their noses. Perhaps they were taking their revenge on him for the silver coins.

As Juan Medinao approached the broken wagon, the children ran away like a wild tribe. He grabbed the wrist of the girl with the burlap hair. The little thing held the mask together against her face with a stubborn desire to run.

"Tell me where Pedro Cruz lives," he asked her. The child's wrist was as slippery as a snake. Maybe she hadn't understood him. So he repeated, "Tell me where the dead boy lives."

The little girl took him there. She walked in front of him, barefoot, small and slender, splashing quickly through the puddles. They stopped in front of a hut of red stone and earth. On the wall was one of those posters that encouraged wolf hunting parties. It was torn and peeling from the dampness. Apathetically, Juan Medinao recalled the recent wolf attacks on his flocks. Pedro Cruz had fled from the wolves last winter. Perhaps at this very moment, they were also

spying on him. There was only one large window in the shack, and a door. Inside, he saw the flickering of fire, hot licks of flame. Even from outside he could hear the lament of the women gathered indoors. Juan and the little girl looked through the window that also seemed to be crying. Juan Medinao noticed a board that hung from two ropes. The little girl pointed to it and said something incomprehensible.

Juan Medinao pushed the door open. In the kitchen, next to the fire, they had laid the boy out on a stretcher; now that the blood had been washed off, he looked combed and white. The mother and neighboring women were gathered together, grieving. When he entered they suddenly became silent. Only the swing kept moving, plaything of time, as if pushed by invisible and cruelly childish hands.

Suddenly, rage began to choke him again. Again he was looking at his eyes, black pinheads, sullen, and arrogant. The master had entered. Orations, humiliation, knees on the ground were powerless against those eyes. His presence was worthless. Were they also going to blame him for the child's death? He began to play with the button on his vest. Again his anger swelled, rose to his throat, choked him with its turbulent red wine. It smelled bad there, it smelled of poverty, dirt. Suddenly, all those things were accusing him, accusing him, Juan Medinao the master. Surely at night the rats gnawed the swing's ropes and the soles of the rope sandals – those wet sandals that had been set near the fire and exuded a nauseous odor.

"Pray," he told them. And his voice held all the sour dryness of an order. But nobody seemed to have heard him.

"Pray, woman," Juan Medinao repeated, clasping his own hands, soft and hot. Without the slightest intention of irony, somebody had put a flower in the dead boy's mouth. It must have been a paper flower because the countryside was dry during that month. And so it remained there, wire stem between his lips, unaware that they had saved him forever from the word "thirst." The mother sighed deeply.

"Are you going to stay?" asked one of the women. There was neither timidity nor affect in her voice. Not even courtesy. At times the women of the earth talked as if time were talking, beyond indifference. It was as if all those women suddenly lacked eyes and mouths. He only saw the withered bulk of their bodies and their coarse, tangled hair. He went down on his knees on the floor and felt for the rosary in his pocket. Through the window he saw the face of

the girl with burlap hair who put on the mask and took it off. She put the mask on and she took it off . . . on the other side of the swing, the rain, and the red brilliance of the fire.

The mother stood up next to the boy. With tears still running down her cheeks, she began to grind a handful of coffee beans that she had been saving in a can since the last funeral.

Chapter III

Juan Medinao bowed his head and began to pray. His oration was completely detached from his voice. His oration was a return to adolescence, to childhood. To loneliness.

The burlap-headed girl had vanished from the window, had again withdrawn into the night, leaving the forgotten mask on the window ledge. The paint, all fallen lines, cried hypocritically in the rain. They were in the height of Lent. (And it was always like that: all the men and women who approached their closed windows later retreated into the denseness of the night from which they had come. Maybe they left a mask leaning against the windowpane. The night. Black, surrounding their actions and their thoughts. He, blind, throughout the night.)

He had been born during Lent forty-two years ago, on a stormy afternoon. The wind whipped around corners, plastered clothing against bodies and hair to foreheads. The trees in the Northwest bent and trembled, and a dog barked on the patio. His mother was that black-waisted woman who often hurled herself face down on the bed moaning and crying; when he was barely three years old, she told him about that Lent afternoon when he came into the world:

"It was almost nighttime," his mother's hands, bony and feverish, grabbed his head, "I saw the sky from my bed. I saw it turn green, just like a man does when he's going to vomit. And I thought I was going to die and I couldn't stand it. Juan Sr. was absent and the doctor arrived drunk, as usual, slumped over his horse and spattered with mud. Your father had brought me from far away, from my land where there was a church and stores. I felt buried here and as lonely as a cadaver."

In the village they said his mother was crazy, crazy and bedevilled in the red house with constant shadows in the corners. Shadows from which he now tried to bare childhood memories with electric light. He spent his childhood terrorized by shadowy corners, terrorized by the big stairs that creaked in the darkness, by the bats that hung on the cold and rough bedroom wall. His first memories of his father were atrocious. His father was brutality, fear, enslaving and distant force, and blows on his back that burned like humiliations. Above all, his father was laughter. Foreign language to his ears, to his unstable life of an ugly child. "That cruel and impossible laughter that one could never imitate."

One day his father was in the middle of the patio. His legs were like tree trunks, encased up to the knees in leather boots. He seemed to have sprung from the ground, vibrant son of the earth, with that cascade of black curls that was his beard tumbling over his chest. His head shook when he laughed, and the sound of his throat was always laughter, always laughter, even when he swore or threatened. And there in the center of the patio, whip in his hand, he was watching while they skinned a bull that had been killed in the ravine. Suddenly he raised an arm and cracked the whip over the dead animal. Two servant girls who were there laughed noisily. Juan Jr., who didn't know how to play, saw the white line turn red, redder, and then, trembling, fuse itself into a burning foam that fell to the ground in drops like sparks. They were flowers. Flowers of an impossible force, of a living aroma that made his skin crawl. Juan Jr. had an oversized head for his body. He covered his ears with his hands and fled from the patio where Juan Sr. liked the servant girls to laugh.

Juan Jr. was four innocent years old, without refuge or horizon. The parish priest of Central Artamila came one day to visit them and to eat cookies with walnuts in the middle. His mother and he listened respectfully to his words. His mother kept her head lowered, her long eyelashes trembling on her cheeks, and tugged at a corner of her shawl. The priest patted Juan Jr.'s shoulders and told him that one day, dressed in white, he would be able to swallow the host. "And ask Him for favors," his mother added timidly. It was then that Juan Jr. knew he must beg for the salvation of Juan Sr. throughout his life. For him and for all other sinning men, ignorant and strong, who whip raw flesh. And also for the pale and eternally hurt women who cry face down on their beds. And for the old priests who suffer from

asthma and have to walk eight kilometers swallowing incarnate dust in order to carry God's voice to forgetful and stubborn children. Soon he came to understand that Juan Sr. was a gambler; he was generous, cruel and disbelieving. His powerful voice made the silver medallion on Juan Jr.'s chest tremble. Juan Sr.'s eyes were clear, hunter's eyes, brilliant, passionate and smiling. Eyes of frost and wine, of a poisonous flower. That flower that grew next to the river among the willows and when cut, stained his fingers with a venomous juice. All the miserliness and avarice of Grandfather Juan became destruction and was squandered with Juan Sr. He was a waster, a show-off, and a drunkard. He hadn't wanted to marry a country girl and that was why, one day, he brought from across the mountains, from a town where there were display windows with colorful ribbons, gold rosaries and colognes, a woman with manicured hands, tearful and frightened, whom he did not love. Juan Sr. abandoned her in the big house and went farther away than the most distant Artamila. He forgot about them and the land and brought things from distant cities that became moldy piles in her bedroom. Juan Sr. drank more and more. One, an amber wine and another, the color of a harvest moon. And he was everything, like the cold wind that slams doors shut and sends the leaves scurrying in October. And he went away, he always went away. And Juan Jr. watched him mount his horse on the patio, cross through the gate and the big wooden door close behind him. And Juan Sr. was gone a long time, he was always gone a long time. He went like all men and all women, like the sweet humble tone of our winter and like the time of the grapes and like the leaves. And when he returned, one cried where one had smiled, and smiled where before one had cried. But one was always the same. And one always remained so alone. With the offended silence of his mother and the pranks of the laborers' sons who laughed at his big head and twisted legs. In the big house, where there was a dry yellowed portrait of Grandfather Juan on the dining room wall, closer to them and their tears, one looked at the mirror marvelling at the activity of the land, of the land that shelters water and mice, flowers like suns and blue snakes. Everything was going to be his one day. The work of the laborers and the sons of the laborers belonged to him. Almost all of Lower Artamila, from that boggy, dying vineyard whose late fruit killed the winter, to the high gold of the summer. "Oh, gloomy land, dark land that gives and takes away like God!" He was

so different from everything around him! His mother was the right corner of the room, dark and carelessly cleaned by the maids, the center of blackness, of scary stories, superstitions and candles lit to St. Anthony. She was the little black beads of the rosary like ants en route to the soul on business, entangled in a black caravan around her wrist where the blood beats irregularly.

Outside, on the patio, under another rare and bluer sky, there were workers and servants celebrating the August festival behind the piles of wheat. The flagstones of the central patio shone from a golden dust like butterfly wings and there was straw gleaming between the flagstones. One of the servants knew how to play the fiddle. Accompanied by guitar, he played strange and mournful tunes, moving and languidly rhythmic, of a heavy sweetness that entered one's veins and made one toss and turn in bed. One night, lying in his little bed, Juan Jr. could not resist any longer. The hot, attractive cadence made the white curtains in his bedroom flutter. He descended barefoot, hiding behind one of the columns of the central patio. He watched them dancing and drinking. They laughed in a low and sinister tone like water that runs within the bowels of the fields. It was then that he noticed the unexpected splendor of that servant girl, Salomé. Until that moment, she had only been one of the others, burnt skin and white blouse. But now someone had brought her silver earrings and an unusual dress from far away. She was almost an insult, her entire being, amidst the beastly sameness of the Artamilan women. It was a green and pink striped dress. All of a sudden she looked like a big exotic insect, celebrating the harvest amidst the music, on the golden dust of the flagstones. Her shadow, under the quick turns of her bare brown feet, was a blue and elastic stain that made one reach out one's hands and submerge them in it like a cold, cold pool. Her pale child's hands, with their bitten nails and ardent wrists. Without anyone telling him, Juan Jr., four years old, knew. He knew it without knowing anything, without ever having seen them together. And, next to Salomé, not the three imposing wings of the house, nor the high mountains, nor the rain and black butterflies, nor the crows' screeches or the whip of the wind from the Northwest could drown out the green and pink and that music from her silver earrings.

From that night on Juan Sr. and Salomé terrified him and attracted him, made him want to flee and find refuge in God or the

Northwest. His mother said that Salomé was a bad woman but could not send her away because of Juan Sr., growing from the ground, violent and alive like an implacable bonfire. Nobody could throw her out into the street. Her existence remained a fascination even when, one day in spring, the dress was torn up to use to scare the birds away, even when she continued to wear the coarse white blouse, and even when he saw her in the vegetable patch, eating with her fingers. She laughed above the straw and lifted her arms toward the sun, revealing large sweat stains in her armpits. Juan Sr. and Salomé, they were like the swollen river, like the red and fiery earth that the wind hurled against Juan Jr.'s closed window. After a while his mother became an exasperated little demon, her eyes ghastly and her lips white with pride. Ah, when Juan Jr. was born, it was for a good reason that the dogs barked on the butterfly patio. "That bad woman," his mother would say, holding back her tears, "will roast in the black flames of Hell." Nevertheless, it seemed to him that he heard the unexpected laughter of his mother, ranting fantasies of what would happen to Salomé in the next life. At that time, Juan Jr.'s heart lay in God. In that God that had bells in Central Artamila. And he loved him and he hoped because he could not love or hope for anything from the fiery fields nor the lashes of whips nor the men and women who lost themselves in the plowed furrows growing smaller and smaller toward the horizon. Even though he didn't know who nor why God was, he had faith in Him. His faith was like the salt of the sea which he had never smelled. He still had not read any of the Catechism and when, one day, he had it in his hands for the first time he was frightened. "It's going to hurt me," he felt intuitively. It made him think about God and God should be left as He was, within the heart, pure and primary. He was five years old, so alone for five years and yet he knew all this. He knew it like he knew autumn would inflame living things. Like he knew that lovely vineyard that Grandfather Juan had planted would not be wine in hard and frugal Artamila where bread and water were enough through the torment and fire of summer. He knew everything so early, he had in his heart from so young an age, the yeast of life that rose against him, that sickened him like a curse throughout his entire existence.

One day, even though he was very small, his mother sent him to school asking that he only be taught to pray. The school was quite a distance down the road that led far away, with brown walls and a roof

full of holes that held clinging empty nests. Without a playground. The windows were like cuts and when it rained, the whole building moaned—the wooden benches and the chrome of the Gospel. A little book came to his hands. It was small, diminutive, between Geography and Arithmetic. It had pictures and the first page read 'YOU WILL BE BLESSED'. Scratching his ear with a toothpick, the teacher explained it to him because Juan Jr. didn't even know how to read. He had to press his dirty, inky thumb on his lips. No, no. God was bigger and more serious. Perhaps only the bells could pray to him. The teacher was bald and he gave the Catechism a tired tone amidst his cigarette smoke. He spoke of the love of God through nicotine-stained teeth. Juan Jr. did not want to go to school anymore, he did not want to see the teacher or the other children again.

It was about that time when that key event occurred in his life. Pablo, Salomé's son, was born. It was in August, burnt and violent time, greenness long dead, when the wet holes of the path become black smoke.

The light that was Salomé went out. It was as if only the tinkling of the silver earrings remained on each side of her inexistent face. As if the imaginary music of the jewelry sang to a woman who had never been born. Salomé's walk was like a duck's and the bulk of her stomach devoured the grace of her fifteen years. Juan Sr. was away again.

One pre-dawn morning, Juan Jr. awoke to the sound of footsteps on the patio. Next to his room slept an old servant woman who acted as midwife for calves and men. Sitting up, Juan Jr. listened, his heart pounding. He felt the proximity of his brother in his bones. Excited, he jumped from the bed. He put on his shirt and pants and went down barefoot to the patio.

Outside, the mosquitoes buzzed and glittered, forming part of the heat. He saw the silhouette of the old servant woman, cursing the interruption of her sleep, running behind Salomé's older sister who was fastening all her innumerable skirts. Otherwise, everything remained quiet and indifferent under the pinkness of the moon. The other servants were exhausted, asleep. The big gate squeaked. The two women ran toward the laborers' shacks. A honey-colored luminosity made the ground glow where the shadows of the picket fence stretched out like arms towards Juan Jr. Overcoming his fear, he followed them to where Salomé lived with her sister and little Agustín.

The women entered and closed the door. Breathless from his run, Juan Jr. sat down on the ground with his back glued to the wall of the shack.

Then, everything was hushed. He could only hear the vibrating silence of blood in his temples and the incessant hum of insects, bluish in the darkness that pressed down upon him. Suddenly he heard Rosa, Salomé's older sister, shouting at Agustín to get up and go outside. A cat escaped through the yellow crack of the door and fled to the fields. On the corner of the hut a pipe ended in a wooden box. This was the only shack with a little water reservoir, invention of little Agustín, whose rare mechanical ability remained a mystery to all. It began to drip. Each droplet of water, rhythmic and musical, was like a luminous recount, sparkling under the moon. The door opened rudely and Agustín came out, already dirty from Juan Sr.'s earth. The dawn glow made a halo around his head. Juan Jr. pressed himself harder against the wall and held his breath. Agustín hesitated a moment. He was half dressed and carried two boxes under his skinny rigid arms that hung along the sides of his body. Then he disappeared behind the other shacks, toward the river. His small reservoir was empty. Juan Jr. slipped in through the door that Agustín had left open. To the right, next to the kitchen, was a dark hollow where they kept the work tools and a leather whip whose nearness hurt him. Juan Jr. squatted down among the rakes and scythes. He sensed, rather than heard, a long scream. And he saw the steam from water boiling on the stove. A man was being born there behind the bedroom door. Maybe he would look like him? . . . No. No. Nobody would be like him. He was different from everyone else. Why had he been born? Tears, long and slow, fell hot on his hand. His five years seemed shaken by the knowledge of his solitude. He was marked, perhaps. But his God would save him from men. He still had to hope for who knows how long! And if he died? The thought occurred to him that, with the birth of his brother, he should die. Yes. They would find him the next day among the hoes and the axes like a crumpled doll. But he did not die. And that long wait was the introduction to that wait that he still dragged over the earth today.

A thought occurred to Juan Jr., "Maybe if this one's born, I won't be alone anymore." But a son of Juan Sr. and Salomé would be like a river flowing through parched plains beneath a burning sun. On a board a skinny candle was still burning. Two flies circled the flame

and Juan Jr. heard the melted wax fall onto the wooden floor. He loved fire and always carried matches in his pocket to light twigs and straw in a corner of the patio when everyone was in the fields and nobody, except the dogs and his mother, could see him. A violent desire began to burn in him. Set fire to the shack and die together with his unborn brother. The two of them, die, and let the wind sweep them together and throw them to the horizon where nobody would know anything any longer. But almost at once he realized that it would be a crime and would stain the whiteness of his soul. It was only then that he wanted to see how men were born. They had made Agustín jump out of his bed and go to the fields. Maybe they had sent him away because it was so ugly. His mother had used the word, "Horrible" when she told him about the day he was born. Now, neither the wind nor the dogs howled. The silence and the heat soaked his hair and forehead. The candle burned out and the wick glowed blue like a dying worm.

The bedroom door in front of him began to move like a black cutting force. It was a door of old wood, the planks were ill-fitted and allowed yellow slashes of light to escape. Slowly, he drew near and pressed his face against it, peeking through one of the cracks. At first he did not see anything, and then only a piece of moisture-stained wall. A smell of dust and mold enveloped him and he felt sweat glue his forehead to the wood. Thus posed, he noticed a very black spider crawling slowly toward the ceiling. He was very still until it disappeared from his limited span of vision. He heard footfalls and voices. But nobody was crying, nobody was moaning. Clearly, he understood, Salomé would no longer be the queen of the harvest. Her green and pink dress was already ashes. Oh, he did not want to see anything! His heart beat hard. Turning around, he began to run.

On the threshold he tripped on the step and fell to the ground. Flat on his face he felt the live flame of the ground in all its cruelty. Painfully, he sat up and looked at his knees that were beginning to ooze dark red blood. One large, nearly black drop slithered down the length of his leg. At that moment she came out of the bedroom and saw him. It was Rosa. She walked over to him with her wet hands on her hips. He raised his head and their eyes met, silent, still. Juan Jr. had stopped crying already. But his neck seemed to tremble gently from childish hiccups. She was thirty, perhaps, and around her eyelids were fine lines, slashes of time. A thin lock of hair fell over her

shoulder and she was half-dressed with her skin stained in two colors; pale where the sun never touched. Everything in her was tired, with early harvests and worn out lines. She did not pity Juan Jr., nor Salomé, nor the one who was being born. But she bent over, took the arm of the master's son and brought him into the kitchen. She always worked for things that did not matter to her or even belong to her.

The kitchen fire was new, the logs were even fresh. The steam from the water blurred the window and made breathing difficult. Without speaking, she washed his knees. Then she pushed him toward the door to the street and closed it behind him.

Outside, Juan Jr. dried his tears on his sleeve. From across the mountains a fiery day was breaking. Stunned by an uncertain power, he set out for the first hill where the threshing-floors were. He couldn't, he simply could not go home and sleep. His brother had been born. On the first threshing-floor was a pile of half cleaned wheat. The heat was heavy in an irritating silence. The flagstones of the threshing-floor were still warm and he lay down on his stomach, burying his face in his arms. He was only five and yet he was already experiencing the weight of countless, ages-old sufferings as he lay stretched out and hurting. He had heard much silence and many words. He was one of those people who go around on tiptoe and listen through keyholes. Juan Jr. abandoned himself completely to the ground and slowly, sensuously, both hate and love for his brother were born in him. "Maybe he's handsome and strong," whispered an angel in his ear. He looked at his pale and dirty hands. A wave of blood surged through him, a blood flower, so intense that he felt nauseous. Its aroma sprung up from himself and reddened his brain and the inside of his eyelids. Then, not knowing how, he slept.

The clamor of the peasants woke him as they rode up to the threshing-floor on their horses. Juan Jr. began to run again. He did not want them to see him. He could not stand the thought of them seeing him and thinking, "How handsome and strong his brother is!" Childishly, he believed his brother was a man, not a weak, red baby like any other newborn.

A voice called him for a long time from below. It was a servant from his house that was looking for him, surely because his mother had noticed his absence. He ran downriver toward the mountain. He turned his head back a moment, panting, and looked toward the threshing-floor with a childish fear of all people. A girl was seated on

a little stool at the foot of a great pile of hay all alight from the sun. She did not work yet, she was probably only three or four, and she had the stiff body of a doll on her lap. A toy was something extraordinary and unheard of in the village! The doll had long yellow hair that fell straight to the ground and the little girl caressed it with her precociously slim hands. Juan Jr. continued his race, faster. Everything hurt him so much! He followed the edge of the river through the reeds. He met up with the face of a sheepdog and came upon a shepherd who was tending some sheep. It was his own flock, he was not one of the Juans' employees. He was old. He was seated on a rock with his hands on his knees. It had been a long time since he had cut his hair and it fell in white locks on his shoulders. He appeared mute and indifferent, with his squinting eyes staring out into space. Juan Jr. approached him, pushed by the same feeling that had made him lie down on the stones of the threshing-floor. He sat down at the old man's feet. He needed so much peace! He was very small and the shade of that old age sank him into a sweet dream, like a lullaby. He did not want to know so much, feel so much. His bones were still like green rushes, his hands were barely sketched. He noticed the smell of leather which came from the shepherd and all the awakening of the countryside, with seedlings pushing each other happily like children as the sheepdog darted about. In contrast, the old man seemed made of stone, less human than the oaks and the clouds.

Juan Jr. raised his head and said in his high little voice, "He's been born."

The shepherd remained indifferent. Juan Jr. added, "In the Zácara's shack . . . Salomé's."

"Whore," said the shepherd.

Juan Jr. fell asleep again. When he reawakened, pebbles from the ground were stuck to his cheek. The shepherd was still up there, cutting little pieces of bread. One he would give to the dog and the next one he would eat. Juan Jr. moved toward him and ate, too. Suddenly the old man pressed the point of the knife against the boy's chest. As if he had been chewing his words until then and had to spit them out violently, he said uncontrollably, "Look at him . . ." and it was as if he were explaining to the dog, "What's this one going to do with Artamila? I saw how his grandfather earned it, the devil. I don't owe them anything but, oh the others! Since then, who in the village

doesn't owe the Juans? . . . I remember, when my children were dying the year the flu epidemic broke out, the old man came knocking at my door with the loan deal. But I looked him in the eye and I said to him, 'Get out of here, son of the devil, you won't drink my blood, even if the sun fries us all.' Okay, he was only given one child, a bad and stupid son. And from that one, came this other one, rickety and big-headed. What a good line, long-nailed race! You, little guy, if you don't rot beforehand, with dirt between your teeth, who knows if that one they let be born won't give you a fight!"

He spat and put the bread in his leather pouch. Juan Jr. followed him around silently and spent the day at his side.

When they returned to the village together, the evening shadows were tagging at their heels. Juan Jr. made his way past the shacks. The night swallowed them up, drank up shades and colors, leaving big whitewashed skeletons under the moon. The little girl's stool next to the hay was vacant. The mosquitoes, so alone in sparkling clouds, continued their torrid song.

Juan Jr. did not feel his body. That day of fasting had made him feel light. Changed into a little flame, he crackled in a red pulsation. He advanced slowly toward the house in a straight line, like a zombie. The whole sky was dying from thirst.

Now, if he had returned, Juan Sr. would whip him, naked. If not, his mother would hold his head in her two hands and cry about his absence. She would say that little boys shouldn't run away from home.

Something strange had happened in the village. The portal gate was open. The moon was perched on top of the roof. On the patio three women were seated in a row on the ground resting on their knees. Peasant hands, lazy, on their black skirts. It gave him an uncomfortable feeling of abnormality. Juan Jr.'s feet stopped. Then he realized how the women, the stableboy, and the moon were all looking at him. Oh, still moon! Nobody had told Juan Jr. the story of the old man who brought kindling to the moon but it lit up his eyes just like those of every other child in the world. A maid appeared in a doorway of the house. When she saw him, she covered her face as if she were going to cry. Juan Jr. understood that he should keep moving forward, advance until an outside and superior force stopped him. He crossed the patio and climbed the stairs. There was light in his mother's room and the yellow square of the door was shortened

on the ground. It was a special light, a light with smell, taste, and touch. It contained nothing violent or dazzling. Glassy and dense, it left a blot on the darkness like a breath. He continued to advance, slight and solemn with his arms hanging straight at his side. Crossing the threshold, his shadow barely made a black wink on the floor. He was trembling all over, like grass blown in the wind.

He stopped finally, next to the short, iron bedframe. Lying rigidly, with her face covered, was the dead mistress of the house. There, the short, black waist and the yellow hands that would no longer touch his head. The room seemed filled with buzzing flies. Then all the heat of the night vanished at once. Through fingernails and eyes, winter entered him and it felt like his blood flowed out of him like a river. To be a little boy, to be only five! Suddenly, he found himself hugging her frantically, with his heart in his throat. It was as if his life had stopped and he would never breathe again. He yanked away the cloth covering her face and saw her, swollen, purplish and blood-colored. She had hung herself.

Then, when the animal-like cry of his own voice surprised him, the servants entered and pried him away from the body. They came out from behind doors and corners like a startled covey of birds. But nobody could ever erase the vision he had of her open eyes. From then on, whenever he remembered that night, he saw a pair of eyes with many living, blue ribbons flying like banners in the wind. He cried for her like a dog, sprawled out on the small floor mat, overcome by loneliness, his green and sour boyhood love betrayed and broken. Dead mother. Dead mother. The two words stabbed him like blades of ice. How pale the moon became. They could not get him out of the room, he clung to the floor ferociously. His throat filled with fire, hoarse from sobbing and at dawn, amidst the whispering of the two praying maids, he slept.

The sound of horse hooves startled him awake. They had told Juan Sr. The light of the rising sun made the room red and gold and the cotton curtains seemed afire. A deaf desperation still shook his shoulders so profoundly that not even he understood it well. He was hurt, covered with mucus and spittle. In the window a bee tried to pierce a fold of the curtain.

The horse's hooves clattered on the flagstones of the patio. Then, those familiar and feared footsteps that made the stairs creak, approached.

Slowly, Juan Jr. pulled himself together. He looked like a little waxen saint. Juan Sr. entered. He had never seemed so big and red. A strong aroma penetrated the room, as if all the forest had begun to blow through the cracks. The smell of resin and fresh leather replaced the mist of buzzing and death. Juan Sr., motionless, stood there looking at him. His eyes were filled with terror.

The man bent over suddenly. He looked at him closely, shaken by hurt and fear. He grabbed him in his arms and sat him on his lap. He cried without tears and there was painful surprise in that grief, a child-like surprise that cleared him of guilt. And then, beside the dry grief of the man, Juan Jr. miraculously sensed something in his father for the first time. He realized that he was not really bad. He was only stupid, that was all. His crying was very similar to his laughter. It was his laughter of always.

Something fell away before Juan Jr. His father had lost his distance, lost strength. He was just another sinner, one of those sinners for whom he had been taught to pray. A common sinner like someone who did not go to mass or robbed fruit. Juan Jr. remained stiff on his father's lap. Close to his cheeks the rough lips of the man emitted a harsh noise, profoundly earthy, almost tangible. Juan Jr. began to feel white, cold, and distant like an angel.

At that moment, Juan Sr. grabbed his hands and kissed them awkwardly as he said, "It's all my fault, my fault. It's all my fault. She was crazier than hell, damn her, but . . . what an idiot your mother was and because of me, because of me, because of me you don't have her anymore! How could I think she wasn't cracked enough to do this? My poor son, forgive me."

The bee had stayed still and silent, caught in the curtain like a golden button. The feeling of weakness left him. Juan Jr. was the strong one now. His strength was thick and could strangle slowly and sweetly like a honey poison. The last words of his father took form: Forgive me. Forgive me. Even his pain stopped and he understood him. A burning wine entered his veins and pounded in his head. Juan Jr. reached out a hand and, without shyness, patted his father's head. He did not love him. He would never love him. But he had just found the sword that would always be heavy in his right hand. The sword he should never throw away. It was the forgiveness of others, the forgiveness forged from the lead of the weak.

"Poor son . . . !" that brutal man kept saying.

But all this had already happened nearly forty years ago.