

NEAR TO THE WILD HEART
CLARICE LISPECTOR

TRANSLATED WITH AN AFTERWORD BY GIOVANNI PONTIERO
A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Part One](#)

[The Father...](#)

[Joana's Day](#)

[... One Day...](#)

[Joana Takes a Stroll](#)

[... The Aunt...](#)

[Joana's Pleasures](#)

[... The Bath...](#)

[The Woman with the Voice and Joana](#)

[Otávio](#)

[Part Two](#)

[The Marriage](#)

[Under the Teacher's Protection](#)

[The Little Family](#)

[Otávio's Encounter](#)

[Lídia](#)

[The Man](#)

[Under the Man's Protection](#)

[The Viper](#)

[The Man's Departure](#)

[The Journey](#)

[AFTERWORD](#)

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GIOVANNI PONTIERO

Manchester, March 1989

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Part One](#)

[The Father...](#)

[Joana's Day](#)

... One Day...

[Joana Takes a Stroll](#)

... The Aunt...

[Joana's Pleasures](#)

... The Bath...

[The Woman with the Voice and Joana](#)

[Otávio](#)

[Part Two](#)

[The Marriage](#)

[Under the Teacher's Protection](#)

[The Little Family](#)

[Otávio's Encounter](#)

[Lídia](#)

[The Man](#)

[Under the Man's Protection](#)

[The Viper](#)

[The Man's Departure](#)

[The Journey](#)

[AFTERWORD](#)

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life.

-James Joyce

A Portrait of the Artist
as a Young Man

Part One

The Father...

Daddy's typewriter was tapping out tac-tac..tac-tac-tac... The clock chimed brightly ting-ting... ting-ting... The silence dragged out zzzzzzz. The wardrobe was saying what? clothes — clothes — clothes. No, no. Between the clock, the typewriter and the silence there was an ear listening out, large, flesh-pink and dead. The three sounds were connected by the light of day and by the rustling of tiny leaves on the tree as they joyfully rubbed against each other.

Resting her head against the cold, shiny window-pane, she looked into the neighbour's yard, at the great world of the chickens-that-did-not-know-they-were-about-to-die. And as if it were right under her nose, she could smell the warm, beaten earth, so fragrant and dry, where she knew perfectly well, she knew perfectly well that some worm or other lay squirming before being devoured by the hen that humans were going to eat.

There was a grand moment, motionless and quite hollow inside. She opened her eyes wide and waited. Nothing happened. Blank. But suddenly with a shudder they wound up the day and they began to function once again, the typewriter tapping, father's cigarette giving off smoke, silence, tiny leaves, plucked chickens, brightness, things restored to life and as impatient as a kettle on the boil. All that was missing was the ting-ting of the clock which gave so much pleasure. She closed her eyes, pretended to hear it chime, and to the rhythm of that imaginary music, she went up on the tips of her toes. She executed three dance steps, so light and ethereal.

Then suddenly she looked at everything with displeasure, as if she had eaten far too much of that concoction. 'Hey, hey, hey...', she murmured wearily and then thought to herself: what will happen now now now? And in the fraction of time that followed, nothing ever happened if she went on waiting for something to happen if you get my meaning? She pushed away this awkward thought, distracting herself with a movement of her bare foot on the dusty wooden floor. She rubbed her foot, looking sideways at her father, awaiting his impatient and nervous smile. But nothing happened. Nothing. It's difficult to suck in people like the vacuum cleaner does.

— Daddy, I've invented a poem.

— What is it called?

— The sun and I — Then almost at once she recited: 'The chickens in the yard have gobbled two worms but I didn't see them.'

— Really? What do you and the sun have to do with poetry?

She looked at him for an instant. He had not understood ...

— The sun is above my worms, Daddy, and I wrote my poem and didn't see the worms... — Pause. — I can make up another poem this very minute: 'Oh sun, come play with me.' Here's a longer one:

'I saw a tiny cloud
poor little worm
I don't think she saw it.'

— Those are pretty verses, my little one, very pretty. How does one compose such a charming poem?

— It isn't difficult, you simply say it out loud.

She had already dressed her doll, she had already undressed it, she had imagined it going to a party where it stood out among all the other baby dolls. A blue car ran over Arlete's body and killed her. Then the fairy appeared and her doll was restored to life. The baby doll, the fairy, the blue car were none other than Joana, otherwise the game would be rather dull. She always found some means of casting herself in the main role as some turn of events highlighted one or other of the characters. She took the game seriously, working in silence, her arms hanging at her sides. She didn't need to get close to Arlete in order to play with her. Even from a distance she possessed things.

She amused herself with the paper cut-outs. She looked at them for a moment and each cut-out was a pupil. Joana was the teacher. The one good, the other bad. Yes, yes, and so what? And now now now? And nothing ever happened if she... that's right.

She invented a little man the size of her index finger, with long trousers and a bow tie. She carried him in the pocket of her school uniform. The little man was a real gem, a diamond in a cravat, he had a deep voice and would say from inside her pocket: 'Your Royal Highness Joana, pray lend me your ear for one moment. I beseech you to interrupt your constant labours just for one moment?' And then he declared: 'I am at your service, dear Princess. Whatever you command I am prepared to do.'

— Daddy, what can I do?

— Go and read your books.

— I've read them.

— Go and play then.

— I have been playing.

— Then don't bother me.

She twirled round and came to a halt, watching without curiosity the walls and ceiling as they went round and fell apart. She walked on tiptoe, only

treading on the dark floorboards. She closed her eyes and moved forward, her hands outstretched, until she bumped into some piece of furniture. Between her and the objects there was something, but when she caught that thing in her hand like a fly and then looked — however much care she took not to let anything escape -all she found was her own hand, rosy and disheartened. Yes, I know it was air, I know it was air! But that didn't help, that didn't explain anything. This was one of her secrets. She would never permit herself to confide, even to daddy, that she was unable to catch 'the thing'. Everything that really mattered was precisely what she found herself unable to confide. She only talked nonsense to people. When she told Ruth, for example, some of her secrets, she became furious with Ruth. The best thing was surely to keep one's mouth shut. Another thing: if she felt some pain and she looked at the hands of the clock while that pain was troubling her, she would then notice that the minutes counted on the clock were passing while the pain went on hurting. Or else, even when it didn't hurt her in the slightest, if she stood in front of the clock staring at it, what she was not feeling was also greater than the minutes counted on the clock. Now, when she experienced some happiness or rage, she would run to the clock and observe the seconds in vain.

She went to the window, traced a cross on the window-sill and spat out in a straight line. If she were to spit once more — now she would have to wait until night-time — the disaster could be avoided and God would be so good to her, but so good that... that what?

— Daddy, what can I do?

— I've already told you: go and play and leave me in peace!

— But I've been playing already, honestly.

Daddy smiled:

— But there's no end to playing...

— Yes there is.

— Make up another game.

— I don't want to play or read my books.

— What do you want to do then?

Joana thought carefully:

— I can't think of anything...

— Do you want to fly? her father asked her, his mind elsewhere.

— No, replies Joana. Pause. — What can I do?

This time Daddy explodes.

— Go and knock your head against the wall!

She goes off, twisting her lank hair into a plait. Never never never yes yes, she sings in a low voice. She has learned to plait her hair just recently. She goes to her little table where she keeps her books, plays with them, glancing at them from afar. Housewife husband children, green is for man, white is for woman, red could be son or daughter. Is 'never' man or woman? Why is 'never' neither son nor daughter? And what about 'yes'? Oh, there were so many things that were quite impossible. She could spend whole afternoons just thinking. For example: who uttered for the very first time this word 'never'?

Daddy finishes his work and goes off to find her sitting in a chair and weeping.

— What's this, child? — he lifts her into his arms, calmly examining her little face, flushed and mournful.

— What's this?

— I've nothing to do.

Never never yes yes. Everything was like the noise of the tram before dozing off, until one feels a little frightened and falls asleep. The mouth of the typewriter had closed like that of an old woman, but something was pressing on her heart like the noise of the tram: only she was not about to go to sleep. It was Daddy's embrace. Her father muses for an instant. But no one can do anything for others, we can only help ourselves. The child is so restless, so thin and precocious... Her breathing comes in bursts, she moves her head back and forth. A tiny egg, that's it, a tiny, living egg. What is to become of Joana?

Joana's Day

The certainty that I'm heading for evil, thought Joana.

What else could that feeling be of restrained force, ready to explode into violence, that urge to use it with her eyes shut, all of it, with the unbridled confidence of a wild beast? Was it in evil alone that one could breathe without fear, accepting the atmosphere and one's lungs? Not even pleasure could give me as much satisfaction as evil, she thought with surprise. She could feel within herself the presence of a perfect animal, full of inconsistencies, of egoism and vitality.

She remembered her husband who probably ignored this aspect of her nature. She tried to recall the appearance of Otávio. But the moment she sensed that he had left the house, she became transformed, absorbed in herself and, as if she had simply been interrupted by him, she slowly continued to live the thread of childhood, she forgot him and went from room to room completely alone. From the peaceful neighbourhood, from the distant houses, there came no sound. And now that she was free, she herself didn't know what she was thinking.

Yes, she could feel within herself the presence of a perfect animal. She resisted the idea of unleashing this animal one day. Perhaps for fear of causing some embarrassment or because she was afraid of some revelation... No, no — she repeated to herself- one mustn't be afraid of being creative. Deep down, the animal probably repelled her because she still felt anxious to please and to be loved by someone as powerful as her dead aunt. Even if only to humiliate her afterwards and disown her without giving it another thought. For the best saying, as well as being the most recent was: goodness makes me want to vomit. Goodness was lukewarm and weak, it stank of raw meat that had been lying around for a long time without, however, becoming completely rotten. It was freshened up from time to time, seasoned sufficiently to preserve it, a lump of lukewarm, stagnating meat.

One day, when she was still unmarried and her aunt was still alive, she had watched a man gorging himself with food. She had watched his bulging eyes, bright and stupid, anxious to savour every morsel. And his hands, his hands. One of them holding the fork embedded in a piece of bleeding meat — not lukewarm and inert, but intensely alive, ironic, and immoral — the other hand twitching on the tablecloth, clawing it nervously in his eagerness to consume another mouthful. The legs under the table beat time to some inaudible tune, satanic music, of sheer uncontrolled violence. The savage cruelty, the richness

of his colour... Crimson on the lips and around the nostrils, pale, bluish tinges under his tiny eyes. Joana had shuddered in horror confronting her miserable cup of coffee. But later she would find it impossible to say whether it had been out of fascination or desire. Almost certainly out of both. She knew that the man was a force to be reckoned with. She felt that she could never bring herself to eat like him, she was abstemious by nature, but the spectacle disturbed her. She was also moved when she read those terrifying tales of tragedy where wickedness was as chilling and intense as bathing in ice. As if she were watching someone drink water only to discover that she was suffering from thirst, a deep and ancient thirst. Perhaps it was only her need for life: she was living less than she might and imagined her thirst pleading for inundations. Perhaps just a few mouthfuls... Ah, that will teach you a lesson, that will teach you a lesson, her aunt used to say: never to go in front, never to steal before knowing that what you aim to steal isn't honestly reserved for you some- where. Or isn't it? Stealing makes everything so much more worthwhile. The taste of evil- chewing crimson, devouring sweetened fire.

Not to blame myself. To seek the basis of egoism: all that I am not is of no interest to me, it is impossible to exceed oneself — meanwhile I surpass myself even without delirium, I am more than my almost normal self— I possess a body and all that I might do is the continuation of my beginning; if the civilization of the ancient Mayas doesn't interest me, it's because I have nothing inside me that may be connected with its bas-reliefs;. I accept everything that comes from me because I have no perception of the causes and I may be treading unawares on what is vital; that is my greatest humility, she surmised.

The worst thing of all is that she could obliterate all her thoughts. Once erected, her thoughts were statues in the garden and she passed through, taking a good look as she went on her way.

She was happy that day and she also looked pretty. She was even a little feverish. Why this romanticism: a little feverish? But the truth is that I do have a little fever: bright eyes, this strength and weakness, irregular heart-beats. When the light breeze, the summer breeze, caught her body, she shivered all over with cold and heat. And then she thought in a flash, unable to pause and invent: It's because I'm still very young and whenever they touch or do not touch me, I feel — she reflected. To think now, for example, of fair streams. Precisely because fair streams don't exist, do you understand? this is how one escapes. Yes, but those streams gilded by the sun, are fair after a fashion... In other words I didn't really imagine it. Always the same fiasco:

neither evil nor imagination. In the first, in the final centre, the simple sensation without adjectives, blind as a rolling stone. In her imagination, for it alone has the power of evil, there is merely the vision enlarged and transformed: beneath it, the impassive truth. One lies and stumbles on the truth. Even in freedom, when she gladly chose new paths, she recognized them afterwards. To be free was to proceed in the end, and here once more is the path traced out. She would only see what she already possessed within herself. Now that the pleasure of imagining had been lost. And the day when I wept? — there was also a certain temptation to lie — I studied mathematics and suddenly sensed the tremendous and chilling impossibility of the miracle. I looked through that window and the only truth, the truth which I could never tell that man to his face without his running away from me, the only truth is that I am alive. Truly, I am alive. Who am I? Well, that is asking too much. I am reminded of a chromatic study by Bach and my intellect fails me. It is as cold and pure as ice, yet one can sleep on it. I lose consciousness, but no matter, I find the greatest serenity in hallucination. How curious that I'm unable to say who I am. That is to say, I know perfectly well, but I cannot bring myself to say it. Most of all, I'm afraid of saying it, because the moment I try to speak, not only do I fail to express what I feel, but what I feel slowly transforms itself into what I am saying. Or at least, what makes me act is not what I feel but what I say. I feel who I am and the impression is lodged in the upper part of my brain, on my lips — especially on my tongue — on the surface of my arms and is also coursing inside me, deep down inside my body, but where, precisely where, I cannot say. The taste is grey, faintly tinged with red, touches of blue on the worn parts, and it moves slowly like gelatine. Sometimes it becomes sharp and wounds me, colliding with me. Very well, now let's think of a blue sky, for example. But above all, where does this certainty of being alive come from? No, no, I am not well. For no one asks himself those questions and I... But the fact is that it's enough to remain silent in order just to see beneath all the realities, the one irreducible reality, that of existence. And beneath all the doubts — the chromatic study — I know that everything is perfect, for it has followed from scale to scale its fatal path in relation to itself. Nothing escapes the perfection of things, that is the history of all things. But this does not explain why I am moved when Otávio coughs and puts his hand to his chest, like this. Or when he smokes, and the ash falls on his moustache, without his even noticing. Ah, pity is what I feel at such moments. Pity is my way of loving. Of hating and communicating. Pity is what sustains me against the world, just as one person lives through desire and another through fear. Pity for the things that happen without my knowing. But I am tired, despite my happiness today, a happiness which comes from

who knows where, like that of a summer dawn. I am tired, I am now desperately tired! Let us weep together, softly. At having suffered, and let us continue to suffer sweetly. Weary sorrow reduced to a tear. But now it's a craving for poetry, this I confess, dear God. Let us sleep holding hands. The world goes round and somewhere there are things unknown to me. Let us sleep on God and on mystery, a quiet, fragile ship floating on the sea, there you have sleep.

Why was she so ardent and light, like the air that comes from the stove when it's uncovered?

The day had been like any other, which might explain this upsurge of life. She had woken up filled with the light of day, inundated. Still in bed, she had thought about sand, the sea, the time she drank sea-water at her aunt's house before the old woman died, about feeling, especially about feeling. Lying there, she waited for several moments and since nothing happened she lived an ordinary day. She had not yet freed herself from the desire-power-miracle that had been with her since childhood. The formula had succeeded so many times: to feel the thing without possessing it. All it required was that everything should come to its assistance, leave it light and pure, in a state of fasting in order to receive imagination. As difficult as flying and, without anywhere to support one's feet, to receive something extremely precious in one's arms, a child for example. Even so, only at a certain point in the game did she lose the feeling that she was telling lies — and she was afraid of not being present in all her thoughts. She loved the sea and could feel the bed-sheets covering her. The day advanced and left her behind, alone.

Still lying in bed, she had remained silent, almost without thinking, as sometimes happened. She superficially observed the house filled with sunshine at that hour, the window-panes high and shining as if they were light itself. Otávio had gone out. There was no one in the house. And no one inside her so that she was able to have thoughts as detached from reality as she pleased. If I were to see myself there in the land of the stars, I would remain only for myself. It was not night-time, there were no stars, impossible to see oneself from such a distance. Distracted, she suddenly remembered someone — large teeth with great gaps, eyes without lashes — saying, with every confidence of being original, yet sincere: my life is tremendously nocturnal. Having spoken, this person remained still, quiet, like an ox at night; from time to time the head moved in a gesture without meaning or purpose only to go back to being engulfed in stupidity. Filling the entire world with fear. Ah, yes, the man belonged to her childhood and connected with his memory there was a moist bunch of enormous violets, trembling with luxuriance... Now fully

awake, should she so desire, Joana could relax a little, and relive her entire childhood... The brief period spent with her father, the removal to her aunt's house, the teacher instructing her how to live, puberty, surfacing mysteriously, boarding school... her marriage to Otávio... But all this was much briefer, a simple look of surprise could exhaust all these facts.

Yes, she had a touch of fever. If sin existed, she had sinned. Her whole life had been a mistake, she felt useless. Where was the woman with the voice? Where were the women who were merely female? And the continuation of what she had initiated as a child? She had a touch of fever. The outcome of those days when she had wandered to and fro, renouncing and loving the same things a thousand times over. The outcome of those nights, lived in darkness and silence, tiny stars twinkling on high. The girl stretched out on the bed, her eye vigilant in the waning light. The whitish bed swimming in the darkness. Weariness creeping inside her body, lucidity fleeing the dusk. Tattered dreams, awakening visions. Otávio alive in the other room. And suddenly all the weariness of waiting concentrating itself in one nervous, rapid movement of her body, the muffled cry. Then coldness, and sleep.

... *One Day*...

One day her father's friend arrived from afar and embraced him. When they sat down to dinner, Joana, bewildered and contrite, saw a naked, yellow chicken lying on the table. Her father and the man were drinking wine and the man kept saying from time to time:

— I just can't believe you've got yourself a daughter...

Turning to Joana with a smile, her father said:

— I bought her in the shop on the corner...

Her father was happy, yet continued to look thoughtful as he kneaded his bread into tiny balls. From time to time, he would swallow a mouthful of wine. The man turned to Joana and asked her:

— Did you know that the pig goes grunt-grunt-grunt?

Her father interrupted:

— You're really good at that, Alfredo... The man was called Alfredo.

— Can't you see, her father continued, that the child is no longer at an age to be playing at being a pig...

They both laughed and Joana joined in. Her father gave her another chicken wing and she went on eating without any bread.

— How does it feel to have a little daughter? the man asked, still chewing.

Her father wiped his mouth with his napkin, leaned his head sideways and replied smiling:

— At times it's like holding a warm egg in my hand. Sometimes I feel nothing: a total loss of memory. Now and then, I'm aware of having a child of my own, my very own.

— Missie, missie, bissie, lissie... the man sang, looking towards Joana. What are you going to be when you grow up and become a young lady and all the rest of it?

— As for all the rest of it, she doesn't have the faintest idea, my dear fellow, her father declared, but if she won't get annoyed with me, I'll tell you what she wants to be. She has told me that when she grows up she's going to be a hero...

The man laughed, and laughed, and laughed. Suddenly he stopped, held Joana by the chin and as long as he remained there holding it, she couldn't chew her food:

— Surely you're not going to cry because your daddy has told me your

secret, little one?

Then they began to discuss things that must have happened before she was born. At times, they were not even the kind of thing that happens, but just words — also before she was born. A thousand times she would have preferred there to be rain because it would be so much easier to sleep without being frightened of the dark. The two men went to get their hats before going out; then she got up and tugged at her father's jacket:

— Stay a little longer...

The two men looked at each other and for a second she couldn't be certain whether they would stay or go. But when her father and his friend put on a serious expression then laughed together, she knew that they would stay. At least until she was sleepy enough not to lie down without hearing rain, without hearing people, or to be thinking of the rest of the house, dark, empty and silent. They sat down and smoked. The light began to twinkle in her eyes and next day, as soon as she awakened, she would go and visit the neighbour's backyard and take a look at the chickens because today she had eaten roast chicken.

— I couldn't forget her, her father was saying. Not that I spent all my time thinking of her. Now and then a thought, like some memory to muse upon much later. Later it came, but I was unable to give it serious consideration. There was only that slight pang, without any pain, an ah! barely outlined, a moment of reflection and then gone from my mind. She was called... he glanced at Joana — she was called Elza. I even remember saying to her: the name Elza makes me think of an empty sack. She was slender, disdainful — you know what I mean don't you? — intimidating. So quick and harsh in making judgements, so independent and embittered that from our very first meeting I accused her of being shrewish. Would you believe it... She burst out laughing, then became solemn. At that time, I found myself imagining what she would do at night. For I didn't believe it possible that she would sleep. No, she was never one to surrender. And even that sallow complexion — fortunately the child has not inherited it — did not look quite right with a nightdress ... She would spend the night in prayer, her eyes fixed on the dark sky, keeping vigil for someone. My memory was bad, I couldn't even remember why I had called her a shrew. But my memory was not so bad that I could forget her. I could still see her striding along the beach, her expression sullen and remote. The oddest thing of all, Alfredo, is that there couldn't have been any beach. Yet that vision persisted and defied any explanation.

The man was smoking and reclining in his chair. Joana was scoring the red hide on the armchair with her nail.

— I woke up early one morning with a fever. I can almost still feel my tongue inside my mouth, hot, dry, as rough as a rag. You know how I hate suffering, I'd rather sell my soul. Then I found myself thinking about her. Incredible. I was already thirty-two, unless I'm mistaken. I'd met her briefly at the age of twenty. And in a moment of anguish, from among so many friends — even you, for I didn't know where you were — at that moment I thought of her. She was the devil...

His friend laughed:

— Yes, she is the devil...

— You can't imagine what she was like: I never saw anyone with so much hatred for others, but real hatred and contempt as well. And to be so good at the same time... dry but good. Or am I wrong? I am the one who did not like that kind of goodness: almost as if she were making a fool of me. However I got used to it. She didn't need me. Nor I her, to be honest. But we lived together. What I should still like to know, would give anything to know, is what was on her mind all the time. You would find me, as you now see me and know me, the greatest fool compared to her. So you can imagine the impression she made on the few miserable relatives I possess: it was as if I had brought into their rosy and ample bosom — do you remember, Alfredo? — they both laughed — it was as if I had brought in some contagious virus, a heretic, I don't know what... Who can tell? But even I prefer that this little one shouldn't take after her. Or after me, for God's sake — Fortunately, I have the impression that Joana will go her own way...

— And then? the man rejoined.

— Then... nothing. She died as soon as possible.

Later the man said:

— Look, your daughter is almost asleep... The kindest thing would be to put her to bed.

But she was not sleeping. She only had to half-close her eyes, and let her head droop to one side, and it was almost as good as if it were raining, with everything gently merging. So that when she finally got into bed and pulled the sheet over her she would be more accustomed to sleep, wouldn't feel the darkness weighing on her bosom. Especially now that she was frightened of Elza. But one cannot be frightened of one's own mother. A mother was like a father. As her father carried her along the passageway to the bedroom, she leaned her head against him and caught the heavy odour that came from his arms. She said without speaking: no, no, no... In order to cheer herself up she thought: tomorrow, first thing tomorrow I'm going to see the live chickens.

The last rays of sunlight flickered on the green branches outside. The pigeons pecked at the loose earth. From time to time, the schoolroom was invaded by the breeze and the silence coming from the playground. Then everything became lighter, the teacher's voice fluttered like a white flag.

— And he and his loved ones lived happily ever after — Pause — the trees stirred in the yard, it was a summer's day. — Write a summary of this story for our next lesson. Still absorbed in the story, the children slowly dispersed, their eyes vacant, their mouths wearing a smile of satisfaction.

— What do you get when you're happy? her voice was as clear and sharp as an arrow. The teacher looked at Joana.

— Can you repeat the question... ?

Silence. The teacher smiled, arranging her books.

— Ask me once more, Joana, I didn't hear you the first time.

— I wanted to know: when you're happy what happens? What comes afterwards? — the girl repeated stubbornly.

The woman looked at her in surprise.

— What an idea! I don't know what you're talking about, what an idea! Ask me the same question with different words...

— To be happy is to get what?

The teacher turned crimson — you could never tell why she turned crimson. She marked the register and dismissed the class for recreation.

The porter came to summon the girl to the office. The teacher was waiting there:

— Sit down... Have you been playing?

— Just a little...

— What do you want to be when you grow up?

— I don't know.

— Well, listen, I've also had an idea — she reddened.

— Take a piece of paper, write down the question you asked me today and hold on to it. When you grow up, read it again. — She looked at her. — Who knows? Perhaps one day, you yourself will be able to reply somehow... — She lost her serious expression, turned crimson — Or perhaps this isn't important and, at least, you will enjoy yourself with...

— No.

— No what? — the teacher asked in surprise.

— I don't like enjoying myself, Joana said proudly. The teacher had turned crimson again:

— Very well, off you go and play.

As Joana made a dash for the door, the teacher called her back, by now flushed to the neck, her eyes lowered, rummaging through the papers on her desk:

— Don't you find it strange... odd that I should ask you to write down a question and hold on to it?

— No, she replied.

And returned to the playground.

Joana Takes a Stroll

I find it so relaxing, Joana explained to Otávio.

Just as the space surrounded by four walls has a specific utility, created not so much by its being space, as by the fact that it is surrounded by walls. Otávio transformed her into something that was not her but Otávio himself and which Joana received out of pity for both of them because both were incapable of freeing themselves through love. Also because she submissively accepted her own fear of suffering, her inability to conduct herself beyond the frontier of revolt. Besides: how was she to tie herself to a man without permitting him to imprison her? How was she to prevent him from enclosing her body and soul within his four walls? And was there some means of acquiring things without those things possessing her?

The evening was naked and transparent, without beginning or end. Birds, agile and black, darted sharply through the pure air, they flew so swiftly that no human eye could accompany their flight. In the far distance, the mountain hovered, massive and dense. There were two ways of looking at it: first, by imagining that it was remote and huge; second by imagining that it was small and within reach. But in any event, a stupid mountain, brown and solid. How she loathed nature at times. Without knowing why, it struck her that this last reflection, associated with the mountain, concluded something, and banging on the table with the palm of her hand, she thought: That's it! That grey and greenish thing extended inside Joana like a recumbent body, thin and harsh, right inside her, completely dry, like a smile without saliva, like strained eyes in need of sleep, that thing affirmed itself before the impassive mountain. What she could not grasp with her hand was now glorious, elevated and free, and it was hopeless to try and summarize it: pure air, a summer's evening. For there was certainly more than this. A hollow victory over the lush trees, the aimless existence of all things. Oh, God. This, yes, this: were God to exist, surely He would abandon that world immediately, too clean by far, like a house on a Saturday, quiet, not a speck of dust anywhere, smelling of soap. Joana smiled. Why did a house that had been polished and cleaned leave her feeling lost as if she were in a monastery, disconsolate, wandering through corridors? And there were many other things she observed. If she applied ice to her liver, she was pervaded by remote, sharp sensations, by luminous, fleeting ideas, and if she were then to speak, she would say, sublime, with outstretched hands, perhaps with her eyes closed:

— Then I find it so relaxing, she repeated. She felt like a withered branch,

stuck in mid-air. Brittle, covered with peeling bark. Perhaps she might be thirsty, but there was no water nearby. And above all, the suffocating certainty that if a man were to embrace her at that moment she would not feel a gentle sweetness in her nerves, but lemon-juice causing her to smart, her body like wood near the fire, warped, split, desiccated. She could not reassure herself by saying: this is just an interval, life will come afterwards like a tidal wave of blood, washing me, dampening the scorched wood. She could not deceive herself because she knew that she was also living and that those moments were the climax of something awkward, of a painful experience for which she should be grateful: almost as if she were experiencing time outside herself, quietly withdrawing.

— I've noticed that you like walking, Otávio remarked, gathering a twig. — Besides, you liked going for a stroll even before we married.

— Yes, that's quite true, she replied.

She could offer him any thought and so create a new relationship between them. This is what pleased her most in her dealings with others. She was under no obligation to follow the past, and with a word she could invent a way of life. If she were to say: I'm three months pregnant, that's it! something would exist between them. Even though Otávio was not particularly stimulating. With him the most likely possibility was to link oneself to what had already taken place. Even so, beneath that gaze of his imploring 'save me, save me', she opened her hand from time to time and allowed a little bird to take sudden flight. But sometimes, perhaps because of the nature of what she said, no bridge was created between them. On the contrary, a gap opened up. 'Otávio — she suddenly said to him — has it ever occurred to you that a dot, a single dot without dimensions is the maximum of solitude? A dot cannot even rely on itself, from one moment to the next, it stands by itself.' As if she had thrown a red-hot coal at her husband, the phrase leaped from one side to the other, slipped from her hands until he rid himself of her with another phrase, cold as ashes, ashes to cover that interval: It's raining, I'm hungry, it's a fine day. Perhaps because she did not know how to play. But she loved him, for that way he had of gathering twigs.

She inhaled the clear, tepid air of evening, and that thing inside her, pleading for water, remained tense and rigid like someone waiting with eyes blindfolded for the shot to ring out.

Night came, and she continued to breathe with the same sterile rhythm. But as dawn gently lit up the bedroom, things emerged fresh from the shadows, she felt the new morning insinuating itself between the sheets and opened her eyes. She sat on the bed. Inside her it was as if there were no death, as if love

could dissipate it, as if eternity meant renewal.

... *The Aunt...*

The journey took ages and from the distant woods came the pungent smell of damp scrub.

It was early morning and Joana had barely had time to wash her face. The housemaid at her side amused herself by reading out the advertisements on the tram. Joana was reclining with her right temple resting on the back of the seat and she permitted herself to be lulled by the consoling sound of the wheels, drowsily transmitted by the wood. The ground sped away beneath her lowered eyes, rapid, grey, lined with swift and fleeting stripes. Were she to open her eyes she would see each stone, she would dispel the mystery. But she half closed them and had the impression that the tram was going faster and that the fresh, salty, dawn breeze was growing stronger.

There was something odd about the cake she had eaten with her coffee, it was dark — tasted of wine and cockroaches — cake which they had persuaded her to eat with so much affection and pity that she hadn't had the heart to refuse. It now weighed heavily on her stomach and brought a sadness to her body which attached itself to that other sadness — something immovable behind the curtain — with which she had slept and awoken.

— Tramping over this sand is hard work, the housemaid complained.

She crossed the stretch of sand which led to her aunt's house, heralding the beach. Beneath the grains of sand, there sprouted thin, dark grasses which wriggled vigorously to the smooth, white surface. A strong wind blew in from the invisible sea, bringing salt, sand, the languid sound of the waters, it entangled their skirts between their legs, furiously licking the girl's skin and that of the woman accompanying her.

— This is awful, the maid muttered between clenched teeth.

An even stronger gust lifted her skirt to her face, exposing her dark, muscular thighs. The coconut-palms writhed in desperation and the light, at once overcast and fierce, reflected itself on the beach and in the sky, without any trace of the sun so far. Dear God, what had happened to things? Everything was calling out: no! no!

Her aunt's house was a refuge where neither wind nor light penetrated. The woman sat down with a sigh in the sombre waiting-room, where, amidst the heavy, dark furniture, the smiling portraits of men in frames cast a gentle glow. Joana remained standing, scarcely inhaling that lukewarm odour which seemed sweet and musty after the sharp tang of the sea. The odour of mildew

and tea sweetened with sugar.

The door leading into the house finally opened and her aunt, dressed in a house-coat with a bold floral pattern, rushed to embrace her. Before she could move in self-defence, Joana found herself being buried between those two mounds of soft, warm flesh which quivered with every sob. Trapped between those breasts and plunged into darkness, she could hear her aunt weeping as if through a pillow:

— My poor little orphan!

She could feel her face being drawn back from her aunt's bosom by those plump hands and for a second she was carefully scrutinized. Her aunt passed from one gesture to another without any transition, in quick abrupt stages. A fresh outburst of weeping exploded in her body and Joana received anguished kisses on her eyes, her mouth, her neck. Her aunt's tongue and mouth were soft and warm like those of a dog. Joana closed her eyes for an instant, swallowed the nausea and the dark cake which were heaving inside her stomach, causing her to shudder from head to foot. Her aunt pulled out a large, crumpled handkerchief and blew her nose. The housemaid remained seated, looking at the portraits, her legs sprawled out, her mouth wide open. The cleavage between the aunt's breasts was deep. She could have put her hand in there as if she were dipping into a bag and pulling out some surprise, an animal, a casket, whatever. Her breasts expanded with every sob, bulged out, and from the kitchen came the smell of beans cooked with garlic. Somewhere in the house, someone must be drinking great mouthfuls of olive oil. Those breasts could bury someone!

— Let me go! — Joana screamed, stamping her foot on the ground, her eyes dilated, her body trembling.

Her aunt leaned against the piano, stunned. The housemaid said: Leave her alone, she's tired. Joana was gasping for breath, her face a deathly white. She passed her darkened eyes over the room, felt she was being pursued. The walls were solid, she was trapped, trapped! A man in one of the portraits was watching her from behind his moustache and her aunt's breasts were in danger of spilling over her, melted into fat. She pushed the heavy door and fled.

A gust of wind and sand entered the hall, lifted the curtains, brought a breath of air. Through the open door, her handkerchief suppressing her sobs and her dismay — such a terrible disappointment — the aunt caught a fleeting glimpse of her niece's thin, bare legs scampering and scurrying between heaven and earth, until they disappeared in the direction of the beach.

Using the back of her hands, Joana wiped her face which was wet with kisses and tears. She breathed more deeply, still felt the insipid taste of that

warm saliva, the cloying fragrance that came from her aunt's bosom. Unable to control her feelings any longer, anger and revulsion surfaced in violent waves and, leaning over a cavity in the rocks, she threw up, her eyes shut and tight, her body painful and vindictive.

The wind was now licking her with force. Pale and fragile, breathing gently, she could feel it salty and playful, pervading and penetrating her entire body, reviving her. She half opened her eyes. Down there below, the sea shone in waves of copper, stretched out, deep, opaque, serene. It came dense and rebellious, rising in spirals. Then it extended itself ... spreading itself over the peaceful sands like a living body. The sea — she said in a whisper, her voice hoarse.

She climbed down from the rocks, walked unsteadily along the solitary beach until she felt the water on her feet. Crouching down, her legs shaking, she drank a little sea-water. And there she lingered, resting. From time to time, she half closed her eyes, kept them level with the sea and she faltered, the vision was so sharp -just that long, green line, attaching her eyes to the water *ad infinitum*. The sun broke through the clouds and the glints of light that sparkled on the waters were tiny flares going in and out. The sea, beyond the waves, watched from afar, silent, without tears, without breasts. Mighty, mighty. Mighty, she smiled. And, suddenly, without any warning, she felt something powerful inside her, something strange which caused her to tremble a little. But it was neither cold nor sad, it was some mighty thing which came from the sea, which came from the taste of salt in her mouth, and from her, from her herself. It was not sadness, but happiness close to horror... Every time she looked at the sea and its tranquil brilliance, she felt a sudden tightening then slackening throughout her body, around her waist and her bosom. She didn't really know if she should laugh for it was no laughing matter. On the contrary, oh, on the contrary, behind that thing lay the events of yesterday. She covered her face with her hands, almost ashamed, as she waited, feeling the heat of her laughter and her exhalation as it was sucked in once more. The water trickled over her feet which were now bare, gurgling between her toes, escaping as clear, as clear, as some transparent animal. Transparent and alive... She felt an urge to drink it, to bite it slowly. She caught it with cupped hands. The tiny quiescent lake glistened calmly in the sun, became warm, trickled away, escaped. The sand absorbed it quickly, quickly, went on absorbing it as if it had never experienced a trickle of water. She wet her face, passed her tongue over the empty, salty palm of her hand. The salt and the sun were like tiny, shining arrows which appeared here and there, stinging, stretching the skin of her wet face. Her happiness increased, gathered in her throat like a sack of air. But it was now a solemn happiness,

with no desire for laughter. It was a happiness close to tears, dear God. Gradually, the thought occurred to her. Without fear, no longer grey and tearful, but naked and silent beneath the sun like the white sand. Daddy is dead. Daddy is dead. She breathed slowly. Now she really knew that Daddy had died. Now, beside the sea where the sparkling light was a shower of fishes made out of water. Her father had died just as the sea was deep. Suddenly she understood. She felt that her father had died just as one cannot see the bottom of the sea. She had not been defeated by her grief. She understood that her father had died. Nothing more. And her sadness was exhausting, heavy, without hatred. She carried that exhaustion with her as she walked along that endless beach. She looked at her dark, slender feet like twigs gathered from the quiescent whiteness where they sank and lifted rhythmically, as if breathing. She walked and walked and there was nothing to be done: her father had died.

She lay prostrate on the sand, her hands protecting her face, leaving only a tiny gap for air. It was starting to get dark, so dark, and little by little there emerged circles and red stains, round, quivering bubbles, growing and diminishing. The grains of sand pricked her skin, became embedded. Even with her eyes shut, she could sense that on the beach the waves were being sucked in rapidly, so rapidly, by the sea, the waves, too, with lowered eyelids. Then they gently returned, to the palms of her open hands, her body completely relaxed. It was consoling to hear that sound. I am a person. And many things were about to follow. What? Whatever might happen would depend on her. Even if no one should understand: she would think of something and then find herself unable to describe it accurately. Especially when it came to thinking, everything was impossible. For example, sometimes an idea occurred to her and, surprised, she would reflect: why didn't I think of this before? It wasn't the same thing as suddenly seeing a tiny gash in the table and saying: Now then, I didn't notice that before! It wasn't... A thing thought did not exist before being thought. Like this, for instance: Gustavo's fingerprints... What was being thought became something thought. Furthermore: not all things thought came into existence from that moment onwards... For if I say: Auntie is having lunch with Uncle, I don't bring anything to life. Or even if I decide I'm going for a stroll; that's fine, I go for a stroll... and nothing exists. But if I say, for example: flowers on the grave, there you have something which did not exist before I thought of flowers on a grave. It's the same with music. Why didn't she play on her own all the pieces of music that existed? — She looked at the open piano — all the pieces of music were stored inside there.. Her eyes widened, grown dark and mysterious. 'Everything, everything.' That was when she began to tell lies. For

she was a person who had already begun. All of this was impossible to explain, like that word 'never', neither masculine nor feminine. But even so, didn't she know when to say 'yes'? She knew. Oh, she knew more and more. For example, the sea. The sea was immense. Just to think of the sea made her want to sink into the sand, or to open her eyes wide, to stay there watching, but then she found there was nothing to watch. At her aunt's home, they would almost certainly spoil her with sweets during the first few days. She would bathe in the blue and white bathtub, once she was living in the house. And each night, when it turned dark, she would slip on her nightdress and go to bed. In the morning, coffee with milk and biscuits. Her aunt always baked large biscuits. But without salt. Like someone dressed in mourning watching from the tram. She would dip her biscuit into the sea before eating it. She would take a bite, then dash home to swallow a mouthful of coffee. And that is how she would go on. She would play in the yard, where there were sticks and bottles. But where, above all, there was that old chicken-coop without any chickens. The place smelled of lime and excrement and of things drying out. But she could sit in there, right down on the ground, looking at the soil. Soil formed from so many bits and pieces that it gave you a headache trying to guess just how many. The chicken-coop had netting and everything, and this would be her home. And there was still her uncle's farm which she scarcely knew, but where she would spend her holidays from now on. There were lots of nice things to look forward to, weren't there? She buried her face in her hands. Oh, such fear, such fear. But it wasn't only fear. It was like someone who has finished something and says: Please, Miss, I've finished. And the teacher says: Just sit there and wait for the others. And you sit there quietly as if you were in church. Inside a tall church and without saying a word. Those slender, fragile saints. When you touch them they feel cold. Cold and divine. And everything remains silent. Oh, such fear, such fear. However, it was not simply fear. I don't have anything to do and I don't know what to do. Like looking at something pretty, a fluffy chick, the sea, a lump in one's throat. But it wasn't only that. Open eyes blinking, and confused with the things behind the curtain.

Joana's Pleasures

The freedom she often experienced did not come from lucid reflections, but from a state that seemed to consist of perceptions, much too organic to be expressed in thoughts. Sometimes at the heart of that sensation there was the glimmering of an idea which made her vaguely aware of her species and colouring.

The state she slipped into when she murmured: eternity. The very thought acquired the nature of eternity. It deepened as if by magic and expanded, without any proper content or form, but also without dimensions. She had the impression that if she could manage to retain that sensation for a few more seconds she would experience a revelation — effortlessly, like seeing the rest of the world simply by leaning away from the earth and out into space. Eternity was not only time, but something akin to the deeply-rooted certainty of not being able to hold it in one's body because of death; the impossibility of suppressing eternity; just as an almost abstract feeling of absolute purity was eternal. But the clearest suggestion of eternity stemmed from the impossibility of knowing how many human beings would succeed her own body, which would one day distance itself from the present with the velocity of a shooting-star.

She defined eternity and explanations were inevitably born like the pulsations of the heart. She would not change a single word for they were her truth. They no sooner appeared, however, than they became devoid of any logic. To define eternity as a quantity greater than time and greater even than the time the human mind can sustain thought, would not permit her, even so, to perceive its duration. Its essential quality was not to have any quantity, not to be measurable and divisible because everything which could be measured and divided had a beginning and an end. Eternity was not that infinitely great quantity that exhausted itself; eternity was succession.

Then Joana suddenly understood that the greatest beauty was to be found in succession, that movement explained form — there was something so elevated and pure when one cried out: movement explains form! — and in succession one also discovered sorrow because the body was much slower than the movement of uninterrupted continuity. Imagination captured and possessed the future of the present, while the body remained at the beginning of the road, living in another rhythm, blind to the experience of the spirit... Through these perceptions — by means of them, Joana made something exist — she connected with a happiness that was self-sufficient.

There were lots of pleasant sensations. To climb a mountain, to linger on the summit and, without looking round, to feel the presence of that conquered territory she had left behind, her uncle's farm way off in the distance. The wind catching her clothes, her hair. Her arms free, her heart closing and opening savagely, but her face bright and serene beneath the sun. And knowing, above all, that the earth beneath her feet was so deep and secret that there was no need to fear the invasion of understanding dissolving its mystery. This sensation had the hallmark of glory.

Certain moments of music. Music belonged to the same category as thought, both vibrated in the same movement and species. It possessed the same quality of a thought so intimate that upon hearing that music, the thought itself was revealed. A thought so intimate that upon hearing someone repeat the subtle nuances of those sounds, Joana found herself surprised, as if she had been invaded and dispersed. She no longer even heard the harmony once it was diffused — for then it was no longer hers. Or even when she listened to it a number of times, which destroyed the analogy: for her thought never repeated itself, while music could be played over and over again and sound exactly as before — thought was only equal to music creating itself. Joana did not identify herself closely with all the sounds. Only with those that were pure, and what she loved here was neither tragic nor comic.

There was also much to see. Certain moments of seeing were as valid as those 'flowers on a grave'. What one saw passed into existence. Joana, however, was not expecting some vision in a miracle announced by the Angel Gabriel. She was as astonished at what she had already perceived, suddenly seeing something for the first time, suddenly realizing that that something was constantly alive. Like a barking dog outlined against the sky. That was something apart that required no further explanation... An open door swinging to and fro, creaking in the evening silence... And suddenly, yes, there was the real thing. An old portrait of someone whom you don't know and are never likely to recognize because the portrait is old or because the person in the portrait has turned to ashes — this little distraction brought a moment of welcome respite. Also a mast without a flag, erect and mute, fixed into position on a summer's day — both the face and body blind. In order to have a vision, the thing did not have to be sad or happy or to manifest itself. It was enough to exist, preferably still and silent, in order to feel its mark. Dear God, the mark of existence... But this was not something to be pursued, since all that existed, perforce existed... The vision, in fact, consisted in surprising the symbol of things in the things themselves.

She found these discoveries confusing. But this also lent a certain grace.

How to clarify herself, for example, what long, sharp lines did the mark clearly have? They were sharp and thin. At a given moment they were nothing but lines, ending up exactly as they had started. Interrupted, constantly interrupted not because they were likely to come to an end, but because no one could terminate them. The circles were more perfect, less tragic, and did not move her sufficiently. A circle was the work of man, completed before death, and God Himself couldn't improve on that finish. While straight, thin, free lines-were like thoughts.

There were other things that confused her. She remembered Joana as a little girl looking out to sea: the tranquillity that came from the eyes of an ox, the tranquillity that came from that sprawling expanse of sea, from the sea's deep womb, from the cat lying rigid on the pavement. All is one, all is one... she had chanted. The confusion stemmed from the entwining of the sea, the cat and the ox with Joana herself. The confusion also arose because she did not know whether she had discovered 'all is one' when she was still a little girl standing looking out to sea, or later, when she remembered those moments. Meanwhile, the confusion didn't only confer a certain grace, but also a sense of reality. It struck her that, if she were to order and clearly explain what she had experienced, she would have destroyed the essence of 'all is one'. In her confusion, she was unwittingly truth itself, which probably gave her a greater capacity for life than knowledge of life. This truth, even though revealed, would be of no use to Joana, because it didn't form her stem but her root, fastening her body to everything that was no longer hers, imponderable and elusive.

Oh, there were motives for happiness, happiness without laughter, serious, profound, fresh. Whenever she discovered things about herself, the very moment she spoke, her thoughts were running parallel to the words. One day, she had told Otávio about Joana's childhood and the housemaid who invented more games than anyone she had ever known. And how she pretended to be dreaming.

— Are you sleeping?

— I'm fast asleep.

— Then wake up, it's morning... Did you dream?

At first she dreamed of sheep, of going to school, of cats drinking milk. Little by little she dreamed of blue sheep, of going to school in the middle of the woods, of cats drinking milk from golden saucers. And her dreams became increasingly dense and acquired colours that were difficult to dilute into words.

— I dreamed that white balls were rising inside...

— What balls? Inside where?

— I don't know, only that they were coming...

After listening to her, Otávio had remarked:

— I'm beginning to think that they abandoned you much too soon — your aunt's house... strangers... the boarding school...

Joana had thought: but there was the teacher. However, she replied:

— No... What else could they have done with me? Surely having had a childhood is everything one could wish for? No one could take that away from me... — and at this moment she was intrigued to discover that she was starting to listen to herself.

— I wouldn't like to go back to being a child, not even for a second, Otávio had continued, distracted, no doubt thinking back to the days of his cousin Isabel and sweet Lídia. Not even for a second.

— Nor me, Joana had hastened to reply, not even for a second. I feel no nostalgia, do you understand? — And at that moment she declared in a loud, deliberate tone of amazement — It isn't nostalgia for I now enjoy my childhood more fully than I did as a child...

Yes, there were many happy things mingled in her blood.

And Joana could also think and feel in various different ways simultaneously. And so, while Otávio had been speaking, even as she listened to him, she had been looking out of the window at a little old woman in the sun, grubby, frail and nimble — a branch quivering in the breeze. A dry branch where there was so much femininity, Joana had thought, that the poor woman might have had a son if life had not dried up in her body. Later, even as Joana was replying to Otávio, she remembered the lines her father had written specially to amuse her during one of those what-is-there-for-me-to-do outbursts:

Margarita befriended Violeta
the one was blind, the other mad,
the blind girl knew what the mad girl was saying
and ended up seeing what no one else saw...

Just like a wheel turning and turning, disturbing the air and creating a breeze.

Even to suffer was good because while the basest suffering unfolded, one also existed — like a river apart.

And one could also await the instant that came... that came... and suddenly precipitated into the present only to dissolve... and another that came... that

came...

... *The Bath*...

The moment her aunt went to pay for her purchases, Joana removed the book and slipped it furtively between the others she was carrying under her arm. Her aunt turned pale.

Once in the street, the woman chose her words carefully:

— Joana.. .Joana, I saw you...

Joana gave her a quick glance. She remained silent.

— But you have nothing to say for yourself? — her aunt could no longer restrain herself, her voice tearful. — Dear God, what is to become of you?

— There's no need to fuss, Auntie.

— But you're still a child... Do you realize what you've done?

— I know...

— Do you know... do you know what it's called... ?

— I stole a book, isn't that what you're trying to say?

God help me! I don't know what I'm going to do, you even have the nerve to own up!

— You forced me to own up.

— Do you think that you can... that you can just go around stealing?

— Well... perhaps not.

— Why do you do it then... ?

— Because I want to.

— You what? — her aunt exploded.

— That's right, I stole because I wanted to. I only steal when I feel like it. I'm not doing any harm.

— God help me! So, stealing does no harm, Joana.

— Only if you steal and are frightened. It doesn't make me feel either happy or sad.

The woman looked at her in despair.

— Look child, you're growing up, it won't be long before you're a young lady... Very soon now you will be wearing your clothes longer... I beg of you: promise me that you won't do it again, promise me, think of your poor father who is no longer with us.

Joana looked at her inquisitively:

— But I'm telling you I can do what I like, that... — Her explanations were

futile — All right, I promise. For my father's sake.

Some time later, passing the door of her aunt's room, Joana could hear her, her voice low and interrupted by her breathing. Joana put her ear to the door, at the spot where you could even see the mark of her head.

— She's like a little demon.. .A woman of my age and experience, with a grown-up daughter of my own who is already married, yet I simply cannot cope with Joana... I never had any of this trouble with our Armanda, may God preserve her for the sake of her dear husband. I can no longer be responsible for the girl, I swear to you, Alberto... I can do whatever I like, she had the nerve to say to me after I caught her stealing... can you believe it... I was left speechless. I told Father Felicio, begged him to advise me... It upset him too... I've had enough! Even here in the house, she never says a word, as if she didn't need anyone... And when she looks at you, it's always straight in the eye, as if she were showing contempt...

— True, her uncle said slowly, the strict discipline at boarding school might help to tame her. Father Felicio is right. I'm convinced that if my brother were still alive he wouldn't hesitate in packing Joana off to boarding school, after catching her stealing... Especially stealing, which is particularly sinful in the eyes of God... Deep down this is what troubles me: her father, irresponsible as he was, wouldn't even have hesitated in sending Joana to a reformatory... I feel sorry for Joana, poor child. You must agree that we would never have considered sending Armanda away to boarding school, even if she had robbed the entire bookshop.

— That's altogether different! Altogether different — her aunt expostulated in triumph. Armanda, even were she to steal, is one of us! And what about this girl... There's no need to feel sorry for her, Alberto! It's me you should pity.. .Even when Joana isn't in the house, I'm uneasy. It may sound foolish, but I feel as if she were watching me all the time... and reading my thoughts... Sometimes I'm laughing at something when I suddenly break off as if I were paralysed. One of these days, here in my own home where I brought up my own daughter, I shall have to beg the forgiveness, God knows why, of this wretched girl... She's a viper. She's a cold-blooded viper, Alberto, she's capable of neither love nor gratitude. It's hopeless trying to show her any affection, or doing anything for her. I can't help feeling the girl is capable of murdering someone...

— That's quite enough! — her uncle exclaimed in alarm. If Joana's father had been a better man, he would rise from his grave this very moment!

— I'm sorry, I'm being stupid. She even makes me come out with these foolish statements... She's a strange creature, Alberto, who has neither friends

nor God. May the Lord forgive me!

Joana's hands fidgeted, independent of her will. She observed them with mild curiosity and forgot them almost immediately. The ceiling was white, the ceiling was white. Even her shoulders, which she had always thought of as being so remote from herself, throbbed with life and began to tremble. Who was she? The viper. Yes, yes, where could she escape to? She didn't feel weak but on the contrary, gripped by a strange passion, mingled with a certain feeling of happiness, sombre and violent. I am suffering, she thought suddenly, taken by surprise. I am suffering, a separate voice of awareness informed her. And this other entity became gigantic all of a sudden and replaced what she was suffering. Nothing ever happened if she went on waiting for something to happen... Everything might come to a halt and Joana would find herself striking in a void like the hands of a clock. She remained empty for several moments, watching herself attentively, probing the return of sorrow. No, no, she did not want it! And as if to restrain herself, ardent and impassioned, she slapped her own face.

She fled once more to her teacher, who still didn't know she was a viper...

The teacher miraculously received her once more. And miraculously he penetrated Joana's nebulous world where he moved with gentleness and caution.

— It's not a question of matching up to other people's ideals. The important thing is to be worthy in yourself. Do you understand, Joana?

— Yes, yes...

He did most of the talking that afternoon.

— After all, animal existence is summed up in this seeking after pleasure. Human life is more complex: it is summed up in the pursuit of pleasure, in its fear, and, above all, in the intervening moments of dissatisfaction. I'm putting it rather simply, but that doesn't matter for now. Do you understand? Every desire is seeking after pleasure. Every moment of remorse, compassion, generosity, is its fear. All the despair, and searchings for other paths betray dissatisfaction. That's it summed up, as it were. Do you understand?

— Yes.

— When someone spurns pleasure, or starts living like a monk in any sense, it's because they have an enormous capacity for pleasure, a dangerous capacity — and so their fear is even greater. Only those who keep their weapons under lock and key are terrified of opening fire on everyone.

— Yes...

— I said: anyone who spurns... For there are plains, patches of land that

will never flower without manure.

She went on listening to him and it was as if her uncle and aunt had never existed, as if the teacher and Joana herself were isolated within the afternoon, within understanding.

— No, I really don't know how to advise you, the teacher was saying. Tell me first of all: what is good and what is evil?

— I don't know...

— 'I don't know' is not a reply. Try to discover everything that exists inside you.

— To live is good... she muttered. Evil is...

— Is what...?

— Evil is not to live...

— And to die? — he probed.

— No, no... she groaned.

— What then? Tell me.

— Not to live is evil, that's all. To die is something else. To die is different from good and evil.

— Yes, he said, without understanding. Fine. Now tell me, for example: who is the greatest man alive today, in your opinion?

She thought and thought, and gave no reply.

— What do you like most? — he rejoined.

Joana's face lit up, she got ready to speak and suddenly found that she didn't know what to say.

— I don't know, I don't know, she said in despair.

— But how? Why then were you almost laughing with pleasure? — the teacher asked in surprise.

— I don't know...

He looked at her severely:

— That you shouldn't be able to name the greatest man alive today, even though you know lots of great men, is all very well. But I refuse to accept that you don't know what you yourself are feeling.

She looked at him with dismay:

— Believe me, the thing I like most of all in the world... is what I feel deep inside me, opening out as it were... I could almost tell you what it is, yet I cannot...

— Try to explain, he said, frowning.

— It's like something that's about to be... It's like...

— Like what? he leaned over, seriously demanding an explanation.

— It's like wanting to take a deep breath, but there's also fear... I don't know... I don't know, it almost hurts. It's everything... It's everything.

— Everything?... — the teacher asked in astonishment. She assented with a nod, visibly moved, mysterious, intense: everything... He went on looking at her for a second, his small face anguished and powerful:

— Fine.

He seemed satisfied but she couldn't understand why, since she hadn't got round to saying anything about that. However, if he was saying 'that's fine', she thought, fervent and submissive, then it was true.

— Which person do you most admire? apart from me, apart from me, the teacher added. Unless you help me, I shall never get to know you, I shall never be able to guide you.

— I don't know, Joana said, wringing her hands under the table.

— Why didn't you mention any one of the great men who are alive today? You know at least ten of them. You're much too honest, much too honest, he said with displeasure.

— I don't know...

— Well, it doesn't matter, he recovered his composure. Never worry about not being able to express an opinion on a wide range of topics. Never worry about being or not being something. In any case, I suppose this is the only advice you would accept. And get used to the idea: what you felt — about what you like most of all in this world -might only have been at the cost of not having any clear opinion about great men. You will have to give up lots of things in order to receive others. — Pause — Do you find this boring?

Joana thought for a second, her dark head tilted, her eyes wide open.

— But when you have the highest thing, she asked slowly, does that mean to say that you don't have all the things lower down?

The teacher shook his head.

— No, he said, no. Not always. Sometimes one can possess what is highest, in the end, one has the impression... — he looked at her askance — one has the impression of dying in a state of chastity. Perhaps this is because things are neither higher nor lower. Simply different in quality, do you understand?

Yes, she was beginning to understand those words and everything they embraced. Yet notwithstanding, she had the feeling that they possessed a false door, carefully concealed, through which she would discover their real

meaning.

— That the words mean more than you said — Joana finished the explanation.

With a sudden movement, almost instinctively unawares, the teacher stretched his hand across the table. Joana, trembling with pleasure, put her hand in his, her face turning red.

— What's happened? — she said in a low voice. And she loved that man as if she herself were a fragile blade of grass being bent and lashed by the wind.

He did not answer, but his eyes were intense and betrayed compassion. What? — suddenly she took fright:

— What's going to happen to me?

— I don't know — he replied after a brief silence — perhaps you will find happiness one day, who knows, a happiness few people will envy you. I'm not even sure that happiness is the right word. Perhaps you won't find anyone else who feels as you do, like...

The teacher's wife came into the room, tall, almost pretty with that copper-coloured hair, cut short and worn straight. And, above all, those long, serene thighs, moving blindly, but with such confidence that it was intimidating. What was the teacher about to say, mused Joana, before she came in? 'No one else who feels as you do, like... like me?' Ah that woman. She looked at her furtively, then lowered her eyes filled with rage. There stood the teacher once more remote, his hand withdrawn, tight-lipped, indifferent, as if Joana were simply a 'little friend', as his wife would say.

The latter had approached, had placed her slender hand, white as wax, yet strangely attractive, on her husband's shoulder. And Joana noted, so full of anguish that she could scarcely swallow, the delightful contrast between these two human beings. His hair still black, his huge body like that of an animal greater than man.

— Would you like to have your dinner now? — his wife asked him.

He played with the pencil between his fingers:

— Yes, I'm leaving earlier. The woman smiled at Joana and slowly departed.

Still insecure, Joana thought that the appearance of that creature made it clear that the teacher was a man while she herself was not yet what might be called a 'young lady'. He too must have noticed, dear God, he too must at least have noticed how hateful that white woman could be, knowing as she did how to destroy their previous conversation?

— Are you giving a class tonight? — she asked uncertainly just for the sake

of carrying on the conversation. And she blushed as she uttered those words, they were so blank, so out of place... Not in the tone of voice with which his wife had said, beautiful and serene: Would you like an early dinner?

— Yes, I'm giving a class -he replied and fumbled through the papers on the table.

Joana got up to go away and suddenly, even before she could perceive her own gesture, she sat down again. She lowered her head over the table and began to weep, covering her eyes. All around there was silence and she could hear the slow, muffled steps of someone inside the house. A long drawn-out minute passed before she felt something pressing gently on her head. It was a hand. His hand. She heard the hollow sound of her heart, she had stopped breathing. All she could think of was her own hair which now existed more than anything else, a great, nervous, thick mop of hair being fondled by those strange, animated fingers. His other hand raised her chin and she allowed herself to be examined, submissive and trembling.

— What brought this on? — he asked, smiling. — Was it our conversation?

She couldn't speak, she shook her head in denial.

— What was it then? — he insisted in a firm voice.

— It's just that I'm so ugly — she answered obediently, her voice barely audible.

The teacher was startled. He opened his eyes wide, stared at her in amazement.

— Now then — he tried to laugh it off — I had almost forgotten that I was speaking to a little girl... Who said you were ugly? — he laughed again. — Stand up.

She got up, broken-hearted, conscious that her knees were as ashen and opaque as ever.

— You're still on the thin side, I agree, but things will improve, don't you worry, he reassured her.

She stared at him from behind those final tears. How could she explain to him? She didn't want to be consoled, he hadn't understood... The teacher met her stare with a frown. What's this? What's this? he asked himself with annoyance.

She held her breath

— I can wait.

The teacher, too, did not breathe for several seconds. He asked, in a flat voice which suddenly sounded cold:

— Wait for what?

— Until I become pretty. Pretty like 'her'.

He himself was to blame. That was his first thought, as if he had slapped his own face. He was to blame for having leaned too close over Joana, for having sought, yes, sought — don't escape, don't escape — thinking that it would go unpunished, her promise of youth, that fragile and ardent stem. And before he could restrain the thought — his hands clenched under the table, it came without mercy: the selfishness and crude hunger of old age was encroaching. Oh, how he loathed himself for having thought of this. 'Her', his wife, was the prettier? The 'other one' was also pretty. And also the 'other one' of this evening. But who possessed that shapeless body, those nervous legs, breasts still unformed? — the miracle: still unformed, he thought, feeling giddy, his vision blurred. Who was like clear, fresh water? The hunger of old age was encroaching. He cringed, terrified, furious, cowardly.

His wife came back into the room. She had changed for the evening, her compact frame swathed in a blue, woollen dress. Her husband stared at her at length, with a vague, somewhat foolish expression on his face. She stared back at him, looking thoughtful and enigmatic with the merest trace of a smile lurking beneath the surface. Joana felt inhibited, became insignificant and dull before that radiant complexion. The shame of the scene that had taken place earlier came flooding back and left her feeling absurd.

— I'm just going — she said.

The wife — or was she mistaken? — the wife looked her straight in the eye, understanding, understanding! And then raised her head, her bright, steady eyes expressing triumph, perhaps even betraying a grain of sympathy:

— When shall we see you again, Joana? you should come and have a chat with the teacher more often...

With the teacher, she said, toying with intimacy, and she was white and smooth. Not miserable and not knowing about anything, not abandoned, not with dirty knees like Joana, like Joana! Joana got up and she knew that her skirt was too short, that her blouse was sticking to her tiny, underdeveloped breasts. She must escape, run to the beach, lie face down on the sands, hide her face, listen to the sound of the sea.

She shook the woman's soft hand, shook his great paw, bigger than a man's hand.

— Don't you want to take your book?

Joana turned round and caught him. She caught his expression. Ah, discovery shone inside her, that look resembling a handshake, that look that

knew she longed for the beach. But why so weak, so bereft of happiness? What had happened in the end? Only a few hours ago they were calling her a viper, the teacher fled, his wife waiting... What was happening? Everything was retreating... And suddenly the setting detached itself in her conscience with a screech, stood out in every detail, burying the characters under a huge wave... Her very feet were floating. The room where she had spent so many afternoons glowed in the crescendo of an orchestra, making no sound, taking revenge on her distraction. From one moment to the next, Joana discovered the unsuspected power of that quiet room. It was strange, silent, absent, as if they had never set foot there, as if it were some reminiscence. Things had preserved themselves until now and then drawn near to Joana, surrounding her, shining in the semi-darkness of twilight. Perplexed, she saw the naked statue standing on top of the gleaming display-cabinet, the lines gently faded as in the finale of a movement. The silence of those elegant, immobile chairs transmitted itself to her brain, draining it slowly... She heard quick footsteps out in the street, saw that tall, thoughtful woman staring at her as well as that stockily-built man, with bent shoulders. What did they expect of her? — she was frightened. She felt the hard cover of the book between her fingers, far, far away as if a great chasm were separating her from her own hands. What then? Why did every human being have something to say to her? Why, why? And what did they want of her, constantly sucking her dry? Vertigo, rapid as a whirlwind, took control of her head, causing her legs to wobble. She stood before them for several minutes, silent, absorbing the atmosphere of the house, but why were people not entirely surprised at her inexplicable attitude towards them? Ah, one could expect everything from her, the viper, even what appeared strange, the viper, ah the pain, the happiness that was paining her.

The couple stood out from the shadows, motionless before her and only in the teacher's expression was there any hint of surprise.

— I felt dizzy, she told them in a hushed voice and the display-cabinet continued to shine like an enshrined saint.

She had barely spoken, her vision still clouded, when Joana sensed an almost imperceptible movement coming from the teacher's wife. They looked at each other and something mean, avid, and humiliated in the wife made the stupefied Joana begin to understand... It was her second attack of vertigo that day! Yes, it was her second attack of vertigo that day! Like the sounding of trumpets... She stared at them intently. I must get out of this house, she called out in her excitement. The room grew increasingly darker, and any moment now, she would arouse fury in this man and woman! Like an outburst of rain,

like an outburst of rain...

Her feet sank into the sand and when they emerged once more, they were leaden. It was already night, the sea tossed, dark and restless, its waves lashed against the shore. The wind had nestled in her hair and blew her short fringe in all directions. Joana no longer felt giddy, a rough arm now weighed on her bosom, a consoling weight. Something will come soon, she thought in haste. This was the second attack of vertigo on the same day! In the morning, when she jumped out of bed, and now... There is more and more life in me, she vaguely realized. She started to run. Suddenly she was freer, more enraged at everything, she felt triumphant. But it wasn't rage, it was love. A love so strong that it could only release its passion in a violent outburst of wrath. Now I am a viper all on my own. She remembered that she had left the teacher for good and that after their conversation she would never be able to return... She felt that he was far away, in that setting which she now remembered with horror and estrangement. All on her own...

Her uncle and aunt were already sitting at the table. In which of them should she confide: I'm getting stronger every day, I'm growing up, am I about to become a young woman? She would confide neither in them nor anyone else. For she could not bring herself to ask of anyone: Tell me about things? Only to be told: I don't know either, just as the teacher had replied. She could see the teacher reappear before her as in those final moments, leaning towards her, terrified or ferocious, she couldn't say, but backing away, that's it, backing away. The reply, she felt, was not so important. What really mattered was that her question had been accepted, that it could exist. Her aunt would retort with surprise: what things? And should she begin to understand, she would almost certainly say: like this, and this, and this. With whom would Joana now speak of the things that exist as naturally as one speaks of those other things that simply are?

Things that exist, others that simply are... She was surprised at this new and unexpected thought which would live from now onwards like flowers on a grave. That would live, that would live, other thoughts would be born and would live, and she herself was more alive. Wild happiness cut into her heart, lit up her body. She pressed the glass between her fingers, drank water with her eyes closed as if she were sipping wine, bloody and glorious wine, the blood of God. No, she would not tell anyone that everything was slowly changing... That she had put away her smile like someone who finally switches off the light and settles down to sleep. No human beings could now be permitted to enter her inner world and merge therein. Her relations with other people became increasingly different from the relations she maintained

with herself. The sweetness of childhood disappeared without trace, no more water flowed from some inner fountain and what she offered the footsteps of passing strangers was parched, colourless sand. But she was walking onwards, ever onwards, as one walks along the shore, the wind caressing her face, blowing her hair back.

How was she to tell them: this is the second attack of vertigo today, even though she desperately wanted to confide in someone? For no one else in her life, no one else would probably ever say to her like the teacher: one lives and one dies. Everyone was forgetting that all they wanted to do was to amuse themselves. She looked at them. Her aunt amused herself with the house, the cook, her husband, with her married daughter and visitors. Her uncle amused himself with his job, his farm, a game of chess, the newspapers. Joana tried to analyse them, thinking that in this way she could destroy them. Yes, they were fond of each other in a distant, familiar way. From time to time, absorbed in their games, they would glance at each other anxiously, as if to reassure themselves that they still existed. Only to resume that lukewarm distance between them which lessened when one of them went down with flu or had a birthday. They certainly slept in the same bed, Joana thought without satisfaction or malice.

Her aunt held out the plate of bread in silence. Her uncle didn't so much as raise his eyes from his plate.

Eating was a matter of great concern in that household, Joana continued. During meals, his arms resting firmly on the table, the man nourished himself as he gasped for breath because he suffered from heart trouble. As he chewed, with some crumb or morsel of food stuck to his mouth, he stared with a glazed expression at some object or other, his attention focused on the inner sensations produced by the food. Her aunt crossed her ankles under her chair. With puckered eyebrows, she ate with a curiosity which renewed itself with every mouthful, her face rejuvenated and mobile. But why were they not sitting back comfortably in their chairs today? Why were they taking so much care not to make a noise with their cutlery, as if someone were dead or asleep? It's because of me, Joana decided.

Around the dark table, under the light weakened by the lamp's soiled fringes, silence, too, had settled that night. Now and then, Joana paused to listen to the sound of those two mouths chewing and to the quick, restless tick-tock of the clock. Then the woman lifted her eyes and rooted to the spot, with her fork in one hand, she waited, apprehensive and defeated. Joana averted her gaze. Triumphant, she lowered her head with a profound happiness that was inexplicably mingled with a sharp tightening in her throat,

making it impossible to sob.

— Has Armanda not come? — Joana's voice accelerated the tick-tock of the clock, provoked a sudden rapid movement at the table.

Her uncle and aunt eyed each other furtively. Joana sighed aloud: was she afraid of her then?

— Armanda's husband isn't on duty today, so she isn't coming to dinner, her aunt finally replied. And suddenly, as if satisfied, she began eating. Her uncle chewed more quickly. Silence returned without dissolving the distant murmur of the sea. So, they didn't have the courage.

— When am I being sent to boarding-school? — Joana asked.

The soup tureen slipped from her aunt's hands, the dark, cynical broth spread rapidly over the table. Her uncle rested his knife and fork on his plate, anguish written all over his face.

— How do you know that... he stammered in confusion... She had been listening at the door...

The drenched tablecloth gave off gentle fumes like the dying embers of a fire. Immobile and mesmerised as if she were confronting something beyond remedy, the woman stared at the spilled soup which was rapidly getting cold.

The water, blind and deaf, but happily not mute, sparkling and bubbling as if splashed on the bright enamel of the bathtub. The bathroom was filled with warm vapours, the mirrors covered in steam, the naked body of a young girl reflected on the damp mosaic walls.

The girl laughs softly, rejoicing in her own body. Her smooth, slender legs, her tiny breasts emerge from the water. She scarcely knows herself, still not fully grown, still almost a child. She stretches out one leg, looks at her foot from a distance, moves it tenderly, slowly, like a fragile wing. She lifts her arms above her head, stretches them out towards the ceiling lost in the shadows, her eyes closed, without any feeling, only movement. Her body stretches and spreads out, the moisture on her skin glistening in the semi-darkness — her body tracing a tense, quivering line. When she drops her arms once more, she becomes compact, white and secure. She chuckles to herself, moves her long neck from one side to another, tilts her head backwards -the grass is always fresh, someone is about to kiss her, soft, tiny rabbits snuggle up against each other with their eyes shut. — She starts laughing again, gentle murmurings like those of water. She strokes her waist, her hips, her life.

She sinks into the bathtub as if it were the sea. A tepid world closes over her

silently, quietly. Small bubbles slip away gently and vanish once they touch the enamel. The young girl feels the water weighing on her body, she pauses for a moment as if someone had tapped her lightly on the shoulder. Paying attention to what she is feeling, the invading tide. What has happened? She becomes a serious creature, with wide, deep eyes. She can scarcely breathe. What has happened? The open, silent eyes of things went on shining amidst the vapours. Over the same body that has divined happiness there is water — water. No, no... Why? Creatures born into the world like water. She becomes restless, tries to escape. Everything — she says slowly as if handing over something, as if probing herself without understanding. Everything. And that word is peace, solemn and enigmatic, like some ritual. The water covers her body. But what has happened? She murmurs in a low voice, she utters syllables that are lukewarm and jumbled.

The bathroom is hazy, almost extinct. The objects and walls have caved in, melt and dissolve into fumes. The water feels a little cooler on her skin and she trembles with fear and discomfort.

When she emerges from the bathtub she is a stranger who doesn't know what she should feel. Around her there is nothing and she knows nothing. She is weak and sad, she moves slowly, unhurried, for some considerable time. The cold runs down her back with icy feet but she is in no mood to play, she huddles up, wounded and unhappy. She dries herself without love, humiliated and miserable, wraps herself in the dressing-gown as in a warm embrace. Shut up in herself, unwilling to look, ah, unwilling to look, she slips through the passageway — that long throat, crimson, dark, and discreet-sinking down into the belly, into everything. Everything, everything, she repeats mysteriously. She closes the window in the room — reluctant to see, hear or feel anything. In the silent bed, floating in the darkness, she curls up as if she were in the last womb and forgets. Everything is vague, uncertain and silent.

Lined up behind her were the dormitory beds from the boarding-school. And in front, the window opened onto the night.

I've discovered a miracle in the rain — Joana thought — a miracle splintered into dense, solemn, glittering stars, like a suspended warning: like a lighthouse. What are they trying to tell me? In those stars I can foretell the secret, their brilliance is the impassive mystery I can hear flowing inside me, weeping at length in tones of romantic despair. Dear God, at least bring me into contact with them, satisfy my longing to kiss them. To feel their light on my lips, to feel it glow inside my body, leaving it shining and transparent, fresh and moist like the minutes that come before dawn. Why do these strange longings possess me? Raindrops and stars, this dense and chilling fusion has

roused me, opened the gates of my green and sombre forest, of this forest smelling of an abyss where water flows. And harnessed it to night. Here, beside the window, the atmosphere is more tranquil. Stars, stars, zero. The word cracks between my teeth into fragile splinters. Because no rain falls inside me, I wish to be a star. Purify me a little and I shall acquire the dimensions of those beings who take refuge behind the rain.

At this moment, inspiration sends pain throughout my body. One more second, and it will need to be something greater than inspiration. Instead of this suffocating happiness, as if there were too much air, I shall experience the clear impossibility of having more than inspiration, of surpassing it, of possessing the thing itself — and really be a star. Look where madness, madness leads one. Nevertheless, it is the truth. What does it matter that to all appearances I am still in the dormitory at this moment, the other girls fast asleep in their beds, their bodies quite still. What does it matter what it really is? Truly I am on my knees, naked as an animal, beside the bed, my soul despairing as only the body of a virgin can despair. The bed gradually disappears, the walls of the room recede, collapse in ruins. And I am in the world, as free and lithe as a colt on the plain. I rise as gentle as a puff of air, I raise my sleepy head like that of a flower, my feet agile, and cross the fields, further than the earth, the world, time, God. I sink only to emerge, as if from clouds, from lands still inconceivable, ah, still inconceivable. From lands, still beyond my powers of imagination, but which will appear one day. I roam, I wander, I go on and on... Always without stopping, distracting my weary desire to reach some final resting-place. Where did I once see a moon high in the sky, white and silent? Livid clothing fluttering in the breeze. The mast without a flag, erect and mute, rooted in space... Everything awaiting midnight — I am deceiving myself, I must return. I feel no madness in my desire to bite into stars, but the earth still exists. And the first truth resides in the earth and in the body. If the brilliance of the stars causes internal pain, if this remote communication is possible, it's because something almost resembling a star glimmers inside me. Here I am, returned to the body. To return to my body. When I suddenly see myself in the depths of the mirror, I take fright. I can scarcely believe that I have limits, that I am outlined and defined. I feel myself to be dispersed in the atmosphere, thinking inside other creatures, living inside things beyond myself. When I suddenly see myself in the mirror, I am not startled because I find myself ugly or beautiful. I discover, in fact, that I possess another quality. When I haven't looked at myself for some time, I almost forget that I am human, I tend to forget my past, and I find myself with the same deliverance from purpose and conscience as something that is barely alive. I am also surprised to find as I

gaze into the pale mirror with open eyes that there is so much in me beyond what is known, so much that remains ever silent. Why silent? Do these curves beneath my blouse exist with impunity? Why are they silent? My mouth, still somewhat childlike, so certain of its destiny, remains true to itself, despite my total distraction. Sometimes, upon making this discovery, there comes this love for myself, constant glances in the mirror, a knowing smile for those who stare at me. A period of interrogation addressed to my body, a time of greed, sleep, long walks in the open air. Until some phrase or glance — like that in the mirror — unexpectedly reminds me of other secrets, those which remove all limits. Enthralled, I plunge my body to the bottom of the well, I penetrate all its sources and walking in my sleep I follow another path. -To analyse moment by moment, to perceive the nucleus of each thing made from time or space. To possess each moment, to link them to my awareness, like tiny filaments, barely perceptible yet strong. Can this be life? Even so, it might elude me. Another way of capturing it would be to live. But the dream is more complete than the reality; the latter plunges me into unconsciousness. What matters in the end: to be alive or to know that one is alive? — The purest of words, crystal drops. I feel their moist and gleaming form struggling inside me. But where can I find what I must express? Inspire me, I have almost everything: I possess the outline awaiting the essence; is that it? — What is someone to do who doesn't know what to do with himself? To utilize himself as body and soul to the advantage of his body and soul? Or to transform his strength into an alien strength? Or to wait for the solution to come from himself as a consequence? I can express nothing, not even within form. All I possess lies much deeper inside me. One day, after finally speaking, shall I still have something on which to live? Or will everything that I might say be beneath and beyond life?

— I try to distance myself from everything that is a form of life. I try to isolate myself in order to find life in itself. Nevertheless, I have relied too much on the game that distracts and consoles and when I distance myself from it, I suddenly find myself defenceless. The moment I close the door behind me, I instantly detach myself from things. All that has been distances itself from me, quietly sinking into my remote waters. I can hear it drop. Happy and tranquil, I wait for myself, I wait for myself to rise and to emerge as I really am before my own eyes. Instead of securing myself with my flight, I see myself abandoned, solitary, thrown into a cell without dimensions, where light and shadows are silent phantoms. Within my inner self I find the silence I am seeking. But it leaves me so bereft of any memory of any human being and of me myself, that I transform this impression into the certainty of physical solitude. Were I to cry out — I can no longer see things clearly —

my voice would receive the same indifferent echo from the walls of the earth. So without experiencing things, should I not find life? But, even so, in the white and limited solitude where I fall, I am still trapped amidst impenetrable mountains. Trapped, trapped. Where is my imagination? I walk over invisible tracks. Prison, freedom. These are the words that occur to me. But I sense that they are not the only true and irreplaceable ones. Freedom means little. What I desire still has no name. — For I am a toy they wind up and once this has been done it will not find its own, much deeper life. To search tranquilly, to concede that perhaps I may only find it were I to look for it in secondary sources. Otherwise I shall die of thirst. Perhaps I have not been made for the pure, expansive waters, but for those which are small and readily accessible. And perhaps my craving for another source, which gives me the expression of someone in search of food, perhaps this craving is a whim-and nothing more. Yet surely those rare moments of self-confidence, of blind existence, of happiness as intense and serene as an organ playing — surely those moments prove that I am capable of fulfilling my quest and that this longing which consumes my whole being is not merely some whim? Moreover, that whim is the truth! I cry out to myself. Such moments are rare. Only yesterday, I suddenly thought in class, almost out of the blue, apropos of nothing: movement explains form. The clear notion of the perfect, the sudden freedom I felt... That day, on my uncle's farm, when I fell into the river. Before I was impenetrable and opaque. But when I clambered out, it as as if I had been born from water. I got out soaking wet, my clothes clinging to my skin, my hair shining wet and straggling. Something stirred inside me and it was almost certainly only my body. But a sweet miracle can make everything transparent and this was certainly my soul as well. At that moment I was truly inside my inner self and there was silence. Only I realized that my silence was part of the silence of the countryside. And I did not feel abandoned. The horse, from which I'd fallen, was waiting for me beside the river. I remounted and sped along the slopes where refreshing shadows were gathering. I pulled up the reins, stroked the animal's fevered and throbbing neck. I rode on at a slow pace, listening to the happiness inside me, as high and limpid as a summer sky. I stroked my arms where there were still trickles of water. I could feel the live animal close to me, an extension of my body. We both breathed, throbbing and youthful. A somewhat sombre colour had settled on the plains, warmed by the last rays of sunlight and the gentle breeze slowly died away. I must never forget, I thought, that I have been happy, that I am happy, happier than anyone could hope to be. But I forgot, I was always forgetting.

I sat waiting in the Cathedral, distracted and vague. I inhaled the overpowering odour, purple and cold, that emanated from the holy statues.

And suddenly before I knew what was happening, like some cataclysm, the invisible organ burst out into rich tremulous strains of the utmost purity. Without any melody, almost without any music, almost without any vibrations. The lengthy walls and high vaults of the church received and returned those strains, sonorous, naked, and intense. They penetrated my body, criss-crossed inside me, filled my nerves with tremors, my brain with sounds. I thought no thoughts, only music. Impassively, under the weight of that canticle, I slid from the bench and knelt down without praying, annihilated. The organ fell silent with the same suddenness with which it had started up, like an inspiration. I went on breathing quietly, my body still vibrating to the final strains that hovered in midair in a warm, translucent buzzing. And the moment was so perfect that I felt neither fear nor gratitude and did not invoke God. I want to die now, something called out inside me, a cry of freedom rather than suffering. Any moment following upon that one would be less exalted and empty. I wanted to rise and only death, as an end, could grant me the summit without the descent. People were getting up around me, were stirring. I stood up and made for the exit, weak and pale.

The Woman with the Voice and Joana

Joana didn't pay all that much attention to her until she heard her voice. That low, arched tone, without any vibrations, roused her. She stared at the woman inquisitively. She must have experienced something that was still unknown to Joana. She could not grasp that intonation, so remote from life, so remote from the days...

Joana recalled how on one occasion, a few months after being married, she had turned to her husband to ask him something. They were in the street. And before actually finishing the sentence, to Otávio's surprise, she had paused — looking worried and distracted. Ah — I had discovered -then she affected one of those voices she had heard so often before getting married, always vaguely perplexed. The voice of a young woman at the side of her man. Like her own voice speaking at that moment to Otávio: sharp, empty, raised to a high pitch, with clear, even notes. Something incomplete, ecstatic, somewhat blase. Straining to call out... Bright days, limpid and dry, a voice and days that were sexless, choirboys singing at an open-air service. And something lost, heading for mild despair...The timbre of a newly-wed woman had a history, a fragile history that went unnoticed by the woman with the voice, but not by this one.

Ever since that day Joana heard the voices, whether she understood them or not. Probably at the end of her life, with every timbre she heard, a tide of personal reminiscences would come flooding back Joana would say: how many voices I've possessed...

She leaned towards the woman. She had approached her when looking for a house to live in and was glad that she had gone without her husband because, on her own, she could observe her with greater freedom. And there, yes, there she found something she had not anticipated, a pause. But the other woman didn't as much as look at her. Thinking as Otávio might, Joana surmised that he would think of the woman as being simply coarse, with that big nose, pale and calm. The woman explained the conveniences and inconveniences of the house she was offering to rent while casting her eyes over the floor, the window, the view, without haste, without interest. She was clean and tidy and had dark hair. Her body, ample and sturdy. And her voice, her voice was of the earth. Not colliding with any object, soft and distant as if it had travelled lengthy paths beneath the soil before reaching her throat.

— Married? -Joana asked, leaning over her.

— Widowed, with one son. — And she went on distilling her song over all the lodgers in the district.

— No, I don't think I'm interested in the house, it's much too big for two, Joana said briskly, even a little harshly. But added — softening her tone, concealing her eagerness -would you mind if I called from time to time to have a chat?

The other woman showed no surprise. She ran one hand over her waist, grown thick with pregnancy and the slowness of her movements:

— That might be difficult.. .Tomorrow, I'm leaving to visit my son. He's married. I'm going away...

She smiled without happiness, without emotion. Simply: I'm going away... What did interest that woman? -Joana asked herself. Could she have a lover...

— Do you live alone? — she asked her.

— My younger sister has gone off to be a nun. I live with my other sister.

— Don't you find life rather sad without a man around the house? -Joana went on.

— Do you think so? — the woman retorted.

— I'm asking you, if you don't find it sad, not me. I'm married, Joana added, trying to bring a note of intimacy into the conversation.

— Ah, no, I don't find it sad, not in the least — And she gave her a wan smile. — Well, since the house obviously isn't what you're looking for, I must ask you to excuse me. I have to wash a few clothes before having a little rest by the window.

Joana went on her way feeling nettled. The woman was clearly moronic... But that voice? It haunted her throughout the entire afternoon. She tried to recall the woman's smile, her ample, lethargic body. The woman had no history, Joana slowly realized. For if things happened to her, they were not part of her and did not merge with her true existence. The essential thing — including past, present and future — is that she was alive. That is the nucleus of the narrative. Sometimes this nucleus seemed blurred, as if seen with one's eyes shut, almost non-existent. But it only needed a brief pause, a little silence, for it to become enormous and to loom up with open eyes, a soft and constant murmur like that of water trickling among pebbles. Why elaborate on this description? It is certain that things happened to her which came from outside. She lost her illusions, suffered an attack of pneumonia. Things happened to her. But they only served to consolidate or weaken the murmur of her centre. Why narrate facts and details if no one dominated her in the end? And if she were merely the life that flowed constantly inside her body?

Her probings never became agitated in their search for an answer—Joana continued to make discoveries. Her questions were still-born, they

accumulated without desire or hope. She attempted no movement outside herself.

Many years of her existence were spent at the window, watching the things that passed and those that stood still. But in fact she didn't so much see the life inside her as hear it. Its sound had fascinated her — like the breathing of a new-born infant — its gentle glow — like that of a new-born plant. She had not yet grown weary of existing and she was so self-sufficient that sometimes, out of sheer happiness, she felt sadness cover her like the shadow of a mantle, leaving her as fresh and silent as nightfall. She expected nothing. She was in herself, her own end.

Once she divided herself, became restless, she began to go out in search of herself. She went to places where men and women were gathered. They said to themselves: fortunately, she has woken up, life is short, one must make the most of it. Previously, she was spiritless, now she's a real person. No one realized that she was being unhappy to the point of needing to go in search of life. That was when she chose a man, loved him and love came to thicken her blood and mystery. She gave birth to a son, her husband died after impregnating her. She carried on and thrived very well. She gathered together all her belongings and no longer went looking for people. She rediscovered her window where she settled, enjoying her own company. And now, more than ever, there was no thing or creature more happy and fulfilled to be found. Despite all those people who looked at her condescendingly, believing her to be weak. For her spirit was so strong that she had never neglected to have an excellent lunch or dinner without, however, any excessive indulgence. Nothing they could say bothered her or whatever happened to her, and everything slid over her and vanished into waters other than those inside her.

One day, after having patiently experienced many such days, she saw herself different from herself. She felt weary. She paced to and fro. She herself didn't know what she wanted. She began to hum quietly without opening her mouth. Then she tired of this and began to think about things. But she didn't quite succeed. Inside her something was trying to call a halt. She waited but nothing came from her to her. She slowly grew sad from a lack of sadness, and was therefore twice as sad. She went on walking for several days and her footsteps sounded like withered leaves falling to the ground. She herself was lined inside with greyness, and she could see nothing within herself other than a reflection of her ancient rhythm, now slow and leaden. Then she knew that she was drained and for the first time she suffered because she really had become divided in two, one part facing the other, watching it, desiring things that it could no longer give. In fact, she had

always been two, the one who superficially knew that she was, and the one that truly existed in depth. Until now both parts functioned together and merged. Now the one that knew that she was, functioned on its own, which meant that that woman was being unhappy and intelligent. She made one last effort to try and invent something, some thought that might distract her. In vain. She only knew how to live.

Until the absence of herself finally made her fall into the night, and pacified, darkened, and refreshed, she began to die. She then embraced sweet death, as if she were a ghost. Nothing more is known because she died. One can merely surmise that in the end she, too, was being happy as only a thing or creature can be. For she had been born for the essential, to live or die. And for her, the intermediary was suffering. Her existence was so complete and so closely bound to truth that she probably thought at the moment of surrendering and reaching her end, had she been in the habit of thinking: I never was. Nor is it known what became of her. Such a beautiful life must surely have been followed by a beautiful death. Today she is certainly grains of earth. She never ceases to gaze up at the sky. Sometimes when it rains, her grains remain full and rotund. Then she dries up in summer and the slightest breeze disperses her. She is now eternal.

After a moment's hesitation, Joana saw that she had envied her, that half-dead creature who was smiling and had spoken to her in an unfamiliar tone of voice. Above all, she went on thinking, she understands life because she is not sufficiently intelligent not to understand it. But what was the use of trying to reason things out... Were she to reach the point of understanding her, without going mad in the process, she wouldn't be able to preserve knowledge as knowledge but would transform it into an attitude, into an attitude of life, the only way of possessing knowledge and of fully expressing it. And that attitude would not be very different from the one in which the woman with the voice reposed. The paths of action were so impoverished. She made a quick, impatient movement with her head. She grabbed a pencil, and on a piece of paper scribbled decisively in bold letters: 'The personality that ignores itself achieves greater fulfilment.' True or false? But in a sense she had taken her revenge by casting her cold intelligent thought over that woman swollen with life.

Otávio

'De Profundis'. Joana waited for the idea to become clearer, for that tenuous and luminous bubble, the germ of a thought, to rise from the mists. 'De Profundis'. She felt it vacillate, almost lose its balance and sink forever into unknown waters. Or at certain moments, push back the clouds and tremulously grow, emerging almost completely... Then silence.

She closed her eyes, gradually she began to rest. When she opened them again, she received a tiny shock. And during the intense, prolonged moments that followed, she recognized that stretch of life as the combination of what she had lived and what remained to be lived, fused together and eternal. Strange, strange. The amber light on the stroke of nine, that impression of an interval, a distant piano being played with emphasis on the sharp notes, her heart beating furiously as it met the morning heat, and behind everything, the throbbing silence, ferocious and menacing, dense and impalpable. Everything began to fade. The piano interrupted its insistence on those final notes and after a momentary pause gently resumed with some middle notes, producing a vivid straightforward melody. And soon she wouldn't be able to tell whether her impression of the morning had been real or simply an idea. She lingered, attentively trying to place it... A sudden weariness confused her for a moment. Her nerves forgotten, her face relaxed, she felt a gentle gust of tenderness for herself, almost of gratitude, even though she couldn't explain why. For a second, it struck her that she had lived and that her life was coming to an end. And immediately afterwards, that everything had been blank so far, like an empty space, that she could hear, remote and muffled, the clamour of life approaching, dense, torrential and violent, its mighty waves rending the sky, coming closer and closer ... to submerge her, to drown her, suffocating her...

She went up to the window, stretched her hands outside and waited in vain for a little wind to come and caress them. And there she remained, oblivious of everything, for some considerable time. She blocked her ears by contracting the muscles of her face, her closed eyes barely allowing the light to penetrate, her head leaning forward. Little by little, she managed to isolate herself completely. This semi-conscious state, where she had the impression of plunging deeply into grey, lukewarm air... She stood in front of the mirror and muttered to herself, her eyes burning with hatred:

— And now what?

She couldn't fail to notice her own face, small and flushed. This distracted her momentarily, helping her to forget her anger. Some little thing always

occurred just in time to divert her from the main torrent. She was so vulnerable. Did she hate herself for this? No, she would hate herself more if she were already an immutable tree-trunk until death, capable only of yielding fruits but not of growing within herself. She craved for even more: to be constantly reborn, to cut away everything she had learned, that she had seen, and to make a fresh start in some new terrain where even the most trifling act might have some meaning, where she might breathe air as if for the very first time. She had the feeling that dense life was flowing slowly inside her, bubbling like a sheet of hot lava. Perhaps if she were to fall in love... And if the thought seemed remote, the piercing blast of a trumpet might suddenly sever that mantle of night and leave the fields empty, green, and vast... And then excitable, white horses rebelliously craning and rearing, almost flying, might cross rivers, mountains, valleys... Thinking about them, she felt the fresh air circulate inside her as if it were escaping from some hidden grotto, damp and fresh in the middle of the desert.

But she soon returned to her senses, in vertical descent. She examined her arms and legs. There she was. There she was. But she must first distract herself, she thought, with firmness and irony. With urgency. For might she not die? She laughed aloud and took a quick glance at herself in the mirror to observe the effect of that laughter on her face. No, no it didn't make it brighter. She looked like a wild cat, her eyes burning above her red cheeks, covered in dark freckles, her brown hair dishevelled over her eyebrows. She perceived in herself a sombre and triumphant purple. What was she doing that she should glow like this? Weariness ... Yes, despite everything, there was fire beneath her weariness, there was fire even when it represented death. Perhaps this was the taste of living.

Once more she was overcome by sheer, inexplicable weariness. Ah, perhaps I should go, perhaps... She closed her eyes for a moment, permitting herself the birth of a gesture or of a phrase without logic. She always did this, confident that deep down, beneath the lava, there might be a desire already directed to some goal. Sometimes, when she closed the doors of consciousness through a special mechanism not unlike that of lapsing into sleep, and allowed herself to act or speak, she was surprised to receive — for she only perceived the gesture at the moment of its execution — a slap on her face from her own hand. Sometimes she heard strange gibberish coming from her lips. Even without understanding those words, they brought a sense of relief, and greater freedom.

And from the core of herself, after a moment of silence and abandon, there surged, at first pale and hesitant, then increasingly compelling and painful: I

summon you from the depths... I summon you from the depths... I summon you from the depths... She remained still for a few more minutes, her expression vacant, listless and weary, as if she had given birth to a child. Little by little, she started to be reborn, she opened her eyes slowly and returned to the light of day. Fragile, breathing quietly, happy as a convalescent enjoying that first moment of fresh air.

Then she began to think that she had actually prayed. Not her. Something greater than her and of which she was unaware had prayed. But she had no desire to pray because she knew that prayer would be the remedy. But a remedy like morphine that numbs any kind of pain. Like the morphine one needs in ever increasing doses in order to feel any effect. No, no she was not so worn out that she should be cowardly enough to want to pray instead of discovering pain, of suffering and possessing it entirely in order to experience all pain's mysteries. And even if she were to pray... She would end up in a convent because all the morphine in the world would not be enough to satisfy her craving. And this would be the final degradation: addiction. Yet unless she were to seek an external god by some natural cause, she would finish up deifying herself in order to explore her own sorrow, by loving her past, by seeking refuge and warmth in her own thoughts, born initially with a desire for a work of art and later serving as familiar nourishment during periods of sterility. She was in danger of establishing and regimenting herself inside suffering, which would also be an addiction and form of sedation.

What was to be done then? What was to be done to interrupt that path, to grant herself some respite between her and herself in order to be able to re-encounter herself without danger, renewed and pure?

What was to be done?

The piano was deliberately attacked with measured uniform scales. Exercises, she thought. Exercises... Yes, she discovered feeling amused... Why not? Why not try to fall in love? Why not try to live?

Pure music unfolding in some uninhabited land, Otávio mused. Moments still without adjectives. Unconscious like the primitive life that pulsates in the blind, impassive trees, in the tiny insects that are born, fly, perish and are reborn unobserved. Meantime the music gyrates and develops, they live the dawn, the powerful day, the night, with one constant note in the symphony, that of transformation. This is music which is not sustained by things, by space or time, the same colour as life and death. The life and death in ideas, isolated from pleasure and pain. So remote from any human qualities that they

might be confused with silence. Silence. Silence, because this music would be the necessary one, the only possible one, the vibrant projection of matter. And in the same way as one doesn't understand matter or perceive it until the senses come up against it, no one hears its melody.

And then? — he thought. To close my eyes and hear my own music which trickles slow and dark like a muddy river. Cowardice is lukewarm and I'm resigned to it, laying down all the heroic weapons which twenty-seven years of thought have granted me. What am I today, at this moment? A trampled, silent leaf, fallen to the ground. No movement of air to rustle it. Scarcely breathing so as not to awaken. But why not, above all, why not use the appropriate words and entangle and envelop myself in images? Why call myself a withered leaf when I am merely a man with folded arms?

Once more, amidst futile reasoning, he was overcome by weariness, a feeling of despondency. To pray, to pray. To kneel before God and beg. For what? Absolution. Such a long word, so full of meaning. He was not guilty — or was he? Guilty of what? He knew that he was, however, he clung to the thought — he was not guilty, but how he would love to receive absolution. On his forehead the broad, plump finger of God, blessing him like a good father, a father made from earth and universe, embracing everything, without omitting to possess even a particle that might later say to him: yes, but I have not forgiven you! Then there would be an end to the silent accusation which all things harboured against him.

What did he think after all? For how long had he been stuck there playing this game with himself? He made some gesture or other.

Cousin Isabel came into the room. 'Blessed, blessed, blessed', her hasty, short-sighted glance was saying, anxious to withdraw. She only abandoned that air of being a stranger when she sat down at the piano. Otávio flinched as he used to when he was a little boy. She then smiled, became human, lost that piercing look. She became more amiable and relaxed in her manner. Seated at the piano, her cracked lips covered in powder, she played Chopin, Chopin, especially the waltzes.

My fingers have become stiff, she said, proud of being able to play from memory. As she spoke, she threw her head back, suddenly appearing coquettish as if she were a dancer in a cabaret. Otávio blushed. Whore, he thought, and erased the word at once with a painful movement. But how dare she? He remembered her face leaning over him attentively, concerned about his stomach-ache. That's why I detest her, he thought illogically. And it was always too late: the thought anticipated him. Whore — as if he were thrashing himself with a whip. Yet even though he repented, he would sin again. How

often as a child, just before falling asleep, he would suddenly become aware that Aunt Isabel was in the bed, unable to sleep, perhaps sitting up, her grey hair tied into a pigtail, her flannel nightdress buttoned up to the neck like that of a virgin. Remorse like acid pervaded his body. But he detested her more and more because he could not love her.

She was no longer capable of achieving as before that smooth transition from one note to another, that sensation of trance. One sound stuck to the other, harsh, syncopated, and the waltzes exploded, feeble, spasmodic and flawed. From time to time, the slow, hollow chimes of the old clock rang out, dividing the music into asymmetrical bars. Otávio remained there waiting for the next stroke, his heart in his mouth. As if those chimes were precipitating all things in a silent dance of sweet insanity. Those implacable chimes interrupting the music with the same cold and smiling tone, threw him back on himself as if into a void without any support. He watched his aunt's firm shoulders, her hands — two swarthy creatures leaping over the piano's yellow keys. She turned round and said to him, conceding the phrase out of sheer euphoria, graciously, like someone throwing flowers:

— What's ailing you? I'm now going to play you something more cheerful...

She broke into one of those ballroom waltzes, spontaneous and jumpy, which he couldn't recall having heard before but which were mysteriously connected with fragmented memories of the past.

— Not that one, Auntie, not that one...

It was too absurd by far. He was afraid. To beg forgiveness because he didn't feel ecstatic about her playing, to beg forgiveness because he had found her unbearable even as a little boy, with that smell of musty clothes, of jewellery ingrained with dust, as he watched her prepare him 'a nice little cup of tea to settle his tummy', when she promised to play him something pretty if he finished his homework. He could see her once more leaving the house. Her grey skin floured in talcum powder, her low, curved neckline exposing her neck where the veins stood out dramatically. Her low-heeled pumps like those worn by teenage girls, her umbrella brandished with disarming vigour, as if it were a walking stick. To beg forgiveness for wishing — no, no! — that she might finally die. -He shuddered, began to sweat. But I am not to blame! Oh! To go away, to plan his book on civil law, to get away from that horrible world, so repugnantly intimate and human.

— Now I'm going to play 'Birdsong in Spring' — Cousin Isabel informed him.

Yes, yes. I long for spring...Help me. I'm suffocating. Ridiculous spring had never been more spring-like and joyful.

— This melody reminds me of a blue rose, she said, half turning in his direction and smiling with a hint of perversity. Suddenly on that dry, wrinkled face, like a vein of water in the desert, the two little diamonds trembled on her withered ears, two tiny moist drops that sparkled. Ah, how exceedingly fresh and voluptuous... The old woman had possessions. But if she wore those drop earrings it was for a reason he never discovered: she herself had bought the diamonds and arranged to have them mounted as earrings, she carried them like two phantoms under her grey bristly hair.

This music reminds me of a blue rose, she had said, well aware that only she could understand what she meant. From experience, he knew that he should ask her to explain that expression and patiently give her the pleasure of answering him, biting her lower lip:

— Ah, that's my little secret.

This time, however, the exciting little game they'd played so often, did not take place. He simply avoided looking at the old woman and confronting her disappointment. He got up and went to knock at his fiancée's door.

She was sewing near the window. He closed the door, locked it and knelt down beside her. He rested his head on her bosom and once more inhaled that tepid, cloying scent of old roses. She continued to smile, absent, almost mysterious, as if she were listening attentively to the gentle current of a river flowing within her breast.

— Otávio, Otávio, she said in a hushed and distant voice. None of the inhabitants in that household, neither his unmarried cousin, nor Lídia, nor the servants, was alive -Otávio thought. Not true — he corrected himself: only he was dead. But he continued: ghosts, ghosts. Those remote voices, no expectations, happiness.

— Lídia, he said, forgive me.

— For what? — she felt a little apprehensive.

— For everything.

She vaguely believed she should agree and remained silent. Otávio, Otávio. It was so much easier to speak to other human beings. Were she not so deeply in love with him, how difficult she would find it to put up with all the misunderstandings on his part. They only understood each other when they kissed, when Otávio rested his head like this, on her bosom. But life was much more drawn-out, she thought with dismay. There would be moments when she would look straight at him without being able to extend her hand to touch him. And then — that oppressive silence. He would always be detached from her and they would only be able to communicate during special

moments -moments of intense life threatened by death. But this was not enough... Their life together was essential precisely in order to live those other moments, she thought in terror, struggling to reason. She would only be able to utter the essential words to Otávio, as if he were some deity anxious to be off. If she embarked on one of those leisurely aimless conversations, which she so thoroughly enjoyed, she could see him grow impatient or observe his expression become exceedingly forbearing and heroic. Otávio, Otávio... What could she do? His approach worked like magic, transformed her into someone who was truly alive, the blood pulsing through her veins. Or else it failed to rouse her. It lulled her as if he were simply approaching by stealth to perfect her.

She knew that it was useless to take any decisions regarding her own destiny. She had loved Otávio from the moment he had loved her, ever since they were children, under the contented eye of his cousin. And she would always love him. It was useless to follow other paths, when her steps were guiding her along only one. Even when he wounded her, she took refuge in him against him. She was so weak. Instead of suffering upon recognizing her weakness, she rejoiced: she somehow knew, without being able to explain it, that from this weakness came her support for Otávio. She sensed that he was suffering, that he was hiding something alive and distressed in his soul and that she could only help him by explaining all the passiveness that lay dormant in her being.

Sometimes she secretly rebelled: life is so drawn-out... She feared the days, one after another, without any surprises, days of total devotion to one man. To a man who would use up all his wife's resources for his own passion, in a tranquil unconscious sacrifice of everything except his own individuality. It was a sham rebellion, a bid for freedom which left her terrified, above all, of victory. She tried for several days to assume an attitude of independence, something which she could only achieve with limited success in the morning when she woke up and before setting eyes on the man. It only required his presence, even its anticipation, to annihilate her completely, and reduce her to waiting. At night, alone in the room, she longed for him. Every nerve and muscle in her body aching. Then she became resigned. Resignation was sweet and fresh. She had been born for resignation.

Otávio examined her dark hair, discreetly combed back behind her large unsightly ears. He examined her body as firm and compact as the trunk of a tree, her hands firm and attractive. And, once more, like the bland refrain of a song, he asked himself again: 'What binds me to her?' He felt sorry for Lídia, he knew that even without any motive, even without knowing any other

woman, even if she were the only woman, he would abandon her at some point. Perhaps even tomorrow. Why not?

— Do you know something! — he said — I dreamt about you last night.

She opened her eyes, glowing from head to foot:

— Did you really! Tell me about it.

— I dreamt that we were strolling together through a meadow filled with flowers, that I was gathering lilies for you and that you were dressed all in white.

— What a pleasant dream...

— Yes, most pleasant...

— Otávio.

— Yes?...

— I hope you won't mind my asking? When are we going to get married! There is nothing to stop us... I must know in order to start making preparations.

— Is that the only reason?

She blushed, happy to be able to speak of something that might make her appear more attractive. She made a clumsy effort to appear coquettish:

— Yes for that reason and... besides, I'm tired of waiting. It's all so difficult.

— I understand. But I can't say when.

— But why not immediately? You should have decided... It's a long time since...

Otávio stood up abruptly and said:

— Can't you see that I'm lying? That I wasn't dreaming about you?

She looked at him in dismay, her face drained of colour.

— You're making fun of me...

— No, I'm serious. I didn't dream about you.

— What did you dream about?

— About no one. I slept soundly without dreaming about anything.

She went back to her sewing.

Joana ran her hand over the bitch's swollen belly, stroking it with slender fingers. She paused, quickly paying attention.

— She's pregnant — she said.

And there was something in her expression, in those hands fondling the bitch's body that linked her directly to reality, laying it bare; as if both of them formed one continuous mass. The woman and the bitch were there, alive and naked, with something ferocious in their communion. She speaks in such precise terms that it is terrifying, Otávio thought uneasily, suddenly feeling himself to be useless and effeminate. And this was when he was seeing her for the first time.

He observed that there was a brittle, crystalline quality about her that attracted and repelled him at the same time. Even the way she moved. Without showing any feeling or liking for her own body, but hurling it dispassionately like an insult for all to see. Otávio watched her move and reflected that not even physically was she the type of woman he fancied. He preferred neat little bodies, perfect in every detail, unsensational. Or big bodies, like that of his fiancée, set and mute. What he might say to them would suffice. Those lines of Joana, so fragile, barely outlined, were disquieting. Those lines were so suggestive, her big eyes incandescent. She was not pretty, much too thin. Even her sensuality must be different from his, because it was much too luminous.

Otávio tried, from the first moment he met her, not to lose any of her details, saying to himself: let no tender feelings crystallize inside me; I must study her carefully. But, as she knew she was being watched, Joana turned to him at that very moment, smiling, cold, not exactly passive. And foolishly he reacted, he spoke, confused and anxious to obey her. Instead of obliging her to drop her mask and so destroy herself in his power. And despite that air of someone who is ignorant of the simplest things, as at their very first meeting, she had thrown him back within himself! She had thrown him back into his own intimacy, coldly forgetting the little, comfortable formulae that sustained him and helped him to communicate with people.

Joana told him...

... The old man drew near, his enormous body swaying, his head completely bald. He came up to her with pouting lips and bulging eyes, his voice tearful. He said, affecting a childish stammer:

— I've hurt myself... It's sore... I rubbed on some ointment, it's getting a little better...

He rolled his eyes and those flabby mounds of blubber began to quiver, the shine on his wet pouting lips gleamed softly. Joana leaned over ever so slightly and saw his bare gums.

— Won't you say you feel sorry for me?

She looked at him gravely. He betrayed no surprise:

— Aren't you going to say 'poor little thing'?

The sight of this short man with his protruding bottom and plaintive eyes that spoke of timid continence left her amused and bewildered. She said nothing. Then slowly, in the same tone of voice:

— Poor little thing.

He laughed, considered the joke over and done with and turned and made for the door. Joana's eyes followed him, she leaned slightly forwards to get a better look the moment he withdrew from the table. She confronted him erect and aloof, her eyes wide open and bright. She looked at the table, rummaged for a second, picked up a small, thick book. No sooner had he put his hand on the latch than he received it on the back of his neck, with full force. He turned round at once, his hand on his head, wide-eyed with pain and fright. Joana remained in the same position. Well, she thought, at least he's lost that nauseating expression. It's only right that an old man should suffer.

She said in a loud, ingratiating voice:

— Forgive me. There's a tiny lizard there, right over the door. — A brief pause. — I missed my aim.

The old man continued to stare at her without understanding. Then a vague terror gripped him, confronted by that smiling face.

— Goodbye... It was nothing... My God!

— Goodbye...

When the door closed, she lingered there with that smile on her face. She gave a little shrug. She went up to the window, her expression weary and vacant:

— Perhaps I should listen to some music.

— Yes, it's true, I threw the book at him, Joana replied in answer to Otávio's question.

He tried to get the upper hand:

— But that's not what you told the old man!

— No, I lied.

Otávio stared at her, looked in vain for some remorse, for some sign of confession.

— Only after having lived more or better, shall I succeed in discounting what is human, Joana sometimes told him. Human — me. Human — people taken separately as individuals. I must forget them because my relations with them can only be sentimental. If I go in search of them, I demand or give

them the equivalent of those familiar words we are always hearing, *fraternity* and *justice*. If they have any real value, it's not because they constitute the apex but rather the base of a triangle. They are the condition and not the fact in itself. Yet they end up by swamping our every thought and emotion because *fraternity* and *justice* are unattainable, they are contrary to nature. Despite everything, they are fatal, given the state of promiscuity in which we live. In this state, hatred transforms itself into love, which never really goes beyond a search for love, never realized except in theory, as in Christianity.

— Oh, spare me, Otávio cried out. She would have liked to stop but weariness and the excitement provoked by the man's presence stimulated her mind, and the words poured out endlessly.

— Discounting what is human is difficult, she continued, difficult to escape this atmosphere of frustrated revolt -adolescence — this solidarity with men who share the same sense of frustration and failure. Yet how nice it would be to build something pure, free from false, sublimated love, free from the fear of not loving... The fear of not loving, worse than the fear of not being loved...

Oh, spare me, Joana could hear in Otávio's silence. But at the same time she liked to think aloud, to reason things out spontaneously, simply following her intuition. Sometimes, even for sheer pleasure, she invented arguments: if a stone falls then that stone exists, there was a force that caused it to fall, a place from which it fell, a place through which it fell — I believe that nothing has escaped the nature of the fact, save for the mystery itself of the fact. But now she was also talking because she did not know how to surrender and, above all, because she merely foresaw, without understanding, that Otávio could embrace her and bring her peace.

— One night, no sooner had I settled down, she told him, when one of the legs of the bed broke, throwing me on to the floor. After a moment of anger, for I was not even sleepy enough to dispense with comfort, I suddenly thought to myself: Why should a bed be intact and not be broken? I got back into bed and was soon asleep...

She was not pretty. Sometimes it was as if her spirit were abandoning her only to reveal — Otávio suspected — what could never be discovered, even by some superhuman vigilance. On the face that then emerged, the limited and unfortunate traits had no intrinsic beauty. Nothing remained of her former mystery except the colour of her skin, milky, sombre, elusive. If the moments of abandon prolonged themselves and succeeded each other, then he was amazed at her ugliness, a kind of abasement and brutality, some blind and irrevocable thing that took possession of Joana's body as if it were

decomposing. Yes, I know, Joana continued. The distance that separates feelings from words. I've already thought about this. And the most curious thing of all is that the moment I try to speak, not only do I fail to express what I am feeling, but what I am feeling slowly transforms itself into what I am saying. Or at least what makes me act is certainly not what I am feeling but what I am saying.

He had no sooner met her than she told him about the old man, told him about the bitch expecting pups and, suddenly alarmed, he had felt as if he had just made a confession, as if he had revealed to that stranger the story of his entire life. What life? The one that struggled inside him and that was nothing, he repeated to himself, afraid of appearing before his own eyes as being self-important and burdened with responsibilities. — He was nothing, nothing, and was therefore free to do nothing, he repeated to himself, his eyes mentally shut. — As if he had told Joana what he could only perceive in the dark. And most surprising of all: as if she had listened and then laughed, pardoning him — not like God, but like the devil — opening wide gates to allow him to pass.

Especially when he had touched her, he had understood: whatever might follow between them would be irremediable. For when he had embraced her, he had felt her come alive in his arms like running water. And seeing her so alive, he had understood, overwhelmed and secretly pleased, that if she loved him, there was nothing he could do... At that moment when he had finally kissed her, he had felt himself to be suddenly free, pardoned beyond what he knew of himself, pardoned in what lay beneath everything, he was...

From then onwards there was no choice. He had plunged giddily from Lídia to Joana. Knowing this helped him to love her. It was not difficult. On one occasion she had become distracted looking through the window-pane, her lips parted, oblivious of herself. He had called her and the gentle, forlorn manner in which she had turned her head and said: eh?... had made him fall into himself, sinking into a foolish and obscure wave of love. Otávio had then turned his face away, anxious to avoid looking at her.

He could love her, he could accept the new and incomprehensible adventure she was offering him. But he continued holding on to the first impulse which had thrown him against her. It was not as a woman, it was not like this, submissive, that he wanted her... He needed her cold and assured. So that he could say as he used to say when he was a little boy, protected and triumphant: It's not my fault...

They would marry, they would see each other at every moment and he would recognize that she was worse than him. And strong, in order to teach him not to be afraid. Not even to be afraid of loving... He wanted her not in

order to make a life together, but so that she might allow him to live. To rise above himself, above his past, above the petty villainies which he had committed with cowardice and to which he was still attached in a cowardly way. Otávio thought that on Joana's side he would be able to go on sinning.

When Otávio had kissed her, he had held her hands, pressing them against his chest, Joana had bitten her lips, at first enraged, because she still didn't know with which thought she should clothe that violent sensation, like a cry surging from her breast and making her feel dizzy. She looked at him without seeing him, her eyes clouded, her body martyred. They had to make their farewell. She withdrew abruptly and went off without turning back, without any nostalgia.

Back in her room, lying undressed on the bed, she was unable to sleep. Her body felt oppressive, existed beyond her like some stranger. She felt it throbbing, feverish. She put out the light and closed her eyes, she tried to escape, to sleep. But she lay there for many hours, examining herself, watching the blood creep sluggishly through her veins like an inebriated animal. And thinking. How little she had known herself until now. Those light, slender forms, those delicate lines of adolescence. They were opening up, breathing as if they were suffocating and ready to explode.

As dawn broke, the gentle breeze caressed her bed and ruffled the curtains. Joana gradually calmed down. The freshness of early morning consoled her aching body. She was slowly overcome with weariness and, suddenly exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep.

She woke up late and felt happy. She imagined that every cell in her body had burst into flower. Miraculously, all her resources of strength were aroused and ready for battle. When she thought of Otávio, she breathed cautiously, as if the atmosphere might be harmful. During the days that followed, she neither saw him nor attempted to see him. She avoided him as if his presence were superfluous.

And she was so completely physical, that she was pure spirit. Incorporeal, she passed through events and hours, weaving between them with the swiftness of an instant. She scarcely took any nourishment and her sleep was as tenuous as a veil. She woke up frequently during the night, unconcerned, preparing to smile before giving it any thought.

She went back to sleep without changing her position, simply closing her eyes. She often searched for herself without vanity. Her smooth complexion, her bright lips made her turn her back on her image almost out of shame, without the strength to go on confronting that woman's gaze, fresh and moist, so subtly open and assured.

The happiness ceased.

Plenitude became sad and oppressive and Joana was a cloud ready to turn to rain. She breathed with difficulty as if there were no room inside her for air. She paced up and down, perplexed by the change. How? — she asked herself and felt that she was being ingenuous. Were there two sides to this? Was she suffering for the same reason that had made her terribly happy?

She carried her diseased body with her, a troublesome wound by day. Lightheartedness was replaced by gloom and fatigue. Satisfied — an animal that had quenched its thirst, filling its body with water. Yet anxious and unhappy as if despite everything there were still lands without water, arid and parched. Above all, she suffered from misunderstanding, alone, dumbfounded. Until leaning her head against the window-pane — the street peaceful, the evening drawing in, the world outside there — she felt moisture on her face. She wept freely, as if this were the solution. Large tears ran down her cheeks, without her moving a single facial muscle. She wept so profusely that she couldn't speak. Afterwards she felt as if she had reverted to her real proportions, tiny, shrunken, humble. Serenely empty. She was prepared.

She then looked for him. And her new glory and suffering were now more intense and somehow more unbearable.

She got married.

Love came to confirm all the familiar things of whose existence she only knew without ever having accepted and experienced them. The world revolved beneath her feet, there were two sexes among humans, a thin line linked hunger to satisfaction, the love of animals, torrential waters coursed towards the sea, children were creatures in the process of growing up, in the soil the bud would transform itself into plant. She would no longer be able to deny... what? — she asked herself in suspense. The luminous centre of things, the affirmation dormant beneath everything, the harmony that existed beneath what she did not understand.

She awoke to a new morning, blissfully alive. And her joy was as pure as the sun's reflection on the water. Each event vibrated in her body like little glass needles that were splintering. After some moments, fleeting and profound, she lived tranquilly for a long time, understanding, accepting, resigning herself to everything. It seemed to her that she formed part of the real world and that she had mysteriously distanced herself from other human beings. Notwithstanding that during this period she was able to extend her hand to them with a fraternity whose vital source could be felt. They spoke to her of their own sorrows and she, although she might not hear, think or speak, wore a kind expression — shining and mysterious like that of a pregnant

woman.

What was happening then? Miraculously she was alive, relieved of all memories. Her entire past had evaporated. And even the present was one of mists, sweet, fresh mists, separating her from solid reality, preventing her from touching it. Were she to pray, were she to think, it would be to give thanks for having a body made for love. The only truth became that tenderness into which she had sunk. Her face was vague and ill-defined, floating among all the other opaque and confident faces, as if it were not yet able to find support in any expression. Her whole body and soul lost their boundaries, they merged and fused into a single chaos, gentle and amorphous, relaxed and with uncertain movements, like matter that was simply alive. It was perfect renewal, creation.

And her union with the earth was so deep and her certainty so firm — about what? what? — that she could now lie without surrendering. All this left her thinking at times: Dear God, perhaps I am making more of this than of love?

She gradually became accustomed to her new state, she became accustomed to breathing, to living. Little by little, she started becoming older in herself, she opened her eyes and once more she was a statue, no longer plastic, yet defined. From afar, disquiet was reawakening. At night, between the sheets, the slightest movement or unexpected thought awakened her to herself. Mildly surprised, she opened her eyes wide, perceived her own body plunged into reassuring contentment. She wasn't suffering, but where was she?

— Joana... Joana... she softly called to herself. And her body scarcely responded, quietly echoing: Joana.

The days sped by and she wished to confront herself more closely. She now summoned herself in a loud voice, and it was not enough that she should be breathing. Happiness was effacing her, effacing her... She now wanted to know herself again, even with sorrow. But she became increasingly submerged. Tomorrow she put it off, tomorrow I shall confront myself. But the new day skimmed over her surface, light as a summer evening, barely unsettling her nerves.

The only thing she had not got used to was sleeping. Each night, sleep became an adventure, to fall from the effortless clarity in which she lived into mystery itself, sombre and fresh, to cross darkness. To die and to be reborn.

So I shall never have any mandate, she thought to herself after she had been married for several months. I slip from one truth to another, always forgetting the first one, always dissatisfied. Her life consisted of tiny, complete lives, of perfect circles, that became isolated from each other. Except that at the end of each of them, instead of dying and beginning life on another plane, inorganic

or organically deficient, Joana recommenced on the human plane itself. Only the fundamental notes were different. Or was it only the supplementary ones that were different while the basic ones were eternally the same?

It was ever futile to have been happy or unhappy. And even to have loved. No happiness or unhappiness had been so intense that it could have transformed the elements of her matter, giving her a unique path — as one's true path ought to be. I perpetually go on inaugurating myself, opening and closing circles of life, throwing them aside, withered, impregnated with the past. Why are they so independent, why don't they merge into one solid mass and provide me with ballast? The fact is that they were far too integral. Moments so intense, red, condensed within themselves that they needed neither past nor future in order to exist. They brought an awareness that did not serve as experience, a direct awareness, closer to feeling than perception. The truth then revealed was so true that it couldn't endure save in its recipient, in the very fact which had provoked it. So true, so fatal, that it only existed in function of its origin. Once the moment of life is over the corresponding truth is also exhausted. I cannot mould it, make it inspire other such moments. Consequently nothing compromises me.

Meanwhile, the justification of her short-lived glory perhaps had no value other than that of affording her a certain pleasure in reasoning things out, such as: if a stone falls, that stone exists, that stone fell from somewhere, that stone... She was often so mistaken.

Part Two

The Marriage

Joana suddenly remembered, without any forewarning, herself standing at the top of the stairs. She did not know if she had once been looking down from the top of a staircase, crammed with lots of people, dressed in satin, with large fans. Most likely she had never actually experienced this. The fans, for example, had no material consistency in her memory. If she tried to think of them, she didn't really see fans, but shiny blotches swimming back and forth amidst words in French, whispered carefully through pursed lips, pouting like this as if a kiss were being blown from afar. The fan began as a fan and ended with words in French. Ridiculous. So it was a lie.

Yet despite everything, the impression persisted as if the most important thing lay beyond the staircase and the fans. She stopped moving for a moment and only her eyes blinked rapidly, in pursuit of some sensation. Ah, yes. She descended the marble staircase, feeling in the soles of her feet that cold fear of slipping, her hands hot and perspiring, the ribbon tightening round her waist, pulling her up like a hoist. Then the smell of new clothes, the bright inquisitive glance of a man eyeing her up and down and leaving her, as if a button had been pressed in the dark, lighting up her body. She was pervaded by long, integral muscles. Any thought descended through those smooth tendons only to tremble there in her ankles whose flesh was as tender as that of young fowl.

She paused on the bottom step, securely and without danger, she placed the palm of her hand gently on the cold, smooth banister. And without knowing why, she felt a sudden happiness, almost painful, a weakness in her heart, as if it were soft pulp and someone was poking fingers into it, kneading it gently. Why? She raised her hand weakly in a gesture of refusal. She did not wish to know. But now the question had surfaced and in absurd reply came the shining banister impulsively tossed from on high like a glossy streamer during carnival time. But it was not carnival time, for there was silence in the room, a silence through which everything could be seen. The humid reflections of the lamps over the mirrors, the ladies' brooches and the buckles on the gentlemen's belts communicating from time to time with the chandelier, through subtle rays of light.

She began to perceive the ambience. Between the men and women there were no hard spaces, everything blended softly. Vapour, humid and exciting, rose from some invisible heater. Once again, she felt a slight pain in her heart, and she smiled, her nose wrinkled, her breathing faint.

She paused for a moment's rest. She began recovering slowly, regaining some sense of reality, despite her efforts to the contrary, her body once more insensible, opaque and strong, like something that has been alive for some considerable time. She could make out the room, the curtains waving ironically, the bed obstinately still and useless. She anxiously tried to take herself to the top of the staircase and to descend once more. She could feel herself walking, but no longer felt her legs shaking, or her hands perspiring. Then she saw that her memory had drained.

She waited near the bookcase, where she had gone to look for... what? She frowned, not really interested. What? She tried to derive some amusement from the impression that in the middle of her forehead there was now a gaping hole where they had extracted the notion of whatever she had gone to look for.

She turned towards the door and asked in a low voice, eyes closed:

— What was it you wanted, Otávio?

— The one about Civil Law, he said, and before getting back to his notebook, he gave her a quick look of surprise.

She brought him the book, distracted, her movements slow. He waited for it with outstretched hand, without lifting his head. She lingered for a moment, holding the book out in his direction, keeping it at a distance. But Otávio didn't notice the delay and with a tiny shrug she put the book into his hand.

She sat down uncomfortably in a nearby chair, as if about to depart at any moment. Gradually, since nothing was happening, she leaned back submissively, her eyes vacant, thinking of nothing.

Otávio continued reading about Civil Law, pausing over some line and then impatiently biting his nail and quickly turning several pages at a time. Until he stopped once more, absorbed, passing his tongue over the edge of his teeth, one hand gently pulling the hairs of his eyebrows. Some word or other immobilized him, his hand in mid-air, his mouth open like that of a dead fish. Suddenly he threw the book down with a thud. His eyes bright and eager, he wrote hastily in his notebook, stopping for a moment to take a deep breath, and, with a gesture which startled her, began tapping on his teeth with his knuckles.

What an animal, she thought. He interrupted what he was writing and looked at her in terror, as if she had thrown something at him. She went on staring at him unintentionally and Otávio stirred in his chair, simply reflecting that he was not alone. He smiled, diffident and annoyed, and held out his hand to her across the table. She leaned forward in her chair and offered him in turn the tips of her fingers. Otávio squeezed them rapidly, smiling, and then

suddenly, before she even had time to withdraw her arm, he returned abruptly to his notebook, almost burying his face in it and writing furiously.

He was the one who was feeling now, Joana thought. And suddenly, perhaps out of envy, without any thought, she hated him with such brute force that her hands were gripping the arms of the chair and her teeth were clenched. She panted for a few seconds, reinvigorated. Fearing that her husband might sense those seconds, force her to disguise her hatred and so diminish the strength of her feelings. He was to blame, she thought coldly, looking out for a fresh wave of anger. He was to blame, he was to blame. His presence and more than his presence: the knowledge that he existed robbed her of any freedom. Only on rare occasions now, in some fleeting escapade, was she able to feel anything. That's right. He was to blame. How had she not discovered it before? — she asked herself in triumph. He was robbing her of everything, everything. And as if the phrase were still weak, she thought with intensity, her eyes closed, everything! She felt better, she could think more clearly.

Before he appeared she had always had her hands outstretched and how much, oh how much she received to her surprise! To her overwhelming surprise, like a ray of sweet surprise, like a shower of tiny lights... Now all her time was devoted to him and she felt that any minutes she could call her own had been conceded, broken into little ice-cubes which she must swallow quickly before they melted. And whipping herself into a gallop: look, that time is freedom! Look, think quickly, look, pull yourself together quickly, look, it's gone! Now — only much later, the tray of ice-cubes once more and yourself looking at it in fascination, watching the drops of water already trickling.

Then he came. And she rested at last, with a heavy sigh. — But she didn't want to rest! — Her blood ran more slowly, its rhythm domesticated, like an animal that has trained itself to fit into a cage.

She remembered that she had gone to look for something — what? Ah, Civil Law — in the bookcase at the top of the stairs, such a gratuitous memory, so free, even if imagined ... How young she was then. Clear water running within and without. She missed that sensation, felt the need to experience it once more. She looked anxiously up and down, searching for something. But everything was as it had always been. Old. I'll leave him, was her first thought, without any premonition. She opened her eyes, watching out for herself. She knew that that thought might bring consequences. As happened in the past, when her resolutions didn't require great facts, merely some trifling idea, some meaningless vision, in order to be formed. I'll leave him, she repeated, and this time tiny fibres broke away from her thought,

attaching it to herself. From now on the thought was inside her and the filaments thickened until they formed roots.

How often would she reach this decision before actually leaving him? She wore herself out in anticipation of the little struggles she would still endure, rebelling and giving in at once, right to the end. She experienced a rapid and impatient inner movement which manifested itself simply with the imperceptible raising of a hand. Otávio glanced at her for a second and carried on writing like someone in a trance. How sensitive he is, she thought during a pause. She went on following her own thoughts: why hold off? Yes, why hold off? — she asked herself. And her question was concrete, it called for a serious reply. She sat comfortably in the chair, adopted a formal pose, as if to hear what he had to say.

Then Otávio gave a loud sigh, closed the book and his notebook with a slam, threw them down with unwarranted force, his long legs stretched way out in front of him. She looked at him alarmed and outraged. Well then... — she began ironically. But she didn't know how to go on and waited, watching him.

He said, with an expression of mock severity:

— Very well. Now do me the favour of coming over here and putting your hand on this manly chest, for that's what I need right now.

She laughed just to please him. But in the midst of her laughter she was already finding some amusement. She remained sitting, trying to go on: then he... and she moved her lips in a gesture of contempt and triumph, like someone receiving the awaited proof. Then, he... Was it like this? She was waiting for Otávio to notice her attitude, to become aware of her determination not to move from her chair. He, in the meantime, as always, was aware of nothing and just at those moments when he should be looking, he was absorbed in something or other. Now, at this very moment, he had remembered to retrieve the book and notebook which he had thrown down on the table. He wasn't even looking at Joana, was he certain that she would come to him? She smiled with malice, thinking how he had deceived himself and how many thoughts she had enjoyed without him even suspecting. Yes, why hold off?

He raised his eyes, somewhat surprised at the delay. And as she remained seated, they went on there looking at each other from a distance. He was intrigued.

— Well? — he said disgruntled: — My manly...

Joana interrupted him with a gesture, for she could not bear the compassion that had suddenly invaded her and the sense of absurdity conveyed by that

phrase, when she herself was so lucid and determined to speak. He was not intimidated by her gesture and she had to swallow carefully in order to suppress the foolish urge to weep which slowly surfaced in her breast.

Now his pity embraced her too, and she saw the two of them together, forlorn and childish. Both of them were going to die, this same man who had tapped his fingers on his teeth with such gusto. She herself, along with the top of the staircase and all her capacity to want to feel. The essential things struck her at such moments also during the empty ones, filling them with meaning. How often she had given a waiter an enormous tip simply because she had remembered that he was going to die and didn't know.

She looked at him mysteriously, her expression grave and tender. And now she tried to excite some emotion by thinking of their future corpses.

She rested her head on his chest and there a heart was beating. She thought: but even so, despite death, I shall leave him one day. She was fully aware of the thought that might come to her, giving her strength if she should yield to emotion before leaving him: 'I've taken everything I could. I neither hate nor despise him. Why look for him even though I love him? I'm not so fond of myself as to like the things I like. I'm more in love with what I want than with myself.' Oh, she also knew that the truth might be contrary to what she had thought. She let her head droop, pressed to her brow against Otávio's white shirt. Little by little, very slowly the idea of death began to fade and she no longer found anything to laugh at. Her heart was softly moulded. Her hearing told her that the other one, indifferent to everything, was pursuing its fatal path with regular heartbeats. .. The sea.

— Hold off, simply hold off, Joana thought before she stopped thinking. Because the last of the ice-cubes had melted, and now she was sadly a happy woman.

Under the Teacher's Protection

Joana remembered it well: days before getting married she had gone to see her teacher.

She had suddenly felt the need to meet him, to listen to him, unyielding and cold, before going away. For in a sense, she had the impression of betraying her entire past by marrying. She wanted to see her teacher again, to feel his support. And when the idea occurred to her of paying a visit, she had calmed down, feeling relieved.

He would have to give her the right word. What word? Nothing, she replied to herself mysteriously, wishing with sudden faith and expectation, to wait and listen to him, completely inexperienced, without having any idea of what she was about to gain. This had happened to her once before: when she had prepared herself for a visit to the circus as a little girl. The best moments had been spent getting ready. And when she approached the broad field where the huge, round tent loomed white, like one of those silver domes that conceal until a certain moment the best dish on the table, when she approached holding the maid's hand, she felt fear and anguish and a disquieting happiness in her heart, she wanted to go back, to escape. When the maid told her: your father has given us money to buy popcorn, then Joana looked at things in wonderment, under that sunny evening sky, as if they were hallucinating.

She knew that the teacher had become ill, that his wife had abandoned him. But although he had aged, she found him stouter and bright-eyed. She had also been afraid, to begin with, that their last dinner together, when she had fled in alarm towards puberty, might make the visit awkward, leave them feeling uneasy, in that same strange, creepy room where the dust had overcome the polish.

The teacher had received her with a serene, distracted air. With those dark circles under his eyes he reminded her of an old-fashioned portrait. He questioned Joana but the moment she tried to answer he stopped listening, as if no longer under any obligation. She interrupted herself a number of times, her attention directed at the clock and the small table with the medicines. She looked all around her and the semi-darkness was humid and stifling. The teacher was like a great tom-cat reigning supreme in a cellar.

— Now you can open the windows, he said. You know what I mean, a little darkness and then plenty of fresh air; your whole body benefits, receives a new lease of life. Just like a neglected child. When it receives everything, it suddenly reacts, blooms again, sometimes even more than the other children.

Joana had flung the windows and doors wide open and the cold air entered with a triumphant blast. A little sunshine came through the door behind him. The teacher had unbuttoned the collar of his pyjama jacket, exposing his chest to the wind.

— It's like this, he had declared.

Looking at him, Joana discovered that he was nothing but a fat old man sitting in the sun, his sparse hairs caught in the breeze, his great body sprawled out in the chair. And his smile, dear God, a smile.

When the clock struck three, he had suddenly become restless, had halted in mid-sentence and, with measured gestures, his expression avid and sober, had counted twenty drops from a phial into a glass of water. He had raised it to eye-level, observing it, his lips pursed, wholly absorbed. He had drunk the dark liquid fearlessly, then stared at the glass with a sour expression and a half-smile which she couldn't explain. He had placed it on the table, had clapped his hands summoning the house-boy, a skinny apathetic black youth. He had waited for him to return in silence, alert, as if he were trying to listen at a distance. Only when he had received the washed glass, examined it carefully and turned it upside down on the saucer, had he given a little sigh:

— Now then, what were we saying? She went on observing him, without paying any attention to the words themselves. Nothing in the man's expression betrayed his wife's departure. Fleetinglly, she saw that figure again which she had so feared and detested, nearly always silent, the face aloof and imperious. And, despite the revulsion that other woman still aroused in her, in a moment of reminiscence Joana had discovered to her surprise that not only then, but perhaps always, she had felt herself united to her, as if both of them had something secret and wicked in common.

Nothing in his appearance betrayed his wife's departure. There was even a new-found tranquillity in his attitude, a composure that Joana had never noticed before. She studied him almost as anguished as waters swollen by the rain, whose depth was now difficult to judge. She had come to hear him, to feel his clear-sightedness like some point of anchorage!

— The torture of a strong man is greater than that of a sick one — she had tried to make him speak. He had barely raised his eyes. Her words had hovered in mid-air, foolish and timid. I'll go on, it's precisely in my nature never to feel ridiculous, I always venture on to any platform. Otávio, on the other hand, is such a sensitive creature that it only takes a pointed smile to demolish him and make him feel miserable. He would listen to me, now feeling uneasy or smiling. Was Otávio already thinking inside her? Had she already become transformed into a woman who listens and waits for her man?

She was giving up something... She wanted to save herself, to hear the teacher, to shake him. So this old man before her no longer remembered everything she had told him? 'To sin against herself...'

— The sick envisage the world and the healthy possess it, Joana had continued. The sick think they cannot because of their illness and the strong feel that their strength is useless.

— Yes, yes, he shook his head timidly. She perceived that his unease was only that of someone who doesn't wish to be interrupted. She had gone on, however, to the end, her dull voice repeating the thought she had had for a long time.

— That's why the poetry of poets who have suffered is sweet and tender. While the poetry of others, of those who had been deprived of nothing, is ardent, anguished and rebellious.

— Yes — he was saying, as he adjusted the loosened collar of his pyjama jacket.

Humiliated and perplexed, she saw his dark, wrinkled neck. Yes, he said from time to time without taking his eyes from the clock as he searched for some support. How could she tell him that she was about to get married?

At four o'clock, the ritual had been re-enacted. This time the black youth ducked in order to avoid a kick in the pants, for he had almost dropped the medicine bottle. Having missed its target, the teacher's slipper went up into the air exposing his naked foot with its curved, yellowing toenails. The boy had caught the slipper and thrown it to Joana, laughing, afraid of getting too close. After the glass had been put away, she had ventured the first word about his illness, slowly, embarrassed, for never before had they penetrated the intimacy of their own circumstances: they had always understood each other on the surface.

There was no need to try to get any closer... He had taken up the subject, broached it gently, and with obvious satisfaction, he carefully explained all the details. His attitude was a little patronizing and mysterious to begin with, as if he found it impossible to believe that she could penetrate his world. But after a few moments, oblivious of her presence and somewhat animated, he was already talking quite openly.

— The doctor has told me that I'm still not better. But I'm going to be fine, I know more than any of these doctors, he had added. After all, I'm the one who's ill...

She had finally discovered to her astonishment that he was happy...

It was almost five o'clock. She felt that he was longing for her to leave. But

she couldn't leave him like this, she tried to press him further. She had cruelly looked him straight in the eye. He had repaid her with a look of mild indifference to begin with, and then almost immediately shunned her, angry and disturbed.

The Little Family

Before starting to write, Otávio arranged his papers neatly on the table, and tidied himself up. He was fond of these little gestures and familiar habits, such as old clothes in which he could move with earnestness and assurance. Ever since his student days, this was how he prepared for any task. After settling at his desk, he would put things in order and, his conscience enlivened by the motion of the objects around him — I mustn't get carried away by any grand ideas, I'm also a thing — he allowed his pen to run somewhat freely to rid himself of some persistent image or reflection that might possibly try to accompany him and impede his train of thought.

For that reason, to work in the presence of others was torture. He feared the absurdity of these tiny rituals yet could not get along without them, for they sustained one as much as any superstition. Just as in order to live, he surrounded himself with do's and don'ts, rules and exceptions. Everything became easier, as if taught. What was fascinating and terrifying about Joana was precisely the freedom in which she lived, suddenly loving certain things, or, in relation to others, completely blind, without as much as using them. For he found himself under an obligation when confronted with what existed. Joana was right when she said that he needed to be possessed by someone... You handle money with such intimacy.. Joana had teased him once as he was paying a bill in a restaurant and she had caught him so unawares and given him such a fright that, in the presence of the waiter, no doubt smirking, the notes and coins had slipped from his hands and scattered at his feet. Although no ironic comment followed — well, to do her justice, Joana doesn't laugh — she still had an argument ready from then on: but what was one to do with money except keep it in order to spend it? He was annoyed, embarrassed. He felt that his argument was no reply for Joana.

The truth is that if he didn't have any money, if he didn't possess the 'right credentials', if he didn't love order, if the *Law Journal* didn't exist, the vague outline of his book on Civil Law, if Lídia were not separate from Joana, if Joana was not a woman and he was not a man, if... oh, God, if everything... what would he do? No, not 'what would he do?', but to whom would he turn, how would he decide. Impossible to slip between the blocks without seeing them, without needing them...

Breaking the rule he adopted when working — a concession — he took up pen and paper before he was actually ready. But he excused himself, he didn't want to lose that note, it might come in handy some day: 'One needs to be

blind to some extent in order to perceive certain things. Perhaps that is the mark of the artist. Any man is capable of knowing more than he does and of reasoning with confidence, according to the truth. But it's precisely those things which escape one in the light. In the dark, they become phosphorescent.'

He thought a little. Then, despite the concession going on for too long, he jotted down: 'It's not the degree that separates intelligence from genius, but the quality. Genius is not so much a question of intellectual power, but the form in which that power manifests itself.' So one can easily be more intelligent than a genius. But *he's the genius*. How childish that *he's the genius*. I must see if I can apply this discovery in relation to Spinoza. — Was it really him? Every idea that occurred to him, for he would familiarize himself with it within seconds, came with the fear that he might have stolen it.

Fine, now for some order. Having laid aside his pencil, he told himself, I must get rid of these obsessions. One, two, three! I deeply regret suffering as I do amidst the bamboos of the north-east of this city, he began. I do as I please — he continued — and no one is forcing me to write the *Divine Comedy*. There is no way of being other than the way it is, the rest is useless embroidery and just as embarrassing as those heavily embroidered angels and flowers with which cousin Isabel used to decorate my pillows. When I was distracted and she would come like a purple, idiotic cloud, guess what I'm thinking, say what, what four more times, what, what, what, what. Like this, like this, don't run away: 'What did you say? You're still alive? You're still not dead?' Yes, yes, that was it, I mustn't run away from myself, I mustn't run away from my handwriting, how delicate and horrid it is, a spider's web, I mustn't run away from my defects, I adore you. My virtues are so few, like those of other men, my defects, my negative side is as beautiful and hollow as any abyss. What I am not would leave an enormous hole in the ground. I don't conceal my mistakes, while Joana doesn't make mistakes, there is the difference. Eh, eh, say something, fellow. The women look at me, the women, the women, my mouth, I let my moustache grow again, they die of happiness and a deep love filled with plums and prunes. I buy all of them without money, money I keep. If one of them slips on a banana-skin there in the road, all one can do is to feel ashamed. Nothing is lost, nothing is nurtured. The man who can feel this, in other words, who doesn't simply understand, but adores, should be as happy as the man who truly believes in God. In the beginning it hurts a little, but then you get used to it. The person writing this page was born one day. It is now precisely a few minutes past seven in the morning. There is mist outside, beyond the window, the Open Window, the grand symbol. Joana would say: I feel myself to be so inside the world that I

appear not to be thinking, to be adopting a new method of breathing. Farewell. Such is the world, I am me, it's raining in the world, it's a lie, I'm someone who works with my intellect, Joana is asleep in the bedroom, someone must be waking up at this moment, Joana would say: another is dying, another is listening to music, someone has gone into the bathroom, such is the world. I intend to arouse the feelings of everyone, to call upon them to share my compassion. I live with a woman who is naked and cold, I mustn't escape, I mustn't escape, who looks into my eyes, I mustn't escape, who watches me, it's a lie, it's a lie, but it's the truth. Now she's in bed sleeping, she's overcome with sleep, overcome, overcome. She is a slender bird in a white nightdress. I intend to arouse the feelings of everyone, I don't conceal my mistakes, but let everyone shield me.

He sat up straight, patted his hair down, remained serious. Now he was going to work. As if everyone were standing by and nodding with approval, closing his eyes in agreement. Yes, that's right, very good. Someone real was disturbing him and on his own he became frustrated and nervous. For 'everyone' was looking on. He gave a little cough. He cautiously moved away the inkwell. He began: 'The tragedy of modern times is man's vain attempt to adapt to the state of things he has created.'

He sat back in his chair, looked at his notebook, straightened his pyjamas. 'Imagination is so essential to man—Joana once more — that his entire world finds its *raison d'être* in the beauty of creation and not in its utility, not in being the result of a series of objectives conforming to his needs. That is why we find an increasing number of remedies aimed at uniting man to existing ideas and institutions — education, for example, which is so difficult — and why we continually find him outside the world he has created. Man builds houses to look at, not to live in. For everything follows the path of inspiration. Determinism is not a determinism of objectives, but a strict determinism of causes. To play, to invent, to pursue the ant to its ant-hill, to mix water with lime in order to see the result, that's what one does when one is small and when one is grown up. It's a mistake to believe that we attain a high level of pragmatism and materialism. In truth, pragmatism — the plan directed towards a genuine and given objective — would be understanding, stability, happiness, the greatest victory of adaptation which man can hope to achieve. Meanwhile to do things "so that" strikes me, in the face of reality, as being the kind of perfection one cannot expect of man. The beginning of everything he construes is "so that". Man's curiosity, dreams, imagination — these have formed the modern world. Following his inspiration, man has blended these ingredients, invented combinations. His tragedy: to have to nourish himself with them. He was confident that he might be able to imagine in one life and

find himself in another, set apart. In fact, that other life continues, but its purification over the imagined one works slowly and a man on his own cannot find foolish thought on one side and the peace of the true life on the other. One cannot think with impunity.' Joana thought without fear and without reprisal. Would she finally possess madness, or what? She could not tell. Perhaps only suffering.

He paused, re-read what he had written. Don't step outside this world, he thought with a certain ardour. Not to have to confront the rest. Simply to think. Simply to think and go on writing. He didn't mind being asked to write articles on Spinoza, so long as no one obliged him to plead in court, to look at and contend with those offensively human beings lining up and shamelessly revealing themselves.

He re-read his notes from earlier readings. The pure scientist stops believing in what he likes. The need to like things: the mark of mankind. — One must not forget: 'the intellectual love of God' is the true knowledge and excludes any mysticism or idolatry.

— Many answers can be found in Spinoza's statements. In the idea, for example, that there can be thought without extension (the modality of God) and vice-versa, surely the soul's mortality is affirmed? Of course it is: mortality as a distinct and reasoning soul, the clear impossibility of the pure form attributed to the angels by St Thomas Aquinas. Mortality in relation to the human. Immortality through the transformation in nature. — Within the world there is no place for other creations. There is merely the opportunity of reintegration and continuation. All that could exist already exists. There is nothing more to be created unless revealed. If the more man evolves, the more he tries to synthesize, to abstract and establish principles and laws for his life, how could God — in any acceptance, even that of the conscious God of religions — be without absolute laws for his own perfection? A God endowed with free will is inferior to a God with only one law. Just as a concept is all the truer when it is only one and does not need to be transformed before each particular case. God's perfection is more readily proved with the impossibility than the possibility of miracles. To work miracles, for a God rendered human by religions, is to be unjust — thousands of people have the same need of this miracle at the same time — or to recognize an error, amending it — which, more than an act of kindness or 'proof of character', means to have erred. — Neither understanding nor volition pertain to God's nature, Spinoza affirms. That makes me feel happier and gives me greater freedom. For the idea of the existence of a conscious God leaves us horribly dissatisfied.

At the top of my essay I should put a literal translation from Spinoza:

'Bodies distinguish themselves from each other in relation to substance.' He had shown the phrase to Joana. Why? He shrugged his shoulders, without seeking any deeper explanation. She had shown herself to be curious, she had wanted to read the book.

Otávio reached out his hand and grabbed it. There was a sheet of notepaper inserted between the pages. He looked at it and discovered Joana's indistinct handwriting. He couldn't resist looking closer: 'The beauty of words: the abstract nature of God. Just like listening to Bach.' Why did he prefer not to have written this phrase? Joana always caught him unawares. He felt embarrassed as if she were clearly lying and he was forced to deceive her, by saying that he believed her...

To read what she had written was like standing before Joana. He evoked her, and avoiding her eyes, he saw her in moments of distraction, her face white, vague and delicate. And suddenly, a great sadness descended upon him. What am I doing after all? he asked himself, and he didn't know why he had so suddenly rounded on himself. No, you mustn't write today. And since that was a concession, an order not to be questioned — he questioned himself: if he wanted to, could he honestly work? and the reply was definite: no — and once the decision was more powerful than himself, he felt almost happy. Today, someone was giving him respite. Not God. Not God, but someone. Someone very powerful.

He would get up, tidy his papers, put the book back on the shelf, get into some warm clothes, go and see Lídia. The consolation of Order. How would Lídia receive him? Before the open window, watching the children walk to school, he saw himself take her by the shoulders, suddenly in a temper, perhaps a little forced, when confronted by that same question: what am I doing after all?

— Aren't you afraid? — he had screamed at her.

Lídia had remained impassive.

— Aren't you afraid of your future, of our future, of me? Don't you realize that... that... being simply my lover... the only place you have is at my side?

She had shaken her head, surprised and tearful:

— But no...

He had given her a good shake, remotely ashamed at having shown so much force, when in the company of Joana, for example, he would say nothing.

— Aren't you afraid that I might leave you? Don't you realize that if I should leave you, you would be a woman without a husband, without anything... A poor devil... who one day was jilted by her fiancé and then

became his mistress when he married another...

— I don't want you to leave me...

— Ah...

—... but I'm not afraid.

He had looked at her in amazement. She was getting thinner, he noticed. But she still looked healthy. Despite everything, she was more nervous, much given to weeping, readily became emotional. Suddenly, he had burst out laughing.

— Honestly, I don't know what to make of you. Lídia, too, had laughed, glad that it was all over. He had been intimidated by her radiant expression, he had drawn her close to him rather than look into those eyes. And they stood there for a moment in each other's arms, wishing for different things.

And now? Lídia would receive him as always. He wrote a note to Joana, letting her know that he wouldn't be home for lunch. Poor Joana... he could tell her if he wished. She would never know. So completely wrapped up in her blind conceit... But he would protect her ferociously, he laughed, his heart pounding. Never mind, tomorrow he would write something definitive for his article.

He looked at himself in the mirror before leaving, with half-closed eyes he observed his well-shaped face, his straight nose, his full, fleshy lips. But after all, I'm not to blame for anything, he said. Not even for having been born. And suddenly he didn't understand how he ever came to believe in responsibility, to feel that constant weight at every hour. He was free... How simple everything became at times.

He made his way on to the street, went to buy some sweets which he chose carefully. He finally decided on a fairly large bag of boiled sweets, apricot-flavoured. The moment he got round the corner, he would suck the first sweet, his hands in his pockets. His eyes filled with tenderness at the thought. Why not? — he asked himself, suddenly irritated. Who said that great men don't eat sweets? Only in biographies are those details never mentioned. Suppose Joana were to know what he was thinking? No, to be frank, she had never been sarcastic about... He felt a moment of anger, began walking more quickly.

Before turning the corner, he took the bag of sweets and emptied them into the gutter. In distress, he watched them merge with the mud, roll to a dark opening, covered with cobwebs.

He continued on his way, walking more slowly, shrunken. It was a little cold. Now someone would be satisfied, he thought remotely. Like a

punishment, a confession.

— Even great men are only truly recognized and honoured once they are dead. Why? Because those who praise them need to feel themselves somehow superior to the person praised, they need to feel they are making some concession. From which... there stems a patent superiority... the person who is praising... has succeeded in holding his own ... there is even a certain condescension... that finishes up as... pity, Otávio told her.

Lídia was observing him in one of his ugly moments. Those thin lips, that wrinkled forehead, his foolish expression — Otávio was thinking. And she loved him at this moment. His ugliness neither excited her nor aroused her pity. It simply drew her closer to him and with greater happiness. The happiness of wholly accepting, of feeling that she was uniting all that was true and primitive in herself to someone, independent of any preconceived ideas about beauty. She recalled her former schoolmates — those girls who were always so lively, who knew everything, were up to date with the latest films, books, love affairs, fashions, those girls with whom she had never really had much in common, withdrawn as she was, never really having much to say for herself. She remembered them and felt certain that they would find Otávio ugly at this moment. For she accepted him to such an extent that she would have preferred him even uglier in order to give even greater proof of her effortless love.

She looked at him, paying no attention to what he was saying. It was reassuring and good to know that between the two of them there were secrets weaving to a delicate transparent life over that other life which was real. Who would ever have imagined that Otávio had once kissed her on the eyelids, that he had felt her eyelashes on his lips and been forced to smile?

And miraculously she had understood everything without either of them saying a word. Who would have guessed that one day they had loved each other so much that they had remained quite silent, grave and still? Both of them gathered inner knowledge no outsider ever probed. He had gone away one day. But it didn't matter all that much. She knew that they both had 'secrets', that they were both irremediably accomplices. Were he to leave her, were he to love another woman, he would leave her and love another woman only to tell her afterwards, even if he should tell her nothing, Lídia would play a part in his life in any case. Certain things don't happen without some consequence, she thought looking at him. Let him escape — he will never be free... Once, as she was falling, he caught her, smoothed her hair with a distracted gesture. She thanked him, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. They smiled into each other's eyes and suddenly felt themselves overcome by sheer

bliss. They began walking more quickly, wide-eyed and in a daze.

Perhaps he no longer remembered that moment. She was the one who remembered such things. The fact is that those moments were so special that one couldn't recall them when speaking. Not even when thinking with words. Only by pausing for a moment and savouring them once more. He might forget. In her soul, however, there would certainly remain a mark, clear and rose-coloured, engraving the sensation and that afternoon. As for her — each day that dawned brought her in its waters more memories on which to nourish herself. And little by little, the certainty of happiness, of having achieved her goal, slowly surfaced inside her body, leaving her satisfied, close to saturation, close to anguish. When she saw Otávio again, she now looked at him almost with indifference, finding him inferior to what he had given her. She wanted to confide her happiness. But she was somehow afraid of hurting him, as if she were confessing that she had betrayed him with another man. Or as if she wanted to flaunt her happiness — before this man who divided himself between two homes and two women — to show him that her happiness was greater than his.

Yes, she thought remotely, staring at him — there are indestructible things that accompany the body until death as if they had been born together. And one of those things is what has been created between a man and a woman who have shared certain moments.

And when her son was born — she stroked her belly which was already filling out — the three of them would form a little family. That was what she wanted. As a happy ending to her whole history. She and Otávio had been brought up together, by their mutual cousin. She had lived close to Otávio. No one had passed through her life except him. In him she had discovered man, before knowing anything about men and women. Without giving it much thought, she had vaguely assembled the male species in Otávio. She had shared his life to such an extent that she had never sensed the presence of others except as closed worlds that were alien and superficial. Always, at every stage, close to him. Even during that phase when she had become astute, hiding as much as she could, even when there was nothing to hide. Also during that phase when people stared at her on the street, and her chums accepted her, admiring her lovely, thick hair. Otávio pursuing her with his eyes... that certainty, never more to be effaced, that she was someone. That was when she became aware that she was not poor, that she had something to give to Otávio, that there was a way of surrendering her life to him, everything that she had been... She had waited for him. When she had caught up with him, Joana had appeared and he had fled. She went on waiting. He

had returned. A child would be born. Yes, but before that birth took place, she would demand her rights. 'To demand her rights' struck her as being a phrase that had been dormant forever inside her, waiting. Waiting until she found the strength. She wanted that child to bud between its parents. And at the heart of all this, she wanted for herself 'the little family'.

She smiled weakly, listening to Otávio holding forth on some topic of which she had lost the thread. Ever since the foetus had started to form inside her, she had lost certain quirks and developed others, she dared to press ahead with certain thoughts. It seemed to her that until that moment she had spent her life telling lies. Her movements were independent from her body, as if there was now more space in the world for her existence. She had to look after the child and Otávio, now if there was... She leaned back more comfortably in the armchair, her embroidery slipped on to the carpet. She half-closed her eyes and her womb expanded, sated and glowing. She relished this sense of well-being, this feeling of lethargy which now frequently came over her. She hadn't experienced the slightest nausea, not even at the beginning. And she was confident that the birth would be easy, as easy as anything. She ran her hand over her hips which hadn't lost their shape so far. Somehow, she rather despised other women.

Otávio caught a glimpse of her expression and felt alarmed. Dispassionate cruelty... He studied her expression without being able to decipher it, aware only that he was excluded from that hovering smile. For it was a smile, a horrible smile, satisfied, despite the fact that she kept her face straight, her eyes open, looking straight ahead. He was gripped by terror, he almost shouted:

— You haven't even been listening!

Lídia sat up with a start, once more his, once more submissive:

— I...

— You haven't even understood what I was saying, he repeated staring at her, breathing with difficulty. Would there be a repetition of the scene that took place that time. No, there was a child inside her. Why should I have a child? Why me? Me of all people? It's strange... She would ask herself in the next breath: What am I doing after all? No, no...

— Not only do I understand you, she said in haste, I love you.

He sighed imperceptibly, still somewhat alarmed by her bid for freedom. The truth is that she had never entirely come back to him, as before her pregnancy. And he himself had given her this kingdom, fool that he was... Yes, but once she had freed herself from the child, once she had freed herself from the child... A few minutes later, his calm restored, Otávio gave in to the

lethargy and weakness which so admirably sustained his relationship with Lída.

Otávio's Encounter

The dark, murky night was cut in half, separated into two sombre blocks of sleep. Where was she? Between the two halves, seeing them — the half she had already slept and the half she still had to sleep — isolated in the timeless and in the spaceless, in an empty gap. That interval would be discounted from the years of life.

The ceiling and the walls joined up without any edges, silent, with folded arms, and she found herself inside a cocoon. Joana looked at it without thinking, without feeling, one thing looking at another. Little by little, just by moving her leg, awareness loomed in the distance, mingled with a taste of sleep in her mouth, spreading, then pervading her entire body. The moonlight sent a pale glow over the room, the bed. One moment, one more moment, one more moment, one more moment. Suddenly, like a tiny ray, something lit up inside her, said rapidly without moving a single facial muscle: Look sideways. She continued to stare at the ceiling without the slightest interest, but her heart was beating furiously. Look sideways. She could see that she would end up looking, had a vague idea of what was there at her side, but she behaved as if she had no intention of looking, as if she were ignoring the rest of the bed. Look sideways. Then defeated, before that multitude of faces watching the scene from up there on the stage, she slowly turned her head on the pillow and looked. There was a man there. She realized that this was precisely what she had been expecting.

His chest was bare, his arms extended, crucified. She turned her head away again. Well, now I've looked. But almost immediately she raised her body and resting on one elbow she stared at him, perhaps without curiosity, but demanding, waiting for a reply. Or mindful that those impassive faces were waiting for that gesture. There was a man there. Who was he? The question surfaced quietly, was already lost, swept away like an unfortunate leaf by the dark waves. But before Joana could altogether forget the question, she saw it become more urgent, pose itself with renewed insistence, its voice whispering in her ear: who was he?

She grew impatient, weary of that multitude of faces which was no longer a game she could control, but now making demands, now making demands. Who was he? A man, a male, she replied. But that stranger was her man. She looked into his face, the languid face of a sleeping child. The lips slightly parted. The pupils, under those thick, lowered eyelids, turned inwards, dead. She touched him gently on the shoulder and before getting any reaction, she

drew back instantly, terrified. She paused for a moment, listening to her own heart beating in her breast. She adjusted her nightdress, giving herself time to withdraw should she still want to. However she carried on. She brought her pale arm close to the naked arm of that human being and, although she had already foreseen the thought that followed, she trembled, struck by the glaring difference in colour, as firm and audacious as a scream. There were two bodies outlined on the bed. And this time she couldn't complain of having led herself unknowingly to tragedy: the thought had imposed itself without her having chosen it. And suppose he were to wake up and find her leaning over him? If he should suddenly open his eyes, they would meet hers, two lights crossing with another two lights... She withdrew rapidly, cowered within herself, overcome with fear, that unconfessed dread of former nights without rain, in the dark without sleep. How often must I experience the same things in different situations? She imagined those eyes as two copper discs, shining without expression. What voice might come from that slumbering throat? Sounds like thick arrows, quietly embedding themselves in the furniture, in the walls, in her. And once again, all with folded arms, staring into remote space. Implacably. The chimes of the clock only finish when they finish, there is nothing to be done. Or one throws a stone at it, and the noise of broken glass and springs is followed by silence spreading within like blood. Why not kill the man? Nonsense, that thought was completely fabricated. She looked at him. Afraid that all 'that', like pressing a button — you only had to touch it — would start working noisily, mechanically, filling the room with live movements and sounds. She was afraid of her own fear, which left her isolated. She could see herself from afar, from the top of the extinguished lamp, lost and puny, covered with moonbeams, beside the man who might come to life at any moment.

And suddenly, disloyally, she experienced real fear, as live as any living thing. The mystery lurking in that animal who was hers, in that man whom she had only known how to love! Fear in her body, fear in her blood! Perhaps he might strangle her, kill her... Why not? — she was frightened — the audacity with which her own thoughts rushed on, guiding her like a tiny beam, mobile and tremulous, through the dark. Where was she heading? But why should Otávio not strangle her? Were they not alone? And suppose he were mad beneath his sleep? — She trembled. Her legs moved involuntarily, she drew back the sheets, ready to defend herself, to escape... Ah, if she were to cry out she would not be afraid, fear would vanish with the scream... Otávio responded to her movements, raising his eyebrows in turn, compressing his lips, parting them once more and going on being dead! She watched him, watched him... and waited...

There was still silence, the same silence. Perhaps, who knows, she might have experienced moments of dreaming merged with reality, she thought to herself. She tried to remember how the day had passed. Nothing of any importance, except Otávio's note letting her know that he would be lurching out, something he had been doing almost regularly for quite some time now. Or had her fear been more than hallucination? The room was now bright and cold. She rested with her eyes closed. Happily, there were few nights when she had nightmares.

How foolish she had been. She brought her hand close, tried to touch him. She placed her outstretched palm on his chest, gently to begin with, almost wavering, but gradually overcoming her fear. Then growing more confident with every minute that passed, she abandoned herself completely over that broad field sparsely covered with vegetation. Her eyes wide open, yet seeing nothing, all her attention focused on herself and on what she was feeling.

Some furniture creaked, the shadows fastened more firmly on to the wardrobe.

Then an idea occurred to her. An idea so passionate that her heart accompanied it at a furious tempo. Like this: she drew near to him, gently nestled her head in his arm, close to his chest. She remained still, waiting. Little by little, she could feel the stranger's warmth on the nape of her neck. She could hear the rhythmic beating of a heart, remote and earnest. She examined herself attentively. That living creature was hers. That unknown man, that other world was hers. She saw him from afar, from the top of the lamp, his naked body — lost and weak. Weak. How fragile and delicate those exposed lines were, unprotected. He, he, the man. From some hidden source, anguish travelled up through her body, filling all her cells, pushing her defenceless to the foot of the bed. My God, my God. Afterwards, in painful childbirth beneath that laboured breathing, she could feel the comforting oil of renunciation spilling inside her, at last, at last. He was hers.

She wanted to call him, to plead his support, to beg him to speak words of appeasement. But she had no desire to awaken him. She feared that he might not know how to make her ascend on to a higher plane of feeling in order to achieve what was still no more than a sweet embryo. She knew that even at this very moment she was alone, that the man would awaken in some remote place. That he would be able to intercept her with some obstacle — a distracted and indifferent word — on the narrow and luminous path where she was taking her first tottering steps. Meanwhile, to imagine that he ignored what was happening inside her did not lessen her affection. It redoubled it, made it greater than her body and soul as if to compensate for the man's

remoteness.

Joana smiled, but she could not avoid the suffering that began to throb throughout her entire body like some bitter thirst. More than suffering, a craving for love swelling and overwhelming her... Caught up in a light, hazy maelstrom, like sudden vertigo, she became conscious of the world, of her own life, of the past from beyond her birth, of the future beyond her body. Yes, lost like a point, a point without dimensions, once, a thought. She had been born, she would die, the earth... A fleeting, intense sensation: a blind immersion into a colour — crimson, tranquil and expansive as a field. The same violent, instantaneous awareness that sometimes assailed her in great moments of love, like a drowning man who is seeing for the last time.

— My... — she began in a low voice.

But all that she might say was not enough. She was living, living. She watched him. How he slept, how he existed. She had never been so aware of him before. When she had made love to him during those first months of their marriage, she had been fascinated to discover her own body. The renewal had been hers, she had not given herself rapturously to this man and had remained isolated. Now suddenly she understood that love could make one desire the moment that comes in that impulse which is life... — She could feel the world gently throbbing in her breast, her body ached as if she were bearing the femininity of all women.

She fell silent once more, peering into herself. She remembered: I am the tiny wave that has no other region except the sea, I tussle with myself, I glide, I fly, laughing, giving, sleeping, but alas, always within myself, always within myself. Since when? Something I read as a child? Thought? Suddenly she remembered: she had thought of it just now, perhaps before placing her arm on that of Otávio, perhaps at that moment when she had felt like screaming... Everything was increasingly in the past... And the past was as mysterious as the future...

Yes... and it had also come, as fast as a silent car out of control, the man she sometimes met in the street... that man who stared at her, silent, thin and as sharp as a knife. She had already felt it vaguely that night, leaning on her conscience like the point of a needle... like a premonition ... but at what moment? In her dream? During her vigil? A new flux of pain and life began to swell and inundate her, with the anguish of being imprisoned.

— I... — she began timidly addressing Otávio.

It was getting darker, she couldn't see him except as a shadow: he became more and more blurred, slipped through her hands, lay dead in the depth of her sleep. And she, solitary as the ticking of a clock in an empty house. She

waited, seated on the bed, wide-eyed, the chill of approaching dawn penetrating her flimsy nightdress. Alone in the world, crushed by the excess of life, listening to the blare of music, much too loud for any human being.

But release came and Joana trembled at its impulse... Because gentle and sweet as daybreak in a forest, inspiration came.. .Then she invented what she must say. Her eyes closed, submissive, she uttered in a whisper words born at that moment, hitherto unheard, still tender from creation — new and fragile buds. They were less than words, merely disconnected syllables, meaningless, lukewarm, that flowed and criss-crossed, fertilized, were reborn in a single being only to separate immediately, breathing, breathing...

Her eyes moistened with sweet happiness and gratitude. She had spoken... The words preceding language itself, from its source, its very source. She went up to him, giving him her soul, while feeling sated as if she had absorbed the world. She was like a woman.

The sombre trees in the garden secretly guarded the silence, she knew, she knew... She fell asleep.

Lídia

The following morning was like a first day all over again, Joana felt.

Otávio had gone early and she had blessed him for it as if he had intentionally given her time to think, to observe herself. She didn't wish to rush into any decision, she felt that any of her movements could make her precious and dangerous.

They had been seconds, nothing but fleeting moments. For she received Lídia's letter inviting her to call.

Reading those words had made Joana smile even before provoking these rapid, heavy heartbeats. And also the cold, steel blade resting against the warmth inside her body. As if her deceased aunt had come back to life and were speaking to her, Joana imagined the old woman's alarm, felt those open eyes — or were they her own eyes that she denied any surprises? Had Otávio returned to Lídia, despite Joana? -her aunt would say.

Joana ran her fingers through her hair, absorbed the cold blade resting against her warm heart, she smiled once more, oh, simply to gain time. But of course, why not continue with Lídia — she answered her dead aunt. This lucid thought caused the icy blade to press on her lungs, mocking her. Why refuse to accept events? To possess many things at the same time, to feel in various ways, to recognize life from different sources... Who could prevent someone from living expansively?

Afterwards she plunged into an odd state of mild excitement. She wandered aimlessly through the house, she even wept a little, without much suffering, just for the sake of weeping — she persuaded herself- nothing more, just like someone waving their hand, like someone looking. Am I suffering? — she sometimes asked herself and once more the one who was thinking filled her with surprise, curiosity and pride and there was no room left for the other to suffer. But this subtle exaltation did not permit her to continue on the same plane for very long. She passed at once to another tone of behaviour, she played a little piano music, forgot Lídia's letter. When she remembered her, vaguely, a bird flying to and fro, she couldn't decide whether to be sad or happy, calm or anxious. She kept thinking of the previous night, of the tall window pane shining serenely in the moonlight, of Otávio's bare chest, of Joana who had fallen into a deep sleep. Almost for the first time in her life, entrusting herself to the man who lay asleep at her side. In fact, she had not distanced herself from the Joana full of affection from the night before. Ashamed, humble and rejected, the latter had wandered until returning and

Joana was increasingly more cruel, more absorbed and closer to herself — she thought. So much the better. Except that the cold steel was constantly being renewed, never became warm. Especially at the core of any thought there hovered yet another, perplexed, almost bewitched, as on the day her father died: things happened without her inventing them...

In the afternoon she could at last observe Lídia and she realized that she was as remote from her as from the woman with the voice. They looked at each other and could not bring themselves to hate or even spurn each other. Lídia had raised, pale and discreet, various topics of no interest to either of them. Her nascent pregnancy floated throughout the entire room, saturated her and penetrated Joana. Even those sombre pieces of furniture with their crocheted mats, appeared to be protected by the same secret soon to be revealed, by the same waiting for a child. Lídia's eyes were wide open and shadowless. Such a beautiful woman. Her lips full but impassive, without the slightest tremor, the lips of someone who is not afraid of pleasure, who receives it without remorse. What poetry supported her existence? What was that murmuring trying to say which she could divine inside Lídia? The woman with the voice multiplied into countless women... But where was their divinity to be found? Even in the most vulnerable of those women there lurked the shadow of that knowledge you don't acquire through intelligence. The intelligence of blind things. The force of the stone which, on falling, pushes another which will finally drop into the sea and kill a fish. Sometimes the same strength could be found in women who were only superficially mothers and wives, the timid mistresses of men, like her aunt, like Armanda. Meanwhile that strength, that unity in weakness... Oh, perhaps she was exaggerating, perhaps the divinity of women was not specific, it was only in the fact that they existed. Yes, yes, there was the truth: they existed more than men, they were the symbol of the thing in the thing itself. And woman was the mystery in itself, she discovered. There was to be found in all women a quality of primary matter, something that might define itself but never came to be realized, for its very essence was that of 'becoming'. For was it not precisely through that essence that the past united itself to the future and to all time? Lídia and Joana remained silent for one drawn-out moment. They didn't exactly feel themselves united, but without any need of words, as if they had really come together simply to look at each other and then go away. The strangeness of their situation became clearer when the two women felt that they were not fighting. In both there was a gesture of impatience, both still had a duty to perform. Joana pushed it aside, suddenly satisfied:

— Well — the tone of her voice roused her abruptly — I think our meeting is over.

Lídia was astonished. But how? If they hadn't as much as said anything! Most of all, she loathed the idea of something unfinished:

— We haven't said anything yet... And we must have a chat.. Joana smiled. In that smile I begin to act out weariness — not with any force — but exactly as I should in order to impress her. What are these foolish thoughts?

— Don't you think — Joana asked — that we're straying from the subject that brought us together? If we discussed it, at least it would now be without interest or passion... Let's leave everything for another day.

For an instant the image of the man struck them as being blurred and importune. But Lídia knew that the moment that woman disappeared, the apathy and torpor to which she had reduced her, leaving her powerless to move, would also vanish. And once roused, she would want the child. The little family. She made an effort to emerge from that drowsiness, to open her eyes and put up a fight.

— It's silly to lose the opportunity...

Yes, let's buy the article, let's buy the article. I feel exhausted after all that work preparing for the party. Joana burst out laughing again, a laughter void of any happiness.

— I know that I can expect nothing from you, the pregnant woman suddenly resumed forcefully — a cloud uncovering the sun, everything shining brightly once more and brimming with life. Joana also brightened, could feel the cloud uncovering the sun, everything bubbling gently hand-in-hand in a leisurely ring-a-ring o'roses, like that played by children.

But suddenly the girl pushed herself and her pregnancy in one last effort to wake up:

— I know you, I know just how evil you are.

Now the room was coming back to life.

— Ah, you know?

Yes, it was coming back to life, it roused Joana. What am I saying? How dare I come here? I am far away, far away. You only need to look at that woman to realize that she couldn't possibly like me. The steel suddenly rested on her heart. Ah, the jealousy, that was jealousy, that cold hand kneading her slowly, squeezing her, shrinking her soul. With me, the following happens or else threatens to happen: from one moment to the next, by moving in a certain manner, I can transform myself into a thin line. Just like that! into a streak of light, so that the person is just at my side, unable to surprise me or my imperfections. Meanwhile Lídia has various planes. With every gesture another aspect of her dimension is revealed. At her side no one slips or is lost

for they can find support on her breasts — solemn, restful and pale, while mine are futile — or on her belly where there is even room for a child. I mustn't exaggerate her importance, for a child may be born in the womb of all women. She is so beautiful and a woman. Tranquil, primary matter, despite all other women. What's in the air? I'm alone. Those full lips Lídia possesses, so sensuous and clearly outlined with bright lipstick, while the one I use is dark, invariably scarlet, scarlet, scarlet, the face white and thin. Those brown eyes of hers, enormous and steady, perhaps they have nothing to offer, but they receive so much that no one could resist them, least of all Otávio. I am a feathered creature. Lídia is covered in hair and Otávio is lost between us, defenceless. How can he escape from my brilliance and from promise of flight or from the self-assurance of that woman? We two women could form an alliance and provide for humanity, we could leave early each morning and go from door to door ringing the bell: Which does madam prefer: mine or hers? and we would deliver a child. I can see why Otávio didn't separate from Lídia: he is always ready to throw himself at the feet of those who walk ahead. He cannot look at a mountain without being impressed by its solidity, he cannot look at a woman with an ample bosom without wanting to rest his head there. How impoverished I am alongside her, so confident and self-possessed. Or I light up and become magnificent, instantly magnificent, or I become obscure, and swathe myself in drapes. Lídia, whatever may be said of her, never changes, always has the same clear foundations. My hands and hers. Mine — outlined, solitary, roughly sketched back and front, with careless haste by a brush soaked in an insipid white; I'm forever raising my hand to my forehead, forever threatening to leave it suspended in mid-air, oh how futile I am, only now do I see it. Lídia's hands — are clearly defined, attractive, covered by pliant skin, pinkish, yellowish, like a flower I once saw somewhere, hands that rest on things, full of authority and wisdom. My whole being swims and floats, I cross what exists with my nerves, I am nothing if not desire, wrath, vagueness, as impalpable as energy. Energy? but where is my strength? in vagueness, in vagueness... And investing it with life, not the reality, but merely the vague impulse forward. I want to astonish Lídia, to turn the conversation into something strange, subtle, evasive, but no, but yes, no, but why not? She suddenly remembered Otávio, stirring and blowing his cup of coffee in order to cool it, his expression serious, interested and ingenuous. To surprise Lídia, yes, to draw her... Like that time at boarding school, when she suddenly felt the need to test her influence, to feel the admiration of her school-mates with whom she generally had little contact. Then she would coldly put on an act, inventing, resplendent as if wreaking vengeance. She emerged from the concealment of silence to engage in battle:

— Look at that man... He drinks his coffee with milk in the morning, very slowly dunking his bread in the cup, allowing it to drip, munching it, then getting to his feet, heavy and sad...

Her school-mates looked, they saw some man or other, and yet, despite their being surprised and intentionally distant to begin with, and yet... it was miraculously correct! They did begin to see the man get up from the table... his cup empty... some flies.. Joana continued to gain time, to advance, her eyes glowing:

— And that other... At night he pulls off his shoes with a struggle, tosses them into the distance, sighs, and mutters to himself: What matters is not to lose heart, what matters is not to lose heart...

The more impressionable girls whispered, already smiling, won over: It's true... how do you know! The others held back. But they ended up surrounding Joana, waiting for her to show them something else. Her gestures at this point became agile, feverish, and as she became more and more inspired, she affected all of them:

— Look at that woman's eyes... round, transparent, they tremble and tremble, any minute now they could dissolve into a drop of water...

— And what about that expression? — sometimes Joana became more daring when she discovered a sudden shyness in those girls who read certain books in the school corridor. And what about that expression? of someone seeking pleasure wherever it may be found...

Her school-mates laughed, but little by little something disquieting, painful and awkward crept into that scene. They ended up laughing much too loudly, nervous and dissatisfied. Joana, in high spirits, excelled herself, held the girls captive to her will and word, imbued with an ardent and cutting wit like the glancing strokes of a whip. Until, hemmed in at last, they breathed her brilliant and suffocating air. Suddenly feeling satisfied, Joana then stopped, her eyes dry, and her body shaking in triumph. Defenceless, sensing Joana's hasty departure and her contempt, the girls also withered away, as if ashamed. One of them said, before they dispersed, bored with each other's company:

— Joana is unbearable when she's happy...

Lídia blushed. The 'Ah, you know?' of Joana had sounded so curt, distracted and odd, so remote from Lídia's emotion.

— It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter — Joana tried to pacify her. So you're going to have a baby... she went on. You want Otávio, the father. It's understandable. Why don't you get a job to support the brat? No doubt, you were expecting greater kindness on my part, despite what I've just told you

about my wickedness. But frankly, kindness makes me want to throw up. Why don't you find yourself a job? Then you wouldn't need Otávio. I'm not prepared to give you just everything. But first tell me about your romance with Otávio, tell me how you managed to get him to come back to you. Or better still: what he thinks of me. Don't be afraid to tell me. Am I making him very unhappy?

— I don't know, we never mention your name.

So I was alone then? and this joy of suffering, the steel crinkling my skin, that chilling cold which is jealousy, no that chilling cold which is so: Oh, you walked all that way? then you must go back. But this time I shall not make a fresh start, I swear, I shall rebuild nothing, I shall remain behind like a stone there in the remote distance, at the beginning of the road. There is something that goes round with me, it goes round and round, it makes me dizzy, it makes me dizzy, and calmly deposits me in the same place.

She turned to the pregnant woman:

— It just isn't possible. .. He wouldn't free himself so readily.

— But in a certain way he loathes you! — Lídia had shouted.

— Ah, is that so?

— Do you also feel the same? — Joana had asked. — Of course, of course... It's not only hatred, despite everything. — Last night, my affection, it isn't important, deep down I knew I was alone, at least I wasn't deceived, for I knew, I knew. — And suppose it was also fear?

— Fear? I don't understand, Lídia expressed surprise, fear of what!

— Perhaps because I'm unhappy, fear of getting close. Perhaps that's it: fear of also having to suffer...

— Are you unhappy? — the other had probed in a whisper.

— But don't be frightened, unhappiness has nothing to do with wickedness, Joana had laughed. — What happened in the end? I'm not present, I'm not present, what happened, weariness, a desire to leave in tears. I know, I know; I should like to spend at least a day watching Lídia go back and forth from the kitchen to the sitting-room, then have lunch with her in a quiet room — a few flies, the tinkling of cutlery — where no heat might penetrate, wearing an old baggy dressing-gown in a bold floral pattern. Later in the afternoon, sitting beside her and looking on as she sewed, giving her a little assistance here and there, the scissors, the thread, waiting until it was time for her bath and a cup of tea, it would be nice, leisurely and refreshing. Was this perhaps what had always been missing in my life? Why is she so powerful? I can't imagine that because I haven't spent my afternoons sewing, that this makes me inferior to

her. Or does it? It does, it doesn't, it does, it doesn't. I know what I want: a woman who is ugly but wholesome with large breasts, who might say to me: what is all this about inventing things? I won't stand for any nonsense, come here at once! — A woman who will give me a warm bath, dress me in a white linen night-dress, braid my hair and put me to bed, thoroughly annoyed and muttering: Whatever next? You run around, eating at any old hour, you'll catch some illness if you're not careful, making up dramas, do you think that makes you important, drink up this bowl of hot broth. She raises my head with one hand, covers me with a large sheet, draws back some straggling hairs from my forehead, now clean and fresh, and says before I sink into the warmth of sleep: You'll see how that face will soon fill out, forget all these foolish ideas and be a good girl. Someone who will rescue me as if I were a poor stray, who will open their door to me, brush me, feed me, simply love me as if I were a dog, that's all I ask, as if I were a dog, as if I were a child.

— Would you like to be married — really married — to him? — Joana questioned her.

Lídia had given her a sharp look, anxious to discover if the question was meant to be sarcastic.

— Yes, I would.

— Why? — Joana asked in surprise. Can't you see that you wouldn't gain anything from such a marriage? Everything marriage has to offer you already have — Lídia blushed, but I wasn't being malicious, an ugly but wholesome woman.

— I'll bet you've spent your whole life wanting to get married.

Lídia felt an urge to rebel: she had been touched to the quick, in the coldest possible manner.

— Yes. Every woman... — she agreed.

— You're getting at me. For I never thought of getting married. The funny thing is that I still feel certain I didn't marry... This is more or less how I saw it: marriage is a goal, after I get married nothing more can happen to me. Just imagine: to have someone always at your side, never to know loneliness. — My God! — never to be by yourself, never, never. And to be a married woman, in other words, someone with her destiny traced out. From then onwards you simply have to wait for death. I thought: you couldn't even preserve the freedom to be unhappy because you drag another person along with you. There is someone constantly watching you, observing you, accompanying every move you make. And even boredom with life has a certain beauty — I thought — when you suffer it alone in quiet despair. But with two, eating the same tasteless bread day after day, seeing your own

frustration mirrored in your partner's habits, the burden of the bed you share, of your life in common, plotting and threatening you with a common death. I always said: never.

— Why did you get married? — Lídia asked.

— I don't know. All I know is that this 'I don't know' is not just my being ignorant about things. It is the very heart of the matter. I'm evading the question, any minute now she'll look at me in that way I know so well. I certainly got married because I wanted to marry. Because Otávio wanted to marry me. That's it, that's it, I've got it: instead of asking to live with me without getting married, he suggested something else. Besides it came to the same thing. And I was foolish, Otávio's good-looking, don't you agree?

I couldn't recall anything else. — Pause — How do you love him: with your body?

— Yes, with my body -Lídia had mumbled.

— It's love.

— And you? Lídia ventured.

— Not quite.

— But he told me, on the contrary...

Lídia had broken off. She studied her carefully. How ingenuous Joana seemed. She spoke of love in such a clear and straightforward manner for it was certain that nothing had been revealed to her so far through love. She had not succumbed to its shadows, she had not yet felt its deep and secret transformations. Otherwise she would be, like her, almost ashamed of so much happiness, she would remain vigilant at its door, protecting from the cold light what mustn't be blighted if it is to go on living. Meanwhile there was Joana's vivacity... what she had understood through Otávio... that life existed inside her... But Lídia suspected that Joana's love didn't even protect Joana herself. Without experience, intact, unblemished, she could have been mistaken for a virgin. Lídia looked at her and tried to explain to herself what was hovering and lucid on that face. Love certainly did not bind her, even to love. While Lídia herself, almost instantly after the first kiss, had been transformed into woman.

— Yes, yes, but nothing changes, Joana continued tranquilly. I also love him more dispassionately, both as a human being and as a man. — Is she about to look at me in that timid way, scared and deferential: oh, why do you discuss such difficult things, why do you raise such enormous issues at such a simple moment? Spare me, spare me. But this time I'm to blame because frankly, I don't know what I was trying to say. Nevertheless, this is how I shall

outdo her.

Lídia hesitated.

— Isn't that more than love?

— Perhaps, Joana said, surprised. What matters is that it's no longer love.

— And suddenly, I'm overcome with weariness, the great 'what's the use' swamps me, and I know that I'm about to say something. — Keep Otávio. Have his child, be happy, and leave me in peace.

— Do you know what you're saying? — the other had shouted.

— Of course I know.

— Don't you like him?...

— I like him. But I've never known what to do with the persons or things I like. Ever since childhood, there comes a point when I find them a burden. Perhaps if I truly loved with my body... Perhaps I should become more tied... -I'm confiding in her, dear God. I'm now going to put it like this: — Otávio is escaping from me because I don't bring peace to anyone, I always end up giving everyone the same treatment. I force them into admitting: I was blind, it wasn't peace I had, but that's what I want now.

— Even so... I believe — no one can complain... Not even Otávio... I suppose not even I... — Lídia had not known how to explain, she had remained uncertain, her hands didn't rest on things.

— What?

— I don't know. — She looked at Joana and searched for something on her face, intrigued, moving her head.

— What? — Joana repeated.

— I don't understand. Joana almost blushed.

— I too. I've never penetrated my own heart. Something had been said.

Joana walked up to the window, looked into the garden where Lídia's child would play, the child that was now in Lídia's womb, the child that would be nourished by Lídia's breasts, that would be Lídia. Or Otávio, unripe fruit? No Lídia, the one who is transmitting herself. Were they to cut her through the middle — the sound of fresh leaves splitting — she would open up like a pomegranate, wholesome and pink, as transparent as bright eyes. The base of her life was as gentle as a stream flowing through a meadow. And in that meadow she herself moved, confident and serene as an animal grazing. She compared her with Otávio, for whom life would never be more than a little private adventure. And with herself, using other people as a sombre background against which her figure stood out, resplendent and imposing. Lídia's verses: Silence alone is my prayer, oh Lord, and I can say no more; I

am so happy feeling that I silence myself to feel even more; it was in silence that a spider's subtle and fragile web formed inside me: this sweet ignorance of life which allows me to live. Or was everything a lie? Oh, God, the more she needed to act, the more she lost herself in foolish thoughts. Everything was almost certainly a lie, it was even possible that Lídia was much less innocent than she imagined. But even so, she was afraid to remain near her, to look at her reluctantly with a little effort, to make her conscious of herself. To preserve her, without changing her colouring or her precious voice.

— He told me that story about the little old man... you threw the book at him, such an old man... Before I understood, but now I don't know how you were able... — Lídia had asked.

But it was true.

Lídia looked at her, her lips parted, waiting for her answer. And suddenly she could see quite clearly that she had no wish to struggle against that woman. She shook her bewildered head. Her face melted, trembled, its features wavered in search of some expression:

— I didn't do that intentionally, you know? No, I didn't do... Lídia went on anxiously, her face punctured by rapid tremors... Why should I want to deceive you? No, no, that's not what I mean to say, it isn't that...

And unexpectedly, taking Joana unawares, she burst into tears and cried her heart out. She's about to have a child, she's nervous, Joana thought. The other humiliated herself wearily:

— It wouldn't bother me to steal Otávio from another woman. But I didn't know that there was you... Not just anyone like me, but someone so...so good... so sublime...

Joana was taken aback. Ah, I was striving for this: I succeeded in being sublime... as in days gone by... No, no, it isn't quite like this, I didn't force the situation, how could I, with the steel scoring and chilling my flesh? Don't put me under that light, with the wrinkles on my forehead so obvious. I must find that degree of light and shade in which I suddenly become fleshy, my lipstick darkening like an ingrained bloodstain, my face white as chalk beneath my hair... Once more they are pressing the steel blade against my heart. When I leave, she will despise me precisely at the moment when she is dazzled. I am instantly wonderful... God, God...I set off running, hallucinating, my body flying, hesitating... where to? There is a startled, light substance in the air which I have managed to secure, it's like the second that precedes the crying of an infant. That night, I don't know when, there were stairways, fluttering fans, soft lights swaying their gentle rays like the nodding heads of indulgent mothers, there was a man watching me from that line beyond the horizon, I

was a stranger, but I triumphed somehow, even if it meant despising something. Everything glided smoothly, in quiet harmony. It was almost coming to an end — the end of what? of that noble, languid staircase, bowing, waving its long, gleaming arm, its magnificent and proud handrail, night coming to an end — as I slipped to the centre of the room, light as a bubble of air. And suddenly, loud as a clap of thunder, yet as mute as silent fear, and, suddenly one more step and I couldn't go on! The hem of my organza dress shuddered into an ugly grimace, struggled, writhed, tore on the sharp edge of a piece of furniture and there it remained trembling, gasping, perplexed beneath my look of amazement. And suddenly things had hardened, an orchestra had exploded into tortuous harmonies and fallen silent immediately, there was something victorious and tragic in the air. I discovered that deep down I held no surprises: that everything was slowly heading towards that mystery which had now precipitated on to its true plane. I wanted to escape at once, weeping over my wretched dress without its hem, torn and disconsolate. The lights now shone with intensity and pride, the fans exposed radiant, mocking faces, there from beyond the horizon the man was laughing in my direction, the banisters recoiled, and closed their eyes. No one needed to tell any more lies now that I already knew everything! Once again, I shall throw myself headlong into another state. Why? Why? I'm getting out of here, I'm going home, from one minute to the next the tear in my dress, to hear the poignant strains of the orchestra followed by sudden silence, all the musicians lying dead on the platform, in that great hall, frenzied and empty. I must look straight ahead at the tear, but I've always been afraid of exploding with pain like the strains of the orchestra. No one suspects just how far I can reach, almost in triumph, as if I were some creation: it's that feeling of super-human power achieved with a certain degree of suffering. But the next minute you cannot tell if it's a feeling of power or of absolute impotency, just like wishing with one's body and brain to move a finger and simply not succeeding. It isn't simply not succeeding: but all things laughing and weeping at the same time. No, I certainly didn't invent this situation, and that is what I find most surprising. For my craving for experience couldn't explain that cold metal resting on my warm flesh, warmed at last by the affection of yesterday. Oh, don't make a martyr of yourself: you know that you couldn't continue in the same state for very long: once more you would open and close circles of life, throwing them aside, withered... That moment, too, would pass, even if Lídia should not reclaim Otávio, even if I were never to know that Otávio had not abandoned her, although married to me. Am I not perhaps mixing a certain happiness, sweet and ironic, with that threat of suffering? Am I not perhaps loving myself at this moment? Only when I leave this place shall I permit

myself to look at the tear on my dress. Nothing has happened except that yesterday I had begun my renewal and now I am withdrawing because that woman is nervous, she's expecting Otávio's child. Especially since there has been no essential transformation, all this already existed, there was simply the tear in the dress, revealing certain things. And truly, truly, truly throbbing headache, weariness, truly everything was heading this way.

— I, too, could have a child, she said aloud. Her voice sounded clear and pleasing.

— Yes — Lídia had murmured in amazement.

— I, too, could have a child. Why not!

— No...

— No? But yes... I could give Otávio a child, not now, but whenever it suited me. I could have a child and then give you back Otávio.

— But this is monstrous! — Lídia had screamed.

— But why? Is it monstrous to keep two women? You know damn well it isn't. I suppose it feels good to be pregnant. But is it enough for someone to be expecting a child or is that still too little?

— It's a nice feeling, Lídia had said wearily, her eyes open.

— So?

— You also feel nervous about childbirth at times, the other replied mechanically.

— Don't be frightened, there isn't an animal that doesn't breed. You'll have an easy delivery and so shall I. We've both been blessed with a broad pelvis.

— Yes...

— I also want everything life has to offer. Why not? Do you think I'm sterile? Not one little bit. I haven't had any children because I didn't want them.

I can feel myself holding a child, Joana thought. Sleep, my baby, sleep, I tell it. The child is warm and I am melancholy. But it's the melancholy of happiness, that peace and reassurance that leaves you looking calm and unperturbed. And when my child touches me he doesn't rob my thoughts like others. But after I've given him milk from these delicate and attractive breasts, my child will thrive on my strength and crush me with his life. He will distance himself from me and I shall become his useless old mother. I won't feel cheated. But simply defeated and I shall say: I know nothing, I'm capable of conceiving a child yet I know nothing. God will accept my humility and say: I was capable of conceiving the world and I know nothing. I shall feel closer to Him and the woman with the voice. My child will stir in my arms

and I shall tell myself: Joana, Joana, this is good. I shall utter no other word for truth will bring comfort to my arms.

The Man

Between one instant and the next, between the past and the future, the white uncertainty of an interval. Empty as the distance from one minute to another on the dial of the clock. The core of events arising silent and dead, a fraction of eternity.

Perhaps no more than a quiet second separating one stretch of life from the next. Not even a second, she couldn't calculate it as time, yet drawn out like an endless straight line. Profound, coming from afar—a black bird, a dot growing on the horizon, approaching one's conscience like a ball thrown from the end to the beginning. And exploding before eyes perplexed in essence by silence. Leaving behind the perfect interval, without knowing how to merge it with life. To carry forever that tiny dot — blind and intact, much too swift to allow itself to be revealed.

Joana felt it as she walked across Lídia's tiny garden, not knowing where she was going, only that she was leaving behind all that had lived. When she closed the little gate, she was leaving Lídia and Otávio behind, and, once more solitary in herself, she walked away.

The beginning of a storm had abated and the fresh air circulated pleasantly. She climbed the hill once more and her heart was still beating without any rhythm. She sought the peace of those paths at that hour, between afternoon and evening, an invisible cicada humming the same melody. The old damp walls in ruins, invaded by ivy and creepers sensitive to the wind. She halted and without her footsteps she could hear the silence stir. Only her own body disturbed that calm. She imagined it without her presence and divined the freshness which those dead things must have when mixed with others, precariously alive as in the beginning of creation.

The tall, shuttered houses, guarded like towers. One of the mansions was reached by a long drive, sombre and quiet, the end of the world. Close by, there was a descent, the starting point of another road, and it became clear that this was not the end. The mansion was squat and wide, its windows broken, the shutters drawn and covered in dust. She was familiar with that garden where soft tufts of grass were interspersed with crimson roses and old, rusty tins. Under the flowering shrubs of jasmine she would find faded newspapers, splinters of damp wood from previous graftings. Amidst the heavy, old trees, the sparrows and pigeons scratching at the soil as usual. A little bird interrupted its flight, hopped around before disappearing into one of the thickets. The mansion proud and serene in its ruined state. To die there.

One could only reach that house when the end had come. To die in that damp earth so suitable for receiving corpses. But it wasn't death she craved. She was also afraid.

A thread of water seeped incessantly through the dark wall. Joana paused for a moment, looked at it with a vacant, impassive expression. During one of her strolls she had already sat beside the rusty little gate, her oval face pressed against the cold railings, trying to sink into the dank, murky smell of the yard. That impenetrable quietness, that odour. But this had been a long time ago. Now she had separated herself from the past.

She carried on walking. She no longer felt that feverish heat which had been provoked by her conversation with Lídia. She was pale and utter exhaustion now left her almost weak, her features more delicate and refined. Once again she waited for an end, an end that never came, to complete her moments. If only something inevitable would descend upon her, she wanted to give way, to surrender. Sometimes her feet took the wrong direction, weighed her down, her legs scarcely able to move. But she forced herself on, saved herself for that fall further ahead. She looked at the ground, the straw-coloured grasses which humbly sprang up again after each trampling.

She raised her eyes and saw him. That same man who often followed her without ever accosting her. She had already seen him many times along these same roads, during her evening stroll. She wasn't surprised. She knew that something would happen somehow. Sharp as a knife, yes, even the night before, lying beside Otávio, not knowing what would happen the following day, she had remembered this man. Sharp as a knife... Almost in a daze, as she tried to catch a glimpse of him from a distance, she saw him multiplied into innumerable faces, trembling and formless as they crammed the road. When her vision cleared, her forehead covered in perspiration, she saw him by contrast as a poor, solitary dot coming towards her, lost on that long, deserted road. She felt sure he would only trail her as on other occasions. But she was tired and came to a halt.

The man's figure drew nearer and nearer, got bigger and bigger, and Joana felt herself sink ever more deeply into the inevitable. She could still withdraw, she could turn tail and go away, thus avoiding him. Nor would she be escaping, for she divined the man's humility. There was nothing to keep her there, immobile, waiting for him to approach. Not even if death were now to approach, not even villainy, hope or suffering once again. She had simply come to a halt. The veins were severed that connected her with living things, assembled into a distant block, exacting a logical sequel, however outdated and spent. Only she herself had survived, still breathing. And before her, a

fresh field, the colour of the rising dawn still neutral. She must penetrate its mists in order to be able to make it out. She couldn't retreat, she saw no reason for doing so. If she still hesitated before that stranger who came closer and closer, it's because she feared the life which implacably approached once more.

She tried to cling to that interval, to remain suspended there, in that cold abstract world, without mingling with its blood.

He arrived. He stopped a few paces away from her. They stood there in silence. She with staring eyes, wide and weary. He was shaking, nervous and uncertain. All around the leaves rustled in the breeze, a bird chirped monotonously.

The silence dragged on, waiting for them to recover their speech. But neither of them could discover in the other some opening word. They both merged in that silence. Little by little he stopped shaking, his eyes focused more intently on the woman's body, they gently took possession of it and its weariness. He looked at her, oblivious of himself and his shyness. Joana could sense him penetrating her and offered no resistance.

When he spoke, she imperceptibly straightened up. She felt as if she had been there for ages, but when he uttered his opening words without attempting to start up a conversation she knew that she had truly distanced herself incom-mensurably from the beginning.

— I live in that house, he said.

She waited.

— Would you like to rest?

Joana nodded and he watched in silence the luminous aura traced out by the tousled hairs around her small head. He walked ahead and she followed him.

When he spoke, she imperceptibly straightened up, he lowered the blinds and the shadow extended across the floor as far as the closed door. He pulled up a comfortable, old armchair which she sank into, drawing in her legs. The man himself sat on the edge of the narrow bed which was covered with a crumpled sheet. He remained quite still, his hands joined, watching her.

Joana closed her eyes. She could hear sounds, muffled and remote, pervading the house, an infant's cry of mild surprise. As if from another world, there rang out the vigorous crowing of a distant cockerel.

Behind everything, water flowing gently, the laboured and rhythmic breathing of the trees.

An anticipated movement nearby made her open her eyes. She couldn't see him at first in the semi-darkness of the room. She began to recognize him

little by little kneeling by the side of the bed, his hands covering his face as it swayed to and fro. She wanted to call out to him but didn't know how. She was reluctant to touch him. But the man's anguish began to affect her more and more, Joana stirred uneasily in the armchair, waiting for him to look at her.

He lifted his head and Joana was surprised. The man's parted lips were moist and shiny as if a light were illuminating them from within. His eyes were bright, it was impossible to say whether because of sorrow or some strange happiness. His head was thrown back, he could scarcely keep his balance in his efforts to get a grip on himself, to stop shaking.

— What is it? — Joana whispered in fascination. He looked at her.

— I'm afraid, he said finally.

They stared at each other for a second. And she was not afraid, but she felt a deep happiness, more intense than fear, possess her and inundate her whole body.

— I shall return to this house, she said.

He confronted her, suddenly terrified, unable to breathe. For a second she waited for him to shout or invent some mad gesture which she couldn't even begin to explain. The man's lips quivered for a second. And scarcely able to rid himself of Joana's gaze, running from it like someone demented, he buried his face abruptly in his long, thin hands.

Under the Man's Protection

Joana. Joana, the man thought, awaiting her arrival. Joana, a simple name. Saint Joana, so chaste. How innocent and pure she was. He saw her childlike features, her eloquent hands like those of a blind man. She was not pretty, at least never since manhood had he dreamed of that creature, never awaited her. Perhaps that is why he had pursued her so often in the road, without even waiting for her to look, perhaps... He couldn't say, he had always enjoyed seeing her. She was not pretty. Or perhaps she was? How could one tell? It was so hard to decide, as if he had never seen her before or never embraced her so often. There was a threat of transformation in her expression, in her movements, from one moment to the next. Even in repose she was something on the point of raising itself. And what did he now understand and feel so miraculously, as if she had explained it to him? — he asked himself. He closed his eyes, his arms outstretched along the sides of the bed. But only until he heard the sound of Joana's footsteps outside. For he had never dared to relax in her presence. He bent over her, waited upon her every moment, absorbing her. But he never tired and that attitude didn't make him any less spontaneous. It simply threw him into another kind of spontaneity, hitherto unknown. He was now two different persons, but little by little his new state of being grew and overshadowed the past of the other. He pursed his lips. He felt there was some strange logic in having experienced certain tortures, serene indignities, the careless lack of any route where he might receive Joana at long last. Not that he had ever been pushed into the mire against his will, not that he considered himself a martyr. He had never awaited a solution. Even with the women whom he guarded, guarded and abandoned. Even with that woman in whose house he had now idly installed himself, even though he could scarcely tolerate her presence, an exhausting and fragile shadow. He had walked on his own feet, his body conscious, experiencing and suffering without any affection for himself, coldly and ingenuously conceding everything to his own curiosity. He even considered himself happy. And now Joana had come to him, she, Joana who... He wanted to add one more word to this muddled thought, the right word, the difficult one, but once again he was struck by the idea that he no longer needed to think, that he needed nothing, nothing... she would soon be here. But listen: soon... It was like this: Joana had liberated him. Increasingly he needed less in order to live: he thought less, ate less, slept very little. She always existed. And she would soon be here.

He closed his eyes more tightly, bit his lips, suffering without knowing why. He opened his eyes immediately and in the room — the empty room! — suddenly he could find no sign of Joana having been there. As if her existence were a lie... He straightened up. Come, something ardent and mortal called out inside him. Come, he repeated in a low voice, overcome with fear, looking forlorn. Come...

Footsteps, almost silent, were treading the dry leaves outside. Once more Joana was coming... once more she could hear him from afar.

He remained standing beside the bed, his eyes vacant, a blind man listening to distant music. She was drawing closer ... and closer.. Joana was coming. Her footsteps became more and more real, the only reality. Joana. With the suddenness of a stab wound, the pain exploded inside her body, illuminated her with happiness and bewilderment.

When the door opened to Joana, he ceased to exist. He had slipped to the very depths of himself, he hovered in the penumbra of his own unsuspected labyrinth. He now moved lightly and his gestures were agile and new. The pupils of his eyes became dark and dilated, suddenly transformed into a slender creature, as nervous as a colt. Meanwhile the atmosphere had become so lucid that he could perceive the slightest movement from any living thing around him. And his body was simply recent memory, where sensations would adapt themselves as if for the first time.

The tiny white ship floated over rough waves, green, brilliant and unruly — he saw her lying there, studying the tiny picture on the wall.

— On the third, Joana continued in a soft, clear voice, with small rounded intervals, on the third, there was a grand parade on behalf of new-born infants. It was amusing to watch people singing and carrying flags full of all the non-colours. Then a man got up as feeble and swift as the breeze that blows when someone is sad and calls from afar: I. No one heard him, but he was almost satisfied. And just then the mighty gale started up that blows from the north-east and trampled over everyone with its great fiery feet. Everyone returned to their homes, wilting and scorched by the heat. They pulled off their shoes, loosened their collars. Their blood ran slowly, trickling through their veins. And the most awful feeling of not-having-anything-to-do crept into their souls. In the meantime, the earth continued to go round. That was when a little boy was born and given a name. The child was beautiful. Enormous eyes that saw, delicate lips that felt, a thin little face that felt, a high forehead that felt. His head large. He walked like someone who really knows the place, slipping effortlessly among the crowd. Anyone following him would arrive. When he was moved, when he was surprised, he shook his

head, slowly like this, like someone being offered more than he expected. He was beautiful. And above all, he was alive. And above all, I loved him. I was born, I was born, I was born. Now a verse. The thing I wish for, my darling, is to see you always, my darling. As I saw you today, my darling. Even should you die, my darling. Another verse: I once heard a flower sing and quietly rejoiced: Then drawing near, what wonder did I find, not a singing flower, but a bird hovering there.

Joana's words tailed off as if she were dreaming. Through her half-closed eyes, the ship floated to one side in the picture, the objects in the room were strung out and luminous, one object growing from another. For if we already knew 'that everything was one', why go on seeing and living? The man, his eyes closed, had buried his head on her shoulder and listened to her dreaming without sleeping. From time to time, she heard within the living silence of that summer afternoon, muffled, unhurried movements coming from the creaking floorboards. It was the woman, the woman, that woman.

On those first visits to the big house, Joana had felt like asking the man the following questions: Is she now like a mother to you? Is she no longer your lover? Even though I exist, does she still want you to live with her? But she had always held back. Meanwhile, the presence of the other woman was so powerful in the house, that the three of them formed a couple. And Joana and the man never felt themselves to be entirely alone. Joana had also wanted to ask the woman herself: But this had been an earlier thought. For one day she had caught a glimpse of her, the woman's broad shoulders concentrated into an indissoluble lump of anguish beneath her black lace dress. She had also watched her at other fleeting moments, passing from one of the rooms into the lounge, giving a quick smile, rushing off with a horrible expression on her face. Then Joana had discovered that she was someone alive and black. Big ears, sad and heavy, with a dark orifice like a cave. The simpering, furtive, inviting glance of a whore, without glory. Her lips moist, chapped, large, smothered in lipstick. How she must love the man. Her hair was fine and sparse and reddish from constant dyeing. And the room where the man slept and received Joana, that room with curtains, almost free of dust, had in all certainty been tidied up by her. Like someone sewing her own child's shroud. Joana, that woman and the teacher's wife. What was it that finally united them? The three diabolical graces.

— Almonds... Joana said, turning to the man. The mystery and sweetness of words: almond... listen, pronounced carefully, the voice placed in the throat, resounding deep down in the mouth. It vibrates, leaves me long and stretched and curved like a bow. Almond, bitter, poisonous and pure.

The three graces, bitter, poisonous and pure.

— Remind me of that saying... — the man asked her.

— What saying?

— The one about the sailor. When you love a sailor, you love the whole wide world.

— How awful... — Joana laughed. I know: I myself said that it must be so true that it has always had that jingle. But I can't remember the rest.

— He was spending his Sunday in the square. He was on the pier... — the man helped her.

One day, breaking the silence which he kept up when he was with Joana, he had tried to make conversation:

— I've never been much good.

— Yes, she replied.

But everything that's happened wouldn't make you go away...

— No.

— Even this woman... this house... It's different, can't you see?

— I do.

— I know that I've always been like a beggar. But I've never asked for anything, there was no need and I didn't know. But then you came. I used to think: nothing was bad. But now... For you're always telling me such crazy things, believe me, I can't...

At this point she raised herself on one elbow, suddenly looking serious, her face bent over him: Do you believe in me?

— Yes... — he replied, startled by her violence.

— You know that I don't lie, that I never lie, not even when... not even? Do you hear? Tell me, tell me. Then the rest wouldn't matter, nothing would matter... When I say these things... these crazy things, when I don't want to know about your past, and I don't want to tell you anything about myself, when I invent words... When I lie, do you feel that I'm not lying?

— Of course, of course...

She was stretched out on the bed once more, her eyes closed, weary. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter if he doesn't believe me afterwards, if he runs from me like the teacher. Meanwhile, lying here beside him, she could think. And meanwhile is also time. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. A little boy, that's what he is. He must have had many women, been much loved, he's attractive, with those long eyelashes, those cold eyes. Before he was harder. I've mellowed him a little. That woman is waiting for me to go away forever

one day. For him to return.

— What was he doing on Sunday in the square? The square is wide and deserted, she finally said slowly, trying to remember in order to answer his question: Yes... So much sun, trapped on the ground as if it came from there. The sea, the sea's swell, silent and breathless. The fishes on Sunday, rapidly twirling their tails and tranquilly continuing to force their way through. A stationary ship. Sunday. The sailors strolling along the pier, through the square. A pink dress appearing and disappearing round the corner. The trees crystallized on Sunday — Sunday would remind you of Christmas trees — shining in silence, holding their breath, like so, like so. A man out walking with a woman in a new dress. The man wishes to be nothing, he walks beside her, almost looking into her face, asking, asking: tell me, bully me, trample me. She making no reply, smiling, pure Sunday. Satisfaction, satisfaction. Pure sadness without any heartache. Sadness that seems to come from behind the woman in pink. The sadness of Sunday on the pier, sailors on loan to terra firma. That gentle sadness is proof of living. And since one doesn't know how to make use of this sudden knowledge, there comes sadness.

— This time the story was different — he complained after a pause.

— That's because I'm simply narrating what I saw, not what I'm seeing. I'm incapable of repeating things, I only know things once — she explained to him.

— It was different, but everything you see is perfect. He wore a chain round his neck with a tiny gold medal.

On one side St Teresa, the Little Flower, and on the other side St Christopher. He revered these two saints:

— But I don't pay much attention to saints. Just occasionally.

She had once told him that as a little girl she could spend a whole afternoon playing with one word. So he would ask her to invent some words. She had never loved him more than at such moments.

— Tell me again what Lalande means — he implored Joana. It's like angel's tears. Do you know what angel's tears are? A kind of daffodil, the slightest breeze bends it backwards. Lalande also means the sea at dawn, before anyone has set eyes on the shore, before the sun has risen. Each time I say: Lalande, you should hear the fresh and salty sea-breeze, you should walk the length of the beach still covered in darkness, slowly, stark naked. In a word, you will feel Lalande... You can trust me, no one knows the sea better than I do.

He did not know at certain moments if he was alive or dead, if everything

he possessed was little or too much. When she spoke, she would invent like mad, like mad! Plenitude filled him, as great as a charm, and his anguish was that of the clear expanse above the water. Why did he feel intimidated in her presence, as bewildered as a white wall in the moonlight? Or he might suddenly awaken and call out: who is this woman? she is superfluous in my life! I can't... I want to turn back... But he no longer could — he suddenly sensed in terror, realizing that he was lost.

— Dearest — she said, interrupting the man's thoughts.

— Yes, yes... — He hid his face on that comforting shoulder and she remained there, listening to his breathing pervade her back and forth, back and forth. They were both creatures. What else matters? — she thought. He moved, rested his head on her bare flesh like... like an insect, a flea blindly searching for the nucleus, for the living centre. Or like a child. Outside, the world slipped away, and day, day, then night, then day. She would have to go at some time, to tear herself away once more. He too. From her? Yes, soon she would become a burden to him with her surfeit of miracles. Like other people, inexplicably ashamed of himself, he would long to be off. But as an act of revenge: he would not free himself entirely. He would end up being surprised at himself, compromising himself, haunted by an uncertain and anguished feeling of responsibility. Joana smiled. He would finish up hating her, as if she were demanding something from him. Like her aunt, her uncle, who respected her even though suspecting that she did not enjoy their pleasures. In some confused way, they imagined her to be superior and despised her. Oh God, once more she was remembering, telling her own story to herself, justifying herself. She could ask the man for confirmation: am I like this? But what did he know? She buried her face on his shoulder, hid herself, possibly happy at that moment. To shake him, to tell him: Joana was man like this, man. And so she became a woman and grew old. She believed herself to be very powerful and felt happy. So powerful that she imagined she had chosen these paths before venturing there — simply by thinking about them. So unhappy that, believing herself to be powerful, she didn't know what to do with her power and saw each minute as being lost because she had failed to guide it towards some objective. That's how Joana grew, man, as tall and slender as a pine tree, and full of courage, too. Her courage had grown inside the room plunged into darkness and luminous worlds had formed, without fear or shame. She learned from childhood to think, and since she had never seen any human being up close except herself, she was deceived, suffered, lived a painful pride, sometimes superficial but nearly always difficult to bear. How can one end Joana's story? If she could gather and magnify the look I spied in Lídia: no one will love you... yes, let's end it like

this: despite her being one of those free and solitary creatures in the world, no one ever thought of giving anything to Joana. Not love, they always offered her some other sentiment. She lived her life, eager as a virgin — that's to say, for the tomb. She asked herself lots of questions, but was never able to provide the answers: she paused in order to listen. How did a triangle come to exist? Was it an idea to begin with? or did that come after it had found its form? Was a triangle fated to exist? things were beautiful. — She would have liked to linger over the question. But love invaded her. Triangle, circle, straight lines... as harmonious and mysterious as a harp. Where is music stored when it isn't playing? — she asked herself. And lost in thought, she replied: let them make a harp from my nerves when I die.

The last of Joana's lucidity merged with the crooked ship moving over the waves. She only had to nod her head for the waves to accompany it. But she had had something, oh yes she had. A husband, breasts, a lover, a house, books, bobbed hair, an aunt, a teacher. Auntie, listen to me, I've met Joana, the one I'm telling you about. She was a weak woman in relation to things. At times, everything seemed to her to be too precise, untouchable. And, sometimes, what others used as air for breathing, became a burden and death for her. See if you can understand my heroine, Auntie, listen. She's vague and bold. She doesn't love, no one loves her. You would end up noticing it just as Lídia, another woman — a young woman full of her own destiny — noticed it. However what's inside Joana is something stronger than the love one gives and what's inside her demands more than the love one receives. Do you see what I mean, Auntie?

I wouldn't call her a hero like the one I promised Daddy. For in her there was a terrible fear. A fear preceding any judgement or understanding. — This has just occurred to me: who knows, perhaps faith in future survival comes from noticing that life always leaves us untouched.

— Do you understand, Auntie? — I forget the interruption of future life — do you understand? I can see your open eyes watching me with fear, with mistrust, yet wanting, nevertheless, as an affectionate old woman — now dead, it's true, now dead — to love me, overlooking my cruelty. Poor thing! the worst rebellion I ever sensed in you, apart from the ones I provoked, can be summed up in that saying you repeated nearly every day, and which I can still hear, mingled with your scent which I shall never forget: 'If only we could go out in the clothes we're wearing!' What more can I tell you? I've had my hair cut short, tinted brown, sometimes I wear it in a fringe. I'm going to die one day. I've also been born. There was the room with the two of them. He was good-looking. The room went round a little. It became transparent and

warm, a veil that kept coming closer and closer. The three of them formed a couple, but to whom could she tell this? She would be able to sleep because the man never slept and he would keep watch like the falling rain. Otávio was also good-looking, with those eyes of his. This was a child an insect flowers whiteness warmth as sleep is for the moment time for the moment life itself that later... Everything like the earth a child Lídia a child Otávio earth De profundis...

The Viper

It's as if I were gently penetrating something...

Otávio read while the clock ticked away the seconds and broke the night's silence with eleven strokes.

It's as if I were gently penetrating something...

There's the impression. This lightness comes from who knows where. Curtains droop languidly over their own cords. But there is also the black march, at a standstill, two eyes staring, unable to say anything. God perched on a tree and twittering, and straight lines running, unfinished, horizontal and cold. That's the impression... Mature moments go on dripping and no sooner does one fall than another surfaces, softly, its face pallid and minute. Suddenly the moments too come to an end. The without-time runs down my walls, tortuous and blind. Little by little, it accumulates in a dark and tranquil lake and I call out: I have lived!

Night silenced the things outside, some toad or other croaked intermittently. Each shrub was an unmoving, recoiling face.

In the distance, there glimmered and flickered tiny reddish lights, sleepless eyes. In the darkness like that of water. The tall, slender sunflowers lit up the garden by stages.

What was one to think at that moment? She was so pure and free that she could choose and didn't know. She could see something, but she couldn't express it, not even mentally, for the image had become tenuous in the darkness of her body. She simply sensed it and looked expectantly through the window as if she were seeing her own face in the night. Would this be the most she could hope to achieve?

To approach herself, to approach herself, to almost touch, only to feel the ebbing wave behind her, firmly and gently sucking her in, engulfing her then leaving her with the startling and intangible memory of a hallucination... Even at that moment, perceiving the night and her own vague thoughts, she was still detached from them, forever that small impenetrable mass, looking on, looking on. That tiny light gleaming in silence, remote, solitary, unconquered. She never surrendered.

She looked around her, the room slowly panting, poorly lit as in a spell of vertigo. She raised her head a little, examined the space and became aware of the rest of the house which was lost in darkness, the objects, grave and indistinct, floating around the corners. She would have to grope her way the

moment she went through the door. Especially if she were a child, in her aunt's house, waking up at night, her mouth dry, going to look for some water. Knowing that people were isolated, every one of them locked inside this secret, impenetrable sleep. Especially if she were that child and as on that night or those nights, upon crossing the pantry she should discover the moonlight settled in the yard as in a cemetery, that wind free and uncertain... especially if she were that frightened child she would bump into objects she couldn't make out in the dark which when touched would suddenly contract into chairs and tables, into barriers, with open, unfeeling, relentless eyes. So they too were imprisoned. After that knock, the pain, the moonlight stripping the terrace of cement, thirst rising up through her body like some memory. Deep silence in the house, the neighbouring rooftops motionless and livid...

Once more, Joana tried to go back into the room, into the presence of Otávio. She was rid of things, of her own things, created by her and alive. Were they to abandon her in the desert, amidst the solitary glaciers, in any spot on Earth, she would preserve the same white, limp hands, the same, almost serene aloofness. She would take a bundle of clothes and slowly go away. Not to escape, but to go away.

Just like that, so comforting. Not to escape, but to go away ... Or to shout aloud, aloud, straight and infinite, with her eyes closed and tranquil. To walk until she encountered those tiny red lights. Flickering as if going out or coming on. Was she also about to die or be born? No, not to go: to remain trapped by the moment just as a pensive look clings to the void, quiet, suspended in mid-air...

The vibration of a distant tram pervaded her as if she were a tunnel. A night train passing through a tunnel. Goodbye. No, anyone travelling at night simply looks through the window and doesn't wave goodbye. No one knows where the hovels are, the unwashed bodies are murky and require no light.

— Otávio — she said, for she was lost.

Joana's voice, expressionless, light and direct, blotted out the room. He raised his eyes:

— What is it? — he enquired. And his voice was full of flesh and blood, it assembled the room inside the room, it labelled and defined things. A gust of air reviving the flames. The crowd had invaded the empty square.

She struggled for a moment, shuddered, woke up. Everything was shining under the lamp, tranquil and happy as round the hearth. Within the shadows of her body, the futility of waiting pervaded her somnambulism like a bird winging through the night.

— Otávio — she repeated.

He was waiting. Then once more conscious of the room, of the man and of herself, her own flames gathered strength, she knew that she should proceed logically, that the man expected her to go on. She looked for a signal, a plea, some definite word:

— I have the impression that you only came to give me a child, she said, and only now have I had the opportunity to fulfil the promise I made to Lídia. Even to go on wanting the child would mean tying herself to the future.

Otávio stared at her for a second in amazement, drained of any affection.

— But — he murmured after some time, his voice faltering, timid and hoarse — but can't you see that everything is almost finished between us?

— And has been almost from the start... he ventured.

— It will only finish when I've had a child — she replied, vague and obstinate.

Otávio opened his eyes in her direction, his face pale and suddenly weary beneath the table-lamp, where his book lay open.

— Isn't that a little far-fetched? — he asked ironically. She ignored the remark:

— What existed between us is not enough. I still haven't given you everything, you may come looking for me one day or I might miss you. Although after the child is born, there will be nothing left for us except to separate.

— And what about the child? — he enquired. — Where does the child come into this clever arrangement?

— Oh, he'll survive — she replied.

— Is that all you have to say? — he rejoined with sarcasm.

— What else can one do? — she launched the question into the air, casually, without expecting any answer.

Otávio, thinking she was waiting, despite his nervousness and rage at having to obey her, concluded uncertainly:

— Be happy, for example.

Joana raised her eyes and watched him from afar with surprise and a certain happiness — Why? — Otávio asked himself in alarm. He became flustered as if he had cracked some silly joke. She saw that he was angry, curled up in his chair, hurt and dejected as if someone had spat in his face. Without stirring, she leaned towards him, full of pity and more than pity — she pursed her lips, embarrassed — a love full of tears. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying not to see him, not to love him any more. At heart she could still unite herself

with Otávio, he scarcely knew just how much. Perhaps it was enough to tell him about her own fears, for example, summarizing in words those feelings of shame and uneasiness when she summoned the waiter in a loud voice and everyone heard her except the waiter who wasn't listening. She laughed. Otávio would like to know about this. She could also unite herself with him by summing up for him her urge to escape whenever she found herself among smiling men and women and she found it difficult to relate to them or experience her own body. Or perhaps she was mistaken and these confidences did not bring them closer together. Just as when she was a little girl and she used to imagine that, if she could tell someone about the 'mystery of the dictionary', she would link herself forever to that someone... Like this: after the *l* it was useless looking for the *i*... Even for the *l*, the letters were companions, scattered like beans over the kitchen table. But after the *l*, they scattered solemn and compact and you could never find, for example, an easy letter like *a* among them. She smiled, opened her eyes little by little and now relaxed, subdued, she could confront him with disdain.

— You know perfectly well that's not the point. Oh, Otávio, Otávio... she murmured after an instant, the flames suddenly revived — what's happening to us when all is said and done, what's happening to us?

Otávio's voice was gruff and sharp when he replied:

— You always left me on my own.

— No... — she said nervously. — It's just that everything I have cannot be given. Nor taken. I myself am capable of dying of thirst in my own presence. Solitude is mingled with my essence...

— No — he repeated stubbornly, his eyes wild. — You always left me on my own because that's what you wanted, because that's what you wanted.

— I'm not to blame -Joana cried out — believe me... It's engraved in me that solitude comes because each body inevitably has its own end, it's engraved in me that love ceases with death... My presence has always been branded like this...

— When I got to know you — he said sardonically — I thought you were going to teach me something more than this. I needed — he went on in a lower tone — what I perceived in you, yet you always denied me.

— No, no... — she protested in a weak voice — Believe me, Otávio, the things I really knew penetrated my skin, came upon me almost by stealth... Everything I know I never learned, nor could I ever teach it to others.

They fell silent for a second. In a fleeting moment Joana saw herself seated beside her father, a ribbon in her hair, in a waiting-room. Her father with his

hair unkempt, rather grubby, perspiring, his mood jovial. She could feel the ribbon more than anything else. She had been playing in her bare feet and had pulled on her shoes in haste without washing them and now they were creaking noisily inside the leather. How could her father be so cheerful, how could he fail to see that the two of them were the most miserable of people, and that no one was as much as looking at them? But she wished to prove to everyone that she would go on as she was, that he was her father, that she would protect him, that she would never wash her feet. She saw herself seated beside her father and she didn't know what had occurred immediately before dinner and immediately afterwards. Nothing but a shadow and she took refuge in it, listening to the music of confusion murmuring in her depths, intangible, blind.

— Nevertheless — Otávio went on — you yourself said: there is a certain moment in the joy of being able to do something which exceeds the fear itself of death. Two persons who live together — he continued in a whisper — try perhaps to attain that moment. You didn't want to.

She said nothing. When she didn't reply, he became uneasy, he went back to the days of his childhood, people angry with him, obliging him to promise, to please them, full of apologies. He recalled some offence or other he had once committed regarding Joana and tried to rid himself of it immediately so that it might nevermore weigh on his conscience. And even though aware that he was about to say something irrelevant, he could not restrain himself: You're right Joana: everything that comes to us is brute matter, but there is nothing in existence that escapes transfiguration — he began and his expression immediately became one of utter embarrassment when confronted by Joana's eyebrows. He forced himself to continue — Don't you remember telling me one day: 'Today's sorrow will be tomorrow's happiness; there is nothing in existence that escapes transfiguration.' Don't you remember? Perhaps it wasn't exactly with those words...

— I remember.

Well... At that moment I couldn't really grasp what you were trying to say. I even got annoyed I suppose...

— I know — Joana said. — You told me that if you had a stomach upset, I should come to lay the same absurd extravagance at your feet.

— Yes, yes, you're quite right — Otávio said impatiently. I seem to remember that you weren't even intimidated. But ... listen, I don't think I ever told you: I realized afterwards that there was no exaggeration in what you'd said... I don't think I ever confessed this to you, or am I wrong? Look, I'm even inclined to believe that there might be some truth in those words. There

is nothing in existence that escapes transfiguration.. .He blushed. — Perhaps that's the secret, perhaps that's what I perceived in you... There are certain presences which allow transfiguration.

Since she remained silent, he insisted further.

— You promise too much... All the possibilities you offer people, within themselves, with a look... I'm at a loss to explain it.

And just as she hadn't shown herself to be proud or diminished when he had first spoken ironically about her absurd extravagance, she didn't now gloat over Otávio's humility. He looked at her. Once again he had not known how to attach himself to that woman. Once more she defeated him.

There was silence in the room and the light and emptiness settled on the white keys of the open piano. Something had died, slowly and truly died. It would be useless to reunite the happiness of living with that moment.

— What comes next? — Otávio murmured, and this time he had succumbed to the essence of things, he had been drawn to Joana's truth.

— I don't know — she said.

Otávio studied her. What was on her mind, she seemed so remote? She appeared to be hovering in the centre of something mobile, her body floating, unsupported, almost non-existent. Just as when she started to relate things from the past and he could see that she was lying. Then Joana's head would slowly wander, she would gently incline her forehead, raise it again, begin to stammer. There was a calculated and solid nucleus to begin with but then everything became fluent and innocuous. And Otávio would look at her, oblivious of himself. He would end up in a state of anguish, for if he wanted to touch her he couldn't, there was an intangible circle around that creature, which was impenetrable and kept her apart. Bitterness then possessed him because he could not perceive her as a woman and his quality as a man became futile, and he was incapable of being anything other than a man. In cousin Isabel's garden white roses grew all those years ago. He had often admired them, perplexed, not knowing how to possess them, because in the presence of those roses his only power, that of a human being, was useless. He put them to his face, to his lips, he inhaled their perfume. They went on quivering, delicate and luxuriant. If only they had thick petals — he used to think — if only they were hard... if only their petals would give a dry sound when they dropped and hit the ground... Feeling the heightening beauty of those flowers penetrate him, like that of Joana, like that of Joana when she lied, he was seized by an impotent fury: he would crush them, chew them, destroy them.

Looking at her now, without quite knowing how to define that face, he

wanted to revive that old feeling, to find himself once more in cousin Isabel's garden.

But in the absence of any other thought, he suddenly realized that Joana would go away. Yes, he would carry on, he had Lída, the child, himself. She would go away, he knew... But what did it matter, he didn't need Joana. No, 'he didn't need her', yet he 'couldn't do without her'. And suddenly he just couldn't fathom how he had managed to live with her for so long. It struck him that after her departure he would simply have to untie the present to that distant past, cousin Isabel's house, Lída, his bride-to-be, his plans to write a substantial book, his personal traumas, tepid, sweet and loathsome as depravity; to that past barely interrupted by Joana. It would be nice to be rid of her, to draw up plans for his book on Civil Law. He could already picture himself moving among his things with intimacy.

But he also saw himself with strange and sudden clarity, one evening perhaps, feeling a twinge of pain in his chest, screwing up his eyes, aware that his hands were empty without even looking at them. The indefinable feeling of loss when Joana might leave him... She would surge inside him, not in his head like any familiar reminiscence, but in the centre of his body, vague and lucid, interrupting his existence like the sudden clanging of a bell. He would suffer as if she were telling the most outrageous lies, yet as if he were unable to expel that hallucination and were progressively inhaling it like air inside his body which might thankfully turn into water. He would feel the clean, open space inside his heart where none of Joana's seeds would bring afforestation, for she was as inviolate as future thought. Nevertheless, she was his, yes, deeply, diffusely, like some music one has heard. You're mine, mine, don't leave me! — he implored her from the depths of his being.

But he would not utter such words for he wanted her to go, he wouldn't know what to do with Joana if she were to stay. He would go back to Lída, pregnant and swollen. He gradually realized that he had chosen to renounce all that was most precious in his being, that tiny suffering portion which he succeeded in living beside Joana. And after a moment of suffering, as if he were abandoning himself, his eyes shining with fatigue, he sensed the futility of desiring something more for the future. Perplexed, he was finally witnessing his own strange, intense purification, as if he were slowly penetrating an inorganic world.

— Do you really want a child? — he asked her. Terrified of the solitude into which he had ventured, he suddenly wanted to link himself to life, to lean on Joana until he could lean on Lída, just as someone crossing an abyss clings to tiny boulders before clambering up the rock itself.

We shouldn't know how to make it live... came Joana's voice.

— Yes, you're right... he said uneasily. And he passionately longed to be with Lída. To go back to her forever. He realized that this would be his last night with Joana, the last, the last...

— No... perhaps I'm right, Joana continued. Perhaps one shouldn't think about any of this before having a child. One lights a bright lamp, everything becomes clear and safe, one drinks tea each afternoon, embroiders, but above all, a lamp brighter than this one. And the child lives. That's quite true... so true that you had no fears for the life of Lída's child...

Otávio did not flinch, he didn't as much as blink. But his whole being shrank and his pallor shone like a lit candle. Joana went on speaking at her leisure, but he didn't hear her because little by little, almost without thinking, fury surfaced in his heavy heart, dulled his hearing, clouded his vision. What... fury, stumbling and panting, raged inside him, so she knew about Lída, about the child... she knew and kept silent... She deceived me... — That stifling burden weighed even more deeply inside him. She quietly condoned my infamy... she continued to sleep with me, to tolerate me... for how long? Why? but why, dear God!...

— Bitch.

Joana jumped, lifted her head rapidly.

— You're despicable.

His voice could scarcely control itself in that swollen throat, the veins on his neck and forehead stood out, thick and knotted, in triumph.

— It was your aunt who once called you a viper. Yes, a viper. Viper! Viper! Viper!

He was now shouting wildly, unable to control himself. Each cry could barely release itself from that convulsed source, vibrated almost gleefully in mid-air.

She watched him beat his fists on the table, maddened, weeping with fury. For how long? Because Joana was aware, as if listening to music in the distance, that everything continued to exist and that those cries were not separate arrows, but were merging with what existed. Until suddenly spent and empty, he slumped into a chair. His face numb, his eyes dead, he sat staring at the floor.

Both of them sank into solitary and peaceful silence. Perhaps years passed. Everything was as bright as an eternal star and they hovered so quietly that they could feel future time clearly revolving inside their bodies with the denseness of the long past which instant by instant they had just lived.

Until the first light of dawn began to disperse the night. In the garden, the darkness frayed like a veil and the sunflowers trembled in the nascent breeze. Dim lights, however, still flickered in the far distance as if coming from the sea.

The Man's Departure

The following day she received a note from the man saying goodbye:

'I've had to go away for a spell, I had to go, they came to look for me, Joana. I'll be back, I'll be back, wait for me. You know that I'm nothing, I'll be back. I shouldn't even be able to see and hear if it weren't for you. If you abandon me, I'll go on living a little longer, the time a little bird can stay in mid-air without flapping its wings, then I'll drop, I'll drop from the sky and die. Joana. The only thing that prevents me from dying this very moment is that I'll be back. I can't explain it but through you I'm able to see. God help me and You, for there is no one like you. I'll be back. I never spoke all that much to you, but it was out of kindness: I'm not breaking my promise am I? I understand you so well, so well, should You want anything from me, you need only ask. May God bless you, here's my little medal with St Christopher and St Teresa of Lisieux.'

She folded the note carefully. She recalled the man's face during those last days, his eyes running and bleary like those of a mangy cat. And the skin around them, livid and inflamed like the gloaming. Where had he gone? His life was undoubtedly confused. A confusion of facts. And she had the impression that in a sense he was disconnected from those facts. The woman who sustained him, that distraction in relation to himself, like someone who has had no beginning and expects no end... Where had he gone? He had suffered a great deal during those last days. She should have spoken to him, he had truly expected it, but afterwards, distracted and thoughtless, she had forgotten.

Where had he gone? — she wondered, her arms empty. The whirlwind spun round and round and set her down once more at the beginning of the road. She looked at the note with its delicate, indecisive lettering, the phrases written with care and difficulty. Once again, she could see her lover's face and she couldn't help admiring those striking features. She closed her eyes for a second, inhaled once more the odour that came from the gloomy corridors of that unexplored house, with only one room revealed, where she had experienced love anew. The smell of old apples, sweet and old, coming from the walls, from their depths. Once again, she could see the narrow bed which had been replaced by a large, soft one, the nervous pleasure with which the man had opened the door that day and seen Joana's face, taking her by surprise. The tiny ship, almost submerged by the exceedingly green waves. She half-closed her eyes and the ship lurched. But everything had slid over

her, nothing had possessed her... In brief, a mere pause, a single note, weak and pure. It was she who had violated that man's soul, who had filled it with a light whose evil he still hadn't fathomed. She herself had scarcely been touched. A pause, a note, faint and without any resonance...

Once more a circle of life that was closing. And she herself in Otávio's tranquil and silent house, sensing his absence in each place where only the day before his things had still existed and where there was now a void lightly covered in dust. Fortunately, she hadn't seen him leave. And fortunately, during those first moments, upon noticing her dismay that he had gone, she still believed she possessed her lover. 'Upon noticing that Otávio had gone'...? — she thought. But why lie? The person who had gone was herself and even Otávio knew it.

She changed out of the clothes she had worn to visit the man. That woman with the moist, loose lips must be suffering, alone and old in that big house. Joana didn't even know his name... She didn't want to know it, she had assured him: I want to know you through other sources, to pursue your soul along other roads; I want nothing of your past life, neither your name, nor your dreams, nor to hear of your sufferings, the mystery clarifies more than any revelation; and I forbid you to start probing anything about me. I am Joana, you are a living body, I am a living body, that's all.

What a fool, what a fool, perhaps she might have tolerated and loved him then had she known his name, been aware of his hopes and sufferings. It's true that the silence between them might have been more perfect. But what was the use ... They were simply living bodies. No, no, even better like this: each with a body, driving it onwards, eagerly seeking to get the most out of it. Avidly trying to climb over the other, pleading, full of cunning and touching cowardice for a better existence, a better existence. She interrupted herself, holding her dress in one hand, alert and liberated. She became aware of the solitude in which she found herself, at the centre of an empty house. She sensed that Otávio was with Lídia, a fugitive beside that pregnant woman, full of seeds for the world.

She went to the window, felt the cold air on her bare shoulders, watched the earth where the plants were thriving peacefully. The globe was moving and she was standing on it. Beside a window, the sky overhead, clear, infinite. It was useless to take refuge in the suffering of every love affair, to rebel against events, for the facts were simply a tear in her dress, the silent arrow pointing to the heart of things, a river that dries up leaving the river-bed exposed.

The chilly night air brought her skin out in goose-pimples; Joana found it difficult to think clearly — there was something in the garden that dislocated

her from the centre, causing her to waver... She remained on the alert. Something was trying to move inside her, responding, and through the dark cavities of her body, waves came surging, light, fresh and ancient. Almost frightened, she wanted to bring that feeling to her consciousness, but found herself being pulled further and further back in sweet vertigo, by gentle fingers. As if it were morning. She examined herself, suddenly alert as if she had advanced too far. Morning?

Morning. Where had she once been, in what strange and miraculous land had she set foot to be now inhaling its perfume? Dry leaves on the moist ground. Her heart slowly contracted, opened, she did not breathe for a moment, waiting ... It was morning, she knew that it was morning... Withdrawing as if being led by a child's delicate hand, she heard, muffled as in a dream, chickens scratching at the soil. A warm, dry soil... the clock chiming ping... ping... the sun showering tiny yellow and red roses over the houses... God, what was that if not she herself? but when? not always...

The pink waves darkened, the dream fled. What was it that I lost? what was it that I lost? It wasn't Otávio, already far away, it wasn't her lover, the wretched man had never existed. It occurred to her that the latter must be trapped, she pushed the thought from her mind impatiently, escaping, rushing headlong... As if everything were part of the same madness, she suddenly heard a nearby cockerel ring out its vigorous and solitary cry. But it isn't daybreak, she said trembling, smoothing her cold forehead... The cockerel didn't know it was about to die! The cockerel didn't know it was about to die! Yes, yes Daddy, what is there for me to do? Ah, she had lost the rhythm of a minuet... Yes... the clock had chimed ping, she had stood on tiptoe and the world had turned much more slowly at that moment. Were there flowers somewhere? And she felt a great desire to melt away until her fibres merged with the beginning of things. To form but one substance, rose-coloured and sweet — breathing gently like a rising and falling womb... Or was she wrong and was that feeling real? Was what existed in that remote instant something green and obscure, the anticipation of continuance, and impatient or patient innocence? empty space... What word could convey just then that something had not condensed and lived more freely? Open eyes floating amidst withering leaves, white clouds, and way down below the countryside stretched out as if it were embracing the earth. And now... Perhaps she might have learned to speak, only this. But the words floated on the surface of her impenetrable sea, and they were hard. Before the sea was pure. And all that remained of the past, flowing within, light and tremulous, was a little of that ancient water amidst gravel, sombre and cool under the trees, the dead leaves and chestnuts covering the verges. God, how sweetly she plunged into

incomprehension of herself. And how much easier still, to abandon herself to that ebbing tide, firm and gentle. And to return. She would have to reunite herself to herself one day, without those hard and solitary words... She would have to merge herself and become once more the sea mute unruly powerful wide motionless blind living. Death would unite her with infancy.

But the iron gate was made by men: and there it was gleaming beneath the sun. She observed this and the shock of this sudden perception made her a woman once more. She trembled, lost in a dream. She wanted to go back, she wanted to go back. What was she thinking about? Ah, death would unite her with infancy. But now her eyes, turned outwards, had become cold, now death was different, since men made the iron gate and since she was woman... Death ... And suddenly death was merely cessation... No! she cried out in terror, not death.

She now ran ahead of herself, already remote from Otávio and from the man who had disappeared. She mustn't die. For...truly where was the death inside her? — she slowly asked herself, with cunning. She opened her eyes wide, still not believing in this question, so novel and fascinating, which she had allowed herself to invent. She walked up to the mirror, looked at herself—still alive! Her pale neck sprouting from delicate shoulders, still alive! - searching for herself. No, listen! listen! the beginning of death did not exist inside her! And as if she were violently pervading her own body, searching, she felt an upsurge of vitality, her whole body opening up to breathe...

So she couldn't die, she then thought slowly. Little by little this fragile thought took a deep breath, expanded, became compact and solid, like a block adapting to its form. There was no space for another presence, no room for doubt. Her heart pounding furiously, she listened carefully. She burst out laughing, a tremulous, bubbling laugh. No... But it was so clear... No, she wouldn't die because... because she could not end. That was it, that was it. A sudden apparition, that of a little old man, perhaps a woman, several blurred human forms merged into one, shaking its head, denying, growing old. No, she told them quietly from the depths of her new truth, no... the forms gradually faded, for she had always been. For her body had never needed anyone, she was free. She walked through the streets. She drank water, she had abolished God, the world, everything. She would not die. It was so easy. She stretched out her hands not knowing what to do with them now that she knew. Perhaps she should caress herself, kiss herself, filled with curiosity and gratitude upon recognizing herself. No longer adhering to reason, it seemed to her that it was so illogical to die, that she checked herself, now bewildered and filled with terror. Eternal? Violent... The most fleeting reflections and as

brilliant as sparks criss-crossing like electric currents, merging as sensations rather than as thoughts. She altered without transition, in tiny leaps, from place to place, ever higher, clearer and more tense. And from one moment to the next, she fell more deeply within herself, into caverns of milky light, breathing loudly, filled with fear and joy because of the journey, perhaps like those sudden descents when one is asleep. The intuition that those moments were fragile made her stir herself gently, fearful of touching herself, of disturbing and dissolving that miracle, the tender creature of light and air who was trying to live inside her.

Once more, she slipped to the window, breathing cautiously. Plunged into a happiness so perfect and intense almost like the chill of ice, almost like the perception of music. Her lips began to tremble, made her look serious. Eternal, eternal. Brilliant and confused, broad tracts of land the colour of chestnuts were succeeded by green, sparkling rivers, coursing with fury and melody. Liquids glowing like flames pouring into her transparent body as if it were an enormous vessel... She herself growing on the smothered earth, dividing into thousands of living particles, filled with her thoughts, her strength, her unawareness...Smoothly crossing the cloudless sky, travelling, flying...

A bird flew slanting into the distance!

It penetrated the clear atmosphere and disappeared into the dense foliage of a tree.

Silence was left behind, palpitating in tiny whispers. How long had she been observing it, without feeling anything?

Ah, so she would die.

Yes, she would die. As simply as the bird had flown. She tilted her head to one side, gently like a harmless madwoman: but it's easy, so easy...not even intelligent... it's death that will come, that will come... How many seconds had passed? Several. Or more. Cold. She perceived that by some miracle she had now become conscious of those thoughts, that they were so deep that they had passed beneath others that were material and easy, simultaneously ... While she had lived the dream, she had observed the things around her, she had used them mentally, nervously, like someone pulling back the curtain to look at the view. She closed her eyes, pleasantly serene and weary, enshrouded in long, grey veils. For yet another moment, she sensed the threat of incomprehension rising from the remote interior of her body like a flux of blood. Eternity is non-being, death is immortality — they were still floating, the scattered remains after the storm. And she no longer knew where she might secure them, she felt so weary.

Now the certainty of immortality had vanished forever. Perhaps once or twice more in life — perhaps one late afternoon, in a moment of love, at the moment of dying — she would achieve sublime creative unconsciousness, the acute and blind intuition that she was truly immortal for evermore.

The Journey

Impossible to explain. She gradually withdrew from that zone where things have a set form and edges, where everything has a solid and immutable name. Increasingly, she sank into that fluid region, quiescent and unfathomable, where clouds hovered, indistinct and fresh like those of dawn. Dawn breaking over the countryside. On her uncle's farm she had woken up in the middle of the night. The floorboards in the old house were creaking. From up there on the first floor, free in that dark space, she had looked out at the land, searching for those plants that were writhing, coiled up like snakes. Something blinked in the night, looking, looking, the eyes of an outstretched dog on guard. The silence throbbed in her blood and she gasped to its rhythm. The dawn broke over the fields, rosy and moist. The plants were once more green and ingenuous, their stems quivering, sensitive to the breeze, emerging from death. There was no longer any dog guarding the farm. Everything was now one, light, unconscious. At that moment there was a horse running free through the silent countryside, the movement of its legs barely visible. Everything was imprecise, but suddenly in that imprecision she had found a lucidity which she had scarcely perceived and hadn't been able to possess entirely. Perturbed, she had thought: everything, everything. The words are pebbles rolling in the river. That wasn't happiness she had felt just then, but what she had felt had been fluid, pleasantly amorphous, a shining moment, a sombre moment. As sombre as the house that stood on the road covered by dense trees and dust from the road. Inside lived a barefooted old man and his two sons, big and handsome breeders. The younger son had eyes, above all eyes. He had once given her a kiss, one of the most satisfying kisses she had ever experienced, and something rose from the bottom of those eyes when she stretched out her hand. This same hand, which was now resting on the back of the chair, like some tiny separate body, satisfied, languid. As a child, she used to make her hand dance, as if it were a delicate little girl. She had made it dance even for the man who fled or who had been caught, for her lover — and he, fascinated and anguished, had ended up by squeezing it, by kissing it as if that hand itself were a woman. Ah, she had experienced so much, the farm, the man, the hours of waiting. Entire summers, when she spent sleepless nights, which left her pale, her eyes dark. Within her insomnia, other insomnias. She had known certain odours. The smell of damp vegetation, trees and plants illuminated by lights, where? In those days she had trodden on the moist soil of flowerbeds, while the attendant wasn't looking. Lights hanging from wires, swaying, like this, meditating indifferently, music

coming from the band-stand, the black musicians sweating in their uniforms. The trees lit up, the chilly, unreal atmosphere of prostitutes. And above all, there was what cannot be expressed: eyes and a mouth spying from behind the curtain, the eyes of a dog blinking from time to time, a river rolling in silence and not knowing. Also: the plants growing from seeds and dying. Also: in some remote place, a sparrow perched on a branch and someone sleeping. Everything dissolved. The farm, too, existed at that same moment and at that same moment the hand of the clock moved forward while her feeling of bewilderment found itself overtaken by the clock.

Within herself she could feel the time she had lived accumulating. It was an uncertain feeling like the memory of some house in which she had lived. Not exactly of the house, but of its location inside her, in relation to her father beating on his typewriter, in relation to their neighbour's backyard and the waning sunlight in the late afternoon. Obscure, remote and silent. An instant... expired. And she was incapable of knowing whether after this time she had lived there would be continuation, renewal or nothing, like some barrier. No one was preventing her from doing exactly the opposite of any of the things that she might be about to do: no one, nothing... she was not obliged to follow her own beginning... Did it bring pain or pleasure? Meanwhile she felt that this strange freedom which had been her downfall, which she had never linked even to herself, that it was this freedom which was illuminating her body. And she knew that it gave her life and her moments of glory as the creative source of every future moment.

She had survived like an embryo that remained moist amidst the parched and burning rocks, Joana mused. On that evening, now grown old — a closed circle of life, a task completed — on that evening when she had received the man's note, she had chosen a new path. She mustn't escape, but go on. She must use the money her father left behind and which had never been touched, the inheritance she had so far disregarded, she must go, go, be humble, suffer, totter on weak foundations, lose any hopes. Above all, lose any hopes.

She loved her choice, and serenity now caressed her face, allowing moments that were dead and gone to come to mind. She must become one of those people without pride or shame who confide in strangers at any time. And in this way, she would link herself to infancy before death, by means of nakedness. She must finally abase herself. How can I humiliate myself sufficiently, how can I expose myself to the world and death?

The ship swayed gently on the sea as if on gentle open hands. She leaned over the deck-rail and felt tenderness rise slowly to the surface, enveloping her in sadness.

On deck, the passengers strolled up and down, impatiently waiting for tea to be served, anxious to reunite time with time. Someone said, in a pained voice: look at the rain! A grey mist was, in fact, encroaching, eyes closed. Very soon, large raindrops could be seen falling on the wooden planks of the deck, the noise of pins dropping as they hit the water, imperceptibly piercing the surface. The wind grew cold, people were raising the collars of their jackets, suddenly looking anxious, fleeing from melancholy like Otávio with his fear of suffering. De profundis...

De profundis?

Something was trying to speak... De profundis... To hear itself! to take the fleeting opportunity that danced with agile feet on the edge of the abyss. De profundis. To shut the doors of consciousness. At first, to perceive corrupted water, foolish phrases, but then amidst the confusion the thread of pure water shimmering on the rough wall. De profundis. She must approach with care, allow the first waves to trickle. De profundis... She closed her eyes, but barely saw the penumbra. She sank more deeply into thought, she saw a thin, immobile figure outlined in bright red, the drawing she had made with her blood-stained finger on a sheet of paper, when she had scratched herself and her father went off to fetch the iodine. In the darkness of those pupils, her thoughts aligned in geometrical form, the one super-imposing itself on the other as in a honeycomb, some empty cocoons, amorphous, without any place for reflection. Soft, grey forms, like a cerebrum. But she didn't really see this, she tried to imagine it perhaps. De profundis. I can see a dream I once had: a dark, empty stage behind a staircase. But the moment I think of 'dark stage' in words, the dream evaporates and all that remains is the empty cocoon. The sensation has faded and is purely mental. Until the words 'dark stage' come to life inside me, in my darkness, in my fragrance, to the point of becoming a shadowy vision, frayed and intangible, but behind the staircase. Then once more I shall possess a truth, my dream. De profundis. Why does that voice wishing to speak not come? I am ready. I close my eyes. Full of flowers that transform themselves into roses while the insect quivers and advances in the direction of the sun just as the vision is much more rapid than the word. I choose the birth of the earth in order to... Meaningless. De profundis, then the thread of pure water will come. I watched the snow tremble full of rose-tinted clouds. To close one's eyes and feel inspiration come tumbling down like a white cascade. De profundis. My God, I await You. God, come to me, God, burgeon in my breast. I am nothing and misfortune rains upon my head. I only know how to use words and words are treacherous and I continue to suffer, nothing in the end but the thread on the dark wall. God, come to me for I have no happiness and my life is as dark as a night without stars, and God, why do

You not exist inside me? Why did You make me separate from You? God, come to me, I am nothing, I am less than dust and I await You each day and night. Help me, I only have one life and that life is trickling through my fingers and serenely heading towards death and I can do nothing except watch my life ebb away with each passing moment, I am alone in the world, those who love me do not know me, those who know me fear me and I am miserable and impoverished and very soon I shall no longer know that I ever existed. I have not much time left to live and what time is left will meantime go on being untouched and useless. Take pity on me, for I am nothing, give me what I need. God, give me what I need whatever that may be, my desolation is as deep as a well and I do not deceive myself before myself and others. Come to me in my misfortune and that misfortune is today, that misfortune is always, I kiss Your feet and the dust on Your feet, I long to dissolve into tears, I call to You from the depths, come to my assistance for I have committed no sins, from the depths I call to You and no answer comes and my despair is as arid as the desert sands and doubts stifle and humiliate me. God, this vanity of living silences me, I am nothing, from the depths I call to You, from the depths I call to You from the depths I call to You from the depths I call to You...

Her thoughts were now becoming coherent and she was breathing like an invalid who had survived moments of crisis. Something was still rumbling inside her, but she was quite exhausted, and her face relaxed into a smooth mask with vacant eyes. From the depths the final surrender. The end...

But first from the depths as a response, yes as a response, enlivened by the air that was still penetrating her body, the flame shot up, burning bright and pure... From the sombre depths the inclement impulse burning, life rising anew, formless, audacious, pitiful. A dry sob as if they had shaken her, happiness shining in her breast, intense and unbearable, ah, such turmoil. Above all, that constant stirring in the depths of her being became clear... it was now growing and throbbing. That stirring of some live thing trying to release itself from the water in order to breathe. And how was she to fly, yes, how was she to fly... walk along the shore and feel the wind on her face, her hair blowing, glory on the mountain... Rising, rising, her body opening itself to the atmosphere, surrendering to the blind pulsation of her own blood, crystalline notes, tintillating, glistening in her soul... There was still no disenchantment before her own mysteries, oh God, God, God, come to me, not to save me, salvation should be in me, but to smother me with Your heavy hand, with punishment, with death, because I am powerless and afraid of dealing that tiny blow which will transform my whole body in this centre which longs to breathe and which is rising, rising... the same impulse as that

of the tide and genesis, genesis! The tiny blow which only allows mad thoughts to exist in the madman, the luminous wound growing, hovering, overpowering. Oh, how she harmonized with what she thought and how what she thought was gloriously, oppressively fatal. I only want You God so that You may take me in like a dog when everything may be once more simply solid and complete, when the moment of bringing one's head out of the waters might be nothing but a memory and when inside me there might be nothing but knowledge, which has been used and is used and by means of which things are once more received and given, oh God.

What dominated in her was not courage, she was only substance, less than human. How could she be a hero and want to vanquish things? She was not woman, she existed, and what was inside her were movements lifting her in constant transition. Perhaps at some time she might have altered with her savage strength the atmosphere around her and no one had noticed, perhaps she had invented a new substance with her breathing and she did not know, she merely sensed what her tiny woman's head could never understand. Endless, feverish thoughts sprang up and pervaded her startled body and they were important in so far as they concealed a vital impulse, they were important in so far as at the very moment of their conception there was that blind and authentic substance creating itself, rising and bulging out like a bubble of air on the water's surface, almost breaking it... She was aware that she still hadn't slept, she thought that she would still be forced to burst into flames. That she would terminate once and for all the prolonged gestation of childhood and that from her painful immaturity her own being would explode, free at last, at long last! No, no, no God, I want to be alone. And one day there will appear, yes, one day there will appear in me, the capacity, as red and affirmative as it is clear and sweet, one day whatever I may do will be blindly securely unconsciously, treading inside me, on my truth, so completely immersed in whatever I might be doing that I shall be unable to speak; above all, the day will come when my every movement will be creation, birth, I shall break all the negations that exist within me, I shall prove to myself that there is nothing to fear, that everything that I might be will always be wherever there is a woman who shares my origins. I shall raise within myself what I am — one day, at a gesture from me, my mighty waves will soar, pure water submerging my doubt, my conscience, I shall be as strong as the soul of an animal and whenever I might speak they will be slow, unthought words, not felt lightly, not full of a desire for humanity, not the past consuming the future! whatever I might say will sound preordained and complete! there will be no space inside me for me to know that time exists, that men and dimensions exist, there will be no space inside me even to notice that I shall

be creating instant by instant, no, not instant by instant: forever fused, for then I shall live, only then shall I live more fully than in childhood, I shall be as brutal and misshapen as a stone, I shall be as light and vague as something felt rather than understood, I shall transcend myself in waves, oh, God, and may everything come and fall on me, even the incomprehension of myself at certain blank moments, for I need only fulfil myself and then nothing will impede my path until death-without-fear; from whatever struggle or truce, I shall arise as strong and comely as a young colt.

AFTERWORD

Believe me, the thing I like most of all in the world... is what I feel deep inside me, opening out as it were... I could almost tell you what it is, yet I cannot...

Near to the Wild Heart [The original title in Portuguese is *Perto do coração selvagem*. First published in Rio de Janeiro, *A Noite*, 1944. Subsequent editions published by Editora Nova Fronteira.] was published in Brazil in 1944. It was Clarice Lispector's first novel and she was nineteen years of age. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, she had amused herself writing stories and short plays. For one reason or another, these were never published. She worked on the manuscript of *Near to the Wild Heart* for several years, a task she combined with her career as a journalist for a prestigious Rio newspaper, *A Noite*. Lispector was one of the first women to be employed there as a journalist. She found the work congenial and became friendly with other talented young writers. The most significant friendship of all was that with Lucio Cardoso, a writer of considerable experience who read and criticized draft chapters of her novel in manuscript form. Cardoso also suggested the lines from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a suitable title.

The reviews commented on the book's striking innovations and welcomed its publication as 'the most serious attempt in Brazil to date to write a truly introspective novel'. But no critic could possibly have foreseen the influence Lispector would exert on feminist literature at home and abroad in years to come. *Near to the Wild Heart* focuses on psychological and philosophical problems in its portrayal of Joana, a young woman in search of an authentic existence. Joana's confidences echo those of Lispector herself. For here is a writer who claimed to be 'affected by everything', who saw and heard too much, who was constantly struggling against the tide of her own self. The traumas experienced by Joana foreshadow most of the preoccupations voiced by woman writers everywhere from the 1960s onwards.

Near to the Wild Heart is divided into two parts. The nine chapters in Part One operate on two different but interrelated planes, the one dealing with the protagonist's childhood and adolescence: the early years with her father, orphanhood, the male teacher whom Joana secretly adores, the aunt who offers her a home without love or understanding, the emotional and physical turmoil of puberty as she comes to discover her own body and its demands.

Interspersed with these fragments of her past are glimpses of Joana as a conventional suburban wife with unconventional thoughts:

How was she to tie herself to a man without permitting him to imprison her?... And was there some means of acquiring things without those things possessing her?...

A mysterious 'female voice' engages Joana in earnest dialogues about existence and constraints.

A second plane focuses on the adult Joana who becomes increasingly aware of *who* and *what* she is. A triangular relationship involving Joana, her unfaithful husband Otávio, and Lídia, Otávio's ex-fiancee who is now expecting his child, exacerbates obsessive self-questioning about social and sexual roles. Joana sees her marriage in retrospect as an unforgivable betrayal of self. Bravely confronting her humiliating situation, she makes a bid for freedom, whatever the cost.

Part Two of the novel sees Joana emerge as a prototype for all the reflective women who appear in subsequent stories and novels. Trapped in a servile and meaningless existence, she rebels in frustration. The mockery of her relationship with Otávio precipitates a crisis which makes their separation inevitable.

My God! — never to be yourself, never, never. And to be a married woman, in other words, someone with their destiny traced out... Even boredom with life has a certain beauty... when you suffer it alone in quiet despair.

It is significant that Clarice Lispector married a fellow law student whilst in the midst of writing this first novel. Early experience of marriage undoubtedly sharpened her perceptions about the considerable problems of readjustment. Joana's simmering resentments are articulated with subtle precision:

Now all her time was devoted to him and she felt that any minutes she could call her own had been conceded, broken into little ice cubes which she must swallow quickly before they melted.

The paths of awareness in *Near to the Wild Heart* were to be further explored in the steady output of novels and short stories Lispector continued to publish until she died from cancer in December 1977. But the power and originality of her best work can already be appraised in this moving tale of self-discovery. Plot or intrigue in any conventional sense is disregarded. Any physical action is sparse. Her characters are much less interested in external reality than in their own inner responses to the people and objects around them.

The essence of Lispector's fiction is her pursuit of a figurative language capable of conveying things arcane and elusive. Joana progresses through a labyrinth of signs and symbols. She sifts the grains of experience and uncovers unsuspected layers of meaning. Her dreams are more lucid than any encounters with reality. Existence is seen to be governed by alien forces, and anguish gathers as she starts to penetrate the mysteries that cloak her destiny. Even in this first novel, Lispector unravels perceptions of remarkable intensity which are not simply physical and emotional but, above all, spiritual. Acute powers of observation and feeling permit her to articulate the most subtle ambiguities, even though Lispector always thought of herself as more intuitive than intellectual. She brings a new pliancy and refinement to the language of Brazil and, like the French existentialists, she believes language to be as mysterious as life itself. Joana becomes the alter ego of Lispector when she recognizes that humans have 'a greater capacity for life than knowledge of life', that thoughts must be treated with suspicion, feelings with mistrust, words with caution. Both author and protagonist abhor 'counterfeit emotions' and 'creative lies'.

Lispector's fictional world takes us into the realms of phenomenology, to a place of heightened awareness and a higher plane of *being*. Rejecting any accepted laws of time or space, Joana confides:

I can scarcely believe that I have limits, that I am outlined and defined. I feel myself to be dispersed in the atmosphere, thinking inside other creatures, living inside things beyond myself.

Joana, like nearly all of Lispector's women characters, rebels against the contradictions of existence. The 'wild heart' she pursues is the very core of freedom and power, an inner sanctum where she can listen undisturbed to 'the music of confusion murmuring in her depths'. Joana's suppressed violence, when she realizes that *fraternity* and *justice* are not merely unattainable but contrary to nature, gradually peters out into 'awesome silence'. Her situation, however, is one of anguish rather than despair. Her threatened existence induces defiance rather than panic, for as she herself recognizes: 'Solitude is mingled with my essence'. Hence her mistrust of 'life in common, plotting and threatening you with a common death'.

Lispector's unorthodox use of syntax and punctuation, her bold rhythms and syncopated phrasing contribute to the overall impression of tense, haunting lyricism. Her startling metaphors and similes show a preference for suggestion rather than clear-cut definition. Words are given new meanings and resonances in order to encompass things amorphous and impalpable. Conscious of the dilemma that confronts any writer who opts for

approximations as opposed to certainties, who struggles with perceptions much too organic to be conceived in thoughts', Lispector has attempted to clarify her own solution to the problem. She observed:

What cannot be expressed only comes to me through the breakdown of language. Only when the structure breaks down do I succeed in achieving what the structure failed to achieve.

This approach is consistent with her avowed preference for 'things which are incomplete or badly finished, which awkwardly try to take flight only to fall clumsily to the ground'. In short, Clarice Lispector was a writer of vision and courage who was never afraid of 'plunging into darkness only to emerge bearing trickling mirrors'.

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