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Class Reader

The twentieth-century volume of this anthology opens with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a work that can be seen as emblematic of the 1900s. Conrad, born Jósef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, left his native Poland when he was seventeen to work on a French ship. He later sailed on English ships and became a British citizen. Fluent in both French and English, he eventually settled in England and before he was forty published the first of his many novels in English, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), a story set in the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. Most of his novels take place outside England—in Asia, Africa, eastern Europe, and Latin America. Today Conrad would probably be described as a "hybrid" writer, one whose life and work bring together more than one culture, among the first of many such twentieth-century writers who represent an emerging global perspective. Indeed, separating literatures into national categories, a habit of the nationalistic nineteenth century, makes less and less sense and

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COMPARATIVE TIME LINE FOR THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1890–1900	1895–1898 Spanish-American War 1899 Boxer Rebellion in China Boer War in South Africa	1890 Williams, *An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II* 1899 Kipling, "The White Man's Burden"	1891 Kinescope movie camera invented by Thomas Edison 1896 Olympic Games revived in Athens
1900–1910	1901 Cuba becomes protectorate of the United States President McKinley assassinated 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War won by Japan; Japan gains control of Korea 1905 Norway separates from Sweden	1902 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1905 Hossain, "Sultana's Dream" 1907 Kipling awarded Nobel Prize Synge, *Playboy of the Western World*	1900 Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* 1901 Marconi broadcasts radio signals 1903 Wright brothers make first powered flight 1905 Einstein, theory of relativity Expressionist movement begun by group of German painters 1907 Cubist exhibition in Paris
1910–1920	1910 Civil war in Mexico Japan annexes Korea 1912 War in the Balkans	1912 Mann, *Death in Venice* 1913 Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* Proust, *Swann's Way* Tagore awarded Nobel Prize	1913 Armory Show introduces cubism and postimpressionism in United States Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*

becomes increasingly difficult with twentieth-century writings. Therefore, the geographical divisions used in earlier books of this anthology are not present here; the globalization of literature and culture that characterizes the modern period has blurred such separations.

FROM EUROPEAN DOMINANCE TO A GLOBAL CULTURE

The twentieth century began with Europe dominating the rest of the world. Controlling nearly four-fifths of the land surface of the earth, the West imagined itself as the force of peace and progress. A second wave of industrialization introduced electricity, chemicals, and oil; it especially transformed transportation and communications, making possible the automobile, the telephone, the radio, and the airplane. Science had achieved the status of a religion. Even nations like China that had previously resisted Westernization sought the benefits of science and industry.

By the time the century concluded, Europe had been displaced from its former centrality by an emerging global culture. Two world wars and numerous lesser

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1910–1920 (cont.)	1914–1918 World War I 1914 British Protectorate in Egypt 1916 Easter Rebellion of Irish nationalists against British rule Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League sign Lucknow Agreement calling for Indian independence 1917 United States enters World War I Russian Revolution 1918 World War I armistice signed 1919 Treaty of Versailles British kill 400 Indian protesters at Amritsar Prohibition amendment ratified	1914 Death of Joseph Conrad Joyce, *The Dead* 1915 Death of August Strindberg Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 1916 Death of Wilfred Owen Death of Isaac Rosenberg Death of Guillaume Apollinaire 1921 Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* Hughes, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* 1922 Eliot, *The Waste Land* Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*	1913 Ford pioneers the assembly line 1915 Einstein's general theory of relativity Dance Instructor Irene Castle introduces the *Castle Lindy Hop* Film, *Birth of a Nation*, by Griffith 1916 Duchamp, Dada beginnings of Dada movement 1918 Spengler, *Decline of the West* 1919 Einstein's and Lorentz's theories of light are confirmed Bauhaus founded by Gropius 1921 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
1920–1930	1920 League of Nations established Women's suffrage passed in United States Irish independence Gandhi emerges as leader of independence movement Sacco and Vanzetti arrested 1921 First Egyptian parliament		1922 Lord Carnarvon discovers the tomb of Tutankhamen 1923 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*

point out the current global order

wars changed the maps and turned what had been virtually a European monologue into a conversation among many old and new nation-states throughout the world. The gas attacks of World War I, the scientific experimentation of the Nazis during the Holocaust, and the atomic bombs that ended World War II had undermined the belief that science brought only progress and prosperity. New sciences, such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology sought to understand the sources of irrationality, violence, and brutality. As they explored the human psyche, psychologists and anthropologists realized that savage impulses were not limited to "primitive" peoples. Eventually the simple dichotomy of "primitive" and "civilized" lost its validity.

In the colonial era that extended into the early twentieth century, industrialized nations exploited their colonies as sources of raw materials and as markets for manufactured goods. Although they claimed to be bringing European enlightenment to benighted parts of the globe, imperialists were really engaged in what Conrad's Marlow calls a "squeeze." They grabbed ivory, rubber, and oil but had little interest in the cultural productions of "savage" peoples. A cultural exchange began nevertheless. According to legend, some Japanese ceramics came to the West

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1920–1930 (cont.)	1922 League of Nations mandates establish European protectorates in the Middle East Formation of the Soviet Union Irish Free State established 1925 Hindenberg elected president of Germany Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, vol. 1 1927 "Black Friday": German economy collapses 1928 Stalin takes over leadership in Soviet Union Kuomintang government established in China Chiang Kai-shek becomes president of China 1929 Stock market crash: beginning of Great Depression	1922 Tanizaki Junichiro, "Aguri" Lu Xun, "The True Story of Ah Q" McKay, *Harlem Shadows* 1923 Yeats awarded Nobel Prize 1924 O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* 1925 Cullen, "Heritage" Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 1926 Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 1927 Hesse, *Steppenwolf* 1928 Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don* Yeats, *The Tower* 1929 Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* Mann awarded Nobel Prize	1925 Scopes trial Film: *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein Louis Armstrong makes first recording with his own band 1927 Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic Film: *The Jazz Singer*, first talking picture 1928 Gershwin, *An American in Paris* Ravel, *Bolero* Fleming discovers penicillin Television demonstrated in Britain 1929 St. Valentine's Day massacre O'Keeffe, *Black Flower and Blue Larkspur*

wrapped in the woodblock prints that inspired artists such as Vincent Van Gogh and James Whistler. African tribal art caught the attention of European modernist painters, especially Pablo Picasso. Hindu gurus from India and Zen masters from Japan promoted their spiritual disciplines in the West. In the first sixty-five years of the twentieth century, only two writers from outside Euro-American cultures had won the Nobel Prize for literature: Rabindranath Tagore of India in 1913 and Gabriela Mistral of Chile in 1945. In the past thirty-five years, however, ten writers from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have been awarded the prize. Like the world music movement that has put Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the American charts and made the Beatles big in Asia, the "world literature movement" begun in the middle of the last century has made literature global.

Nationalism in literature was replaced by cross-culturalism. Joseph Conrad, who migrated from Poland to France and then England at the beginning of the century to become an English novelist, would prove to be one of the first of the century's world citizens. His successors include Vladimir Nabokov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, an émigré and an exile, respectively, who came from Russia to the United States; Derek Walcott, Claude McKay, Michelle Cliff, and V. S. Naipaul, who

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1930–1940	1930 Gandhi leads campaign against British salt monopoly 1931 Japan invades Manchuria 1932 F. D. Roosevelt elected U.S. President; New Deal begins 1933 Repeal of Prohibition Hitler becomes German chancellor; granted dictatorial powers 1934 Dust Bowl in the Plains states 1936 Abyssinian War ends; Italy annexes Ethiopia Mussolini and Hitler proclaim Rome-Berlin Axis Edward VIII abdicates Spanish Civil War China: Kai-shek declares war on Japan 1937 French suppress rebellion in Morocco Japan invades China 1938 Mexico nationalizes U.S. and British oil companies Germany mobilizes, occupies Sudetenland; Munich conference 1939 World War II	1930 Mistral, *Nobody Wins but Only Tears* 1932 Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* Huxley, *Brave New World* 1933 Brecht, *When Evil Doing Comes Like Falling Rain* Sean O'Casey, *The Autobiography of Alfred Pollard* 1934 Lorca, *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* Pirandello awarded Nobel Prize 1935 Neruda, *Residence on Earth* 1937 P.B.S. *Kanthapura* 1939 Cesaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*	1931 Dali, *Persistence of Memory* Empire State Building 1932 Lindbergh kidnapping Calder exhibits first mobiles in Paris Earhart first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic 1936 Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* Turing develops mathematical theory of computing 1937 Picasso, *Guernica* Wright, *Fallingwater* house built in Pennsylvania 1938 Carson develops Xerography

all migrated from the West Indies to the United States or Britain; Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Samuel Beckett from Ireland, who both went to Paris; and James Baldwin from the United States, who spent many years in Paris. Some of these migrants were driven into exile by political oppression, censorship, or poor economic conditions. *In the World:* Crossing Cultures draws upon writers from India, Pakistan, and the Indian diaspora to illustrate one aspect of this globalization of culture.

In addition to being globalized, literature also became diversified. Many formerly unheard voices joined the cultural conversation, especially women and members of ethnic and cultural minorities. New American literatures of ethnic subcultures, such as Chicano and Native American literature, developed themes of cultural pride and allegories of cultural history and mythology that recall the nationalistic literatures of Europe and America in the nineteenth century. They are part of a worldwide postcolonial movement through which many former colonies are constructing national identities. As industrialization has brought global culture to nearly every landscape on earth, an appreciation of the differences between cultures and individuals has also awakened.

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1940–1950	1940 Trotsky assassinated in Mexico 1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, United States enters war Italian forces expelled from East Africa 1942 Battle of El Alamein drives Axis powers from North Africa 1944 International Monetary Fund and World Bank established D-Day, June 6 1945 Germany surrenders, V-E Day, May 8 United States drops atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrenders Arab League founded United Nations founded 1946 Nuremberg trials 1947 India gains independence U.N. develops plan for partitioning Palestine Truman Doctrine offering support for countries opposing Communism 1948 Mohandas Gandhi assassinated	1940 Wright, *Native Son* Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* 1941 Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* 1942 Camus, *The Stranger* 1943 Sartre, *The Flies* 1945 Senghor, *Shadow Songs* 1947 *The Diary of Anne Frank* 1948 Pound, *The Pisan Cantos* T. S. Eliot awarded Nobel Prize	1940 Lascaux caves discovered 1942 Fermi splits the atom 1944 Wright-Johnson Administration and Research Building 1947 Dead Sea Scrolls discovered 1948 Bell Labs develops transistor Pollock, *Composition No. 1*

WORLD WAR I

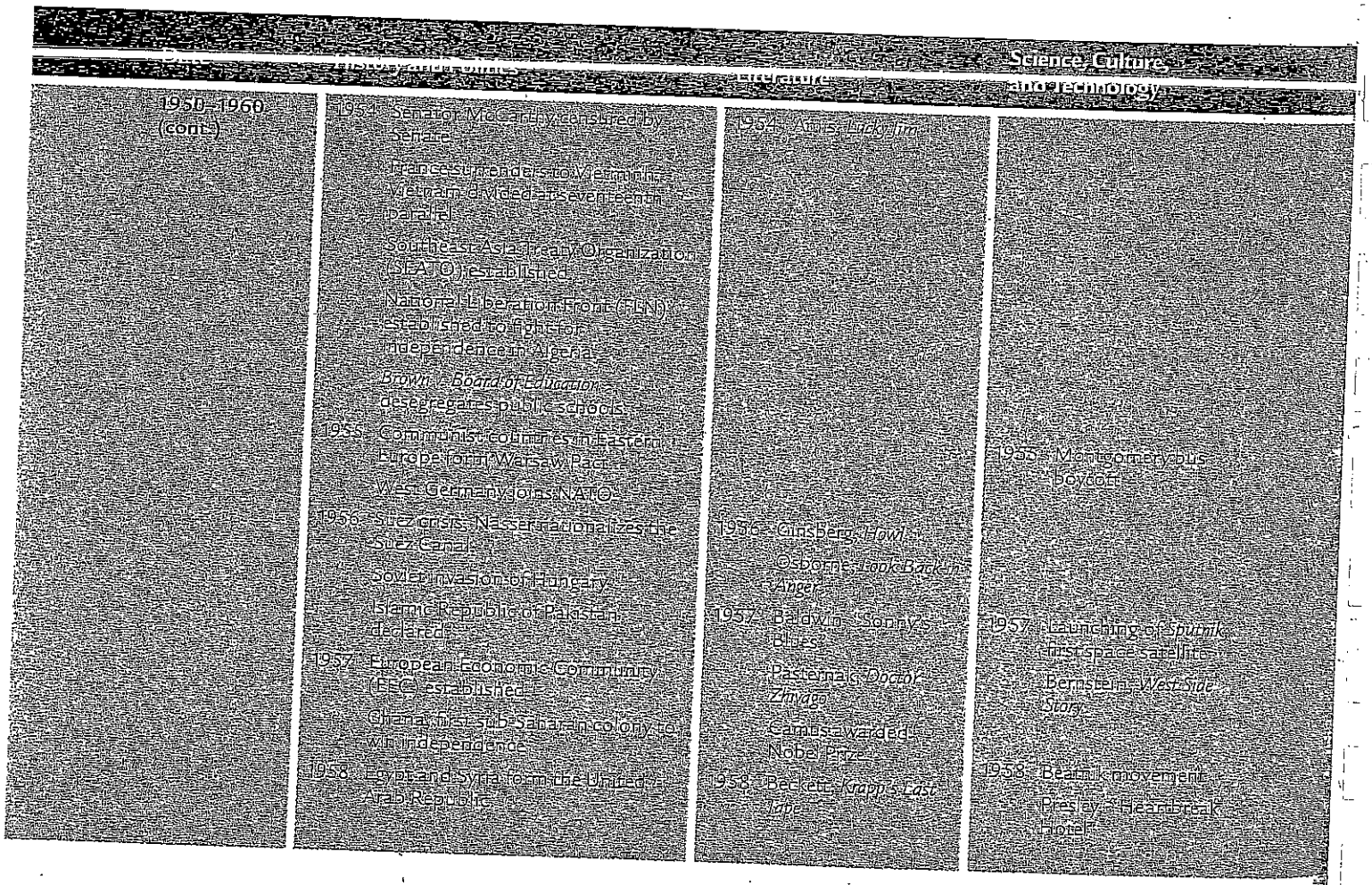
The competition among European nations for control of disputed territories in eastern Europe and for sources of raw materials and new markets in Asia and Africa reached an impasse in the first decade of the twentieth century. When German expansionism threatened to engulf the rest of Europe, France, Russia, and Britain went to war to contain Germany and its allies, Austria and Italy. After the German strategy to defeat the French quickly and move on to other fronts failed, the war settled into a long and brutal siege in which millions of young men from all the European nations perished. Soldiers died hideous deaths in the massive trench warfare of World War I (1914–1918)—by gassing, shelling, and aerial bombardment—and more troops of more nationalities were slaughtered under grimmer conditions than in any previous war. The conflict ground to a stalemate in Western Europe in 1917. America belatedly entered the war in 1917, and the fresh American troops made enough of a difference that Germany surrendered by November 1918.

Although the war was fought with the expectation that it would produce lasting peace, it had just the opposite effect. The Treaty of Versailles (1919), which

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1940–1950 (cont.)	1948: War in Palestine between Arabs and Jews, founding of Israel 1949: NATO established People's Republic of China proclaimed by Mao Zedong End of Greek civil war Apartheid introduced in South Africa		
1950–1960	1950: Korean War 1951: End of Allied occupation in Japan Rosenbergs sentenced to death 1952: First hydrogen bomb exploded by United States Eisenhower elected president Mau Mau terror campaign against British in Kenya Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya 1953: Yugoslav constitution: Tito elected president Stalin succeeded by Malenkov in USSR Shah Reza Pahlavi monarchy established in Iran Laos gains independence from France	1950: Abe Kobo, "The Red Cocoon" 1951: Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye* 1952: Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 1953: Kawabata Yasunari, "The Moon on the Water"	1953: Crick and Watson model structure of DNA Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

ended the war, reconfigured the map of Europe in ways that would soon antagonize both Germany and Russia, and it punished Germany with ruinous demands for reparations. In little more than a decade, the Germans, financially broken and restless for more *lebensraum* (living space), embraced an even more virulent nationalism—fascist National Socialism, or Nazism—and instigated a new war.

Although the protagonists in World War I were the major European powers, the war had reached far beyond the borders of Europe. By having chosen to side with Germany, the Ottoman empire, which had ruled the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and north Africa from its capital in Turkey since 1299, was brought to its final collapse. The resulting power vacuum allowed Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal Ataturk (1881–1938) to establish a secular republic. The new League of Nations placed other Ottoman lands in the Middle East under either French or British administration, a resolution that created many of the inequities and tensions in that region that still plague the world nearly a century later. The British and French roles in the Middle East differed from those that Britain and France had played in colonial Africa, for now they were administrators, not rulers. Nevertheless, the Europeans' interference in Middle Eastern



affairs was often resented and led to such confrontations as the Suez crisis between Egypt and Britain in 1956. In other parts of the world, European nations had recruited their colonial subjects to fight in the First World War. After the war, German colonies went to the victors: African colonies, for example, were divided among Britain, France, and Belgium; Japan was even able to seize some of the remote German possessions in the Pacific.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

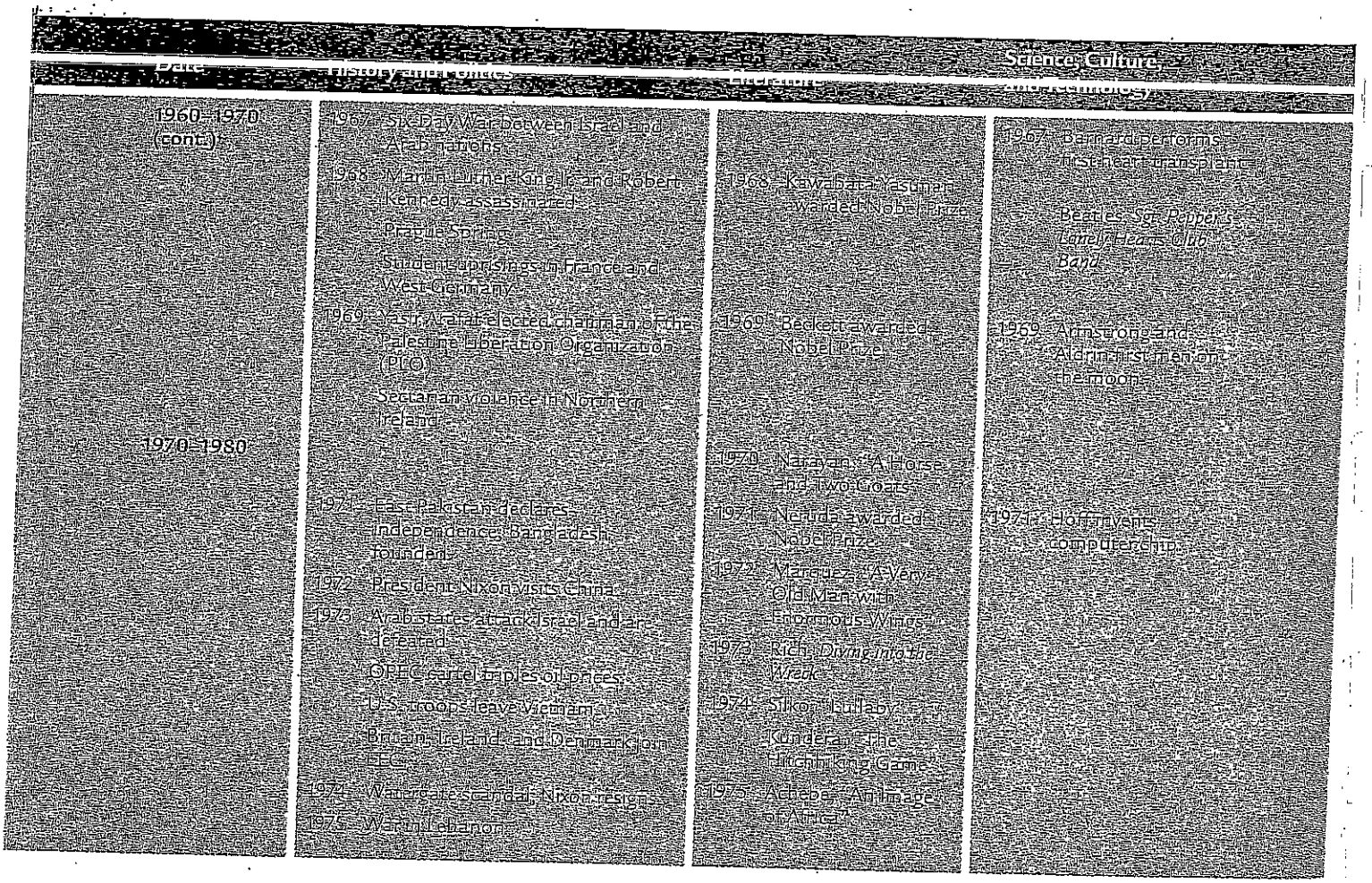
Russia had entered World War I in 1914 ill prepared for battle. Russian industry was not capable of supplying the army that was under the personal charge of Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918). Long-standing discontent with the autocratic tsar was intensified by his incompetence as a military commander and by the bungling of his generals. After two million Russian soldiers were killed in the first two years of the war and an economic crisis and food shortages wracked the homeland, Russia lost the will to continue fighting abroad. Nicholas was forced to abdicate early in 1917, and the country plunged into civil war. Loosely organized "White," or Menshevik, forces pursued a vague program of social democracy while "Red,"

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1950–1960 (cont.)	1959 Cuban revolution Chinese suppress rebellion in Tibet; Dalai Lama flees the country Homelands established in South Africa	1958 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 1959 Grass, *The Tin Drum* Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel*	
1960–1970	1960 Eichmann found guilty Seventeen nations win independence from European powers Sharpeville [illegible] demonstrators killed in South Africa 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion Berlin Wall put up 1962 Cuban missile crisis Algerian independence American combat troops sent to Vietnam 1963 President Kennedy assassinated 1964 China tests atomic bomb 1965 Vietnam War escalates; United States begins bombing campaign War between India and Pakistan 1966 Cultural Revolution in China	1961 Camus, *The Wretched of the Earth* 1962 Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths* 1963 Mahfouz, *Zaabalawi* Takamishi, *Iroko* *The Rite* Akhmatova, *Requiem* published in Germany 1964 Sartre awarded Nobel Prize 1965 Oe Kenzaburo, *Hiroshima Notes* 1966 El Hakim, *The Fate of a Cockroach* Sachs awarded Nobel Prize	1961 Gagarin first man in space Beatles perform in Liverpool; Bob Dylan debuts in New York 1962 Carson, *Silent Spring* 1963 Pop art 1965 Malcolm X shot Op art

or Bolshevik, forces sought to institute a COMMUNIST government in what would later be known as the Russian or Communist Revolution. Under the leadership of Vladimir Ulianov Lenin (1870–1924), the Bolsheviks' Red Army won out by 1921, but the industrial and agricultural sectors of the Russian economy had been devastated. The first item on Lenin's postrevolution agenda was to rebuild Russia economically, a program that was cut short by his death in 1924. The subsequent struggle for power among the leaders of the politburo, the policy-making and executive arm of the Communist Party, led to the dictatorship of Josef Stalin (1879–1953), who consolidated his position by 1928 and ruled the nation for the next quarter century.

says law?

Many Western intellectuals saw the Great Depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929 as proof of Karl Marx's prediction of the collapse of capitalism. Although Karl Marx (1818–1883), the economist who developed communist theory, had asserted that communist revolutions would take place in the most advanced capitalist countries, Russia, the one existing communist state, had been the least industrialized of the European nations, and its brand of communism in fact emphasized dictatorship at the expense of the proletariat. In spite of its



impact of the great depression on the left & right

shortcomings, however, Russia was an alternative to the ruthless capitalist economies that seemed to produce wealth for the few and unemployment and misery for the many. The Great Depression did not bring any of the more advanced European countries to revolution, but it did encourage the growth of communist and socialist parties, on the left, and a reactionary nationalism, on the right, in the form of FASCISM. Fascists took power in Nazi Germany, the Italy of Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), the Spain of Francisco Franco (1892–1975), and the China of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975). Communism characterized itself as the movement that opposed fascism and transcended national interests to represent the international working class; in the eyes of many, it became the international alternative to nationalistic fascism.

As part of his international vision Lenin had encouraged the development of communist movements in many nonindustrial countries, particularly in colonial or formerly colonial countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. By allying themselves with the nationalistic and independence movements in those countries, communists appealed to people who resented colonial exploitation and wished to modernize without being Westernized. This strategy was most successful

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1970–1980 (cont.)	1975 Franco dies; Juan Carlos becomes king of Spain 1976 Deaths of Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai Soweto protests in South Africa 1977 President Sadat of Egypt visits Jerusalem 1979 Israel and Egypt sign peace treaty at Camp David Ayatollah Khomeini establishes Islamic republic in Iran Soviet Union invades Afghanistan Saddam Hussein becomes president of Iraq	1977 Morrison, *Song of Solomon* Head, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration" 1978 Desai, "The Farewell Party"	1976 Haley, *Roots* Wosniak and Jobs develop the personal computer 1978 Birth of first test-tube baby
1980–1990	1980 Lech Walesa leads Solidarity strike in Gdansk 1980–1988 Iraq-Iran War 1981 President Sadat of Egypt assassinated 1984 Indira Gandhi assassinated 1985 Gorbachev becomes leader of USSR 1986 Space shuttle *Challenger* explodes Chernobyl nuclear accident in the Ukraine	1980 Mnthali, "The Stranglehold of English Lit" 1981 Brooks, "To the Diaspora" 1982 Marquez awarded Nobel Prize 1984 Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown" 1986 Soyinka awarded Nobel Prize 1987 Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*	1981 AIDS first recognized as a disease 1982 Lin, Vietnam Veterans' Memorial

in China, where the Communists joined forces with the nationalist revolution led by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and his successor Chiang Kai-shek. When Chiang Kai-shek later tried to suppress the Communists, he inspired revolutionary opposition led by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) that eventually defeated the Nationalists and in 1949 established the People's Republic of China.

WORLD WAR II

Very soon after 1918 it became clear that the forces that had started the First World War were preparing for another confrontation. Competition among colonial powers, ultranationalism, the rise of dictators, and the stresses of a worldwide depression brought Europe and the rest of the world to the brink of explosion in the late 1930s. Two contradictory versions of Western civilization opposed each other. Fascists presented themselves as preservers or restorers of a pure European culture that would reverse the decline of the West. Their opponents saw Fascists as achieving order only by destroying the free democratic institutions that were the West's finest achievement. With the rise of fascism, many people were drawn to the Marxian conclusion that revolution was the inevitable result of the divide between

Fascists & their opponents

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1980–1990 (cont.)	1988 Soviet Union begins withdrawing troops from Afghanistan 1989 End of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe Berlin Wall torn down Tiananmen Square demonstrators shot	1987 Chinweizu, *Decolonizing the African Mind* 1988 Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* Mukherjee, "A Wife's Story" Mahfouz awarded Nobel Prize	1988 Genome Project begun
1990–2000	1990 East and West Germany are reunited 1990–1991 Iraq invades Kuwait; Iraq defeated by U.S.-led coalition 1990 Nelson Mandela released from prison Mexico City becomes world's most populous city 1991 Warsaw Pact dissolved Gorbachev resigns as Soviet premier; USSR ceases to exist 1992 Canada, Mexico, and United States form the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) Hindu extremists demolish Ayodhya mosque in India Islamic rebels capture Kabul and overthrow Communist government	1990 Fuentes, *The Prisoner of Las Lomas* Naipaul, "Our Universal Civilization" O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* Paz awarded Nobel Prize 1991 Gordimer awarded Nobel Prize 1992 Gao Xingjian, *Dialogue and Rebuttal* Walcott awarded Nobel Prize	1990 *Hubble* space telescope placed in orbit

capitalists and the working classes. Dismayed by the failure of capitalist governments to put a stop to Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, people were drawn into affiliations with the communist parties and other leftist movements that formed a diverse and committed Popular Front opposed to fascism. That opposition was dramatically and tragically expressed in the Spanish civil war (1936–1939), in which international brigades of idealistic leftists volunteered to fight beside the Spanish Republicans in an unsuccessful effort to preserve the democratic second Spanish Republic against the coalition of conservative and Fascist forces under General Franco.

No one was prepared for the scope of World War II. The war reached beyond Europe into China, Japan, and colonial possessions of the European powers in Africa and Asia. Neither was anyone ready for the extent of the devastation, the leveling of whole cities by aerial bombardment and the civilian genocide of the Holocaust. The massive suffering, the torture, and the deaths of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others whom the Nazis deemed unfit to live was beyond comprehension. These atrocities were carried out with a deliberate and scientific efficiency that applied the principles of industrial organization and technological

scientific efficiency & industrialization of violence!

Date	History and Politics	Literature	Science, Culture, and Technology
1990–2000 (cont.)	1993 Czech and Slovak republics established as seperate countries 1994 Nelson Mandela becomes President of South Africa Palestinian Authority takes control of Gaza Strip Zapatista uprising in Mexico 1995 Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin assassinated Bosnian war Uprising in Russian province of Chechnya Terrorist bombing of federal building in Oklahoma City 1997 Hong Kong returned to China 1998 Arms inspectors driven from Iraq 1999 War in Kosovo	1993 Morrison awarded Nobel Prize 1994 Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Oe Kenzaburo awarded Nobel Prize 1995 Paz, *In Light of India* 1996 Szymborska awarded Nobel Prize 1997 Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* Others See US 2000 Gao Xingjian awarded Nobel Prize	1994 World Wide Web created 1997 Sheep cloned! Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain 2000 Human genome deciphered 2002 Scientists confirm presence of water on Mars
2000–2010	2001 Terrorists destroy World Trade Center in New York City		

productivity to the business of mass murder. And the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States at the end of the war raised unsettling ethical and technological questions. Would atomic energy restore belief in science and progress or had it simply given humanity the power to create Armageddon?

In some ways, World War II fulfilled its stated mission: "to save the world for democracy." Not only were democratic governments established in the defeated countries—Germany, Italy, and Japan—but the war also forced democratic changes in the victorious nations as well, such as the decline of the class system in Britain and a move toward racial integration in the United States. The war also gave impetus to independence movements throughout the colonized world. Before World War II there was one independent country in Africa—Liberia; by the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were no remaining African colonies. World War II was the twentieth century's pivotal event. Its consequences and the issues it raised but did not settle, such as the realignment of the Middle East, are still shaping the world's experience today.

THE POSTWAR YEARS AND THE COLD WAR

Europe, Asia, parts of Africa, and the Middle East awoke from World War II as from a nightmare of devastation and suffering. Although some writers looked on the war as a prelude to the apocalypse, the biblical end of the world, others, especially in Europe and Japan, saw in the rubble an opportunity to rebuild a society now rid, they thought, of narrow nationalism, militarism, and expansionist designs. In the face of sometimes seemingly insurmountable obstacles and despite devastating setbacks, since World War II many nations took steps toward improving relations and understanding among the various countries and cultures of the world. The United Nations was founded in 1945 to mediate conflicts between member nations, to provide economic and technological assistance to countries in need, and to promote cooperation and cultural understanding. Fifty countries joined the four "sponsoring" nations—Britain, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States—to sign the original U.N. charter, and by 1960 another fifty had added their names to the document.

Despite the hope for world peace, the first decade after the war witnessed many regional conflicts, some of which, like the Greek civil war (1946–1949), the Chinese Communist revolution (1945–1949), and the Korean War (1950–1953), threatened to erupt into large-scale confrontations. Even as the peace agreements were being signed at Yalta in 1945, the frost of the cold war between the West and the Soviet Union was crystallizing. Treaties essentially had divided the world into Western and communist blocs, best symbolized perhaps by Germany, which was

ıto West and East. Both sides attempted to enlarge their spheres of influence, ·st in the NATO alliance, the Soviet Union in the Warsaw Pact with its n European satellite states. Both sides also sought to enlist the allegiance of ·ries in the Third World. Conflicts on the fringes, in Korea, for example, and , threatened to turn the cold war hot. When the Soviet Union announced in hat it had developed a hydrogen bomb to match that of the United States, the ıoff took on a more menacing aspect.

Europe and Japan lost most of their remaining colonies in Africa and Asia in wo decades following World War II. Often, as in the case of India and Pakistan, h and South Vietnam, Indonesia, and various African states, including South ·ca, the collapse of colonialism introduced a turbulent period of civil, religious, nationalist strife. The independence movements in these regions also marked a ·wal of interest in traditional cultural practices, folklore, religion, and native guages. In Africa, for example, writers such as Jomo Kenyatta (1893–1978) and ıgi Wa Thiong'o (b. 1938) of Kenya, Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) and Wole Soyinka 1934) of Nigeria, and Alex La Guma (1925–1985) and Lewis Nkosi (b. 1936) of ıth Africa adapted traditional forms of oral storytelling to European narrative to ·ebrate African identity and articulate unique aspects of the African experience.

The colonial struggle in Indochina—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—had ·reaching implications for the United States. Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969), who ıd lived in China, Moscow, and Paris, led the nationalist Vietminh against the ·nch, who gave up their colonial holdings in Vietnam after a major defeat at ıen Bien Phu in 1954. Vietnam was then divided into two parts, North and South. he revolutionary nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh ruled the North while Diem 30 Dinh (1901–1963), supported by the United States, was the official leader of the outh. Diem's regime was unpopular, and a succession of coup attempts against m ultimately led to direct U.S. military intervention in 1964; America feared that Communist takeover in South Vietnam would lead to further revolutions in the gion. Arguably the United States's most unpopular war, the Vietnam War polar-ed public opinion throughout the country, especially after heavy U.S. losses during the Tet offensive of January 1968, which prompted massive antiwar demon-rations in both the United States and Europe. The antiwar and civil rights move-ments in the United States and the independence efforts around the world omented a global struggle for basic human rights.

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, at least symbolically ending the cold war, some claimed that "the end of history" had been reached, for the separation of he world into three entities—the Free World, the Communist World, and the Third World—no longer stood. Every country had become a member of a single global community, a participant in an expanding free market connected to one

network of communications. The arrogance of the assumption that the only significant differences in the world had been those between the capitalist West and the communist East was compounded in the notion that once those oppositions disappeared, the world had become homogenous. Some Asian observers of the world scene have described the almost continuous wars on their continent since World War II, wars that often involved Western interference, as World War III. In the wake of the cold war, many countries remained suspicious of modernization and Westernization, resisted the economic exploitation of the poor by rich nations, and viewed globalization as American subjugation of the rest of the world. History had not ended; it had merely been reconfigured.

MODERNISM

The first two decades of the twentieth century could be called the twilight of the ENLIGHTENMENT, the last time people held comforting beliefs in science and progress. The shock of the First World War shattered that faith and thrust the times into intellectual, cultural, and political crises. The following lines from "The Second Coming," written in 1920 by William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), one of Europe's most visionary poets, capture the spirit of the age that witnessed the Russian Revolution, the horrors of World War I, and the collapse of accepted truths in science, religion, and politics.

> Things fall apart, the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) in *Decline of the West* (1918) asserted that the West had lived out its allotted cycle of glory, citing World War I as a point of no return in the downward spiral to final desolation. Since Europe had not suffered a widespread war for nearly a century, even the memories of earlier conflicts were distant. The young men who fought in the trenches had been nursed on comfortable pieties about God, country, and bravery, and had not even matured before they became the "lost generation," so called because so many had been wiped out on the battlefields or disillusioned by the destruction of the Great War. The wartime poets, many of whom died in combat, articulated the trauma in different ways. The traditionalism of the verse forms of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918) is undermined by the subject matter of trench warfare and gas attacks, while the expressionist imagery of Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887–1914) turns the madness of war into surreal nightmare. The death and destruction wrought by the

war seemed to confirm an assertion of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who in the preceding century had declared: "God is dead."

The Waste Land (1922) by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), probably the classic description of modernist malaise, imagines modern urban society as a sterile, materialistic wasteland in which the search for meaning is filled with detours and dead ends. The poem pieces together realistic vignettes of banal urban life with fragments of great literary works from the past, shards of a broken and forgotten tradition. Communication between individuals is faulty or nonexistent, sexual relations mechanical and alienating. Although the end of the poem suggests potential sources of healing, *The Waste Land*, like much modernist writing from the first half of the twentieth century, is less concerned with a cure than with describing the societal sickness.

The chief diagnostician of the diseased modern psyche was Viennese physician Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who described human beings in very different terms from those of the Enlightenment scientists. Instead of rational creatures who by seeking their own self-interests served the best interests of all, human beings, according to Freud, were driven by stifled desires and unconscious drives. Freud developed a scientific theory to explain the role of dreams, secret desires, personal history, and sexuality in defining the individual and to account for how modern urban society frustrates and forces suppression of those desires, causing neuroses. Freud developed psychoanalysis to enable individuals to overcome neuroses by becoming more aware of their suppressed inner life. Freud's ideas spurred an interest in consciousness, the role of sexuality in forming the individual, and the ways in which the perceiver affects his or her perceptions of the external world. Visual artists turned away from painting the exterior world to expressing on canvas their own interior visions. Sometimes this change in perspective produced pictures that distorted or transformed reality, as in the work of cubist painter Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Other artists, known as abstract expressionists, or action painters, made no attempt to relate the images on their canvases to any exterior reality.

"Primitive" cultures, in which, Freud thought, natural impulses and instinctive drives were more openly expressed, became the focus of much scholarship. One of the early classics in the new fields of comparative religion and anthropology was *The Golden Bough* (1890) by Sir James Frazer (1854–1941). A broad survey of myth and ritual, this work was intended to defend the truth of Christianity against pagan religions, but it actually provided a rich symbolic tapestry for reevaluating the archetypal roots of Christianity and its resemblance to pagan religions. The similarities between "primitive" and modern cultures that Frazer brought to light appeared to argue against the myth of progress, especially when modern secularism was seen to be shallow and materialistic in comparison with the mythology of

tribal or traditional societies. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), one of the first anthropologists to study native people in the field, challenged the nineteenth-century contention that myth represented prelogical or prescientific thinking and a rudimentary stage of civilization. By implication, Malinowski questioned any simplistic application of the idea of progress or lack of progress to native cultures.

Anthropologists and comparativists said that the truths and values of individual cultures and their religions were relative, a theory that came to be known as cultural relativism. They considered a particular religion or myth system merely a culture's language for addressing universal human needs, so that all surviving myths and mores from the hundreds of native cultures around the world are true in some sense. The primary issue was not universal truth but whether a particular mythology satisfied the social and psychological needs of those who embraced it. Ruth Benedict's (1887–1948) *Patterns of Culture* (1934) is a classic of the "new" relativism, in which anthropologists describe the behavior of a tribe but pass no value judgments on it. Investigators need to be ultrasensitive to their own cultural systems in order to minimize their cultural bias.

Some of the new social scientists found universal "deep structures" beneath the superficial differences among cultures. Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) believed that social codes governing religious, social, and cultural practices were not particular to certain cultures or historical periods but universal and timeless. In myth, literature, art, and religious symbolism, Jung found what he called "ARCHETYPES," or age-old symbols, such as the Quest, the Great Mother, and the Wise Man, that suggested that human beings in diverse times and cultures shared a common spiritual and psychic makeup. Moreover, although the outward or physical forms of religion changed or evolved, spiritual needs remained relatively constant for each new generation. Jung's explorations of world religions and his investigations of dreams, in stark contrast to the positivist philosophy of science that accepted only measurable observations of the physical world and turned its back on the soul, offered a path for spiritual rebirth.

The new focus on the perceiver and on consciousness prompted a growing uncertainty about the physical world and the nature of reality. After progressing in the nineteenth century to a place where they could explain nearly all material phenomena, the physical sciences were transformed by quantum physics and the theory of relativity in the twentieth century. The complex theories of such scientists as Max Planck (1858–1947), Albert Einstein (1879–1955), Niels Bohr (1885–1962), and Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976) constituted a paradigm shift that revised the Newtonian worldview in place since the seventeenth century. Einstein's theory of relativity modified the customary three-dimensional view of things, adding time as a necessary fourth dimension in any physical description of an

object. In 1927, Werner Heisenberg's experiments with electrons led to his "uncertainty principle," which implied that scientists could not describe reality exactly because they could not simultaneously observe both the position and velocity of an electron. The work of these scientists paved the way for the discovery of a fascinating subatomic world that, to paraphrase Yeats's "The Second Coming," would eventually "vex the world to nightmare" with the nuclear bomb.

If such fundamental concepts as God, time, space, and matter were merely convenient and expedient "fictions," as the philosopher Hans Vaihinger concluded in 1911, what then of human values, language, literature, art, culture, the state, or the self? Philosophers known as logical positivists relegated questions of human ideals and metaphysics to the realm of emotions or the irrational and focused instead on language, recommending that abstract and imprecise terms such as *God, beauty,* and *truth* be exorcised from the lexicon. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) contended that languages were systems of arbitrary symbols that had identifiable connections within the system but no natural or necessary relationship to external reality. Languages were games and all we could ever really know were the rules of the games.

The general uncertainty about the nature of reality along with the alienation and fragmentation that followed the war produced feverish cultural activity as artists and writers sought new expressions for the unfamiliar world they confronted. AVANT-GARDE movements in art, music, and literature abounded, giving some credence to the insight of Mexican poet Octavio Paz (1914–1998) that "Modernity is a sort of creative self-destruction." Artists, musicians, and writers seemed to be trying to outpace the dizzying technological changes with artistic experimentation. In 1909 the Italian writer Filippo Marinetti (1876–1944) launched futurism, which strove to capture in the arts the aggressive and iconoclastic spirit of the new science and the rapidity of industrial and technological change. Other avant-garde schools, such as fauvism, expressionism, cubism, vorticism, and surrealism, challenged materialism, tepid conservatism, and the timid conformity of the bourgeoisie in social and cultural life.

Artists such as the French postimpressionist Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), the Russian Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), and Pablo Picasso took painting toward a complex, geometrical display of surfaces. In their creations, objects and figures were fragmented and distorted through multiple planes crisscrossing the canvas. American painter Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) went a step further, dripping paint on his canvases and making their subject the act of painting itself. In music, Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) and Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) challenged harmonic and melodic conventions by introducing atonality and polytonality. Atonality abandoned the concept of key;

polytonality allowed the composer to intermix keys at will. Both approaches resulted in a strange new music that replaced harmony with dissonance and discord. When Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* opened in Paris in 1913, shocked patrons rioted. The distortion in these artists' works reflected the feel of early-twentieth-century Europe, which seemed to be spinning out of control.

Like the war that engendered it, MODERNISM began in Europe but its effects were global. As Western science and technology spread to many non-Western countries and as Western-educated artists and intellectuals carried modernism back to their native countries, experimentation in the arts and literature shaped movements in India, Japan, and many Latin American countries. Indian artists like Amrita Shergil (1913–1941) and Jamini Roy (1887–1972) melded Indian traditions with those of European modernism in their paintings. The fiction of Japanese novelist Tanizaki Junichiro (1886–1965) attempted to reconcile Western ideas, particularly those of Freud, with Japanese tradition. Even such anticolonial revolutionaries as Aimé Césaire (b. 1913) from Martinique and Léopold Senghor (1906–2001) from Senegal were profoundly influenced by European modernism.

MODERNIST LITERATURE

In "September 1913," Yeats lashes out at the Dublin middle classes whose obtuseness prevented a collection of impressionist paintings from being acquired by the city:

> What need you, being come to sense,
> But fumble in a greasy till
> And add the halfpence to the pence
> And prayer to shivering prayer, until
> You have dried the marrow from the bone?

Yeats's countryman James Joyce (1882–1941) also found fault with the Irish middle class in *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) before shocking the sensibilities of the whole of Europe with the more experimental and sexually explicit *Ulysses* (1922). Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) did away with the conventions of realistic theater in his experimental play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921); at its premier performance in Rome, Pirandello had to be protected from offended audience members. The German novelist Franz Kafka (1883–1924) characterized modern life as a nightmare of bureaucratic anonymity that reduced his protagonists to paranoia. English novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), putting into fiction the "vitalism" of French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), who celebrated an *élan vital* (vital spirit) against the deadening rationality of the logical positivists, featured sexually explicit themes and unabashedly sensual characters. Futurism, expressionism, and cubism found

kindred spirits in writers such as Ezra Pound (1885–1972), Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), and Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), all of whom experimented with form, narrative structure, and language.

Twentieth-century novelists turned from social realism to psychological exploration, using first-person narration to tell stories that were more about their narrators than about the stories they told. In Japan, novelists such as Shimazaki Toson (1872–1943) developed a whole new genre known as the "I-Novel" (*shishosetsu*), autobiographical and confessional stories told in the first person. When modernists did employ a third-person voice, it was not that of the omniscient narrator of nineteenth-century fiction; this new point of view was limited to a single consciousness. Inheritors of nineteenth-century ROMANTICISM like Yeats and Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) used the first person even when writing about the momentous events of their time. Yeats writes of his personal involvement in the struggle for Irish independence and Akhmatova speaks directly of her suffering under Stalin's oppressive regime.

Many modernists attempted to mirror the era's changes in consciousness with nonlinear patterns of language. Gertrude Stein's work disrupted the reader's conventional expectations of narratives by exploding syntax, as in this "sentence" from "As a Wife Has a Cow":

> Has made, as it has made as it has made, has made has to be as a wife has a cow, a love story. Has made as to be as a wife has a cow a love story.

Imagist poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound juxtaposed associated images in their work to convey a nondiscursive inner reality. Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) funneled folk and surrealist influences to picture the world of dreams in disconnected, evocative images. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) carried experimentation with language to its logical conclusion, inventing words by assembling familiar sounds into strange and ambiguous new combinations.

The most important innovations in fiction were those of Joyce, Marcel Proust (1871–1922), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), who experimented with ways to represent consciousness in prose. In his monumental sequence of novels *Remembrance of Things Past* (*A la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927), Proust explored the role of time and memory in shaping one's awareness of the world. Joyce and Woolf tried to replicate the "STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS"; in flowing, unpunctuated sentences that merged memory and present awareness and followed an associative logic, these writers evoked the inner life of their characters.

The modernists' experimentation with form, obscure personal symbolism, unfamiliar or invented language, and bleak subject matter alienated many readers. Often these writers were communicating with only a small cultural elite.

Modernists often made the artist himself the subject of a work, as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Thomas Mann's (1875–1955) *Death in Venice* (1912). The artist appears in these works as an exiled, isolated, and alienated figure cut off from the common people.

POSTCOLONIALISM

The term POSTCOLONIALISM is sometimes used to describe the period following World War II; viewed from the point of view of colonized peoples, the struggle against colonialism is *the* important movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Although agitation to end colonial occupation had been organized in some countries, such as India, for example, as early as the late nineteenth century, it was not until after World War II that independence movements came to successful fruition. Led by Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), India gained independence in 1947. In the years that followed, independence movements and wars of liberation challenged colonialism throughout Asia and Africa. Although some colonial possessions remained intact at the end of the century—the Falkland Islands (Britain), the Canary Islands (Spain), New Caledonia (France), and Puerto Rico (United States) to name a few—the age of colonialism ended almost completely with the twentieth century.

The struggle to break the hold of colonial domination sometimes turned into civil war, as competing factions sought to control the destiny of a newly independent nation. In some cases, colonizers had created a single territory out of smaller tribal areas; when the colonial masters left, there was no longer an enforcer to hold disparate groups together and no natives prepared to take over the job of governing. In other places, governmental and social institutions had been well established and natives trained for leadership positions, but this native elite was often distrusted as being agents of the colonial culture that had been overthrown.

Educated and independent direction often came from writers, scholars, and intellectuals. Many writers, such as Nigerian poet Christopher Okibo (1932–1967) and Cape Verdean poet Amilcar Cabral (1924–1973), died while engaged in the struggle for independence. Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), a psychiatrist from Martinique who practiced in Algeria before joining the Algerian revolutionaries, wrote insightful social analyses of colonialism and passionate polemics against colonizers in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Writers who did not actively fight, like Indian novelist Raja Rao (b. 1909), who lived in an ashram and supported Gandhi's movement, wrote of the battle for independence. Writers and intellectuals who led independence movements or fought in revolutionary armies often took the lead in recovering or inventing an identity for their new nations after independence was gained. Aimé Césaire (b. 1913), a poet from

Martinique, attacked colonialism in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) and fought for independence in the French Chamber of Deputies. Léopold Senghor (1906–2001), another poet, served as president of Senegal from 1960 to 1981. Postcolonial writers employed the tools of folklore, mythology, and realism inherited from the nineteenth-century European Romantics and Realists to construct that cultural history and identity for their homelands. Their Realist novels create what critic Frederic Jameson has called a "national allegory," stories that tell a myth of a nation through accounts of individual lives.

In the postcolonial context, however, the project of literary nation-building raises troubling questions. Can formerly colonized peoples retrieve their precolonial culture, or have they been forever changed by their engagement with the colonizers and cut off from the past by a hiatus often lasting several generations? Can the indigenous elements in a culture be distinguished from colonial accretions? Writers that had no precolonial written language worry that they can write only in the European languages learned in colonial schools, the "languages of the oppressors." By doing so, do they prolong the oppression and use a language ill-suited to express their culture's unique view of the world?

POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

In Joseph Conrad's (1857–1924) *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Conrad and his narrator, Marlow, are clearly appalled by the excesses of the colonizers, though neither is able to view the Congo through African eyes. *Heart of Darkness* is not so much about Africa as it is about Marlow and his demonic alter-ego, Kurtz, and the journey the novella chronicles is on one level a look into the divided psyche of the colonizers. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) directly critiques Conrad's book in "An Image of Africa," and in his own novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), he implicitly attacks the stereotypical objectification of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* by individualizing his own hero, Okonkwo, and describing the richness of his culture. In doing so, he challenges European racism while offering Africans an image of their cultural identity.

Such postcolonial cultural construction is a recent example of what European Romantics did in the nineteenth century, when they collected folklore and wrote novels to articulate an identity for the emerging nations of Europe, in what could be called the first wave of postcolonial literature. The writers of the Bengali Renaissance—Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and others—based poems on Bengali folk songs and wrote fiction that explored the conflict between their Indian and British heritages. Writers of the Irish Renaissance, from the 1890s to the 1920s, active in the political struggle to free Ireland from British rule, wrote about their native culture. Yeats uses Irish mythology and history in his poems as a way of

establishing a distinct cultural identity for the Irish and thus justify Ireland's independence from Britain. The Irish Renaissance, in turn, strongly influenced writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, who sought to establish a black culture with African roots and its own distinctive music, art, and literature. For the first generation of postcolonial African writers, such as Léopold Senghor of Senegal or Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) of Nigeria, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance—especially Claude McKay (1889–1948) and Langston Hughes (1902–1967)—were defining figures who had pioneered a black literature. This history is traced in some of the selections in *In the World:* Imagining Africa.

Several writers in *In the World:* Colonialism attack various aspects of colonial oppression: Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), the psychological infantilization of the black man; Césaire, the physical degradation of the colonized and their loss of personal pride and identity; Felix Mnthali (b. 1933), the cultural imperialism that denigrates native literary traditions. And in "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," South African Bessie Head (1937–1986) describes a whole culture that has lost its ties to the past and its identity.

To rebuild cultures undermined by colonialism, writers sometimes recovered, sometimes invented a history and mythology for their people. In poems like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Who Goes with Fergus?" Yeats creates an idealized Irish rural landscape and mythology that contrasts with the urban rationalism of Great Britain. Achebe places Okonkwo in a culture of stories and ritual practices that defines his difference from the Europeans and presages his confusion when caught between African and European influences. In recording Okonkwo's cultural heritage, Achebe confirms its reality and, by extension, its equality with European culture. A similar process of recording formerly oral cultures in writing occurs in Black Elk's (1863–1950) account of Lakota rituals and myths and Leslie Marmon Silko's (b. 1948) adaptations of traditional Pueblo Indian stories.

Nations that emerged from colonialism faced a dual challenge: to discover or create their own independent identity and to establish themselves amid a globalizing world. Increasingly, twentieth-century writers from all nations were becoming international citizens who melded their particular national identity with a global outlook. As writers moved from one nation to another, they became world citizens with what Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) calls "imaginary homelands," and their perspective changed from postcolonial to postmodernist.

POSTMODERNISM

In its simplest sense, the controversial term **POSTMODERNISM** refers to the period after the modernist period, roughly from World War II to the present. "Postcolonials" viewed the same period from the perspective of formerly colonized

peoples. *Postmodern* describes the period from the perspective of the former colonizers. World War II, with its massive bombing of civilian populations, the genocidal destruction of the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bomb magnified the horrors of the First World War and deepened postwar despair. T. S. Eliot had tried to piece together the fragments of Western culture after World War I; writers and artists after the Second World War, like the poets included in *In the Tradition: The Literature of War, Conflict, and Resistance*, wondered whether there were any fragments left. Takenishi Hiroko (b. 1929), in "The Rite," tells of a Hiroshima survivor who searches for a ceremony that will restore meaning to her life. The narration is broken into fragments from several periods of the survivor's life and does not pull the loose pieces together, suggesting that she will live out her life with a permanent sense of loss. Takenishi's search does not end, as Eliot's does, with hope. If the modernists were disillusioned and sought vainly for meaning, many postmodernists began with the assumption that there was no meaning to search for.

Postwar despair was formulated into a philosophy by the French EXISTENTIALISTS. Led by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), whose ideas were shaped by his experiences fighting in the French resistance movement during the war, the existentialists did not simply abandon the pieties of patriotism and honor. They called into question all the essential Truths of the Western tradition. Asserting that "existence precedes essence," they considered any attempt to find meaning beyond an individual's experience—in God, for example, in a national ideal, or in a concept of human nature—a form of "bad faith." One could not use Christianity or patriotism as justification for one's choices. Faced with radical isolation and the lack of any inherent meaning in the world, a condition the existentialists—especially Albert Camus (1913–1960)—referred to as "the absurd," the existential individual had to take total responsibility for his or her actions, for his or her existence. By doing so, individuals defined themselves. By rejecting the concept of essences, or established truths, existentialists established one of the tenets of postmodernism: that there are no essential truths.

The existentialists' rejection of established ideas was a prelude to the spurning of many institutions prompted by the antiwar and civil rights movements of the late 1960s. A worldwide quest for greater human rights challenged such institutions as the family, public schools, the university, police departments, and civil administrations. In May 1968, police moved in on rioting students at the Sorbonne, France's most prestigious university, setting off months of often violent protests. In what German-born philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) called the "Great Refusal," students aimed to topple the elitist hierarchy of the university, to make the curriculum reflect more accurately the social and political realities of the time,

and to provide greater access to education for minorities and the poor. A new generation of French intellectuals, including Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), and Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), subverted such Establishment values as humanism and the priority of the individual; they repudiated the materialism and conservatism that, in their view, limited power and prestige to a privileged few. These writers continue to exert a significant influence among postmodern intellectuals, many of whom began their higher education during or just after the Vietnam era in the 1970s.

Postmodernists replaced essentialism (truths) with pluralism and seriousness with playfulness. Jean-François Lyotard reformulated the existential rejection of essences, calling it "incredulity toward metanarratives" (stories that explain an underlying truth). There is no one story, no eternal truth, no one set of laws that explains the world, Lyotard said. Rather, there are many narratives. Like other postmodern theorists, Lyotard could trace his intellectual ancestry back to Ferdinand de Saussure, whose linguistic theory described language not as a way of representing an external reality but as an arbitrary system of signs (words) that derive their meaning from the network of relationships within a language. Rejecting the high seriousness that characterizes discussions of the "big ideas" or the great books of the Western tradition, Lyotard employed the metaphor of "language games" to describe the way humanity's many stories relate to one another. Modernists often took art very seriously, but postmodernists indulge in artistic playfulness and parody. They mix genres, make paintings of soup cans, wrap buildings in massive curtains, record sounds in the street as a substitute for music. Unlike modernist architects who implemented the maxim that "form follows function" by attempting to reduce a building to its simplest functional components, postmodern architects mix styles, add unnecessary and playful decoration, and include stairways and doors that lead nowhere.

Postmodernists also "decenter" or "deconstruct" traditional notions. Jacques Derrida, whose work also builds on the linguistic theories of Saussure, calls essential ideas, or metanarratives, "centers." According to Derrida, centers are related to their opposites, the "others" that are "marginalized" in relation to them. For example, male marginalizes female, white marginalizes black, West marginalizes East, mind marginalizes body, speech marginalizes writing. Postmodernists "decenter" such pairs, opening up a free play between opposites and allowing the marginalized other, temporarily at least, to play a central role. Such decentering challenges established authority. "Man is no longer to be the measure of all things, the center of the universe," concludes Leonard Meyer, writing of "the end of the Renaissance" in 1963. Even the authority of the author is passé; for postmodernists, the formerly marginalized reader determines the meaning of a text.

Postmodernists also decentered traditional notions of character. For Jacques Lacan, the self is inevitably alienated since the "I" it uses to describe itself makes the self an object, an other. By decentering character, postmodernists also challenged traditional notions of plot, which depicts a character's growth through a causative series of actions.

Although manipulating the center and the margin can be seen as a kind of game, it also, of course, has serious political and social implications. By equating knowledge and power, philosopher Michel Foucault showed how some schools of thought become accepted and others rejected and how people construct a worldview and an understanding of themselves by adopting the terms of the dominant discourses around them. His analysis of prisons and mental institutions explores how those institutions are socially constructed and suggests ways in which different ideas about criminality or mental illness could change the world. Telling the world from the perspective of the repressed and marginalized has opened contemporary thought to many formerly ignored points of view—for example, those of women and of racial and cultural minorities.

Modernists assumed that some works of art were more serious and hence more valuable than others. Works of high culture—classical music or abstract expressionist painting, for example—were significant; popular songs or the illustrations of Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) were not. Postmodernists reject such hierarchical distinctions; there are simply many texts, many discourses, many pictures. Meaning is not inherent in the work, but is supplied by the reader, the listener, the viewer. In a culture where everything becomes a commodity and value is established in the marketplace, postmodernists make no distinction between fine and popular art, for all art is bought and sold. In the postmodern world, multiplicity rules. Distinctions between high and low, past and present, reality and illusion, serious and frivolous make little sense when everything is on the Internet. National borders are crossed with a keystroke. There are as many versions of reality as there are perspectives.

POSTMODERN LITERATURE

Modernism did not suddenly disappear after World War II. The aestheticism, experimentation, and engagement with interior reality that dominated literature in the first half of the twentieth century was continued in the work of later writers and incorporated into many postmodern works. The inventions in Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges's (1899–1986) labyrinthine short stories and in Abé Kobo's (1924–1993) "The Red Cocoon" are descended from the bizarre worlds in the stories of Franz Kafka. The aestheticism of Kawabata Yasunari's (1899–1972) "The Moon on the Water" recalls Virginia Woolf's short story "The Fascination

of the Pool." Adrienne Rich's (b. 1929) psychological exploration in *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) builds on the work of earlier poets. But after World War II, modernism became international, comprising as many voices from the margins as from the white, male, European "center."

Existentialism's challenge to that center and to the relatively consistent story that it told is represented by several selections in this book. Sartre's play *The Flies* (1943) retells the story of Orestes in a way that challenges the patriarchal order represented by Zeus and Athena in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and by the Nazis during World War II. Orestes takes full responsibility for the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus; he does not justify his actions by appealing to any spiritual or temporal authority. Like Orestes, Daru, the hero of Albert Camus' story "The Guest," is "condemned to be free." Caught between the warring sides in the Algerian struggle for independence, he is misunderstood by both. In the dramas of the ABSURD, Samuel Beckett's (1906–1989) *Krapp's Last Tape* and Tawfiq al-Hakim's (1898–1987) *The Fate of a Cockroach*, the characters who take the absurdity of their situation for granted are considered insane.

Nearly all the postcolonial writers of the second half of the twentieth century similarly decentered the Western version of things by making formerly nameless natives into living persons. In his search for Zaabalawi, for example, Naguib Mahfouz's (b. 1911) narrator gives Cairo a history, a spiritual center, and a mystery independent of Western orientalism. R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), in "A Horse and Two Goats," makes a comedy of the misunderstandings between the Western traveler and the Indian villager, but he also demonstrates how a horse and two goats can be more valuable than a roadside statue. Postcolonial decentering combines with postmodern playfulness in *The Prisoner of Las Lomas,* by Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes (b. 1928), and "The Courter," by Anglo-Indian Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). Both writers dramatize the relations between the margin and the center, using wordplay, puns, parody, allusions, serendipitous happenings, and bizarre surprises to facilitate the free play between them. In Fuentes's story, native peoples "imprison" a powerful businessman in his Mexico City mansion. Rushdie's adolescent hero is pulled between his Indian heritage and the lure of Western popular culture.

Language games become the subject as well as a technique in such stories as Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" and Milan Kundera's (b. 1929) "The Hitchhiking Game." Both challenge traditional ideas about character and plot by imagining worlds where everything is possible and where different aspects of characters emerge in alternating plots. In neither story is there a "metacharacter"—one who determines the possibilities of the story. As Borges's and Kundera's characters take on different personas, they change the characters around them and the course of the action.

Established categories for postmodern authors do not make much sense. Rushdie, for example, was born in India and educated in England; he worked in Pakistan, eventually claimed British citizenship, and now lives in New York. He has written novels reflecting each of these changing geographical identities, and he calls himself an "English writer" and a "translated man." He might be best described as a world writer. Fuentes's description of his situation holds true for many of his contemporaries. "I don't see myself as a nationalist writer at all," he commented. "I don't believe in nationalism in literature. Especially today, I think literature is an international event." Even when contemporary writers treat their native culture, they often do so with a broad audience in mind. Chinua Achebe, for example, was aware that he was writing about tribal culture in his native Nigeria for readers who would include many non-Nigerians. Indeed, in the essay "An Image of Africa," he implies that one important goal of his novel is to make Africans real to European and American readers by decentering their perspective on Africa. In similar ways, Leslie Marmon Silko, Alifa Rifaat (b. 1930), and Anita Desai (b. 1937) reestablish point of view by writing as women and former colonial subjects. Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) reimagines notions of life and death by presenting the second act of *Dialogue and Rebuttal* from the perspective of two characters who murdered each other at the end of Act One. Probably no writer has taken the notion of decentering further than Abé Kobo, who in "The Stick" writes from the point of view of a stick.

GLOBALIZING AMERICA

This anthology of twentieth-century world literature ends with selections by young American writers who do more than remind us that America is a multicultural society, a microcosm of the world. Sometimes called "hyphenated Americans" because of the ethnic groups they belong to and the countries they or their families emigrated from, these writers often revise our ideas about the United States and Americans. Many challenge, for example, the assumption that the United States is not an imperial power with colonial subjects, and they make clear how American culture, for both good and ill, reaches worldwide. They can help us to learn from the margins, as Europeans had to do in the last century, for we are connected worldwide. The voices from the margins, both within our own society and from remote parts of the world, can, as Nadine Gordimer illustrates, help us to see ourselves "as others see us." We don't need to be reminded, as we begin the twenty-first century, that it is much better to learn from the creators of stories and poems than from those who choose only to destroy.

JOSEPH CONRAD

B. POLAND, 1857–1924

[Conrad] seems to write books about the sea, the Malay archipelago and the Congo, but he is really writing about the desperate, convoluted, hopeless heart of man.

– ANTHONY BURGESS, writer, 1979

Joseph Conrad's life and work cross cultural boundaries, making him representative of many writers of the twentieth century. Born a Pole in Russian-occupied Poland, Conrad went on to become a French merchant-seaman and then an English seaman and citizen. When he began writing he composed in English, his third language after Polish and French. Although he was a proud British citizen and a Polish nationalist, he was in a broad sense a European: a man whose political identity transcended any single national definition. Conrad's experience as a sailor in many parts of the world further broadened his identity, making him a kind of world citizen. Like most of his novels, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is rooted in Conrad's own experience, but in this work his personal story is objectified to become the narrator Marlow's story, a story about storytelling itself and about the cultural experience of Europeans in Africa, a story that Thomas Mann[1] is reported to have said "prophetically inaugurated the twentieth century."

YOO-zef tay-OH-dore KOHN-rahd VAN-welech koh-zheh-NYAWF-skee; bare-DIH-chef

tah-DAY-oosh boh-BRAWF-skee

A Polish Nobleman Cased in British Tar. Conrad was born **Józef Teodor Konrad Walecz Korzeniowski** in 1857 in **Berdyczew** in Russian-occupied Polish Ukraine. His father, Apollo, a writer and translator of French and English literature, was a Polish nationalist. His participation in revolutionary activities led to the family being exiled to the far north of Russia when Conrad was four. The physical hardships of the exile led to his mother's death when he was seven and to his father's death just a few years later. So Conrad, an imaginative and sensitive child, was raised from age eleven by an uncle, **Tadeusz Bobrowski.** Although he grew up far from the sea, the boy dreamed of a life as a sailor, and when he was sixteen he convinced his uncle to allow him to seek a seagoing career. He joined the French merchant service, became involved in gunrunning and an intense love affair, and attempted suicide. At twenty Conrad switched to the English merchant service, and for the next twenty years he worked his way up from seaman to mate and master. His voyages took him to many other parts of the world, including the East and West Indies, Asia, Africa, and South America. When he left the merchant service in 1894 he was fluent in three languages, a British citizen with multinational work experience, and a European with a knowledge of cultures throughout the world.

Novelist of the Sea. Conrad's second career—as an English novelist—began in 1895 with the publication of *Almayer's Folly* and lasted until his death in 1924. During that period Conrad wrote thirteen novels, two

[1] **Thomas Mann** (1875–1955): German novelist, essayist, and short-story writer. In symbolic stories like *Death in Venice* (1912; see p. 266), Mann treated the subject of the diseased condition of European civilization.

books of memoirs, and twenty-eight short stories. He established friendships with a large number of British and American writers of the time, including H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, W. H. Hudson, John Galsworthy, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Ford Madox Ford, with whom he collaborated on three books. Many of his novels and stories take place on ships isolated at sea, as do *Typhoon* (1902), *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1898), and *The Secret Sharer* (1912). Others are set in exotic locations Conrad visited as a sailor: the Malay Peninsula in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *Lord Jim* (1900), a South Sea island in *Victory* (1915), and a South American mining town in *Nostromo* (1904). Conrad often studied the failure of Europeans to maintain their personal and cultural ideals in these exotic and alien places. His novels with European settings, such as *The Secret Agent* (1907), describing the activities of anarchist provocateurs in London, and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), about revolutionaries challenging Russian despotism, also treat failures of idealism. For this recurrent theme of lost or corrupted idealism, Conrad has been described as a deeply pessimistic writer. But in spite of their shortcomings his heroes are often engaging and sympathetic figures who have an idealistic belief in themselves and who follow a romantic desire for freedom. It may be that all Conrad's novels hearken back to his childhood experience as the son of a Polish nationalist who died for ideals that failed to become political realities because of the weaknesses of human beings and the complexities and imbalances of political relationships.

Although he is usually described as a novelist of the sea, Conrad used the sea and exotic settings symbolically to write about the human situation and the human spirit. In the preface to *Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* he said of its shipboard setting: "The problem . . . is not a problem of the sea, it is merely a problem that has arisen on board a ship where the conditions of complete isolation from all land entanglements make it stand out with particular force and colouring."

Conrad in Africa. *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's 1890 journey up the Congo River. Like his narrator, Marlow, Conrad was hired by a Belgian trading company to captain a steamship on the Congo, but when he arrived in Africa he found that the ship he was hired to pilot had sunk. Conrad was left to spend most of his time as a mate on another vessel, taking over as captain only briefly when the regular master was incapacitated. The journey upriver entailed bringing out the body of a trader, a man named Klein who had died at a trading post deep in the interior of Africa. In *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad spoke of his own experience in the Congo as a transforming one: "Before the Congo," he wrote, "I was just a mere animal." Shortly after returning from that trip, he gave up the sea and turned to storytelling as his profession. In retelling his African experiences in *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad transformed his personal history into myth.

Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa becomes a journey into the human spirit. Ostensibly it is an account of the truth about Kurtz, a man whose talents and achievements earned him regard as an "extraordinary" human being—a model of European enlightenment. But when Marlow



Portrait of Conrad
Joseph Conrad had a tenuous relationship with nationality; though he was born in Poland, he gained literary acclaim as a writer in English. (Hulton/Archive)

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Conrad was a bloody racist.

– CHINUA ACHEBE, 1975

TIME AND PLACE

Twentieth-Century America: Apocalypse Now

Apocalypse Now premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979, director Francis Ford Coppola said of his now legendary work: "My film is not about Vietnam. My film is Vietnam." Using Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as inspiration, *Apocalypse Now* tells the tale of a journey up river—the Mekong River rather than the Congo—in search of renegade Colonel Kurtz as well as some truths about the nature of the self and war.





Francis Ford Coppola, Apocalypse Now, *1979. In this film still, a small navy patrol boat reaches its destination, the wild jungle tribe led by the renegade colonel Kurtz. (The Kobal Collection / Zoetrope / USA)*

Apocalypse Now is one of many American movies about Vietnam; others include *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and most recently, *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

After the Vietnamese had defeated and expelled their French colonial rulers, the country plunged into civil war. The United States government, fearful of the spread of communism in southeast Asia, entered the civil war on the side of South Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson escalated American involvement, calling for massive bombing raids and the commitment of thousands of troops, but American forces were unable to defeat the committed guerrilla fighters and were finally forced to retreat without victory in 1973. The conflict in Vietnam has played a huge role in the American imagination. It divided the nation, created a counterculture, and destroyed many lives. Several of the films about Vietnam—*Apocalypse Now* perhaps most spectacularly—dramatize the war's impact by showing characters caught in the middle of senseless slaughter as they ask themselves why they are fighting and who is in charge. These questions continue to trouble Americans to the present day.

arrives at Kurtz's camp, he discovers that in the depths of his being Kurtz is "a horror." Marlow also makes discoveries about himself and about his "kinship" with Kurtz.

Conrad and Marlow. In many ways *Heart of Darkness* is as much about Marlow and storytelling as it is about Africa or Kurtz or ivory. As in much modern literature, the truth here is not in the tale but in the teller. The initial description of Marlow's method of storytelling, which opens the novel, is also a blueprint for Conrad's narrative technique: "The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within

the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical . . . and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." Although Marlow is never explicit about what he learns from his experiences, his psychological kinship with Kurtz, or why he lies to Kurtz's Intended, his account raises questions about how and why he was able to survive his journey and about the ways he differs from Kurtz and the other Europeans. Did he prevail through superior understanding or greater strength of will or moral character, or was it because he had a more repressed personality than the others? To what degree did he avoid complicity with Kurtz and the other colonizers? How much of what he tells us can we believe? What might he be trying to hide or repress that would make his account, at least to some extent, unreliable? What knowledge is he trying to pass on to those aboard the *Nellie*? There are hints but no definitive answers to these questions in the story.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.

– CHINUA ACHEBE, 1975

Conrad and Colonialism. Part of the "shell" that envelops Marlow's story is his critique of European colonialism. When Marlow compares Africa in the nineteenth century to England at the time of the Romans, he implies that his story is about colonialism and greed, about what he calls "the squeeze." Marlow's descriptions of the ivory trade and the European presence in Africa are solidly based on historical fact. In 1890, the Congo was in effect the personal domain of King Leopold II of Belgium, who promoted the commercial exploitation of the Congo's resources and the virtual enslavement of its native people. Historical accounts confirm that there is no exaggeration in the excesses described by Marlow. He is clearly appalled by what he finds in Africa: the mistreatment of natives, the venality and hypocrisy of the Europeans, the colossal corruption at the inner station. He also suggests that these shortcomings are not unique to colonizers in Africa, but rather are deep drives of the human character and will manifest themselves if allowed unrestrained expression. In Kurtz, Marlow sees a monstrous reflection of himself. He is, at least in part, horrified by what he sees.

Nigerian novelist **Chinua Achebe** has attacked this "European" story as an example of literary colonialism and European racism.[2] *Heart of Darkness* is not about Africa, Achebe argues, for Conrad's Africa has no reality and the natives no individuality, no names. For Conrad, Marlow, and Europeans, he says, Africa and Africans are "other"—objects against which the Europeans define their own individuality. As critical as they may be of the abuses of the ivory trade, they, too, are exploiting Africa to reconstruct a European civilization by contrasting it with both black and white savagery in Africa. Achebe delivered his attack in a 1975 speech, "**An Image of Africa**," at the University of Massachusetts long after Conrad's

CHIN-wah ah-CHAY-bay

p. 107

[2] **Chinua Achebe** (b. 1930): Nigerian novelist best known for *Things Fall Apart* (1958); see page 1023. Achebe's essay on *Heart of Darkness* appears in *In the World:* Colonialism: Europe and Africa on page 107.

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see.*

– JOSEPH CONRAD, Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

death—testimony to the enduring currency of Conrad's story and to the centrality of the questions it raises.

A Story about European Culture. Marlow's experience is enlightening as well as horrifying. He has gained wisdom from his time in Africa, as his pose in the last scene as a meditating Buddha suggests. But he has acquired more than personal wisdom. Like epic heroes who journey to the underworld to gain the knowledge that will enable them to found nations, Marlow has traveled to Africa to recover what Europe—the "whited sepulchre"—has lost, repressed, or forgotten. In gaining that knowledge, Marlow's personal story becomes a cultural story, a modern epic about a deadened and wasted culture seeking to recover the vital heart of its humanity. His mission has been a dangerous and spiritually expensive one, and it is unclear how successful he was and whether what he gained was worth the horror.

CONNECTIONS

Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," p. 107, *Things Fall Apart,* p. 1023; *In the World:* Colonialism, p. 97. In "An Image of Africa," Achebe accuses Conrad of being a "bloody racist" in *Heart of Darkness.* What aspects of Conrad's novel does Achebe consider racist? In what ways does *Things Fall Apart* correct the failings that Achebe finds in the novel? Do the materials in *In the World:* Colonialism offer any defense for Conrad?

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice,* p. 266; T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land,* p. 486; James Joyce, "The Dead," p. 372; W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," p. 193; *In the World:* Society and Its Discontents (Book 5). Many modern writers, continuing the critique developed by the nineteenth-century writers in *In the World:* Society and Its Discontents, considered European culture blighted, diseased, and lacking in vitality. Marlow, for example, describes Brussels as a "whited sepulchre," that lacks the heart-pounding life force of the Congo. Consider how this theme is handled in Mann's *Death in Venice,* T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* and Joyce's "The Dead" as well as in *Heart of Darkness.* Do these writers share Yeats's vision in "The Second Coming" that a new age was about to be born?

Homer, *The Odyssey* (Book 1); Virgil, *The Aeneid* (Book 1); Dante, *The Inferno* (Book 2). One of the conventions of the epic is a journey to the underworld in which the hero learns from the dead truths not given to ordinary people. Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante all make this harrowing trip. Compare Marlow's journey into Africa with those of the epic heroes. Are there any indications in *Heart of Darkness* that Marlow has gained extraordinary wisdom? What does he learn?

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PRONUNCIATION

Chinua Achebe: CHIN-wah ah-CHAY-bay
Berdyczew: bare-DIH-chef
Tadeusz Bobrowski: tah-DAY-oosh boh-BRAWF-skee
Józef Teodor Konrad Walecz Korzeniowski: YOO-zef tay-OH-dore KOHN-rahd VAH-wench koh-zheh-NYAWF-skee
Nostromo: nah-STROH-moh

www For links to sites with more information about Conrad, a quiz on *Heart of Darkness,* and information about the culture and context of Europe in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

Heart of Darkness

1

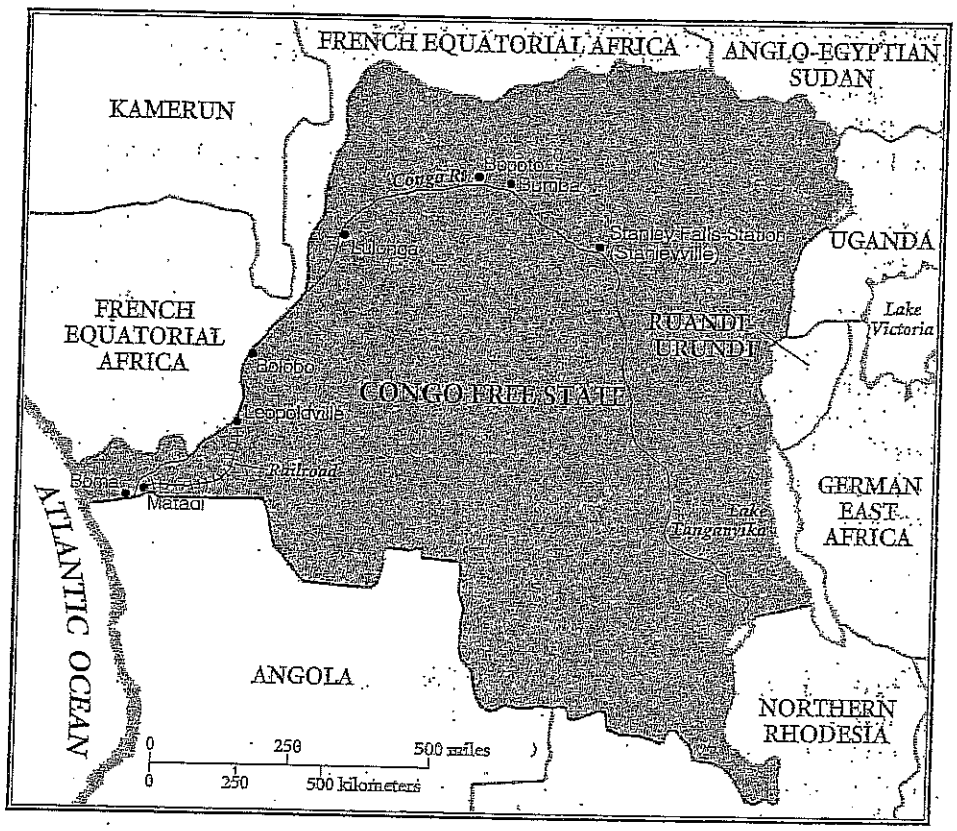
The *Nellie,* a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing[1] the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

Heart of Darkness. Based on Conrad's personal experiences in the Congo in 1890, this novella was published as a serial in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899 and in 1902 was included in the collection *Youth and Two Other Tales.* Although at times the story reads like a nightmare version of Conrad's trip, the details of European exploitation it recounts are factually based. Beyond that, Conrad turns the facts of his actual experience into a myth of transformation. Marlow's journey into the interior of Africa becomes a descent into the darkness in himself and in humanity. The story contrasts Kurtz, who succumbs to his most elemental and savage impulses, with Marlow, who resists the powers of darkness and survives the ordeal. On his return to Europe, however, Marlow is unable or unwilling to reveal the truth of what he has seen, at least to Kurtz's Intended.

All notes are the editors'.

[1] **offing:** The horizon.



Congo Free State, 1890

The Congo of Conrad's time was, in fact, not a free state. A conference of European states in 1876 had assigned it to King Leopold II of Belgium as his personal property. Under Leopold's brutal rule, which lasted until his death in 1908, the people of the Congo were subjected to atrocities and forced labor. When Conrad journeyed through the Congo in 1890, many Congolese were virtual slaves under the harsh discipline of Leopold's officials.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The Lawyer—the best of old fellows—had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug. The Accountant had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. The director,

satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin,[2] knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror,* bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change;[3] captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned "generals" of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone

[2] **Drake . . . Franklin:** Drake circumnavigated the globe from 1577 to 1580 on the *Golden Hind.* Franklin sought the Northwest Passage from 1845 to 1847 on the *Erebus* and the *Terror.*

[3] **'Change:** The Exchange, the British financial market.

strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

He was the only man of us who still "followed the sea." The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow—

"I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'ye call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been, too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian[4] wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death,—death

[4] **Falernian:** A fine vintage wine.

skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by and by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him,—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."

He paused.

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower—"Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ."

He broke off. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently—there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, "I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit," that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.

"I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; "yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of

navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.

"I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas—a regular dose of the East—six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you. It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship—I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game, too.

"Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.

"True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.

"You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society; but I have a lot of relations living on the Continent, because it's cheap and not so nasty as it looks, they say.

"I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to get things that way, you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself; but, then—you see—I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and

also a man who has lots of influence with,' etc., etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy.

"I got my appointment—of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven—that was the fellow's name, a Dane—thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain, so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me in the least to hear this, and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man—I was told the chief's son—in desperation at hearing the old chap yell, made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man—and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest, expecting all kinds of calamities to happen, while, on the other hand, the steamer Fresleven commanded left also in a bad panic, in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes. I couldn't let it rest, though; but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it, sure enough. The people had vanished. Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow. However, through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it.

"I flew around like mad to get ready, and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city[5] that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre.[6] Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade.

"A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished

[5] **a city:** The capital of Belgium. Between 1885 and 1908, when it became a Belgian colony, the Congo—now the Democratic Republic of the Congo—was owned by King Leopold II of Belgium.

[6] **whited sepulchre:** Jesus compared the hypocritical Pharisees to whited sepulchres, or tombs, which "outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones." See Matthew 23:27.

staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me—still knitting with down-cast eyes—and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room. I gave my name, and looked about. Deal[7] table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself. He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage.*

"In about forty-five seconds I found myself again in the waiting-room with the compassionate secretary, who, full of desolation and sympathy, made me sign some document. I believe I undertook amongst other things not to disclose any trade secrets. Well, I am not going to.

"I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy—I don't know—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.*[8] Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way.

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[7] **Deal:** Pine.

[8] ***Ave . . . salutant:*** "Hail! Those who are about to die salute you." This was the gladiators' salute to the Roman emperor in the Colosseum.

"There was yet a visit to the doctor. 'A simple formality,' assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows. Accordingly a young chap wearing his hat over the left eyebrow, some clerk I suppose,—there must have been clerks in the business, though the house was as still as a house in a city of the dead—came from somewhere upstairs, and led me forth. He was shabby and careless, with ink-stains on the sleeves of his jacket, and his cravat was large and billowy, under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot. It was a little too early for the doctor, so I proposed a drink, and thereupon he developed a vein of joviality. As we sat over our vermuths he glorified the Company's business, and by and by I expressed casually my surprise at him not going out there. He became very cool and collected all at once. 'I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples,' he said sententiously, emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose.

"The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. 'Good, good for there,' he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. 'And when they come back, too?' I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting, too.' He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. 'Is that question in the interests of science, too?' 'It would be,' he said, without taking notice of my irritation, 'interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but . . .' 'Are you an alienist?'[9] I interrupted. 'Every doctor should be—a little,' answered that original, imperturbably. 'I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman coming under my observation . . .' I hastened to assure him I was not in the least typical. 'If I were,' said I, 'I wouldn't be talking like this with you.' 'What you say is rather profound, and probably erroneous,' he said, with a laugh. 'Avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun. Adieu. How do you English say, eh? Good-bye. Ah! Good-bye. Adieu. In the tropics one must before everything keep calm.' . . . He lifted a warning forefinger. . . . *'Du calme, du calme. Adieu.'*

"One thing more remained to do—say good-bye to my excellent aunt. I found her triumphant. I had a cup of tea—the last decent cup of tea for many days—and in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look, we had a long quiet chat by the fireside. In the course of these confidences it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high

[9] **alienist:** A psychiatrist.

dignitary, and goodness knows to how many more people besides, as an exceptional and gifted creature—a piece of good fortune for the Company—a man you don't get hold of every day. Good heavens! and I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.

"'You forget, dear Charlie, that the labourer is worthy of his hire,'[10] she said, brightly. It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.

"After this I got embraced, told to wear flannel, be sure to write often, and so on—and I left. In the street—I don't know why—a queer feeling came to me that I was an impostor. Odd thing that I, who used to clear out for any part of the world at twenty-four hours' notice, with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street, had a moment—I won't say of hesitation, but of startled pause, before this commonplace affair. The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth.

"I left in a French steamer, and she called in every blamed port they have out there, for, as far as I could see, the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom-house officers. I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there grayish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background. We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers—to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had

[10] **the labourer . . . his hire:** See Luke 10:7.

not moved; but we passed various places—trading places—with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere.

"We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves,[11] that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.

"It was upward of thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We anchored off the seat of the government. But my work would not begin till some two hundred miles farther on. So as soon as I could I made a start for a place thirty miles higher up.

"I had my passage on a little sea-going steamer. Her captain was a Swede, and

[11] **mangroves:** Tropical maritime trees.

knowing me for a seaman, invited me on the bridge. He was a young man, lean, fair, and morose, with lanky hair and a shuffling gait. As we left the miserable little wharf, he tossed his head contemptuously at the shore. 'Been living there?' he asked. I said, 'Yes.' 'Fine lot these government chaps—are they not?' he went on, speaking English with great precision and considerable bitterness. 'It is funny what some people will do for a few francs a month. I wonder what becomes of that kind when it goes up country?' I said to him I expected to see that soon. 'So-o-o!' he exclaimed. He shuffled athwart, keeping one eye ahead vigilantly. 'Don't be too sure,' he continued. 'The other day I took up a man who hanged himself on the road. He was a Swede, too.' 'Hanged himself! Why, in God's name?' I cried. He kept on looking out watchfully. 'Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps.'

"At last we opened a reach. A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants. A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare. 'There's your Company's station,' said the Swede, pointing to three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope. 'I will send your things up. Four boxes did you say? So. Farewell.'

"I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. I blinked, the path was steep. A horn tooted to the right, and I saw the black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.

"A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights[12] swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, death-

[12] **bights:** Slack sections.

like indifference of unhappy savages. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.

"Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left. My idea was to let that chain-gang get out of sight before I climbed the hill. You know I am not particularly tender; I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes—that's only one way of resisting—without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into. I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning. Finally I descended the hill, obliquely, towards the trees I had seen.

"I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals something to do. I don't know. Then I nearly fell into a very narrow ravine, almost no more than a scar in the hillside. I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled in there. There wasn't one that was not broken. It was a wanton smash-up. At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound—as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.

"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

"They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing

down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held—there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.

"Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone.

"I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station. When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.

"I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant, and that all the book-keeping was done at this station. He had come out for a moment, he said, 'to get a breath of fresh air.' The expression sounded wonderfully odd, with its suggestion of sedentary desk-life. I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow to you at all, only it was from his lips that I first heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time. Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years; and, later, I could not help asking him how he managed to sport such linen. He had just the faintest blush, and said modestly, 'I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.' Thus this man had verily accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order.

"Everything else in the station was in a muddle,—heads, things, buildings. Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory.

"I had to wait in the station for ten days—an eternity. I lived in a hut in the yard, but to be out of the chaos I would sometimes get into the accountant's office. It

was built of horizontal planks, and so badly put together that, as he bent over his high desk, he was barred from neck to heels with narrow strips of sunlight. There was no need to open the big shutter to see. It was hot there, too; big flies buzzed fiendishly, and did not sting, but stabbed. I sat generally on the floor, while, of faultless appearance (and even slightly scented), perching on a high stool, he wrote, he wrote. Sometimes he stood up for exercise. When a truckle-bed with a sick man (some invalid agent from up-country) was put in there, he exhibited a gentle annoyance. 'The groans of this sick person,' he said, 'distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate.'

"One day he remarked, without lifting his head, 'In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz.' On my asking who Mr. Kurtz was, he said he was a first-class agent; and seeing my disappointment at this information, he added slowly, laying down his pen, 'He is a very remarkable person.' Further questions elicited from him that Mr. Kurtz was at present in charge of a trading post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country, at 'the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together . . .' He began to write again. The sick man was too ill to groan. The flies buzzed in a great peace.

"Suddenly there was a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping of feet. A caravan had come in. A violent babble of uncouth sounds burst out on the other side of the planks. All the carriers were speaking together, and in the midst of the uproar the lamentable voice of the chief agent was heard 'giving it up' tearfully for the twentieth time that day. . . . He rose slowly. 'What a frightful row,' he said. He crossed the room gently to look at the sick man, and returning, said to me, 'He does not hear.' 'What! Dead?' I asked, startled. 'No, not yet,' he answered, with great composure. Then, alluding with a toss of the head to the tumult in the station-yard, 'When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death.' He remained thoughtful for a moment. 'When you see Mr. Kurtz,' he went on, 'tell him from me that everything here'—he glanced at the desk—'is very satisfactory. I don't like to write to him—with those messengers of ours you never know who may get hold of your letter—at that Central Station.' He stared at me for a moment with his mild, bulging eyes. 'Oh, he will go far, very far,' he began again. 'He will be somebody in the Administration before long. They, above—the Council in Europe, you know—mean him to be.'

"He turned to his work. The noise outside had ceased, and presently in going out I stopped at the door. In the steady buzz of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying flushed and insensible; the other, bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death.

"Next day I left that station at last, with a caravan of sixty men, for a two-hundred-mile tramp.

"No use telling you much about that. Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut. The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds

of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. Only here the dwellings were gone, too. Still I passed through several abandoned villages. There's something pathetically childish in the ruins of grass walls. Day after day, with the stamp and shuffle of sixty pair of bare feet behind me, each pair under a 60-lb. load. Camp, cook, sleep, strike camp, march. Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side. A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country. Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive—not to say drunk. Was looking after the upkeep of the road he declared. Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement. I had a white companion, too, not a bad chap, but rather too fleshy and with the exasperating habit of fainting on the hot hillsides, miles away from the least bit of shade and water. Annoying, you know, to hold your own coat like a parasol over a man's head while he is coming-to. I couldn't help asking him once what he meant by coming there at all. 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' he said, scornfully. Then he got fever, and had to be carried in a hammock slung under a pole. As he weighed sixteen stone[13] I had no end of rows with the carriers. They jibbed,[14] ran away, sneaked off with their loads in the night—quite a mutiny. So, one evening, I made a speech in English with gestures, not one of which was lost to the sixty pairs of eyes before me, and the next morning I started the hammock off in front all right. An hour afterwards I came upon the whole concern wrecked in a bush—man, hammock, groans, blankets, horrors. The heavy pole had skinned his poor nose. He was very anxious for me to kill somebody, but there wasn't the shadow of a carrier near. I remembered the old doctor—'It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.' I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting. However, all that is to no purpose. On the fifteenth day I came in sight of the big river again, and hobbled into the Central Station. It was on a back water surrounded by scrub and forest, with a pretty border of smelly mud on one side, and on the three others enclosed by a crazy fence of rushes. A neglected gap was all the gate it had, and the first glance at the place was enough to let you see the flabby devil was running that show. White men with long staves in their hands appeared languidly from amongst the buildings, strolling up to take a look at me, and then retired out of sight somewhere. One of them, a stout, excitable chap with black moustaches, informed me with great volubility and many disgressions, as soon as I told him who I was, that my

[13] **stone:** A British unit of weight equal to 14 pounds. Sixteen stone equals 224 pounds.
[14] ***jibbed:*** Balked.

steamer was at the bottom of the river. I was thunderstruck. What, how, why? Oh, it was 'all right.' The 'manager himself' was there. All quite correct. 'Everybody had behaved splendidly! splendidly!'—'you must,' he said in agitation, 'go and see the general manager at once. He is waiting!'

"I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now, but I am not sure—not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid—when I think of it—to be altogether natural. Still . . . But at the moment it presented itself simply as a confounded nuisance. The steamer was sunk. They had started two days before in a sudden hurry up the river with the manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been out three hours they tore the bottom out of her on stones, and she sank near the south bank. I asked myself what I was to do there, now my boat was lost. As a matter of fact, I had plenty to do in fishing my command out of the river. I had to set about it the very next day. That, and the repairs when I brought the pieces to the station, took some months.

"My first interview with the manager was curious. He did not ask me to sit down after my twenty-mile walk that morning. He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold, and he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe. But even at these times the rest of his person seemed to disclaim the intention. Otherwise there was only an indefinable, faint expression of his lips, something stealthy—a smile—not a smile—I remember it, but I can't explain. It was unconscious, this smile was, though just after he had said something it got intensified for an instant. It came at the end of his speeches like a seal applied on the words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable. He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts—nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust—just uneasiness—nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a . . . a . . . faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill . . . He had served three terms of three years out there . . . Because triumphant health in the general rout of constitutions is a kind of power in itself. When he went home on leave he rioted on a large scale—pompously. Jack[5] ashore—with a difference—in externals only. This one could gather from his casual talk. He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going—that's all. But he was great. He was great by this little thing that it was impossible to tell what could control such a man. He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause—for out there there were no external checks. Once when various tropical diseases had laid low almost every 'agent' in the station, he was heard to say, 'Men who come out here should have no entrails.' He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it

[5] **Jack:** Jack Tar; a sailor.

had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping. You fancied you had seen things—but the seal was on. When annoyed at meal-times by the constant quarrels of the white men about precedence, he ordered an immense round table to be made, for which a special house had to be built. This was the station's mess-room. Where he sat was the first place—the rest were nowhere. One felt this to be his unalterable conviction. He was neither civil nor uncivil. He was quiet. He allowed his 'boy'—an overfed young negro from the coast—to treat the white men, under his very eyes, with provoking insolence.

"He began to speak as soon as he saw me. I had been very long on the road. He could not wait. Had to start without me. The up-river stations had to be relieved. There had been so many delays already that he did not know who was dead and who was alive, and how they got on—and so on, and so on. He paid no attention to my explanations, and, playing with a stick of sealing-wax, repeated several times that the situation was 'very grave, very grave.' There were rumours that a very important station was in jeopardy, and its chief, Mr. Kurtz, was ill. Hoped it was not true. Mr. Kurtz was . . . I felt weary and irritable. Hang Kurtz, I thought. I interrupted him by saying I had heard of Mr. Kurtz on the coast. 'Ah! So they talk of him down there,' he murmured to himself. Then he began again, assuring me Mr. Kurtz was the best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company; therefore I could understand his anxiety. He was, he said, 'very, very uneasy.' Certainly he fidgeted on his chair a good deal, exclaimed, 'Ah, Mr. Kurtz!' broke the stick of sealing-wax and seemed dumfounded by the accident. Next thing he wanted to know 'how long it would take to' . . . I interrupted him again. Being hungry, you know, and kept on my feet too, I was getting savage. 'How can I tell?' I said. 'I haven't even seen the wreck yet—some months, no doubt.' All this talk seemed to me so futile. 'Some months,' he said. 'Well, let us say three months before we can make a start. Yes. That ought to do the affair.' I flung out of his hut (he lived all alone in a clay hut with a sort of verandah) muttering to myself my opinion of him. He was a chattering idiot. Afterwards I took it back when it was borne in upon me startlingly with what extreme nicety he had estimated the time requisite for the 'affair.'

"I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life. Still, one must look about sometimes; and then I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.

"Oh, these months! Well, never mind. Various things happened. One evening a grass shed full of calico, cotton prints, beads, and I don't know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash. I was smoking my pipe quietly by my dismantled

steamer, and saw them all cutting capers in the light, with their arms lifted high, when the stout man with moustaches came tearing down to the river, a tin pail in his hand, assured me that everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,' dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail.

"I strolled up. There was no hurry. You see the thing had gone off like a box of matches. It had been hopeless from the very first. The flame had leaped high, driven everybody back, lighted up everything—and collapsed. The shed was already a heap of embers glowing fiercely. A nigger was being beaten near by. They said he had caused the fire in some way; be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly. I saw him, later, for several days, sitting in a bit of shade looking very sick and trying to recover himself: afterwards he arose and went out—and the wilderness without a sound took him into its bosom again. As I approached the glow from the dark I found myself at the back of two men, talking. I heard the name of Kurtz pronounced, then the words, 'take advantage of this unfortunate accident.' One of the men was the manager. I wished him a good evening. 'Did you ever see anything like it—eh? it is incredible,' he said, and walked off. The other man remained. He was a first-class agent, young, gentlemanly, a bit reserved, with a forked little beard and a hooked nose. He was stand-offish with the other agents, and they on their side said he was the manager's spy upon them. As to me, I had hardly ever spoken to him before. We got into talk, and by and by we strolled away from the hissing ruins. Then he asked me to his room, which was in the main building of the station. He struck a match, and I perceived that this young aristocrat had not only a silver-mounted dressing-case but also a whole candle all to himself. Just at that time the manager was the only man supposed to have any right to candles. Native mats covered the clay walls; a collection of spears, assegais,[16] shields, knives was hung up in trophies. The business entrusted to this fellow was the making of bricks—so I had been informed; but there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting. It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know what—straw maybe. Anyways, it could not be found there, and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe, it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps.[17] However, they were all waiting—all the sixteen or twenty pilgrims of them—for something; and upon my word it did not seem an uncongenial occupation, from the way they took it, though the only thing that ever came to them was disease—as far as I could see. They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that

[16] **assegais:** Javelins.

[17] **An act . . . perhaps:** Special creation was the belief, challenged by the evolutionists, that God created each species individually.

account,—but as to effectually lifting a little finger—oh, no. By heavens! there is something after all in the world allowing one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter. Steal a horse straight out. Very well. He has done it. Perhaps he can ride. But there is a way of looking at a halter that would provoke the most charitable of saints into a kick.

"I had no idea why he wanted to be sociable, but as we chatted in there it suddenly occurred to me the fellow was trying to get at something—in fact, pumping me. He alluded constantly to Europe, to the people I was supposed to know there—putting leading questions as to my acquaintances in the sepulchral city, and so on. His little eyes glittered like mica discs—with curiosity—though he tried to keep up a bit of superciliousness. At first I was astonished, but very soon I became awfully curious to see what he would find out from me. I couldn't possibly imagine what I had in me to make it worth his while. It was very pretty to see how he baffled himself, for in truth my body was full only of chills, and my head had nothing in it but that wretched steamboat business. It was evident he took me for a perfectly shameless prevaricator. At last he got angry, and, to conceal a movement of furious annoyance, he yawned. I rose. Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister.

"It arrested me, and he stood by civilly, holding an empty half-pint champagne bottle (medical comforts) with the candle stuck in it. To my question he said Mr. Kurtz had painted this—in this very station more than a year ago—while waiting for means to go to his trading-post. 'Tell me, pray,' said I, 'who is this Mr. Kurtz?'

"'The chief of the Inner Station,' he answered in a short tone, looking away. 'Much obliged,' I said, laughing. 'And you are the brickmaker of the Central Station. Everyone knows that.' He was silent for a while. 'He is a prodigy,' he said at last. 'He is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else. We want,' he began to declaim suddenly, 'for the guidance of the cause intrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose.' 'Who says that?' I asked. 'Lots of them,' he replied. 'Some even write that; and so *he* comes here, a special being, as you ought to know.' 'Why ought I to know?' I interrupted, really surprised. He paid no attention. 'Yes. To-day he is chief of the best station, next year he will be assistant-manager, two years more and . . . but I daresay you know what he will be in two years' time. You are of the new gang—the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specially also recommended you. Oh, don't say no. I've my own eyes to trust.' Light dawned upon me. My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect upon that young man. I nearly burst into a laugh. 'Do you read the Company's confidential correspondence?' I asked. He hadn't a word to say. It was great fun. 'When Mr. Kurtz,' I continued, severely, 'is General Manager, you won't have the opportunity.'

"He blew the candle out suddenly, and we went outside. The moon had risen. Black figures strolled about listlessly, pouring water on the glow, whence proceeded a sound of hissing; steam ascended in the moonlight, the beaten nigger groaned somewhere. 'What a row the brute makes!' said the indefatigable man with the

moustaches, appearing near us. 'Serve him right. Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future. I was just telling the manager . . .' He noticed my companion, and became crestfallen all at once. 'Not in bed yet,' he said, with a kind of servile heartiness; 'it's so natural. Ha! Danger—agitation.' He vanished. I went on to the river-side, and the other followed me. I heard a scathing murmur at my ear, 'Heap of muffs—go to.' The pilgrims could be seen in knots gesticulating, discussing. Several had still their staves in their hands. I verily believe they took these sticks to bed with them. Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dim stir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard, the silence of the land went home to one's very heart—its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life. The hurt nigger moaned feebly somewhere near by, and then fetched a deep sigh that made me mend my pace away from there. I felt a hand introducing itself under my arm. 'My dear sir,' said the fellow, 'I don't want to be misunderstood, and especially by you, who will see Mr. Kurtz long before I can have that pleasure. I wouldn't like him to get a false idea of my disposition. . . .'

"I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe. He, don't you see, had been planning to be assistant-manager by and by under the present man, and I could see that the coming of that Kurtz had upset them both not a little. He talked precipitately, and I did not try to stop him. I had my shoulders against the wreck of my steamer, hauled up on the slope like a carcass of some big river animal. The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes; there were shiny patches on the black creek. The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out from there, and I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it, too—God knows! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it—no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there. I believed it in the same way one of you might believe there are inhabitants in the planet Mars. I knew once a Scotch sailmaker who was certain, dead sure, there were people in Mars. If you asked him for some idea how they looked and behaved, he would get shy and mutter something about 'walking on all-fours.' If you as much as smiled, he would—though a man of sixty—offer to fight you. I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie. You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me

miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . ."

He was silent for a while.

". . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream—alone. . . ."

He paused again as if reflecting, then added—

"Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know. . . ."

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.

". . . Yes—I let him run on," Marlow began again, "and think what he pleased about the powers that were behind me. I did! And there was nothing behind me! There was nothing but that wretched, old, mangled steamboat I was leaning against, while he talked fluently about 'the necessity for every man to get on.' 'And when one comes out here, you conceive, it is not to gaze at the moon.' Mr. Kurtz was a 'universal genius,' but even a genius would find it easier to work with 'adequate tools—intelligent men.' He did not make bricks—why, there was a physical impossibility in the way—as I was well aware; and if he did secretarial work for the manager, it was because 'no sensible man rejects wantonly the confidence of his superiors.' Did I see it? I saw it. What more did I want? What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work—to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast—cases—piled up—burst—split! You kicked a loose rivet at every second step in that station yard on the hillside. Rivets had rolled into the grove of death. You could fill your pockets with rivets for the trouble of stooping down—and there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted. We had plates that would do, but nothing to fasten them with. And every week the messenger, a lone negro, letter-bag on shoulder and staff in hand, left our station for the coast. And several times a week a coast caravan came in with trade goods—ghastly glazed calico that made you shudder only to look at it, glass beads value about a penny a quart, confounded spotted cotton handkerchiefs. And no rivets. Three carriers could have brought all that was wanted to set that steamboat afloat.

"He was becoming confidential now, but I fancy my unresponsive attitude must have exasperated him at last, for he judged it necessary to inform me he feared neither God nor devil, let alone any mere man. I said I could see that very well, but what I wanted was a certain quantity of rivets—and rivets were what really Mr. Kurtz wanted, if he had only known it. Now letters went to the coast every week. . . . 'My dear sir,' he cried, 'I write from dictation.' I demanded rivets. There was a way—for an intelligent man. He changed his manner; became very cold, and suddenly began to talk about a hippopotamus; wondered whether sleeping on board the steamer (I stuck to my salvage night and day) I wasn't disturbed. There was an old hippo that had the bad habit of getting out on the bank and roaming at night over the station grounds. The pilgrims used to turn out in a body and empty every rifle they could lay hands on at him. Some even had sat up o' nights for him. All this energy was wasted, though. 'That animal has a charmed life,' he said; 'but you can say this only of brutes in this country. No man—you apprehend me?—no man here bears a charmed life.' He stood there for a moment in the moonlight with his delicate hooked nose set a little askew, and his mica eyes glittering without a wink, then, with a curt Good-night, he strode off. I could see he was disturbed and considerably puzzled, which made me feel more hopeful than I had been for days. It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. I clambered on board. She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit-tin kicked along a gutter; she was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do. No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means.

"I was not surprised to see somebody sitting aft, on the deck, with his legs dangling over the mud. You see I rather chummed with the few mechanics there were in that station, whom the other pilgrims naturally despised—on account of their imperfect manners, I suppose. This was the foreman—a boiler-maker by trade—a good worker. He was a lank, bony, yellow-faced man, with big intense eyes. His aspect was worried, and his head was as bald as the palm of my hand; but his hair in falling seemed to have stuck to his chin, and had prospered in the new locality, for his beard hung down to his waist. He was a widower with six young children (he had left them in charge of a sister of his to come out there), and the passion of his life was pigeon-flying. He was an enthusiast and a connoisseur. He would rave about pigeons. After work hours he used sometimes to come over from his hut for a talk about his children and his pigeons; at work, when he had to crawl in the mud under the bottom of the steamboat, he would tie up that beard of his in a kind of white serviette[18] he brought for the purpose. It had loops to go over his ears. In the evening

[18] **serviette:** A napkin.

he could be seen squatted on the bank rinsing that wrapper in the creek with great care, then spreading it solemnly on a bush to dry.

"I slapped him on the back and shouted, 'We shall have rivets!' He scrambled to his feet exclaiming, 'No! Rivets!' as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then in a low voice, 'You . . . eh?' I don't know why we behaved like lunatics. I put my finger to the side of my nose and nodded mysteriously. 'Good for you!' he cried, snapped his fingers above his head, lifting one foot. I tried a jig. We capered on the iron deck. A frightful clatter came out of that hulk, and the virgin forest on the other bank of the creek sent it back in a thundering roll upon the sleeping station. It must have made some of the pilgrims sit up in their hovels. A dark figure obscured the lighted doorway of the manager's hut, vanished, then, a second or so after, the doorway itself vanished, too. We stopped, and the silence driven away by the stamping of our feet flowed back again from the recesses of the land. The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not. A deadened burst of mighty splashes and snorts reached us from afar, as though an ichthyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river. 'After all,' said the boiler-maker in a reasonable tone, 'why shouldn't we get the rivets?' Why not, indeed! I did not know of any reason why we shouldn't. 'They'll come in three weeks,' I said, confidently.

"But they didn't. Instead of rivets there came an invasion, an infliction, a visitation. It came in sections during the next three weeks, each section headed by a donkey carrying a white man in new clothes and tan shoes, bowing from that elevation right and left to the impressed pilgrims. A quarrelsome band of footsore sulky niggers trod on the heels of the donkey; a lot of tents, camp-stools, tin boxes, white cases, brown bales would be shot down in the courtyard, and the air of mystery would deepen a little over the muddle of the station. Five such instalments came, with their absurd air of disorderly flight with the loot of innumerable outfit shops and provision stores, that, one would think, they were lugging, after a raid, into the wilderness for equitable division. It was an inextricable mess of things decent in themselves but that human folly made look like the spoils of thieving.

"This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot.

"In exterior he resembled a butcher in a poor neighbourhood, and his eyes had a look of sleepy cunning. He carried his fat paunch with ostentation on his short legs, and during the time his gang infested the station spoke to no one but his

nephew. You could see these two roaming about all day long with their heads close together in an everlasting confab.

"I had given up worrying myself about the rivets. One's capacity for that kind of folly is more limited than you would suppose. I said Hang!—and let things slide. I had plenty of time for meditation, and now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz. I wasn't very interested in him. No. Still, I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there."

2

"One evening as I was lying flat on the deck of my steamboat, I heard voices approaching—and there were the nephew and the uncle strolling along the bank. I laid my head on my arm again, and had nearly lost myself in a doze, when somebody said in my ear, as it were: 'I am as harmless as a little child, but I don't like to be dictated to. Am I the manager—or am I not? I was ordered to send him there. It's incredible.' . . . I became aware that the two were standing on the shore alongside the forepart of the steamboat, just below my head. I did not move; it did not occur to me to move: I was sleepy. 'It *is* unpleasant,' grunted the uncle. 'He has asked the Administration to be sent there,' said the other, 'with the idea of showing what he could do; and I was instructed accordingly. Look at the influence that man must have. Is it not frightful?' They both agreed it was frightful, then made several bizarre remarks: 'Make rain and fine weather—one man—the Council—by the nose'—bits of absurd sentences that got the better of my drowsiness, so that I had pretty near the whole of my wits about me when the uncle said, 'The climate may do away with this difficulty for you. Is he alone there?' 'Yes,' answered the manager; 'he sent his assistant down the river with a note to me in these terms: "Clear this poor devil out of the country, and don't bother sending more of that sort. I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me." It was more than a year ago. Can you imagine such impudence!' 'Anything since then?' asked the other, hoarsely. 'Ivory,' jerked the nephew; 'lots of it—prime sort—lots—most annoying, from him.' 'And with that?' questioned the heavy rumble. 'Invoice,' was the reply fired out, so to speak. Then silence. They had been talking about Kurtz.

"I was broad awake by this time, but, lying perfectly at ease, remained still, having no inducement to change my position. 'How did that ivory come all this way?' growled the elder man, who seemed very vexed. The other explained that it had come with a fleet of canoes in charge of an English half-caste clerk Kurtz had with him; that Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself, the station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers, leaving the half-caste to continue down the river with the ivory. The two fellows there seemed astounded at anybody attempting such a thing. They were at a loss for an adequate motive. As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man

turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake. His name, you understand, had not been pronounced once. He was 'that man.' The half-caste, who, as far as I could see, had conducted a difficult trip with great prudence and pluck, was invariably alluded to as 'that scoundrel.' The 'scoundrel' had reported that the 'man' had been very ill—had recovered imperfectly. . . . The two below me moved away then a few paces, and strolled back and forth at some little distance. I heard: 'Military post—doctor—two hundred miles—quite alone now—unavoidable delays—nine months—no news—strange rumours.' They approached again, just as the manager was saying, 'No one, as far as I know, unless a species of wandering trader—a pestilential fellow, snapping ivory from the natives.' Who was it they were talking about now? I gathered in snatches that this was some man supposed to be in Kurtz's district, and of whom the manager did not approve. 'We will not be free from unfair competition till one of these fellows is hanged for an example,' he said. 'Certainly,' grunted the other; 'get him hanged! Why not? Anything—anything can be done in this country. That's what I say; nobody here, you understand, *here*, can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate—you outlast them all. The danger is in Europe; but there before I left I took care to——' They moved off and whispered, then their voices rose again. 'The extraordinary series of delays is not my fault. I did my best.' The fat man sighed. 'Very sad.' 'And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk,' continued the other, 'he bothered me enough when he was here. "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing." Conceive you—that ass! And he wants to be manager! No, it's—' Here he got choked by excessive indignation, and I lifted my head the least bit. I was surprised to see how near they were—right under me. I could have spat upon their hats. They were looking on the ground, absorbed in thought. The manager was switching his leg with a slender twig: his sagacious relative lifted his head. 'You have been well since you came out this time?' he asked. The other gave a start. 'Who? I? Oh! Like a charm—like a charm. But the rest—oh, my goodness! All sick. They die so quick, too, that I haven't the time to send them out of the country—it's incredible!' 'H'm. Just so,' grunted the uncle. 'Ah! my boy, trust to this—I say, trust to this.' I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river,—seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence. You know the foolish notions that come to one sometimes. The high stillness confronted these two figures with its ominous patience, waiting for the passing away of a fantastic invasion.

"They swore aloud together—out of sheer fright, I believe—then pretending not to know anything of my existence, turned back to the station. The sun was low; and leaning forward side by side, they seemed to be tugging painfully uphill their

two ridiculous shadows of unequal length, that trailed behind them slowly over the tall grass without bending a single blade.

"In a few days the Eldorado Expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver. Long afterwards the news came that all the donkeys were dead. I know nothing as to the fate of the less valuable animals. They, no doubt, like the rest of us, found what they deserved. I did not inquire. I was then rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz very soon. When I say very soon I mean it comparatively. It was just two months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz's station.

"Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it any more; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tightropes for—what is it? half-a-crown a tumble——"

"Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself.

"I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed what does the price matter, if the trick be well done? You do your tricks very well. And I didn't do badly either, since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It's a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road. I sweated and shivered over that business considerably, I can tell you. After all, for a seaman, to scrape the bottom of the thing that's supposed to float all the time under his care is the unpardonable sin. No one may know of it, but you

never forget the thump—eh? A blow on the very heart. You remember it, you dream of it, you wake up at night and think of it—years after—and go hot and cold all over. I don't pretend to say that steamboat floated all the time. More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing. We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils. Phoo! I can sniff it now. I had the manager on board and three or four pilgrims with their staves—all complete. Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of a tumble-down hovel, with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange—had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell. The word ivory would ring in the air for a while—and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel. Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on—which was just what you wanted it to do. Where the pilgrims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they expected to get something, I bet! For me it crawled towards Kurtz—exclusively; but when the steam-pipes started leaking we crawled very slow. The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by the descent of a chill stillness; the wood-cutters slept, their fires burned low; the snapping of a twig would make you start. We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

"The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who's that grunting? You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this—that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully (with an impromptu charm, made of rags, tied to his arm, and a piece of polished bone, as big as a watch, stuck flat-ways through his lower lip), while the wooded banks slipped past us slowly, the short noise was left behind, the interminable miles of silence—and we crept on, towards Kurtz. But the snags were thick, the water was treacherous and shallow, the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither that fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts.

"Some fifty miles below the Inner Station we came upon a hut of reeds, an inclined and melancholy pole, with the unrecognizable tatters of what had been a flag of some sort flying from it, and a neatly stacked wood-pile. This was unexpected. We came to the bank, and on the stack of firewood found a flat piece of board with some faded pencil-writing on it. When deciphered it said: 'Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously.' There was a signature, but it was illegible—not Kurtz—a much longer word. 'Hurry up.' Where? Up the river? 'Approach cautiously.' We had not done so. But the warning could not have been meant for the place where it could be only found after approach. Something was wrong above. But what—and how much? That was the question. We commented adversely upon the imbecility of that telegraphic style. The bush around said nothing, and would not let us look very far, either. A torn curtain of red twill hung in the doorway of the hut, and flapped sadly in our faces. The dwelling was dismantled; but we could see a white man had lived there not very long ago. There remained a rude table—a plank on two posts; a heap of rubbish reposed in a dark corner, and by the door I picked up a book. It had lost its covers, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson—some such name—Master in his Majesty's Navy. The matter looked dreary reading enough, with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures, and the copy was sixty years old. I handled this amazing antiquity with the greatest possible tenderness, lest it should dissolve in my hands. Within, Towson or Towser was inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships' chains and tackle, and other such matters. Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases,[19] made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it—and making notes—in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery.

"I had been dimly aware for some time of a worrying noise, and when I lifted my eyes I saw the wood-pile was gone, and the manager, aided by all the pilgrims, was shouting at me from the river-side. I slipped the book into my pocket. I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship.

"I started the lame engine ahead. 'It must be this miserable trader—this intruder,' exclaimed the manager, looking back malevolently at the place we had left. 'He must be English,' I said. 'It will not save him from getting into trouble if he is not

[19] purchases: Tackles or levers or similar mechanical devices.

careful,' muttered the manager darkly. I observed with assumed innocence that no man was safe from trouble in this world.

"The current was more rapid now, the steamer seemed at her last gasp, the stern-wheel flopped languidly, and I caught myself listening on tiptoe for the next beat of the boat, for in sober truth I expected the wretched thing to give up every moment. It was like watching the last flickers of a life. But still we crawled. Sometimes I would pick out a tree a little way ahead to measure our progress towards Kurtz by, but I lost it invariably before we got abreast. To keep the eyes so long on one thing was too much for human patience. The manager displayed a beautiful resignation. I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what any one knew or ignored? What did it matter who was manager? One gets sometimes such a flash of insight. The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling.

"Towards the evening of the second day we judged ourselves about eight miles from Kurtz's station. I wanted to push on; but the manager looked grave, and told me the navigation up there was so dangerous that it would be advisable, the sun being very low already, to wait where we were till next morning. Moreover, he pointed out that if the warning to approach cautiously were to be followed, we must approach in daylight—not at dusk, or in the dark. This was sensible enough. Eight miles meant nearly three hours' steaming for us, and I could also see suspicious ripples at the upper end of the reach. Nevertheless, I was annoyed beyond expression at the delay, and most unreasonably, too, since one night more could not matter much after so many months. As we had plenty of wood, and caution was the word, I brought up in the middle of the stream. The reach was narrow, straight, with high sides like a railway cutting. The dusk came gliding into it long before the sun had set. The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all round you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it—all perfectly still—and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves. I ordered the chain, which we had begun to heave in, to be paid out again. Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it

seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. 'Good God! What is the meaning——' stammered at my elbow one of the pilgrims,—a little fat man, with sandy hair and red whiskers, who wore side-spring boots, and pink pyjamas tucked into his socks. Two others remained open-mouthed a whole minute, then dashed into the little cabin, to rush out incontinently and stand darting scared glances, with Winchesters at 'ready' in their hands. What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her—and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.

"I went forward, and ordered the chain to be hauled in short, so as to be ready to trip the anchor and move the steamboat at once if necessary. 'Will they attack?' whispered an awed voice. 'We will be all butchered in this fog,' murmured another. The faces twitched with the strain, the hands trembled slightly, the eyes forgot to wink. It was very curious to see the contrast of expressions of the white men and of the black fellows of our crew, who were as much strangers to that part of the river as we, though their homes were only eight hundred miles away. The whites, of course greatly discomposed, had besides a curious look of being painfully shocked by such an outrageous row. The others had an alert, naturally interested expression; but their faces were essentially quiet, even those of the one or two who grinned as they hauled at the chain. Several exchanged short, grunting phrases, which seemed to settle the matter to their satisfaction. Their headman, a young, broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. 'Aha!' I said, just for good fellowship's sake. 'Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—'catch 'im. Give 'im to us.' 'To you, eh?' I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat 'im!' he said, curtly, and, leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude. I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry: that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past. They had been engaged for six months (I don't think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time—had no inherited experience to teach them as it were), and of course, as long as there was a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other made down the river, it didn't enter anybody's head to trouble how they would live. Certainly they had brought with them some rotten hippo-meat, which couldn't have lasted very long, anyway, even if the pilgrims hadn't, in the midst of a shocking hullabaloo, thrown a considerable quantity of it overboard. It looked like a high-handed proceeding; but it was really a case of legitimate self-defence. You can't breathe dead hippo waking, sleeping, and eating, and at the same time keep your precarious grip on existence. Besides that, they had

given them every week three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in river-side villages. You can see how *that* worked. There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director, who like the rest of us fed out of tins, with an occasional old he-goat thrown in, didn't want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reason. So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. I must say it was paid with a regularity worthy of a large and honourable trading company. For the rest, the only thing to eat—though it didn't look eatable in the least—I saw in their possession was a few lumps of some stuff like half-cooked dough, of a dirty lavender colour, they kept wrapped in leaves, and now and then swallowed a piece of, but so small that it seemed done more for the looks of the thing than for any serious purpose of sustenance. Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us—they were thirty to five—and have a good tuck-in[20] for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard. And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest—not because it occurred to me I might be eaten by them before very long, though I own to you that just then I perceived—in a new light, as it were—how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so—what shall I say?—so—unappetizing: a touch of fantastic vanity which fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time. Perhaps I had a little fever, too. One can't live with one's finger everlastingly on one's pulse. I had often 'a little fever,' or a little touch of other things—the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught which came in due course. Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul—than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad, but true. And these chaps, too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma, a mystery greater—when I thought of it—than the curious,

[20] tuck-in: A hearty meal.

inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamour that had swept by us on the river-bank, behind the blind whiteness of the fog.

"Two pilgrims were quarrelling in hurried whispers as to which bank. 'Left.' 'No, no; how can you? Right, right, of course.' 'It is very serious,' said the manager's voice behind me; 'I would be desolated if anything should happen to Mr. Kurtz before we came up.' I looked at him, and had not the slightest doubt he was sincere. He was just the kind of man who would wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint. But when he muttered something about going on at once, I did not even take the trouble to answer him. I knew, and he knew, that it was impossible. Were we to let go our hold of the bottom, we would be absolutely in the air—in space. We wouldn't be able to tell where we were going to—whether up or down stream, or across—till we fetched against one bank or the other,—and then we wouldn't know at first which it was. Of course I made no move. I had no mind for a smash-up. You couldn't imagine a more deadly place for a shipwreck. Whether drowned at once or not, we were sure to perish speedily in one way or another. 'I authorize you to take all the risks,' he said, after a short silence. 'I refuse to take any,' I said, shortly; which was just the answer he expected, though its tone might have surprised him. 'Well, I must defer to your judgment. You are captain,' he said, with marked civility. I turned my shoulder to him in sign of my appreciation, and looked into the fog. How long would it last? It was the most hopeless look-out. The approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle. 'Will they attack, do you think?' asked the manager, in a confidential tone.

"I did not think they would attack, for several obvious reasons. The thick fog was one. If they left the bank in their canoes they would get lost in it, as we would be if we attempted to move. Still, I had also judged the jungle of both banks quite impenetrable—and yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us. The river-side bushes were certainly very thick; but the undergrowth behind was evidently penetrable. However, during the short lift I had seen no canoes anywhere in the reach—certainly not abreast of the steamer. But what made the idea of attack inconceivable to me was the nature of the noise—of the cries we had heard. They had not the fierce character boding immediate hostile intention. Unexpected, wild, and violent as they had been, they had given me an irresistible impression of sorrow. The glimpse of the steamboat had for some reason filled those savages with unrestrained grief. The danger, if any, I expounded, was from our proximity to a great human passion let loose. Even extreme grief may ultimately vent itself in violence—but more generally takes the form of apathy. . . .

"You should have seen the pilgrims stare! They had no heart to grin, or even to revile me: but I believe they thought me gone mad—with fright, maybe. I delivered a regular lecture. My dear boys, it was no good bothering. Keep a look-out? Well, you may guess I watched the fog for the signs of lifting as a cat watches a mouse; but for anything else our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a heap of cotton-wool. It felt like it, too—choking, warm, stifling. Besides, all I said, though it sounded extravagant, was absolutely true to fact. What we afterwards alluded to as an attack was really an attempt at repulse. The action was very far

from being aggressive—it was not even defensive, in the usual sense: it was undertaken under the stress of desperation, and in its essence was purely protective.

"It developed itself, I should say, two hours after the fog lifted, and its commencement was at a spot, roughly speaking, about a mile and a half below Kurtz's station. We had just floundered and flopped round a bend, when I saw an islet, a mere grassy hummock of bright green, in the middle of the stream. It was the only thing of the kind; but as we opened the reach more, I perceived it was the head of a long sandbank, or rather of a chain of shallow patches stretching down the middle of the river. They were discoloured, just awash, and the whole lot was seen just under the water, exactly as a man's backbone is seen running down the middle of his back under the skin. Now, as far as I did see, I could go to the right or to the left of this. I didn't know either channel, of course. The banks looked pretty well alike, the depth appeared the same; but as I had been informed the station was on the west side, I naturally headed for the western passage.

"No sooner had we fairly entered it than I became aware it was much narrower than I had supposed. To the left of us there was the long uninterrupted shoal, and to the right a high, steep bank heavily overgrown with bushes. Above the bush the trees stood in serried ranks. The twigs overhung the current thickly, and from distance to distance a large limb of some tree projected rigidly over the stream. It was then well on in the afternoon, the face of the forest was gloomy, and a broad strip of shadow had already fallen on the water. In this shadow we steamed up—very slowly, as you may imagine. I sheered her well inshore—the water being deepest near the bank, as the sounding-pole informed me.

"One of my hungry and forbearing friends was sounding in the bows just below me. This steamboat was exactly like a decked scow. On the deck, there were two little teak-wood houses, with doors and windows. The boiler was in the fore-end, and the machinery right astern. Over the whole there was a light roof, supported on stanchions. The funnel projected through that roof, and in front of the funnel a small cabin built of light planks served for a pilot-house. It contained a couch, two camp-stools, a loaded Martini-Henry[21] leaning in one corner, a tiny table, and the steering-wheel. It had a wide door in front and a broad shutter at each side. All these were always thrown open, of course. I spent my days perched up there on the extreme fore-end of that roof, before the door. At night I slept, or tried to, on the couch. An athletic black belonging to some coast tribe, and educated by my poor predecessor, was the helmsman. He sported a pair of brass earrings, wore a blue cloth wrapper from the waist to the ankles, and thought all the world of himself. He was the most unstable kind of fool I had ever seen. He steered with no end of a swagger while you were by; but if he lost sight of you, he became instantly the prey of an abject funk, and would let that cripple of a steamboat get the upper hand of him in a minute.

"I was looking down at the sounding-pole, and feeling much annoyed to see at each try a little more of it stick out of that river, when I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the

[21] **Martini-Henry:** A powerful rifle.

trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed. Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet—perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at! I stepped in quickly to close the shutter on the land-side. That fool-helmsman, his hands on the spokes, was lifting his knees high, stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse. Confound him! And we were staggering within ten feet of the bank. I had to lean right out to swing the heavy shutter, and I saw a face amongst the leaves on the level with my own, looking at me very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes,—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour. The twigs shook, swayed, and rustled, the arrows flew out of them, and then the shutter came to. 'Steer her straight,' I said to the helmsman. He held his head rigid, face forward; but his eyes rolled, he kept on lifting and setting down his feet gently, his mouth foamed a little. 'Keep quiet!' I said in a fury. I might just as well have ordered a tree not to sway in the wind. I darted out. Below me there was a great scuffle of feet on the iron deck; confused exclamations; a voice screamed, 'Can you turn back?' I caught sight of a V shaped ripple on the water ahead. What? Another snag! A fusillade burst out under my feet. The pilgrims had opened with their Winchesters, and were simply squirting lead into that bush. A deuce of a lot of smoke came up and drove slowly forward. I swore at it. Now I couldn't see the ripple or the snag either. I stood in the doorway, peering, and the arrows came in swarms. They might have been poisoned, but they looked as though they wouldn't kill a cat. The bush began to howl. Our wood-cutters raised a warlike whoop; the report of a rifle just at my back deafened me. I glanced over my shoulder, and the pilot-house was yet full of noise and smoke when I made a dash at the wheel. The fool-nigger had dropped everything, to throw the shutter open and let off that Martini-Henry. He stood before the wide opening, glaring, and I yelled at him to come back, while I straightened the sudden twist out of that steamboat. There was no room to turn even if I had wanted to, the snag was somewhere very near ahead in that confounded smoke, there was no time to lose, so I just crowded her into the bank—right into the bank, where I knew the water was deep.

"We tore slowly along the overhanging bushes in a whirl of broken twigs and flying leaves. The fusillade below stopped short, as I had foreseen it would when the squirts got empty. I threw my head back to a glinting whizz that traversed the pilot-house, in at one shutter-hole and out at the other. Looking past that mad helmsman, who was shaking the empty rifle and yelling at the shore, I saw vague forms of men running bent double, leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete, evanescent. Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound,

familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little camp-stool. It looked as though after wrenching that thing from somebody ashore he had lost his balance in the effort. The thin smoke had blown away, we were clear of the snag, and looking ahead I could see that in another hundred yards or so I would be free to sheer off, away from the bank; but my feet felt so very warm and wet that I had to look down. The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear that, either thrown or lunged through the opening, had caught him in the side just below the ribs; the blade had gone in out of sight, after making a frightful gash; my shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. The fusillade burst out again. He looked at me anxiously, gripping the spear like something precious, with an air of being afraid I would try to take it away from him. I had to make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze and attend to the steering. With one hand I felt above my head for the line of the steam whistle, and jerked out screech after screech hurriedly. The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly, and then from the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth. There was a great commotion in the bush; the shower of arrows stopped, a few dropping shots rang out sharply—then silence, in which the languid beat of the stern-wheel came plainly to my ears. I put the helm hard a-starboard at the moment when the pilgrim in pink pyjamas, very hot and agitated, appeared in the doorway. 'The manager sends me——' he began in an official tone, and stopped short. 'Good God!' he said, glaring at the wounded man.

"We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding, and menacing expression. The lustre of inquiring glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness. 'Can you steer?' I asked the agent eagerly. He looked very dubious; but I made a grab at his arm, and he understood at once I meant him to steer whether or no. To tell you the truth, I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks. 'He is dead,' murmured the fellow, immensely impressed. 'No doubt about it,' said I, tugging like mad at the shoe-laces. 'And by the way, I suppose Mr. Kurtz is dead as well by this time.'

"For the moment that was the dominant thought. There was a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with . . . I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will

never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together? That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preëminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.

"The other shoe went flying unto the devil-god of that river. I thought, By Jove! it's all over. We are too late; he has vanished—the gift has vanished, by means of some spear, arrow, or club. I will never hear that chap speak after all,—and my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush. I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life. . . . Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! mustn't a man ever——Here, give me some tobacco." . . .

There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids, with an aspect of concentrated attention; and as he took vigorous draws at his pipe, it seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame. The match went out.

"Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst of trying to tell. . . . Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded! Absurd! My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes! Now I think of it, it is amazing I did not shed tears. I am, upon the whole, proud of my fortitude. I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh, yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices—even the girl herself—now——"

He was silent for a long time.

"I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie," he began, suddenly. "Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it. You should have heard the disinterred body of Mr. Kurtz saying, 'My Intended.' You would have perceived directly then how completely she was out of it. And the lofty frontal bone of

Mr. Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this—ah—specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite. Ivory? I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it. You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country. 'Mostly fossil,' the manager had remarked, disparagingly. It was no more fossil than I am; but they call it fossil when it is dug up. It appears these niggers do bury the tusks sometimes—but evidently they couldn't bury this parcel deep enough to save the gifted Mr. Kurtz from his fate. We filled the steamboat with it, and had to pile a lot on the deck. Thus he could see and enjoy as long as he could see, because the appreciation of this favour had remained with him to the last. You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my——' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally. You can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil: the fool is too much of a fool, or the devil too much of a devil—I don't know which. Or you may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds. Then the earth for you is only a standing place—and whether to be like this is your loss or your gain I won't pretend to say. But most of us are neither one nor the other. The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove!—breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated. And there, don't you see? your strength comes in, the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in—your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business. And that's difficult enough. Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain—I am trying to account to myself for—for—Mr. Kurtz—for the shade of Mr. Kurtz. This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing

confidence before it vanished altogether. This was because it could speak English to me. The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by and by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. And he had written it, too. I've seen it. I've read it. It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. Seventeen pages of close writing he had found time for! But this must have been before his—let us say—nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand?—to Mr. Kurtz himself. But it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc. etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' The curious part was that he had apparently forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum, because, later on, when he in a sense came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take good care of 'my pamphlet' (he called it), as it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon his career. I had full information about all these things, and, besides, as it turned out, I was to have the care of his memory. I've done enough for it to give me the indisputable right to lay it, if I choose, for an everlasting rest in the dust-bin of progress, amongst all the sweepings and, figuratively speaking, all the dead cats of civilization. But then, you see, I can't choose. He won't be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking. No; I can't forget him, though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him. I missed my late helmsman awfully,—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done

something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

"Poor fool! If he had only left that shutter alone. He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz—a tree swayed by the wind. As soon as I had put on a dry pair of slippers, I dragged him out, after first jerking the spear out of his side, which operation I confess I performed with my eyes shut tight. His heels leaped together over the little door-step; his shoulders were pressed to my breast; I hugged him from behind desperately. Oh! he was heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth, I should imagine. Then without more ado I tipped him overboard. The current snatched him as though he had been a wisp of grass, and I saw the body roll over twice before I lost sight of it for ever. All the pilgrims and the manager were then congregated on the awning-deck about the pilot-house, chattering at each other like a flock of excited magpies, and there was a scandalized murmur at my heartless promptitude. What they wanted to keep that body hanging about for I can't guess. Embalm it, maybe. But I had also heard another, and a very ominous, murmur on the deck below. My friends the wood-cutters were likewise scandalized, and with a better show of reason—though I admit that the reason itself was quite inadmissible. Oh, quite! I had made up my mind that if my late helmsman was to be eaten, the fishes alone should have him. He had been a very second-rate helmsman while alive, but now he was dead he might have become a first-class temptation, and possibly cause some startling trouble. Besides, I was anxious to take the wheel, the man in pink pyjamas showing himself a hopeless duffer at the business.

"This I did directly the simple funeral was over. We were going half-speed, keeping right in the middle of the stream, and I listened to the talk about me. They had given up Kurtz, they had given up the station; Kurtz was dead, and the station had been burnt—and so on—and so on. The red-haired pilgrim was beside himself with the thought that at least this poor Kurtz had been properly avenged. 'Say! We must have made a glorious slaughter of them in the bush. Eh? What do you think? Say?' He positively danced, the bloodthirsty little gingery[22] beggar. And he had nearly fainted when he saw the wounded man! I could not help saying, 'You made a glorious lot of smoke, anyhow.' I had seen, from the way the tops of the bushes rustled and flew, that almost all the shots had gone too high. You can't hit anything unless you take aim and fire from the shoulder; but these chaps fired from the hip with their eyes shut. The retreat, I maintained—and I was right—was caused by the screeching of the steam-whistle. Upon this they forgot Kurtz, and began to howl at me with indignant protests.

[22] **gingery:** Redheaded.

"The manager stood by the wheel murmuring confidentially about the necessity of getting well away down the river before dark at all events, when I saw in the distance a clearing on the river-side and the outlines of some sort of building. 'What's this?' I asked. He clapped his hands in wonder. 'The station!' he cried. I edged in at once, still going half-speed.

"Through my glasses I saw the slope of a hill interspersed with rare trees and perfectly free from undergrowth. A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background. There was no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. The rails, or whatever there had been between, had disappeared. Of course the forest surrounded all that. The river-bank was clear, and on the water-side I saw a white man under a hat like a cart-wheel beckoning persistently with his whole arm. Examining the edge of the forest above and below, I was almost certain I could see movements—human forms gliding here and there. I steamed past prudently, then stopped the engines and let her drift down. The man on the shore began to shout, urging us to land. 'We have been attacked,' screamed the manager. 'I know—I know. It's all right,' yelled back the other, as cheerful as you please. 'Come along. It's all right. I am glad.'

"His aspect reminded me of something I had seen—something funny I had seen somewhere. As I manœuvred to get alongside, I was asking myself, 'What does this fellow look like?' Suddenly I got it. He looked like a harlequin. His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland[23] probably, but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow—patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on elbows, on knees; coloured binding around his jacket, scarlet edging at the bottom of his trousers; and the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done. A beardless, boyish face, very fair, no features to speak of, nose peeling, little blue eyes, smiles and frowns chasing each other over that open countenance like sunshine and shadow on a wind-swept plain. 'Look out, captain!' he cried; 'there's a snag lodged in here last night.' What! Another snag? I confess I swore shamefully. I had nearly holed my cripple, to finish off that charming trip. The harlequin on the bank turned his little pug-nose up to me. 'You English?' he asked, all smiles. 'Are you?' I shouted from the wheel. The smiles vanished, and he shook his head as if sorry for my disappointment. Then he brightened up. 'Never mind!' he cried, encouragingly. 'Are we in time?' I asked. 'He is up there,' he replied, with a toss of the head up the hill, and becoming gloomy all of a sudden. His face was like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next.

"When the manager, escorted by the pilgrims, all of them armed to the teeth, had gone to the house this chap came on board. 'I say, I don't like this. These natives

[23] **holland:** Unbleached cotton or linen.

are in the bush,' I said. He assured me earnestly it was all right. 'They are simple people,' he added; 'well, I am glad you came. It took me all my time to keep them off.' 'But you said it was all right,' I cried. 'Oh, they meant no harm,' he said; and as I stared he corrected himself, 'Not exactly.' Then vivaciously, 'My faith, your pilot-house wants a clean-up!' In the next breath he advised me to keep enough steam on the boiler to blow the whistle in case of any trouble. 'One good screech will do more for you than all your rifles. They are simple people,' he repeated. He rattled away at such a rate he quite overwhelmed me. He seemed to be trying to make up for lots of silence, and actually hinted, laughing, that such was the case. 'Don't you talk with Mr. Kurtz?' I said. 'You don't talk with that man—you listen to him,' he exclaimed with severe exaltation. 'But now——' He waved his arm, and in the twinkling of an eye was in the uttermost depths of despondency. In a moment he came up again with a jump, possessed himself of both my hands, shook them continuously, while he gabbled: 'Brother sailor . . . honour . . . pleasure . . . delight . . . introduce myself . . . Russian . . . son of an arch-priest . . . Government of Tambov . . . What? Tobacco! English tobacco; the excellent English tobacco! Now, that's brotherly. Smoke? Where's a sailor that does not smoke?'

"The pipe soothed him, and gradually I made out he had run away from school, had gone to sea in a Russian ship; ran away again; served some time in English ships; was now reconciled with the arch-priest. He made a point of that. 'But when one is young one must see things, gather experience, ideas; enlarge the mind.' 'Here!' I interrupted. 'You can never tell! Here I met Mr. Kurtz,' he said, youthfully solemn and reproachful. I held my tongue after that. It appears he had persuaded a Dutch trading-house on the coast to fit him out with stores and goods, and had started for the interior with a light heart, and no more idea of what would happen to him than a baby. He had been wandering about that river for nearly two years alone, cut off from everybody and everything. 'I am not so young as I look. I am twenty-five,' he said. 'At first old Van Shuyten would tell me to go to the devil,' he narrated with keen enjoyment; 'but I stuck to him, and talked and talked, till at last he got afraid I would talk the hind-leg off his favourite dog, so he gave me some cheap things and a few guns, and told me he hoped he would never see my face again. Good old Dutchman, Van Shuyten. I've sent him one small lot of ivory a year ago, so that he can't call me a little thief when I get back. I hope he got it. And for the rest I don't care. I had some wood stacked for you. That was my old house. Did you see?'

"I gave him Towson's book. He made as though he would kiss me, but restrained himself. 'The only book I had left, and I thought I had lost it,' he said, looking at it ecstatically. 'So many accidents happen to a man going about alone, you know. Canoes get upset sometimes—and sometimes you've got to clear out so quick when the people get angry.' He thumbed the pages. 'You made notes in Russian?' I asked. He nodded. 'I thought they were written in cipher,' I said. He laughed, then became serious. 'I had lots of trouble to keep these people off,' he said. 'Did they want to kill you?' I asked. 'Oh, no!' he cried, and checked himself. 'Why did they attack us?' I pursued. He hesitated, then said shamefacedly, 'They don't want him to go.' 'Don't they?' I said, curiously. He nodded a nod full of mystery and wisdom. 'I tell you,' he cried,

'this man has enlarged my mind.' He opened his arms wide, staring at me with his little blue eyes that were perfectly round."

3

"I looked at him, lost in astonishment. There he was before me, in motley, as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes, enthusiastic, fabulous. His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain—why he did not instantly disappear. 'I went a little farther,' he said, 'then still a little farther—till I had gone so far that I don't know how I'll ever get back. Never mind. Plenty time. I can manage. You take Kurtz away quick—quick—I tell you.' The glamour of youth enveloped his particoloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings. For months—for years—his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and there he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearance indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity. I was seduced into something like admiration—like envy. Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed. He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this bepatched youth. I almost envied him the possession of this modest and clear flame. It seemed to have consumed all thought of self so completely, that even while he was talking to you, you forgot that it was he—the man before your eyes—who had gone through these things. I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far.

"They had come together unavoidably, like two ships becalmed near each other, and lay rubbing sides at last. I suppose Kurtz wanted an audience, because on a certain occasion, when encamped in the forest, they had talked all night, or more probably Kurtz had talked. 'We talked of everything,' he said, quite transported at the recollection. 'I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. Everything! Everything! . . . Of love too.' 'Ah, he talked to you of love!' I said, much amused. 'It isn't what you think,' he cried, almost passionately. 'It was in general. He made me see things—things.'

"He threw his arms up. We were on deck at the time, and the headman of my wood-cutters, lounging near by, turned upon him his heavy and glittering eyes. I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness. 'And, ever since, you have been with him, of course?' I said.

"On the contrary. It appears their intercourse had been very much broken by various causes. He had, as he informed me proudly, managed to nurse Kurtz

through two illnesses (he alluded to it as you would to some risky feat), but as a rule Kurtz wandered alone, far in the depths of the forest. 'Very often coming to this station, I had to wait days and days before he would turn up,' he said. 'Ah, it was worth waiting for!—sometimes.' 'What was he doing? exploring or what?' I asked. 'Oh, yes, of course'; he had discovered lots of villages, a lake, too—he did not know exactly in what direction; it was dangerous to inquire too much—but mostly his expeditions had been for ivory. 'But he had no goods to trade with by that time,' I objected. 'There's a good lot of cartridges left even yet,' he answered, looking away. 'To speak plainly, he raided the country,' I said. He nodded. 'Not alone, surely!' He muttered something about the villages round that lake. 'Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he?' I suggested. He fidgeted a little. 'They adored him,' he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see his mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak of Kurtz. The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions. 'What can you expect?' he burst out; 'he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know—and they had never seen anything like it—and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no! Now—just to give you an idea—I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me, too, one day—but I don't judge him.' 'Shoot you!' I cried. 'What for?' 'Well, I had a small lot of ivory the chief of that village near my house gave me. You see I used to shoot game for them. Well, he wanted it, and wouldn't hear reason. He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased. And it was true, too. I gave him the ivory. What did I care! But I didn't clear out. No, no. I couldn't leave him. I had to be careful, of course, till we got friendly again for a time. He had his second illness then. Afterwards I had to keep out of the way; but I didn't mind. He was living for the most part in those villages on the lake. When he came down to the river, sometimes he would take to me, and sometimes it was better for me to be careful. This man suffered too much. He hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him. And he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people—forget himself—you know.' 'Why! he's mad,' I said. He protested indignantly. Mr. Kurtz couldn't be mad. If I had heard him talk, only two days ago, I wouldn't dare hint at such a thing. . . . I had taken up my binoculars while we talked, and was looking at the shore, sweeping the limit of the forest at each side and at the back of the house. The consciousness of there being people in that bush, so silent, so quiet—as silent and quiet as the ruined house on the hill—made me uneasy. There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale that was not so much told as suggested to me in desolate exclamations, completed by shrugs, in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs. The woods were unmoved, like a mask—heavy, like the closed door of a prison—they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence. The Russian was explaining to me that it was only lately that Mr. Kurtz had come down to the river, bringing along with him all the fighting men of that lake tribe. He had been absent for several

months—getting himself adored, I suppose—and had come down unexpectedly, with the intention to all appearance of making a raid either across the river or down stream. Evidently the appetite for more ivory had got the better of the—what shall I say?—less material aspirations. However he had got much worse suddenly. 'I heard he was lying helpless, and so I came up—took my chance,' said the Russian. 'Oh, he is bad, very bad.' I directed my glass to the house. There were no signs of life, but there was the ruined roof, the long mud wall peeping above the grass, with three little square window-holes, no two of the same size; all this brought within reach of my hand, as it were. And then I made a brusque movement, and one of the remaining posts of that vanished fence leaped up in the field of my glass. You remember I told you I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.

"I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. . . . I put down the glass, and the head that had appeared near enough to be spoken to seemed at once to have leaped away from me into inaccessible distance.

"The admirer of Mr. Kurtz was a bit crestfallen. In a hurried, indistinct voice he began to assure me he had not dared to take these—say, symbols—down. He was not afraid of the natives; they would not stir till Mr. Kurtz gave the word. His ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the

chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl. . . . 'I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,' I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine. The young man looked at me with surprise. I suppose it did not occur to him that Mr. Kurtz was no idol of mine. He forgot I hadn't heard any of these splendid monologues on, what was it? on love, justice, conduct of life—or what not. If it had come to crawling before Mr. Kurtz, he crawled as much as the veriest savage of them all. I had no idea of the conditions, he said: these heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks. 'You don't know how such a life tries a man like Kurtz,' cried Kurtz's last disciple. 'Well, and you?' I said. 'I! I! I am a simple man. I have no great thoughts. I want nothing from anybody. How can you compare me to . . . ?' His feelings were too much for speech, and suddenly he broke down. 'I don't understand,' he groaned. 'I've been doing my best to keep him alive, and that's enough. I had no hand in all this. I have no abilities. There hasn't been a drop of medicine or a mouthful of invalid food for months here. He was shamefully abandoned. A man like this, with such ideas. Shamefully! Shamefully! I—I—haven't slept for the last ten nights . . .'

"His voice lost itself in the calm of the evening. The long shadows of the forest had slipped downhill while we talked, had gone far beyond the ruined hovel, beyond the symbolic row of stakes. All this was in the gloom, while we down there were yet in the sunshine, and the stretch of the river abreast of the clearing glittered in a still and dazzling splendour, with a murky and overshadowed bend above and below. Not a living soul was seen on the shore. The bushes did not rustle.

"Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility.

"'Now, if he does not say the right thing to them we are all done for,' said the Russian at my elbow. The knot of men with the stretcher had stopped, too, halfway to the steamer, as if petrified. I saw the man on the stretcher sit up, lank and with an uplifted arm, above the shoulders of the bearers. 'Let us hope that the man who can talk so well of love in general will find some particular reason to spare us this time,' I said. I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonouring necessity. I could not hear a

sound, but through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks. Kurtz—Kurtz—that means short in German—don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life—and death. He looked at least seven feet long. His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting. He fell back suddenly. The stretcher shook as the bearers staggered forward again, and almost at the same time I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration.

"Some of the pilgrims behind the stretcher carried his arms—two shot-guns, a heavy rifle, and a light revolver-carbine—the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter. The manager bent over him murmuring as he walked beside his head. They laid him down in one of the little cabins—just a room for a bedplace and a camp-stool or two, you know. We had brought his belated correspondence, and a lot of torn envelopes and open letters littered his bed. His hand roamed feebly amongst these papers. I was struck by the fire of his eyes and the composed languor of his expression. It was not so much the exhaustion of disease. He did not seem in pain. This shadow looked satiated and calm, as though for the moment it had had its fill of all the emotions.

"He rustled one of the letters, and looking straight in my face said, 'I am glad.' Somebody had been writing to him about me. These special recommendations were turning up again. The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper. However, he had enough strength in him—factitious no doubt—to very nearly make an end of us, as you shall hear directly.

"The manager appeared silently in the doorway; I stepped out at once and he drew the curtain after me. The Russian, eyed curiously by the pilgrims, was staring at the shore. I followed the direction of his glance.

"Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skins, warlike and still in statuesque repose. And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

"She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek,

innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

"She came abreast of the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water's edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. A whole minute passed, and then she made a step forward. There was a low jingle, a glint of yellow metal, a sway of fringed draperies, and she stopped as if her heart had failed her. The young fellow by my side growled. The pilgrims murmured at my back. She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene.

"She turned away slowly, walked on, following the bank, and passed into the bushes to the left. Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared.

"'If she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her,' said the man of patches, nervously. 'I have been risking my life every day for the last fortnight to keep her out of the house. She got in one day and kicked up a row about those miserable rags I picked up in the storeroom to mend my clothes with. I wasn't decent. At least it must have been that, for she talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour, pointing at me now and then. I don't understand the dialect of this tribe. Luckily for me, I fancy Kurtz felt too ill that day to care, or there would have been mischief. I don't understand. . . . No—it's too much for me. Ah, well, it's all over now.'

"At this moment I heard Kurtz's deep voice behind the curtain: 'Save me!—save the ivory, you mean. Don't tell me. Save *me*! Why, I've had to save you. You are interrupting my plans now. Sick! Sick! Not so sick as you would like to believe. Never mind. I'll carry my ideas out yet—I will return. I'll show you what can be done. You with your little peddling notions—you are interfering with me. I will return. I. . . .'

"The manager came out. He did me the honour to take me under the arm and lead me aside. 'He is very low, very low,' he said. He considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful. 'We have done all we could for him—haven't we? But there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously, cautiously—that's my principle. We must be cautious yet. The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole, the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory—mostly fossil. We must save it, at all

events—but look how precarious the position is—and why? Because the method is unsound.' 'Do you,' said I, looking at the shore, 'call it "unsound method"?' 'Without doubt,' he exclaimed, hotly. 'Don't you?' . . . 'No method at all,' I murmured after a while. 'Exactly,' he exulted. 'I anticipated this. Shows a complete want of judgment. It is my duty to point it out in the proper quarter.' 'Oh,' said I, 'that fellow—what's his name?—the brickmaker, will make a readable report for you.' He appeared confounded for a moment. It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief. 'Nevertheless I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man,' I said with emphasis. He started, dropped on me a cold heavy glance, said very quietly, 'He *was*,' and turned his back on me. My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares.

"I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night. . . . The Russian tapped me on the shoulder. I heard him mumbling and stammering something about 'brother seaman—couldn't conceal—knowledge of matters that would affect Mr. Kurtz's reputation.' I waited. For him evidently Mr. Kurtz was not in his grave; I suspect that for him Mr. Kurtz was one of the immortals. 'Well!' said I at last, 'speak out. As it happens, I am Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way.'

"He stated with a good deal of formality that had we not been 'of the same profession,' he would have kept the matter to himself without regard to consequences. 'He suspected there was an active ill will towards him on the part of these white men that——' 'You are right,' I said, remembering a certain conversation I had overheard. 'The manager thinks you ought to be hanged.' He showed a concern at this intelligence which amused me at first. 'I had better get out of the way quietly,' he said, earnestly. 'I can do no more for Kurtz now, and they would soon find some excuse. What's to stop them? There's a military post three hundred miles from here.' 'Well, upon my word,' said I, 'perhaps you had better go if you have any friends amongst the savages near by.' 'Plenty,' he said. 'They are simple people—and I want nothing, you know.' He stood biting his lip, then: 'I don't want any harm to happen to these whites here, but of course I was thinking of Mr. Kurtz's reputation—but you are a brother seaman and——' 'All right,' said I, after a time. 'Mr. Kurtz's reputation is safe with me.' I did not know how truly I spoke.

"He informed me, lowering his voice, that it was Kurtz who had ordered the attack to be made on the steamer. 'He hated sometimes the idea of being taken away—and then again. . . . But I don't understand these matters. I am a simple man. He thought it would scare you away—that you would give it up, thinking him dead. I could not stop him. Oh, I had an awful time of it this last month.' 'Very well,' I said. 'He is all right now.' 'Ye-e-es,' he muttered, not very convinced apparently. 'Thanks,' said I; 'I shall keep my eyes open.' 'But quiet—eh?' he urged, anxiously. 'It would be awful for his reputation if anybody here——' I promised a complete dis-

cretion with great gravity. 'I have a canoe and three black fellows waiting not very far. I am off. Could you give me a few Martini-Henry cartridges?' I could, and did, with proper secrecy. He helped himself, with a wink at me, to a handful of my tobacco. 'Between sailors—you know—good English tobacco.' At the door of the pilot-house he turned round—'I say, haven't you a pair of shoes you could spare?' He raised one leg. 'Look.' The soles were tied with knotted strings sandal-wise under his bare feet. I rooted out an old pair, at which he looked with admiration before tucking it under his left arm. One of his pockets (bright red) was bulging with cartridges, from the other (dark blue) peeped 'Towson's Inquiry,' etc., etc. He seemed to think himself excellently well equipped for a renewed encounter with the wilderness. 'Ah! I'll never, never meet such a man again. You ought to have heard him recite poetry—his own, too, it was, he told me. Poetry!' He rolled his eyes at the recollection of these delights. 'Oh, he enlarged my mind!' 'Good-bye,' said I. He shook hands and vanished in the night. Sometimes I ask myself whether I had ever really seen him—whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon! . . .

"When I woke up shortly after midnight his warning came to my mind with its hint of danger that seemed, in the starred darkness, real enough to make me get up for the purpose of having a look round. On the hill a big fire burned, illuminating fitfully a crooked corner of the station-house. One of the agents with a picket[24] of a few of our blacks, armed for the purpose, was keeping guard over the ivory; but deep within the forest, red gleams that wavered, that seemed to sink and rise from the ground amongst confused columnar shapes of intense blackness, showed the exact position of the camp where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil. The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive, and had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses. I believe I dozed off leaning over the rail, till an abrupt burst of yells, an overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy, woke me up in a bewildered wonder. It was cut short all at once, and the low droning went on with an effect of audible and soothing silence. I glanced casually into the little cabin. A light was burning within, but Mr. Kurtz was not there.

"I think I would have raised an outcry if I had believed my eyes. But I didn't believe them at first—the thing seemed so impossible. The fact is I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much, that I did not raise an alarm.

[4] **picket:** A band of sentries.

"There was an agent buttoned up inside an ulster[25] and sleeping on a chair on deck within three feet of me. The yells had not awakened him; he snored very slightly; I left him to his slumbers and leaped ashore. I did not betray Mr. Kurtz—it was ordered I should never betray him—it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice. I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone,—and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience.

"As soon as I got on the bank I saw a trail—a broad trail through the grass. I remember the exultation with which I said to myself, 'He can't walk—he is crawling on all-fours—I've got him.' The grass was wet with dew. I strode rapidly with clenched fists. I fancy I had some vague notion of falling upon him and giving him a drubbing. I don't know. I had some imbecile thoughts. The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair. I saw a row of pilgrims squirting lead in the air out of Winchesters held to the hip. I thought I would never get back to the steamer, and imagined myself living alone and unarmed in the woods to an advanced age. Such silly things—you know. And I remember I confounded the beat of the drum with the beating of my heart, and was pleased at its calm regularity.

"I kept to the track though—then stopped to listen. The night was very clear; a dark blue space, sparkling with dew and starlight, in which black things stood very still. I thought I could see a kind of motion ahead of me. I was strangely cocksure of everything that night. I actually left the track and ran in a wide semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) so as to get in front of that stir, of that motion I had seen—if indeed I had seen anything. I was circumventing Kurtz as though it had been a boyish game.

"I came upon him, and, if he had not heard me coming, I would have fallen over him, too, but he got up in time. He rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent before me; while at my back the fires loomed between the trees, and the murmur of many voices issued from the forest. I had cut him off cleverly; but when actually confronting him I seemed to come to my senses, I saw the danger in its right proportion. It was by no means over yet. Suppose he began to shout? Though he could hardly stand, there was still plenty of vigour in his voice. 'Go away—hide yourself,' he said, in that profound tone. It was very awful. I glanced back. We were within thirty yards from the nearest fire. A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough. 'Do you know what you are doing?' I whispered. 'Perfectly,' he answered, raising his voice for that single word: it sounded to me far off and yet loud, like a hail through a speaking-trumpet. If he makes a row we are lost, I thought to myself. This clearly was not a case for fisticuffs, even apart from the very natural aversion I had to beat that Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing. 'You will be lost,' I said—'utterly

[25] **ulster:** A long overcoat.

lost.' One gets sometimes such a flash of inspiration, you know. I did say the right thing, though indeed he could not have been more irretrievably lost than he was at this very moment, when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid—to endure—to endure—even to the end—even beyond.

"'I had immense plans,' he muttered irresolutely. 'Yes,' said I; 'but if you try to shout I'll smash your head with——' There was not a stick or stone near. 'I will throttle you for good,' I corrected myself. 'I was on the threshold of great things,' he pleaded, in a voice of longing, with a wistfulness of tone that made my blood run cold. 'And now for this stupid scoundrel——' 'Your success in Europe is assured in any case,' I affirmed, steadily. I did not want to have the throttling of him, you understand—and indeed it would have been very little use for any practical purpose. I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head—though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too—but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air. I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance—barring, of course, the killing him there and then, which wasn't so good, on account of unavoidable noise. But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. I kept my head pretty well; but when I had him at last stretched on the couch, I wiped my forehead, while my legs shook under me as though I had carried half a ton on my back down that hill. And yet I had only supported him, his bony arm clasped round my neck—and he was not much heavier than a child.

"When next day we left at noon, the crowd, of whose presence behind the curtain of trees I had been acutely conscious all the time, flowed out of the woods again,

filled the clearing, covered the slope with a mass of naked, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies. I steamed up a bit, then swung downstream, and two thousand eyes followed the evolutions of the splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air. In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail—something that looked like a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany.

"We had carried Kurtz into the pilot-house: there was more air there. Lying on the couch, he stared through the open shutter. There was an eddy in the mass of human bodies, and the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the very brink of the stream. She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance.

"'Do you understand this?' I asked.

"He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning, appear on his colourless lips that a moment after twitched convulsively. 'Do I not?' he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power.

"I pulled the string of the whistle, and I did this because I saw the pilgrims on deck getting out their rifles with an air of anticipating a jolly lark. At the sudden screech there was a movement of abject terror through that wedged mass of bodies. 'Don't! don't you frighten them away,' cried someone on deck disconsolately. I pulled the string time after time. They broke and ran, they leaped, they crouched, they swerved, they dodged the flying terror of the sound. The three red chaps had fallen flat, face down on the shore, as though they had been shot dead. Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river.

"And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun, and I could see nothing more for smoke.

"The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time. The manager was very placid, he had no vital anxieties now, he took us both in with a comprehensive and satisfied glance: the 'affair' had come off as well as could be wished. I saw the time approaching when I would be left alone of the party of 'unsound method.' The pilgrims looked upon me with disfavour. I was, so to speak, numbered with the dead. It is strange how I accepted this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms.

"Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his trength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his ıeart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by -hadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round ıis unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my :areer, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated ;entiments. The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow ham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth. But ɔoth the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying ame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power.

"Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to ıccomplish great things. 'You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability,' he would say. 'Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always.' The long :eaches that were like one and the same reach, monotonous bends that were exactly alike, slipped past the steamer with their multitude of secular[26] trees looking patiently ıfter this grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of rade, of massacres, of blessings. I looked ahead—piloting. 'Close the shutter,' said Kurtz suddenly one day; 'I can't bear to look at this.' I did so. There was a silence. 'Oh, ɔut I will wring your heart yet!' he cried at the invisible wilderness.

"We broke down—as I had expected—and had to lie up for repairs at the head of an island. This delay was the first thing that shook Kurtz's confidence. One morn- ng he gave me a packet of papers and a photograph—the lot tied together with a shoe-string. 'Keep this for me,' he said. 'This noxious fool' (meaning the manager) 'is capable of prying into my boxes when I am not looking.' In the afternoon I saw him. He was lying on his back with closed eyes, and I withdrew quietly, but I heard him mutter, 'Live rightly, die, die . . .' I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehears- ing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper ırticle? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, 'for the fur- thering of my ideas. It's a duty.'

"His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines. But I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod, and in other such matters. I lived in an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet- drills—things I abominate, because I don't get on with them. I tended the little forge we fortunately had aboard; I toiled wearily in a wretched scrap-heap—unless I had the shakes too bad to stand.

"One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little remulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a

[6] secular: Lasting from century to century.

foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed.

"Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

"'The horror! The horror!'

"I blew the candle out and left the cabin. The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room, and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored. He leaned back, serene, with that peculiar smile of his sealing the unexpressed depths of his meanness. A continuous shower of small flies streamed upon the lamp, upon the cloth, upon our hands and faces. Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt—

"'Mistah Kurtz—he dead.'

"All the pilgrims rushed out to see. I remained, and went on with my dinner. I believe I was considered brutally callous. However, I did not eat much. There was a lamp in there—light, don't you know—and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark. I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.

"And then they very nearly buried me.

"However, as you see, I did not go to join Kurtz there and then. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it

had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate. And it is not my own extremity I remember best—a vision of grayness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal.

"No, they did not bury me, though there is a period of time which I remember mistily, with a shuddering wonder, like a passage through some inconceivable world that had no hope in it and no desire. I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance. I daresay I was not very well at that time. I tottered about the streets—there were various affairs to settle—grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons. I admit my behaviour was inexcusable, but then my temperature was seldom normal in these days. My dear aunt's endeavours to 'nurse up my strength' seemed altogether beside the mark. It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing. I kept the bundle of papers given me by Kurtz, not knowing exactly what to do with it. His mother had died lately, watched over, as I was told, by his Intended. A clean-shaved man, with an official manner and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, called on me one day and made inquiries, at first circuitous, afterwards suavely pressing, about what he was pleased to denominate certain 'documents.' I was not surprised, because I had had two rows with the manager on the subject out there. I had refused to give up the smallest scrap out of that package, and I took the same attitude with the spectacled man. He became darkly menacing at last, and with much heat argued that the Company had the right to every bit of information about its 'territories.' And said he, 'Mr. Kurtz's knowledge of unexplored regions must have been necessarily extensive and peculiar—owing to his great abilities and to the deplorable circumstances in which he had been placed: therefore——' I assured him Mr. Kurtz's knowledge, however

extensive, did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration. He invoked then the name of science. 'It would be an incalculable loss if,' etc., etc. I offered him the report on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs,' with the postscriptum torn off. He took it up eagerly, but ended by sniffing at it with an air of contempt. 'This is not what we had a right to expect,' he remarked. 'Expect nothing else,' I said. 'There are only private letters.' He withdrew upon some threat of legal proceedings, and I saw him no more; but another fellow, calling himself Kurtz's cousin, appeared two days later, and was anxious to hear all the details about his dear relative's last moments. Incidentally he gave me to understand that Kurtz had been essentially a great musician. 'There was the making of an immense success,' said the man, who was an organist, I believe, with lank gray hair flowing over a greasy coat-collar. I had no reason to doubt his statement; and to this day I am unable to say what was Kurtz's profession, whether he ever had any—which was the greatest of his talents. I had taken him for a painter who wrote for the papers, or else for a journalist who could paint—but even the cousin (who took snuff during the interview) could not tell me what he had been—exactly. He was a universal genius—on that point I agreed with the old chap, who thereupon blew his nose noisily into a large cotton handkerchief and withdrew in senile agitation, bearing off some family letters and memoranda without importance. Ultimately a journalist anxious to know something of the fate of his 'dear colleague' turned up. This visitor informed me Kurtz's proper sphere ought to have been politics 'on the popular side.' He had furry straight eyebrows, bristly hair cropped short, an eye-glass on a broad ribbon, and, becoming expansive, confessed his opinion that Kurtz really couldn't write a bit—'but heavens! how that man could talk. He electrified large meetings. He had faith—don't you see?—he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything—anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party.' 'What party?' I asked. 'Any party,' answered the other. 'He was an—an—extremist.' Did I not think so? I assented. Did I know, he asked, with a sudden flash of curiosity, 'what it was that had induced him to go out there?' 'Yes,' said I, and forthwith handed him the famous Report for publication, if he thought fit. He glanced through it hurriedly, mumbling all the time, judged 'it would do,' and took himself off with this plunder.

"Thus I was left at last with a slim packet of letters and the girl's portrait. She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. I concluded I would go and give her back her portrait and those letters myself. Curiosity? Yes; and also some other feeling perhaps. All that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up, too, to the past, in a way—to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate. I don't defend myself. I had no clear perception of what it was I really wanted. Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfilment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell. But I went.

"I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life—a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage; but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul. And the memory of what I had heard him say afar there, with the horned shapes stirring at my back, in the glow of fires, within the patient woods, those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity. I remembered his abject pleading, his abject threats, the colossal scale of his vile desires, the meanness, the torment, the tempestuous anguish of his soul. And later on I seemed to see his collected languid manner, when he said one day, 'This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk. I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do—resist? Eh? I want no more than justice.' . . . He wanted no more than justice—no more than justice. I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor, and while I waited he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel—stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, 'The horror! The horror!'

"The dusk was falling. I had to wait in a lofty drawing-room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns. The bent gilt legs and backs of the furniture shone in indistinct curves. The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. A high door opened—closed. I rose.

"She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. It was more than a year since his death, more than a year since the news came; she seemed as though she would remember and mourn forever. She took both my hands in hers and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming.' I noticed she was not very young—I mean not girlish. She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I—I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves. But while we

were still shaking hands, such a look of awful desolation came upon her face that I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time. For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove! the impression was so powerful that for me, too, he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute. I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death. Do you understand? I saw them together—I heard them together. She had said, with a deep catch of the breath, 'I have survived' while my strained ears seemed to hear distinctly, mingled with her tone of despairing regret, the summing up whisper of his eternal condemnation. I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold. She motioned me to a chair. We sat down. I laid the packet gently on the little table, and she put her hand over it. . . . 'You knew him well,' she murmured, after a moment of mourning silence.

"'Intimacy grows quickly out there,' I said. 'I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.'

"'And you admired him,' she said. 'It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?'

"'He was a remarkable man,' I said, unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, 'It was impossible not to——'

"'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. 'How true! how true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.'

"'You knew him best,' I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love.

"'You were his friend,' she went on. 'His friend,' she repeated, a little louder. 'You must have been, if he had given you this, and sent you to me. I feel I can speak to you—and oh! I must speak. I want you—you who have heard his last words—to know I have been worthy of him. . . . It is not pride. . . . Yes! I am proud to know I understood him better than any one on earth—he told me so himself. And since his mother died I have had no one—no one—to—to——'

"I listened. The darkness deepened. I was not even sure whether he had given me the right bundle. I rather suspect he wanted me to take care of another batch of his papers which, after his death, I saw the manager examining under the lamp. And the girl talked, easing her pain in the certitude of my sympathy; she talked as thirsty men drink. I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn't rich enough or something. And indeed I don't know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there.

"'. . . Who was not his friend who had heard him speak once?' she was saying. 'He drew men towards him by what was best in them.' She looked at me with intensity. 'It is the gift of the great,' she went on, and the sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sor-

row, I had ever heard—the ripple of the river, the soughing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness. 'But you have heard him! You know!' she cried.

"'Yes, I know,' I said with something like despair in my heart, but bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself.

"'What a loss to me—to us!'—she corrected herself with beautiful generosity; then added in a murmur, 'To the world.' By the last gleams of twilight I could see the glitter of her eyes, full of tears—of tears that would not fall.

"'I have been very happy—very fortunate—very proud,' she went on. 'Too fortunate. Too happy for a little while. And now I am unhappy for—for life.'

"She stood up; her fair hair seemed to catch all the remaining light in a glimmer of gold. I rose, too.

"'And of all this,' she went on, mournfully, 'of all his promise, and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart, nothing remains—nothing but a memory. You and I——'

"'We shall always remember him,' I said, hastily.

"'No!' she cried. 'It is impossible that all this should be lost—that such a life should be sacrificed to leave nothing—but sorrow. You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them, too—I could not perhaps understand—but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died.'

"'His words will remain,' I said.

"'And his example,' she whispered to herself. 'Men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act. His example——'

"'True,' I said; 'his example, too. Yes, his example. I forgot that.'

"'But I do not. I cannot—I cannot believe—not yet. I cannot believe that I shall never see him again, that nobody will see him again, never, never, never.'

"She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them back and with clasped pale hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window. Never see him! I saw him clearly enough then. I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her, too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. She said suddenly very low, 'He died as he lived.'

"'His end,' said I, with dull anger stirring in me, 'was in every way worthy of his life.'

"'And I was not with him,' she murmured. My anger subsided before a feeling of infinite pity.

"'Everything that could be done——' I mumbled.

"'Ah, but I believed in him more than any one on earth—more than his own mother, more than—himself. He needed me! Me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance.'

"I felt like a chill grip on my chest. 'Don't,' I said, in a muffled voice.

"'Forgive me. I—I—have mourned so long in silence—in silence.... You were with him—to the last? I think of his loneliness. Nobody near to understand him as I would have understood. Perhaps no one to hear....'

"'To the very end,' I said, shakily. 'I heard his very last words....' I stopped in a fright.

"'Repeat them,' she murmured in a heart-broken tone. 'I want—I want—something—something—to—to live with.'

"I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! the horror!'

"'His last word—to live with,' she insisted. 'Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him!'

"I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

"'The last word he pronounced was—your name.'

"I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!'... She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether...."

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

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Colonialism: Europe and Africa

Colonialism was one of the defining issues of the twentieth century, which began with most of Asia and Africa under the sway of European nations. In 1800, European powers controlled about 35 percent of the globe. The competition among them to gain additional colonies gathered momentum over the next hundred years until, by 1914, Europe—led by Britain, France, Holland, and Portugal—could claim approximately 85 percent of the earth's surface. European dominance of large areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America continued until after World War II, when colonies worldwide fought to gain their independence and a new age of "decolonization" or "postcolonialism" was ushered in.

"THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN"

The primary impetus behind the acquisition of colonies, called at the time "the great game," was, of course, economic. An increasing population in Europe and a lack of enough agricultural land fueled the colonial enterprise. By 1870, for example, England could no longer grow enough food to feed itself. Less developed countries and regions in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean were exploited for cheap labor, raw materials used for manufactures in European factories, and land. On maps made by European cartographers, large areas of Asia and Africa appeared as "blank spaces," as Marlow says in *Heart of Darkness;* Europeans did not recognize the presence or the property rights of indigenous peoples, and these white spaces were colored in only when a European nation colonized an area.

Colonial conquest was justified in terms of the benefits it bestowed on the colonized. Along with economic development, the

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white man said he was bringing civilization and Christianity to unenlightened regions of the world. Furthermore, this was a mission, "the white man's burden," as it was referred to at the time, but as Rudyard Kipling claims in his poem of that title (1899), the job was often a thankless one. And there was always the danger of being engulfed like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* by the supposed darkness one had set out to enlighten.

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CONRAD AND ACHEBE

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa" represent European colonialism and a postcolonial response to it, respectively. At the time it was written, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) was one of several literary attacks on the excesses of European colonialism in the Congo. Conrad recognizes that the colonizers are there only for "the squeeze," as he calls it, and that their promises to bring enlightenment and civilization to the "dark continent" hid their real intentions. But Achebe points out that neither Conrad nor his narrator, Marlow, question the assumption that European culture is superior to that in the jungle. Achebe's essay raises important literary as well as social and historical questions: Is it reasonable to expect a great work of literature to rise above the perspectives of its time and place? Can a literary work grounded in mistaken ideas still be great literature?

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COLONIALISM IN THE CONGO

The Free State of the Congo was one of the most cruel colonial enterprises of the late nineteenth century. In 1876 Leopold II of Belgium, a nation less than fifty years old with no overseas possessions, called a conference of the European powers to consider Africa and "to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops

The wealth of a common global culture will . . . be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers.

– Ngugi, "Creating Space . . ." in *Moving the Centre* 24

◀ L'Africa È il Continente di Domani (Africa Is the Continent of Tomorrow). Poster, Late 1930s

This piece of propaganda was created during Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy. The Fascists, seeking to extend their reach by colonizing more of Africa (Italy had claimed Somalia in 1889), followed Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Belgium in acquiring parts of the continent. This poster was created to drum up public support for the campaign. (The Art Archive / Imperial War Museum)

Eng. Lit., my sister,
was more than a
cruel joke—
it was the heart
of alien conquest.
– Felix Mnthali

the entire population." Leopold's ulterior motive was to acquire a colony for himself, and in 1884 he convinced a Berlin conference to grant him nearly a million square miles in Central Africa to be known as the Congo Free State. By promising to allow open economic access and trade to all European powers, Leopold was given virtually absolute control over the territory, which he ruled—but never visited—until his death in 1908. Although his stated aims were humanitarian, his rule was despotic. His agents extracted ivory and rubber from the Congo using deception and violence and did almost nothing to bring enlightenment and civilization. George Washington Williams, an African American journalist and historian, was the first to expose Leopold's fraud and the cruelties he imposed on the Congolese people in *An Open Letter,* a missive addressed to the king and published in 1890. Leopold managed to discredit Williams and cover up his own crimes until the turn of the century, when a journalistic onslaught, especially from Britain and America, confirmed Williams's allegations. *Heart of Darkness* and Mark Twain's satiric essay *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905) were part of this storm of criticism.

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DECOLONIZATION

Although there were anti-imperialist movements active at the beginning of the century, little change came until after World War II, which ushered in the age of decolonization. In the two decades following the war, many of the colonies of Britain, France, Holland, and other European countries were liberated—most dramatically, perhaps, India and Pakistan, Algeria, and Indonesia. At the same time the civil rights movement emerged in the United States, a movement that Martin Luther King Jr. among others connected with worldwide decolonization. By 1990 forty-nine new African nations had been formed. There were instances of peaceful resistance movements, like the nonviolent campaign led by Mohandas Gandhi in India, but more often independence was gained by bitter wars of liberation, as in Algeria.

The classic work on the psychology of colonialism is Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Fanon, a psychiatrist from the French colony of Martinique, left his medical post to join the struggle for Algerian independence. His experiences in the war contributed to his view that colonialism could be ended only by violence. Fanon's analysis of the polarities of colonizer and colonized is shared by his fellow Martinican Aimé Césaire, whose *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) demonstrates "how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism." Kurtz enacts this drama, as does Prospero in Césaire's play, *A Tempest* (1969), a reworking of Shakespeare's *The Tempest;* Césaire's Prospero becomes a colonizing slave owner and Caliban his slave. In a selection from the final scene of the play included here, Césaire depicts the intractibility of the colonial situation that leaves Prospero and Caliban alone on an island locked in undying enmity. Nigerian writer Chinweizu (p. 142) uses characters from *The Tempest* to represent different positions in his analysis. He urges a generation of Calibans to challenge the Ariels and to re-Africanize the continent. Felix Mnthali, a poet from Malawi who now lives in Botswana, expresses his take on the role of English literature in Africa in his poem "The Stranglehold of English Lit." In "Creating Space for a Hundred Flowers to Bloom," Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o takes a more positive view of the postcolonial situation. By rediscovering and affirming their native linguistic traditions, Africans can, Ngugi asserts, challenge the legacy of colonialism and enter the global culture on equal terms.

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CONNECTIONS

In the World: Emancipation (Book 5); *In the World:* East and West (Book 5); "Imagining Africa," p. 853; *In the World:* Crossing Cultures, p. 1278. Colonialism is addressed by the abovementioned *In the World* sections in Books 5 and 6 of this anthology. How was the anticolonial struggle of the twentieth century brought about by the social and economic forces and by the ideal of freedom inherited from the European Enlightenment?

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart,* p. 1023; Léopold Senghor, "Prayer to the Masks," p. 886; Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel,* p. 1146; Bessie Head, "Snapshots of a Wedding," p. 1213. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* presents a Nigerian village disrupted by colonial intrusion. Senghor, the Senegalese writer who founded the Négritude movement along with Césaire, writes about being black in a white world in "Prayer to the Masks." Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel,* finds comedy in Nigerian natives like schoolmaster Lakunle, whose exaggerated respect for European culture makes him a fool. Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding" contrasts traditional village customs with urban—and Western—ways of doing things. How do these depictions of African life relate to one another? What elements of colonialism link them together?

William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916," p. 190; Pablo Neruda, "The United Fruit Co.," p. 686. Although colonialism is usually associated with the "Third World," especially with Asia and Africa, it is also a theme in many of Yeats's poems. Poems like

When the native
hears a speech ab
Western culture l
pulls out his knif
– Frantz Fanon
Wretched of the E

p. 137

mun-THAH-lee

p. 148

p. 150

en-GOO-gee wah
thee-ONG-oh

You know very
that I'm not in
ested in peace
interested in b
free! Free, you
– Ca
Prospero, *A*

"Easter 1916" respond to the struggle of the Irish to free themselves from British rule. And Neruda's "The United Fruit Co." treats the exploitation of Central America by U.S. corporations. How do these colonized peoples' experiences differ from those in India and Africa? In what ways are their depictions of colonization similar?

■ PRONUNCIATION

Mnthali: mun-THAH-lee
Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: en-GOO-gee wah thee-ONG-oh

RUDYARD KIPLING

B. INDIA, 1865–1936

Though many of Kipling's works, particularly his short stories and novels, demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the Indian people and their culture, in other works, like the poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899), Kipling sounds like a jingoistic imperialist. The poem's unquestioned assumption of European superiority expresses the attitude that promoted colonialism in the first place and excused its excesses, an attitude nearly universal among nineteenth-century Europeans, even those critical of colonial enterprise.

The White Man's Burden

Take up the White Man's burden—
    Send forth the best ye breed—
Go, bind your sons to exile
    To serve your captives' need;
To wait, in heavy harness,
    On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
    Half devil and half child.

Take up the White Man's burden—
    In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
    And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
    An hundred times made plain,



The Rhodes Colossus. Drawing *Cecil Rhodes was prime minister of the Cape Colony, in what is now South Africa, from 1890 to 1897. Here pictured as a giant straddling and taking the measure of the continent of Africa, he dreamed of expanding the British empire "from the Cape to Cairo." (Hulton/Archive)*

To seek another's profit
    And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden—
    The savage wars of peace—
Fill full the mouth of Famine,
    And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
    (The end for others sought)
Watch sloth and heathen folly
    Bring all your hope to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden—
    No iron rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper—
    The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
    The roads ye shall not tread,

Go, make them with your living
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden,
And reap his old reward—
The blame of those ye better
The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly?) toward the light:—
"Why brought ye us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"[1]

Take up the White Man's burden—
Ye dare not stoop to less—
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloak your weariness.
By all ye will or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent sullen peoples
Shall weigh your God and you.

Take up the White Man's burden!
Have done with childish days—
The lightly-proffered laurel,
The easy ungrudged praise:
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers.

[1] "Why . . . Egyptian night?": When things got hard in the wilderness, the Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron for their troubles; see Exodus 16:23.

Chinua Achebe

b. Nigeria, 1930

In the following transcript of a lecture delivered at the University of Massachusetts in February 1975, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe challenges the status of *Heart of Darkness* as one of the great books of Western literature. Conrad's novel, Achebe argues, does not treat its African characters as fully human. Achebe's own novel *Things Fall Apart* can be read as a response to Conrad's story. (For more on Chinua Achebe and the text of *Things Fall Apart*, see p. 1017.)

All notes are the editors' unless otherwise indicated.

An Image of Africa

It was a fine autumn morning at the beginning of this academic year such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man, going the same way as I, turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. "Oh well," I heard him say finally, behind me, "I guess I have to take your course to find out."

A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high-school children in Yonkers, New York, who—bless their teacher—had just read *Things Fall Apart*. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them: But only at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person being fully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor Roper, pronounce a few years ago that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful experience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might

indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new: which should relieve us of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the desire nor, indeed, the competence to do so with the tools of the social and biological sciences. But, I can respond, as a novelist, to one famous book of European fiction, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just spoken about. Of course, there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose, but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language."[1] I will return to this critical opinion in due course because it may seriously modify my earlier suppositions about who may or may not be guilty in the things of which I will now speak.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story takes place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world."

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. What actually worries Conrad is the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames, too, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and of falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

I am not going to waste your time with examples of Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere. In the final consideration it amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. An example of the former is "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" and of the latter, "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy." Of course, there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time so that instead of "inscrutable," for example, you might have "unspeakable," etc., etc.

[1] "among . . . language": Albert J. Guerard, Introduction to *Heart of Darkness* (New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 9.

The eagle-eyed English critic, F. R. Leavis, drew attention nearly thirty years ago to Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery." That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw. For it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact, is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally, normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must quote a long passage from the middle of the story in which representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa:

> We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.
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> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours. . . . Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

> And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things (and persons) being in their place is of the utmost importance.

Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes great attention quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little imitation of Conrad) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

> She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent . . . She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story; she is a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end:

> She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk. She was in mourning. . . . She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming" . . . She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. They only "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves but mostly they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

> "Catch 'im," he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curtly . . .

The other occasion is the famous announcement:

> Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

At first sight, these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality, they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals, the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway," what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire*[2] between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

> They were all dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of

[2] *cordon sanitaire:* A buffer.

different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer,[3] who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time Schweitzer says: "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother." And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally, he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberene, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word "brother" however qualified; the farthest he would go was "kinship." When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

> And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about *distant kinship* as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "... the thought of their humanity—like yours ... Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives. A Conrad student told me in Scotland last year that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question

[3] Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965): Alsatian philosopher, theologian, musician, writer, physicist, and missionary; he gave his life to a medical mission and hospital at Lamberene, in Gabon, West Africa.

is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautifully his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy, or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people. This, I take it, is what Yevtushenko[4] is after when he tells us that a poet cannot be a slave trader at the same time, and gives the striking example of Arthur Rimbaud,[5] who was fortunately honest enough to give up any pretenses to poetry when he opted for slave trading. For poetry surely can only be on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler's master races or Conrad's "rudimentary souls."

Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of Conrad's death. He was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

> A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

> A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.

as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave *white* arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in *A Personal Record* what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered

[4] Yevtushenko: Yevgeny Yevtushenko (b. 1933), Russian poet known in the West in particular for his poems criticizing Stalinism.

[5] Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891): French symbolist poet who abandoned poetry for a life of adventure; among his later occupations were slave trading and gunrunning.

his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman" and describes him in the following manner:

> [his] calves exposed to the public gaze . . . dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory . . . The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men . . . illumined his face . . . and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth . . . his white calves twinkled sturdily.

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally, Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In this lengthy book, Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example, he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-cutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's anti-Semitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon[6] in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately, his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and totally deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language," and why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in the twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here. Indeed the time is long overdue for a hard look at things.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."[7]

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

> Gauguin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904–5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was "speechless" and "stunned" when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze . . . The revolution of twentieth century art was under way![8]

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name, the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. As you might have guessed, the event to which Frank Willett refers marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind.

Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled *Description of the World* his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. There are at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He says nothing about the art of printing unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly

[6] Frantz Fanon: See the excerpt from *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 129, for more on Fanon.

[7] "notoriously . . . history": Meyer, p. 30.

[8] Gaugin . . . under way: Frank Willett, *African Art* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 35–36.

four thousand-miles long and already more than one thousand years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon![9] Indeed, travellers can be blind.

As I said earlier, Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparing itself to Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There, but for the grace of God, go I. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray[10]—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this talk I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western culture some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of your television and the cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there is something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately, the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word *willful* a few times in this talk to characterize the West's view of Africa it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more, but less, hopeful. Let me give you one last and really minor example of what I mean.

[9] About the omission of the Great Wall of China, I am indebted to *The Journey of Marco Polo* as recreated by artist Michael Foreman, published by *Pegasus Magazine*, 1974. [Achebe's note.]

[10] Africa is . . . Dorian Gray: In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), a portrait of the hero bears all his marks of age and guilt while he himself remains young.

Last November the *Christian Science Monitor* carried an interesting article written by its education editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in this country, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadrilingual phenomenon in Malaysia, and so on. And all this while the article speaks unequivocally about *language*. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

> In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.[11]

I believe that the introduction of *dialects*, which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects. In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done to words and their meaning. Look at the phrase "native language" in the above excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer obviously means something else—something Indians and Africans speak.

Perhaps a change will come. Perhaps this is the time when it can begin, when the high optimism engendered by the breathtaking achievements of Western science and industry is giving way to doubt and even confusion. There is just the possibility that Western man may begin to look seriously at the achievements of other people. I read in the papers the other day a suggestion that what America needs at this time is somehow to bring back the extended family. And I saw in my mind's eye future African Peace Corps Volunteers coming to help you set up the system.

Seriously, although the work which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe that it is not one day too soon to begin. And where better than at a University?

[11] In London . . . language: *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 15, 1974, p. 11.

And are the fault-finders frank with my private character? They could not be more so if I were a plebeian, a peasant, a mechanic. They remind the world that from the earliest days my house has been chapel and brothel combined, and both industries working full time; that I practised cruelties upon my queen and my daughters, and supplemented them with daily shame and humiliations; that, when my queen lay in the happy refuge of her coffin, and a daughter implored me on her knees to let her look for the last time upon her mother's face, I refused; and that, three years ago, not being satisfied with the stolen spoils of a whole alien nation, I robbed my own child of her property and appeared by proxy in court, a spectacle to the civilized world, to defend the act and complete the crime. It is as I have said: They are unfair, unjust; they will resurrect and give new currency to such things as those, or to any other things that count against me, but they will not mention any act of mine that is in my favor. I have spent more money on art than any other monarch of my time, and they know it. Do they speak of it, do they tell about it? No, they do not. They prefer to work up what they call "ghastly statistics" into offensive kindergarten object lessons, whose purpose is to make sentimental people shudder, and prejudice them against me. They remark that "if the innocent blood shed in the Congo State by King Leopold were put in buckets and the buckets placed side by side, the line would stretch two thousand miles; if the skeletons of his ten millions of starved and butchered dead could rise up and march in single file, it would take them seven months and four days to pass a given point; if compacted together in a body, they would occupy more ground than St. Louis covers, World's Fair and all; if they should all clap their bony hands at once, the grisly crash would be heard at a distance of—" Damnation, it makes me tired! And they do similar miracles with the money I have distilled from that blood and put into my pocket. They pile it into Egyptian pyramids; they carpet Saharas with it; they spread it across the sky, and the shadow it casts makes twilight in the earth. And the tears I have caused, the hearts I have broken—oh, nothing can persuade them to let *them* alone!

Frantz Fanon

b. Martinique, 1925–1961

A psychiatrist from the French colonial island of Martinique in the Caribbean, Fanon is the leading theorist of the colonial mind. After leaving Martinique in 1943 to fight with the Free French in World War II, he studied medicine and psychiatry at Lyon and in 1953 became head of psychiatry at a hospital in Algeria. During the Algerian war for independence from France, Fanon sympathized with the rebels, resigning his post in 1956 to work with the independence movement. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon analyzes how colonialism and racism make psychological health impossible for the black man. *The Wretched of the Earth*, published after Fanon's untimely death from leukemia in 1961, extends the argument of his earlier work to show how violent revolution is inevitable because of the colonial situation.

All notes are the editors' unless otherwise indicated.

FROM

The Wretched of the Earth

Translated by Constance Farrington

[Decolonization]

National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: Whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. At whatever level we study it—relationships between individuals, new names for sports clubs, the human admixture at cocktail parties, in the police, on the directing boards of national or private banks—decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain "species" of men by another "species" of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete, and absolute substitution. It is true that we could equally well stress the rise of a new nation, the setting up of a new state, its diplomatic relations, and its economic and political trends. But we have precisely chosen to speak of that kind of *tabula rasa*[1] which characterizes at the outset all decolonization. Its unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonized. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another "species" of men and women: the colonizers.

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: That is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler—was

[1] *tabula rasa*: Blank tablet.

carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons. The settler and the native are old acquaintances. In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing "them" well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence. The settler owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say, his property, to the colonial system.

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.

In decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation. If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: "The last shall be first and the first last." Decolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence. That is why, if we try to describe it, all decolonization is successful.

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and blood-stained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence.

You do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside down with such a program if you have not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that program, to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.

The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized.

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression. In capitalist societies the educational system, whether lay or clerical, the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal

service, and the affection which springs from harmonious relations and good behavior—all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably. In the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counselors, and "bewilderers" separate the exploited from those in power. In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native.

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown, and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.

This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure

is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.

Everything up to and including the very nature of precapitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again. The serf is in essence different from the knight, but a reference to divine right is necessary to legitimize this statutory difference. In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines. In defiance of his successful transplantation, in spite of his appropriation, the settler still remains a foreigner. It is neither the act of owning factories, nor estates, nor a bank balance which distinguishes the governing classes. The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, "the others."

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. To wreck the colonial world is henceforward a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitute the colonized people. To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country.

The natives' challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute. The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil.[2] Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. Monsieur Meyer could thus state seriously in the French National Assembly that the Republic must not be prostituted by allowing the Algerian people to become part of it. All values, in fact, are irrevocably poisoned and diseased as soon as they are allowed in contact with the colonized race. The customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths—above all, their myths—are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity. That is why we must put the DDT which destroys parasites, the bearers of disease, on the same level as the Christian religion which wages war on embryonic heresies and instincts, and on evil as yet unborn. The recession of yellow fever and the advance of evangelization form part of the same balance sheet. But the triumphant *communiqués* from the missions are in fact a source of information concerning the implantation of foreign influences in the core of the colonized people. I speak of the Christian religion, and no one need be astonished. The Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And as we know, in this matter many are called but few chosen.

At times this Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary. The European rarely hits on a picturesque style; but the native, who knows what is in the mind of the settler, guesses at once what he is thinking of. Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody, that laziness stretched out in the sun, that vegetative rhythm of life—all this forms part of the colonial vocabulary. General de Gaulle speaks of "the yellow multitudes" and François Mauriac[3] of the black, brown, and yellow masses which soon will be unleashed. The native knows all this, and laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other's words. For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.

As soon as the native begins to pull on his moorings, and to cause anxiety to the settler, he is handed over to well-meaning souls who in cultural congresses point out to him the specificity and wealth of Western values. But every time Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lockjaw. During the period of decolonization, the native's reason is appealed to. He is offered definite values, he is told frequently that decolonization need not mean regression, and that he must put his trust in qualities which are well tried, solid, and highly esteemed. But it so happens that when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife—or at least he makes sure it is within reach. The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are

[2] quintessence of evil: We have demonstrated the mechanism of this Manichean world in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). [Fanon's note.]

[3] de Gaulle . . . Mauriac: Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), French general and statesman; president of France from 1959 to 1969. François Mauriac (1885–1970), French novelist, critic, and essayist; recipient of the 1952 Nobel Prize in literature.

mentioned in front of him. In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up. . . .

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing precolonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.

When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality.

On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology, and its own unhappiness which is its very essence.

In such a situation the claims of the native intellectual are not a luxury but a necessity in any coherent program. The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people.

Such an examination is not specifically national. The native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent. The past is given back its value. Culture, extracted from the past to be displayed in all its splendor, is not necessarily that of his own country. Colonialism, which has not bothered to put too fine a point on its efforts, has never ceased to maintain that the Negro is a savage; and for the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of "the Negro." For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals—in short, the Negro's country. Colonialism's condemnation is continental in its scope. The contention by colonialism that the darkest night of humanity lay over precolonial history concerns the whole of the African continent. The efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism. The native intellectual who has gone far beyond the domains of Western culture and who has got it into his head to proclaim the existence of another culture never does so in the name of Angola or of Dahomey. The culture which is affirmed is African culture. The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: He must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists.

And it is only too true that those who are most responsible for this racialization of thought, or at least for the first movement toward that thought, are and remain those Europeans who have never ceased to set up white culture to fill the gap left by the absence of other cultures. Colonialism did not dream of wasting its time in denying the existence of one national culture after another. Therefore the reply of the colonized peoples will be straight away continental in its breadth. In Africa, the native literature of the last twenty years is not a national literature but a Negro literature. The concept of negritude, for example, was the emotional if not the logical antithesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity. This rush of negritude against the white man's contempt showed itself in certain spheres to be the one idea capable of lifting interdictions and anathemas. Because the New Guinean or Kenyan intellectuals found themselves above all up against a general ostracism and delivered to the combined contempt of their overlords, their reaction was to sing praises in admiration of each other. The unconditional affirmation of African culture has succeeded the unconditional affirmation of European culture. On the whole, the poets of negritude oppose the idea of an old Europe to a young Africa, tiresome reasoning to lyricism, oppressive logic to high-stepping nature, and on one side stiffness, ceremony, etiquette, and scepticism, while on the other frankness, liveliness, liberty, and—why not?—luxuriance: but also irresponsibility.

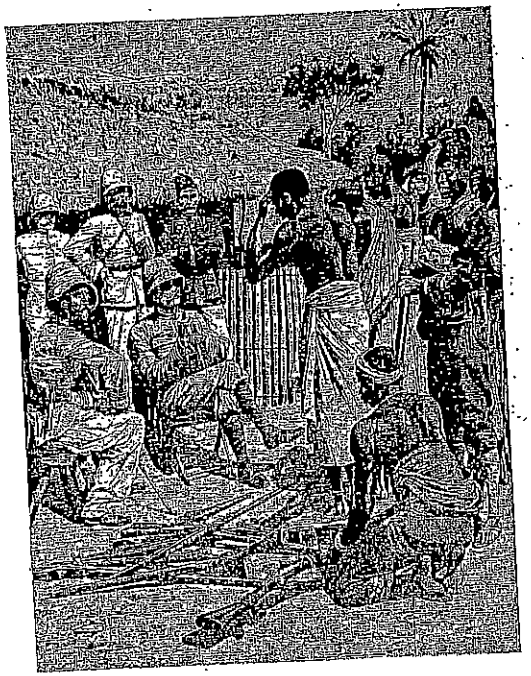
The poets of negritude will not stop at the limits of the continent. From America, black voices will take up the hymn with fuller unison. The "black world" will see the light and Busia from Ghana, Birago Diop from Senegal, Hampaté Ba from the Soudan, and Saint-Clair Drake[4] from Chicago will not hesitate to assert the existence of common ties and a motive power that is identical.

[4] Busia . . . Drake: Black writers and intellectuals. Kofe A. Busia, Ghanaian scholar and writer, was prime minister of Ghana from 1969 to 1972; Birago Diop of Senegal was one of the earliest anticolonial African poets; Hampaté Ba was a Senegalese historian and author; Saint-Clair Drake was an anthropologist.

Aimé Césaire

b. Martinique, 1913

Poet, playwright, and politician from the island of Martinique, Césaire brings a modernist perspective to bear on themes of decolonization, Western racism, and negritude, an affirmation of the independent validity of Negro culture. Educated in France in the 1930s, Césaire was influenced by the French modernists, particularly Andre Bréton and the surrealists. In Paris he also met Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Léon Gotran Damas from Guiana; together they founded the Négritude movement, which sought to counter European racism and establish



Native Soldiers Surrendering to French Commander Nogues after Three Months of Rebellion, Ivory Coast. *Le Petit journal*, 1910. Engraving *Formidable European firepower and a strong military presence overwhelmed the Africans who had rebelled against the colonialists. (The Art Archive / Dagli Orti)*

positive meanings for blackness. After World War II, Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, and deputy to the French Assembly, in which role he fought for anticolonialist causes until he retired from politics in 1993. In *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Césaire argues that fascism is simply colonialism turned on white Europeans, suggesting that the violence and racism in both colonialism and fascism are inherent in Western culture. *A Tempest* (1969), Césaire's reworking of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Book 3), casts Prospero as a slave owner on the island where he has been exiled; he has enslaved the native islanders, the mixed-race Ariel and the black Caliban. In the final scene of the play presented here, Prospero, reconciled with his brother Antonio, prepares to return to Europe to reclaim his throne as the duke of Milan and to celebrate the marriage of his daughter, Miranda, to Ferdinand, son of Alonso and heir to the throne of Naples. Prospero plans to set his slaves free before leaving, but in a confrontation with Caliban he realizes he cannot do so; he remains on the island, an oppressor still.

A Tempest

Translated by Richard Miller

CAST

ALONSO
ANTONIO
ARIEL
CALIBAN
FERDINAND
GONZALO
MIRANDA
PROSPERO

Act III

FROM *Scene 5*

Prospero's cave. MIRANDA *and* FERDINAND *are playing chess.*

MIRANDA: Sir, I think you're cheating.
FERDINAND: And what if I told you that I would not do so for twenty kingdoms?
MIRANDA: I would not believe a word of it, but I would forgive you. Now, be honest . . . you did cheat!
FERDINAND: I'm pleased that you were able to tell. *(Laughing)* That makes me less worried at the thought that soon you will be leaving your innocent flowery kingdom for my less-innocent world of men.
MIRANDA: Oh, you know that, hitched to your star, I would brave the demons of hell!

The Nobles enter.
ALONSO: My son! This marriage! The thrill of it has struck me dumb! The thrill and the joy!
GONZALO: A happy ending to a most opportune shipwreck!
ALONSO: A unique one, indeed, for it can legitimately be described as such.
GONZALO: Look at them! Isn't it wonderful! I've been too choked up to speak, or I would have already told these children all the joy my old heart feels at seeing them living love's young dream and cherishing each other so tenderly.
ALONSO: *(to* FERDINAND *and* MIRANDA*)* My children, give me your hands. May the Lord bless you.
GONZALO: Amen! Amen!

Enter PROSPERO.
PROSPERO: Thank you, Gentlemen, for having agreed to join in this little family party. Your presence has brought us comfort and joy. However, you must now think of getting some rest. Tomorrow morning, you will recover your vessels—they are undamaged—and your men, who I can guarantee are safe, hale and hearty. I shall return with you to Europe, and I can promise you—I should say: promise us—a rapid sail and propitious winds.
GONZALO: God be praised! We are delighted . . . delighted and overcome! What a happy, what a memorable day! With one voyage Antonio has found a brother,

his brother has found a dukedom, his daughter has found a husband. Alonso has regained his son and gained a daughter. And what else? . . . Anyway, I am the only one whose emotion prevents him from knowing what he's saying . . .

PROSPERO: The proof of that, my fine Gonzalo, is that you are forgetting someone: Ariel, my loyal servant. *(Turning to* ARIEL*)* Yes, Ariel, today you will be free. Go, my sweet. I hope you will not be bored.

ARIEL: Bored! I fear that the days will seem all too short!
There, where the Cecropia gloves its impatient hands with silver,
Where the ferns free the stubborn black stumps
from their scored bodies with a green cry—
There where the intoxicating berry ripens the visit
of the wild ring-dove
through the throat of that musical bird
I shall let fall
one by one,
each more pleasing than the last
four notes so sweet that the last
will give rise to a yearning
in the heart of the most forgetful slaves
yearning for freedom!

PROSPERO: Come, come. All the same, you are not going to set my world on fire with your music, I trust!

ARIEL: *(with intoxication)*
Or on some stony plane
perched on an agave stalk
I shall be the thrush that launches
its mocking cry
to the benighted field-hand
"Dig, nigger! Dig, nigger!"
and the lightened agave will
straighten from my flight,
a solemn flag.

PROSPERO: That is a very unsettling agenda! Go! Scram! Before I change my mind! [. . .] Come here, Caliban. Have you got anything to say in your own defence? Take advantage of my good humor. I'm in a forgiving mood today.

CALIBAN: I'm not interested in defending myself. My only regret is that I've failed.

PROSPERO: What were you hoping for?

CALIBAN: To get back my island and regain my freedom.

PROSPERO: And what would you do all alone here on this island, haunted by the devil, tempest tossed?

CALIBAN: First of all, I'd get rid of you! I'd spit you out, all your works and pomps! Your "white" magic!

PROSPERO: That's a fairly negative program . . .

CALIBAN: You don't understand it . . . I say I'm going to spit you out, and that's very positive . . .

PROSPERO: Well, the world is really upside down . . . We've seen everything now: Caliban as a dialectician! However, in spite of everything I'm fond of you, Caliban. Come, let's make peace. We've lived together for ten years and worked side by side! Ten years count for something, after all! We've ended up by becoming compatriots!

CALIBAN: You know very well that I'm not interested in peace. I'm interested in being free! Free, you hear?

PROSPERO: It's odd . . . no matter what you do, you won't succeed in making me believe that I'm a tyrant!

CALIBAN: Understand what I say, Prospero:
For years I bowed my head
for years I took it, all of it—
your insults, your ingratitude . . .
and worst of all, more degrading than all the rest,
your condescension.
But now, it's over!
Over, do you hear?
Of course, at the moment
You're still stronger than I am.
But I don't give a damn for your power
or for your dogs or your police or your inventions!
And do you know why?
It's because I know I'll get you.
I'll impale you! And on a stake that you've sharpened yourself!
You'll have impaled yourself!
Prospero, you're a great magician:
you're an old hand at deception.
And you lied to me so much,
about the world, about myself,
that you ended up by imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent
that's how you made me see myself!
And I hate that image . . . and it's false!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
And I also know myself!
And I know that one day
my bare fist, just that,
will be enough to crush your world!
The old world is crumbling down!

Isn't it true? Just look!
It even bores you to death.
And by the way . . . you have a chance to get it over with:
You can pick up and leave.

You can go back to Europe.
But the hell you will!
I'm sure you won't leave.
You make me laugh with your "mission"!
Your "vocation"!
Your vocation is to hassle me.
And that's why you'll stay,
just like those guys who founded the colonies
and who now can't live anywhere else.
You're just an old addict, that's what you are!

PROSPERO: Poor Caliban! You know that you're headed towards your own ruin. You're sliding towards suicide! You know I will be the stronger, and stronger all the time. I pity you!

CALIBAN: And I hate you!

PROSPERO: Beware! My generosity has its limits.

CALIBAN: *(shouting)*

Shango marches with strength
along his path, the sky!
Shango is a fire-bearer,
his steps shake the heavens
and the earth
Shango, Shango, ho!

PROSPERO: I have uprooted the oak and raised the sea,
I have caused the mountain to tremble and have bared my chest to adversity.
With Jove I have traded thunderbolt for thunderbolt.
Better yet—from a brutish monster I have made man!
But ah! To have failed to find the path to man's heart . . .
if that be where man is.
(to CALIBAN*)*
Well, I hate you as well!
For it is you who have made me
doubt myself for the first time.
(to the Nobles)
. . . My friends, come near. We must say farewell . . . I shall not be going with you. My fate is here: I shall not run from it.

ANTONIO: What, Sire?

PROSPERO: Hear me well.
I am not in any ordinary sense a master,
as this savage thinks,
but rather the conductor of a boundless score:
this isle,
summoning voices, I alone,
and mingling them at my pleasure,
arranging out of confusion
one intelligible line.
Without me, who would be able to draw music from all that?
This isle is mute without me.
My duty, thus, is here,
and here I shall stay.

GONZALO: Oh day full rich in miracles!

PROSPERO: Do not be distressed. Antonio, be you the lieutenant of my goods and make use of them as procurator until that time when Ferdinand and Miranda may take effective possession of them, joining them with the Kingdom of Naples. Nothing of that which has been set for them must be postponed: Let their marriage be celebrated at Naples with all royal splendor. Honest Gonzalo, I place my trust in your word. You shall stand as father to our princess at this ceremony.

GONZALO: Count on me, Sire.

PROSPERO: Gentlemen, farewell.

They exit.

And now, Caliban, it's you and me!
What I have to tell you will be brief:
Ten times, a hundred times, I've tried to save you,
above all from yourself.
But you have always answered me with wrath
and venom,
like the opossum that pulls itself up by its own tail
the better to bite the hand that tears it from the darkness.
Well, my boy, I shall set aside my indulgent nature
and henceforth I will answer your violence
with violence!

Time passes, symbolized by the curtain's being lowered halfway and reraised. In semidarkness PROSPERO *appears, aged and weary. His gestures are jerky and automatic, his speech weak, toneless, trite.*

PROSPERO: Odd, but for some time now we seem to be overrun with opossums. They're everywhere. Peccarys, wild boar, all this unclean nature! But mainly opossums. Those eyes! The vile grins they have! It's as though the jungle was laying siege to the cave . . . But I shall stand firm . . . I shall not let my work perish! *(Shouting)* I shall protect civilization! *(He fires in all directions.)* They're done for! Now, this way I'll be able to have some peace and quiet for a while. But it's cold. Odd how the climate's changed. Cold on this island . . . Have to think about making a fire . . . Well, Caliban, old fellow, it's just us two now, here on the island . . . only you and me. You and me. You-me . . . me-you! What in the hell is he up to? *(Shouting)* Caliban!

In the distance, above the sound of the surf and the chirping of birds, we hear snatches of Caliban's song:

FREEDOM HI-DAY, FREEDOM HI-DAY!

Chinweizu

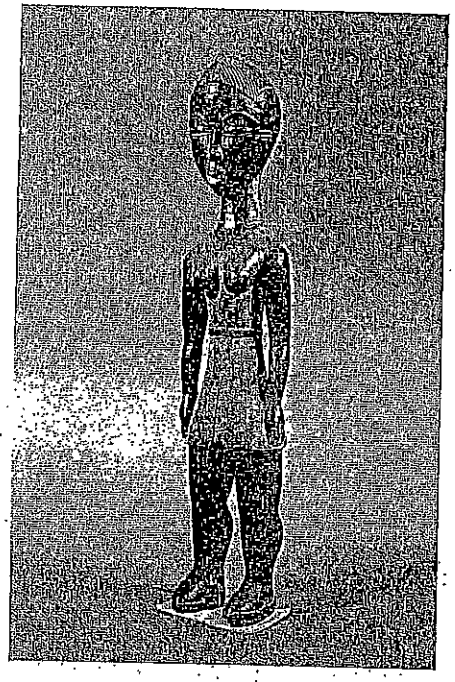
b. Nigeria, 1943

Clearly, those Ariels who are Arabising or Europeanising Africa must be defeated if Africa is to be free to concentrate on its historic tasks. A battle must be waged against them by the African Calibans, the inheritors of the movement for political decolonization.

– Chinweizu, *Decolonising the African Mind*

Scholar, poet, playwright, and critic Chinweizu was born and educated in Nigeria; he did graduate work in the United States, studying mathematics, philosophy, American studies, history, and economics. He is the author of several volumes of poetry and books on African history, literature, and culture. Of particular interest to students of literature are *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1980), written with Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, and *Decolonising the African Mind* (1987), from which the following selection is taken. In it Chinweizu uses Ariel and Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to characterize the two postcolonial factions in Africa.

A note on the spelling: Chinweizu's British spelling is reproduced here.



Young Black Woman in European Dress, 1900s. Wooden Figurine

This sculpture, made in Mali in West Africa, shows how European dominance usurped African dress style. (The Art Archive / Private Collection Paris / Dagli Orti)

Decolonising the African Mind

From Calibans v. Ariels

I

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's parable on colonialism, when Prospero, the ruler of the island, sailed back to his own country, he handed power over his colony to Ariel, his obedient native auxiliary, but not to Caliban who had fought against his rule. In each Third World country, the colonial administrator's mission, like Prospero's, was to conquer, pacify, and rule, and to extract as much wealth as possible for the West. The native auxiliaries of colonialism, the Ariels, were trained to assist this mission wholeheartedly.

The anticolonial nationalists—the Calibans of their world—aimed to expel the conquerors, revitalise the nation, and develop its resources for its people. With independence, the Ariels have had to adopt at least parts of the Calibans' programme in order to stay in power. But can minds conditioned for the first purpose accomplish the second without reeducation? Can Ariel carry out Caliban's mission, especially when it requires him to battle his mentor, Prospero?

There was once a stuntman who would stand his partner against a board and throw a knife at him, always missing him by a hair's breadth, until his partner's shape was outlined in knifepoints upon the board. One day the two quarrelled; the stuntman resolved to kill his partner during their next performance. But no matter how he tried, he could not hit him: He kept missing his partner's body by the habitual hair's breadth. His purpose had changed, but the habits of his eye and muscles had not.

Even if Ariel were to overcome his ingrained awe and turn on his creator, his conditioning would likewise conspire to defeat his new purpose.

For as long as Ariel leads in the Third World, Prospero's old world order—whether economic, cultural, political, or informational—will be safe. For the present Third World struggle to succeed, Caliban must press on with his old battle until he routs Prospero's agent, Ariel.

Ariel and Caliban symbolise two factions in the Third World; indeed two rival tendencies in each Third World mind. Ariel's rout would mean the eradication of the colonial mentality. The decolonisation of the mind required to accomplish this is a necessary step toward a new world order which will be more than a refurbished version of the old.

II

In decolonising the African mind, as distinct from the Third World mind, certain particulars of African history need to be taken into account. The most important is that, for the past thirteen centuries, Africa has been invaded, conquered, and colonised by Arabs and Europeans. Their cultural assimilation programmes,

which continue till this day, have burdened Africa with Arabised and Europeanised Ariels.

Severed from his ancestral traditions and alienated from his natural African identity, the Arabised African strives to be even more Arab than his Arab master; and the Europeanised African strives to be even more European than his European master. Like Uthman Biri ibn Idris, a fourteenth century King of Borno, the Arabised African declares himself an Arab on the basis of his Arabised culture, or of a fictitious genealogy linking himself to some Arab ancestor, preferably to some alleged member of the Prophet Mohammed's tribe of the Quraish. The Europeanised African, like the late Kofi Busia, one-time Prime Minister of Ghana, declares himself a European because of his European education and culture. Fanon's famous phrase "Black Skin, White Mask" applies to both kinds of African Ariel. Both believe in the intrinsic superiority of the white invaders of Africa; each proselytises for the culture of his Prospero, is hostile to decolonisation, and its contemptuous of any re-Africanisation of African culture.

Believing that Arabs are Allah's chosen people, the Arabised African does not find it anomalous that there are so many "Arab Republics" on African soil. He is not moved to ask: How did they come into existence? What does their presence mean? Why are their numbers increasing? If anything, he views them as a matter for rejoicing. Obviously, he can't well resist Arab imperialism if he believes that Arabs are god's chosen mediators between man and god; or that Arabic, one of the major colonial languages in Africa, is the language of god himself. Any invitation to de-Arabise his culture would be viewed as sacrilegious; as an invitation to opt to spend eternity in hell.

The Europeanised African, for his part, is overwhelmed by the fantastic achievements of industrial civilisation. But having accepted the European propaganda that industrial civilisation is the genetic property of its European pioneers, he fails to distinguish industrial civilisation as a type from modern European civilisation as an instance of the type. His desire for the former is therefore perverted into a wish to assimilate himself into the latter. He overlooks the fact, which the Japanese and the Chinese have demonstrated, that industrial civilisation can be replicated by non-Europeans, and so cannot be regarded as somehow intrinsically European. And he is usually ignorant of the fact that Europeans were latecomers to scientific culture, and that their pioneering of the industrial revolution was based on the scientific heritage they borrowed from others—including the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations. Obviously, he can't resist European imperialism if he believes that Europeans are the sole owners of the paradise of industrial civilisation; or that European languages, which are colonial languages in Africa, are indispensable for participation in industrial civilisation. Any invitation to de-Europeanise his culture would be viewed as an invitation away from the industrial paradise and back to some pre-industrial hell.

Such veneration of alien cultures leaves the African Ariel susceptible to foreign domination. It makes him eager for approval and acclaim by Arab and European imperialists. He wants to write and read literature approved by these imperialists. He wants to contest in those sports that these imperialists organise and dominate. He wants to embark on the subservient economic development which these imperialists promote. He wants to accept the identity which these imperialists fashion for him. He is eager to abandon his ancestral religions for those concocted and dispensed by these imperialists. He wants to hear only the version of his history which these imperialists peddle. He is eager to join the "commonwealths" which these imperialists sponsor. If the African Ariel has his way, African countries would join or perpetually remain in the Arab commonwealth known as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the British Commonwealth, the French Community, and the COMECON[1] of the Russians. Yet these are only thinly disguised continuations today of the old Arab, British, French, and Russian empires.

The historic mission of present-day Africans is to effect a renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode so that Africa can henceforth defend itself against all invaders. In this connection, the African Ariel's commitment to alien religions has curious consequences for his defence of Africa. It was recently proclaimed that the Nigerian Army recognised only two religions: Christianity and Islam. This means that religions which were founded by Jews and Arabs, and which were imported into Nigeria, are the only ones recognized in the army of the leading nation of the Black World. Their shrines in Mecca, Rome, and Jerusalem are sacred to the Nigerian state, which helps fund pilgrimages to them; but shrines at Ife, Benin, Calabar, etc., which belong to religions founded by the ancestors of Nigerians, are given no place in the rites of the Nigerian state. Thus, if Nigeria ever went to war against invading Jews or Arabs (as might well happen, given Nigerian passions over the Arab-Israeli conflict), patriotic Nigerians would march out, praying to Jehovah of the Jews and Allah of the Arabs to help them vanquish these invaders. But what god would desert his chosen people and side with outsiders against them? A sorry fix Nigerians would then find themselves in for relying on the gods of others.

As that example shows, our historic mission demands a re-Africanisation of the African even in such matters as his religion. But at the core of its demands is a restoration of the African cultural personality in a version consistent with an industrial economy. Doing that requires that Africans exercise an independent cultural initiative. Decolonising the African mind, freeing it from alien control, is a necessary condition for such initiative.

The reason is simple. The colonised mind, like a well-conditioned slave, is incapable of initiative independent of its master. Initiative in pursuit of the slave's own interest would be tantamount to revolt. Given his conditioning, all his master need do to end his revolt is to speak in tones that trigger his deeply ingrained habit of obedience. Ending his habit of submission to his master's voice, destroying his master's authority over him, become necessary if that slave is to do things in his own interest. A renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode is not in the interest of Africa's Arab and European enemies. So long as they have any authority over what Africans do, they will assuredly use it to sabotage such a renaissance.

[1] COMECON: Acronym for the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, an organization active from 1949 to 1991 that included the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, East Germany, Mongolia, Cuba, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia. [Editors' note.]

The central objective in decolonising the African mind is to overthrow the authority which alien traditions exercise over the African. This demands the dismantling of white supremacist beliefs, and the structures which uphold them, in every area of African life. It must be stressed, however, that decolonisation does not mean ignorance of foreign traditions; it simply means denial of their authority and withdrawal of allegiance from them. Foreign traditions are part of the harvest of human experience. One should certainly know about them, if only because one must know one's environment, and especially one's enemy. One should certainly use items from other traditions provided they are consistent with African cultural independence and serve African objectives; but one should neither ape nor revere them, let alone sacrifice the African interest to them.

The strategic importance of overthrowing the authority of alien traditions lies in this. A renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode implies a far-reaching renovation of African cultures. Renovation calls for selectivity guided by the new objectives. Like a plank, brick, or tile being used to renovate a house, every cultural item for use in renovating African civilisation has to be critically appraised to see if it meets the specifications demanded by the new objectives. Elements from African tradition, no less than elements from non-African traditions, have to be thus appraised. But such appraisal would be impaired, if not entirely prevented, if a tradition exercises an intimidating authority over Africans—as is now, alas, the case with the Arab and European traditions.

Overthrowing the authority of alien traditions will allow for the questioning of their contents, for selection of what is useful, for adapting to African conditions and needs whatever is selected as useful. It will prevent the unexamined importation of the harmful, as well as the unexamined importation of that for which equivalent, or even superior, African counterparts exist. If a foreign technique or principle (in law, medicine, politics, economics, architecture, etc.) has its analogue in the African tradition, there is no reason not to keep the African item, provided both are of equal benefit. And even if they are not, the foreign item would be selectable only if the African item cannot be adapted to do the job. Otherwise, we will clutter our culture with unnecessary borrowings.

It ought to be stressed that Europeanisation and Arabisation are, at best, superfluous to the creation of an industrial version of African civilisation. We need to remind ourselves that the Japanese and Chinese have not repudiated their civilisations, and did not abandon their identities when they set out to industrialise. The notion that industrialisation of a society demands Europeanisation of its culture (whether in the American, Russian, or other version) is a piece of imperialist propaganda. The cultures of the industrial societies differ profoundly from one another. What each has done is to take its pre-industrial culture and place it on an industrial foundation. In the process, each has had to extensively renovate its culture to install the scientific ethos, and to satisfy conditions necessary for industrialism. Africa's pre-industrial cultures can equally expect to be profoundly altered by the demands of an industrial foundation. Such changes should not be confused with Europeanisation, just because they were first manifested during the industrialisation of Europe.

If a case cannot even be made for Africa to Europeanise its culture; if Europeanisation is, at best, a pointless distortion; Arabisation would be pure retrogression, a flight into an archaic feudalism with an anti-industrial mentality. We must soberly ask ourselves: Has Arabic culture enabled the Arabs to achieve an industrial society? Have they been able to defeat the industrialised Israelis whom they outnumber some 75 to 1? If they have not, why would any sane African want to copy their impotent culture? Of course, the Arabs could claim to hold the keys to the Arab heaven. Africans should then emulate the moribund Arab culture if death, with entry into an Arab controlled hereafter, is their aim, rather than survival and prosperity in the here and now.

According to Fanon, with the withdrawal of the colonial masters, "the country finds itself in the hands of new managers; but the fact is that everything needs to be reformed and everything thought out anew."[1] The Ariels cannot see beyond merely managing their colonial inheritance; indeed, they see it as against their interest to do anything else. But the Calibans know, with Fanon, that the task is not to manage the colonial inheritance, but to reform everything, to think everything out anew. The task is to define our own objectives, set our own standards, and pick our own heroes from among those who outstandingly serve our own interests.

Clearly, those Ariels who are Arabising or Europeanising Africa must be defeated if Africa is to be free to concentrate on its historic tasks. A battle must be waged against them by the African Calibans, the inheritors of the movement for political decolonisation. The battle is against Ariels among our artists and critics who pine for Prospero's praise. It is against Ariels who parrot Prospero's version of our history. It is against economic and political Ariels who would keep us subservient to Prospero's economic and political systems. These are today's equivalents of the old slaving elites who destroyed Africa while hunting slaves for sale to Arabs and Europeans.

Decolonising the African mind may alternatively be seen as a battle between the Caliban and Ariel tendencies within each African, for bits of Ariel and Caliban exist within each of us. No African living in the twentieth century has escaped the taint of the colonial experience. None has freed himself from the colonial mentality in every department, or from the structures which maintain and reproduce that mentality. The decolonisation of the African mind must therefore be seen as a collective enterprise, as a communal exorcism through an intellectual bath in which we need one another's help to scrub those nooks of our minds which we cannot scour by ourselves.

[1] "the country . . . anew": Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, p. 79. [Chinweizu's note.]

Felix Mnthali

b. Malawi, 1933

mun-THAH-lee

Felix Muthali, Malawian poet, novelist, and scholar, was educated at Cambridge University, England. In Africa he has taught in the English departments at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, Malawi University, and the University of Botswana. His published works include *When Sunset Comes to Saptiwa* (1980), a collection of poetry, and the novel *Yoranivyoto* (1998).

The Stranglehold of English Lit.

(for Molara Ogundipe-Leslie)

Those questions, sister,
those questions
stand
stab
jab
and gore
too close to the centre!

For if we had asked
why Jane Austen's people
carouse all day
and do no work

would Europe in Africa
have stood
the test of time?
and would she still maul
the flower of our youth
in the south?
Would she?

Your elegance of deceit,
Jane Austen,
lulled the sons and daughters
of the dispossessed
into a calf-love
with irony and satire
around imaginary people.

While history went on mocking
the victims of branding irons
and sugar-plantations
that made Jane Austen's people
wealthy beyond compare!

Eng. Lit., my sister,
was more than a cruel joke—
it was the heart
of alien conquest.

How could questions be asked
at Makerere and Ibadan,
Dakar and Ford Hare[1]—
with Jane Austen
at the centre?
How could they be answered?

[1] Makerere . . . Ford Hare: African universities: Makerere, in Uganda; Ibadan, in Nigeria; Dakar, in Senegal; and Ford Hare, in South Africa.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

b. Kenya, 1938

en-GOO-gee wah thee-ONG-oh

The novelist, playwright, and essayist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o from Kenya is one of East Africa's most important writers, whose works dealing with anticolonialism, class struggle, language, and national identity have exerted considerable influence throughout the world. Educated at Makerere College in Uganda and Leeds University in England, Ngugi has held academic positions at universities in Africa, Europe, and the United States, where he has taught at Yale, Smith, Amherst, and New York University. His first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), a moving account of the Mau Mau rebellion, was written in English, under the name James Ngugi, as were other early novels dealing with cultural and class conflict in the wake of British colonialism in Kenya, such as *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). After 1977, Ngugi turned to his native Gikuyu tongue as a more appropriate medium for his plays and novels, which he aimed at the native Gikuyu audience. The 1977 play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry when I Please*), written in Gikuyu with the collaboration of

Ngugi Wa Mirii, was so popular among the Gikuyu that the Kenyan government banned the play and detained Ngugi without trial out of fear that he was promoting political dissent. While in prison Ngugi wrote *Devil on the Cross* (1982), again in Gikuyu, and later translated it into English; his time in prison is the subject of *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). Further censorship from the government forced Ngugi to leave Kenya in 1982, and he has lived in exile ever since. He is currently professor of comparative literature at New York University.

As the author of critical works such as *Homecomings: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (1972), *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), and *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), from which the following selection is taken, Ngugi has emerged as perhaps the foremost advocate of preserving and indeed revitalizing native languages in the so-called postmodern era. He believes that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history," and as such it empowers native language users, in his words, "to confront the world creatively." For his views Ngugi has been criticized as being nostalgic or for being a "nativist"; he responds, as he does in the following selection, that a common global culture can be achieved only when it is expressed "in the particularities of our different languages and cultures." His work to preserve the language and culture of native traditions does not point backward, he says, to reviving an antiquated tradition; rather, it revitalizes the present and contributes to the blending of cultures that he concedes is taking place already. Like Goethe, Ngugi contends that a world literature can flourish only when it acknowledges the linguistic and cultural particularities of the many traditions making up the global community.

All notes are the editors'.

FROM

Creating Space for a Hundred Flowers to Bloom

The Wealth of a Common Global Culture

Looking at the world today, one sees many countries, nations, peoples, customs, languages, and a multiplicity of apparently unsolvable conflicts and problems. But in reality the world is becoming one. Human beings who live in space circle the earth within only a few hours. They can hardly settle their eyes for long on any one country—even their own. On the earth itself, the ease of transportation has put every corner of the globe within general reach in a matter of hours, a far cry from the days of Phineas Fogg and his wager of going round the earth in eighty days.

Economic links are quite obvious. The leading financial institutions—banks, insurances, credit cards—operate in nearly all the capitals of the earth. Transnationals of all kinds link economic activities of several countries; some brands becoming almost national to many people so familiar a sight they have become in their daily lives. So a worker in Nairobi, Kenya, in an automobile warehouse can have the same employer as many others in North, Central, South American, and Asian cities. Messrs Coca-Cola and McDonalds, between themselves, are making the world in their own image. It is of course true that these processes are controlled by a handful of Western transnationals. IMF and the World Bank dictate the social and economic policies of many countries. But it does mean that many workers, many nations, even when they may not be consciously aware of it, are linked to the same controlling central forces. Their apparently individual struggles against any excesses of the central command are invisibly linked to others. Workers for instance could be struggling against the same employer even though they are located in the different capitals and nations of the earth. As for the distribution of power, a handful of Western nations still dominate various other nations. Hence the experiences of national liberation and even the internal social struggles of many nations might be shaped in a similar way by the fact of their being aimed against the practices of a common enemy.

Those global economic and political processes invariably give rise to cultural links. The evolution of the present global order over the last five hundred years has seen the world being dominated by a handful of languages; European languages of course and the cultures these have carried will have shaped the dominated in similar ways. The fax, the telex, the computer, while facilitating communications, also mean the instant spread of information and culture across national boundaries. Television images via satellites enable the whole world to experience the Palestinian uprising in the Middle East, the struggle for Amandla[1] in South Africa, the mass uprisings and calls for democratic accountability to the people in Eastern Europe, at about the same time. Mandela could speak to billions in the world from his platform at the Wembley stadium in London, the concert in his honour there becoming part of a global instant experience. His release from twenty-seven years in prison was watched by millions. Words like perestroika, glasnost, amandla, a luta continua,[2] people power, democracy, socialism have become part of a common vocabulary.

In terms of the structures of domination, subordination, and resistance, a common global experience is emerging. Gradually a vocabulary of concepts of domination and revolt become part of a shared intellectual tradition.

Literature, more than all the fleeting images brought about by the screen or newsprint, is one of the more enduring multinational cultural processes which have been building the basis of a shared common tradition. From the ancient and modern literatures names of characters like Rama, Sinbad, Ali Baba, Isis and Osiris,

[1] **Amandla:** From the Kwazulu phrase *amandla awethus*, meaning "power to the people."

[2] **perestroika . . . continua:** *Perestroika* and *glasnost* are terms associated with the opening of the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s; *amandla* and *a luta continua* are freedom cries associated with the African liberation movements that followed World War II.

Abunuwasi, Anansi, Hercules, Odysseus, Achilles, Helen, Oedipus, Prometheus, Gargantua and Pantagruel, Faustus, Hamlet, Okonkwo,[3] to mention just a few; and writers like Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Goethe, Schiller, Thomas Mann, Brecht, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Faulkner, Melville, Lu Hsun, Kim Chi Ha, the Grimm brothers, Andersen, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Alex la Guma, Sembene Ousmane,[4] have become part of a global inheritance.

Inevitably because of the position of domination of Europe *vis-à-vis* the rest of the globe over the last five hundred years, European literature has occupied a place of great prominence on the world stage. It has, unarguably, given rise to a great humanistic tradition. It has given us fantastic images of the world of struggle, of great upheavals, of change, of movement. When Shakespeare's King Lear breaks down under the storm occasioned by the fact of the old feudal order and conception of nature being challenged to the roots by the new bourgeois conception of nature and asks, who is that can tell me who I am, or the assassins in *Julius Caesar*, bathing themselves in the blood of the victim, and one of them wondering how many times their deeds would be duplicated in the world in times and states as yet unborn, could they not have been painting images of the twentieth century? When Adam and Eve are taken by the angel Gabriel on to a hill just before their expulsion from paradise in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and are shown visions of the world to be; they are actually being given a global vision of all the cities and civilisations of the world among which are the great African empires of Songhay and the twelfth-century city-states along the Kenyan coast such as Malindi and Mombasa.

The humanistic side of European literature reflects of course the democratic social struggles of the European peoples. But given the domination of the West over the rest of the world through such repressive historical moments as the slave trade and slavery, colonialism and currently neocolonialism, this literature tends to opt for silence or ambivalence or downright collaboration. Of course there are writers who show great sensitivity to the social evils perpetrated against other peoples: William Blake, Walt Whitman, Brecht, Sartre for instance. But taken as a whole this literature could not avoid being affected by the Eurocentric basis of its world view or global vision, and most of it, even when sympathetic, could not altogether escape from the racism inherent in Western enterprise in the rest of the world. . . .

Thus, if people were really to depend on European literature, even at its best, they would get a very distorted picture of the modern world, its evolution and its contemporary being. The twentieth century is a product of imperialist adventurism,

[3] **Abunuwasi . . . Okonkwo:** Abunuwasi and Anansi are trickster figures from East and West African legends, respectively; Okonkwo is the hero of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

[4] **Lu Hsun . . . Ousmane:** Lu Hsun (Lu Xun, 1881–1936), Chinese writer, see p. 331; Kim Chi Ha (b. 1941), a Korean poet imprisoned first in 1964 and sentenced to death in 1974 for his poems critical of the government of Park Chung Hee; before the sentence was carried out, it was commuted to life in prison in 1980, after Park was assassinated. Alex la Guma (1925–1985), South African writer and activist who was imprisoned and placed under house arrest on charges of treason, then forced into exile in 1966; his most famous novel is *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972). Sembene Ousmane (b. 1923), Senegalese writer and film director, whose most well-known novel is *God's Bits of Wood* (*Les Bouts de bois de dieu*, 1960).

true, but also of resistance from the people of the Third World. This resistance is often reflected in the literature of the Third World and it is an integral part of the modern world, part of the forces which have been creating and are still creating the heritage of a common culture. They come from Asia. They come from South America. They come from Africa. And they come from the oppressed national sectors and social strata in North America, Australasia, and Europe. The Third World is all over the world. There is of course no absolute uniformity in this literature and within itself as a modern tradition, a twentieth-century tradition, it carries all sorts of tendencies. Let me concentrate on literature from the African continent.

There are, as you know, three traditions in the literature from Africa. First is that of the oral tradition or orature. It is the literature passed on from mouth to ear, generation to generation. It consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles, sayings, and it is the richest and oldest of heritages. Furthermore, it is still very much alive and readily incorporates new elements. It can be extremely simple or very complex depending on the time, place, and the occasion. I can think of no better demonstration of this tradition than in the remarkable recording of the *Ozidi Saga* by J. P. Clark.[5] Here the epic of Ozidi and his grandmother Oreame is told over a period of seven nights. The section dealing with the education of the epic hero, Ozidi, by his very demanding grandmother, is a remarkable example of narrative in orature while the scene involving the empowerment of Ozidi illustrates even more remarkably the fusion of theatre, drama, poetry, magic, ritual, music, song, audience participation, the real and the marvellous in orature. Among the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya there used to be a Gĩkũyũ poetry festival, or shall I say, competition, which drew large crowds. The best poets of the various regions would meet in the arena, like in a battle, and compete with words and instant compositions. These poets had even developed a form of hierographics which they kept to themselves. This kind of festival was killed by the British for they did not want crowds of people meeting and practising things that they, in the colonial administration, could not understand. The importance of the oral tradition is that through its agency African languages in their most magical form have been kept alive. One of the highest developments of this was the *griot*[6] tradition in West Africa. Whole epics and histories of families and nations were banked in the memories of these keepers of the word.

The second tradition is that of Africans writing in European languages, particularly in those of the former colonisers. This is clearly a product of the fatal encounter between Africa and Europe in two ways. First is the question of language choice and this links it inevitably to the literatures carried by European languages. This literature is branded with the Europeanness of the word. A case of black skins in white linguistic masks? Secondly, it arose out of and was generally inspired by the great

[5] **J. P. Clark:** J. P. Clark-Bekederemo (b. 1935), Nigerian poet and playwright whose works include *A Reed in the Tide* (1965), *A Decade of Tongues* (1981), and *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988); Clark's research of the oral tradition of his Izon (Ijo) people in the delta of the former kingdom of Benin led to the publication of the *Ozidi Saga* (1977), the national epic of the Ijo.

[6] ***griot:*** West African bard or storyteller, whose performance of traditional epics and stories involves speech, song, and often dance.

anticolonial resistance of the African masses. Much of the literature was initially often a reaction to the conception of the universe in European literature in which the African was depicted as the negation of history. It had done a remarkable job in redrawing the images of the world as previously drawn by the literature of Europe. It has rescued the world defined by European languages from the total grip of Eurocentrism. But in another sense it continued and even aided in that Eurocentrism by its very choice of languages. In other words it does not really matter how much Caliban is able to curse in European languages. He can do very remarkable things with it as we can see in *The Tempest*, in that great poetic evocation of Caliban's love of the island and his total identification with its landscape. But in so far as he has not been forced to abandon his language, as happened in the case of the African diaspora, he is accepting Prospero's racist assumptions about the universe and contributing to Prospero's linguistic universe. He accepts that only by adopting the European tongue can he manage to express his humanity adequately. He has colluded in Prospero's uprooting of the African tongue à la Coetzee; the African peasant and worker in this literature reappears on the stage of world history speaking not his gabble but perfect English, French, or Portuguese, a remarkable case of literary surgery and transplant since in reality the masses of African people do continue speaking and using and creating in African languages. Note that the new Caliban comes to Prospero's linguistic high table with an offering, a linguistic bottle of wine so to speak. Thus, this tradition has tried to forge an identity by borrowing very heavily from African languages, that is from the rich harvest of orature as developed by African languages over the years. But note also that Caliban is not borrowing from Prospero to enrich his own gabble. On the contrary. He sees his role as that of borrowing from his own gabble to enlarge the possibilities of Prospero's languages. He gives nothing, absolutely nothing, back to his languages. This ultimately is the tragedy of the Europhone tradition which has come to wear the mask of African literature. It is now a case of black skins in white masks wearing black masks.

In the area of economics and geography, it is the raw materials of gold, diamonds, coffee, tea, which are taken from Africa and processed in Europe and then resold to Africa. In the area of culture, the raw material of African orature and histories developed by African languages are taken, repackaged through English or French or Portuguese and then resold back to Africa. In both cases one is not questioning the quality of the products for this is not really what is at issue.

The third tradition is that of Africans writing in African languages. In the precolonial era, this was a minority tradition among the nations in that not many of the African languages had been reduced to writing. But it has always been there and as Professor Abiola Irele has pointed out it is these languages which contain the classical era of African literature, a precolonial tradition. It is the one that owns the label, the title, the name, "African literature." It has been overshadowed by the more recent Europhone tradition. But African languages are coming back. The language debate has dominated every single literature conference to do with Africa over the last few years and it is going to continue to do so with even greater aggressive insistence as we face the twenty-first century. To the old voices of Cheikh Anita Diop and David Diop calling for reconnection with that tradition are newer voices from the oral tradition

adding to the continental chorus of concern. The Somali poet of the oral tradition, Mohamed Ismail of Garce, has gone so far as to accuse the educated Africans of committing treason against their own languages:

> Oh my friends, the Somali language is very perplexed;
> It is all anxiety in its present condition;
> The value of its words and expressions are being gagged by its own people;
> Its very back and hips are broken, and it accuses its own speakers of neglect;
> It is weeping with deep sorrow;
> It is being orphaned and its value is vanishing.

A reconnection with the classic tradition of our languages to express the contemporary world will not be an easy, "walkover" kind of task. Writing in African languages has many difficulties and problems. Problems of literacy. Problems of publishing. Problems of the lack of a critical tradition. Problems of orthography. Problems of having very many languages in the same country. Problems of hostile governments with a colonised mentality. Abandonment by some of those who could have brought their genius—demonstrated by their excellent performance in foreign languages—to develop their own languages.

In short, literature in African languages suffers from a lack of a strong tradition, creative and critical. Writers in African languages are having to create several traditions simultaneously; publishing, critical vocabulary, orthography, and even words. But it has the advantage of being able to establish a natural give and take relationship to the rich heritage of orature. African writers in African languages are giving something back, however tiny, to the development of African languages.

That is why I still believe that despite the hue and cry about reductionism, nativism, backwardlookingness from the Europhonist opponents of this development, writing in African languages still holds the key for the positive development of new and vital traditions in African literature as we face the twenty-first century. Many more people are facing up to the creative necessity of writing in African languages and to do for African languages what Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton did for English; what Cervantes did for Spanish; what Rabelais did for French; what Martin Luther, Goethe, and Schiller did for the German language; what Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy did for Russian; what Elias Lonnrot of the Finnish classic, the *Kalevala*, did for Finnish; indeed what all writers in history have done for their languages. In short they are hearkening to the rescue call by the Somali poet quoted earlier.

African writers in African languages are engaged in the great adventure and drama of creating a new and great tradition. In this task they have at least two great reservoirs: the heritages of orature and of world literature and culture.

All great national literatures have rooted themselves in the culture and language of the peasantry. The Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as was all Greek drama, were rooted in the legends and stories that everybody knew. The Russian writers of the nineteenth century, particularly Pushkin, rooted their work in the culture of the peasantry. The *Kalevala*, the founding text of modern Finnish literature and language, was rooted in the folklore of the peasantry. The oral tradition will then be the basis or the foundation of the new tradition in African literature.

African languages must not be afraid of also borrowing from the best in world culture. All the dynamic cultures of the world have borrowed from other cultures in a process of mutual fertilisation. In his very interesting essay on the relationships between languages and cultures *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse*, Bakhtin[7] has this to say on the development of Latin:

> Latin literary language in all its generic diversity was created in the light of Greek literary language. Its national distinctiveness and the specific verbal thought process inherent in it were realised in creative literary consciousness in a way that would have been absolutely impossible under conditions of monoglossia. After all it is possible to objectivise one's own particular language, its internal form, the peculiarities of its world view, its special linguistic habitus only in the light of another language belonging to somebody else, which is almost as much "one's own" as one's own native language.

One could add the rhetorical question: and is it possible to conceive of the development of Greek literature and culture without Egyptian and other Mediterranean cultures? African languages, as we have seen, have contributed immensely to the development of European languages and extended their possibilities through the Europhone literary tradition of the modern African experience. Indeed the new *Oxford English Dictionary* has canonised quite a number of new words from Kiswahili and other African languages.

African languages will borrow from one another; they will borrow from their classical heritages; they will borrow from the world—from the Caribbean, from Afroamerica, from Latin America, from the Asian—and from the European worlds. In this, the new writing in African languages will do the opposite of the Europhone practice: Instead of being appropriated by the world, it will appropriate the world and one hopes on terms of equal exchange, at the very least, borrow on its own terms and needs.

The growth and the development of the new African literature in African languages will have vast implications for critical scholarship. Currently no expert on the so-called "African literature" need ever show even the slightest acquaintance with any African language. Can you imagine a professor of French literature and culture who does not know a single word of French? Unfortunately it is not just the case of non-African scholars. African scholars of African realities need never show any acquaintance with African languages, even with their mother tongues. An African-languages-based critical scholarship would have a very vital role to play in the further development of the new African literature. The Europhone would occupy its proper place; as an appendage of European literature or as a footnote in African literature.

[7] Bakhtin: Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975), influential Russian critic and philosopher of language whose work focuses on the interrelationship between language, discourse, and society; his major works include *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics (Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo)*, first published in 1929, and *The Dialogic Imagination (Voprosi literatury i estetiki)*, a collection of important essays on discourse, epic, and the novel, first published between 1937 and 1941.

It is these revitalised African languages rooting themselves in the traditions of orature and of written African literature, inspired by the deepest aspirations of the African people for a meaningful social change, which will also be best placed to give and receive from the wealth of our common culture on an equal basis.

Similar cases can be made for the literature of Asia and South America over the last four hundred years. These literatures growing in the shadow of both great classical pasts and of European literatures, sometimes bitterly resisting their appeal, at other times borrowing from them, but absorbing the borrowed features to create their unique traditions, creating so to speak their own space in a world dominated by cultural imperialism from the West, all add to the literature and culture of resistance. They are an integral part of what makes up the twentieth century and the foundation of the literature and cultures of the twenty-first century. The languages and literatures of Asia, Africa, and South America, the literatures of peoples of non-European stock but who are now part of the economic, political, and cultural reality of the West, are all creating space for a hundred flowers to bloom on a global scale; and the organisation of cultural studies all over the world should reflect this multi-coloured reality of the human creative stream. The continued domination of the world by a handful of European languages and literatures can only make the world poorer not richer. The transition in African, Asian, South American, North American, and European letters is towards traditions that will freely give and take, on the basis of equality and mutual respect, from this vast heritage of human creativity.

The wealth of a common global culture will then be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers. The "flowerness" of the different flowers is expressed in their very diversity. But there is cross-fertilisation between them. And what is more, they all contain in themselves the seeds of a new tomorrow.

ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

B. INDIA, 1880–1932

Western women writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often focused on characters and situations that illustrated the psychological and social toll of a patriarchal society. The young widow in Emilia Pardo Bazán's "The Revolver" is driven into paralytic passivity by the threat of her husband's gun. The new mother in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is driven mad by imagining a woman trapped inside the wallpaper, which has been read as an extreme expression of the limitations that Western women experience under patriarchy. Most of these women would wish for Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own,"[1] space in which to assert their independence from male control. In many non-Western societies, however, physical separation and confinement of women in rooms of their own are the very media of oppression. The PURDAH system in India, practiced in somewhat different ways by Muslims and Hindus, mandates that women be kept in their own section of the house, one that can be visited only by other women or by a narrowly restricted circle of male relatives. In public, women are hidden from view by curtains, robes, and veils. For Begum **Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**, one of the foremost feminist writers of early-twentieth-century India, challenging this system became a lifelong crusade.

roh-KAY-yuh
sah-kah-WAHT
hoh-SINE

Although Hossain herself wore a traditional robe throughout her life, she objected to the physical constraints, the denial of opportunity, and the psychological impact purdah had on women, who colluded with their own confinement. In *The Secluded Ones* (1928), a collection of true stories about the effects of the system, Hossain tells of a woman whose house caught on fire. When the woman attempted to escape, Hossain writes, "she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She would not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom . . . and hid under the bed. She burned to death but did not come out." Such were the debilitating results of the purdah system that Hossain set out to change.

A Secret Education. Hossain was born in 1880 into a prominent and well-to-do Muslim family in the village of Pairaband in northern Bengal, in what is now Bangladesh. Her brothers were educated at home and later at a school in Calcutta, but the girls were not given any systematic education. Rokeya was encouraged to learn only enough Arabic to read the Qur'an (Koran) and enough Urdu to read some primers on feminine conduct. Luckily, her older brother, Ibrahim Saber, believed in education for women and at night secretly taught his sisters English and Bangla (Bengali), languages their parents had forbidden because they were spoken by non-Muslims. Ibrahim Saber was also instrumental in persuading

[1] **"room . . . own":** Asked to speak on the topic of "Women and Fiction," English novelist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941; see p. 402) asserted, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Her essay, *A Room of One's Own*, was published in 1929.

the family to marry Rokeya to Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a liberal district magistrate educated in Calcutta and London who was committed to the cause of women's education. Rokeya expressed her gratitude to her brother in the dedication of her novel *Padmaraga* (1924): "You have moulded me from childhood . . . your love is sweeter than honey which after all has a bitter after-taste; [your love] is pure and divine like Kausar."[2]

Promoting Women's Education. The newly married couple moved to Rangpur where Sakhawat was stationed; there he encouraged Rokeya to associate with other educated women, Hindus and Christians as well as Muslims. He also encouraged her to write. "If my dear husband had not been so supportive," Hossain commented later, "I might never have written or published anything." After eleven years of marriage—when Hossain was twenty-seven—her husband died, leaving her sufficient money to live on as well as a substantial sum designated to be spent on women's education. Hossain used the money to start a girl's school in Bhagalpur in 1909, moving the school a year later to Calcutta, where it is still operating as the Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School. She designed the school as a model of the women's educational programs she advocated and promoted through the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, the Muslim Women's Association, an activist group she founded in 1916.

Hossain in fact devoted her life to women's education, which she saw as essential to female liberation. Most of her writings are directed to bringing about the social changes in the culture of northern India that she saw as essential for achieving a measure of equality for Muslims and for liberating Muslim women. She advocated a curriculum for women that included the sciences; practical training in horticulture, personal hygiene, health care, and nutrition; and painting and the other fine arts. Education must lead to freedom from male domination, she asserted, so it needed to develop potential vocational skills in women. By the time of her death in 1932, Hossain was recognized as a national leader in the cause of Muslim rights and women's education. The day of her death, December 9, is celebrated in Bangladesh as Rokeya Day.

Hossain's Literary Work. Hossain wrote most of her literary works in Bangla (Bengali), the vernacular language of her region of northern India. Since she was writing to raise the consciousness of her compatriots, especially Muslim women, she wrote in the language most familiar to them. Of her Bangla writings, only parts of *The Secluded Ones* have been translated into English. She also wrote many articles, essays, and speeches as well as a novel, *Padmaraga* (*Ruby*, 1924), in Bangla. Her collected works, entitled *Racanavali*, were published in Bangla in 1973.

"Sultana's Dream." Unlike most of Hossain's work, "Sultana's Dream" (1905) was written in English and initially published in an English magazine, *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*. Hossain wrote the story while her

[2] Kausar: A stream of nectar in Paradise, mentioned in the Qur'an.

> If our liberation from male domination depends on our ability to earn independently, then we should begin. We should be lawyers, magistrates, judges, clerks. . . . The sort of labour we put in our households can bring us wages if we use it outside.
>
> – ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

WWW For links to more information about Hossain, a quiz on "Sultana's Dream," and for information on the culture and context of India in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

That women may possess faculties and talents equivalent to or greater than men—that they are capable of developing themselves to a stage where they may attain complete mastery over nature without any help from men and create a new world of perfect beauty, great wealth, and goodness—this is what "Sultana's Dream" depicts.

— Abdul Hussain, critic, 1921

husband was away on a business trip to pass the time and to demonstrate to him her proficiency in English. When he returned, she showed him the story and, she recalled, "he read the whole thing without even bothering to sit down. 'A terrible revenge!' he said when he was finished." Clearly the story's utopian fantasy was an angry indictment of purdah and the oppression of women in Bengal. The "revenge" was Hossain's satiric reversal of gender roles, which placed men in seclusion and belittled their desires. Another aspect of Hossain's vision of an ideal society, one devoted to horticulture and life-enhancing sciences rather than warfare, was apparently less immediately striking. Like Jonathan Swift (1667–1745),[3] to whose *Gulliver's Travels* "Sultana's Dream" has often been compared, Hossain was accused of misanthropy and sexism, but ultimately these attitudes did not deter the positive impact her story had on its Indian readers.

■ CONNECTIONS

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 408. Although Hossain does not focus specifically on the situation of women writers, as Woolf does in *A Room of One's Own*, she is interested in how things might be different if women had their own space. What things do the two writers see as distinctively feminine? Where do their visions of a woman's world significantly differ?

Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis* (Book 3); Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4); Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (Book 1). "Sultana's Dream" is written within a tradition of utopian literature that satirizes existing social arrangements by imagining alternative societies. Compare Ladyland with Bacon's New Atlantis and Swift's Houyhnhnmland. What existing social institutions do the authors criticize and how do their alternative societies correct social ills? What would Swift and Bacon think of Ladyland? Can Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* be considered a work of utopian literature? Does it envision a feminine society similar to Ladyland?

***In the World*: Love, Marriage, and the Education of Women (Book 4).** Education has been a centerpiece of feminist proposals for social reform in the last several centuries. Consider Hossain's educational ideas in relation to those in *In the World: Love, Marriage, and the Education of Women*. Is Hossain's curriculum similar to what Western feminists would propose? In what way do her views seem most determined by her cultural situation?

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *"Sultana's Dream" and Selections from* The Secluded Ones, Roushan Jahan, trans. and ed. 1988.

■ PRONUNCIATION

Koh-i-Noor: KOH-ee-noor
Padmaraga: pud-muh-RAH-guh
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: roh-KAY-yuh sah-kah-WAHT hoh-SINE
Zenana: zay-NAH-nah

[3] **Jonathan Swift:** Swift's fantasy travel narrative *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) satirized human foibles and suggested that horses were wiser and more rational than humans. (See Book 4.)

Sultana's Dream

One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far as I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamondlike stars, very distinctly.

All of a sudden a lady stood before me; how she came in, I do not know. I took her for my friend, Sister Sara.

"Good morning," said Sister Sara. I smiled inwardly as I knew it was not morning, but starry night. However, I replied to her, saying, "How do you do?"

"I am all right, thank you. Will you please come out and have a look at our garden?"

I looked again at the moon through the open window, and thought there was no harm in going out at that time. The menservants outside were fast asleep just then, and I could have a pleasant walk with Sister Sara.

I used to have my walks with Sister Sara, when we were at Darjeeling.[1] Many a time did we walk hand in hand and talk lightheartedly in the botanical gardens there. I fancied Sister Sara had probably come to take me to some such garden, and I readily accepted her offer and went out with her.

When walking I found to my surprise that it was a fine morning. The town was fully awake and the streets alive with bustling crowds. I was feeling very shy, thinking I was walking in the street in broad daylight, but there was not a single man visible.

Some of the passersby made jokes at me. Though I could not understand their language, yet I felt sure they were joking. I asked my friend, "What do they say?"

"The women say you look very mannish."

"Mannish?" said I. "What do they mean by that?"

"They mean that you are shy and timid like men."

"Sultana's Dream." Published in 1905 in *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, an English periodical produced in Madras, this story has been described by Roushan Jahan as "one of the earliest 'self-consciously feminist' utopian stories written in English by a woman." Characterizing Hossain as "the first and foremost feminist of Bengali Muslim society," Jahan goes on to observe: "One hesitates to use a term that is not content-free and *feminist* does mean different things to different people, yet it is the term that automatically occurs to many who read Rokeya's work now." By reversing the gender roles of Bengali Muslim society so that women take charge of public affairs while men are sequestered in their houses, Hossain satirizes the system of purdah that confined and controlled women in Indian society. She also speculates about the ways in which a feminine society would differ from a masculine one, especially in environmental and educational practices and in the marriage laws. Jahan describes her edition of "Sultana's Dream" as one that "retains the style of Rokeya's early-twentieth-century, Bangla-influenced English." Jahan normalized capitalization, spelling, and punctuation to contemporary U.S. standards.

All notes are the editors' unless otherwise indicated.

[1] **Darjeeling:** A resort city in northwest Bengal in the foothills of the Himalayas.

enjoy a shower [or] bath whenever she liked, by simply removing the roof (which was like the lid of a box) and turning on the tap of the shower pipe.

"You are a lucky people!" ejaculated I. "You know no want. What is your religion, may I ask?"

"Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful. If any person lies, she or he is . . ."

"Punished with death?"

"No, not with death. We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God—especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again."

"Is an offender never forgiven?"

"Yes, if that person repents sincerely."

"Are you not allowed to see any man, except your own relations?"

"No one except sacred relations."

"Our circle of sacred relations is very limited, even first cousins are not sacred."

"But ours is very large; a distant cousin is as sacred as a brother."

"That is very good. I see Purity itself reigns over your land. I should like to see the good Queen, who is so sagacious and farsighted and who has made all these rules."

"All right," said Sister Sara.

Then she screwed a couple of seats onto a square piece of plank. To this plank she attached two smooth and well-polished balls. When I asked her what the balls were for, she said they were hydrogen balls and they were used to overcome the force of gravity. The balls were of different capacities, to be used according to the different weights desired to be overcome. She then fastened to the air-car two winglike blades, which, she said, were worked by electricity. After we were comfortably seated she touched a knob and the blades began to whirl, moving faster and faster every moment. At first we were raised to the height of about six or seven feet and then off we flew. And before I could realize that we had commenced moving, we reached the garden of the Queen.

My friend lowered the air-car by reversing the action of the machine, and when the car touched the ground the machine was stopped and we got out.

I had seen from the air-car the Queen walking on a garden path with her little daughter (who was four years old) and her maids of honor.

"Hallo! you here!" cried the Queen, addressing Sister Sara. I was introduced to Her Royal Highness and was received by her cordially without any ceremony.

I was very much delighted to make her acquaintance. In [the] course of the conversation I had with her, the Queen told me that she had no objection to permitting her subjects to trade with other countries. "But," she continued, "no trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us. Men, we find, are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them. We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousandfold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor,[6]

[6] **Koh-i-Noor:** Meaning "mountain of light," this is the name of a large and exceptionally brilliant diamond in the possession of the Mughal rulers of India, currently part of the British crown jewels; a symbol of great wealth. [Jahan's note.]

nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne.[7] We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems [that] Nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy Nature's gifts as much as we can."

After taking leave of the Queen, I visited the famous universities, and was shown over some of their factories, laboratories, and observatories.

After visiting the above places of interest, we got again into the air-car, but as soon as it began moving I somehow slipped down and the fall startled me out of my dream. And on opening my eyes, I found myself in my own bedroom still lounging in the easy chair!

[7] **Peacock Throne:** A famous jewel-encrusted throne built for the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who was responsible for the Taj Mahal. The throne was carried away from Delhi by the Persian invader Nadir Shah. Its current location is the cause of much speculation. Many think that one of the thrones displayed in the Istanbul Museum is the Peacock Throne. It is a longstanding Indian symbol of royal power and splendor. [Jahan's note.]

Lu Xun

b. China, 1881–1936

Lu Xun, the pen name of Zhou Shuren, was born into comfortable circumstances and expected to become an educated member of the professional classes. He first challenged those expectations when he turned his back on a career in the civil service and left China to study medicine in Japan. Once trained as a surgeon, however, he realized that what he wished to cure most was the backward condition of the Chinese people, not merely their bodily illnesses. "The most important thing," he wrote, "was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to that end, I decided to promote a literary movement." Creating a new school of writing called CRITICAL REALISM[1] that examined social tendencies through the actions of realistic characters, Lu Xun's writing was marked by a tough-mindedness that exposed those within China who prevented social progress. Lu Xun was a fierce opponent of the conventional Chinese morality that was handed down to each new generation through the doctrines of CONFUCIANISM, which stresses obedience, reverence for the past, and constricting rules of acceptable behavior. Confucianism, he said, had "cannibalized" China. Although he died

loo-SHWEN

My themes were usually the unfortunates of this abnormal society. My aim was to expose the disease and draw attention to it so that it might be cured.

– Lu Xun

[1] **critical realism:** The idea of critical realism became increasingly connected to Lu Xun's notion of revolution. In an address to the League of Left-Wing Writers (1930), a group he had helped to form, Lu Xun stated: "Revolution is a bitter thing, mixed with filth and blood, not as lovely or perfect as poets think. Of course there is destruction in a revolution, but construction is even more necessary to it; and while destruction is straightforward, construction is troublesome."

mow-dzuh-DOHNG



Portrait of Lu Xun, c. 1900
The writer Lu Xun was revered by Mao Zedong and the Communists. (© Bettmann / CORBIS)

before Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party[2] seized control of the country after World War II, Lu Xun was recognized by the Communist leader as the spiritual father of the Chinese Revolution.

A Revolutionary Life. While a medical student in Japan, Lu Xun came across a photograph from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. The picture showed a Chinese prisoner about to be beheaded by the Japanese surrounded by a group of Chinese who appeared indifferent to the fate of their countryman. Lu Xun decided to challenge the apathy of the Chinese by returning home and creating a movement to win the youth of China to the cause of social change, starting the literary journal *New Youth* and working as a teacher. His first short story, "Diary of a Madman" (1918), is a scathing attack on what Lu Xun saw as a cannibalistic society that was devouring itself. Considered the first work of modern Chinese literature, it was written in vernacular and colloquial Chinese rather than in the usual literary language. The "madman" who narrates the story is obsessed by the growing paranoia that he lives in a society of cannibals. "In ancient times," he writes in an early entry in his diary, "as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up but my history book has no chronology, and scrawled over each page are the words 'virtue' and 'morality.' Since I could not sleep anyway, I read hard half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with two words—'Eat People.'" As his "dementia" grows, the madman realizes that cannibalism is not just a thing of the past. The disease has been passed down from father to son for four thousand years. By the end of the diary, he sees only one glimmer of hope: "Perhaps there are still children who have not eaten men? Save the children." This hope was also Lu Xun's revolutionary program for China and the aim of his literary work.

jahng-kigh-SHEK
gwoh-min-DAHNG

From 1920 to 1926 Lu Xun worked in the anti-imperialist movement in Beijing (Peking), and in 1927 he moved to Canton, then a seat of revolutionary activity. After the coup d'état of **Chiang Kai-shek** and his **Kuomintang** army[3] later that year, Lu Xun retreated to Shanghai, where he lived his last ten years fighting the Japanese imperialists on the one hand and Chiang Kai-shek's rightist government on the other. He organized the League of Left-Wing Writers and wrote more than six hundred essays under many pen names while dodging political repression. Though encouraged by the successes of the Chinese Communists, he never joined the Communist Party. He died of tuberculosis in Shanghai in 1936.

[2] **Mao . . . Party:** Mao Zedong (1893–1976) was a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party (1921). After breaking with the Kuomintang nationalists in 1927, Mao Zedong consolidated his authority against both the invading Japanese and the Kuomintang and ousted the Chinese nationalists in 1949.

[3] **Chiang . . . army:** Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) originally supported the separatist Chinese government of Sun Yat-sen in 1918, occupied the capital of Beijing in 1928, then lost ground to the Communist Party and was finally forced to withdraw with his army to the island of Taiwan in 1949.

Political Fiction. Lu Xun wrote many political essays, commentaries, literary sketches, and reminiscences, but his literary reputation is based on the twenty-six short stories that were published between 1918 and 1935 and gathered in three collections: *Call to Arms* (1922), *Wandering* (1925), and *Old Tales Retold* (1935). The recurrent theme in nearly all of the stories is the oppressive hold of the past on the present. Influenced by the work of European Realists, especially Nikolai Gogol and Maxim Gorky,[4] Lu Xun described his subject as "the unfortunates of this abnormal society. My aim was to expose the disease and draw attention to it so that it might be cured." In "The New Year's Sacrifice," for example, he shows how the feudal family system in China "murders" a woman who is treated as property and sold into two wretched marriages and who finally dies as an outcast beggar on New Year's day. The story's irony and bleak satire are characteristic of Lu Xun's work. In "Regret for the Past," he writes of two lovers who defy social rules by living together and rejecting established gender roles. The social rejection and financial hardship they suffer as a result of their defiance, however, destroys their love, drives them apart, and presages their deaths. Lu Xun's stories always lead to the conclusion that so destructive a culture has to be changed.

"The True Story of Ah Q." Lu Xun's fictional masterpiece, "The True Story of Ah Q," was written in 1921. In this cautionary tale, set in 1911, an old farmhand who has suffered bullying and persecution all his life and dreamed of deliverance at the hands of revolutionaries is charged with committing an act of common thievery and executed in the town square at the moment of liberation. The story is typically complex. It exposes the folly of the laborer himself, who cringes before authority and lives in a fantasy world, and the weakness of the old order in the subplot of the rich man who is robbed of his possessions. It also reveals the hypocrisy of the young "revolutionaries" who execute Ah Q to give the appearance of maintaining law and order. The opposing forces in prerevolutionary China are all here: a hapless individual out of touch with society; the old order, helpless to defend itself; and the new order about to be born—callow, superficial, as yet unable to do the right thing. "Ah Q" does not have a happy ending: It is a look at false notions of social revolution, and its irony and satire leave no group untouched.

Lu Xun was wont to use irony and satire to scrutinize the social conventions of China's past and the revolutionary excesses of his day, making it difficult for readers to identify the author's point of view in his work, hidden as it is behind the mask of the SATIRIST.[5] At the beginning of "The True Story of Ah Q," Lu Xun seems to be making fun of the narrator's obsessive attempt to find the proper literary name for the story and his

Regarded as a national hero and canonized by the Chinese Communi Party, Lu Xun has been revered as th intellectual source the Chinese Revol tion who preparec the ideological ground for Mao Zedong.

– DANIEL S. B critic, a

Lu Xun was the m leader in the Chin cultural revolutio He was not only a great writer but a great thinker and great revolu- tionist. . . . Lu Xu breached and stormed the ener citadel; on the cu tural front he wa bravest and most correct, the firme the most loyal, a the most ardent national hero, a without parallel i our history.

– MAO ZE

[4] **Gogol . . . Gorky:** The Russian writers Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), author of "The Overcoat" (1842) and *Dead Souls* (1842), and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), author of *The Lower Depths* (1902) and *Mother* (1907).

[5] **mask of the satirist:** Satirists often write through the personae of narrators, like Gulliver in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, who obscure the author's point of view from the reader.

WWW For links to more information about Lu Xun, a quiz on "The True Story of Ah Q," and more on the culture and content of twentieth-century China, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

pedantic references to seemingly meaningless episodes in Chinese history. Indeed, for the first half of the story, the narrator's straight-faced depiction of the adventures of Ah Q makes comedy of the "hero," who is for the most part a fool. In the second half of the story, however, the tone becomes less comic as the serious consequences of Ah Q's foolishness are revealed. The society's power to devour turns comedy into pathos. Unaware of the real forces that may doom him whatever his actions, Ah Q has no idea what is about to happen to him, and his flights of equivocation, self-deception, and bravado only hasten his fate.

■ CONNECTIONS

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 428; Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 1023; Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (Book 5). Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, the aristocrats in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and Achebe's Okonkwo, Ah Q is a victim of historical forces largely beyond his comprehension. Identify the historical changes that undo the characters in each of these works. What is the outcome of the characters' failure to understand their situations? Is it tragic? Comic? Pathetic?

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4); Voltaire, *Candide* (Book 4). Like Swift's Gulliver and Voltaire's Candide, Ah Q is naive and gullible. His naiveté highlights the cruelty of the social forces that oppress and eventually kill him. The positive social vision that Swift and Voltaire hold in opposition to the societies they satirize is more visible, implicitly at least, than that of Lu Xun. What alternative does each satirist offer to the social ills he attacks? How is it suggested in each work?

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* (Book 1). Ah Q is an example of the type of protagonist sometimes called an "anti-hero." Although his story broadly follows a tragic plot that ends with his execution, he is not noble and has no largeness of spirit. Compare Ah Q with a tragic hero like Oedipus. What about Ah Q's story might be considered tragic? Is its overall effect cathartic?

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■ PRONUNCIATION

Ah Gui: ah-GWAY
Bao Si: bow-SUH
Chen Duxiu: chun-doo-SHYOO
Chiang Kai-shek: jahng-kigh-SHEK
Chong Zhen: chohng-JUN
Da Ji: dah-JEE
Diao Chan: dyow-CHAHN
Dong Zhuo: dohng-JWOH
Fu Xi: foo-SHEE
Kuomintang: gwoh-min-DAHNG, kwoh-min-TAHNG
Lu Xun: loo-SHWEN
Mao Zedong: mow-dzuh-DOHNG

Qian: chee-EN
Qing: CHING
Shaoxing: show-SHING
Tianshui: tyen-SHWAY
Xuan De, Xuan Tong: shwen-DUH, shwen-TOHNG
Weizhuang: way-JWAHNG
Zhang: JAHNG
Zhao, Zhao Baiyan, Zhao Sichen: JOW, jow-bah-YAN, jow-suh-CHUN
Zhou: JOH
Zi You Dang: dzuh-yoh-DAHNG
Zou: DZOH
Zuo Zhuan: dzwoh-JWEN

The True Story of Ah Q

Translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang

Chapter 1

Introduction

For several years now I have been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q. But while wanting to write I was in some trepidation too, which goes to show that I am not one of those who achieve glory by writing; for an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man, the man becoming known to posterity through the writing and the writing known to posterity through the man—until finally it is not clear who is making whom known. But in the end, as though possessed by some fiend, I always came back to the idea of writing the story of Ah Q.

And yet no sooner had I taken up my pen than I became conscious of tremendous difficulties in writing this far-from-immortal work. The first was the question of what to call it. Confucius said, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring

"The True Story of Ah Q." Written in 1921 and collected in the volume *Call to Arms* (1922), this story takes place a decade earlier, in 1911, at the time of the revolution in China that overthrew the Manchu dynasty and installed a republic under Sun Yat-sen. The story can be taken as a parable about the diseased condition of China at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ah Q, representing China, is incapable of understanding his situation or taking any responsibility for it. On the contrary, he interprets every defeat as a victory and is convinced of his superiority relative to everyone else. Finally, his delusions entangle him in a revolution and lead to his destruction. Lu Xun's harsh satire, intended to motivate his readers to want to change China, combines an ironic narration that mocks rule-bound Confucianism with a "hero" who values nothing except his own narrow and immediate self-interest in a black comedy that ends up with the protagonist's execution. No characters in the story offer hope for a better society. The rich are interested only in maintaining their privileged position, the revolutionaries are out to prove they are in control and can ensure law and order, and Ah Q never awakens.

A note on the translation: The translation is by Xianyi and Gladys Yang, who have translated many of Lu Xun's stories. All notes are the editors'.

tram, in which they were the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. Leaning comfortably back in their seats they canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection that these were not at all bad, for the jobs they had got, which so far they had never really discussed with each other, were all three admirable and likely to lead to better things later on. The greatest immediate improvement in their condition would of course arise from moving to another house; they wanted to take a smaller and cheaper but also better situated and more easily run apartment than the one they had, which Gregor had selected. While they were thus conversing, it struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body.

Tanizaki Junichiro

B. Japan, 1886–1965

tah-nee-ZAH-kee
joo-nee-CHEE-roh

Tanizaki Junichiro is one of modern Japan's most prolific and acclaimed writers, rivaling in popularity and reputation Nobel Prize–winning writer Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972) (p. 659), a contemporary of his, and the younger Japanese novelist Mishima Yukio (1925–1970). Beginning his writing career in 1909 with the publication of a one-act play, Tanizaki achieved notoriety a year later with "The Tattooer," the story of a tattoo artist obsessed with a desire to cover the entire body of a beautiful young woman with his work. This piece anticipates the exoticism, decadence, sexual tension, fascination with the past, and quest for the beautiful that recur throughout Tanizaki's writings. His work exercised a profound influence on Japanese writing in the twentieth century and in 1949 earned him the Imperial Culture Prize, the highest official sanction for a writer's work given in Japan, and in 1964 an honorary membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

WWW For links to more information about Tanizaki, a quiz on "Aguri," and for information on the culture and context of Japan in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

Early Influences. Tanizaki Junichiro was born in 1886 in Tokyo and raised in the old merchant quarter. During Tanizaki's childhood, his father struggled to keep up the once-prosperous family's social position, attempting several business enterprises and intermittently relying on Tanizaki's maternal grandfather's printing business for support. With his mother, a woman recognized for her beauty and accustomed to the finer things in life, Tanizaki attended Kabuki theater,[1] where he developed the keen sensitivity and love for music, spectacle, and drama that characterize his work. A frequenter of nearby book shops, Tanizaki cultivated his interest in heroic tales of the samurai, even as his mother nurtured his appreciation for handmade paper and fine fabrics. Perhaps fittingly, his fiction features characters who despite their mastery of creating appearances do not measure up to their nobler ambitions.

Because of financial difficulties, in 1910 Tanizaki left the Tokyo Imperial University, where he had been studying Japanese literature. At the time, Tanizaki was fascinated with the West, and his early work shows the influence of Western writers, including the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), the American fiction writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), and the Irish satirist Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), whose *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Tanizaki translated into Japanese. Setting up household in Yokohama, a cosmopolitan port city south of Tokyo, Tanizaki sought out European ideas and influences and even built a Western-style house in the foreign enclave of the city. There he continued his writing and produced several screenplays for the developing Japanese movie industry.

Kyoto Culture. After the great earthquake of 1923 that devastated parts of Tokyo and Yokohama, Tanizaki moved to Ashihi in the Kyoto-Osaka region. In this more traditional region of Japan, Tanizaki shrugged off his Euro-American ways and began seriously to explore the history and culture of his homeland. In the novel *A Fool's Love* (*Chijin no Ai*, 1924), written just after his move to Ashihi, Tanizaki self-consciously parodied and criticized his and his generation's infatuation with the West, particularly with American culture. As in Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), as a result of mimicking Western ways, the protagonist in *A Fool's Love* is shown to be a hollow man, emptied of identity and caught up in a self-destructive attraction to a simplified version of the West. The novel also continues Tanizaki's exploration of the destructiveness of sexuality.

The move to Ashihi marked a turning point for Tanizaki, and in his later fiction, such as *Some Prefer Nettles* (*Tade Kuu Mushi*, 1928–29), the Kyoto region would be identified with traditional Japanese culture while Tokyo and its environs would symbolize Japan under the influence of the West. To further his reorientation to his country's indigenous traditions and history, Tanizaki for several years undertook the overwhelming task of translating the classic Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji* (see Book 2) into modern Japanese, making the text accessible to his contemporaries. Moreover, many of his novels and short stories, such as "A Blind Man's Tale" and "A Portrait of Shunkin," turn on themes drawn from Japanese history and are remarkable for their display of historical scholarship as well as their creativity. The latter story takes place during the Japanese

Tanizaki's reputatio has at times been controversial, owing to his preoccupatior with the bizarre and with sexual aberration. He never forgo the novelist's duty t entertain, but his work is a serious exploration of a psyche tormented b a dual vision of woman as both devi and nurturer, and forced also to choos between the reticence of Japanese culture and the harc brashness of the West.

– Phillip Tudc Harries, litera critic, 19

p. 1146

[1] Kabuki theater: A form of popular Japanese drama using only male actors that is aimed primarily at the middle classes; Kabuki developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries parallel to *joruri*, or puppet theater, which often shares the same plots and stories and even the same plays.

Tanizaki Junichiro . . . remains for many the most sophisticated and satisfying Japanese novelist of this century. A highly skilled storyteller with an aristocratic irony that brings wit and perspective to every subject he touches, Tanizaki reveals in virtually every work an ability to look into past and present alike and create excitement, and, often, erotic suspense.

– THOMAS RIMER, literary critic and historian, 1999

civil war of the sixteenth century that culminated in the rise of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first shogun of the newly united Japan after whom the TOKUGAWA, or EDO, era (1603–1867) is named.[2] Following the events in the life of a servant named Yaichi, Tanizaki re-creates the chaotic atmosphere of war and the shifting alliances that characterized sixteenth-century Japan. Like Mori Ogai before him (see Book 5) and Kawabata Yasunari, Tanizaki increasingly was drawn in his work to the historical past, which became for each of these writers a sanctuary for the values of order and beauty.

In one of the great essays of twentieth-century literature, "In Praise of Shadows" ("In'ei Raisan," 1933), Tanizaki describes his project as a recuperation of the "world of shadows"—that is, the cultivated traditions of the past—that were giving way to the desire to emulate the West:

> No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind. But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the color it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied. I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing. In the mansion called literature I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly, I would strip away the useless decoration. I do not ask that this be done everywhere, but perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them.

In this brilliant essay, the dark contours of *Nō* drama, the shadowed interiors of Japanese houses, the soft light of the candle lantern—all things that evoke the subtle tones of Japanese culture—are contrasted with the bewildering glare of the electric lamp that illuminates in the West everything from the commode to the low ceilings of the Western-style Miyaho Hotel in Kyoto. Thus, the shadow world is that of the receding traditions of old Japan, while the overly illuminated spaces of contemporary Japan are those abandoned to Westernization.

Ties to Tradition. In 1930, in what would be only halfway through his long career, a "Complete Works" of Tanizaki appeared. But the writer had just begun his prolific exploration of numerous genres—short stories, novels, plays, screenplays, poetry, essays, and criticism—that today fill twenty-eight volumes. Twice married and divorced, in 1935 Tanizaki

[2]Tokugawa era (1603–1867): Period of Japanese history named after Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), who was named *shogun* in 1603; also known as the Edo era, named after the capital (now Tokyo). The early Tokugawa period was one of international isolation, political stability, and nation building when the middle classes rose to power and influence; it was a period of great literary and cultural growth, particularly among popular art forms—such as Kabuki and *joruri* (puppet) theater, the popular novel, and colored woodblock art—produced for the flourishing middle-class audiences. The era ended in 1867 when a group of resentful samurai restored imperial rule under the teenage emperor Meiji (r. 1867–1912) and opened Japan to Western trade and cultural exchange.

wed Mrs. Nezu Matsuko, the recently widowed daughter of a rich merchant from Osaka. With Matsuko, the now-famous writer found a lifelong companion, whose sense of custom and traditional values further strengthened his own. During World War II, Tanizaki wrote *The Makioka Sisters* (*Sasameyuki*, 1943–48), a novel of manners that was at first banned in Japan as an impediment to the war effort. At the end of the war, however, he received the prestigious Imperial Culture Prize in part for his novel, which traces the history of four sisters living in Osaka and clinging to outmoded ways as they attempt to find a husband for the second sister, Yukiko. The work marked a way of life that was passing quickly out of existence in the war years.

OH-sah-kah

Postwar Novels. Tanizaki's postwar novels return to the realm of the senses, to the shadowy side of fantasy and sadomasochism that he had first broached in "The Tattooer." *The Key* (*Kagi*, 1956) and *Diary of a Mad Old Man* (*Futen Rojin Nikki*, 1961–62), his last completed novel, are both written in the form of a diary and record the sexual escapades of an aging professor and his wife, and those of a seventy-year-old man. In both novels, as in "Aguri," Western commodities and fashions heighten eroticism. Also as in "Aguri," the world of appearances is confused with fact, and imagined fictions influence life. Picking up the themes of his youthful writing, Tanizaki rounds out his oeuvre with an ironic celebration of the power of imagination and desire to construct the beautiful, however idiosyncratic or perverse it may appear to others. His explorations of sexuality place him in the company of Western writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Milan Kundera, whose **"The Hitchhiking Game"** similarly engages in playing games as a way to explore the psychological dimensions of its characters and their relationships. After completing the *Diary of a Mad Old Man*, Tanizaki continued to write but did not complete another novel before his death in Yugawara, south of Tokyo, on July 30, 1965.

ah-GOO-ree

p. 1005

■ CONNECTIONS

Emilia Pardo Bazán, "The Revolver" (Book 5); Milan Kundera, "The Hitchhiking Game," p. 1005. Tanizaki's "Aguri" presents a couple whose game playing upsets the tenuous balance of an already strained relationship. Similarly, Kundera's story recounts the erotically charged adventure of a couple involved in a game that leads them into confusion and then to some serious self-reflection about the meaning and nature of their relationship as well as their own identities. Pardo Bazán's story depicts from a feminist perspective the consequences of game playing as a means of controlling a partner. Taken together, what do these stories suggest about the stability and formation of identity in the modern world? How do they negotiate or define the boundary between art and life?

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 486. As in "Aguri," Tanizaki's fiction often concerns itself with the erosion of traditional Japanese values in the modern world, often figured by a superficial and misguided fascination with Western fashion, movies, architecture, and the like. Eliot's *The Waste Land* similarly presents a picture of London uprooted from its traditional moorings. In what ways do Eliot and Tanizaki share the same concerns about the loss of meaning or value in the modern world?

. . . it is likely that if any one writer of the period will stand the test of time and be accepted as a figure of world stature, it will be Tanizaki.

– DONALD KEENE, critic and literary historian, 1984

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, p. 266. Writers in the early twentieth century were interested in such psychological conditions as neurosis, narcissism, schizophrenia, obsession, and compulsion. Tanizaki's early fiction often deals with sexual obsession, and "Aguri" explores what might be called the erotic economy of the beautiful: that is, the difference between love and desire, between the beautiful object and the fetish. Similarly, in *Death in Venice*, Gustave Aschenbach's attraction to Tadzio blurs the distinction between erotic desire and aesthetic appreciation, and the novella explores the psychology of obsession as Aschenbach both recoils from and is consumed by his desire. Compare Okada and Aschenbach in terms of their narcissism, or egocentricity, and obsessive behavior. What is each author's purpose in creating such characters?

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PRONUNCIATION

Aguri: ah-GOO-ree
Okada: oh-KAH-dah
Osaka: OH-sah-kah, oh-SAH-kah
Tanizaki Junichiro: tah-nee-ZAH-kee joo-nee-CHEE-roh

Aguri

Translated by Howard Hibbert

"Getting a bit thinner, aren't you? Is anything wrong? You're not looking well these days. . . ."

That was what his friend T. had said in passing when they happened to meet him along the Ginza a little while ago. It reminded Okada that he had spent last night with Aguri too, and he felt more fatigued than ever. Of course T. could scarcely have been teasing him about *that*—his relations with Aguri were too well known, there was nothing unusual about being seen strolling on the Ginza in downtown Tokyo with her. But to Okada, with his taut-stretched nerves and his vanity, T.'s remark was disturbing. Everyone he met said he was "getting thinner"—he had worried about it himself for over a year. In the last six months you could almost see the change from one day to the next, as his fine rich flesh slowly melted away. He'd got into the habit of furtively examining his body in the mirror whenever he took a bath, to see how emaciated it was becoming, but by now he was afraid to look. In the past (until a year or two ago, at least) people said he had a feminine sort of figure. He had rather prided himself on it. "The way I'm built makes you think of a woman, doesn't it?" he used to say archly to his friends at the bathhouse. "Don't get any funny ideas!" But now . . .

It was from the waist down that his body had seemed most feminine. He remembered often standing before a mirror entranced by his own reflection, running his hand lovingly over his plump white buttocks, as well rounded as a young girl's. His thighs and calves were almost *too* bulging, but it had delighted him to see how fat they looked—the legs of a chophouse waitress—alongside Aguri's slim ones. She was only fourteen then, and her legs were as slender and straight as those of any Western girl: Stretched out beside his in the bath, they looked more beautiful than ever, which pleased him as much as it did Aguri. She was a tomboy, and used to push him over on his back and sit on him, or walk over him, or trample on his thighs as if she were flattening a lump of dough. . . . But now what miserable skinny legs he had! His knees and ankles had been nicely dimpled, but for some time now the bones had stuck out pathetically, you could see them moving under the skin. The exposed blood vessels looked like earthworms. His buttocks were flattening out too: When he sat on something hard it felt as if a pair of boards had been clapped together. Yet it was only lately that his ribs began to show: One by one they had come into sharp relief, from the bottom up, till now you could see the whole skeleton of his chest so distinctly that it made a somewhat grim anatomy lesson. He was such a heavy eater that his little round belly had seemed safe enough, but even *that* was gradually shriveling—at this rate, you'd soon be able to make out his inner organs! Next to his legs, he had prided himself on his smooth "feminine" arms; at the slightest excuse he rolled up his sleeves to show them off. Women admired and envied them, and he used to joke with his girl friends about it. Now, even to the fondest eye, they didn't look at all feminine—or masculine either for that matter. They weren't so much human arms as two sticks of wood. Two pencils hanging down beside his body. All the little hollows between one bone and the next were deepening, the flesh dwindling away. How much longer can I go on losing weight like this? he asked himself. It's amazing that I can still get around at all, when I'm so horribly emaciated! He felt grateful to be alive, but also a little terrified. . . .

These thoughts were so unnerving that Okada had a sudden attack of giddiness. There was a heavy, numbing sensation in the back of his head; he felt as if his knees were shaking and his legs buckling under him, as if he were being knocked over backward. No doubt the state of his nerves had something to do with it, but he knew very well that it came from long overindulgence, sexual and otherwise—as did his diabetes, which caused some of his symptoms. There was no use feeling sorry now, but he *did* regret having to pay for it so soon, and pay, moreover, by the deterioration of his good looks, his proudest possession. I'm still in my thirties, he thought. I

"Aguri." First published in 1922, this work is the story of both Okada, a man in his thirties suffering from poor health due in part to overindulgence—"sexual and otherwise"—and the title character, Aguri, a woman half his age. Compelled by sexual desire, Okada lives out his fantasy of seeing Aguri dressed in Western clothes. Aguri becomes a symbol, in turn, of the Japanese desire for Euro-American culture, in this case a near-fatal attraction.

don't see why my health has to fail so badly. . . . He wanted to cry and stamp his feet in rage.

"Wait a minute—look at that ring! An aquamarine, isn't it? I wonder how it would look on me."

Aguri had stopped short and tugged at his sleeve; she was peering into a Ginza show window. As she spoke she waved the back of her hand under Okada's nose, flexing and extending her fingers. Her long slender fingers—so soft they seemed made only for pleasure—gleamed in the bright May afternoon sunlight with an especially seductive charm. Once in Nanking he had looked at a singsong girl's fingers resting gracefully on the table like the petals of some exquisite hothouse flower, and thought there could be no more delicate beauty than a Chinese woman's hands. But Aguri's hands were only a little larger, only a little more like those of an ordinary human being. If the singsong girl's hands were hothouse flowers, hers were fresh young wildflowers: The fact that they were not so artificial only made them more appealing. How pretty a bouquet of flowers with petals like these would be. . . .

"What do you think? Would it look nice?" She poised her fingertips on the railing in front of the window, pressed them back in the half-moon curve of a dancer's gesture, and stared at them as if she had lost all interest in the ring.

Okada mumbled something in reply but forgot it immediately. He was staring at her hands too, at the beautiful hands he knew so well. . . . Several years had passed since he began playing with those delicious morsels of flesh: squeezing them in his palms like clay, putting them inside his clothes like a pocket warmer, or in his mouth, under his arm, under his chin. But while he was steadily aging, her mysterious hands looked younger every year. When Aguri was only fourteen they seemed yellow and dry, with tiny wrinkles, but now at seventeen the skin was white and smooth, and yet even on the coldest day so sleek you'd think the oil would cloud the gold band of her ring. Childish little hands, as tender as a baby's and as voluptuous as a whore's—how fresh and youthful they were, always restlessly seeking pleasure! . . . But why had his health failed like this? Just to look at her hands made him think of all they had provoked him to, all that went on in those secret rooms where they met; and his head ached from the potent stimulus. . . . As he kept his eyes fixed on them, he began to think of the rest of her body. Here in broad daylight on the crowded Ginza he saw her naked shoulders . . . her breasts . . . her belly . . . buttocks . . . legs . . . one by one all the parts of her body came floating up before his eyes with frightening clarity in queer, undulating shapes. And he felt crushed under the solid weight of her hundred and fifteen or twenty pounds. . . . For a moment Okada thought he was going to faint—his head was reeling, he seemed on the verge of falling. . . . Idiot! Suddenly he drove away his fantasies, steadied his tottering legs. . . .

"Well, are we going shopping?"

"All right."

They began walking toward Shimbashi Station. . . . Now they were off to Yokohama.

Today Aguri must be happy, he thought, I'll be buying her a whole new outfit. You'll find the right things for yourself in the foreign shops of Yokohama, he had told her; in Arthur Bond's and Lane Crawford, and that Indian jeweler, and the Chinese dressmaker. . . . You're the exotic type of beauty; Japanese kimonos cost more than they're worth, and they're not becoming to you. Notice the Western and the Chinese ladies: They know how to set off their faces and figures to advantage, and without spending too much money at it. You ought to do the same from now on. . . . And so Aguri had been looking forward to today. As she walks along, breathing a little heavily in the early-summer heat, her white skin damp with sweat under the heavy flannel kimono that hampers her long, youthful limbs, she imagines herself shedding these "unbecoming" clothes, fixing jewels on her ears, hanging a necklace around her throat, slipping into a near-transparent blouse of rustling silk or cambric, swaying elegantly on tiptoes in fragile high-heeled shoes. . . . She sees herself looking like the Western ladies who pass them on the street. Whenever one of them comes long Aguri studies her from head to toe, following her with her eyes and badgering him with questions about how he likes that hat, or that necklace, or whatever.

But Okada shared her preoccupation. All the smart young foreign ladies made him think of an Aguri transfigured by Western clothes. . . . I'd like to buy that for you, he thought; and this too. . . . Yet why couldn't he be a little more cheerful? Later on they would play their enchanting game together. It was a clear day with a refreshing breeze, a fine May afternoon for any kind of outing . . . for dressing her up in airy new garments, grooming her like a beloved pet, and then taking her on the train in search of a delightful hiding place. Somewhere with a balcony overlooking the blue sea, or a room at a hot-spring resort where the young leaves of the forest glisten beyond glass doors, or else a gloomy, out-of-the-way hotel in the foreign quarter. And there the game would begin, the enchanting game that he was always dreaming of, that gave him his only reason for living. . . . Then she would stretch herself out like a leopard. A leopard in necklace and earrings. A leopard brought up as a house pet, knowing exactly how to please its master, but one whose occasional flashes of ferocity made its master cringe. Frisking, scratching, striking, pouncing on him—finally ripping and tearing him to shreds, and trying to suck the marrow out of his bones. . . . A deadly game! The mere thought of it had an ecstatic lure for him. He found himself trembling with excitement. Once again his head was swimming, he thought he was going to faint. . . . He wondered if he might be dying, now at last, aged thirty-four, collapsing here in the street. . . .

"Oh, are you dead? How tiresome!" Aguri glances absent-mindedly at the corpse lying at her feet. The two-o'clock sun beats down on it, casting dark shadows in the hollows of its sunken cheeks. . . . If he *had* to die he might have waited half a day longer, till we finished our shopping. . . . Aguri clicks her tongue in annoyance. I don't want to get mixed up in this if I can help it, she thinks, but I suppose I can't just leave him here. And there are hundreds of yen in his pocket. That money was *mine*—he might at least have willed it to me before he died. The poor fool was so crazy about me he couldn't possibly resent it if I take the money and buy anything I please, or flirt with any man I please. He knew I was fickle—he even seemed to enjoy it, sometimes. . . . As she makes excuses to herself Aguri extracts the money from his pocket. If he tries to haunt me I won't be afraid of *him*—he'll listen to me whether he's alive or dead. I'll have my way. . . .

"Look, Mr. Ghost! I bought this wonderful ring with your money. I bought this beautiful lace-trimmed skirt. And see!" (She pulls up her skirt to show her legs.) "See these legs you're so fond of, these gorgeous legs? I bought a pair of white silk stockings, and pink garters too—all with your money! Don't you think I have good taste? Don't you think I look angelic? Although you're dead I'm wearing the right clothes for me, just the way you wanted, and I'm having a marvelous time! I'm so happy, really happy! You must be happy too, for having given me all this. Your dreams have come true in me, now that I'm so beautiful, so full of life! Well, Mr. Ghost, my poor love-struck Mr. Ghost who can't rest in peace—how about a smile?"

Then I'll hug that cold corpse as hard as I can, hug it till his bones crack, and he screams: "Stop! I can't bear any more!" If he doesn't give in, I'll find a way to seduce him. I'll love him till his withered skin is torn to shreds, till his last drop of blood is squeezed out, till his dry bones fall apart. Then even a ghost ought to feel satisfied. . . .

"What's the matter? Is something on your mind?"

"Uh-h . . ." Okada began mumbling under his breath.

They looked as if they were having a pleasant walk together—it ought to have been extremely pleasant—and yet he couldn't share her gaiety. One sad thought after another welled up, and he felt exhausted even before they began their game. It's only nerves, he had told himself; nothing serious, I'll get over it as soon as I go outside. That was how he had talked himself into coming, but he'd been wrong. It wasn't nerves alone: His arms and legs were so tired they were ready to drop off, and his joints creaked as he walked. Sometimes being tired was a mild, rather enjoyable sensation, but when it got this bad it might be a dangerous symptom. At this very moment, all unknown to him, wasn't his system being invaded by some grave disease? Wasn't he staggering along letting the disease take its own course till it overwhelmed him? Better to collapse right away than be so ghastly tired! He'd like to sink down into a soft bed. Maybe his health had demanded it long ago. Any doctor would be alarmed and say: "Why in heaven's name are you out walking in *your* condition? You belong in bed—it's no wonder you're dizzy!"

The thought left Okada feeling more exhausted than ever; walking became an even greater effort. On the Ginza sidewalk—that dry, stony surface he so much enjoyed striding over when he was well—every step sent a shock of pain vibrating up from his heel to the top of his head. First of all, his feet were cramped by these tan box-calf shoes that compressed them in a narrow mold. Western clothes were intended for healthy, robust men: To anyone in a weakened condition they were quite insupportable. Around the waist, over the shoulders, under the arms, around the neck—every part of the body was pressed and squeezed by clasps and buttons and rubber and leather, layer over layer, as if you were strapped to a cross. And of course you had to put on stockings before the shoes, stretching them carefully up on your legs by garters. Then you put on a shirt, and then trousers, cinching them in with a buckle at the back till they cut into your waist and hanging them from your shoulders with suspenders. Your neck was choked in a close-fitting collar, over which you fastened a nooselike necktie, and stuck a pin in it. If a man is well filled out, the tighter you squeeze him, the more vigorous and bursting with vitality he seems; but a man who is only skin and bones can't stand that. The thought that he was wearing such appalling garments made Okada gasp for breath, made his arms and legs even wearier. It was only because these Western clothes held him together that he was able to keep on walking at all—but to think of stiffening a limp, helpless body, shackling it hand and foot, and driving it ahead with shouts of "Keep going! Don't you dare collapse!" It was enough to make a man want to cry. . . .

Suddenly Okada imagined his self-control giving way, imagined himself breaking down and sobbing. . . . This sprucely dressed middle-aged gentleman who was strolling along the Ginza until a moment ago, apparently out to enjoy the fine weather with the young lady at his side, a gentleman who looks as if he might be the young lady's uncle—all at once screws up his face into a dreadful shape and begins to bawl like a child! He stops there in the street and pesters her to carry him. "*Please,* Aguri! I can't go another step! Carry me piggyback!"

"What's wrong with you?" says Aguri sharply, glaring at him like a stern auntie. "Stop acting like that! Everybody's looking at you!" . . . Probably she doesn't notice that he has gone mad: It's not unusual for her to see him in tears. This is the first time it's happened on the street, but when they're alone together he always cries like this. . . . How silly of him! she must be thinking. There's nothing for him to cry about in public—if he wants to cry I'll let him cry his heart out later! "Shh! Be quiet! You're embarrassing me!"

But Okada won't stop crying. At last he begins to kick and struggle, tearing off his necktie and collar and throwing them down. And then, dog-tired, panting for breath, he falls flat on the pavement. "I can't walk any more. . . . I'm sick . . .," he mutters, half delirious. "Get me out of these clothes and put me in something soft! Make a bed for me here, I don't care if it *is* in the street!"

Aguri is at her wit's end, so embarrassed her face is as red as fire. There is no escape—a huge crowd of people has swarmed around them under the blazing sun. A policeman turns up. . . . He questions Aguri in front of everyone. ("Who do you suppose she is?" people begin whispering to one another. "Some rich man's daughter?" "No, I don't think so." "An actress?") "What's the matter there?" the policeman asks Okada, not unkindly. He regards him as a lunatic. "How about getting up now, instead of sleeping in a place like this?"

"I won't! I won't! I'm sick, I tell you! How can I ever get up?" Still sobbing weakly, Okada shakes his head. . . .

He could see the spectacle vividly before his eyes. He felt as if he were actually sobbing. . . .

"Papa . . ." A faint voice is calling—a sweet little voice, not Aguri's. It is the voice of a chubby four-year-old girl in a printed muslin kimono, who beckons to him with her tiny hand. Behind her stands a woman whose hair is done up in a chignon; she looks like the child's mother. . . . "Teruko! Teruko! Here I am! . . . Ah, Osaki! Are you there too?" And then he sees his own mother, who died several years ago. She is gesturing eagerly and trying hard to tell him something, but she is too far away, a veil of mist hangs between them. . . . Yet he realizes that tears of loneliness and sorrow are streaming down her cheeks. . . .

I'm going to stop thinking sad thoughts like that, Okada told himself; thoughts about Mother, about Osaki and the child, about death. . . . Why did they weigh so

heavily on him? No doubt because of his poor health. Two or three years ago when he was well they wouldn't have seemed so overpowering, but now they combined with physical exhaustion to thicken and clog all his veins. And when he was sexually excited the clogging became more and more oppressive. . . : As he walked along in the bright May sunshine he felt himself isolated from the world around him: His sight was dimmed, his hearing faded, his mind turned darkly, obstinately in upon itself.

"If you have enough money left," Aguri was saying, "how about buying me a wrist watch?" They had just come to Shimbashi Station; perhaps she thought of it when she saw the big clock.

"They have good watches in Shanghai. I should have bought you one when I was there."

For a moment Okada's fancies flew off to China. . . . At Soochow, aboard a beautiful pleasure boat, being poled along a serene canal toward the soaring Tiger Hill Pagoda . . . Inside the boat two young lovers sit blissfully side by side like turtle-doves. . . . He and Aguri transformed into a Chinese gentleman and a singsong girl. . . .

Was he in love with Aguri? If anyone asked, of course he would answer "Yes." But at the thought of Aguri his mind became a pitch-dark room hung with black velvet curtains—a room like a conjurer's stage set—in the center of which stood the marble statue of a nude woman. Was that really Aguri? Surely the Aguri he loved was the living, breathing counterpart of that marble figure. This girl walking beside him now through the foreign shopping quarter of Yokohama—he could see the lines of her body through the loose flannel clothing that enveloped it, could picture to himself the statue of the "woman" under her kimono. He recalled each elegant trace of the chisel. Today he would adorn the statue with jewels and silks. He would strip off that shapeless, unbecoming kimono, reveal that naked "woman" for an instant, and then dress her in Western clothes: He would accentuate every curve and hollow, give her body a brilliant surface and lively flowing lines; he would fashion swelling contours, make her wrists, ankles, neck, all strikingly slender and graceful. Really, shopping to enhance the beauty of the woman you love ought to be like a dream come true.

A dream . . . There was indeed something dreamlike about walking along this quiet, almost deserted street lined with massive Western-style buildings, looking into show windows here and there. It wasn't garish, like the Ginza; even in daytime a hush lay over it. Could anyone be alive in these silent buildings, with their thick gray walls where the window glass glittered like fish eyes, reflecting the blue sky? It seemed more like a museum gallery than a street. And the merchandise displayed behind the glass on both sides was bright and colorful, with the fascinating, mysterious luster of a garden at the bottom of the sea.

A curio-shop sign in English caught his eye: ALL KINDS OF JAPANESE FINE ARTS: PAINTINGS, PORCELAINS, BRONZE STATUES. . . . And one that must have been for a Chinese tailor: MAN CHANG DRESS MAKER FOR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. . . . And also: JAMES BERGMAN JEWELLERY . . . RINGS, EARRINGS, NECKLACES. . . . E & B CO. FOREIGN DRY GOODS AND GROCERIES . . . LADY'S UNDERWEARS . . . DRAPERIES, TAPESTRIES, EMBROIDERIES. . . . Somehow the very ring of these words in his ear had the

heavy, solemn beauty of the sound of a piano. . . . Only an hour by streetcar from Tokyo, yet you felt as if you had arrived at some far-off place. And you hesitated to go inside these shops when you saw how lifeless they looked, their doors firmly shut. In these show windows—perhaps because they were meant for foreigners—goods were set out on display in a cold, formal arrangement well behind the glass, quite unlike the ingratiating clutter of the windows along the Ginza. There seemed to be no clerks or shop-boys at work; all kinds of luxuries were on display, but these dimly lit rooms were as gloomy as a Buddhist shrine. . . . Still, that made the goods within seem all the more curiously enticing.

Okada and Aguri went up and down the street several times: past a shoeshop, a milliner's shop, a jeweler, a furrier, a textile merchant. . . . If he handed over a little of his money, any of the things in these shops would cling fast to her white skin, coil around her lithe, graceful arms and legs, become a part of her. . . . European women's clothes weren't "things to wear"—they were a second layer of skin. They weren't merely wrapped over and around the body but dyed into its very surface like a kind of tattooed decoration. When he looked again, all the goods in the show windows seemed to be so many layers of Aguri's skin, flecked with color, with drops of blood. She ought to choose what she likes and make it part of herself. If you buy jade earrings, he wanted to tell her, think of yourself with beautiful green pendants growing from your earlobes. If you put on that squirrel coat, the one in the furrier's window, think of yourself as an animal with a velvety sleek coat of hair. If you buy the celadon-colored stockings hanging over there, the moment you pull them on, your legs will have a silken skin, warmed by your own coursing blood. If you slip into patent-leather shoes, the soft flesh of your heels will turn into glittering lacquer. My darling Aguri! All these were molded to the statue of woman which is you: blue, purple, crimson skins—all were formed to your body. It's *you* they are selling there, your outer skin is waiting to come to life. Why, when you have such superb things of your own, do you wrap yourself up in clothes like that baggy, shapeless kimono?

"Yes, sir. For the young lady? . . . Just what does she have in mind?"

A Japanese clerk had emerged out of the dark back room of the shop and was eying Aguri suspiciously. They had gone into a modest little dress shop because it seemed least forbidding: Not a very attractive one, to be sure, but there were glass-covered cases along both sides of the narrow room, and the cases were full of dresses. Blouses and skirts—women's breasts and hips—dangled overhead. There were low glass cases in the middle of the room, too, displaying petticoats, chemises, hosiery, corsets, and all manner of little lacy things. Nothing but cool, slippery, soft fabrics, literally softer than a woman's skin: delicately crinkled silk crepe, glossy white silk, fine satin. When Aguri realized that she would soon be clothed in these fabrics, like a mannequin, she seemed ashamed at being eyed by the clerk and shrank back shyly, losing all her usual vivaciousness. But her eyes were sparkling as if to say: "I want this, and that, and that. . . ."

"I don't really know what I'd like. . . ." She seemed puzzled and embarrassed. "What do *you* think?" she whispered to Okada, hiding behind him to avoid the clerk's gaze.

"Let me see now," the clerk spoke up briskly. "I imagine any of these would look

good on you." He spread out a white linen-like dress for her inspection. "How about this one? Just hold it up to yourself and look at it—you'll find a mirror over there."

Aguri went before the mirror and tucked the white garment under her chin, letting it hang down loosely. Eyes upturned, she stared at it with the glum look of a fretful child.

"How do you like it?" Okada asked.

"Mmm. Not bad."

"It doesn't seem to be linen, though. What's the material?"

"That's cotton voile, sir. It's a fresh, crisp kind of fabric, very pleasant to the touch."

"And the price?"

"Let's see. . . . Now this one . . ." The clerk turned toward the back room and called in a startlingly loud voice: "Say, how much is this cotton voile—forty-five yen?"

"It'll have to be altered," Okada said. "Can you do it today?"

"Today? Are you sailing tomorrow?"

"No, but we *are* rather in a hurry."

"Hey, how about it?" The clerk turned and shouted toward the back room again. "He says he wants it today—can you manage it? See if you can, will you?" Though a little rough-spoken, he seemed kind and good-natured. "We'll start right now, but it'll take at least two hours."

"That will be fine. We still need to buy shoes and a hat and the rest, and she'll want to change into the new things here. But what is she supposed to wear underneath? It's the first time she's ever had Western clothes."

"Don't worry, we have all those too—here's what you start with." He slipped a silk brassière out of a glass case. "Then you put this on over it, and then step into this and this, below. They come in a different style too, but there's no opening, so you have to take it off if you want to go to the toilet. That's why Westerners hold their water as long as they can. Now, this kind is more convenient: It has a button here, you see? Just unbutton it and you'll have no trouble! . . . The chemise is eight yen, the petticoat is about six yen—they're cheap compared with kimonos, but see what beautiful white silk they're made of! Please step over here and I'll take your measurements."

Through the flannel cloth the dimensions of the hidden form were measured; around her legs, under her arms, the leather tape was wound to investigate the bulk and shape of her body.

"How much is this woman worth?" Was that what the clerk was calculating? It seemed to Okada that he was having a price set on Aguri, that he was putting her on sale in a slave market.

About six o'clock that evening they came back to the dress shop with their other purchases: shoes, a hat, a pearl necklace, a pair of amethyst earrings. . . .

"Well, come in! Did you find some nice things?" The clerk greeted them in a breezy, familiar tone. "It's all ready! The fitting room is over here—just go in and change your clothes!"

Okada followed Aguri behind the screen, gently holding over one arm the soft, snowy garments. They came to a full-length mirror, and Aguri, still looking glum, slowly began to undo her sash. . . .

The statue of woman in Okada's mind stood naked before him. The fine silk snagged on his fingers as he helped apply it to her skin, going round and round the white figure, tying ribbons, fastening buttons and hooks. . . . Suddenly Aguri's face lit up with a radiant smile. Okada felt his head begin to swim. . . .

T. S. Eliot

B. United States, 1888–1965



T. S. Eliot, 1948
Eliot in his office at the Institute for Advanced Study.
(Hulton / Archive)

T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, the most notable twentieth-century poem in English, appeared in the November 1922 issue of the literary magazine *The Dial*. *The Waste Land* depicts the modern world as a devastated place whose land has lost its regenerative capacity, whose cities are sites of pollution and despair, and whose human relationships are empty and sterile, without moral or spiritual value. More than any other single work, it also reflects the disillusionment of American intellectuals, some of them European expatriates, with Western society at the end of World War I. Nonlinear in structure, fragmented in organization, and obscure in its references, the poem seemed destined for a limited audience; but after being augmented by notes by the author and supported by interpretive reviews and essays, it went on to establish itself as a monument of its age.

It is now common to identify the postwar period in Europe and America as the "wasteland," the spiritual and intellectual condition that promoted the spread of EXISTENTIALISM in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. In 1948, twenty-six years after the poem's publication, Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, and as Elizabeth Drew recounts, a symposium held to pay tribute to his influence "contained contributions from forty-seven writers from more than a dozen different countries, and hailed the poet-critic-dramatist as perhaps the most powerful literary influence in the civilized world of today." Eliot was like an entire literary movement in himself: a poet, an enormously popular lecturer on both sides of the Atlantic, a leading critic, a publisher of an influential literary magazine, and a director of a prominent publishing house in London.

Eliot came to symbolize the traditional and the conservative in religion, politics, and literature, but his poems are marvelously innovative and experimental. He was heavily influenced by the FRENCH SYMBOLISTS,[1]

[1] French Symbolists: Nineteenth-century French Symbolists Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), and Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) made use of symbols as a means of evoking the inner world of consciousness.

differential equations. The war, he knew, would finally take him, but for the time being he would not let himself think about it. He had stopped praying; instead, now, he waited. And as he waited, in his final year at the university, he fell in love with a classmate, a girl of seventeen, who one day told him that his wrists were like the wrists of a child, so small and delicate, and who admired his narrow waist and the cowlick that rose up like a bird's tail at the back of his head. She liked his quiet manner; she laughed at his freckles and bony legs. One evening, perhaps, they exchanged gold rings.

Now one eye was a star.

"You okay?" Kiowa said.

The body lay almost entirely in shade. There were gnats at the mouth, little flecks of pollen drifting above the nose. The butterfly was gone. The bleeding had stopped except for the neck wounds.

Kiowa picked up the rubber sandals, clapping off the dirt, then bent down to search the body. He found a pouch of rice, a comb, a fingernail clipper, a few soiled piasters, a snapshot of a young woman standing in front of a parked motorcycle. Kiowa placed these items in his rucksack along with the gray ammunition belt and rubber sandals.

Then he squatted down.

"I'll tell you the straight truth," he said. "The guy was dead the second he stepped on the trail. Understand me? We all had him zeroed. A good kill—weapon, ammunition, everything." Tiny beads of sweat glistened at Kiowa's forehead. His eyes moved from the sky to the dead man's body to the knuckles of his own hands. "So listen, you best pull your shit together. Can't just sit here all day."

Later he said, "Understand?"

Then he said, "Five minutes, Tim. Five more minutes and we're moving out."

The one eye did a funny twinkling trick, red to yellow. His head was wrenched sideways, as if loose at the neck, and the dead young man seemed to be staring at some distant object beyond the bell-shaped flowers along the trail. The blood at the neck had gone to a deep purplish black. Clean fingernails, clean hair—he had been a soldier for only a single day. After his years at the university, the man I killed returned with his new wife to the village of My Khe, where he enlisted as a common rifleman with the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He knew he would die quickly. He knew he would see a flash of light. He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people.

Kiowa covered the body with a poncho.

"Hey, you're looking better," he said. "No doubt about it. All you needed was time—some mental R&R."

Then he said, "Man, I'm sorry."

Then later he said, "Why not talk about it?"

Then he said, "Come on, man, talk."

He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole.

"Talk," Kiowa said.



Fadwa Tuqan

b. Palestine, 1917

One of Palestine's most important poets, Fadwa Tuqan was born in the West Bank town of Nablus in 1917. Raised in a conservative, middle-class Islamic household, she describes in her early poetry what it was like growing up under strict rules that limited her freedom of expression and movement. Nonetheless, in part due to the assistance of her brother, the celebrated poet Ibrahim Tuqan (1905–1941), Fadwa read widely in Islamic literature and moved to Jerusalem in 1939, a city that she describes as having lifted the veil separating the two sexes. After her brother's death, she returned to Nablus, which has remained her primary place of residence throughout her life. Her early *divan*, or collections of poetry, including *I Found It* (1957), were celebrated for their candid portrayal of a woman's love and feelings. After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that followed the Six-Day War of 1967, Fadwa turned to more political themes in her writing, calling for justice for the Palestinians and recognition of Palestine as a nation. Her poetic works include *In Front of the Closed Door* (1967), *Horsemen of the Night* (1969), *Alone on the Summit of the World* (1973), and *Daily Nightmares* (1988). Her important autobiography, *Mountainous Journey* (1985), describes her life up to the 1967 war.

Enough for Me

Translated by Olive Kenny

Enough for me to die on her earth
be buried in her
to melt and vanish into her soil
then sprout forth as a flower
played with by a child from my country.
Enough for me to remain
in my country's embrace
to be in her close as a handful of dust
a sprig of grass
a flower.

Song of Becoming

Translated by Naomi Shihab Nye

They're only boys
who used to frolic and play
releasing in the western wind
their blue red green kites
the colour of the rainbow
jumping, whistling, exchanging spontaneous jokes
and laughter
fencing with branches, assuming the roles
of great heroes in history.

They've grown suddenly now
grown more than the years of a lifetime
grown, merged with a secret word of love
carried its letters like a Bible, or a Quran
read in whispers

They've grown more than the years of a lifetime
become the trees plunging deep into the earth
and soaring high towards the sun
They're now the voice that rejects
they're the dialectics of destruction and building anew
the anger burning on the fringes of a blocked horizon
invading classroom, streets, city quarters
centering on the squares
and facing sullen tanks with a stream of stones.

With plain rejection they now shake the gallows of the dawn
assailing the night and its deluge
They've grown, grown more than the years of a lifetime
become the worshipped and the worshipper
When their torn limbs merged with the stuff of our earth,
they became a legend
They grew, and became the bridge
they grew, grew and became
larger than all poetry.

Yehuda Amichai

b. Germany, 1924–2000

Israel's most renowned contemporary poet, Yehuda Amichai was born in Würzburg in 1924. Seeking refuge from the Nazis, his family emigrated to what was at the time Palestine and took up residence in Jerusalem, where Yehuda attended school and studied Hebrew. During World War II Amichai served in the British army, and in the war of independence and the wars of 1956 and 1973 he was a commando in the Israeli army. Between the wars Amichai enrolled at Hebrew University, where he studied Hebrew literature and wrote poetry. His first book of poems, *Now and in Other Days*, appeared in 1955. After graduating, Amichai worked as a teacher in secondary schools and continued to write verse. With his second volume, *Two Hopes Away* (1958), he fully realized the poetic power of the colloquial language of the emerging state of Israel—a modernized form of Hebrew—and received international recognition. In the 1970s and '80s, Amichai held visiting professorships at several American higher-learning institutions, including University of California, Berkeley, and New York University. When Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin, and Yasir Arafat shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, Amichai's poems were read at the ceremony. By his death in September 2000, Amichai had published two novels, several short stories, and eleven collections of poetry. His memories of war drive the imagery and themes of many of his poems, and his firsthand experience of brutal killings inspired the longing for peace that permeates his work.

Sort of an Apocalypse

Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

The man under his fig tree telephoned the man under his vine:
"Tonight they definitely might come. Assign
positions, armor-plate the leaves, secure the tree,
tell the dead to report home immediately."

The white lamb leaned over, said to the wolf:
"Humans are bleating and my heart aches with grief.
I'm afraid they'll get to gunpoint, to bayonets in the dust.
At our next meeting this matter will be discussed."

All the nations (united) will flow to Jerusalem
to see if the Torah has gone out. And then,

inasmuch as it's spring, they'll come down
and pick flowers from all around.

And they'll beat swords into plowshares and plowshares into swords,
and so on and so on, and back and forth.

Perhaps from being beaten thinner and thinner,
the iron of hatred will vanish, forever.

God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children

Translated by Assia Gutmann

God has pity on children in kindergartens,
He pities school children—less.
But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,
Sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the roasting sand
To reach the dressing station,
And they are streaming with blood.

But perhaps
He will have pity on those who love truly
And take care of them
And shade them,
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
Our last pennies of kindness
Inherited from mother,

So that their own happiness will protect us
Now and on other days.

Mahmoud Darwish

b. Palestine, 1941

The foremost Palestinian poet of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish was about seven years old in 1948 when the Israelis occupied his native village of Al-Birwah, near Akka (Acre). For a year his family took refuge in Lebanon, after which they returned to Galilee and Mahmoud began writing poetry as an elementary-school student. He published his first volume of poems, *Birds without Wings*, in 1960 and followed with three more collections by 1967. In 1969 he was awarded the Lotus Prize at the Fourth Afro-Asian Writers Conference.

As his reputation as a writer grew, Darwish became increasingly active in the pro-Arab branch of the Israeli Communist Party, *Rakah*, and served for a while as editor of its newspaper, *Al-Ittihad* (*Unity*), published biweekly in Haifa. While working as a journalist and editor, Darwish was continually under surveillance by the Israelis and several times was placed under house arrest. In 1971 he announced his exile from Israel and settled for a year in Cairo, where he contributed to the newspaper *al-Ahram*. In the next year he published *I Love You, I Love You Not* and moved to Beirut, where he lived for the next ten years, writing poetry, directing the Palestinian Center for Research, and editing *Shu'un Falastiniyya* (*Palestinian Affairs* magazine). Later Darwish moved to Damascus, Syria, working again as an editor and journalist. He eventually became president of the Union of Arab Poets, and he served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization until 1993. After residing for some time in Paris and serving as editor of the Palestinian literary review, *Al-Karmel*, in 1996 Darwish returned for the first time to Israel and was greeted by crowds of celebrating Palestinians. After that visit he said, "As long as my soul is alive no one can smother my feeling of nostalgia to a country which I still consider as Palestine."

As a poet living outside of his homeland, Darwish communicates an exile's powerful sense of loss and desire for his land in his work. He also celebrates the human dignity of the Palestinians and dramatically describes the fear and suffering of his people. He has published more than thirty books of poetry and prose; two of his most recent books are *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982* (1995) and *Bed of a Stranger* (1998). The poem "Identity Card," one of the most celebrated of all his poems among Palestinians, stems from an incident when an Israeli censor changed the word "Palestine" in one of his poems to "Eretz Israel," or land of Israel.

All notes are the editors'.

Frantz Fanon

b. Martinique, 1925–1961

Frantz Fanon was born in 1925 on the island of Martinique in the Caribbean where he received his early education. In 1943 he went to France to join the resistance and fight with the Free French against the Germans in World War II. After the war he received a scholarship to study medicine and psychiatry in Lyon. Before leaving France, he published *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, an analysis of the profound and long-lasting psychological effects of white colonization and racism on blacks. In 1953, Fanon took a position in the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria as head of psychiatry. When the Algerian civil war broke out (1954), he was shocked by stories of French torturers; in 1956 he resigned from his official position with the French government and joined the Algerian rebels, the Algerian National Liberation Front, or FLN. In his letter of resignation, Fanon wrote: "If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. . . . The events in Algeria are the logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralize a people."

Fleeing to Tunisia, Fanon attended to patients and wrote articles openly supporting the FLN for publications like Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* and the FLN newspaper *el Moudjahid*. While serving as ambassador to Ghana for the Provisional Algerian Government, Fanon developed leukemia and, refusing to rest, finished his provocative indictment of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which Sartre published in 1961, the year of Fanon's death. Frantz Fanon died in Bethesda, Maryland, where he had sought medical aid for his cancer at the National Institutes of Health. His body was buried by the Algerian National Army of Liberation in Algeria.

The author's first task in *Black Skin, White Masks*, originally titled "An Essay for the Disalienation of Blacks," was to describe the process of alienation. Born into a culture that spoke French and then schooled in French history and culture, the young Fanon thought of himself as a Frenchman until he encountered racism in France. Racism made him doubt both his identity as a Frenchman and his manhood as a black individual. To speak French was to adopt the values of French culture, which identified blacks as evil and inferior. In an attempt to transcend this characterization, the black man wears a white mask; he focuses on the idealized values of equality and tolerance in white culture while nevertheless experiencing racism. The black man becomes split between his consciousness and his skin, and thus alienated from himself.

Fanon proposes a program for "disalienation." Essentially, it means a profound change of consciousness whereby a man lets go of those labels from the past that have conditioned his behavior—he drops his secondary identity as a black man or a white man—in order to live as a human being in the present. The goal is not to get involved in the past and argue about the appropriateness of racist categories but to free one's self from labels and make choices as an individual. In this way, Fanon appropriates existential concepts for blacks.

A note on the translation: The translation is by Charles Lam Markmann; all notes are the editors'.

Black Skin, White Masks

Translated by Charles Lam Markmann

From By Way of Conclusion

The problem considered here is one of time. Those Negroes and white men will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past. For many other Negroes, in other ways, disalienation will come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive.

I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo.[1]

Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act.

In no way should I derive my basic purpose from the past of the peoples of color.

In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future.

It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe. When one remembers the stories with which, in 1938, old regular sergeants described the land of piastres and rickshaws, of cut-rate boys and women, one understands only too well the rage with which the men of the Viet-Minh go into battle.

An acquaintance with whom I served during the Second World War recently returned from Indo-China. He has enlightened me on many things. For instance, the serenity with which young Vietnamese of sixteen or seventeen faced firing squads. "On one occasion," he told me, "we had to shoot from a kneeling position; The soldiers' hands were shaking in the presence of those young 'fanatics.'" Summing up, he added: "The war that you and I were in was only a game compared to what is going on out there."

[1] Santo Domingo: The inhabitants of Santo Domingo—what is today the Dominican Republic, in the Caribbean—rebelled against French rule in 1808 and 1809.

Identity Card

Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

Put it on record.
I am an Arab
And the number of my card is fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth is due after summer.
What's there to be angry about?

Put it on record.
I am an Arab
Working with comrades of toil in a quarry.
I have eight children
For them I wrest the loaf of bread,
The clothes and exercise books
From the rocks
And beg for no alms at your door,
Lower not myself at your doorstep.
What's there to be angry about?

Put it on record.
I am an Arab.
I am a name without a title,[1]
Patient in a country where everything
Lives in a whirlpool of anger.
My roots
Took hold before the birth of time
Before the burgeoning of the ages,
Before cypress and olive trees,
Before the proliferation of weeds.
My father is from the family of the plough
Not from highborn nobles.
And my grandfather was a peasant
Without line or genealogy.
My house is a watchman's hut
Made of sticks and reeds.

[1] without a title: Arabs often use titles, such as "Bey" or "Pasha"; to lack a title is an indication of his lack of official acknowledgment of his identity.

Does my status satisfy you?
I am a name without a surname.

Put it on record.
I am an Arab.
Colour of hair: jet black.
Colour of eyes: brown.
My distinguishing features:
On my head the *'iqal* cords over a *keffiyeh*[2]
Scratching him who touches it.
My address:
I'm from a village, remote, forgotten,
Its streets without name
And all its men in the fields and quarry.

What's there to be angry about?

Put it on record.
I am an Arab.
You stole my forefathers' vineyards
And land I used to till,
I and all my children,
And you left us and all my grandchildren
Nothing but these rocks.
Will your government be taking them too
As is being said?

So!
Put it on record at the top of page one:
I don't hate people,
I trespass on no one's property.
And yet, if I were to become hungry
I shall eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware, beware of my hunger
And of my anger!

[2] *'iqal . . . keffiyeh:* A *keffiyeh* is a head scarf worn by Arab men, which is held in place by a black cord known as an *'iqal*.

Seen from Europe, these things are beyond understanding. There are those who talk of a so-called Asiatic attitude toward death. But these basement philosophers cannot convince anyone. This Asiatic serenity, not so long ago, was a quality to be seen in the "bandits" of Vercors and the "terrorists" of the Resistance.

The Vietnamese who die before the firing squads are not hoping that their sacrifice will bring about the reappearance of a past. It is for the sake of the present and of the future that they are willing to die.

If the question of practical solidarity with a given past ever arose for me, it did so only to the extent to which I was committed to myself and to my neighbor to fight for all my life and with all my strength so that never again would a people on the earth be subjugated. It was not the black world that laid down my course of conduct. My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values. It is a long time since the starry sky that took away Kant's breath revealed the last of its secrets to us. And the moral law is not certain of itself.

As a man, I undertake to face the possibility of annihilation in order that two or three truths may cast their eternal brilliance over the world.

Sartre has shown that, in the line of an unauthentic position,[2] the past "takes" in quantity, and, when solidly constructed, *informs* the individual. He is the past in a changed value. But, too, I can recapture my past, validate it, or condemn it through my successive choices.

The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence.

Have I no other purpose on earth, then, but to avenge the Negro of the seventeenth century?[3]

In this world, which is already trying to disappear, do I have to pose the problem of black truth?

Do I have to be limited to the justification of a facial conformation?

I as a man of color do not have the right to seek to know in what respect my race is superior or inferior to another race.

I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race.

I as a man of color do not have the right to seek ways of stamping down the pride of my former master.

I have neither the right nor the duty to claim reparation for the domestication of my ancestors.

There is no Negro mission; there is no white burden.

I find myself suddenly in a world in which things do evil; a world in which I am summoned into battle; a world in which it is always a question of annihilation or triumph.

[2] unauthentic position: Authenticity results from an individual making conscious choices for himself rather than having others make choices for him.

[3] Negro . . . century?: The Negro who was enslaved and oppressed by slavery.

I find myself—I, a man—in a world where words wrap themselves in silence; in a world where the other endlessly hardens himself.

No, I do not have the right to go and cry out my hatred at the white man. I do not have the duty to murmur my gratitude to the white man.

My life is caught in the lasso of existence. My freedom turns me back on myself. No, I do not have the right to be a Negro.

I do not have the duty to be this or that. . . .

If the white man challenges my humanity, I will impose my whole weight as a man on his life and show him that I am not that "sho' good eatin'" that he persists in imagining.

I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: that of demanding human behavior from the other.

One duty alone: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices.

I have no wish to be the victim of the *Fraud* of a black world.

My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values.

There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence.

There are in every part of the world men who search.

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.

I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence.

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.

And, through a private problem, we see the outline of the problem of Action. Placed in this world, in a situation, "embarked," as Pascal would have it, am I going to gather weapons?

Am I going to ask the contemporary white man to answer for the slave ships of the seventeenth century?

Am I going to try by every possible means to cause Guilt to be born in minds?

Moral anguish in the face of the massiveness of the Past? I am a Negro, and tons of chains, storms of blows, rivers of expectoration flow down my shoulders.

But I do not have the right to allow myself to bog down. I do not have the right to allow the slightest fragment to remain in my existence. I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined.

I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors.

To many colored intellectuals European culture has a quality of exteriority. What is more, in human relationships, the Negro may feel himself a stranger to the Western world. Not wanting to live the part of a poor relative, of an adopted son, of a bastard child, shall he feverishly seek to discover a Negro civilization?

Let us be clearly understood. I am convinced that it would be of the greatest interest to be able to have contact with a Negro literature or architecture of the third century before Christ. I should be very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between some Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see

how this fact would change anything in the lives of the eight-year-old children who labor in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe.

No attempt must be made to encase man, for it is his destiny to be set free.

The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions.

I am my own foundation.

And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom.

The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved.

The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally. But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations.

I, the man of color, want only this:

That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be.

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.

Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible. Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. At the beginning of his life a man is always clotted, he is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child.

It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?

Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?

At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!

Oe Kenzaburo

b. Japan, 1935

Oe Kenzaburo was born in 1935 on Shikoku, probably the most isolated of Japan's four main islands, into a family of wealthy landowners. He was raised in the strong, antinationalistic village culture of his region until World War II brought the death of his father, the loss of family property, and sweeping changes to all of Japan. After Japan's defeat in 1945, democratic ideas from the West began to replace the hierarchical emperor system. In 1953, Oe left his village and moved to Tokyo, and in 1954 he enrolled in Tokyo University to study French literature, which influenced the writing that he began in 1957. His story "The Catch" won the Akutagawa Award. His early works, including his first novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (1958; trans. 1995), deal with the uprooting of village life in Japan after the war and its effects on young people. He gained the reputation of being the most promising writer since Mishima Yukio, who also wrote about the social turbulence that followed the war in novels like *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1959). After graduating from Tokyo University in 1959 Oe became a full-time writer. His works of this period increasingly focus on the effects of the U.S. occupation of Japan and the struggles of young intellectuals.

Oe's first son, Hikari, was born mentally handicapped due to a brain deformity. Learning how to live with this tragedy is the subject of *A Personal Matter* (1964; trans. 1968), his best-known and possibly his finest novel. After a visit to Hiroshima, Oe made an extraordinary connection between his son and the survivors of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; he wrote a long essay on the issues of survival and the challenge of living amidst pain and destruction in *Hiroshima Notes* (1965). His interest in the history and culture of Okinawa resulted in *The Silent Cry* (1967), which examines the tension between villages and modern life. After that work, Oe's writings centered around two major subjects. One was the challenges of life with his son and the search for his own father in *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* (1969) and *My Deluged Soul* (1973); Hikari's transition to young manhood is dealt with in *Rouse Up, O Young Men of the New Age* (1983), Oe's culminating confessional work on raising his handicapped son who has, in actuality, become an accomplished composer. The other was the reconciliation of the myths and culture of traditional village life with the modern age of technology, as begun in *The Silent Cry*. He draws on cultural anthropology for *Letters to My Sweet Bygone Years* (1987) and *Wonders of the Forest* (1986). Oe's output includes more than twenty novels, several short story collections, and the extended essay *Hiroshima Notes*. He writes that his ultimate goal is "to contribute to the healing and reconciliation of all peoples." He received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1994.

In the summer of 1963, Oe was asked to go to Hiroshima and write a report on an international rally to abolish nuclear weapons. He began a series of interviews with survivors of the atomic bombing of that city,



Michael Schwartz, *Oe Kenzaburo, 1995 The 1994 winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Oe Kenzaburo. (© Michael Schwartz/The Image Works)*

Spooool! Happiest moment of the past half million. *(Pause.)* Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known. *(Pause.)* One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt. *(Pause.)* Crawled out once or twice, before the summer was cold. Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. Not a soul. *(Pause.)* Last fancies. *(Vehemently.)* Keep 'em under! *(Pause.)* Scalded the eyes out of me reading *Effie*[8] again, a page a day, with tears again. Effie . . . *(Pause.)* Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. *(Pause.)* Could I? *(Pause.)* And she? *(Pause.)* Pah! *(Pause.)* Fanny came in a couple of times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn't do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch. The last time wasn't so bad. How do you manage it, she said, at your age? I told her I'd been saving up for her all my life. *(Pause.)* Went to Vespers once, like when I was in short trousers. *(Pause. Sings.)*

Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh-igh,
Shadows—*(coughing, then almost inaudible)*—of the evening
Steal across the sky.

(Gasping.) Went to sleep and fell off the pew. *(Pause.)* Sometimes wondered in the night if a last effort mightn't—*(Pause.)* Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. *(Pause.)* Leave it at that. *(Pause.)* Lie propped up in the dark—and wander. Be again in the dingle[9] on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. *(Pause.)* Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. *(Pause.)* And so on. *(Pause.)* Be again, be again. *(Pause.)* All that old misery. *(Pause.)* Once wasn't enough for you. *(Pause.)* Lie down across her.

Long pause. He suddenly bends over machine, switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away, puts on the other, winds it forward to the passage he wants, switches on, listens staring front.

TAPE: —gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. *(Pause.)* I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—*(pause)*—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. *(Pause. Low.)* Let me in. *(Pause.)* We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the steml *(Pause.)* I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

Pause. Krapp's lips move. No sound.

Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.

Pause.

[8] *Effie:* *Effi Briest* (1895), a novel by Theodor Fontane. [9] **dingle:** Wooded hollow.

Here I end this reel. Box—*(pause)*—three, spool—*(pause)*—five. *(Pause.)* Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.

Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.

CURTAIN

R. K. Narayan

b. India, 1906–2001



R. K. Narayan
The author rarely le his home village in India. (© DPA / Th *Image Works*)

ruh-see-POO-rum
krish-nuh-SWAH-me
nuh-RIGH-yun

Many of R. K. Narayan's novels and stories describe the people and the life in the mythical Indian town of Malgudi, a place much like Madras and Mysore, the cities in southern India where Narayan spent nearly all his life. The rich and varied gallery of characters in Narayan's work gives Malgudi the density and presence of a real place—of India itself. Narayan has remarked that "the material available to the story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations. . . . Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story)." The many memorable characters that populate Narayan's novels and stories have led critics to compare Malgudi to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo, places imagined and made real by the power of literature.[1]

The Creator of Malgudi. Born in 1906 into a Brahman family, **Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan** spent his early childhood in the house of his maternal grandmother in Madras. While he was there, he attended a Lutheran mission school where he was disliked by the teachers and students as one of the few non-Christians. When he reached high-school age, he rejoined his parents in Mysore and attended the school where his father was headmaster. He was not a particularly dedicated student; when he finished school in 1924, he failed the university entrance exam in English and had to delay his university studies for a year. He spent his free time reading books of all sorts, but mainly fiction by such novelists as

[1] **Faulkner . . . Márquez:** William Faulkner (1897–1962), American novelist; in works like *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Faulkner created a whole history and sociology for his home area of northeastern Mississippi—and implicitly the American South—depicting the dissolution of its values and social traditions. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Gabriel García Márquez (b. 1928; see p. 924) similarly creates a history and sociology for Macondo, based on the village in northern Colombia where he grew up.

WWW For links to more information about Narayan and a quiz on "A Horse and Two Goats," and for information about the culture and context of India in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

Dickens, Conan Doyle, Sir Walter Scott, Tagore, and H. G. Wells.[2] Graduated from Maharaja's College (now the University of Mysore) in 1930, he briefly tried secondary-school teaching before taking up writing, the profession he pursued for the rest of his life.

Narayan wrote about the life and the people he observed around him in Mysore, the town he fictionalized as Malgudi. His work as the Mysore correspondent for a Madras newspaper sent him out daily in search of stories and established the discipline of daily writing that accounts for his prolific output. Beginning in 1935 when *Swami and Friends*, his first novel, was published, Narayan produced more than fifteen novels, twelve volumes of short stories and essays, and an autobiography as well as retellings of *The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978), and numerous articles and stories in his lifetime. The best known of his novels are *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma: A Novel* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983).

A Tradition of Storytelling. Unlike many Indian writers who in the last century either left or spent much of their lives outside of India, R. K. Narayan was content to remain at home. He traveled abroad only rarely, remaining in the region of India where he had grown up. In many ways he was a traditional village storyteller, a figure he celebrates in the short story "Under the Banyan Tree" (1985). Narayan did not experiment with the form of the novel or that of the short story; he aimed to tell a good tale and record the lives of the people he knew. Discussing the differences between America and India in an essay in *In the World:* Crossing Cultures (see p. 1278), Narayan contrasts the pragmatic American temperament with the Indian way: "From childhood," he writes, "an Indian is brought up on the notion that austerity and a contented life is good, and also a certain otherworldliness is inculcated through the tales a grandmother narrates, the discourses at the temple hall, and through moral books." Narayan sought to give expression to the values of his upbringing in his fiction.

Narayan's Themes. Narayan's novels document the transition of a society from an agrarian village culture to middle-class urban life. His works tend to center on middle-class people—schoolteachers, financial managers, and merchants—in the mythical town of Malgudi. These self-conscious characters seek to grow and establish an identity distinct from

The material available to the story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations. . . . Under such circumstances the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story).

– R. K. Narayan

[2] **Dickens . . . Wells:** Writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of whom influenced Indian letters. Charles Dickens (1812–1870), English novelist, is best known for *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), English novelist and short-story writer, composed the Sherlock Holmes stories. Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) wrote a history of Scotland and its emergence as a nation in novels like *Waverley* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1818). Scott also wrote historical romances about the Middle Ages. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was a Bengali poet, novelist, and playwright who inspired almost all later Indian writers of the twentieth century; see Book 5. H. G. Wells (1866–1946), English novelist, science-fiction writer, and popular historian, wrote *Tono-Bungay* (1909) and *The Time Machine* (1895).

TIME AND PLACE

Twentieth-Century India: Caste and Gender in an Indian Village

Its major cities such as Bombay and Calcutta notwithstanding, India is still a village culture, and many Indians, like Muni in "A Horse and Two Goats," follow traditional ways of life little affected by modern technology. Many rural Indians are poor and illiterate, deprivations magnified for many village women who also suffer the constraints traditional Indian culture places on their gender. Novelist and short-story writer Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926) has devoted her life to alleviating the sufferings of such women, by both her writing and her social work among the indigenous villagers in Bengal. Her short story "Rudali" (1980) tells of a widow of the untouchable caste left to fend for herself after her husband, children, and grandchildren either die or leave the village. Exploited by landowners and priests, the widow subsists by grinding grain into flour, never sure where her next meal will come from. Her lot improves when she and another widow challenge the mores of traditional village life by living together and starting a business as *rudali*, or professional mourners, sometimes employing the local prostitutes. The story, made into a controversial play in 1992 by Usha Ganguli and into a film nominated for the foreign film Oscar in 1994, celebrates the power of women to take charge of their lives and through mutual support to overturn the centuries-old restrictions of caste and gender.



Low Caste Indian Family. India's rigid caste system dictates that those born into a lower caste must endure a life of hardship. (© Bettmann/CORBIS)

family and community. The resulting tension between individuality and tradition forms a recurrent theme in the novels. In Malgudi, as in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, education and a middle-class way of life bring a degree of Westernization, raising questions about cultural identity and the relationship between the traditional and the modern. Although Narayan is not a political novelist, Malgudi inevitably embodies the key social and political issues of India—its urbanization and its colonial heritage.

[Narayan's stories are] comedies of sadness . . . lighted with the glint of mockery of both self and others.

– William R. Walsh, critic, 1971

English has been with us [Indians] for over a century and a half. I am particularly fond of the language. I was never aware that I was using a different, a foreign, language when I wrote in English, because it came very easily.
– R. K. NARAYAN

Even though many of Narayan's characters speak the vernacular languages of India—like the villager Muni in "A Horse and Two Goats" (1970), who speaks Tamil and does not understand English—Narayan himself writes in English. Commenting on this choice, he said, "English has been with us [Indians] for over a century and a half. I am particularly fond of the language. I was never aware that I was using a different, a foreign, language when I wrote in English, because it came very easily." Indeed, the ease and natural rhythms of Narayan's prose demonstrate the author's comfort with English; however, the invasiveness of British colonialism on the subcontinent is perhaps evidenced by that very comfort level.

"A Horse and Two Goats." Narayan's short stories are often less "modern" than his novels. Tales such as "A Horse and Two Goats" describe traditional village life and retain the character of stories that are told rather than written. The story of Muni the goatherd is a comic folktale about the misunderstandings that arise when a traditional culture meets the modern world. Its humor is similar to that in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a film about a Kalahari Bushman's contact with Western culture. Narayan's story does not condescend to the villager or make him out to be a simpleton. Its sympathetic portrayal of Muni and his situation allows the reader to both laugh at his absurd negotiations and celebrate his good fortune.

CONNECTIONS

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 35; Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 1023, and "An Image of Africa," p. 107; Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel*, p. 1146; Carlos Fuentes, *The Prisoner of Las Lomas*, p. 938. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, and Fuentes's *The Prisoner of Las Lomas*, "A Horse and Two Goats" is a story about cross-cultural misunderstanding. Achebe, in his essay "An Image of Africa," argues that point of view in such stories is a critical factor. What is the point of view in each of the works listed above? Does it reveal the assumptions made on both sides of the misunderstanding addressed by these texts? What are the issues in each?

In the World: Crossing Cultures, p. 1278. "A Horse and Two Goats" is an implicit commentary on some of the issues in *In the World:* Crossing Cultures, which includes several Indian writers, among them Narayan, who comment on Indian culture and globalism. How does Narayan's point of view differ from that of many of the Indian writers in that section? How does "A Horse and Two Goats" articulate the point of view that Narayan develops in "My America"?

In the World: Travel Narratives (Book 4); *In the World:* Discovery and Confrontation (Book 3); Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4); William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Book 3); Montaigne, "Of Cannibals" (Book 3). "A Horse and Two Goats" might be considered an unusual travel narrative, one told by a nontraveler. Ponder how this shift in perspective makes this story different from usual travel narratives, such as those in *In the World* sections on travel in Books 3 and 4 of this anthology. How might Gulliver's voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms have been different had it been told from the Houyhnhnms' point of view? How successful is Shakespeare in understanding Caliban? How well does Montaigne understand cannibals?

From childhood an Indian is brought up on the notion that austerity and a contented life are good; a certain otherworldliness is inculcated through a grandmother's tales, the discourses at the temple hall, and moral books.
– R. K. NARAYAN, "A Passage to America"

FURTHER RESEARCH

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Criticism
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PRONUNCIATION

Avvaiyar: uh-VIGH-yar
Bhagwan: BAH-gwahn
dhall: DAHL
dhobi: DOH-bee
dhoti: DOH-tee
lakh: LAHK
Lakshmi: LUK-shmee
Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan: ruh-see-POO-rum krish-nuh-SWAH-mee nuh-RIGH-yun
swarga: SWAR-guh

India's most distinguished literary career of recent times.
– SHASHI THAROOR

Narayan is a master in control of his subtle effects. He is very funny: His use of irony is superb, and there is much going on in the tiny world he describes.
– HANIF KUREISHI, writer, 1

A Horse and Two Goats

Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India, in which the majority of India's five hundred million live, flourish, and die, Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot, the map being meant more for the revenue official out to collect tax than for the guidance of the motorist, who in any case could not hope to reach it since it sprawled far from the highway at the end of a rough track furrowed up by the iron-hooped wheels of bullock carts. But its size did not prevent its giving itself the grandiose name Kritam, which meant in Tamil "coronet" or "crown" on the brow of this subcontinent. The village consisted of less than thirty houses, only one of them built with brick and cement. Painted a brilliant yellow and blue all over with gorgeous carvings of gods and gargoyles on its balustrade, it was known as the Big House. The other houses, distributed in four streets, were generally of bamboo thatch, straw, mud, and other

"A Horse and Two Goats." This piece of short fiction serves as the title story for the R. K. Narayan collection that appeared in 1970. Although not set in Malgudi, the city that serves as the setting for nearly all his longer works of fiction, this story develops themes that are central to all Narayan's work. In the confrontation of the Indian villager and the American businessman, Narayan makes comedy of the differences between the culture of traditional rural India and that of the industrialized urban world. Within the comedy, he questions whether there are values inherent in village life, ponders the differences in scale of the traditional agrarian world and the industrialized world, and challenges the notion of what is valued by each culture.

All notes are the editors'.

unspecified material. Muni's was the last house in the fourth street, beyond which stretched the fields. In his prosperous days Muni had owned a flock of forty sheep and goats and sallied forth every morning driving the flock to the highway a couple of miles away. There he would sit on the pedestal of a clay statue of a horse while his cattle grazed around. He carried a crook at the end of a bamboo pole and snapped foliage from the avenue trees to feed his flock; he also gathered faggots and dry sticks, bundled them, and carried them home for fuel at sunset.

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday. She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive.

His fortunes had declined gradually, unnoticed. From a flock of forty which he drove into a pen at night, his stock had now come down to two goats, which were not worth the rent of a half rupee a month the Big House charged for the use of the pen in their back yard. And so the two goats were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut and from which occasionally Muni could shake down drumsticks. This morning he got six. He carried them in with a sense of triumph. Although no one could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because he lived in its shadow.

She said, "If you were content with the drumstick leaves alone, I could boil and salt some for you."

"Oh, I am tired of eating those leaves. I have a craving to chew the drumstick out of sauce, I tell you."

"You have only four teeth in your jaw, but your craving is for big things. All right, get the stuff for the sauce, and I will prepare it for you. After all, next year you may not be alive to ask for anything. But first get me all the stuff, including a measure of rice or millet, and I will satisfy your unholy craving. Our store is empty today. Dhall,[1] chili, curry leaves, mustard, coriander, gingelley[2] oil, and one large potato. Go out and get all this." He repeated the list after her in order not to miss any item and walked off to the shop in third street.

He sat on an upturned packing case below the platform of the shop. The shopman paid no attention to him. Muni kept clearing his throat, coughing, and sneezing until the shopman could not stand it any more and demanded, "What ails you? You will fly off that seat into the gutter if you sneeze so hard, young man." Muni laughed inordinately, in order to please the shopman, at being called "young man." The shopman softened and said, "You have enough of the imp inside to keep a second wife busy, but for the fact the old lady is still alive." Muni laughed appropriately again at this joke. It completely won the shopman over; he liked his sense of humour to be appreciated. Muni engaged his attention in local gossip for a few minutes, which

[1] **dhall:** A grain like lentils or split peas.

[2] **gingelley:** An Indian plant whose seeds are pressed into a cooking oil.

always ended with a reference to the postman's wife who had eloped to the city some months before.

The shopman felt most pleased to hear the worst of the postman, who had cheated him. Being an itinerant postman, he returned home to Kritam only once in ten days and every time managed to slip away again without passing the shop in the third street. By thus humouring the shopman, Muni could always ask for one or two items of food, promising repayment later. Some days the shopman was in a good mood and gave in, and sometimes he would lose his temper suddenly and bark at Muni for daring to ask for credit. This was such a day, and Muni could not progress beyond two items listed as essential components. The shopman was also displaying a remarkable memory for old facts and figures and took out an oblong ledger to support his observations. Muni felt impelled to rise and flee. But his self-respect kept him in his seat and made him listen to the worst things about himself. The shopman concluded, "If you could find five rupees and a quarter, you will have paid off an ancient debt and then could apply for admission to swarga.[3] How much have you got now?"

"I will pay you everything on the first of the next month."

"As always, and whom do you expect to rob by then?"

Muni felt caught and mumbled, "My daughter has sent word that she will be sending me money."

"Have you a daughter?" sneered the shopman. "And she is sending you money! For what purpose, may I know?"

"Birthday, fiftieth birthday," said Muni quietly.

"Birthday! How old are you?"

Muni repeated weakly, not being sure of it himself, "Fifty." He always calculated his age from the time of the great famine when he stood as high as the parapet around the village well, but who could calculate such things accurately nowadays with so many famines occurring? The shopman felt encouraged when other customers stood around to watch and comment. Muni thought helplessly, "My poverty is exposed to everybody. But what can I do?"

"More likely you are seventy," said the shopman. "You also forget that you mentioned a birthday five weeks ago when you wanted castor oil for your holy bath."

"Bath! Who can dream of a bath when you have to scratch the tank-bed for a bowl of water? We would all be parched and dead but for the Big House, where they let us take a pot of water from their well." After saying this Muni unobtrusively rose and moved off.

He told his wife, "That scoundrel would not give me anything. So go out and sell the drumsticks for what they are worth."

He flung himself down in a corner to recoup from the fatigue of his visit to the shop. His wife said, "You are getting no sauce today, nor anything else. I can't find anything to give you to eat. Fast till the evening, it'll do you good. Take the goats and be gone now," she cried and added, "Don't come back before the sun is down." He

[3] **swarga:** Heaven.

knew that if he obeyed her she would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening. Only he must be careful not to argue and irritate her. Her temper was undependable in the morning but improved by evening time. She was sure to go out and work—grind corn in the Big House, sweep or scrub somewhere, and earn enough to buy foodstuff and keep a dinner ready for him in the evening.

Unleashing the goats from the drumstick tree, Muni started out, driving them ahead and uttering weird cries from time to time in order to urge them on. He passed through the village with his head bowed in thought. He did not want to look at anyone or be accosted. A couple of cronies lounging in the temple corridor hailed him, but he ignored their call. They had known him in the days of affluence when he lorded over a flock of fleecy sheep, not the miserable gawky goats that he had today. Of course he also used to have a few goats for those who fancied them, but real wealth lay in sheep; they bred fast and people came and bought the fleece in the shearing season; and then that famous butcher from the town came over on the weekly market days bringing him betel leaves, tobacco, and often enough some *bhang*,[4] which they smoked in a hut in the coconut grove, undisturbed by wives and well-wishers. After a smoke one felt light and elated and inclined to forgive everyone including that brother-in-law of his who had once tried to set fire to his home. But all this seemed like the memories of a previous birth. Some pestilence afflicted his cattle (he could of course guess who had laid his animals under a curse), and even the friendly butcher would not touch one at half the price . . . and now here he was left with the two scraggy creatures. He wished someone would rid him of their company too. The shopman had said that he was seventy. At seventy, one only waited to be summoned by God. When he was dead what would his wife do? They had lived in each other's company since they were children. He was told on their day of wedding that he was ten years old and she was eight. During the wedding ceremony they had had to recite their respective ages and names. He had thrashed her only a few times in their career, and later she had the upper hand. Progeny, none. Perhaps a large progeny would have brought him the blessing of the gods. Fertility brought merit. People with fourteen sons were always so prosperous and at peace with the world and themselves. He recollected the thrill he had felt when he mentioned a daughter to that shopman; although it was not believed, what if he did not have a daughter?—his cousin in the next village had many daughters, and any one of them was as good as his; he was fond of them all and would buy them sweets if he could afford it. Still, everyone in the village whispered behind their backs that Muni and his wife were a barren couple. He avoided looking at anyone; they all professed to be so high up, and everyone else in the village had more money than he. "I am the poorest fellow in our caste and no wonder that they spurn me, but I won't look at them either," and so he passed on with his eyes downcast along the edge of the street, and people left him also very much alone, commenting only to the extent, "Ah, there he goes with his two goats; if he slits their throats, he may have more peace of mind." "What has he to worry about anyway? They live on nothing and have none to worry about." Thus

[4] *bhang*: A narcotic made from hemp.

people commented when he passed through the village. Only on the outskirts did he lift his head and look up. He urged and bullied the goats until they meandered along to the foot of the horse statue on the edge of the village. He sat on its pedestal for the rest of the day. The advantage of this was that he could watch the highway and see the lorries[5] and buses pass through to the hills, and it gave him a sense of belonging to a larger world. The pedestal of the statue was broad enough for him to move around as the sun travelled up and westward; or he could also crouch under the belly of the horse, for shade.

The horse was nearly life-size, moulded out of clay, baked, burnt, and brightly coloured, and reared its head proudly, prancing its forelegs in the air and flourishing its tail in a loop; beside the horse stood a warrior with scythe-like mustachios, bulging eyes, and aquiline nose. The old image-makers believed in indicating a man of strength by bulging out his eyes and sharpening his moustache tips, and also decorated the man's chest with beads which looked today like blobs of mud through the ravages of sun and wind and rain (when it came), but Muni would insist that he had known the beads to sparkle like the nine gems at one time in his life. The horse itself was said to have been as white as a dhobi-washed[6] sheet, and had had on its back a cover of pure brocade of red and black lace, matching the multicoloured sash around the waist of the warrior. But none in the village remembered the splendour as no one noticed its existence. Even Muni, who spent all his waking hours at its foot, never bothered to look up. It was untouched even by the young vandals of the village who gashed tree trunks with knives and tried to topple off milestones and inscribed lewd designs on all walls. This statue had been closer to the population of the village at one time, when this spot bordered the village; but when the highway was laid through (or perhaps when the tank and wells dried up completely here) the village moved a couple of miles inland.

Muni sat at the foot of the statue, watching his two goats graze in the arid soil among the cactus and lantana bushes. He looked at the sun; it had tilted westward no doubt, but it was not the time yet to go back home; if he went too early his wife would have no food for him. Also he must give her time to cool off her temper and feel sympathetic, and then she would scrounge and manage to get some food. He watched the mountain road for a time signal. When the green bus appeared around the bend he could leave, and his wife would feel pleased that he had let the goats feed long enough.

He noticed now a new sort of vehicle coming down at full speed. It looked like both a motor car and a bus. He used to be intrigued by the novelty of such spectacles, but of late work was going on at the source of the river on the mountain and an assortment of people and traffic went past him, and he took it all casually and described to his wife, later in the day, everything he saw. Today, while he observed the yellow vehicle coming down, he was wondering how to describe it later to his wife when it sputtered and stopped in front of him. A red-faced foreigner, who had been

[5] lorries: Trucks.

[6] dhobi-washed: Clothes washed by the riverside by a native washerwoman.

driving it, got down and went round it, stooping, looking, and poking under the vehicle; then he straightened himself up, looked at the dashboard, stared in Muni's direction, and approached him. "Excuse me, is there a gas station nearby, or do I have to wait until another car comes—" He suddenly looked up at the clay horse and cried, "Marvellous," without completing his sentence. Muni felt he should get up and run away, and cursed his age. He could not readily put his limbs into action; some years ago he could outrun a cheetah, as happened once when he went to the forest to cut fuel and it was then that two of his sheep were mauled—a sign that bad times were coming. Though he tried, he could not easily extricate himself from his seat, and then there was also the problem of the goats. He could not leave them behind.

The red-faced man wore khaki clothes—evidently a policeman or a soldier. Muni said to himself, "He will chase or shoot if I start running. Some dogs chase only those who run—oh, Shiva protect me. I don't know why this man should be after me." Meanwhile the foreigner cried, "Marvellous!" again, nodding his head. He paced around the statue with his eyes fixed on it. Muni sat frozen for a while, and then suddenly fidgeted and tried to edge away. Now the other man suddenly pressed his palms together in a salute, smiled, and said, "Namaste![7] How do you do?"

At which Muni spoke the only English expressions he had learnt, "Yes, no." Having exhausted his English vocabulary, he started in Tamil: "My name is Muni. These two goats are mine, and no one can gainsay it—though our village is full of slanderers these days who will not hesitate to say that what belongs to a man doesn't belong to him." He rolled his eyes and shuddered at the thought of evil-minded men and women peopling his village.

The foreigner faithfully looked in the direction indicated by Muni's fingers, gazed for a while at the two goats and the rocks, and with a puzzled expression took out his silver cigarette case and lit a cigarette. Suddenly remembering the courtesies of the season, he asked, "Do you smoke?" Muni answered, "Yes, no." Whereupon the red-faced man took a cigarette and gave it to Muni, who received it with surprise, having had no offer of a smoke from anyone for years now. Those days when he smoked bhang were gone with his sheep and the large-hearted butcher. Nowadays he was not able to find even matches, let alone bhang. (His wife went across and borrowed a fire at dawn from a neighbour.) He had always wanted to smoke a cigarette; only once did the shopman give him one on credit, and he remembered how good it had tasted. The other flicked the lighter open and offered a light to Muni. Muni felt so confused about how to act that he blew on it and put it out. The other, puzzled but undaunted, flourished his lighter, presented it again, and lit Muni's cigarette. Muni drew a deep puff and started coughing; it was racking, no doubt, but extremely pleasant. When his cough subsided he wiped his eyes and took stock of the situation, understanding that the other man was not an Inquisitor of any kind. Yet, in order to make sure, he remained wary. No need to run away from a man who gave him such a potent smoke. His head was reeling from the effect of one of those

[7] **Namaste!:** A word of greeting.

strong American cigarettes made with roasted tobacco. The man said, "I come from New York," took out a wallet from his hip pocket, and presented his card.

Muni shrank away from the card. Perhaps he was trying to present a warrant and arrest him. Beware of khaki, one part of his mind warned. Take all the cigarettes or bhang or whatever is offered, but don't get caught. Beware of khaki. He wished he weren't seventy as the shopman had said. At seventy one didn't run, but surrendered to whatever came. He could only ward off trouble by talk. So he went on, all in the chaste Tamil for which Kritam was famous. (Even the worst detractors could not deny that the famous poetess Avvaiyar was born in this area, although no one could say whether it was in Kritam or Kuppam, the adjoining village.) Out of this heritage the Tamil language gushed through Muni in an unimpeded flow. He said, "Before God, sir, Bhagwan,[8] who sees everything, I tell you, sir, that we know nothing of the case. If the murder was committed, whoever did it will not escape. Bhagwan is all-seeing. Don't ask me about it. I know nothing." A body had been found mutilated and thrown under a tamarind tree at the border between Kritam and Kuppam a few weeks before, giving rise to much gossip and speculation. Muni added an explanation. "Anything is possible there. People over there will stop at nothing." The foreigner nodded his head and listened courteously though he understood nothing.

"I am sure you know when this horse was made," said the red man and smiled ingratiatingly.

Muni reacted to the relaxed atmosphere by smiling himself, and pleaded, "Please go away, sir, I know nothing. I promise we will hold him for you if we see any bad character around, and we will bury him up to his neck in a coconut pit if he tries to escape; but our village has always had a clean record. Must definitely be the other village."

Now the red man implored, "Please, please, I will speak slowly, please try to understand me. Can't you understand even a simple word of English? Everyone in this country seems to know English. I have gotten along with English everywhere in this country, but you don't speak it. Have you any religious or spiritual scruples against English speech?"

Muni made some indistinct sounds in his throat and shook his head. Encouraged, the other went on to explain at length, uttering each syllable with care and deliberation. Presently he sidled over and took a seat beside the old man, explaining, "You see, last August, we probably had the hottest summer in history, and I was working in shirt-sleeves in my office on the fortieth floor of the Empire State Building. We had a power failure one day, you know, and there I was stuck for four hours, no elevator, no air conditioning. All the way in the train I kept thinking, and the minute I reached home in Connecticut, I told my wife Ruth, 'We will visit India this winter, it's time to look at other civilizations.' Next day she called the travel agent first thing and told him to fix it, and so here I am. Ruth came with me but is staying back at Srinagar,[9] and I am the one doing the rounds and joining her later."

[8] **Bhagwan:** Master.

[9] **Srinagar:** Capital of Kashmir; a popular vacation spot.

Muni looked reflective at the end of this long oration and said, rather feebly, "Yes, no," as a concession to the other's language, and went on in Tamil, "When I was this high"—he indicated a foot high—"I had heard my uncle say . . ."

No one can tell what he was planning to say, as the other interrupted him at this stage to ask, "Boy, what is the secret of your teeth? How old are you?"

The old man forgot what he had started to say and remarked, "Sometimes we too lose our cattle. Jackals or cheetahs may sometimes carry them off, but sometimes it is just theft from over in the next village, and then we will know who has done it. Our priest at the temple can see in the camphor flame the face of the thief, and when he is caught . . ." He gestured with his hands a perfect mincing of meat.

The American watched his hands intently and said, "I know what you mean. Chop something? Maybe I am holding you up and you want to chop wood? Where is your axe? Hand it to me and show me what to chop. I do enjoy it, you know, just a hobby. We get a lot of driftwood along the backwater near my house, and on Sundays I do nothing but chop wood for the fireplace. I really feel different when I watch the fire in the fireplace, although it may take all the sections of the Sunday *New York Times* to get a fire started." And he smiled at this reference.

Muni felt totally confused but decided the best thing would be to make an attempt to get away from this place. He tried to edge out, saying, "Must go home," and turned to go. The other seized his shoulder and said desperately, "Is there no one, absolutely no one here, to translate for me?" He looked up and down the road, which was deserted in this hot afternoon; a sudden gust of wind churned up the dust and dead leaves on the roadside into a ghostly column and propelled it towards the mountain road. The stranger almost pinioned Muni's back to the statue and asked, "Isn't this statue yours? Why don't you sell it to me?"

The old man now understood the reference to the horse, thought for a second, and said in his own language, "I was an urchin this high when I heard my grandfather explain this horse and warrior, and my grandfather himself was this high when he heard his grandfather, whose grandfather . . ."

The other man interrupted him. "I don't want to seem to have stopped here for nothing. I will offer you a good price for this," he said, indicating the horse. He had concluded without the least doubt that Muni owned this mud horse. Perhaps he guessed by the way he sat on its pedestal, like other souvenir sellers in this country presiding over their wares.

Muni followed the man's eyes and pointing fingers and dimly understood the subject matter and, feeling relieved that the theme of the mutilated body had been abandoned at least for the time being, said again, enthusiastically, "I was this high when my grandfather told me about this horse and the warrior, and my grandfather was this high when he himself . . ." and he was getting into a deeper bog of reminiscence each time he tried to indicate the antiquity of the statue.

The Tamil that Muni spoke was stimulating even as pure sound, and the foreigner listened with fascination. "I wish I had my tape-recorder here," he said, assuming the pleasantest expression. "Your language sounds wonderful. I get a kick out of every word you utter, here"—he indicated his ears—"but you don't have to waste your breath in sales talk. I appreciate the article. You don't have to explain its points."

"I never went to a school, in those days only Brahmin[10] went to schools, but we had to go out and work in the fields morning till night, from sowing to harvest time . . . and when Pongal[11] came and we had cut the harvest, my father allowed me to go out and play with others at the tank, and so I don't know the Parangi language you speak, even little fellows in your country probably speak the Parangi language, but here only learned men and officers know it. We had a postman in our village who could speak to you boldly in your language, but his wife ran away with someone and he does not speak to anyone at all nowadays. Who would if a wife did what she did? Women must be watched; otherwise they will sell themselves and the home." And he laughed at his own quip.

The foreigner laughed heartily, took out another cigarette, and offered it to Muni, who now smoked with ease, deciding to stay on if the fellow was going to be so good as to keep up his cigarette supply. The American now stood up on the pedestal in the attitude of a demonstrative lecturer and said, running his finger along some of the carved decorations around the horse's neck, speaking slowly and uttering his words syllable by syllable, "I could give a sales talk for this better than anyone else. . . . This is a marvellous combination of yellow and indigo, though faded now. . . . How do you people of this country achieve these flaming colours?"

Muni, now assured that the subject was still the horse and not the dead body, said, "This is our guardian, it means death to our adversaries. At the end of Kali Yuga,[12] this world and all other worlds will be destroyed, and the Redeemer will come in the shape of a horse called 'Kalki'; this horse will come to life and gallop and trample down all bad men." As he spoke of bad men the figures of his shopman and his brother-in-law assumed concrete forms in his mind, and he revelled for a moment in the predicament of the fellow under the horse's hoof: served him right for trying to set fire to his home. . . .

While he was brooding on this pleasant vision, the foreigner utilized the pause to say, "I assure you that this will have the best home in the U.S.A. I'll push away the bookcase, you know I love books and am a member of five book clubs, and the choice and bonus volumes mount up to a pile really in our living room, as high as this horse itself. But they'll have to go. Ruth may disapprove, but I will convince her. The T.V. may have to be shifted too. We can't have everything in the living room. Ruth will probably say what about when we have a party? I'm going to keep him right in the middle of the room. I don't see how that can interfere with the party—we'll stand around him and have our drinks."

Muni continued his description of the end of the world. "Our pundit[13] discoursed at the temple once how the oceans are going to close over the earth in a huge wave and swallow us—this horse will grow bigger than the biggest wave and carry on its back only the good people and kick into the floods the evil ones—plenty of

[10] **Brahmin:** Members of the highest or priestly Hindu caste.

[11] **Pongal:** A festival that is observed in early January.

[12] **Kali Yuga:** One of the cycles of time in Hindu mythology; a destructive period.

[13] **pundit:** A Brahmin scholar.

them about—" he said reflectively. "Do you know when it is going to happen?" he asked.

The foreigner now understood by the tone of the other that a question was being asked and said, "How am I transporting it? I can push the seat back and make room in the rear. That van can take in an elephant"—waving precisely at the back of the seat.

Muni was still hovering on visions of avatars and said again, "I never missed our pundit's discourses at the temple in those days during every bright half of the month, although he'd go on all night, and he told us that Vishnu[14] is the highest god. Whenever evil men trouble us, he comes down to save us. He has come many times. The first time he incarnated as a great fish, and lifted the scriptures on his back when the floods and sea waves . . ."

"I am not a millionaire, but a modest businessman. My trade is coffee."

Amidst all this wilderness of obscure sound Muni caught the word "coffee" and said, "If you want to drink 'kapi,' drive further up, in the next town, they have Friday market, and there they open 'kapi-otels'—so I learn from passers-by. Don't think I wander about. I go nowhere and look for nothing." His thoughts went back to the avatars. "The first avatar was in the shape of a little fish in a bowl of water, but every hour it grew bigger and bigger and became in the end a huge whale which the seas could not contain, and on the back of the whale the holy books were supported, saved and carried." Once he had launched on the first avatar, it was inevitable that he should go on to the next, a wild boar on whose tusk the earth was lifted when a vicious conqueror of the earth carried it off and hid it at the bottom of the sea. After describing this avatar Muni concluded, "God will always save us whenever we are troubled by evil beings. When we were young we staged at full moon the story of the avatars. That's how I know the stories; we played them all night until the sun rose, and sometimes the European collector would come to watch, bringing his own chair. I had a good voice and so they always taught me songs and gave me the women's roles. I was always Goddess Lakshmi,[15] and they dressed me in a brocade sari, loaned from the Big House . . ."

The foreigner said, "I repeat I am not a millionaire. Ours is a modest business; after all, we can't afford to buy more than sixty minutes of T.V. time in a month, which works out to two minutes a day, that's all, although in the course of time we'll maybe sponsor a one-hour show regularly if our sales graph continues to go up . . ."

Muni was intoxicated by the memory of his theatrical days and was about to explain how he had painted his face and worn a wig and diamond earrings when the visitor, feeling that he had spent too much time already, said, "Tell me, will you accept a hundred rupees or not for the horse? I'd love to take the whiskered soldier also but no space for him this year. I'll have to cancel my air ticket and take a boat home, I suppose. Ruth can go by air if she likes, but I will go with the horse and keep him in my cabin all the way if necessary." And he smiled at the picture of himself

[14] **Vishnu:** One of the chief Hindu gods.

[15] **Lakshmi:** Goddess of wealth and good fortune; symbol of all domestic virtues.

voyaging across the seas hugging this horse. He added, "I will have to pad it with straw so that it doesn't break . . ."

"When we played *Ramayana,* they dressed me as Sita,"[16] added Muni. "A teacher came and taught us the songs for the drama and we gave him fifty rupees. He incarnated himself as Rama, and He alone could destroy Ravana, the demon with ten heads who shook all the worlds; do you know the story of *Ramayana*?"

"I have my station wagon as you see. I can push the seat back and take the horse in if you will just lend me a hand with it."

"Do you know *Mahabharata*?[17] Krishna was the eighth avatar of Vishnu, incarnated to help the Five Brothers regain their kingdom. When Krishna was a baby he danced on the thousand-hooded giant serpent and trampled it to death; and then he suckled the breasts of the demoness and left them flat as a disc though when she came to him her bosoms were large, like mounds of earth on the banks of a dug up canal." He indicated two mounds with his hands. The stranger was completely mystified by the gesture. For the first time he said, "I really wonder what you are saying because your answer is crucial. We have come to the point when we should be ready to talk business."

"When the tenth avatar comes, do you know where you and I will be?" asked the old man.

"Lend me a hand and I can lift off the horse from its pedestal after picking out the cement at the joints. We can do anything if we have a basis of understanding."

At this stage the mutual mystification was complete, and there was no need even to carry on a guessing game at the meaning of words. The old man chattered away in a spirit of balancing off the credits and debits of conversational exchange, and said in order to be on the credit side, "Oh, honourable one, I hope God has blessed you with numerous progeny. I say this because you seem to be a good man, willing to stay beside an old man and talk to him, while all day I have none to talk to except when somebody stops by to ask for a piece of tobacco. But I seldom have it, tobacco is not what it used to be at one time, and I have given up chewing. I cannot afford it nowadays." Noting the other's interest in his speech, Muni felt encouraged to ask, "How many children have you?" with appropriate gestures with his hands. Realizing that a question was being asked, the red man replied, "I said a hundred," which encouraged Muni to go into details. "How many of your children are boys and how many girls? Where are they? Is your daughter married? Is it difficult to find a son-in-law in your country also?"

In answer to these questions the red man dashed his hand into his pocket and brought forth his wallet in order to take immediate advantage of the bearish trend in the market. He flourished a hundred-rupee currency note and said, "Well, this is what I meant."

[16] **Sita:** The wife of Rama, hero of the *Ramayana,* an Indian epic. At one point in the story Sita is abducted by Ravana, a demon king.

[17] ***Mahabharata:*** An Indian epic. In the most famous section of the poem, reprinted separately as the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna gives spiritual counsel to the hero of the epic, Arjuna.

The old man now realized that some financial element was entering their talk. He peered closely at the currency note, the like of which he had never seen in his life; he knew the five and ten by their colours although always in other people's hands, while his own earning at any time was in coppers and nickels. What was this man flourishing the note for? Perhaps asking for change. He laughed to himself at the notion of anyone coming to him for changing a thousand- or ten-thousand-rupee note. He said with a grin, "Ask our village headman, who is also a moneylender; he can change even a lakh[18] of rupees in gold sovereigns if you prefer it that way; he thinks nobody knows, but dig the floor of his puja[19] room and your head will reel at the sight of the hoard. The man disguises himself in rags just to mislead the public. Talk to the headman yourself because he goes mad at the sight of me. Someone took away his pumpkins with the creeper and he, for some reason, thinks it was me and my goats . . . that's why I never let my goats be seen anywhere near the farms." His eyes travelled to his goats nosing about, attempting to wrest nutrition from minute greenery peeping out of rock and dry earth.

The foreigner followed his look and decided that it would be a sound policy to show an interest in the old man's pets. He went up casually to them and stroked their backs with every show of courteous attention. Now the truth dawned on the old man. His dream of a lifetime was about to be realized. He understood that the red man was actually making an offer for the goats. He had reared them up in the hope of selling them some day and, with the capital, opening a small shop on this very spot. Sitting here, watching towards the hills, he had often dreamt how he would put up a thatched roof here, spread a gunny sack out on the ground, and display on it fried nuts, coloured sweets, and green coconut for the thirsty and famished wayfarers on the highway, which was sometimes very busy. The animals were not prize ones for a cattle show, but he had spent his occasional savings to provide them some fancy diet now and then, and they did not look too bad. While he was reflecting thus, the red man shook his hand and left on his palm one hundred rupees in tens now, suddenly realizing that this was what the old man was asking. "It is all for you or you may share it if you have a partner."

The old man pointed at the station wagon and asked, "Are you carrying them off in that?"

"Yes, of course," said the other, understanding the transportation part of it.

The old man said, "This will be their first ride in a motor car. Carry them off after I get out of sight, otherwise they will never follow you, but only me even if I am travelling on the path to Yama Loka."[20] He laughed at his own joke, brought his palms together in a salute, turned round and went off, and was soon out of sight beyond a clump of thicket.

The red man looked at the goats grazing peacefully. Perched on the pedestal of the horse, as the westerly sun touched off the ancient faded colours of the statue with a fresh splendour, he ruminated, "He must be gone to fetch some help, I suppose!" and settled down to wait. When a truck came downhill, he stopped it and got the help of a couple of men to detach the horse from its pedestal and place it in his station wagon. He gave them five rupees each, and for a further payment they siphoned off gas from the truck, and helped him to start his engine.

Muni hurried homeward with the cash securely tucked away at his waist in his dhoti.[21] He shut the street door and stole up softly to his wife as she squatted before the lit oven wondering if by a miracle food would drop from the sky. Muni displayed his fortune for the day. She snatched the notes from him, counted them by the glow of the fire, and cried, "One hundred rupees! How did you come by it? Have you been stealing?"

"I have sold our goats to a red-faced man. He was absolutely crazy to have them, gave me all this money and carried them off in his motor car!"

Hardly had these words left his lips when they heard bleating outside. She opened the door and saw the two goats at her door. "Here they are!" she said. "What's the meaning of all this?"

He muttered a great curse and seized one of the goats by its ears and shouted, "Where is that man? Don't you know you are his? Why did you come back?" The goat only wriggled in his grip. He asked the same question of the other too. The goat shook itself off. His wife glared at him and declared, "If you have thieved, the police will come tonight and break your bones. Don't involve me. I will go away to my parents. . . ."

[18] lakh: One hundred thousand; a large number. [19] puja: A rite or ceremony. [20] Yama Loka: The underworld.

[21] dhoti: Loincloth.

Naguib Mahfouz

b. Egypt, 1911

When Naguib Mahfouz received the Nobel Prize in 1988, he was the first Arabic writer to be so recognized. Although he was Egypt's premier novelist and deserving of such a distinction for his work, the prize was widely regarded in the Arab world as recognition for Arabic literature generally. Mahfouz and fellow Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim had been pioneers in creating modern Arabic literature, al-Hakim largely in drama, Mahfouz in fiction. Both writers had managed to create, indeed invent, a new Arabic literary idiom, one that was free of the formality and remoteness of classical literary Arabic but that also had a refinement and a versatility that contemporary colloquial Arabic lacked. The prize was seen as an acknowledgment of both men's achievement in remaking the language and establishing a literature comparable to those of Europe, America, and Asia.



Naguib Mahfou
Mahfouz was th Egyptian to win Nobel Prize in literature.
(© Topham/Th Image Works)

Creating a Modern Arabic Literature. After its golden age in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, Arabic literature went into decline. When

WWW For links to more information about Mahfouz and a quiz on "Zaabalawi," and for information about the culture and context of the Middle East in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

nuh-GEEB mah-FOOZ

the Ottoman empire established Turkish as the language of commerce and government in the early modern period, Arabic literature virtually disappeared. As the Ottomans lost power in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Arabic was revived, but the hiatus in its use as a literary language meant that there were no models for such modern literary forms as the novel. Traditional Arabic literature was almost exclusively poetry. Those who hoped to revive Arabic literature and make it modern had to discover or create a literary and accessible language and adapt modern literary forms to the Islamic culture.

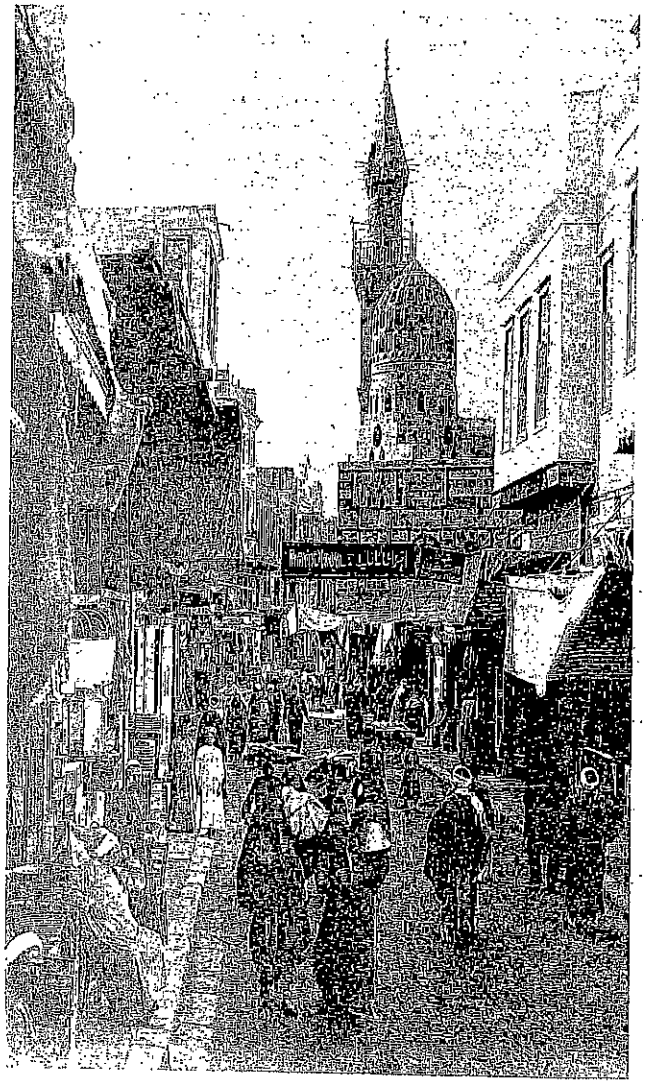
A Career in Government Service. Born in 1911 in the Gamaliya district of Cairo, the seventh child in a middle-class family of modest means, **Naguib Mahfouz** spent his earliest years in the crowded districts of the old city. He attended government schools and graduated with a degree in philosophy from the University of Cairo in 1934. After graduation he decided to become a professional writer and worked for a few years as a journalist before entering the Egyptian civil service in 1939, where he worked for the next thirty-two years. There he adapted novels for the movies and television before going on to become the director of the national Cinema Organization, the governmental agency that manages the film industry in Egypt. He retired from the civil service in 1971.

A Literary Career. Mahfouz's first book, *The Whisper of Madness*, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1938. He continued to write during his years with the civil service and in his retirement, producing more than forty novels and fourteen volumes of short stories. His writing career can be divided into four periods. From 1939 to 1944, Mahfouz set out to write a series of historical novels modeled after the novels of Sir Walter Scott,[1] tracing the history of Egypt from ancient times to Mahfouz's day. He completed only three of the thirty books he planned to write, all on ancient Egypt, and in them indirectly critiqued contemporary Egypt. *The Struggle for Thebes* (1944), for example, was interpreted as an allegory, or a symbolic representation, of the British occupation and the presence in Egypt of a ruling aristocracy of foreigners. Many of Mahfouz's novels are a fictional representation of the history and contemporary situation of Egypt, articulating the author's view that the novelist serves as an "informer that engages in re-creating a collective memory and thus produces and offers knowledge of a given society and an alternative articulation of that society's history."

The novelist serves as an "informer that engages in re-creating a collective memory and thus produces and offers knowledge of a given society and an alternative articulation of that society's history.
– NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

Social Realism. With *A New Cairo* (1945), Mahfouz entered a second stage of his writing career, during which he produced the SOCIAL-REALIST novels about contemporary Egypt for which he is widely known. *The*

[1] **novels . . . Scott:** The Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), which dealt with Scottish history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were written as an allegory of Scotland's emergence into nationhood and national identity. The novels were an important literary statement for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, especially in nations that were just developing their own identities.



Cairo, c. 1912
This street scene shows the great Mohammed-el-Worde mosque in the background. (Library of Congress, LC USZ62 099022)

Cairo Trilogy, made up of *Palace Walk, Palace of Desire,* and *Sugar Street,* written in the early fifties but not published until 1956 and 1957, trace three generations of a Cairo family from 1918 to 1944. In the tumultuous period between the two world wars, Egypt went through continuous political and social upheaval, much of it involving the place of Britain in Egyptian affairs and the growing movement for Egyptian independence. The repeated attempts to get rid of the British army, to expel foreigners who controlled the Egyptian government and economy, and to replace a corrupt monarchy with a constitutional government boiled over into revolution in 1919 and again in the 1950s. Meanwhile a rapidly growing population exacerbated the social inequities and poverty that plagued the nation. Mahfouz's realistic novels about the suffering and struggles of the middle and lower classes chronicle the human consequences of the



The Middle East, 2000
The twentieth century saw the end of colonial interests in the Middle East, but as in Africa, the postcolonial states were the product not of historical national identities but of borders drawn up by the colonial powers. Inevitably, problems arose. The discovery of oil, however, brought unprecedented wealth to the region and endowed it with a strategic importance for the United States and the Soviet Union, who struggled during the cold war to maintain influence with oil-rich states such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

government's and the foreign powers' neglect of the people of Egypt. Edward Fox describes politics in Mahfouz's books as "simply another of the evils that afflict humankind, a force whose harm one may be lucky enough to avoid." Mahfouz may have temporarily suspended this persistent cynicism in the early fifties, in hopes that Gamal Abdel Nasser[2] would bring positive political change. He had completed the *Cairo* trilogy before Nasser came to power in 1952 but delayed its publication until 1956, when he lost hope that Nasser would make a difference in the lives of the people. Mahfouz's novels of the sixties openly criticize the Nasser regime.

Existential Modernism and Arabic Traditions. After the publication of the trilogy, Mahfouz's work changed again. The transitional novel, published in 1959 and translated as *Children of Gebelawi* and *Children of the Alley,* is a history of mankind in which God, Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad appear as figures in a modern family saga that is also an allegory of mankind's religious history. Unable to secure a publisher in Egypt, Mahfouz published the book in Lebanon. It was subsequently attacked for taking license with sacred history and was banned in nearly every Islamic country, even though its theme could be said to be how greed for material things takes humanity away from God. Mahfouz further developed this theme in his EXISTENTIALIST and MODERNIST novels of the 1960s, works such as *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961) that probe the inner workings of an individual's mind, making use of STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS and SURREALIST techniques. In the fourth stage of his career, beginning in about the mid seventies, Mahfouz turned from European modernism to the traditions of Arabic literature, drawing on *Arabian Nights* and other Arabic classics and folklore for novels like *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982) and *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (1983).

"Zaabalawi." Written in the early 1960s, Mahfouz's story "Zaabalawi" raises many of the same concerns as the controversial *Children of the Alley.* Like that novel, the story is concerned with the secularization of Egyptian life and the loss of religious traditions. The narrator's search for Zaabalawi is a quest for his own spiritual roots, for the truths hidden in the memories of old men living in the older parts of Cairo and for an understanding that transcends the rational and scientific explanations of things.

Through works rich in nuance—now clear-sightedly realistic, now evocatively ambiguous—[Mahfouz] has formed an Arabic narrative art that applies to all mankind.
– SWEDISH ACADEMY FOR THE NOBEL AWARDS, 19

zah-bah-LAH-wee

CONNECTIONS

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* p. 35. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* "Zaabalawi" is a quest story. In both works, the narrators are looking for something

[2] Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970): Egyptian military officer who led the army coup that deposed the corrupt king Farouk in 1952. Nasser was named the first president of the republic of Egypt in 1956. Although he sought to modernize Egypt and improve the lives of the poor through measures such as land reform, his changes, in Mahfouz's view, simply brought more suffering.

missing in their lives, something that has personal as well as larger social and cultural significance. What are these characters searching for? How clearly does each know what he seeks, and what does each find by the end of his quest?

Søren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness unto Death" (Book 5), Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 428. Kierkegaard characterizes modern life as diseased and modern man's mission as seeking a cure. In a similar vein Kafka dramatizes modern man's condition or "illness" through the transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*. Is the disease "for which no one possesses a remedy" in Mahfouz's story similar to that defined by Kierkegaard and made into a parable by Kafka? What are its symptoms? Do you think it can be cured? Would you describe "Zaabalawi" as an "existential" story?

Wu Ch'eng-en, *Monkey* (Book 3). Like Tripitaka, the monk who brings the Buddhist scriptures back to China from India, the narrator of "Zaabalawi" sets out to recover or discover spiritual knowledge. Both characters must pass a series of tests before they can succeed. Think about the tests that each undergoes. Do they have symbolic import? Are the two pilgrims similar in character? Is each ultimately successful in achieving the goal of his mission?

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PRONUNCIATION

Hassanein: hah-sah-NANE.
Naguib Mahfouz: nuh-GEEB mah-FOOZ
Qamar: kah-MAR
Tabakshiyya: tah-bahk-SHEE-yah
Umm al-Ghulam: OOM ahl-goo-LAHM
Wanas al-Damanhouri: wah-NAHS ahl-dah-mahn-HOO-ree
Zaabalawi: zah-bah-LAH-wee

Zaabalawi

Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

Finally I became convinced that I had to find Sheikh[1] Zaabalawi.
The first time I had heard of his name had been in a song:

Oh what's become of the world, Zaabalawi?
They've turned it upside down and taken away its taste.

It had been a popular song in my childhood, and one day it had occurred to me to demand of my father, in the way children have of asking endless questions:

"Who is Zaabalawi?"

He had looked at me hesitantly as though doubting my ability to understand the answer. However, he had replied, "May his blessing descend upon you, he's a true

"Zaabalawi." Included in a collection of short stories first published in 1963, this work comes from the same period in Mahfouz's career as the controversial novel *Children of the Alley*. The story takes place in the old neighborhoods of Cairo where Mahfouz grew up and that provide the settings for many of his novels. The narrator remembers hearing in his childhood of Zaabalawi, an elusive figure who could work miracles of healing. His search for Zaabalawi takes him from the modern offices of a lawyer to the old city and to figures from the past. In meetings with a calligrapher, a composer, and, finally, an old drunkard, the narrator gradually surrenders more and more control of his quest until he succumbs to a drunken sleep. While he is sleeping, Zaabalawi appears—only to disappear again before the narrator awakens. At the end of the story the narrator still seeks to meet Zaabalawi.

The simple folktale structure of "Zaabalawi" is made complex by several crucial ambiguities. The nature of the narrator's illness is unclear, for it is described simply as an illness "for which no one possesses a remedy." Exactly who Zaabalawi is or was is also left vague. Most of those who have known him knew him only in the past, while others only know of him or of others who know him. Even after he appears at the end of the story, questions remain about his reality and his whereabouts. Indeed, the final ambiguity in the story is whether Zaabalawi appeared at all, for the narrator has only Wanas's report, a dream of paradise, and some drops of water on his forehead as signs of Zaabalawi's visit, and even after his evening at the Negma Bar he still seeks to know that Zaabalawi is not "a mere myth."

The narrator's quest can be read as a spiritual one, a search for certainty and assurance in the face of despair. It can also be viewed as a search for something from the past that has been lost, something from the narrator's childhood or from his father's generation. The allegory also suggests that the story is about the creative process, the discoveries an artist, composer, or writer makes when he or she relaxes and gives up the search only to have the thing sought after appear of its own accord.

A note on the translation: This translation from the Arabic captures the folktale qualities of Mahfouz's story; translator Denys Johnson-Davies was challenged by the process of translating into English a grammatically and structurally very different language. All notes are the editors'.

[1] **Sheikh:** Title of respect, especially for older, important men.

saint of God, a remover of worries and troubles. Were it not for him I would have died miserably—"

In the years that followed, I heard my father many a time sing the praises of this good saint and speak of the miracles he performed. The days passed and brought with them many illnesses, for each one of which I was able, without too much trouble and at a cost I could afford, to find a cure, until I became afflicted with that illness for which no one possesses a remedy. When I had tried everything in vain and was overcome by despair, I remembered by chance what I had heard in my childhood: Why, I asked myself, should I not seek out Sheikh Zaabalawi? I recollected my father saying that he had made his acquaintance in Khan Gaafar[2] at the house of Sheikh Qamar, one of those sheikhs who practiced law in the religious courts, and so I took myself off to his house. Wishing to make sure that he was still living there, I made inquiries of a vendor of beans whom I found in the lower part of the house.

"Sheikh Qamar!" he said, looking at me in amazement. "He left the quarter ages ago. They say he's now living in Garden City and has his office in al-Azhar Square."[3]

I looked up the office address in the telephone book and immediately set off to the Chamber of Commerce Building, where it was located. On asking to see Sheikh Qamar, I was ushered into a room just as a beautiful woman with a most intoxicating perfume was leaving it. The man received me with a smile and motioned me toward a fine leather-upholstered chair. Despite the thick soles of my shoes, my feet were conscious of the lushness of the costly carpet. The man wore a lounge suit and was smoking a cigar; his manner of sitting was that of someone well satisfied both with himself and with his worldly possessions. The look of warm welcome he gave me left no doubt in my mind that he thought me a prospective client, and I felt acutely embarrassed at encroaching upon his valuable time.

"Welcome!" he said, prompting me to speak.

"I am the son of your old friend Sheikh Ali al-Tatawi," I answered so as to put an end to my equivocal position.

A certain languor was apparent in the glance he cast at me; the languor was not total in that he had not as yet lost all hope in me.

"God rest his soul," he said. "He was a fine man."

The very pain that had driven me to go there now prevailed upon me to stay.

"He told me," I continued, "of a devout saint named Zaabalawi whom he met at Your Honor's. I am in need of him, sir, if he be still in the land of the living."

The languor became firmly entrenched in his eyes, and it would have come as no surprise if he had shown the door to both me and my father's memory.

"That," he said in the tone of one who has made up his mind to terminate the conversation, "was a very long time ago and I scarcely recall him now."

Rising to my feet so as to put his mind at rest regarding my intention of going, I asked, "Was he really a saint?"

"We used to regard him as a man of miracles."

[2] Khan Gaafar: A shopping district in Cairo.

[3] al-Azhar Square: A section of Cairo near a famous mosque and the university.

"And where could I find him today?" I asked, making another move toward the door.

"To the best of my knowledge he was living in the Birgawi Residence in al-Azhar," and he applied himself to some papers on his desk with a resolute movement that indicated he would not open his mouth again. I bowed my head in thanks, apologized several times for disturbing him, and left the office, my head so buzzing with embarrassment that I was oblivious to all sounds around me.

I went to the Birgawi Residence, which was situated in a thickly populated quarter. I found that time had so eaten at the building that nothing was left of it save an antiquated façade and a courtyard that, despite being supposedly in the charge of a caretaker, was being used as a rubbish dump. A small, insignificant fellow, a mere prologue to a man, was using the covered entrance as a place for the sale of old books on theology and mysticism.

When I asked him about Zaabalawi, he peered at me through narrow, inflamed eyes and said in amazement, "Zaabalawi! Good heavens, what a time ago that was! Certainly he used to live in this house when it was habitable. Many were the times he would sit with me talking of bygone days, and I would be blessed by his holy presence. Where, though, is Zaabalawi today?"

He shrugged his shoulders sorrowfully and soon left me, to attend to an approaching customer. I proceeded to make inquiries of many shopkeepers in the district. While I found that a large number of them had never even heard of Zaabalawi, some, though recalling nostalgically the pleasant times they had spent with him, were ignorant of his present whereabouts, while others openly made fun of him, labeled him a charlatan, and advised me to put myself in the hands of a doctor—as though I had not already done so. I therefore had no alternative but to return disconsolately home.

With the passing of days like motes in the air, my pains grew so severe that I was sure I would not be able to hold out much longer. Once again I fell to wondering about Zaabalawi and clutching at the hope his venerable name stirred within me. Then it occurred to me to seek the help of the local sheikh of the district; in fact, I was surprised I had not thought of this to begin with. His office was in the nature of a small shop, except that it contained a desk and a telephone, and I found him sitting at his desk, wearing a jacket over his striped galabeya.[4] As he did not interrupt his conversation with a man sitting beside him, I stood waiting till the man had gone. The sheikh then looked up at me coldly. I told myself that I should win him over by the usual methods, and it was not long before I had him cheerfully inviting me to sit down.

"I'm in need of Sheikh Zaabalawi," I answered his inquiry as to the purpose of my visit.

He gazed at me with the same astonishment as that shown by those I had previously encountered.

"At least," he said, giving me a smile that revealed his gold teeth, "he is still alive.

[4] galabeya: Traditional Arab robe.

The devil of it is, though, he has no fixed abode. You might well bump into him as you go out of here, on the other hand you might spend days and months in fruitless searching."

"Even you can't find him!"

"Even I! He's a baffling man, but I thank the Lord that he's still alive!"

He gazed at me intently, and murmured, "It seems your condition is serious."

"Very."

"May God come to your aid! But why don't you go about it systematically?" He spread out a sheet of paper on the desk and drew on it with unexpected speed and skill until he had made a full plan of the district, showing all the various quarters, lanes, alleyways, and squares. He looked at it admiringly and said, "These are dwelling-houses, here is the Quarter of the Perfumers, here the Quarter of the Coppersmiths, the Mouski,[5] the police and fire stations. The drawing is your best guide. Look carefully in the cafés, the places where the dervishes perform their rites, the mosques and prayer-rooms, and the Green Gate,[6] for he may well be concealed among the beggars and be indistinguishable from them. Actually, I myself haven't seen him for years, having been somewhat preoccupied with the cares of the world, and was only brought back by your inquiry to those most exquisite times of my youth."

I gazed at the map in bewilderment. The telephone rang, and he took up the receiver.

"Take it," he told me, generously. "We're at your service."

Folding up the map, I left and wandered off through the quarter, from square to street to alleyway, making inquiries of everyone I felt was familiar with the place. At last the owner of a small establishment for ironing clothes told me, "Go to the calligrapher Hassanein in Umm al-Ghulam—they were friends."

I went to Umm al-Ghulam,[7] where I found old Hassanein working in a deep, narrow shop full of signboards and jars of color. A strange smell, a mixture of glue and perfume, permeated its every corner. Old Hassanein was squatting on a sheepskin rug in front of a board propped against the wall; in the middle of it he had inscribed the word "Allah"[8] in silver lettering. He was engrossed in embellishing the letters with prodigious care. I stood behind him, fearful of disturbing him or breaking the inspiration that flowed to his masterly hand. When my concern at not interrupting him had lasted some time, he suddenly inquired with unaffected gentleness, "Yes?"

Realizing that he was aware of my presence, I introduced myself. "I've been told that Sheikh Zaabalawi is your friend; I'm looking for him," I said.

His hand came to a stop. He scrutinized me in astonishment. "Zaabalawi! God be praised!" he said with a sigh.

"He *is* a friend of yours, isn't he?" I asked eagerly.

[5] **the Mouski:** A central market bazaar. [6] **the Green Gate:** Medieval gate in Cairo. [7] **Umm al-Ghulam:** Street in Cairo. [8] **"Allah":** "God" in Arabic.

"He was, once upon a time. A real man of mystery: He'd visit you so often that people would imagine he was your nearest and dearest, then would disappear as though he'd never existed. Yet saints are not to be blamed."

The spark of hope went out with the suddenness of a lamp snuffed by a power-cut.

"He was so constantly with me," said the man, "that I felt him to be a part of everything I drew. But where is he today?"

"Perhaps he is still alive?"

"He's alive, without a doubt. . . . He had impeccable taste, and it was due to him that I made my most beautiful drawings."

"God knows," I said, in a voice almost stifled by the dead ashes of hope, "how dire my need for him is, and no one knows better than you of the ailments in respect of which he is sought."

"Yes, yes. May God restore you to health. He is, in truth, as is said of him, a man, and more. . . ."

Smiling broadly, he added, "And his face possesses an unforgettable beauty. But where is he?"

Reluctantly I rose to my feet, shook hands, and left. I continued wandering eastward and westward through the quarter, inquiring about Zaabalawi from everyone who, by reason of age or experience, I felt might be likely to help me. Eventually I was informed by a vendor of lupine[9] that he had met him a short while ago at the house of Sheikh Gad, the well-known composer. I went to the musician's house in Tabakshiyya,[10] where I found him in a room tastefully furnished in the old style, its walls redolent with history. He was seated on a divan, his famous lute beside him, concealing within itself the most beautiful melodies of our age, while somewhere from within the house came the sound of pestle and mortar and the clamor of children. I immediately greeted him and introduced myself, and was put at my ease by the unaffected way in which he received me. He did not ask, either in words or gesture, what had brought me, and I did not feel that he even harbored any such curiosity. Amazed at his understanding and kindness, which boded well, I said, "O Sheikh Gad, I am an admirer of yours; having long been enchanted by the renderings of your songs."

"Thank you," he said with a smile.

"Please excuse my disturbing you," I continued timidly, "but I was told that Zaabalawi was your friend, and I am in urgent need of him."

"Zaabalawi!" he said, frowning in concentration. "You need him? God be with you, for who knows, O Zaabalawi, where you are."

"Doesn't he visit you?" I asked eagerly.

"He visited me some time ago. He might well come right now; on the other hand I mightn't see him till death!"

I gave an audible sigh and asked, "What made him like that?"

[9] **lupine:** Beans. [10] **Tabakshiyya:** District in Cairo named for the straw trays that are made and sold there.

The musician took up his lute. "Such are saints or they would not be saints," he said, laughing.

"Do those who need him suffer as I do?"

"Such suffering is part of the cure!"

He took up the plectrum and began plucking soft strains from the strings. Lost in thought, I followed his movements. Then, as though addressing myself, I said, "So my visit has been in vain."

He smiled, laying his cheek against the side of the lute. "God forgive you," he said, "for saying such a thing of a visit that has caused me to know you and you me!"

I was much embarrassed and said apologetically, "Please forgive me; my feelings of defeat made me forget my manners."

"Do not give in to defeat. This extraordinary man brings fatigue to all who seek him. It was easy enough with him in the old days when his place of abode was known. Today, though, the world has changed, and after having enjoyed a position attained only by potentates, he is now pursued by the police on a charge of false pretenses. It is therefore no longer an easy matter to reach him, but have patience and be sure that you will do so."

He raised his head from the lute and skillfully fingered the opening bars of a melody. Then he sang:

> I make lavish mention, even though I blame myself, of those I love,
> For the stories of the beloved are my wine.[11]

With a heart that was weary and listless, I followed the beauty of the melody and the singing.

"I composed the music to this poem in a single night," he told me when he had finished. "I remember that it was the eve of the Lesser Bairam.[12] Zaabalawi was my guest for the whole of that night, and the poem was of his choosing. He would sit for a while just where you are, then would get up and play with my children as though he were one of them. Whenever I was overcome by weariness or my inspiration failed me, he would punch me playfully in the chest and joke with me, and I would bubble over with melodies, and thus I continued working till I finished the most beautiful piece I have ever composed."

"Does he know anything about music?"

"He is the epitome of things musical. He has an extremely beautiful speaking voice, and you have only to hear him to want to burst into song and to be inspired to creativity. . . ."

"How was it that he cured those diseases before which men are powerless?"

"That is his secret. Maybe you will learn it when you meet him."

But when would that meeting occur? We relapsed into silence, and the hubbub of children once more filled the room.

[11] "I make . . . wine": Lines from a poem by the medieval mystic Ibn al-Farid.

[12] Lesser Bairam: Holiday celebrated at the end of the month of Ramadan.

Again the sheikh began to sing. He went on repeating the words "and I have a memory of her" in different and beautiful variations until the very walls danced in ecstasy. I expressed my wholehearted admiration, and he gave me a smile of thanks. I then got up and asked permission to leave, and he accompanied me to the front door. As I shook him by the hand, he said, "I hear that nowadays he frequents the house of Hagg Wanas al-Damanhouri. Do you know him?"

I shook my head, though a modicum of renewed hope crept into my heart.

"He is a man of private means," the sheikh told me, "who from time to time visits Cairo, putting up at some hotel or other. Every evening, though, he spends at the Negma Bar in Alfi Street."

I waited for nightfall and went to the Negma Bar. I asked a waiter about Hagg Wanas, and he pointed to a corner that was semisecluded because of its position behind a large pillar with mirrors on all four sides. There I saw a man seated alone at a table with two bottles in front of him, one empty, the other two-thirds empty. There were no snacks or food to be seen, and I was sure that I was in the presence of a hardened drinker. He was wearing a loosely flowing silk galabeya and a carefully wound turban; his legs were stretched out toward the base of the pillar, and as he gazed into the mirror in rapt contentment, the sides of his face, rounded and handsome despite the fact that he was approaching old age, were flushed with wine. I approached quietly till I stood but a few feet away from him. He did not turn toward me or give any indication that he was aware of my presence.

"Good evening, Mr. Wanas," I greeted him cordially.

He turned toward me abruptly, as though my voice had roused him from slumber, and glared at me in disapproval. I was about to explain what had brought me to him when he interrupted in an almost imperative tone of voice that was none the less not devoid of an extraordinary gentleness. "First, please sit down, and, second, please get drunk!"

I opened my mouth to make my excuses but, stopping up his ears with his fingers, he said, "Not a word till you do what I say."

I realized I was in the presence of a capricious drunkard and told myself that I should at least humor him a bit. "Would you permit me to ask one question?" I said with a smile, sitting down.

Without removing his hands from his ears he indicated the bottle. "When engaged in a drinking bout like this, I do not allow any conversation between myself and another unless, like me, he is drunk, otherwise all propriety is lost and mutual comprehension is rendered impossible."

I made a sign indicating that I did not drink.

"That's your lookout," he said offhandedly. "And that's my condition!"

He filled me a glass, which I meekly took and drank. No sooner had the wine settled in my stomach than it seemed to ignite. I waited patiently till I had grown used to its ferocity, and said, "It's very strong, and I think the time has come for me to ask you about—"

Once again, however, he put his fingers in his ears. "I shan't listen to you until you're drunk!"

He filled up my glass for the second time. I glanced at it in trepidation; then, overcoming my inherent objection, I drank it down at a gulp. No sooner had the wine come to rest inside me than I lost all willpower. With the third glass, I lost my memory, and with the fourth the future vanished. The world turned round about me and I forgot why I had gone there. The man leaned toward me attentively, but I saw him—saw everything—as a mere meaningless series of colored planes. I don't know how long it was before my head sank down onto the arm of the chair and I plunged into deep sleep. During it, I had a beautiful dream the like of which I had never experienced. I dreamed that I was in an immense garden surrounded on all sides by luxuriant trees, and the sky was nothing but stars seen between the entwined branches, all enfolded in an atmosphere like that of sunset or a sky overcast with cloud. I was lying on a small hummock of jasmine petals, more of which fell upon me like rain, while the lucent spray of a fountain unceasingly sprinkled the crown of my head and my temples. I was in a state of deep contentedness, of ecstatic serenity. An orchestra of warbling and cooing played in my ear. There was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without discord or distortion. In the whole world there was no single reason for speech or movement, for the universe moved in a rapture of ecstasy. This lasted but a short while. When I opened my eyes, consciousness struck at me like a policeman's fist and I saw Wanas al-Damanhouri regarding me with concern. Only a few drowsy customers were left in the bar.

"You have slept deeply," said my companion. "You were obviously hungry for sleep."

I rested my heavy head in the palms of my hands. When I took them away in astonishment and looked down at them, I found that they glistened with drops of water.

"My head's wet," I protested.

"Yes, my friend tried to rouse you," he answered quietly.

"Somebody saw me in this state?"

"Don't worry, he is a good man. Have you not heard of Sheikh Zaabalawi?"

"Zaabalawi!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet.

"Yes," he answered in surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know where he is now. He was here and then he left."

I was about to run off in pursuit but found I was more exhausted than I had imagined. Collapsed over the table, I cried out in despair, "My sole reason for coming to you was to meet him! Help me to catch up with him or send someone after him."

The man called a vendor of prawns and asked him to seek out the sheikh and bring him back. Then he turned to me. "I didn't realize you were afflicted. I'm very sorry. . . ."

"You wouldn't let me speak," I said irritably.

"What a pity! He was sitting on this chair beside you the whole time. He was playing with a string of jasmine petals he had around his neck, a gift from one of his admirers, then, taking pity on you, he began to sprinkle some water on your head to bring you around."

"Does he meet you here every night?" I asked, my eyes not leaving the doorway through which the vendor of prawns had left.

"He was with me tonight, last night, and the night before that, but before that I hadn't seen him for a month."

"Perhaps he will come tomorrow," I answered with a sigh.

"Perhaps."

"I am willing to give him any money he wants."

Wanas answered sympathetically, "The strange thing is that he is not open to such temptations, yet he will cure you if you meet him."

"Without charge?"

"Merely on sensing that you love him."

The vendor of prawns returned, having failed in his mission.

I recovered some of my energy and left the bar, albeit unsteadily. At every street corner I called out "Zaabalawi!" in the vague hope that I would be rewarded with an answering shout. The street boys turned contemptuous eyes on me till I sought refuge in the first available taxi.

The following evening I stayed up with Wanas al-Damanhouri till dawn, but the sheikh did not put in an appearance. Wanas informed me that he would be going away to the country and would not be returning to Cairo until he had sold the cotton crop.

I must wait, I told myself; I must train myself to be patient. Let me content myself with having made certain of the existence of Zaabalawi, and even of his affection for me, which encourages me to think that he will be prepared to cure me if a meeting takes place between us.

Sometimes, however, the long delay wearied me. I would become beset by despair and would try to persuade myself to dismiss him from my mind completely. How many weary people in this life know him not or regard him as a mere myth! Why, then, should I torture myself about him in this way?

No sooner, however, did my pains force themselves upon me than I would again begin to think about him, asking myself when I would be fortunate enough to meet him. The fact that I ceased to have any news of Wanas and was told he had gone to live abroad did not deflect me from my purpose; the truth of the matter was that I had become fully convinced that I had to find Zaabalawi.

Yes, I have to find Zaabalawi.

Albert Camus

b. Algeria, 1913–1960



Albert Camus, c. 1945 *Algerian-born Camus, photographed here at about age thirty-two, died in a car accident in 1960 at the age of forty-seven. (Hulton/Archive)*

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Albert Camus is usually associated with EXISTENTIALISM, the popular philosophical and literary movement of the mid twentieth century exemplified in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. In a secular world that seemed to run according to natural law rather than God's will and that resonated with Kafka's nightmares and T. S. Eliot's "wasteland," existentialism focused on the freedom that humans must exercise when making choices, when deciding who they are and how they will act. In Camus' early writings, such as *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (1942), the author depicts a world that offers no purpose and little meaning to its inhabitants. Camus, calling this secular reality ABSURD, was quickly identified as the philosopher of the absurd, the outsider, and the gentle hedonist.

The two great wars of the first half of the twentieth century, with their massive destruction of human life and social ideals, left many wondering whether there was anything or anyone in which to believe. Camus looked at the postwar era with courage, honesty, and sensitivity. He became the quintessential rebel, starting a peoples' theater, joining and then rejecting the Communist Party, writing social polemics for newspapers, fighting in the French Underground against the Nazis, and refusing to side with either the French or the Algerians in the Algerian struggle for independence in the 1950s. He denounced tyranny, terrorism, and FASCISM, whether they occurred on the extreme right or the extreme left. And he searched for the basis of meaning and social commitment in a world disillusioned with traditional beliefs, movements, and institutions.

Since his death in 1960, Camus' popularity has periodically waxed and waned, but his writings have consistently encouraged a serious discussion of social issues and invited readers to commit themselves to bettering the human condition.

Beginning Life in Poverty. **Albert Camus** was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria, in what was then French North Africa. His father, a transplanted Frenchman, was an illiterate farmer who was killed at the first Battle of Marne in World War I. His mother, who was originally from Spain, moved her family—Albert and his brother, uncle, and grandmother—to a two-room apartment in Belcourt, a working-class suburb of Algiers, where she worked as a charwoman. Raised by his maternal grandmother who used a whip to discipline him, Camus was permanently affected by the silence in his relationship with his illiterate, deaf mother who rarely spoke.

Ordinarily, he would have worked after completing elementary school, but a teacher, Louis Germain, to whom Camus would later dedicate his Nobel Prize speech, recognized his intellectual gifts and arranged for a scholarship to the lycée in the European section of Algiers (now Lycée Albert Camus). As a scholarship student from a poor, working-class neighborhood, the young Camus met with the prejudice and arrogance of his schoolmates, sons of wealth and privilege whose first allegiance was to Europe rather than to North Africa. These experiences influenced the youthful writings of Camus in 1932 when he took the side of the oppressed, seeking to give voice to the sufferings of those who like his mother were largely silent. His sympathy for the plight of the working class guided his moral and political struggles for the rest of his life. Winning honors both as a young scholar of philosophy and as a passionate goalie for the soccer team at the University of Algiers, Camus' world collapsed at age seventeen when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis; a year's convalescence was prescribed. Undoubtedly, his brush with death and subsequent unreliable health had a profound effect on the young man.

WWW For links to more information about Camus and a quiz on "The Guest," and for information about the culture and context of Algeria in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

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Left-Wing Politics. Camus married Simone Hie in 1933. Influenced by the liberal writings of such French writers as **André Gide** and **André Malraux**[1] and the apparent sympathy Communists showed toward the plight of the Arabs, Camus joined the Algerian Communist Party in 1934 and founded The Labor Theater (*Le Théâtre du Travail*). While working at various jobs, Camus directed, wrote, and adapted plays for this peoples' theater, which performed on the docks in Algiers. Camus broke with the Communist Party in 1937 because of its growing hostility toward the Arab cause. His first collection of essays, *The Wrong and the Right Side* (*L'Envers et l'endroit*, 1937) reveals his passionate attachment to the people and landscapes of North Africa. As an AGNOSTIC, he characterizes the twin poles of his secular religion in these essays as Yes and No: a passionate Yes to "life with its face of tears and sun, life in the salt sea and on warm stones," but a resounding No to injustice and oppression. In "Return to Tipasa" he writes, "Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking, I should like never to be unfaithful either to one or to the others." In 1938 he joined the staff of a left-wing newspaper, *Alger-Républicain*, for which he wrote book reviews and a series of articles critical of the government's treatment of the Kabyles, a mountain people south of Algiers. He was eventually forced out of Algeria because of his politics. Living in Paris, he worked for *Paris-Soir* and continued to write.

Pursuing the Absurd. It was at this time that Camus devised an ambitious plan that reflected his extraordinary gifts as a writer and thinker: He would write a philosophical essay, a novel, and a play around one particular theme and if possible publish all three works together. For his first theme he chose the absurd. ***The Myth of Sisyphus*** (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), a collection of essays, explains how absurdity arises from one's longing for clear answers about the nature of reality in an

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[1] Gide . . . Malraux: André Gide (1869–1951) wrote poems, plays, and novels that focused on the importance of self-examination and the life of the senses. André Malraux (1901–1976), like Camus, was a French intellectual who combined writing with political action; his most famous novel, *Man's Fate* (1934), is about the Shanghai uprising and the Communist encroachment in China.

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irrational, incomprehensible world—absurdity exists in the gulf between human need and the "unreasonable silence of the world." *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*, 1942), Camus' most famous—and disturbing—novel, presents an absurd hero, **Meursault**, who refuses to adopt the social and religious conventions of his day and is therefore a stranger to his society. The play *Caligula* (1945) takes the idea of liberty to destructive extremes and completes the triumvirate on the absurd.

World War II interfered with Camus' plans for developing a second theme. He joined the French resistance movement in 1942, and in 1943, after another attack of tuberculosis, became a publisher's reader and a member of the administrative staff at Gallimard, a position he held until he died. The next year he became editor of the underground newspaper *Combat*, writing editorials and articles. In most of his writing of this period, and as a consequence of his associations with French existentialism and Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus examines the grounds for moral responsibility in a world in which God and religious institutions no longer provide a comprehensive vision and an imperative for ethical action. In a secular world, what connects us to the plight of our neighbors and thrusts us into the social arena? Several of Camus' plays depict life in a world in which restraints have been lifted and anything is possible: *The Misunderstanding* (*Le Malentendu*, 1944), *The State of Siege* (*L'État de siège*, 1948), and *The Just Assassins* (*Les Justes*, 1948).

. . . there is a *passion* of the absurd. The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the "divine irresponsibility" of the condemned man.

– JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, 1955

Revolution and Morality. In 1947 Camus published *The Plague* (*La Peste*), a novel that sets up a situation in which he can test his ideas: He gradually reveals the ethical motivations and psychological needs of the book's characters in a North African city besieged and isolated by the plague. *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*, 1951), written as a complement to *The Plague*, discusses the nature of revolution and the relation of means and ends in political movements. Camus asks if the sacrifices demanded by the new secular prophets like Marx and Lenin[2] will lead ultimately to better societies. These works were attacked by Sartre and others. In 1952, Camus broke with Sartre over a fundamental issue: The latter accepted the evils of Stalinism[3] as a means to an end—a more humane society. Camus refused to exchange present sufferings for abstract promises of a better future, regardless of whether those promises were made by a socialist philosopher or a religious prophet.

Camus's final novel, *The Fall* (*La Chute*, 1956), is a strange, ironic monologue about personal responsibility and the darkness surrounding human motivation. His last volume of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom* (*L'Exil et le royaume*, 1957), captures the poignant loneliness of being caught between two cultures: of being born in North Africa and yet

[2] **Marx and Lenin:** Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a social philosopher and founder of modern socialism. Nikolai Lenin (1870–1924) led the Communist Revolution of 1917 in Russia.

[3] **Stalinism:** A form of Marxism associated with Josef Stalin (1879–1953), the Communist dictator of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953. Stalin harshly repressed all dissent and upheld the absolute central authority of his government. Millions died under his brutal orchestration of the USSR's industrialization.

feeling like a colonial and an exile, all the while searching for a home, a "kingdom." This colonial dilemma was repeated for Europeans throughout Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, but for Camus it represented a universal condition: To have been born anywhere with full consciousness was to be an exile, estranged in one's own country or kingdom.

Albert Camus received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1957, one of the youngest persons to be awarded that honor. Tragically, he died in a car crash en route to Paris on January 4, 1960—a rather absurd conclusion to a tremendously productive and worthwhile life.

"The Guest." The Algerian struggle for independence from France in the 1950s amply illustrated the complexity of revolutionary situations. Recognizing the deep loyalties that both the Algerian-born French and Arab Algerians had toward their homeland, Camus risked the criticism of leftists and sought a reconciliation between the French government and the Algerian rebels, the FLN. This struggle, which polarized attitudes and forced an unwanted partisanship on both the Algerian Arabs and the Algerian French, serves as the volatile setting for Camus' "The Guest," taken from his collection *Exile and the Kingdom*. In this story, colonialism has reached into the Algerian backcountry, but Camus creates a situation in which the ideal of individual freedom takes precedence over political ideology and local politics. Even though French domination is symbolized in the local schoolteacher Daru, who distributes food to his drought-stricken region and teaches French geography to his pupils, the remote desert setting of the story provides an open arena for individual choices—Daru is free to act.

Real class differences are first introduced by showing Balducci, the gendarme, riding on his horse while the Arab prisoner, with hands bound, is walking. When Daru is given custody of the prisoner, he seeks ways to give the Arab his freedom. Through small signs of decency, Daru affirms the prisoner's common humanity and at the same time preserves his own set of values. Although there is little real, verbal communication between them, Daru acknowledges the minimal bond of their shared meals and lodgings. Daru resents both the legal system that interposed itself in the Arab's family quarrel and the subjugated Arab who failed to avoid capture. Even when presented with his freedom, the Arab ironically is incapable of escaping. Furthermore, Daru returns to the schoolhouse to find that his efforts on behalf of the Arab are totally misunderstood by other Arabs. Like Camus himself, Daru feels the loneliness of one who is neither an exile nor at home in the kingdom, a situation reflected in the collection title *Exile and the Kingdom*.

Some time ago I summed up *The Stranger* by a statement which I recognize is highly paradoxical: "In our society, any man who does not weep at the funeral of his mother risks being sentenced to death." I only wished to say that the hero of the book was sentenced because he did not play the game . . . he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what is not. It is also, it is above all, to say more than what is, and, in matters of the human heart, to say more than what one feels. This is what we do, all of us, every day, to simplify life. . . . One would not be greatly mistaken in reading in *The Stranger* the account of a man who, without any heroic posturing, consents to die for the truth.

– ALBERT CAMUS, preface to the 1955 edition of *L'Étranger*

CONNECTIONS

In the World: Existentialism, p. 746; *In the World:* Emancipation (Book 5); Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor" (Book 5). The concept of freedom is central to existentialism. Consider Daru's feelings about holding the Arab captive and the prisoner's refusal to run away when Daru releases him. What is Camus saying about freedom? Is his point the same as that made by Sartre or by Dostoevsky in "The Grand Inquisitor"?

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Flies*, p. 697. One of the most important social and artistic movements of the twentieth century was existentialism. Sartre, one of the founders of French existentialism, created characters in *The Flies* who are brought to a recognition of responsibility for their choices. Camus, also considered an existentialist, created a character who is an outsider in society; does Daru in any way fit the existential label?

Voltaire, *Candide* (Book 4). Writers of satire often speak through an innocent protagonist to create the illusion of an unbiased observer or participant. The innocence of Voltaire's Candide allows the author to comment on the irrationalities of social institutions like religion. How does Camus use Daru as a means of social criticism?

FURTHER RESEARCH

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PRONUNCIATION

Albert Camus: ahl-BARE kah-MOO
André Gide: ahn-DRAY ZHEED
André Malraux: ahn-DRAY mahl-ROH
Meursault: mur-SOH

The Guest

Translated by Justin O'Brien

The schoolmaster was watching the two men climb toward him. One was on horseback, the other on foot. They had not yet tackled the abrupt rise leading to the schoolhouse built on the hillside. They were toiling onward, making slow progress in the snow, among the stones, on the vast expanse of the high, deserted plateau. From time to time the horse stumbled. Without hearing anything yet, he could see the breath issuing from the horse's nostrils. One of the men, at least, knew the region. They were following the trail although it had disappeared days ago under a layer of dirty white snow. The schoolmaster calculated that it would take them half an hour to get onto the hill. It was cold; he went back into the school to get a sweater.

He crossed the empty, frigid classroom. On the blackboard the four rivers of France,[1] drawn with four different colored chalks, had been flowing toward their estuaries for the past three days. Snow had suddenly fallen in mid-October after eight months of drought without the transition of rain, and the twenty pupils, more or less, who lived in the villages scattered over the plateau had stopped coming. With fair weather they would return. Daru now heated only the single room that was his lodging, adjoining the classroom and giving also onto the plateau to the east. Like the class windows, his window looked to the south too. On that side the school was a few kilometers from the point where the plateau began to slope toward the south. In clear weather could be seen the purple mass of the mountain range where the gap opened onto the desert.

Somewhat warmed, Daru returned to the window from which he had first seen the two men. They were no longer visible. Hence they must have tackled the rise. The sky was not so dark, for the snow had stopped falling during the night. The morning had opened with a dirty light which had scarcely become brighter as the ceiling of clouds lifted. At two in the afternoon it seemed as if the day were merely beginning. But still this was better than those three days when the thick snow was falling amidst unbroken darkness with little gusts of wind that rattled the double door of the classroom. Then Daru had spent long hours in his room, leaving it only to go to the shed and feed the chickens or get some coal. Fortunately the delivery truck from Tadjid, the nearest village to the north, had brought his supplies two days before the blizzard. It would return in forty-eight hours.

Besides, he had enough to resist a siege, for the little room was cluttered with bags of wheat that the administration left as a stock to distribute to those of his pupils whose families had suffered from the drought. Actually they had all been victims because they were all poor. Every day Daru would distribute a ration to the children. They had missed it, he knew, during these bad days. Possibly one of the fathers or big brothers would come this afternoon and he could supply them with grain. It was just a matter of carrying them over to the next harvest. Now shiploads of wheat were arriving from France and the worst was over. But it would be hard to forget that

"The Guest." For Camus, life in an absurd world meant making choices without the assurance of universally accepted guidelines or principles. In fact, the complex secular world often presents individuals with conflicting sets of values and conflicting ethical codes. The question then becomes "How do I live a socially committed life in a culture where I feel so alienated that I am tempted to withdraw into a private world?" In "The Guest," Daru appears to be living quite contentedly "in exile," a distant, out-of-the-way place where moral issues are simplified. Then his privacy is shattered when he experiences a conflict between his European background and the indigenous Arab culture. Since there are no guarantees that Daru's attempt to do the right thing will be met with success or recognition, he is faced with a classic existential situation in which the individual has only his inner resources to guide him in making a decision.

The translation is by Justin O'Brien; the notes are the editors'.

[1] **four rivers of France:** The Seine, Loire, Rhône, and Gironde rivers; French geography is being taught rather than Algerian.

poverty, that army of ragged ghosts wandering in the sunlight, the plateaus burned to a cinder month after month, the earth shriveled up little by little, literally scorched, every stone bursting into dust under one's foot. The sheep had died then by thousands and even a few men, here and there, sometimes without anyone's knowing.

In contrast with such poverty, he who lived almost like a monk in his remote schoolhouse, nonetheless satisfied with the little he had and with the rough life, had felt like a lord with his whitewashed walls, his narrow couch, his unpainted shelves, his well, and his weekly provision of water and food. And suddenly this snow, without warning, without the foretaste of rain. This is the way the region was, cruel to live in, even without men—who didn't help matters either. But Daru had been born here. Everywhere else, he felt exiled.

He stepped out onto the terrace in front of the schoolhouse. The two men were now halfway up the slope. He recognized the horseman as Balducci, the old gendarme he had known for a long time. Balducci was holding on the end of a rope an Arab who was walking behind him with hands bound and head lowered. The gendarme waved a greeting to which Daru did not reply, lost as he was in contemplation of the Arab dressed in a faded blue jellaba,[2] his feet in sandals but covered with socks of heavy raw wool, his head surmounted by a narrow, short *chèche*.[3] They were approaching. Balducci was holding back his horse in order not to hurt the Arab, and the group was advancing slowly.

Within earshot, Balducci shouted: "One hour to do the three kilometers from El Ameur!" Daru did not answer. Short and square in his thick sweater, he watched them climb. Not once had the Arab raised his head. "Hello," said Daru when they got up onto the terrace. "Come in and warm up." Balducci painfully got down from his horse without letting go the rope. From under his bristling mustache he smiled at the schoolmaster. His little dark eyes, deep-set under a tanned forehead, and his mouth surrounded with wrinkles made him look attentive and studious. Daru took the bridle, led the horse to the shed, and came back to the two men, who were now waiting for him in the school. He led them into his room. "I am going to heat up the classroom," he said. "We'll be more comfortable there." When he entered the room again, Balducci was on the couch. He had undone the rope tying him to the Arab, who had squatted near the stove. His hands still bound, the *chèche* pushed back on his head, he was looking toward the window. At first Daru noticed only his huge lips, fat, smooth, almost Negroid; yet his nose was straight, his eyes were dark and full of fever. The *chèche* revealed an obstinate forehead and, under the weathered skin now rather discolored by the cold, the whole face had a restless and rebellious look that struck Daru when the Arab, turning his face toward him, looked him straight in the eyes. "Go into the other room," said the schoolmaster, "and I'll make you some mint tea." "Thanks," Balducci said. "What a chore! How I long for retirement." And addressing his prisoner in Arabic: "Come on, you." The Arab got up and, slowly, holding his bound wrists in front of him, went into the classroom.

[2] **jellaba:** "Djellaba": a long, loose robe worn by men and women in some Arab countries.

[3] ***chèche:*** A head scarf or turban.

With the tea, Daru brought a chair. But Balducci was already enthroned on the nearest pupil's desk and the Arab had squatted against the teacher's platform facing the stove, which stood between the desk and the window. When he held out the glass of tea to the prisoner, Daru hesitated at the sight of his bound hands. "He might perhaps be untied." "Sure," said Balducci. "That was for the trip." He started to get to his feet. But Daru, setting the glass on the floor, had knelt beside the Arab. Without saying anything, the Arab watched him with his feverish eyes. Once his hands were free, he rubbed his swollen wrists against each other, took the glass of tea, and sucked up the burning liquid in swift little sips.

"Good," said Daru. "And where are you headed?"

Balducci withdrew his mustache from the tea. "Here, son."

"Odd pupils! And you're spending the night?"

"No. I'm going back to El Ameur. And you will deliver this fellow to Tinguit. He is expected at police headquarters."

Balducci was looking at Daru with a friendly little smile.

"What's this story?" asked the schoolmaster. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"No, son. Those are the orders."

"The orders? I'm not . . ." Daru hesitated, not wanting to hurt the old Corsican. "I mean, that's not my job."

"What! What's the meaning of that? In wartime people do all kinds of jobs."

"Then I'll wait for the declaration of war!"

Balducci nodded.

"O.K. But the orders exist and they concern you too. Things are brewing, it appears. There is talk of a forthcoming revolt. We are mobilized, in a way."

Daru still had his obstinate look.

"Listen, son," Balducci said. "I like you and you must understand. There's only a dozen of us at El Ameur to patrol throughout the whole territory of a small department[4] and I must get back in a hurry. I was told to hand this guy over to you and return without delay. He couldn't be kept there. His village was beginning to stir; they wanted to take him back. You must take him to Tinguit tomorrow before the day is over. Twenty kilometers shouldn't faze a husky fellow like you. After that, all will be over. You'll come back to your pupils and your comfortable life."

Behind the wall the horse could be heard snorting and pawing the earth. Daru was looking out the window. Decidedly, the weather was clearing and the light was increasing over the snowy plateau. When all the snow was melted, the sun would take over again and once more would burn the fields of stone. For days, still, the unchanging sky would shed its dry light on the solitary expanse where nothing had any connection with man.

"After all," he said, turning around toward Balducci, "what did he do?" And, before the gendarme had opened his mouth, he asked: "Does he speak French?"

"No, not a word. We had been looking for him for a month, but they were hiding him. He killed his cousin."

[4] **department:** A territorial unit.

"Is he against us?"

"I don't think so. But you can never be sure."

"Why did he kill?"

"A family squabble, I think. One owed the other grain, it seems. It's not at all clear. In short, he killed his cousin with a billhook. You know, like a sheep, *kreezk!*"

Balducci made the gesture of drawing a blade across his throat and the Arab, his attention attracted, watched him with a sort of anxiety. Daru felt a sudden wrath against the man, against all men with their rotten spite, their tireless hates, their blood lust.

But the kettle was singing on the stove. He served Balducci more tea, hesitated, then served the Arab again, who, a second time, drank avidly. His raised arms made the jellaba fall open and the schoolmaster saw his thin, muscular chest.

"Thanks, kid," Balducci said. "And now, I'm off."

He got up and went toward the Arab, taking a small rope from his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Daru asked dryly.

Balducci, disconcerted, showed him the rope.

"Don't bother."

The old gendarme hesitated. "It's up to you. Of course, you are armed?"

"I have my shotgun."

"Where?"

"In the trunk."

"You ought to have it near your bed."

"Why? I have nothing to fear."

"You're crazy, son. If there's an uprising, no one is safe, we're all in the same boat."

"I'll defend myself. I'll have time to see them coming."

Balducci began to laugh, then suddenly the mustache covered the white teeth.

"You'll have time? O.K. That's just what I was saying. You have always been a little cracked. That's why I like you, my son was like that."

At the same time he took out his revolver and put it on the desk.

"Keep it; I don't need two weapons from here to El Ameur."

The revolver shone against the black paint of the table. When the gendarme turned toward him, the schoolmaster caught the smell of leather and horseflesh.

"Listen, Balducci," Daru said suddenly, "every bit of this disgusts me, and first of all your fellow here. But I won't hand him over. Fight, yes, if I have to. But not that."

The old gendarme stood in front of him and looked at him severely.

"You're being a fool," he said slowly. "I don't like it either. You don't get used to putting a rope on a man even after years of it, and you're even ashamed—yes, ashamed. But you can't let them have their way."

"I won't hand him over," Daru said again.

"It's an order, son, and I repeat it."

"That's right. Repeat to them what I've said to you: I won't hand him over."

Balducci made a visible effort to reflect. He looked at the Arab and at Daru. At last he decided.

"No, I won't tell them anything. If you want to drop us, go ahead; I'll not denounce you. I have an order to deliver the prisoner and I'm doing so. And now you'll just sign this paper for me."

"There's no need. I'll not deny that you left him with me."

"Don't be mean with me. I know you'll tell the truth. You're from hereabouts and you are a man. But you must sign, that's the rule."

Daru opened his drawer, took out a little square bottle of purple ink, the red wooden penholder with the "sergeant-major" pen he used for making models of penmanship, and signed. The gendarme carefully folded the paper and put it into his wallet. Then he moved toward the door.

"I'll see you off," Daru said.

"No," said Balducci. "There's no use being polite. You insulted me."

He looked at the Arab, motionless in the same spot, sniffed peevishly, and turned away toward the door. "Good-by, son," he said. The door shut behind him. Balducci appeared suddenly outside the window and then disappeared. His footsteps were muffled by the snow. The horse stirred on the other side of the wall and several chickens fluttered in fright. A moment later Balducci reappeared outside the window leading the horse by the bridle. He walked toward the little rise without turning around and disappeared from sight with the horse following him. A big stone could be heard bouncing down. Daru walked back toward the prisoner, who, without stirring, never took his eyes off him. "Wait," the schoolmaster said in Arabic and went toward the bedroom. As he was going through the door, he had a second thought, went to the desk, took the revolver, and stuck it in his pocket. Then, without looking back, he went into his room.

For some time he lay on his couch watching the sky gradually close over, listening to the silence. It was this silence that had seemed painful to him during the first days here, after the war. He had requested a post in the little town at the base of the foothills separating the upper plateaus from the desert. There, rocky walls, green and black to the north, pink and lavender to the south, marked the frontier of eternal summer. He had been named to a post farther north, on the plateau itself. In the beginning, the solitude and the silence had been hard for him on these wastelands peopled only by stones. Occasionally, furrows suggested cultivation, but they had been dug to uncover a certain kind of stone good for building. The only plowing here was to harvest rocks. Elsewhere a thin layer of soil accumulated in the hollows would be scraped out to enrich paltry village gardens. This is the way it was: Bare rock covered three quarters of the region. Towns sprang up, flourished, then disappeared; men came by, loved one another or fought bitterly, then died. No one in this desert, neither he nor his guest, mattered. And yet, outside this desert neither of them, Daru knew, could have really lived.

When he got up, no noise came from the classroom. He was amazed at the unmixed joy he derived from the mere thought that the Arab might have fled and that he would be alone with no decision to make. But the prisoner was there. He had merely stretched out between the stove and the desk. With eyes open, he was staring at the ceiling. In that position, his thick lips were particularly noticeable, giving him a pouting look. "Come," said Daru. The Arab got up and followed him. In the bedroom, the schoolmaster pointed to a chair near the table under the window. The Arab sat down without taking his eyes off Daru.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," the prisoner said.

Daru set the table for two. He took flour and oil, shaped a cake in a frying-pan, and lighted the little stove that functioned on bottled gas. While the cake was cooking, he went out to the shed to get cheese, eggs, dates, and condensed milk. When the cake was done he set it on the window sill to cool, heated some condensed milk diluted with water, and beat up the eggs into an omelette. In one of his motions he knocked against the revolver stuck in his right pocket. He set the bowl down, went into the classroom, and put the revolver in his desk drawer. When he came back to the room, night was falling. He put on the light and served the Arab. "Eat," he said. The Arab took a piece of the cake, lifted it eagerly to his mouth, and stopped short.

"And you?" he asked.

"After you. I'll eat too."

The thick lips opened slightly. The Arab hesitated, then bit into the cake determinedly.

The meal over, the Arab looked at the schoolmaster. "Are you the judge?"

"No, I'm simply keeping you until tomorrow."

"Why do you eat with me?"

"I'm hungry."

The Arab fell silent. Daru got up and went out. He brought back a folding bed from the shed, set it up between the table and the stove, perpendicular to his own bed. From a large suitcase which, upright in a corner, served as a shelf for papers, he took two blankets and arranged them on the camp bed. Then he stopped, felt useless, and sat down on his bed. There was nothing more to do or to get ready. He had to look at this man. He looked at him, therefore, trying to imagine his face bursting with rage. He couldn't do so. He could see nothing but the dark yet shining eyes and the animal mouth.

"Why did you kill him?" he asked in a voice whose hostile tone surprised him.

The Arab looked away.

"He ran away. I ran after him."

He raised his eyes to Daru again and they were full of a sort of woeful interrogation. "Now what will they do to me?"

"Are you afraid?"

He stiffened, turning his eyes away.

"Are you sorry?"

The Arab stared at him openmouthed. Obviously he did not understand. Daru's annoyance was growing. At the same time he felt awkward and self-conscious with his big body wedged between the two beds.

"Lie down there," he said impatiently. "That's your bed."

The Arab didn't move. He called to Daru:

"Tell me!"

The schoolmaster looked at him.

"Is the gendarme coming back tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"Are you coming with us?"

"I don't know. Why?"

The prisoner got up and stretched out on top of the blankets, his feet toward the window. The light from the electric bulb shone straight into his eyes and he closed them at once.

"Why?" Daru repeated, standing beside the bed.

The Arab opened his eyes under the blinding light and looked at him, trying not to blink.

"Come with us," he said.

In the middle of the night, Daru was still not asleep. He had gone to bed after undressing completely; he generally slept naked. But when he suddenly realized that he had nothing on, he hesitated. He felt vulnerable and the temptation came to him to put his clothes back on. Then he shrugged his shoulders; after all, he wasn't a child and, if need be, he could break his adversary in two. From his bed he could observe him, lying on his back, still motionless with his eyes closed under the harsh light. When Daru turned out the light, the darkness seemed to coagulate all of a sudden. Little by little, the night came back to life in the window where the starless sky was stirring gently. The schoolmaster soon made out the body lying at his feet. The Arab still did not move, but his eyes seemed open. A faint wind was prowling around the schoolhouse. Perhaps it would drive away the clouds and the sun would reappear.

During the night the wind increased. The hens fluttered a little and then were silent. The Arab turned over on his side with his back to Daru, who thought he heard him moan. Then he listened for his guest's breathing, become heavier and more regular. He listened to that breath so close to him and mused without being able to go to sleep. In this room where he had been sleeping alone for a year, this presence bothered him. But it bothered him also by imposing on him a sort of brotherhood he knew well but refused to accept in the present circumstances. Men who share the same rooms, soldiers or prisoners, develop a strange alliance as if, having cast off their armor with their clothing, they fraternized every evening, over and above their differences, in the ancient community of dream and fatigue. But Daru shook himself; he didn't like such musings, and it was essential to sleep.

A little later, however, when the Arab stirred slightly, the schoolmaster was still not asleep. When the prisoner made a second move, he stiffened, on the alert. The Arab was lifting himself slowly on his arms with almost the motion of a sleepwalker. Seated upright in bed, he waited motionless without turning his head toward Daru, as if he were listening attentively. Daru did not stir; it had just occurred to him that the revolver was still in the drawer of his desk. It was better to act at once. Yet he continued to observe the prisoner, who, with the same slithery motion, put his feet on the ground, waited again, then began to stand up slowly. Daru was about to call out to him when the Arab began to walk, in a quite natural but extraordinarily silent way. He was heading toward the door at the end of the room that opened into the shed. He lifted the latch with precaution and went out, pushing the door behind him but without shutting it. Daru had not stirred. "He is running away," he merely thought. "Good riddance!" Yet he listened attentively. The hens were not fluttering; the guest must be on the plateau. A faint sound of water reached him, and he didn't know what it was until the Arab again stood framed in the doorway, closed the door carefully, and came back to bed without a sound. Then Daru turned his back on him

and fell asleep. Still later he seemed, from the depths of his sleep, to hear furtive steps around the schoolhouse. "I'm dreaming! I'm dreaming!" he repeated to himself. And he went on sleeping.

When he awoke, the sky was clear; the loose window let in a cold, pure air. The Arab was asleep, hunched up under the blankets now, his mouth open, utterly relaxed. But when Daru shook him, he started dreadfully, staring at Daru with wild eyes as if he had never seen him and such a frightened expression that the schoolmaster stepped back. "Don't be afraid. It's me. You must eat." The Arab nodded his head and said yes. Calm had returned to his face, but his expression was vacant and listless.

The coffee was ready. They drank it seated together on the folding bed as they munched their pieces of the cake. Then Daru led the Arab under the shed and showed him the faucet where he washed. He went back into the room, folded the blankets and the bed, made his own bed, and put the room in order. Then he went through the classroom and out onto the terrace. The sun was already rising in the blue sky; a soft, bright light was bathing the deserted plateau. On the ridge the snow was melting in spots. The stones were about to reappear. Crouched on the edge of the plateau, the schoolmaster looked at the deserted expanse. He thought of Balducci. He had hurt him, for he had sent him off in a way as if he didn't want to be associated with him. He could still hear the gendarme's farewell and, without knowing why, he felt strangely empty and vulnerable. At that moment, from the other side of the schoolhouse, the prisoner coughed. Daru listened to him almost despite himself and then, furious, threw a pebble that whistled through the air before sinking into the snow. That man's stupid crime revolted him, but to hand him over was contrary to honor, Merely thinking of it made him smart with humiliation. And he cursed at one and the same time his own people who had sent him this Arab and the Arab too who had dared to kill and not managed to get away. Daru got up, walked in a circle on the terrace, waited motionless, then went back into the schoolhouse.

The Arab, leaning over the cement floor of the shed, was washing his teeth with two fingers. Daru looked at him and said: "Come." He went back into the room ahead of the prisoner. He slipped a hunting-jacket on over his sweater and put on walking-shoes. Standing, he waited until the Arab had put on his *chèche* and sandals. They went into the classroom and the schoolmaster pointed to the exit, saying: "Go ahead." The fellow didn't budge. "I'm coming," said Daru. The Arab went out. Daru went back into the room and made a package of pieces of rusk, dates, and sugar. In the classroom, before going out, he hesitated a second in front of his desk, then crossed the threshold and locked the door. "That's the way," he said. He started toward the east, followed by the prisoner. But, a short distance from the schoolhouse, he thought he heard a slight sound behind them. He retraced his steps and examined the surroundings of the house, there was no one there. The Arab watched him without seeming to understand. "Come on," said Daru.

They walked for an hour and rested beside a sharp peak of limestone. The snow was melting faster and faster and the sun was drinking up the puddles at once, rapidly cleaning the plateau, which gradually dried and vibrated like the air itself. When they resumed walking, the ground rang under their feet. From time to time a bird rent the space in front of them with a joyful cry. Daru breathed in deeply the fresh morning light. He felt a sort of rapture before the vast familiar expanse, now almost entirely yellow under its dome of blue sky. They walked an hour more, descending toward the south. They reached a level height made up of crumbly rocks. From there on, the plateau sloped down, eastward, toward a low plain where there were a few spindly trees and, to the south, toward outcroppings of rock that gave the landscape a chaotic look.

Daru surveyed the two directions. There was nothing but the sky on the horizon. Not a man could be seen. He turned toward the Arab, who was looking at him blankly. Daru held out the package to him. "Take it," he said. "There are dates, bread, and sugar. You can hold out for two days. Here are a thousand francs too." The Arab took the package and the money but kept his full hands at chest level as if he didn't know what to do with what was being given him. "Now look," the schoolmaster said as he pointed in the direction of the east, "there's the way to Tinguit. You have a two-hour walk. At Tinguit you'll find the administration and the police. They are expecting you." The Arab looked toward the east, still holding the package and the money against his chest. Daru took his elbow and turned him rather roughly toward the south. At the foot of the height on which they stood could be seen a faint path. "That's the trail across the plateau. In a day's walk from here you'll find pasturelands and the first nomads. They'll take you in and shelter you according to their law." The Arab had now turned toward Daru and a sort of panic was visible in his expression. "Listen," he said. Daru shook his head: "No, be quiet. Now I'm leaving you." He turned his back on him, took two long steps in the direction of the school, looked hesitantly at the motionless Arab, and started off again. For a few minutes he heard nothing but his own step resounding on the cold ground and did not turn his head. A moment later, however, he turned around. The Arab was still there on the edge of the hill, his arms hanging now, and he was looking at the schoolmaster. Daru felt something rise in his throat. But he swore with impatience, waved vaguely, and started off again. He had already gone some distance when he again stopped and looked. There was no longer anyone on the hill.

Daru hesitated. The sun was now rather high in the sky and was beginning to beat down on his head. The schoolmaster retraced his steps, at first somewhat uncertainly, then with decision. When he reached the little hill, he was bathed in sweat. He climbed it as fast as he could and stopped, out of breath, at the top. The rock-fields to the south stood out sharply against the blue sky, but on the plain to the east a steamy heat was already rising. And in that slight haze, Daru, with heavy heart, made out the Arab walking slowly on the road to prison.

A little later, standing before the window of the classroom, the schoolmaster was watching the clear light bathing the whole surface of the plateau, but he hardly saw it. Behind him on the blackboard, among the winding French rivers, sprawled the clumsily chalked-up words he had just read: "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this." Daru looked at the sky, the plateau, and, beyond, the invisible lands stretching all the way to the sea. In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone.

And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Not that great German master[2] in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

[2] German master: Probably German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827).

Claude McKay

B. Jamaica, 1889–1948

Claude McKay began writing poems in Caribbean dialect while still a child. Recognized by the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences for two volumes of poetry he published in 1912, McKay was awarded a scholarship to study in the United States. After two years of studying agriculture at Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University, McKay went to New York, where he became a writer and editor for radical journals. His most important collection of poems, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), was published at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. His short and very intense lyric poetry is technically conservative, following English literary forms, but politically radical: McKay was the most militant writer of the Harlem Renaissance.

McKay left New York in 1923, living abroad in France, Britain, and North Africa, where he published several novels including *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929). In identifying McKay as the spiritual founder of the Négritude movement, Léopold Senghor said,

> Claude McKay can rightfully be considered the true inventor of Négritude. I speak not of the word, but of the values of Négritude. . . . Far from seeing in one's blackness an inferiority, one accepts it, one lays claim to it with pride, one cultivates it lovingly.

McKay's novel *Banjo* was particularly influential for the Négritude writers, who responded to its frank and affirmative treatment of blackness.



James L. Allen, *Claude McKay*
McKay wrote novels and short stories as well as poetry. (Photographs and Print Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

To the White Fiends

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?
Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match—out-match: am I not Afric's son,
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?
But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!

Harlem Shadows

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

Outcast

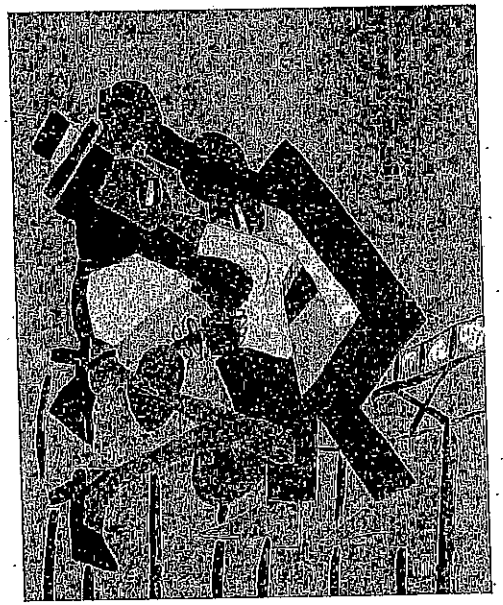
For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.

For I was born, far from my native clime,
Under the white man's menace, out of time.

Langston Hughes

b. United States, 1902–1967

Langston Hughes was born and raised in the Midwest, influenced by such writers as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg. After attending Columbia University briefly in 1922, he left school and worked his way across the Atlantic to Europe and Africa on a freighter. His first book of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1925), reveals his fascination with jazz and the blues as well as the spirituals of his youth. Besides twelve volumes of poetry, Hughes wrote novels, plays, essays, and historical works. He is perhaps best known for his short stories, many of which are included in a late collection, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956). Known for his generosity and his support of many younger writers, Hughes defended the right of young black authors "to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." An early star of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes dedicated "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to W. E. B. Du Bois. In that poem Hughes traces his heritage by associating the Mississippi, the river near his childhood home in St. Louis, with rivers in Africa and the Middle East.



William H. Johnson, *Jitterbugs*, 1940–45. Oil on plywood
Johnson, a painter during the Harlem Renaissance, was known for his renderings of black New York nightlife. Jazz figured greatly in his work, as it did in the poetry of his friend Langston Hughes. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/ Art Resource, NY)

Léopold Sédar Senghor

b. Senegal, 1906–2001

Quite simply, *négritude* is the *sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world.*

– Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la Politique Africaine*, 1962

Léopold Sédar Senghor, the son of a wealthy Catholic merchant, was born in 1906 in Joal, a predominantly Muslim port town in Senegal. As a child, Senghor received a traditional African education as well as a formal introduction to European culture. Eventually, he completed his education, first at the Lycée Louis le Grand and later at the Sorbonne. In Paris Senghor joined with other French-speaking African and Caribbean writers, including Aimé Césaire (b. 1913) from Martinique, to lay the foundations of what would become known as the Négritude movement. Together Senghor, Césaire, and Léon Damas founded *Black Student* (*L'Étudiant noir*), a journal exploring questions of race and celebrating African culture. After obtaining the equivalent of a master's degree from the Sorbonne in 1932 with a thesis on Baudelaire, Senghor went on to become the first African to receive the prestigious *agrégation*, a fellowship for advanced study in France, for which he had to become a French citizen.

Senghor's teaching career was interrupted by World War II; he fought on the northern front and was captured by the Germans in 1940. While in the prison camps, Senghor wrote many of the poems that would later appear in *Shadow Songs* (*Chants d'ombre*, 1945) and *Black Hosts* (*Hosties noires*, 1948). Released in 1942, Senghor returned to teaching and in 1944 became the Professor of African Languages at the École Nationale de la France d'Outre Mer (National School of the Overseas French Territories). After the war Senghor entered a new phase of his career, publishing *Chants d'ombre* and being elected to the French Constituent Assembly as a deputy for Senegal.

Starting in his student years, Senghor wrote for and organized the then-burgeoning Négritude movement. In addition to founding the short-lived journal *L'Étudiant noir*, Senghor helped to found two other journals, *The Human Condition* (*Condition humaine*) and *African Presence* (*Présencè Africaine*). Throughout his career, Senghor's writings celebrated Africa's cultural heritage and attempted to promote a new view of African culture and society.

In 1948, the year he published his second collection of poetry, *Hosties noires*, Senghor also published *Anthology of the New Black and Madagascan Poetry* (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*) with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's introduction to the groundbreaking work that brought together works of French-speaking black writers articulated for the first time the constituent features of Négritude and its historical and cultural importance. *Songs for Naett* (*Chants pour Naëtt*), Senghor's third volume of poetry, appeared in 1949; his next book of poems, *Ethiopiques*, would not appear until 1960, as he devoted much time and energy to politics. In the forties and fifties, Senghor founded several political parties and sat on various political committees. Representing the interests of Senegal in particular and French Africa in general, Senghor attempted to reshape the relationship between France and its

colonies into one of an equal balance of power. After Senegal finally won its independence in 1960, Senghor was elected president of that nation, holding the position until 1981 when he retired.

In the selection that follows, Senghor's definition of Négritude comes from his essay "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la Politique Africaine" ("Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and African Politics"), published in 1962.

All notes are the editors'.

Négritude

Translated by John Reed and Clive Wake

It is time to define this word which so lends itself to polemical and to contradictory interpretations. Quite simply, *négritude* is the *sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world.* It is not racialism, it is culture. It is the embracing and domination of a situation in order to apprehend the cosmos by the process of coming to terms with it. Because it is a symbiosis of particular determinisms . . . geographical and ethnic . . . *négritude* is rooted in these and takes from them the color of its original style. But historically, it does this in order to transcend these, as life transcends the matter from which it arises. This Teilhardian[1] concept of *négritude* was not however at the outset, in the years from 1928 to 1935, to be our own. *Négritude* as we had then begun to conceive and define it was a weapon of defense and attack and inspiration rather than an instrument of construction. Of its values we held on only to those which were opposed to the values of Europe, to the reason which is discursive, logical, instrumental, chrematistic. *Négritude* then was intuitive reason, reason which is embrace and not reason which is eye. More precisely, it was *the communal warmth, the image-symbol and the cosmic rhythm which instead of dividing and sterilizing, unified and made fertile.*

[1]Teilhardian: Refers to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Jesuit philosopher and scientist who promulgated an evolutionary theory of the development of the collective spiritual consciousness of mankind and of the earth itself.

Black Woman

Translated by Melvin Dixon

Naked woman, black woman
Dressed in your color[1] that is life, in your form that is beauty!
I grew up in your shadow. The softness of your hands
Shielded my eyes, and now at the height of Summer and Noon,

[1]your color: Both the green of the African landscape and the black of the woman's skin.

bark bark bark
and the owl[11] my beautiful inquisitive angel may hoot.
The master of laughter?
The master of ominous silence?
The master of hope and despair?
The master of laziness? Master of the dance?
It is I!
and for this reason, Lord,
the frail-necked men
receive and perceive deadly triangular calm[12]

Rally to my side my dances
you bad nigger dances
the carcan-cracker dance[13]
the prison-break dance
the it-is-beautiful-good-and-legitimate-to-be-a-nigger-dance
Rally to my side my dances and let the sun bounce on the racket of my hands

but no the unequal sun is not enough for me
coil, wind, around my new growth
light on my cadenced fingers
to you I surrender my conscience and its fleshy rhythm
to you I surrender the fire in which my weakness smolders
to you I surrender the "chain-gang"
to you the swamps
to you the nontourist of the triangular circuit
devour wind
to you I surrender my abrupt words
devour and encoil yourself
and self-encoiling embrace me with a more ample shudder
embrace me unto furious us
embrace, embrace US
but after having drawn from us blood
drawn by our own blood!
embrace, my purity mingles only with yours
so then embrace
like a field of even filagos[14]
at dusk

[11] the owl: Césaire's guardian angel.

[12] triangular calm: Césaire associates the triangular slave trade—operating between Europe, Africa, and America—with the Christian Holy Trinity, traditionally represented by a triangle.

[13] carcan-cracker dance: The carcan was an iron collar fixed around the necks of slaves, and this dance was a dance of freedom.

[14] filagos: Casuarina trees.

our multicolored purities
and bind, bind me without remorse
bind me with your vast arms to the luminous clay
bind my black vibration to the very navel of the world
bind, bind me, bitter brotherhood
then, strangling me with your lasso of stars
rise,
Dove[15]
rise
rise
rise
I follow you who are imprinted on my ancestral white cornea.
rise sky licker
and the great black hole where a moon ago I wanted to drown it is there I will now
fish the malevolent tongue of the night in its motionless veerition![16]

[15] Dove: The Christian symbol of the Pentecost.

[16] veerition: Coined from the Latin verb *verri*, meaning "to sweep," "to scrape a surface," and ultimately "to scan." (Translators' note.)

Okot p'Bitek

b. Uganda, 1931–1982

Ugandan poet and novelist Okot p'Bitek combined soccer playing with writing as a young man. When he went to England with the Ugandan national team in 1958, he stayed there for several years, earning degrees in education from Bristol University, in law from the University of Wales, and in anthropology from Oxford. Returning to Africa, he taught at Makerere University in Uganda and Nairobi University in Kenya. His most famous works, from which the selections here are taken, are two long poems written in the traditional song style of Acholi, Okot p'Bitek's native town. *Song of Lawino* (1969) is a woman's extended lament about her college-educated husband, who has abandoned her for Western ways and a Westernized woman. In *Song of Ocol* (1970), the woman's husband responds, decrying the backwardness of his wife and praising European customs and values. This argument between husband and wife articulates the debate over the same issues taking place throughout Africa.

A note on the translation: These poems, written in Okot p'Bitek's native language of Acholi, have been translated into English by the author. All notes are the editors'.

FROM

Song of Lawino

My Husband's Tongue Is Bitter

Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief,
Now you compare me
With the rubbish in the rubbish pit,
You say you no longer want me
Because I am like the things left behind
In the deserted homestead.
You insult me
You laugh at me
You say I do not know the letter A
Because I have not been to school
And I have not been baptized
You compare me with a little dog,
A puppy.

My friend, age-mate of my brother,
Take care,
Take care of your tongue,
Be careful what your lips say.

First take a deep look, brother,
You are now a man
You are not a dead fruit!
To behave like a child does not befit you!

Listen Ocol, you are the son of a Chief,
Leave foolish behavior to little children,
It is not right that you should be laughed at in a song!
Songs about you should be songs of praise!

Stop despising people
As if you were a little foolish man,
Stop treating me like a saltless ash[1]

[1] saltless ash: The ash remaining after salt has been removed from it.

Become barren of insults and stupidity;
Who has ever uprooted the Pumpkin?

My clansmen, I cry
Listen to my voice:
The insults of my man
Are painful beyond bearing.

My husband abuses me together with my parents;
He says terrible things about my mother
And I am so ashamed!

He abuses me in English
And he is so arrogant.

He says I am rubbish,
He no longer wants me!
In cruel jokes, he laughs at me,
He says I am primitive
Because I cannot play the guitar,
He says my eyes are dead
And I cannot read,
He says my ears are blocked
And cannot hear a single foreign word,
That I cannot count the coins.
He says I am like sheep,
The fool,

Ocol treats me
As if I am no longer a person,
He says I am silly
Like the *ojuu* insects that sit on the beer pot
My husband treats me roughly.
The insults!
Words cut more painfully than sticks!
He says my mother is a witch,
That my clansmen are fools
Because they eat rats,
He says we are all Kaffirs.[2]
We do not know the ways of God,
We sit in deep darkness

[2] Kaffirs: Arabic for "nonbelievers."

And do not know the Gospel,
He says my mother hides her charms
In her necklace
And that we are all sorcerers.

My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the *lyonno* lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee,
Like the sting of the *kalang*[3]
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the arrow of the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet.
It is ferocious
Like the poison of a barren woman
And corrosive like the juice of the gourd.

My husband pours scorn
On Black People,
He behaves like a hen
That eats its own eggs
A hen that should be imprisoned under a basket.

His eyes grow large
Deep black eyes
Ocol's eyes resemble those of the Nile Perch!
He becomes fierce
Like a lioness with cubs,
He begins to behave like a mad hyena.

He says Black People are primitive
And their ways are utterly harmful,
Their dances are mortal sins
They are ignorant, poor, and diseased!

Ocol says he is a modern man,
A progressive and civilized man,
He says he has read extensively and widely
And he can no longer live with a thing like me
Who cannot distinguish between good and bad,

He says I am just a village woman,
I am of the old type,
And no longer attractive.

[3] *kalang:* A large African fruit bat.

He says I am blocking his progress,
My head, he says,
Is as big as that of an elephant
But it is only bones,
There is no brain in it,
He says I am only wasting his time.

FROM

Song of Ocol

What Is Africa to Me?

What is Africa
To me?

Blackness,
Deep, deep fathomless
Darkness;

Africa,
Idle giant
Basking in the sun,
Sleeping, snoring,
Twitching in dreams;

Diseased with a chronic illness,
Choking with black ignorance,
Chained to the rock
Of poverty,
And yet laughing,
Always laughing and dancing,
The chains on his legs
Jangling;

Displaying his white teeth
In bright pink gum,
Loose white teeth
That cannot bite,
Joking, giggling, dancing . . .

Stuck in the stagnant mud
Of superstitions,
Frightened by the spirits
Of the bush, the stream,

The rock,
Scared of corpses . . .

He hears eerie noises
From the lakeside
And from the mountain top,
Sees snakes
In the whirlwind
And at both ends
Of the rainbow;

The caves house his gods
Or he carries them
On his head
Or on his shoulder
As he roams the wilderness,
Led by his cattle,
Or following the spoor
Of the elephant
That he has speared
But could not *kill*;

Child,
Lover of toys,
Look at his toy weapons,
His utensils, his hut . . .
Toy garden, toy chickens,
Toy cattle,
Toy children . . .

Timid,
Unadventurous,
Scared of the unbeaten track,
Unweaned,
Clinging to mother's milkless breasts
Clinging to brother,
To uncle, to clan,
To tribe

To blackness,

To Africa,

Africa
This rich granary

Of taboos, customs,
Traditions . . .

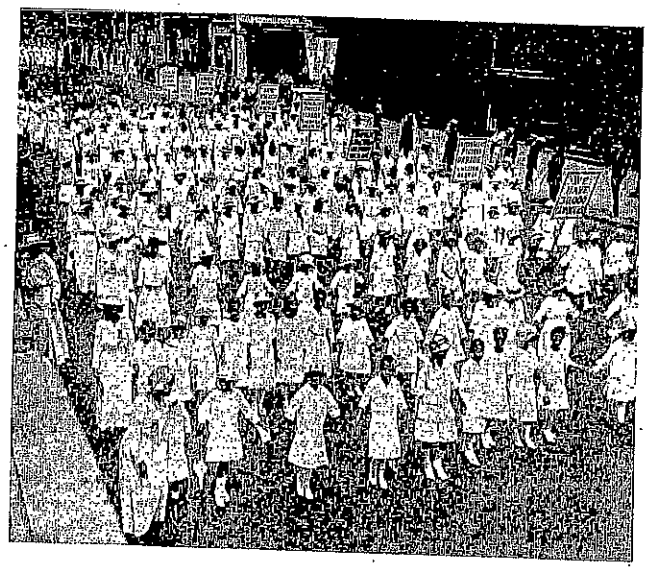
Mother, mother,
Why,
Why was I born
Black?

James Baldwin

B. United States, 1924–1987

As one of the most important black writers of the civil rights era of the 1960s, James Baldwin commented on nearly all of the racial controversies of his time. In 1956 he was asked to report on the first Conference of Black Writers held in Paris, a meeting that sought to articulate a unified voice for black writers worldwide. In the section of his essay included here, Baldwin ponders whether there is a common black culture shared by Africans, African Americans, and blacks from around the world. Unlike Senghor and the spokesmen for the Négritude movement, Baldwin is skeptical that such a culture exists.

All notes are the editors'.



Children in the Silent Protest Parade, 1917
A silent march, part of which is captured in this photograph, was held on July 28, 1917, in Harlem to protest a massacre in East St. Louis and lynchings in Waco, Texas. (Manuscripts, Archives & Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

nal twenty-one—all boys and all of them with the same mother. Jake was the baby. The baby and the wife were right next to him when he flew off."

"When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?"

"No, I mean flew. Oh, it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There's a big double-headed rock over the valley named for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife. I guess you could say 'wife.' Anyway she's supposed to have screamed out loud for days. And there's a ravine near here they call Ryna's Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it's the wife, Solomon's wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?"

She talked on and on while Milkman sat back and listened to gossip, stories, legends, speculations. His mind was ahead of hers, behind hers, with hers, and bit by bit, with what she said, what he knew, and what he guessed, he put it all together.

Sing had said she was going to a Quaker school, but she joined Jake on his wagonful of ex-slaves heading for Boston or somewhere. They must have dropped their passengers all along the way. And then Jake, at the reins, took a wrong turn, because he couldn't read, and they ended up in Pennsylvania.

"But there's a children's game they play around here. And in the game they sing, 'Jake the *only* son of Solomon.' *Only.*" He looked at her, hoping she wouldn't mind the interruption.

"Well, they're wrong. He wasn't the only son. There were twenty others. But he was the only one Solomon tried to take with him. Maybe that's what it means. He lifted him up, but dropped him near the porch of the big house. That's where Heddy found him. She used to come over there and help with the soapmaking and the candlemaking. She wasn't a slave, but she worked over at the big house certain times of year. She was melting tallow when she looked up and saw this man holding a baby and flying toward the ridge. He brushed too close to a tree and the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. He was unconscious, but the trees saved him from dying. Heddy ran over and picked him up. She didn't have any male children, like I said, just a little bitty girl, and this one just dropped out of the sky almost in her lap. She never named him anything different; she was afraid to do that. She found out the baby was Ryna's, but Ryna was out of her mind. Heddy lived a good ways off from the place Solomon and them others worked on. She tried to keep the girl away from that place too. And you can imagine how she felt when both of them ran off. Just my father was left."

"Did Jake have to register at the Freedmen's Bureau before he left the state?"

"Everybody did. Everybody who had been slaves, that is. Whether they left the state or not. But we were never slaves, so—"

"You told me that. Weren't any of Jake's brothers registering too?"

"I couldn't say. Those must have been some times, back then. Some bad times. It's a wonder anybody knows who anybody is."

"You've helped me a lot, Miss Byrd. I'm grateful." He thought then about asking her if she had a photo album. He wanted to see Sing, Crowell, even Heddy. But he decided against it. She might start asking him questions, and he didn't want to trouble her with a new-found relative who was as black as Jake.

"Now, that's not the woman you're looking for, is it? Pilate?"

"No," he said. "Couldn't be." He made motions of departure and then remembered his watch.

"By the way, did I leave my watch here? I'd like it back."

"Watch?"

"Yes. Your friend wanted to see it. Miss Long. I handed it to her but I forgot—" Milkman stopped. Susan Byrd was laughing out loud.

"Well, you can say goodbye to it, Mr. Macon. Grace will go to dinner all over the county telling people about the watch you gave her."

"What?"

"Well, you know. She doesn't mean any real harm, but it's a quiet place. We don't have many visitors, especially young men who wear gold watches and have northern accents. I'll get it back for you."

Chinweizu

b. Nigeria, 1943

Onwuchekwa Jemie

Ihechukwu Madubuike

In their sometimes controversial book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (1980), Nigerian scholars and critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike articulate an African perspective on Africa and its literature. Since earlier writing on these topics was done by Western critics and blacks in the diaspora, these three native authors set out to challenge the existing scholarship, in which they saw both white imperialism and black romanticism. In the excerpt that follows, they call for "critical realism" in the treatment of Africa and its literature.

All notes are the editors'.

The African Writer and the African Past

In contemporary African literature and criticism there have been three dominant attitudes towards the African past: shamefaced rejection; romantic embrace; and realistic appraisal. Those who reject the African past and would have as little to do with it as possible are those who, shamed by imperialist propaganda and misrepresentation, would wish to forget it entirely and to hurry off into a euromodernist African future. Prominent among them are those champions of tigritude, those African neo-Tarzanists who dismiss African literature that deals with the African past as a "literature of self-worship," a literature of narcissism. Against this school of thought headed by Wole Soyinka,[1] it must be emphasized that since our past has been vilified by imperialism, and since an imperialist education has tried to equip us with all manner of absurd views and reactions to our past, we do need to reclaim and rehabilitate our genuine past, to repossess our true and entire history in order to acquire a secure launching pad into our future. Thus, a concern with our past will never be out of place.

Those African writers and critics who understand the need for us to repossess and rehabilitate our past have approached it with either romanticism or critical realism. In our view, there are excellent grounds for avoiding a romanticization of our past and for according it a critical and realistic appraisal. Most important is the fact that we cannot afford to build on misinformation, and romanticism has a tendency to put misleading glosses upon whatever it gazes upon. In this regard, the romanticism of the negritude school is notorious. But before proceeding to examine this, we should first disentangle three important aspects of negritude and state our attitudes to them.

First, there is its African nationalist consciousness which revolts against European cultural imperialism. As we argued earlier, an active African nationalist consciousness is indispensable to the task of African liberation. For its stand and contributions in this department, African nationalism is indebted to negritude. To its champions we offer our salute!

The second important aspect of negritude is its concern with recapturing for modern literature the technical repertory of traditional African orature. This again is a crucial project in cultural retrieval. Without it, the task of ensuring continuity between traditional and modern African culture would be practically impossible. For its pioneering efforts in this department, African nationalism is again indebted to negritude. To its champions, we also offer our salute!

The third important aspect of negritude is the image of traditional Africa which it has held up to view. This is highly questionable. In reaction to colonial insults the

[1] **Wole Soyinka** (b. 1934; see p. 1141): Nigerian playwright and novelist. In "Myth, Literature, and the African World" (1976), Soyinka attacks the Négritude writers, stating that "the tiger does not stalk about crying his tigritude."

negritude poets generally salve their wounds with extravagant nostalgia for a vaguely conceived past. But ought we to persist in this disservice to our past, and even to our present? Was our past one uninterrupted orgy of sensuality? One boring canvas of idyllic goodness, fraternity, and harmony? Were our ancestors a parade of plaster saints who never, among themselves, struck a blow, or hurt a fly, and who suffered all psychic and physical pain gladly and cheerfully, or never suffered at all?

No doubt, at its inception, even this romanticism filled a historic need. It was an understandably extreme reaction, offering blanket praise in retort to Europe's blanket condemnation of Africa. But that mythical portrait of traditional Africa can prove to be a new prison. In the task of decolonization we cannot afford an uncritical glorification of the past. We may brandish our memories of empires of ages ago as shields against Western disparagement, but we also know that before colonialism came there was slavery. Who hunted the slaves? And who sold them for guns, trinkets, and gin? And the African attitudes and roles which made that slave trade possible, are they not part of that nostalgic past? Are those attitudes not still with us, poisoning our present? How much of this illusion of purity and sanctity can survive the events of the past two decades? After all, "When a nigger kicks a nigger / Where is the negritude?" (Madubuike). Even though other parts of the blame belong elsewhere, we cannot deny our own share of the responsibility.

As regards the arts, romanticism of the negritude kind, because it venerates what it considers a gold past, could discourage our use of exemplars from that past as points of contemporary departure. By encouraging the minting of facsimiles, it could imprison the contemporary imagination in a bygone era. As has happened in the plastic arts, especially in the lamentable case of airport art, the romantic minting of facsimiles from a golden past could saddle us with anachronistic imagery, and prevent the evolution of new literary forms out of the old, resulting in a fossilization of forms and a literary stasis.

In contrast, critical realism, because it does not spread a gloss of sanctity on the past, does not extol every aspect of it. It is content to praise what it sees as praiseworthy, and to dispraise what it sees as not praiseworthy. It thereby treats our past like any other valid era of culture. This enables us to see welcome as well as objectionable similarities between our present and our past, and such discrimination and selectivity enables us to adopt desirable features from the arts of our past as we endeavor to anchor our modern culture in our tradition. Because critical realism prevents us from treating exemplars as sacrosanct, it allows for the evolution of new forms through adaptations from the old. When, as in Okigbo's "Path of Thunder,"[2] contemporary events and objects are put into the traditional image matrix and described with traditional terms of rhetoric, the effect is refreshing. We thereby obtain a modernism that has emerged from a clearly African poetic tradition.

Other examples in which aspects of our modern literature have been successfully

[2] **"Path of Thunder"** (1965): Written by Nigerian novelist Christopher Okigbo (1932–1967), who died fighting for Biafra's independence from Nigeria.

grafted onto traditional trunks include the following: Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*,[3] *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and other novels, which are embedded in the Yoruba mythic imagination; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*[4] and *Arrow of God* which capture, in English, Igbo speech patterns, proverbs, and idiom; and Okot p'Bitek's[5] *Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol, Song of a Prisoner,* and *Song of Malaya,* each of which uses authentic African imagery and Acholi rhetorical devices to examine an aspect of the contemporary African condition.

[3] *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952): Authored by Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola (1920–1997), this work draws on Yoruba mythology.

[4] *Things Fall Apart* (1958; see p. 1023): Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) penned this work as well as *Arrow of God* (1964); both are novels about the impact of colonialism on tribal societies in Nigeria.

[5] Okot p'Bitek (1931–1982): Ugandan novelist and poet who wrote a series of poems in the style of traditional Acholi song: *Song of Lawino* (1969; see p. 894), *Song of Ocol* (1969; see p. 897), *Song of a Prisoner* (1971), and *Song of Malaya* (1971).

Nadine Gordimer

b. South Africa, 1923

Described by Irish poet Seamus Heaney as one of the "guerrillas of the imagination," South African novelist and short-story writer Nadine Gordimer has devoted her long writing career to exploring the racial divide in her native land and in writing across the color line. Born into a middle-class white family in the suburbs of Johannesburg, Gordimer published her first story when she was still a teenager. In the fourteen novels and more than two hundred short stories she as written since, Gordimer provides an inside view of the transformation of South Africa during the last half century. An ardent opponent of APARTHEID, South Africa's official system of racial segregation, Gordimer joined the African National Congress (ANC) while it was still illegal to do so, and many of her works are written from the point of view of South African blacks. She considers the proudest day of her life to be not the one on which she received the Nobel Prize, in 1991, but the day in 1986 when she testified at a trial to save the lives of twenty-two ANC members accused of treason. Her many novels include *A Guest of Honor* (1970), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and *My Son's Story* (1990). In "As Others See Us" (1997), Gordimer compares race relations in postapartheid South Africa with those in the United States, offering an African point of view on America and suggesting that Americans may not see themselves clearly and that what they imagine about Africa may not be the whole truth.

As Others See Us

There is nothing more presumptuous than a foreigner telling other people what is wrong with their country. I know how I react when pundits who are not South African make flip judgments of our problems on the basis of the slim experience of visits to our country. This does not mean that a reasoned, critical look is not useful; just that the onlooker understands not most, but only half of the game. So it is right that I provide my modest credentials for an opinion on race relations in the U.S.A. in contrast to race relations in my own country—relations I have been part of since birth.

I have visited America once a year or more since the 1950s, usually only for several weeks but twice for several months, spent in New York and Cambridge, with forays to the Midwest, the West Coast, and the South. I began in the McCarthy era and have gathered my impressions through the eras of Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Andy Young, Louis Farrakhan, and your roster of presidents up to the present incumbent. In my early visits as a young writer I mixed in an easy fashion with a good number of my peers, black men and women whose interests in the arts and in Africa coincided with mine. I remember parties in Queens, welcoming visits to homey apartments, jazz evenings in Harlem not as a gaping tourist but as an individual sharing the leisure diversion of newfound friends themselves. These were not people with big names; all of us were starting out.

As time went by, on subsequent visits to the U.S., I found I was meeting fewer and fewer black Americans. Those that I did meet—and much enjoyed—were Du Bois's Talented Tenth: Harry Belafonte, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Jamaica Kincaid, Randall Robinson, Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, and Cornel West, for example.

While housed in an apartment adjacent to a student residence at Harvard, in 1995, when I gave the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, almost the only black Americans I met were through the efforts of Skip Gates. The Talented Tenth again. At the homes of my white American friends, people to whom colour truly means nothing, I now find I meet blacks from Africa, but rarely a black American. Whites from Africa who came from active antiracist backgrounds, and now live in the States, have no black men and women among their friends. Why? A paradox, since back home in South Africa they mixed in tough friendship with blacks, and were totally accepted by them, under conditions that made this difficult, to say the least. The reason seems to be that black Americans do not want to mix with whites, however much compatibility is beckoning to be recognized. The old, old answer I think not only survives but seems to have grown in bitterness, for reasons (of economics and opportunity?) Americans know best: When you have been so long rejected, your collective consciousness tells you that the open door, open arms, have come too late. You assert your self-respect only by saying "no." No no no: I read that playwright August Wilson wants black theatre for *blacks only*—black writers, actors, audiences. If even the doors of the arts are slammed shut, how shall people find their common humanity?

Gabriel García Márquez

b. Colombia, 1928



Ben Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez, 1984*
García Márquez in his home library in Colombia. (Ben Martin / Timepix)

GAH-bree-el gar-SEE-ah MAR-kes

WWW For links to more information about García Márquez and a quiz on "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," and for information on the culture and context of South America in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

At one point in *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* Gabriel García Márquez's best-known novel, the characters succumb to a case of collective amnesia. To combat this contagion, the villagers label everything in town: "Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters." This episode and the narrator's comment on it are emblematic of García Márquez's work as a whole. The fictional village of Macondo, where García Márquez sets many of his novels and stories, is based on the obscure village of Aracataca in northeastern Colombia where the author spent his early childhood. Although he left the village when he was eight, he guaranteed its literary survival by naming it "Macondo" in his work and making it one of modern literature's mythic places of the imagination along with William Faulkner's Yoknopatawpha County and R. K. Narayan's Malgudi.[1]

A Tradition of Storytelling. Raised by his maternal grandparents in Aracataca, a village they helped to found, **Gabriel García Márquez** listened to tales of his grandfather's military exploits in the civil war and of the massacre of the striking workers on the local banana plantations in 1928, the year that Gabriel was born, when the workers resisted exploitation by the United Fruit Company. The young García Márquez especially listened to his grandmother's stories of ghosts, haunted houses, omens, and the lives and superstitions of the local people. Looking back years later, García Márquez would remark: "I feel that all my writing has been about the experiences of the time I spent with my grandparents."

Gabriel was sent to a boarding school in Barranquilla after his grandfather died. Eight years old, he was nicknamed "the old man" by his schoolmates, who thought him bookish and too serious; he eventually developed a rapport with them by writing stories, drawing cartoons, and reading aloud in the dormitory. In time his classmates came to regard him as a writer. He went on to study law and journalism at the Universities of Bogotá and Cartagena and then worked as a journalist in Bogotá, Havana, New York, Barcelona, and Mexico City. Though he has lived and worked internationally, his writings almost always go back to Macondo, whose history and mythology distill his experience and embody his view of the human condition.

[1] **Faulkner . . . Narayan's Malgudi:** William Faulkner (1897–1962), American novelist who in works like *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) created a history and sociology for his home area of northeastern Mississippi—and implicitly the American South—describing the dissolution of its values and social traditions. R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), Indian novelist who wrote about Malgudi, an imagined city in southern India, in many of his novels and stories, including *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Guide* (1958); see page 781.

A Career in Journalism. Although García Márquez began publishing stories in the late forties, literary work remained a sideline for many years. After his first book of fiction appeared in 1955 to little notice, he continued to support himself by working as a journalist, earning a measure of notoriety for a series of reports that revealed the incompetence of the Colombian navy. To escape the government's retribution for those reports, he took an assignment as a foreign correspondent in Europe and eventually settled in Paris, intending to devote himself full-time to writing stories. In the early sixties he published several volumes: the novels *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961) and *The Evil Hour* (1962), and a collection of stories, *Big Mama's Funeral* (1962). While those works enjoyed some critical recognition, their sales did not produce enough money to enable García Márquez to give up journalism; he continued to work off and on as a journalist and screenwriter. Much of his journalism was devoted to politics, such as his opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and his support of the Cuban revolution. He used some of the money he received with the Nobel Prize in literature in 1982 to fund his antifascist magazine, *Alternativa.* His position with *Prensa Latina,* the Cuban news agency, as well as his friendship with Fidel Castro led the U.S. government to deny him a visa for many years.

The Impact of Modernism. García Márquez was inspired to write fiction by reading the MODERNIST writers of the early twentieth century, especially Hemingway, Faulkner, Kafka, and Borges.[2] From Hemingway he learned an objective, bare-bones, Realist style; Faulkner's use of local myths and legends to construct an imaginary world recalled for the Colombian his grandmother's stories and inspired the village of Macondo; the work of Kafka and Borges suggested ways to meld dreams and nightmares with everyday reality. Reading Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (Borges's Spanish translation) was a watershed for García Márquez: "I thought to myself that I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing much earlier." But the most important influence on the author's writing, it turned out, was his grandmother. García Márquez recounts an incident that occurred in the mid sixties as he was driving from Mexico City to Acapulco. Suddenly he had the beginning of his next novel—*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad,* 1967), over which he had been fruitlessly struggling for a long time—so clearly in mind that he could have dictated it verbatim. He had remembered his grandmother's way of telling stories:

> The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness. . . . What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face.
>
> – GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

[2] **Hemingway . . . Borges:** Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), American novelist and short-story writer noted for his blunt, terse, and starkly objective style in novels like *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and stories like "The Killers." Franz Kafka (1883–1924), German novelist and short-story writer; García Márquez was profoundly influenced by reading *The Metamorphosis.* "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" has many similarities to Kafka's "The Hunger Artist," a story about a carnival performer who makes not eating an attraction and ultimately starves himself to death. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), Argentine writer especially noted for his enigmatic and fantastic short stories; see page 648.

Often humorous, at times bitterly ironic or grotesque, occasionally tinged with pathos, García Márquez's work possesses a rare power of invention.
– REGINA JAMES, critic, 1981

things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness. . . . What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face.

After the revelation on the Acapulco highway, García Márquez spent the next eighteen months writing night and day.

Magical Realism. *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* the saga of the founding of Macondo and its rise and fall over a century, combines realistic detail with folk legends and myths; hyperbolic, archetypal characters; and fantastic, dreamlike events. It chronicles seven generations of the family of the founder, José Arcadio Buendía. The town and its history become an imaginative microcosm of the Latin American experience and, indeed, the human experience, for its mythic dimensions reach from the Garden of Eden to the Flood to the Apocalypse. Its mixture of realism, myth, and the miraculous has been called "MAGICAL REALISM,"[3] the dominant mode adopted by the writers of *el boom* (the boom), a movement in Latin American literature during the 1960s and 1970s, in the works of García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, Julio Cortázar of Argentina, and others. These writers combine the realistic details of everyday life with extraordinary, even miraculous events.

bwayn-*THEE*-ah

YOH-sah

The success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* freed García Márquez from the necessity of having to hold another job, and with it began a period of rich productivity in the writer's creative life. *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother,* García Márquez's third collection of short stories, appeared in 1972. *The Autumn of the Patriarch (El otoño del patriarca),* a novel about a South American dictator, an all-powerful madman who, somewhere between the ages of 107 and 232, still rules his nation in lonely solitude, followed in 1975. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) is a fictional version of an actual murder case; *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del cólera,* 1985) tells the story of a lifelong love affair. And *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989) is a historical novel recounting the last days of the Latin American liberator Simón Bolívar.

I have just read eighty pages by a master!
– CARLOS FUENTES, after reading the first three chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in manuscript

[3] **magical realism:** Fiction in which a Realist technique is used to narrate stories that combine mundane and miraculous events, everyday realities and the supernatural. The term is most often used to describe the work of the Latin American writers of *el boom:* García Márquez; Carlos Fuentes (b. 1928; see p. 933), Mexican novelist and author of such works as *Christopher Unborn* (1989); Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936), Peruvian novelist and journalist, and author of *The Time of the Hero* (1963), *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), and other works; and Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), Argentine author best known for the novel *Hopscotch* (1963) and the short story "Blow-Up," which was made into a successful film. Critics have also applied the term to other modern writers, especially Kafka (see p. 423), Thomas Mann (see p. 261), and Borges.

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." García Márquez stresses the realism in his work; "my work as a whole," he has written, "is founded on a geographical and historical reality." The description of the fallen angel in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1972) illustrates this fundamental realism. Bald and dirty, with missing teeth, ragged clothes, and an unbearable smell, the stranger who appears in the courtyard of Pelayo and Elisenda's house is first of all "an old man." The priest concludes that "seen close up he was much too human." Even the wings that mark him as an angel are bedraggled and "strewn with parasites." His presence in the village may be magical, but it is also absurd, and the reactions of the villagers quickly transform the unfamiliar creature into something familiar. Father Gonzaga is convinced that the old man is an impostor and writes to the Pope for confirmation of his suspicions; the villagers treat the angel as a sideshow spectacle, one that is outdone when the spider woman comes to town. The story she tells of her suffering provides a conventional explanation for her situation, unlike the "haughty" silence of the angel. In the end, when the angel miraculously flies away, Elisenda is relieved that the "annoyance" is gone from her life. The angel may be magical, but the various responses of the villagers—from indifference to exploitation—deflate his significance and lead readers to wonder about the place of magic in the modern world.

pay-LAH-yoh; eh-lee-SEN-dah

CONNECTIONS

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis,* p. 428. Like García Márquez, Kafka begins his story with a miraculous event—Gregor's transformation into a bug—and then realistically explores its consequences. The angel and the cockroach provoke reactions from others. What do the angel and the cockroach symbolize? Do people's reactions to them satirize similar human failings?

Carlos Fuentes, *The Prisoner of Las Lomas,* p. 938; Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," p. 652; Pablo Neruda, poems, p. 677; Abé Kobo, "The Red Cocoon" and "The Stick," pp. 918 and 920. Several modern works in this anthology adopt the magical realist technique of mixing the uncanny, bizarre, or supernatural with the realistic and the mundane: Fuentes's *The Prisoner of Las Lomas,* Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," Abé Kobo's "The Red Cocoon" and "The Stick," and Neruda's poems could all be considered, in a broad sense, "magical realism." What is fantastic in each work? How does each author make the fantastic believable? Is the same point being made in each work through magical realism?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Book 5). The Romantics in the early nineteenth century were fascinated with supernatural and uncanny events, often using the conventions of the folktale to give credence to an extraordinary story. In the story told by Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, the albatross has similarities to García Márquez's angel. Both, for example, have a religious dimension. What does each symbolize? Are Pelayo and Elisenda likely to become compulsive storytellers like the mariner, waylaying people to listen to their tale?

FURTHER RESEARCH

Criticism

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PRONUNCIATION

Buendía: bwayn-*THEE*-ah
Cartagena: kar-tah-HAY-nah
Elisenda: eh-lee-SEN-dah
Gabriel García Márquez: GAH-bree-el gar-SEE-ah MAR-kes
Llosa: YOH-sah
Pelayo: pay-LAH-yoh
Yoknapatawpha: yahk-nuh-puh-TAW-puh

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings

Translated by Gregory Rabassa

On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish. The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings.

Frightened by that nightmare, Pelayo ran to get Elisenda, his wife, who was putting compresses on the sick child, and he took her to the rear of the courtyard. They both looked at the fallen body with mute stupor. He was dressed like a ragpicker.

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." This short story, written shortly after *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and included in a collection of García Márquez's stories in 1972, recounts in deadpan, realistic narration a series of bizarre and miraculous events—a voice characteristic of the author's magical realism. The angel of the story's title does not have the appearance of a supernatural being but rather that of an unkempt and disheveled old man. As each of the villagers seeks to "explain" the angel and deny or ignore his supernatural nature, García Márquez reveals their superstition and self-interest and satirizes institutions such as the church. The ending may surprise readers as it does the villagers; it also raises questions about the presence of the miraculous in the midst of the mundane.

There were only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather had taken away any sense of grandeur he might have had. His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud. They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor's voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, and all she needed was one look to show them their mistake.

"He's an angel," she told them. "He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down."

On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo's house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels in those times were the fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy, they did not have the heart to club him to death. Pelayo watched over him all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with his bailiff's club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop. In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Elisenda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up without a fever and with a desire to eat. Then they felt magnanimous and decided to put the angel on a raft with fresh water and provisions for three days and leave him to his fate on the high seas. But when they went out into the courtyard with the first light of dawn, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if he weren't a supernatural creature but a circus animal.

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o'clock, alarmed at the strange news. By that time onlookers less frivolous than those at dawn had already arrived and they were making all kinds of conjectures concerning the captive's future. The simplest among them thought that he should be named mayor of the world. Others of sterner mind felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars. Some visionaries hoped that he could be put to stud in order to implant on earth a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe. But Father Gonzaga, before becoming a priest, had been a robust woodcutter. Standing by the wire, he reviewed his catechism in an instant and asked them to open the door so that he could take a close look at that pitiful man who looked more like a huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens. He was lying in a corner drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early risers had thrown him. Alien to the impertinences of the world, he only lifted his antiquarian eyes and murmured something in his dialect when Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an impostor when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close-up he was much too human: He had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back

side of his wings was strewn with parasites and his main feathers had been mistreated by terrestrial winds, and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels. Then he came out of the chicken coop and in a brief sermon warned the curious against the risks of being ingenuous. He reminded them that the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in order to confuse the unwary. He argued that if wings were not the essential element in determining the difference between a hawk and an airplane, they were even less so in the recognition of angels. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his bishop so that the latter would write to his primate so that the latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the final verdict from the highest courts.

His prudence fell on sterile hearts. The news of the captive angel spread with such rapidity that after a few hours the courtyard had the bustle of a marketplace and they had to call in troops with fixed bayonets to disperse the mob that was about to knock the house down. Elisenda, her spine all twisted from sweeping up so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the angel.

The curious came from far away. A traveling carnival arrived with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat. The most unfortunate invalids on earth came in search of health: a poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers; a Portuguese man who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him; a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake; and many others with less serious ailments. In the midst of that shipwreck disorder that made the earth tremble, Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a week they had crammed their rooms with money and the line of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the horizon.

The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire. At first they tried to make him eat some mothballs, which, according to the wisdom of the wise neighbor woman, were the food prescribed for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the papal lunches that the penitents brought him, and they never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man that in the end he ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience. Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes, and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought that his reaction had been one not of rage but of pain, from then on they were careful not to annoy him, because the majority understood that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose.

Father Gonzaga held back the crowd's frivolity with formulas of maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings. Those meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time if a providential event had not put an end to the priest's tribulations.

It so happened that during those days, among so many other carnival attractions, there arrived in town the traveling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror. She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents' house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals. Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel's reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo's courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to lament. With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn't get in during the winter, and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in. Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn't receive any attention. If they washed it down with creolin and burned tears of myrrh inside it every so often, it was not in homage to the angel but to drive away the dungheap stench that still hung everywhere like a ghost and was turning the new house into an old one. At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too

close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before the child got his second teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions. They both came down with chicken pox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn't resist the temptation to listen to the angel's heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too.

When the child began school it had been some time since the sun and rain had caused the collapse of the chicken coop. The angel went dragging himself about here and there like a stray dying man. They would drive him out of the bedroom with a broom and a moment later find him in the kitchen. He seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew to think that he'd been duplicated, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exasperated and unhinged Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels. He could scarcely eat and his antiquarian eyes had also become so foggy that he went about bumping into posts. All he had left were the bare cannulae of his last feathers. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him sleep in the shed, and only then did they notice that he had a temperature at night, and was delirious with the tongue twisters of an old Norwegian. That was one of the few times they became alarmed, for they thought he was going to die and not even the wise neighbor woman had been able to tell them what to do with dead angels.

And yet he not only survived his worst winter, but seemed improved with the first sunny days. He remained motionless for several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no one would see him, and at the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings, the feathers of a scarecrow, which looked more like another misfortune of decrepitude. But he must have known the reason for those changes, for he was quite careful that no one should notice them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he sometimes sang under the stars. One morning Elisenda was cutting some bunches of onions for lunch when a wind that seemed to come from the high seas blew into the kitchen. Then she went to the window and caught the angel in his first attempts at flight. They were so clumsy that his fingernails opened a furrow in the vegetable patch and he was on the point of knocking the shed down with the ungainly flapping that slipped on the light and couldn't get a grip on the air. But he did manage to gain altitude. Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she saw him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.

Carlos Fuentes

b. Panama, 1928

For many in the United States, Mexicans are, as one commentator has described them, "distant neighbors." Americans know more about European culture than they do about that of the nation next door. The work of Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's foremost contemporary novelist, is a good introduction to contemporary Mexico, as he writes about Mexican history and culture in nearly all of his books. He is also a very cosmopolitan writer, involved with Europe, the United States, and the traditions of Western culture generally. His interest in relations between industrial nations and developing nations and his experiments with narrative point of view and MAGICAL REALISM place his work in the mainstream of contemporary world literature. He is the first Mexican novelist to have had one of his works—*The Old Gringo* (1985)—on the *New York Times* best-seller list.



Bob Daemmrich, *Carlos Fuentes*, 1999
This photograph of Fuentes was taken while the author was attending the Latin American Studies symposium at Southwestern University. (© Bob Daemmrich / The Image Works)

A Citizen of the World. Fuentes has been an internationalist from birth. The son of a career diplomat, he was born in Panama and spent most of his childhood outside Mexico—in the United States, Latin America, and Europe. He learned English at age four in Washington, D.C., and he attended schools in the United States, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. He has suggested that this childhood dislocation helped to ignite his literary career: "I had to imagine Mexico before I ever lived in Mexico," he remarked in a 1988 interview, "so when I went to live in Mexico, the first thing I had to do was to contrast my imagination of the country to the reality of the country, which is the kind of tension from which literature is born." After studying law at the University of Mexico and at the Institute of Advanced International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, Fuentes became a diplomat himself, serving as a cultural officer and on other diplomatic missions and as Mexico's ambassador to France in the 1970s. Even though his support for the Marxist revolution in Cuba led to disputes with the U. S. State Department and he has been barred on occasion from entering the United States, he has spent a great deal of time in this country, teaching at many American universities, including Columbia, Harvard, George Mason, and the Universities of California, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. He has also taught at the University of Paris; Cambridge University, in England; and the University of Concepción, in Chile.

KAR-lohs FWEN-tays

The Early Novels. **Carlos Fuentes** began his writing career in the late forties. In 1958 he published his first novel, *Where the Air Is Clear* (*La región mas transparente*), the story of an old revolutionary, Federico Robles, who has become a financial tycoon preoccupied with making money. Robles symbolizes a Mexico that has lost direction, betrayed its revolution, and adopted the empty values of materialistic capitalism. In the course of the novel, Robles's financial empire falls, and he leaves the city to return to the country and reestablish contact with some mythic

WWW For links to more information about Fuentes and a quiz on *The Prisoner of Las Lomas,* and for information about the culture and context of Mexico in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

sources of Mexican culture. *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (*La muerte de Artemio Cruz,* 1962) further developed these cultural themes. Like Robles, Cruz is a businessman who has betrayed the revolution of 1910–1920, in which he fought as a young man. Although he came from peasant origins, he used the revolution as a way of acquiring personal wealth and power. He lied and married his way into a wealthy family, made opportunistic political alliances, and abandoned the ideal of land reform for which the revolution was fought so that he could inhabit the mansions of the prerevolutionary landowners. He has increased his wealth by becoming a Mexican front man for large American corporations. An old man on his deathbed at the time of the narration, he tells of his life in several voices representing the fragmentation of his character and of Mexican culture. The story of his life thus becomes an account of the history of Mexico in the twentieth century.

Mexico and Its History. Nearly all of Fuentes's novels take up the themes of these early works: the class domination and polarization of Mexican culture; its lost contact with its own mythic and historic roots through materialism and "Americanization"; the financial corruption of modern, urban life; and the betrayal of Mexico's revolutionary ideals, especially the failure to carry out land reform. These social themes have made Mexican history important elements in Fuentes's work. Many of the characters and situations in his novels are defined in historical terms. Eruptions from the Aztec past, for example, intrude on the contemporary scene. The bloody revolution of 1910–1920 is a particularly defining event in Fuentes's work. Fought at the same time as the BOLSHEVIK Revolution in Russia, the Mexican Revolution sought to limit the power of the Catholic Church, overthrow the large landowners, and, by redistributing the land among the *campesinos* (peasants), create a more equitable distribution of the national wealth. Although the single-party government that took power in the revolution and ruled for the rest of the twentieth century paid lip service to revolutionary ideals, it failed to carry out a program of land reform. For Fuentes this betrayal is the defining fact about modern Mexico.

Fuentes has said that "the theme of the country, the culture, and the society in which I work . . . has been [my] most powerful external impulse." The divisions between primitive and modern, past and present, revolutionary idealism and continuing corruption, the rural countryside and the sprawl of the world's largest city, and a mythic past and a materialistic present become the defining contradictions in his work. Fuentes's Mexico City, a microcosm of Mexican culture that centers most of his novels, is reminiscent of Dickens's London, Balzac's Paris, and the urban wasteland of T. S. Eliot's vision of the modern world.[1] Banal, anonymous,

What strikes the reader first in Fuentes's work may be his erudition and intellectual rigour, but what remains in the mind is his sympathy, his concern to commemorate the countless lives sacrificed in pain and obscurity so that we might live.

– MICHAEL KERRIGAN, *Times Literary Supplement,* 1994

[1] Fuentes's Mexico City . . . world: The Romantic Realists of the nineteenth century—Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Charles Dickens (1812–1870), for example—were noted for creating mythic versions of the cities they wrote about. T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* (see p. 486), similarly creates a mythic version of modern London that symbolically represents the spiritually empty post–World War I modern cities.

TIME AND PLACE

Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) was the first great social revolution of the twentieth century and one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of North America. Contemporary Mexico cannot be understood without reference to it. Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz (1830–1915) steered Mexico into the twentieth century with the slogan "Order and progress," but by the end of his rule landowners had amassed inordinate power while the poor had slipped deep into poverty and deprivation. During the second decade of the twentieth century, a series of revolutionary leaders—among them Francisco I. Madero, Victoriano Huerta, Venustiano Carranza, Francisco Villa, and Emiliano Zapata—fought to control the country and institute liberal reforms. The revolution was not a clear-cut struggle between oppression and liberty but a succession of shifting allegiances among a wide-ranging assortment of leaders in which attempts to create stability were ineffective and overly complicated. During this period some industries, railroads and mining, for example, were nationalized; some common lands were restored to indigenous peoples; and modest reforms were made in labor laws, agricultural policy, and education. Church and state were separated and anticlericalism was institutionalized, as was the Party of the Revolution (P.R.I.), which ruled Mexican government for the rest of the twentieth century. Although some argue that the revolution continued for another twenty years in varying degrees, the 1910s, the most turbulent decade of violent civil war, cost an estimated one and a half to two million lives.



Defiende las Conquistas, c. 1910–1920. This advertisement, featuring the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, translates, "Defend the Conquests for which We Gave Our Lives." (The Art Archive)

The theme of the country, the culture, and the society in which I work . . . has been [my] most powerful external impulse.

– Carlos Fuentes

ah-YEN-day

and spiritually empty, the product of technology and greed, Mexico City is part of an international network and is cut off from its own history and traditions. Fuentes has also acknowledged kinship with William Faulkner as a "novelist of defeat," for in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County Fuentes finds a fragmented and declining rural culture similar to Mexico's. This suppressed peasant culture and the sacred traditions of the Aztec past show up in the present in recollections of Aztec myth or in mysterious events that cannot be explained in the more logical or scientific terms of the city. These touches of "magical realism" give a surreal edge to Fuentes's vision and ally him with the most important movement in Latin American literature in the last thirty years. Like other magical realists—such writers as Alejo Carpentier, Isabel **Allende**,[2] and Gabriel García Márquez—Fuentes juxtaposes the everyday and the miraculous as a way of revealing the discontinuities and contradictions of modern life. Besides *Artemio Cruz*, the novels by which Fuentes is known in the United States are *Terra Nostra* (1975), an exploration of Mexico's Spanish heritage; *The Old Gringo* (*El gringo viejo*, 1985) a novel about the disappearance of American writer Ambrose Bierce in Mexico in 1913, during the revolution; and *Christopher Unborn* (*Cristobal nonato*, 1989), a satiric commentary on Columbus and his impact on the Western Hemisphere. Fuentes has also written many short stories, collected in *The Masked Days* (*Los días enmascarados*, 1954), *Songs of the Blind* (*Candar de ciegos*, 1964), *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* (*Constancia y otros novelas para vírgenes*, 1989), and *Distant Relations, a Novel in Nine Stories* (*La frontera de cristal: una novela en nueve cuentos*, 1995).

I had to imagine Mexico before I ever lived in Mexico, so when I went to live in Mexico, the first thing I had to do was to contrast my imagination of the country to the reality of the country, which is the kind of tension from which literature is born.

– Carlos Fuentes, in a 1988 interview

■ CONNECTIONS

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 35; *In the World:* Colonialism, p. 97. The issues of colonialism raised by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *In the World:* Colonialism are implicit in the uneasy relationship between Fuentes's lawyer-narrator, an inheritor of the culture of the Europeans who settled Mexico, and the country peasants who come to occupy the courtyard of his house and "imprison" him. Like Kurtz, Nicolás is a captive of the people he has conquered. Does he share Kurtz's initial idealism or his ultimate recognition of "the horror"? What does he learn?

Milan Kundera, "The Hitchhiking Game," p. 1005. *The Prisoner of Las Lomas* and Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game" contain similar contemporary versions of the Don Juan myth, narrated in both cases by the Don Juan figure in the story. What role does sexual conquest play in the lives of these characters? What does the Don Juan motif contribute thematically to these stories? Can these stories be interpreted as commentary on patriarchal cultures?

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (Book 5); Rabindranath Tagore, "The Hungry Stones" (Book 5). The house in *The Prisoner of Las Lomas* represents Mexican culture and history; it "owns" Nicolás as much as he owns it. It is similar to the palace haunted by its Indian past in Tagore's "The Hungry Stones" and to the estate in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which represents the Russian past. Consider the qualities of these domiciles and what they add to the picture of the past of their three cultures. How do they function symbolically in the outcomes of these three works?

[2] **Carpentier . . . Allende:** Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), Cuban novelist and musicologist influenced by French surrealism and the author of *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) and other works; Isabel Allende (b. 1942), Chilean novelist and short-story writer who has penned *House of the Spirits* (1982), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), and other works.

The first active and conscious agent of the internationalization of the Spanish American novel.

– Jose Donoso, 1977

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

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■ PRONUNCIATION

Allende: ah-YEN-day
Calle de Córdoba: KAH-yay *thay* KORE-*thoh*-vah
Camino Real: kah-MEE-noh ray-AHL
Chapultepec: chuh-PUL-tuh-peck, chah-pool-teh-PECK
Cinco de Mayo: SEENG-koh *thay* MAH-yoh
Escobedo: ays-koh-VAY-*thoh*
Eulalia: yoo-LAY-lee-uh
Carlos Fuentes: KAR-lohs FWEN-tays
Guanajuanto: gwah-nah-WAHN-toh
Ixtapa-Zihuatenejo: ees-TAH-pah thee-wah-tah-NAY-hoh
Michoacán: mee-choh-ah-KAHN
Morelos: moh-RAY-lohs
Oaxaca: wah-HAH-kah
Potosí: poh-toh-SEE
Prisciliano Nieves: pree-see-LYAH-noh NYAY-vays
Querétaro: kay-RAY-tah-roh
Quezada: kay-THAH-*thah*, kay-*THAH*-dah
Sarita Palazuelos: sah-REE-tah pah-lah-THWAY-lohs
Solomillo: soh-loh-MEE-yoh
Tehuacán: tay-wah-KAHN
Virreyes: vee-RAY-yes

The Prisoner of Las Lomas

Translated by Thomas Christensen

[To Valerio Adami, for a Sicilian story]

1

As incredible as this story is, I might as well begin at the beginning and continue straight on to the end. Easy to say. The minute I get set to begin, I realize I begin with an enigma. It follows that difficulties ensue. Oh, fuck! It can't be helped: the story begins with a mystery; my hope, I swear, is that by the end you'll understand everything. That you will understand me. You'll see: I leave out nothing. But the truth is that when I entered the sickroom of Brigadier General Prisciliano Nieves on February 23, 1960, in the British hospital then located in the Avenida Mariano Escobedo (present site of the Camino Real Hotel, to orient my younger listeners), I myself had to believe in the enigma, or what I was planning would not succeed. I want to be understood. The mystery was true. (The truth was the mystery.) But if I was not myself convinced of it, I would not convince the old and astute Brigadier Nieves, not even on his sickbed.

He was, as I said, a general. You know that already. I was a young lawyer who had recently received my degree—news for you and for me. I knew everything about him. He, nothing about me. So when I found the door to his private room in the hospital ajar and pushed it open, he didn't recognize me, but neither did he draw back. Lax as security is in Mexican hospitals, there was no reason for the brigadier to be alarmed. I saw him lying there in one of those beds that are like the throne of death, a white throne, as if cleanliness were the compensation that dying offers us. His name *Nieves* means *snow*, but lying in all that bleached linen he was like a fly in milk. The brigadier was very dark, his head was shaved, his mouth a long, sourish crack, his eyes masked by two thick, livid veils. But why describe him, when he was so soon gone? You can look up his photo in the Casasola Archives.

Who knows why he was dying? I went by his house and they said to me:

—The general's bad.

—It's just he's so old.

I scarcely noticed them. The one who spoke first seemed a cook, the second a young girl servant. I made out a sort of majordomo inside the house, and there was a gardener tending the roses outside. You see: only of the gardener was I able to say definitely, that man is a gardener. The others were just one thing or another. They didn't exist for me.

But the brigadier did. Propped up in his hospital bed, surrounded by a parapet of cushions, he looked at me as he must have looked at his troops the day he single-handedly saved the honor of his regiment, of the Northeast Corps, almost of the very Revolution, and maybe even of the country itself—why not?—in the encounter of La Zapotera, when the wild Colonel Andrés Solomillo, who confused extermination with justice, occupied the Santa Eulalia sugar mill and lined both masters and workers against its wall to face the firing squad, saying the servants were as bad as those they served.

—The one who holds the cow is as bad as the one who slaughters it.

So said Solomillo, helping himself to the possessions of the Escalona family, masters of the hacienda: quickly grabbing all the gold coins he'd found in the library, behind the complete works of Auguste Comte, he proposed to Prisciliano: —Take these, my captain, so that for once those who are as hungry as you and I may be invited to the banquet of life.

Prisciliano Nieves—the legend goes—not only refused the gold his superior offered him but, when it came time for the execution, he placed himself between the firing squad and the condemned and said to Colonel Andrés Solomillo: —The soldiers of the Revolution are neither murderers nor thieves. These poor people are guilty of nothing. Separate the poor from the rich, please.

What happened then—so the story goes—was this: the colonel, furious, told Prisciliano that if he didn't shut up he would be the second feature in the morning's firing; Prisciliano shouted to the troops not to kill other poor people; the squad hesitated; Solomillo gave the order to fire at Prisciliano; Prisciliano gave the order to fire at the colonel; and in the end the squad obeyed Prisciliano:

—Mexican soldiers do not murder the people, because they are the people, said Prisciliano beside the body of Solomillo, and the soldiers cheered him and felt satisfied.

The Prisoner of Las Lomas. Written in 1987 and included in the volume *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* (*Constancia y otros novelas para vírgenes*, 1989; English translation, 1990), this work displays many of Fuentes's characteristic themes. Like *Artemio Cruz*, *Prisoner* is a first-person narrative. Although Nicolás Sarmiento's personal history does not reach back to the revolution, his personal story does, for he has linked his life with that of General Prisciliano Nieves, a legendary hero of the war. Sarmiento, a cynical opportunist, uses his serendipitous knowledge of the truth about Nieves's role in the war to blackmail the general and establish himself as his heir. His hard-headed realism, urbanity, and lack of sentimentality make him a successful blackmailer, businessman, and Don Juan. But these same traits also make him incapable of understanding the appeal of the legend about General Nieves and of recognizing the emotional bonds that link the Mexican people into "family." His education in the mysteries of emotion and cultural solidarity begins when he departs from his rule of emotional detachment and becomes involved with Lala, a mysterious woman with ties to rural Mexico. Her murder implicates him and forces him to recognize his servants as individuals with names. Ironically, he discovers his alter ego Dimas Palmero, the servant charged with murdering Lala. They both become prisoners—Palmero in the jail where he is held without trial, and Sarmiento in his mansion in Las Lomas de Chapultepec, where he is surrounded by a host of nameless peasants, Lala's kin, who take control of his life. Both the peasant and the *patrón* are entangled in the tragedy, as they are in the truth and legends of Mexican history and culture. By the end of the story, faced with its power to control his destiny, Sarmiento has learned just how limited his knowledge of Mexican history is.

A note on the translation: The translation is by Thomas Christensen, who has translated the works of many Latin American writers, including Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, and Laura Esquivel. The notes are the editors'.

This phrase, associated ever since with the fame, the life, and the virtues of the instantly Colonel and soon-to-be Brigadier General Don Prisciliano Nieves, surely would be engraved on the base of his monument: THE HERO OF SANTA EULALIA.

And now here I come, forty-five years later, to put a damper on the final glory of General Prisciliano Nieves.

—General Nieves, listen carefully. I know the truth of what happened that morning in Santa Eulalia.

The maraca that sounded in the throat of my brigadier Prisciliano Nieves was not his death rattle, not yet. In the dim light of the hospital, my middle-class lawyer's young breath smelling of Sen-Sen mixed with Don Prisciliano's ancient respiration, a drumroll scented of chloroform and *chile chipotle*.[1] No, my general, don't die without signing here. For your honor, my general: worry no more about your honor, and rest in peace.

2

My house in Las Lomas de Chapultepec has one outstanding virtue: it shows the advantages of immortality. I don't know how people felt about it when it was constructed, when the forties were dawning. The Second World War brought Mexico a lot of money. We exported raw materials at high prices and the farmworkers entered the churches on their knees, praying for the war to go on. Cotton, hemp, vegetables, strategic minerals; it all went out in every direction. I don't know how many cows had to die in Sonora for this great house to be erected in Las Lomas, or how many black-market deals lay behind its stone and mortar. You have seen such houses along the Paseo de la Reforma and the Boulevard de los Virreyes and in the Polanco neighborhood: they are architectural follies of pseudo-colonial inspiration, resembling the interior of the Alameda movie house, which in turn mimics the Plateresque of Taxco with its cupolas, towers, and portals. Not to mention that movie house's artificial ceiling, dappled with hundred-watt stars and adorned with scudding little clouds. My house in Boulevard de los Virreyes stopped short of that.

Surely the Churrigueresque[2] delirium of the house I have lived in for more than twenty years was an object of derision. I imagine two or three caricatures by Abel Quezada[3] making fun of the cathedral-like portal, the wrought-iron balconies, the nightmare ornamentation of decorations, reliefs, curves, angels, madonnas, cornucopias, fluted plaster columns, and stained-glass windows. Inside, things don't get any better, believe me. *Inside* reproduces *outside:* once again, in a hall that rises two stories, we encounter the blue-tile stairs, the iron railing and balconies overlooking the hall from the bedrooms, the iron candelabra with its artificial candles dripping fake wax of petrified plastic, the floor of Talavera tile, the uncomfortable wood-and-leather furniture, straight and stiff as if for receiving a sentence from the Holy Inquisition. What a production . . . !

[1] ***chile chipotle:*** A hot chile sauce. [2] **Churrigueresque:** An elaborate and extravagantly decorated style of Spanish baroque architecture. [3] **Abel Quezada:** A Mexican painter and cartoonist.

But the extraordinary thing, as I was saying, is that this white elephant, this symbol of vulgar pretension and the new money of the entrepreneurs who made a profit off the war, has been converted, with time, into a relic of a better era. Today, when things are fast going downhill, we fondly recall a time when things were looking up. Better vulgar and satisfied than miserable but refined. You don't need me to tell you that. Bathed in the glow of nostalgia, unique and remote in a new world of skyscrapers, glass, and concrete, my grotesque quasimodel home (my Quasimodo[4] abode, my friends, ha ha! it might be hunchbacked, but it's mine, all mine!) has now become a museum piece. It's enough to say that first the neighbors and then the authorities came to me, imploring:

—Never, sir, sell your house or let it be demolished. There aren't many examples left of the Neocolonial architecture of the forties. Don't even think of sacrificing it to the crane or (heaven protect us!) (we would never imagine such a thing of you!) to vile pecuniary interests.

I had a strange friend once, named Federico Silva, whom his friends called the Mandarin and who lived in another kind of house, an elegant villa dating from the adolescent decade of the century (1915? 1920?), squeezed and dwarfed by the looming skyscrapers lining the Calle de Córdoba. He wouldn't let it go on principle: he would not cave in to the modernization of the city. Obviously, nostalgia makes demands on me. But if I don't let go of my house, it's not because of my neighbors' pleas, or because I have an inflated sense of its value as an architectural curiosity, or anything like that. I remain in my house because I have lived like a king in it for twenty-five years: from the time I was twenty-five until I turned fifty, what do you think of that? An entire life!

Nicolás Sarmiento, be honest with those who are good enough to hear you out, pipes up the little inner voice of my Jiminy Cricket. Tell them the truth. You don't leave this house for the simple reason that it belonged to Brigadier General Prisciliano Nieves.

3

An entire life: I was about to tell you that when I took over this meringue of a house I was a miserable little lawyer, only the day before a clerk in an insignificant law office on the Avenida Cinco de Mayo. My world, on my word of honor, went no farther than the Celaya candy store; I would look through the windows of my office and imagine being rewarded with mountains of toffees, rock candy, candy kisses, and *morelianas*. Maybe the world was a great candied orange, I said to my beloved fiancée, Miss Buenaventura del Rey, from one of the best families of the Narvarte district. Bah, if I had stayed with her I would have been turned into a candied orange, a lemon drop. No: the world was the sugared orange, I would take one bite and then, with disdain and the air of a conquistador, I would throw it over my shoulder. Give me a hug, sweetheart!

[4] **Quasimodo:** The hunchback of Notre Dame in Victor Hugo's novel.

Buenaventura, on the other hand, wanted to eat the orange down to the last seed, because who knows if tomorrow will bring another. When I walked into the house in Las Lomas for the first time, I knew that there was no room in it for Miss Buenaventura del Rey. Shall I confess something to you? My sainted fiancée seemed to me less fine, less interesting than the servants that my general had in his service. Adieu, Buenaventura, and give your papa my warmest thanks for having given away to me, without even realizing it, the secret of Prisciliano Nieves. But goodbye also, worthy cook, lovely girl servant, stupid waiter, and stooped gardener of the Hero of Santa Eulalia. Let no one remain here who served or knew Prisciliano Nieves when he was alive. Let them all be gone!

The women tied their bundles and went proudly off. The waiter, on the other hand, half argued and half whined that it wasn't his fault the general died, that nobody ever thought of them, what would become of them now, would they die of hunger, or would they have to steal? I would like to have been more generous with them. I couldn't afford it; no doubt, I was not the first heir that couldn't use the battalion of servants installed in the house he inherited. The gardener returned now and again to look at his roses from a distance. I asked myself if it wouldn't be a good idea to have him come back and take care of them. But I didn't succumb: I subscribed to the motto *Nothing from the past!* From that moment, I started a new life: new girlfriend, new servants, new house. Nobody who might know anything about the battle of La Zapotera, the hacienda of Santa Eulalia, or the life of Brigadier Prisciliano Nieves. Poor little Buenaventura; she shed a lot of tears and even made a fool of herself calling me up and getting the brush-off from my servants. The poor thing never found out that our engagement was the source of my fortune; her father, an old army accountant, cross-eyed from constantly making an ass of himself, had been in Santa Eulalia and knew the truth, but for him it was just a funny story, it had no importance, it was a bit of table talk; he didn't act on the precious information he possessed, whereas I did, and at that moment I realized that information is the source of power, but the crucial thing is to know how to use it or, if the situation demands, not use it: silence, too, can be power.

New life, new house, new girlfriend, new servants. Now I'm reborn: Nicolás Sarmiento, at your service.

I was reborn, yes, gentlemen: an entire life. Who knew better than anyone that there was a device called the telephone with which a very foxy lawyer could communicate better than anyone with the world, that great sugared orange? You are listening to him now. Who knew better than anyone that there is a seamless power called information? Who knows knows—so the saying goes. But I amended it: who knows can do, who can do knows—power is knowledge. Who subscribed to every gringo review available on technology, sports, fashion, communications, interior decoration, architecture, domestic appliances, shows, whatever you need and desire? Who? Why, you're listening to him, he's talking to you: the lawyer Nicolás Sarmiento, who joined information to telephone: as soon as I found out about a product that was unknown in Mexico, I would use the telephone and in a flash obtain the license to exploit it here.

All by telephone: patents for Dishwasher A and Microcomputer B, for telephone answering machines and electromagnetic recorders, rights to Parisian *prêt-à-porter*[5] and jogging shoes, licenses for drills and marine platforms, for photocopiers and vitamins, for betablockers for cardiacs and small aircraft for magnates: what didn't I patent for Mexico and Central America in those twenty-five years, sirs, finding the financial dimension for every service, tying my Mexican sub-licenses in with the fortunes of the manufacturing company in Wall Street, the Bourse, and the City? And all, I tell you, without stirring from the house of my Brigadier Prisciliano Nieves, who to do his business had, as they say, to shunt cattle all around the ranch. Whereas, with telephone raised, I almost singlehandedly brought Mexico into the modern era, Without anybody realizing. In the place of honor in my library were the telephone directories of Manhattan, Los Angeles, Houston . . . St. Louis, Missouri: home of the McDonnell Douglas airplane factory and Ralston cereals; Topeka, Kansas: home of Wishwashy detergent; and Dearborn, Michigan, of the auto factory in the birthplace of Henry Ford; not to mention nacho manufacturing in Amarillo, Texas, and the high-tech conglomerates on Route 128 in Massachusetts.

The directory, my friends, the phone book, the area code followed by seven numbers: an invisible operation, and, if not quite silent, at least as modulated as a murmur of love. Listen well: in my office at Las Lomas I have a console of some fifty-seven direct telephone lines. Everything I need is at my fingertips: notaries, patent experts, and sympathetic bureaucrats.

In view of what has happened, I'm speaking to you, as they say, with all my cards on the table and nothing up my sleeve. But you still don't have to believe me. I'm a bit more refined than in those long-ago days of my visit to the British hospital and my abandonment of Miss Buenaventura del Rey. I'm half chameleon, you can't tell me from any middle-class Mexican who has become polished by taking advantage of trips, conversations, lectures, films, and good music available to . . . well, get rich, everyone has a chance, there's a field marshal's baton in every knapsack. I read Emil Ludwig[6] in a pocket edition and learned that Napoleon has been the universal supermodel of ascent by merit, in Europe and in the so-called Third World. The gringos, so dull in their references, speak of self-made men like Horatio Alger and Henry Ford. We, of Napoleon or nothing: Come, my Josephine, here is your very own Corsican, St. Helena is far away, the pyramids are watching us, even if they are in Teotihuacán,[7] and from here to Waterloo is a country mile. We're half Napoleon, half Don Juan, we can't help it, and I tell you, my terror of falling back to where I'd come from was as great as my ambition: you see, I hold nothing back. But the women, the women I desired, the anti-Buenaventuras, I desired them as they desired me, refined, cosmopolitan, sure, it cost me a little something, but self-confident, at times imperious, I made them understand (and it was true) that there was no commitment between us: grand passion today, fading memory tomorrow . . . That was another story, although they soon learned to count on my discretion and they forgave my

[5] *prêt-à-porter:* Ready-to-wear. [6] Emil Ludwig (1881–1948): Author of *Napoleon* (1924). [7] Teotihuacán: The ancient city of Mexico, located about thirty miles northeast of the present Mexico City, the site of Aztec ceremonial pyramids.

failings. Women and servants. From my colonial watchtower of Las Lomas, armed with telephones that passed through all the styles, country black, Hollywood white, October crisis red, bright green Technicolor, golden Barbie Doll, detached speaker, hand-dialed, to telephones like the one I am using at present, pure you-talk-to-me-when-I-press-the-button, to my little black Giorgio Armani number with TV screen, which I use only for my conquests.

Women: in the sixties there were still some foreign castaways from the forties, a little weather-beaten now but eager to acquire a young lover and a large house where they could throw parties and dazzle the Aztecs; it was through them that I burst on the scene and went on to charm the second wave of women, that is, girls who wanted to marry a young lawyer on the way up who had already had as lover the Princess of Salm-Salm or the heiress of the Fresno, California, cardboard-recycling factory. Such is this business of love. I used those young girls to tell the world I was on the make. I seduced all I could, the rest went running to confide to their coreligionists that the spirits that flowed here were strong but fleeting: Nicolás Sarmiento isn't going to lead you to the altar, dearie. I made myself interesting, because the sixties demanded it. I tried to seduce the two Elenas, mother and daughter, though without success. They still kept their particular domestic arrangements. But after them came a generation of desperate Mexican women who believed that to be interesting was to be melancholy, miserable, and a reader of Proust. As soon as they satisfied me they would try to commit suicide in my bathroom, with such frequency that I turned, in reaction, to the working class. Secretaries, manicurists, shop clerks who wanted to hook a husband the same as the Mexican princesses, but whom I sidetracked with sweet talk, educating them, teaching them how to walk, dress themselves, and use a finger bowl after eating shrimp (things the women of my first generation had taught me). They coaxed me into educating them, instead of being educated, as I had been by the three preceding generations. So where was my golden mean? The fifth generation left me at a loss. Now they wanted neither to teach me nor to learn from me, only to vie and divide. Sure of themselves, they acted like men and told me that was what it meant to be women. Can that be true? But the philosophy of the good Don Juan is simply this: check out the chicks and chalk them up. And although, when I talk about it, this all sounds quite orderly, the truth is that in my bed, ladies and gentlemen listeners, a great chaos reigned, because there was always an Austro-Hungarian of generation number one who had left a prescription in the medicine cabinet ten years before and returned to reclaim it (in the hope of fanning old flames) and who, seated under said cabinet in a compromising position, would find a potential Galatea[8] throwing up an unknown (to her) kir and, in the bathtub, smothered in soapsuds scented of German woods, a potential Maria Vetsera from the Faculty of Letters and, knocking at the front door, an ex-girlfriend, now married and with five children, with a mind to show me all of them, lined up like marimba keys, simply to make me see what I had lost! I won't even mention the girls (most

[8] Galatea: The statue brought to life by Aphrodite in response to the plea of the sculptor, Pygmalion, who had fallen in love with his creation.

amusing!) who, during the eighties, began to appear at my house unexpectedly, on pogo sticks, leaping fences behind the Churrigueresque mansions of Virreyes, hopping here and there, from house to house, demonstrating thereby that:

—Private property is okay, pal, but only if it's shared!

They passed like wisps in the breeze, on their pogo sticks, so nubile, ah, as I, turning fifty, saw them bound by as if in a dream, all of them under twenty, assuming the right to enter all the houses, rich or poor, and to talk, to talk, nothing else, with everyone, saying: Get with it, get with what's happening, now!

If you're still listening to me, you might conclude that my destiny was to end up with a woman who would combine the qualities (and the defects, there's no way around it!) of the five generations of ladies I had seduced. You see: the essence of Don Juan is to move, to travel, to scoff at boundaries, whether between countries, gardens, balconies, or beds. For Don Juan there are no doors, or, rather, there is always an unforeseen door for his escape. Now my merry bands of girls on pogo sticks were the Doña Juanitas (damned if they don't smell of pot!) and I, as you know by now, tied to the phone, doing everything by phone, meetings, business deals, love affairs . . .

And servants. I needed them, and very good ones, to throw my famous parties, to receive equally a woman in intimate and attentive circumstances and a crowd of five hundred guests for an epochal bash—the frosting on my house of meringue! But eventually they went out of style, those offensive shows of extravagance, as the richest politicians in Mexico called them, and although I never made a public display of crying over the poverty of my countrymen, at least I always tried to give them honest work. Honest but temporary: What I never could stand was a servant staying with me too long. He would gain power from my past. He would remember the previous women. He couldn't help making comparisons. He would treat the new ones the way he treated the old ones, as if he were trying to serve me well and perform satisfactorily, when the sly fellow would know perfectly well that he was performing poorly and making me look bad: Here's your hot-water bottle, madam, the way you like it. Listen, dog, who are you confusing me with? The diuretic morning grapefruit for the pudgy lady who prefers cheese and tortillas. The confusion becomes an allusion, and no Mexican woman was ever born who can't see, smell, and catch those subtle little innuendos. (Except one from Chiapas who was so out of it that I had to clap like crazy to wake her up when she fell asleep in the middle of the action, and then the cunt would pop up and start doing her regional dance. It must be something in the genes. Send them all back to Guatemala!)

Besides denying them the power that cumulative memory gave them over me, I refused to retain my servants, to keep them from intriguing with each other. A servant who stayed more than two years would end up conspiring with other servants against me. The first year, they idolize me and compete with each other; the second, they hate the one they see as my favorite; the third, they join together to throw me out on my ear. All right, then! Here no one passes more than two Christmases in a row. Before the Wise Men make their third trip through the desert on their camels, let the Star of Bethlehem be put out: my butcher and baker and candlestick maker, hey diddle diddle, out on your asses! Cook, upstairs maid, boy, gardener, and a

chauffeur who only runs errands because, tied to my telephones and computers, I hardly ever leave my colonial house. That's all I need.

Since I inherited the house, I've kept an exact list of lovers and servants. The first is already rather long, though not like Don Juan's; besides, it's pretty personalized. The servants' list, on the other hand, I try to do seriously, with statistics. Into the computer I put their birthplace, previous occupation. In that way, I have on hand a most interesting sort of sociological profile, since the regions that provide me servants have come down, over the years, to Querétaro, Puebla, the state of Mexico, and Morelos.[9] Next, within each of these, come the cities (Toluca wins by a long shot), the towns, the villages, the old haciendas. Thanks to the relative speed with which I change servants, I think I'll end up covering every square inch of those four federal states. It will be highly entertaining to see what sorts of coincidences, exceptions, and convergences, among them and in relation to my own life, the detailed memories of my computers will provide. How many instances will there be of servants coming from Zacatlán de las Manzanas, state of Puebla? Or, how many members of the same family will end up in my service? How many will know each other and will gossip about me and my house? The possible combinations of their employment and my accounting are obvious: both are infinite, but the calculation of probabilities is, by definition, finite—repetition is not dispersion but, finally, unity. We all end up looking at ourselves in the mirror of the world and seeing our own foolish faces and nothing more.

The world comes to me and the proof is that here you are, listening to me and hanging on my wise and statistical words. Ahem, as they say in the funnies, and also: How fickle is fate, and how often it manages to give a kick in the pants to the best-laid plans!

The present revolving odalisque[10] was, in a certain sense, my ideal lover. We met by telephone. Tell me if there could be a more perfect *class action,* as we Mexican legal types say; or *serendipity* (what a word!), as the gringo yuppies, who keep on looking for it, say; or *birds of a feather flocking together,* as the prole Indian types around here whom we call *nacos* say. (*Naco* hero on a train: Nacozari. Jealous *naco* in an inn: Nacothello. Corsican *naco* imprisoned on a remote island: Nacoleon. Anarchist *nacos* executed in the electric chair: Naco and Vanzetti.)

—Nacolás Sarmiento.

So she addressed me, mocking me, my last conquest, my latest love, my last girlfriend, how could she fail to conquer me if she entered my game list in this way? Nacolás Sarmiento, she called me, putting me down and tickling me at the same time; her name was Lala and she possessed characteristics of each of the generations that preceded her. She was polyglot like my first round of women (although I suspect that Lala didn't learn languages in an ancestral castle surrounded by governesses, but by the Berlitz method here in the Avenida Chapultepec, or serving meals to the gringo tourists in Ixtapa–Zihuatanejo). Her melancholy was the genuine

[9] Querétaro . . . Morelos: The states that include Mexico City and the surrounding countryside.

[10] odalisque: A concubine or harem girl.

article, not put in her skull by a decadent prof of philosophy and letters; she didn't know Proust, not even by the book covers—her melancholy was more in the style of the mariachi singer José Alfredo Jimenez:

And if they want to know about my past,
I'll have to tell them another lie,
I'll tell them I came from a different world . . .

I mean that she was pretty mysterious, too good to be true, and when she sang that hold-me-tight, I'd rush to bury myself in her arms and whisper sweet nothings in my tenderest manner . . . Ah, Lala, how I adored you, love, how I adored your tight little ass, my sweet, your savage howling and biting each time I entered your divine zoology, my love, so wild and so refined, so submissive and so mad at the same time, so full of unforgettable details: Lala, you who left me flowers drawn with shaving cream on the bathroom mirror; you who filled champagne bottles with soil; you who highlighted in yellow your favorite names in my telephone books; you who always slept face-down, with your hair disheveled and your mouth half-open, solitary and defenseless, with your hands pressed against your tummy; you who never cut your toenails in my presence, who brushed your teeth with baking soda or ground tortilla, Lala, is it true that I surprised you praying one night, kneeling, and you laughed nervously and showed me a sore knee as excuse, and I said, Let Daddy kiss it and make it better? Lala, you existed only for me, in my bed, in my house, I never saw you outside my vast Churrigueresque prison, but you never felt yourself a prisoner, isn't that so? I never wanted to know about you; as I've said: in all this, the truth is the mystery. Light streaks ran through your hair; you drank carbonated *Tehuacán* before sleeping; you paid the price for a ravenous appetite; you knew how to walk barefoot.

But let's take things in order: of the fourth generation, Lala had a certain lack of breeding that I was going to refine—and to which she submitted willingly, which was the part of her makeup she got from the fifth generation of young little Mexicans, sure of themselves, open to education, experience, professional responsibility. Women, ladies and gentlemen, are like computers: they have passed from the simplest operations, such as adding, subtracting, carrying sums and totaling columns of figures, successively, to the simultaneous operations of the fifth generation: instead of turning each tortilla in turn, we'll turn them all at once. I know this because I've brought to Mexico all the innovations of computation, from the first to the fourth, and now I wait for the fifth and know that the country that discovers it is going to dominate the twenty-first century, which is now approaching, as the old song says, in the murk of night, like an unknown soul, through streets ever winding this way and that, passing like an old-time lover, cloaked in a trailing cape . . . and then the surprise: Who'd known all along? Why, who else but Nicolás Sarmiento, the same son of a bitch who subscribes to the gringo magazines and does business by phone and has a new squeeze, dark and silky, called Lala, a true guava of a girl, in his house in Las Lomas.

Who lacked a past. And yet it didn't matter that I learned nothing, I sensed that part of my conquest of Lala consisted in not asking her anything, that what was new

about these new Mexicans was that they had no past, or if they had one it was from another time, another incarnation. If that was the case, it only increased Lala's mysterious spell. If her origins were unknown, her present was not: soft, small, burning in all her recesses, dark, always half open and mistress of a pair of eyes that never closed because they never opened; the deliberation of her movements restraining an impetuousness that she and I shared; it was the fear that once exhausted it would not return. No, Lala, always slow, long nights, endless hope, patient flesh, and the soul, my love, always quicker than the body: closer to decadence and death, Lala.

Now I must reveal a fact to you. I don't know if it's ridiculous or painful. Maybe it's simply what I've just said: a fact. I need to have servants because physically I'm a complete idiot. In business I'm a genius, as I've established. But I can't manage practical things. Cooking, for example: zilch. Even for a couple of eggs, I have to get someone to fix them for me. I don't know how to drive; I need a chauffeur. I don't know how to tie my tie or untie my shoes. The result: nothing but these monkey ties with clips that stick in your shirt collars; nothing but slip-ons, never shoes with laces. To women, this all seems sort of endearing and they become maternal with me. They see me so useless in this, such a shark in everything else; they're moved, and they love me that much more. It's true.

But nobody but Lala has known how to kneel before me, with such tenderness, with such devotion, just as if praying, and what's more, with such efficiency: what more perfect way to tie a shoe, leaving the loop expansive as a butterfly ready to fly, yet bound like a link yoked to its twin; and the shoe itself, secure, exact, comfortable, neither too tight nor too loose, a shoe kind to my body, neither constricting nor loose. Lala was perfection, I tell you: *purr-fec-tion.* Neither more nor less. And I say so myself, I who classify my servants by provinces on my computer, but my girls by neighborhoods.

What else should I tell you before I tell you what happened? You suspect already, or maybe not. I had a vasectomy when I was about thirty to avoid having children and so no one can show up in these parts with a brat in her arms, weeping: "Your baby, Nicolás! Aren't you going to acknowledge it? Bastard!" I arranged everything by telephone; it was my business weapon, and although I traveled from time to time, each time I stayed shut up longer in Las Lomas de Chapultepec afterwards. The women came to me and I used my parties to take new ones. I replaced my servants so they wouldn't get the idea that here in Don Nico we've found our gold mine. I never cared, as other Mexican politicians and magnates do, to employ procurers for my women. I make my conquests by myself. As long as I always have someone around to drive my car, cook my beans, and tie my shoes.

All this came to a head one night in July 1982, when the economic crisis was upon us and I was getting nervous, pondering the significance of a declaration of national bankruptcy, the interplanetary travels of Silva Herzog,[11] the debt, Paul Volcker, and my patents and licenses business, in the middle of all this turmoil. Better to throw a big party to forget the crisis, and I ordered a bar and buffet by the pool. The waiter was new, I didn't know his name; my relationship with Lala had lasted two months now and the lady was growing on me, I was liking her more and more, she made me, I confess, hot and bothered, if the truth be told. She arrived late, when I was already mingling with a hundred revelers, calling on my waiters and the guests alike to sample the Taittinger; who knew when we would see it again, much less taste it!

[11] Silva Herzog: Mexican finance minister in 1982 at the time of a major devaluation of the Mexican peso; Paul Volcker was chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board.

Lala appeared, and her Saint Laurent strapless gown, of black silk, with a red wrap, would likewise not be seen again *pour longtemps*[12]—believe me, who had arranged for her to wear it. How she glowed, my beautiful love, how all eyes followed her, each and every one, you hear me? to the edge of the pool, where the waiter offered her a glass of champagne; she stood for a long time looking at the *naco* dressed in a white cotton jacket, black pants shiny from so much use by previous boys in my service, bow tie—it was impossible to tell him from the others who had had the same position, the same clothes, the same manner. Manner? The servant lifted his head, she emptied the glass into his face, he dropped the tray in the pool, grabbed Lala's arm violently, she drew away, said something, he answered, everyone watched, I moved forward calmly, took her arm (I saw where his fingers had pressed my lady's soft skin), I told him (I didn't know his name) to go inside, we would talk later. I noticed he seemed confused, a wild uncertainty in his black eyes, his dark jaw quivering. He arranged his glossy hair, parted in the middle, and walked away with his shoulders slumped. I thought he was going to fall into the pool. It's nothing, I told the guests, and everything seemed fine, ladies and gentlemen who are listening to me. I laughed: Remember, the pretexts for parties like this are going fast. Everyone laughed with me and I said nothing to Lala. But she went up to bed and waited for me there. She was asleep when the party ended and I got in. I stepped on a champagne glass as I entered the room. I left it on the floor; and in bed, Lala was sleeping in her elegant Saint Laurent dress. I took off her shoes. I studied her. We were tired. I slept. The next day, I got up around six, with that faint sense of absence that takes shape as we wake—and *she* wasn't there. The tracks of her bare feet, on the other hand, were. Bloody tracks; Lala had cut her feet because of my carelessness in not cleaning up the broken glass. I went out the rococo balcony to the pool. There she was, floating face-down, dressed, barefoot, her feet cut, as if she had gone all night without huaraches, walking on thorns, surrounded by a sea of blood. When I turned her over, there was a gaping wound in her belly; the dagger had been withdrawn. They took my servant Dimas Palmero to the Reclusorio Norte, where he was held, awaiting the slow march of Mexican justice, accused of murder. And I was given the same sentence, though in the Churrigueresque palace of Las Lomas de Chapultepec, once the residence of Brigadier General Prisciliano Nieves, who died one morning in 1960 in the old British hospital on the Avenida Mariano Escobedo.

[12] *pour longtemps:* For a long time.

4

The morning of the tragedy, I had only four servants in the big colonial house of Las Lomas, apart from the said Dimas Palmero: a cook, a maid, a chauffeur, and a gardener. I confess that I can barely recall their features or their names. That is perhaps because, as I work in my house, I have rendered them invisible. If I went out every day to an office, I would notice them, by contrast, on my return. But they stayed out of sight so as not to disturb me. I don't know their names, or what they are like. My secretary, Sarita Palazuelos, dealt with them; I was busy with my work in the house, I'm not married, the servants are invisible. They don't exist, as they say.

I think I'm alone in my house. I hear a voice, I ask:

—Who's there?

—Nobody, sir, answers the maid's little voice.

They prefer to be invisible. But there must be someone.

—Take this gift, girl.

—Oh, sir, you shouldn't. I'm nobody to get presents from you, oh, no!

—Happy birthday, I insist.

—Oh, but you shouldn't be thinking of me, sir.

They return to being invisible.

—Oh! Excuse me!

—Please excuse my boldness, sir.

—I won't bother you for even a moment, sir. I'm just going to dust the furniture.

Now one of them had a name: Dimas Palmero.

I couldn't bear to see him. Hate kept me from sleeping; I hugged the pillow that held the scent, each day fainter, of Lala my love, and I cried in despair. Then, to torture myself, I racked my mind with her memory and imagined the worst: Lala with that boy; Lala in the arms of Dimas Palmero; Lala with a past. Then I realized that I couldn't recall the face of the young murderer. Young: I said that and began to remember. I began to draw him out from the original anonymity with which I regarded him that fatal night. Uniformed as a waiter, white cotton jacket, shiny pants, bow tie, identical to all, same as none. I began to wonder how Lala might have regarded him. Young, I said; was he handsome as well? But, besides being young and handsome, was he interesting? and was he interesting because he held some secret? I induced and deduced like mad those first days of my solitude, and from his secret I passed to his interest, from his interest to his youth, and from there to his good looks. Dimas Palmero, in my strange fiftyish pseudo-widowhood, was the Lucifer who warned me: For the first time in your life, you have lost a woman, cuckold Nicolás, not because you left her, or chased her out, not even because *she* left you, but because I took her away from you and I took her forever. Dimas had to be handsome, and he had to have a secret. No other way a cheap *naco* could have defeated me. It couldn't be. It would have to take a youth who was handsome, at least, and who held a secret, to defeat me.

I had to see him. One night it became an obsession: to see Dimas Palmero, speak with him, convince myself that at least I deserved my grief and my defeat.

They had been bringing me trays of food. I barely touched them. I never saw who brought the tray three times a day, or who took it away. Miss Palazuelos sent a note that she was waiting for my instructions, but what instructions could I give, drowned as I was in melancholy? I told her to take a vacation while I got over my broken heart. I noticed the eyes of the boy who took the message. I didn't know him. Surely Miss Palazuelos had substituted a new boy for Dimas Palmero. But I was obsessed: I saw in this new servant a double, almost, of the incarcerated Dimas. How I wanted to confront my rival!

I was obsessed, and my obsession was to go to the Reclusorio and speak with Dimas, to see him face to face. For the first time in ten days, I showered, I shaved, I put on a decent suit, and I left my bedroom, I went down the stairs of gargoyled ironwork to the colonial hall surrounded by little balconies, with a glazed-tile fountain in the corner, burbling water. I reached the front door and tried, with a natural gesture, to open it. It was locked. Such security! The help had turned cautious, indeed, after the crime. Skittish and, as I've said, invisible. Where were the damned bastards? How did I call them? What did I call them?? Boy, girl! Ah, my good woman, my good man! . . . Fuck it!

Nobody answered. I looked out the stained-glass windows of the hall, parting the curtains. They were there in the gardens. Settled in. Sprawled over the grass, trampling it, smoking cigarettes and crushing the butts in the rose mulch; squatting, pulling from their food bags steaming pigs' feet in green mole[13] and steaming sweet and hot tamales, strewing the ground with the burnt maize leaves; the women coquettishly clipping my roses, sticking them in their shiny black hair, while the kids pricked their hands on the thorns and the piglets crackled over the flame . . . I ran to one of the side windows: they were playing marbles and ball-and-cup, they had set some suspicious, leaking casks by the side of the garage. I ran to the right wing of the mansion: a man was urinating in the narrow, shady part of the garden, a man in a lacquered straw hat was pissing against the wall between my house and . . .

I was surrounded.

A smell of purslane came from the kitchen. I entered. I had never seen the new cook, a fat woman, square as a die, with jet-black hair and a face aged by skepticism.

—I am Lupe, the new cook—she told me—and this is Don Zacarías, the new chauffeur.

Said chauffeur did not even rise from the table where he was eating purslane tacos. I looked at him with astonishment. He was the image of the ex-president Don Adolfo Ruiz Cortines,[14] who in turn was identified, in popular wit, with the actor Boris Karloff: bushy eyebrows, deep eyes, huge bags under the eyes, wrinkles deeper than the Grand Canyon, high forehead, high cheekbones, compressed skull, graying hair brushed to the back.

—Pleased, I said, like a perfect idiot.

I returned to the bedroom and, almost instinctively, I decided to put on some of the few shoes with laces that I have. I looked at myself there, seated on the unmade bed, by the pillow that held her scent, with my shoelaces untied and hanging loose like inert but hungry earthworms. I pulled the bell cord by the headboard, to see who would answer my call.

[13] **green mole:** A chile sauce. [14] **Cortines:** President of Mexico from 1952 to 1959.

A few minutes passed. Then knuckles rapped.

He entered, the young man who resembled (according to my fancy) the incarcerated Dimas Palmero. I decided, nonetheless, to tell them apart, to separate them, not to allow any confusion. The murderer was locked away. This was someone else.

—What is your name?

—Marco Aurelio.

You'll notice he didn't say "At your service, sir," or "What may I do for you, *patrón*." Nor did he look at me sideways, eyes hooded, head lowered.

—Tie my shoes.

He looked at me a moment.

—Right now, I said. He continued to look at me, and then knelt before me. He tied the laces.

—Tell the chauffeur I'm going out after eating. And tell the cook to come up so I can plan some menus. And another thing, Marco Aurelio . . .

Now back on his feet, he looked at me fixedly.

—Clear all the intruders out of my garden. If they're not gone within half an hour, I'll call the police. You may go, Marco Aurelio. That's all, you hear?

I dressed, ostentatiously and ostensibly, to go out, I who had gone out so seldom. I decided to try for the first time—almost—a beige gabardine double-breasted suit, blue shirt, stupid yellow clip tie, and, sticking out of my breast pocket, a Liberty[15] handkerchief an Englishwoman had given me.

Real sharp, real shark: I spoke my name and, stomping loudly, I went downstairs. But there it was the same story. Locked door, people surrounding the house. A full-fledged party, and a piñata in the garage. The children squealing happily. A child making a hubbub, trapped in a strange metal crib, all barred in up to the top, like a furnace grate.

—Marco Aurelio!

I sat down in the hall of stained-glass windows. Marco Aurelio solicitously undid my shoes, and, solicitously, offered me my most comfortable slippers. Would I like my pipe? Did I want a brandy? I would lack nothing. The chauffeur would go out and get me any videotape I wanted: new pictures or old, sports, sex, music . . . The family has told me to tell you not to worry. You know, Don Nico, in this country (he was saying as he knelt before me, taking off my shoes, this horrendous *naco*) we survive the worst calamities because we take care of each other, you'll see, I was in Los Angeles as an illegal and the American families there are scattered all around, they live far apart from each other, parents without children, the old ones abandoned, the young ones looking to break away, but here it's just the opposite, Don Nico, how can you have forgotten that? you're so solitary, God help you, not us—if you don't have a job, the family will feed you, it will put a roof over your head, if the cops are after you, or you want to escape the army, the family will hide you, send you back from Las Lomas to Morelos and from there to Los Angeles and back into circulation: the family knows how to move by night, the family is almost always invisible,

[15] **Liberty:** A London department store noted for its fine printed fabrics.

but what the fuck, Don Nico, it can make its presence felt, how it can make its presence felt! You'll see. So you're going to call the police if we don't go? Then I assure you that the police will not find us here when they arrive, although they will find you, quite stiff, floating in the pool, just like Eduardita, whom God has taken onto . . . But listen, Don Nico, there's no need to look like you've seen a ghost, our message is real simple: you'll lead your usual life, phone all you like, manage your business, throw parties, receive your pals and their dolls, and we'll take care of you, the only thing is, you'll never leave this place as long as our brother Dimas is in the pen: the day that Dimas leaves jail, you leave your house, Don Nico, not a minute before, not a minute later, unless you don't play straight with us, and then you'll leave here first—but they'll carry you out, that much I swear.

He pressed together his thumb and index finger and kissed them noisily as I buried myself in the pillow of Eduardita—my Lala!

5

So began my new life, and the first thing that will strike you, my listeners, is the same thought that occurred to me, in my own house in Las Lomas: Well, really my life hasn't changed; indeed, now I'm more protected than ever; they let me throw my parties, manage my business affairs by telephone, receive the girls who console me for the death of Lala (my cup runneth over: I'm a tragic lover, howboutthat!), and to the cops who showed up to ask why all these people have surrounded my house, packed in the garden, frying quesadillas[16] by the rosebushes, urinating in the garage, they explained: Because this gentleman is very generous, every day he brings us the leftovers from his parties—*every day!* I confirmed this personally to the police, but they looked at me with a mournful smirk (Mexican officials are expert at looking at you with a sardonic grimace) and I understood: So be it. From then on, I would have to pay them their weekly bribe. I recorded it in my expense books, and I had to fire Miss Palazuelos, so that she wouldn't suspect anything. She herself hadn't an inkling why she was fired. I was famous for what I've mentioned: nobody lasted very long with me, not secretary or chauffeur or lover. I'm my own boss, and that's the end of it! You will note that this whole fantastic situation was simply an echo of my normal situation, so there was no reason for anyone to be alarmed: neither the exterior world that kept on doing business with me nor the interior world (I, my servants, my lovers, the same as ever . . .).

The difference, of course, is that this fantastic situation (masquerading as my usual situation) contained one element of abnormality that was both profound and intolerable: it was not the work of my own free will.

There was that one little thing; this situation did not respond to my whim; I responded to it. And it was up to me to end it; if Dimas Palmero went free, I would be freed as well.

But how was I going to arrange for said Dimas to get off? Although I was the one

[16] **quesadillas:** Tortillas with melted cheese.

who called the police to have him arrested, he was now charged with murder by the District Attorney's office.

I decided to put on shoes with laces; it was a pretext for asking the valet Marco Aurelio to come up to help me, chat with me, inform me: Were all those people in the garden really the family of the jailed Dimas Palmero? Yes, answered Marco Aurelio, a fine, very extended Mexican family, we all help each other out, as they say. And what else? I insisted, and he laughed at that: We're all Catholic, never the pill, never a condom, the children that God sends . . . Where were they from? From the state of Morelos, all *campesinos,*[17] workers in the cane fields; no, the fields were not abandoned, didn't they tell you, Don Nico? this is hardly the full contingent, ha ha, this is no more than a delegation, we're good in Morelos at organizing delegations and sending them to the capital to demand justice, surely you remember General Emiliano Zapata;[18] well, now you can see that we've learned something. Now we don't ask for justice. Now we make justice. But I am innocent, I said to Marco Aurelio kneeling before me, I lost Lala, I am . . . He lifted his face, black and yellow as the flag of an invisible, hostile nation:—Dimas Palmero is our brother.

Beyond that, I couldn't make him budge. These people are tight-lipped. Our brother: did he mean it literally, or by solidarity? (Stubborn sons of that fucking Zapata!) A lawyer knows that everything in the world (words, the law, love . . .) can be interpreted in the *strict* sense or in the *loose* sense. Was the brotherhood of Marco Aurelio, my extraordinary servant, and Dimas, my incarcerated servant, of blood, or was it figurative? Narrow, or broad? I would have to know to understand my situation. Marco Aurelio, I said one day, even if I withdraw the charges against your brother, as you call him (poker-faced, bilious silence), the prosecutor will try him because too many people witnessed the scene by the pool between Lala and your brother, it doesn't depend on me, they will proceed ex officio, understand? it's not a question of avenging Lala's death . . .

—Our sister . . . But not a whore, no way.

He was kneeling in front of me, tying my shoelaces, and on hearing him say this, I gave him a kick in the face. I assure you it wasn't intentional; it was a brutal reflex responding to a brutal assertion. I gave him a brutal kick in the jaw, I knocked him good, he fell on his back, and I followed my blind instinct, left reason aside (left it sound asleep), and ran down the stairs to the hall just as an unfamiliar maid was sweeping the entrance, and the open door invited me to go out into the morning of Las Lomas, the air sharp with pollution, the distant whoosh of a balloon and the flight of the red, blue, yellow spheres, liberated, far from the empty barranca[19] that surrounded us, its high eucalyptuses with their peeling bark fighting the smell of shit from the bluff's recesses: globes of colors greeted me as I went out and breathed poison and rubbed my eyes.

My garden was the site of a pilgrimage. The scent of fried food mixed with the odor of shit and eucalyptus: smoke from cookstoves, squeals of children, the strumming of guitars, click of marbles, two policemen flirting with the girls in braids and aprons on the other side of the gargoyled grillwork of my mansion, an old, toothless, graying man in patched pants and huaraches, his lacquered straw hat in his hand and an invitation—he came over to me: Please try something, sir, there are good tacos, sir. I looked at the policemen, who didn't look at me but laughed wickedly with the country girls and I thought the stupid cunts were practically pregnant already, who said they weren't whores, giving birth in the open fields to the bastard kids of these bastard cops, their children adding to the family of, of, of this old patriarch who offered me tacos instead of protecting the two girls being seduced by this pair of sinister uniformed bandits, smiling, indifferent to my presence on the steps of my house. Was he going to protect them the way he protected Lala? I got up. I studied him, trying to understand.

What could I do? I thanked him and sat down with him in my own garden and a woman offered us hot tortillas in a willow basket. The old man asked me to take the first bite and I repeated the atavistic gesture of taking the moistened bread of the gods out from under the damp colored napkin, as if the earth itself had opened up to offer me the Proustian madeleine[20] of the Mexican: the warm tortilla. (You who are listening to me will remember that I had plied a whole generation of young readers with Marcel Proust, and he who reads Proust, said a staunch nationalistic friend of mine, Proustitutes himself!) Awfull The truth is that, sitting there with the old patriarch eating hot salted tortillas, I felt so transported, so back in my mama's arms again or something like that, that I was already telling myself, forget it, let's have the tortillas, let's have those casks of *pulque*[21] that I saw going into the garage the other day; they brought us brimming glasses of thick liquor, tasting of pineapple, and Marco Aurelio must have had a pretty good knock, because there wasn't a trace of him to be seen. I sat with my legs crossed on my own lawn, the old man feeding me, I questioning him: How long are you going to be here? Don't worry, we don't have to return to Morelos, this could go on for years, do you realize that, señor? He looked at me with his ageless face, the old goat, and told me that they were taking turns, hadn't I caught on? They came and went, they were never the same twice, every day some went home and others arrived, because it's a question of making a sacrifice for Dimas Palmero and for Eduardita, poor child, too, hadn't I realized? Did I think it was always the same folk outside here? He laughed a little, tapping his gummy mouth: the truth was that I had never really noticed them, to me they had, indeed, all appeared the same . . .

But each one is different, the old man said quickly, with a dark seriousness that filled me with fear, each one comes into the world to aid his people, and although most die in infancy, those who have the good fortune to grow, those, señor, are a treasure for an old man like me, they are going to inherit the earth, they are going to go to work there in the North with the gringos, they are going to come to the capital to serve you; and they won't send money to the old folks, you can't argue with that,

[17] ***campesinos:*** Fieldworkers, peasants. [18] General Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919): Revolutionary who led an army of peasants during the Mexican Revolution in a fight for land reform. [19] **barranca:** A steep slope or escarpment.

[20] **madeleine:** French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922) in *Remembrance of Things Past* describes a boyhood experience of eating a small French cake, a madeleine, that becomes a defining sensory memory in his life. [21] ***pulque:*** A fermented drink made from agave.

señor (he resumed his usual cordiality), if the old folks don't know who each of their children are, their names, what they do, what they look like, if we depend on them to keep from dying of hunger when we grow old? Just one condition, he said, pausing:

—Poor, señor, but proud.

He looked over my shoulder, waved. I followed his look. Marco Aurelio in his white shirt and his black pants was rubbing his chin, resting against the door of the house. I got up, thanked the old man, brushed the dirt from my rear, and walked toward Marco Aurelio. I knew that, from then on, it would be nothing but loafers for me.

6

That night I had a terrifying dream that those people would stay here forever, renewing themselves again and again, generation after generation, without concern for any one individual destiny, least of all that of a little half-elegant lawyer: the canny dandy of Las Lomas de Chapultepec. They could hold out until I died. But I still couldn't understand how my death would avenge that of Dimas Palmero, who languished in preventive custody, waiting for the Mexican judicial tortoise to summon him to justice. Listen close. I said tortoise, not torture. That could take years, didn't I know it. If they observed the law limiting the amount of time a man can be detained before being tried, Mexico would stop being what it always has been: a reign of influence, whim, and injustice. So I tell you, and you, like it or not, you have to listen. If I'm the prisoner of Las Lomas, you're the prisoners of my telephones—you listen to me.

Don't imagine I haven't thought of all the ways I could make this my link to the outside, my Ariadne's thread,[22] my vox humana. I have a videotape I often watch, given the circumstances: poor Barbara Stanwyck lying paralyzed in bed,[23] listening to the footsteps of the murderer climbing the stairs to kill her and take control of her millions (will it be her husband? suspense!), and she is trying to call the police and the telephone is out of order, a voice answering, sorry, wrong number . . . What a thriller!—*La voix humaine*, a French girlfriend told me . . . But this was not a Universal picture, only a modest Huaraches Films production, or some such totally asshole thing. All right, I know that I speak to you to take my mind off things for a while; don't think, however, that I have ever stopped plotting my escape. It would be so easy, I tell myself, to go on strike, stop using my phones to make money, neglect my bank accounts, stop talking to you, to my public auditors, my stockbrokers . . . My immediate conclusion: these people wouldn't give a fuck about my poverty. They are not here to take my cash. If I didn't feed them, they would feed me. I suspect that this Morelos operation functions as efficiently as a Japanese assembly line. If I became poor, they would come to my assistance!

You are free as I was once, and you will understand when I say that, come what may, one doesn't easily resign oneself to giving up one's liberty just like that. Very

[22] **Ariadne's thread:** In Greek mythology Ariadne gave Theseus the thread that he could follow to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. [23] **a videotape . . . in bed:** The film is *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948).

well: They have sworn to kill me if I denounce them. But what if I managed to escape, hide, set the authorities on them from afar? Don't try it, Don Nico, said my recovered jailer, Marco Aurelio, we are many, we will find you; he laughed: there are branches of the family in Los Angeles, in Texas, in Chicago, even in Paris and London, where rich Mexican señoras take their Agripinas, their Rudecindas, and their Dalmacias to work abroad . . . It wouldn't surprise me to see some guy in a big sombrero get off a jumbo jet at Charles de Gaulle Airport and chop me to bits in the middle of Paris, laughing wickedly, brandishing the machete that dangles eternally from him like a spare penis. How I hated Marco Aurelio! How dare one of these cheap *nacos* talk so familiarly about General de Gaulle! That's instant communications for you!

They knew my intentions. I took advantage of one of my parties to put on the overcoat and hat of a friend, without his noticing, and while everyone was drinking the last bottle of Taittinger (the pretext for the party) and eating exquisite canapés prepared by the block-shaped fat woman of the kitchen, Doña Lupe (a genius, that woman!), with the hat pulled down over my ears and my lapels turned up, I slipped through the door, which was open that night (and every night: you must realize that my jailers no longer imagined that I would escape, what for? if my life was the same as ever!—me inside with my parties and my telephones; they outside, invisible: as always!). As I say, they no longer locked the door. But I disguised myself and slipped through the door because I didn't want to accept a sentence of confinement imposed by others. I did so without caring about success or failure. The door, freedom, the street, the jumbo to Paris, even if I was met there by Rudecinda, the cousin of Marco Aurelio, rolling pin in hand . . .

—You forgot to tie your shoes, Don Nico, said Marco Aurelio, holding high a tray heaped with canapés, looking at my feet, and blocking the way to the front door.

I laughed, sighed, took off the overcoat and the hat, returned to my guests.

I tried it several times, I wouldn't give up, to keep my self-respect. But one time I couldn't get beyond the garden, because the children, instinctively, surrounded me, forming a circle, and sang a play song to me. Another time, escaping at night by the balcony, I was hanging by my fingernails when I heard a group at my feet serenading me: it was my birthday and I had forgotten! Many happy returns, Don Nico, these are the years of your life that . . . ! I was in despair: fifty springtimes in these circumstances! In desperation I resorted to Montecristo's strategy:[24] I feigned death, lying very stiff in my bed; not to give up, as I say, to touch all the bases. Marco Aurelio poured a bucket of cold water on me and I cried out, and he just stood there, saying: Don Nico, when you die on me, I'll be the first to let you know, you can be sure. Will you cry for me, Marco Aurelio, you bastard? I was incensed! I thought first of poisoning my immediate jailers, the valet Marco Aurelio, the cubic cook, the Karloff car man; but not only did I suspect that others would rush in to replace them, I also feared (inconsistent of me!) that while the lawsuit against the miserable Dimas

[24] **Montecristo's strategy:** In Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), the hero escapes from prison by pretending to be dead.

Palmero dragged on indefinitely, an action against me for poisoning my servants would be thunderous, scandalous, trumpeted in the press: Heartless Millionaire Poisons Faithful Servants! From time to time, a few fat morsels must be cast to the (nearly starved) sharks of justice . . . Besides, when I entered the kitchen, Doña Lupe was so kind to me: Do sit down, Don Nico, do you know what I'm fixing today? Can you smell it? Don't you like your cheese and squash? Or would you rather have what we're fixing ourselves, *chilaquilitos*[25] in green sauce? This made my mouth water and made life seem bearable. The chauffeur and the boy sat down to eat with Doña Lupe and me, they told me stories, they were quite amusing, they made me remember, remember her . . .

So why didn't I explain my situation to the girls who passed through my parties and my bed? What would they think of such a thing? Can you imagine the ridicule, the incredulity? So just leave when you want to, Nicolás, who's going to stop you? But they'll kill me, baby. Then I'm going to save you, I'm going to inform the police. Then they'll kill you along with me, my love. Or would you rather live on the run, afraid for your life? Of course I never told them a thing, nor did they suspect anything. I was famous as a recluse. And they came to console me for the death of Lala. Into my arms, goddesses, for life is short, but the night is long.

7

I saw her. I tell you I saw her yesterday, in the garden.

8

I called a friend of mine, an influential man in the District Attorney's office: What do you know about the case of my servant, Dimas Palmero? My friend stopped laughing and said: Whatever you want, Nicolás, is how we'll handle it. You understand: if you like, we'll keep him locked up without a trial until Judgment Day; if you prefer, we'll move up the court date and try him tomorrow; if what you want is to see him free, that can be arranged, and, look, Nicolás, why play dumb, there are people who disappear, who just simply disappear. Whatever you like, I repeat.

Whatever I liked. I was on the point of saying no, this Dimas or Dimass or Dimwit or whatever he's called isn't the real problem, I'm the prisoner, listen, call my lawyer, have the house surrounded, make a big fuss, kill these bastards . . .

I thanked my friend for his offer and hung up without indicating a preference. What for? I buried my head in my pillow. There is nothing left of Lala, not even the aroma. I racked my brains thinking: What should I do? What solution have I overlooked? What possibilities have I left in the inkwell? I had an inspiration; I decided to speed things up. I went down to the kitchen. It was the hour when Marco Aurelio, Doña Lupe, and the chauffeur with the face of the former president ate. The smell of pork in purslane came up the rococo stairway, stronger than the scent, ever fainter, of Lala—Eduardita, as they called her. I went down berating myself furiously: What was I thinking? Why this terrible helplessness? Why did I think only of myself, not of her, who was the victim, after all? I deserved what had happened to me; I was the prisoner of Las Lomas even before all this happened, I was imprisoned by my own habits, my comfortable life, my easy business deals, my even easier loves. But also—I said when my bare feet touched the cold tile of the living room—I was bound by a sort of devotion and respect for my lovers: I didn't ask questions, I didn't check out their stories: —I have no past, Nico, my life commenced the moment we met, and I might whistle a tune as my only comment, but that was all.

The three were sitting comfortably eating their lunch.

—May I? I inquired cordially.

Doña Lupe got up to prepare something for me. The two men didn't budge, although Marco Aurelio waved for me to sit down. The presidential double merely looked at me, without blinking, from the imperturbable depths of his baggy eyes.

—Thank you. I came down just to ask a question. It occurred to me that what is important to you is not to keep me imprisoned here but to free Dimas. That's right, isn't it?

The cook served me an aromatic dish of pork with purslane, and I began to eat, looking at them. I had said the same thing that they had always said to me: You leave here the day our brother Dimas Palmero gets out of jail. Why now these little looks exchanged between them, this air of uncertainty, if I had only repeated what we all knew: the unwritten rule of our covenant? Give me statutory law; down with *common law,* which is subject to all sorts of interpretations and depends too much on the ethics and good sense of the people. But these peasants from Morelos must be, like me, inheritors of Roman law, where all that counts is what is written, not what is done or not done, even if it violates the letter of the law. The law, sirs, is august, and supersedes all exceptions. These people's lands always had depended on a statute, a royal decree; and now I felt that my life also was going to depend on a written contract. I looked at the looks of my jailers as they looked at each other.

—Tell me if you are willing to put this in writing: The day that Dimas Palmero gets out of the pen, Nicolás Sarmiento goes free from Las Lomas. Agreed?

I began to lose confidence; they didn't answer; they looked at each other, suspicious, tight-lipped, let me tell you, the faces of all three marked with a feline wariness; but hadn't I merely asked them to confirm in writing what they had always said! Why this unforeseen suspicion all of a sudden?

—We've been thinking, Don Nico, said Marco Aurelio finally, and we have reached the conclusion that you could quickly arrange for our brother Dimas Palmero to be freed; then we let you go; but you could still play us a trick and have the law spread its net over Dimas again. —And over us, too, said the cook, not even sighing.

—That game has been played on us plenty, said the pale, baggy-eyed chauffeur gloomily, arranging his hair with his five-fingered comb.

—Come on, come on, the cook emphatically exhorted the electric stove, atavistically airing it with her hands and lips, as if it were a charcoal brazier. The old idiot!

—So what we're willing to write down, Don Nico, is that you'll be freed when you confess to the murder of Eduardita, so that our brother cannot be judged for a crime committed by another.

[25] chilaquilitos: A snack of eggs, chiles, and tortillas.

I won't give them the pleasure of spitting out the pork (anyway, it's quite tasty), or of spilling my glass of fermented pineapple juice, which, quite complacently, the cook has just set in front of my nose. I'm going to give them a lesson in cool, even though my head is spinning like a carousel.

—That was not our original agreement. We've been shut up together here more than three months. Our accord is now binding, as they say.

—Nobody ever respected any agreement with us, the cook quickly replied, waving her hands furiously, as though they were straw fans, in front of the electric burner.

—Nobody, said the chauffeur sepulchrally. All they do is send us to hell.

And I was going to pay for all the centuries of injustice toward the people of Morelos? I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The simple truth was, I didn't know what to say. I was too busy taking in my new situation. I pushed my plate aside and left the kitchen without saying a word. I climbed the stairs with the sensation that my body was a sick friend I was following with great difficulty. I sat down in the bathroom and there I remained, sleeping. But even my dreams betrayed me. I dreamed that they were right. Damn! They were right.

9

And it is you who wake me, with a furious ringing, a buzz of alarm, calling me on the phone, questioning me urgently, sympathizing with me: Why don't I ask them about her? About whom? I say, playing the fool. About Lala, la Eduarda, la Eduardita, as they called her, la Lala, la . . . Why? She's the key to the whole business! You're completely in the dark: what was behind that scene between Lala and Dimas by the pool? Who was Lala? Have all these people besieged you because of her, or him, or both of them? Why not find out? Fool!

Both of them. I laughed, fell back to sleep, sitting on the toilet in the bathroom, with my pajama bottoms rolled down around my ankles, in a stupor: both of them, you said, without realizing that I can't bear to imagine, much less to pursue the thought, of her with another—she with another, that thought I cannot bear, and you laugh at me, I hear your laughter on the telephone line, you say goodbye, you accuse me, you ask when I got so delicate and sentimental? You, Nicolás Sarmiento, who have had dozens of women just as dozens of women have had you, both you and they members of a city and a society that abandoned all that colonial-catholiccantabrian hypocrisy a few generations ago and cheerfully dedicated themselves to fucking anyone, you who know perfectly well that your dames come to you from others and go from you to others, just as they know that you weren't a monk before you knew them, nor will you become one after leaving them: you, Nicolás Sarmiento, the Don Juan of venture capital, are going to tell us now that you can't bear the thought of your Lala in the arms of Dimas Palmero? Why? It turns your stomach to think that she slept with a servant? Could it be that your horror is more social than sexual? Tell us! Wake up!

I tell you I saw her in the garden.

I got up slowly from the bathroom, I pulled up my pajamas, I didn't have to tie them, they closed with a snap, thank God, I'm hopeless for daily life, I'm only good at making money and making love; does that justify a life?

I look at the garden from the window of my bedroom.

Tell me if you don't see her, standing, with her long braids, a knee slightly bent, looking toward the barranca, surprised to be caught between the city and nature, unable to tell where one begins and the other ends, or which imitates the other: the barranca doesn't smell of the mountains, it smells of the buried city and the city no longer smells of city but of infirm nature: she longs for the country, looking toward the barranca, now Doña Lupe goes out for air, approaches the girl, puts a hand on her shoulder, and says: Don't be sad, you mustn't, you're in the city now and the city can be ugly and hard, but so can the country, the country is at least as violent as the city, I could tell you stories, Eduarda . . .

I'll say it straight out. There is only one redeeming thing in my life and that is the respect I've shown my women. You can condemn me as egotistical, or frivolous, or condescending, or manipulating, or unable to tie my shoes. The one thing you can't accuse me of is sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. I think that's all that has saved me. I think that's why women have loved me: I don't ask for explanations, I don't check out their pasts. No one can check the past of anyone in a society as fluid as ours. Where are you from? What do you do? Who were your mama and papa? Each of our questions can be a wound that doesn't heal. A wound that keeps us from loving or being loved. Everything betrays us: the body sends us one signal and an expression reveals another, words turn against themselves, the mind cons us, death deceives death . . . Beware!

10

I saw Lala that afternoon in the garden, when she was nobody, when she was someone else, when she looked dreamily over a barranca, when she was still a virgin. I saw her and realized that she had a past and that I loved her. These, then, were her people. This, then, was all that remained of her, her family, her people, her land, her nostalgia. Dimas Palmero, was he her lover or her brother, either one longing for revenge? Marco Aurelio, was he really the brother of Dimas or, perhaps, of Eduardita? What was her relationship to the cook Doña Lupe, the baggy-eyed chauffeur, the shabby old patriarch?

I dressed. I went down to the living room. I went out to the garden. There was no longer any reason to bar my way. We all knew the rules, the contract. One day we would sit down to write it out and formalize it. I walked among the running children, took a piece of jerky without asking permission, a plump red-cheeked woman smiled at me, I waved cordially to the old man, the old man looked up and caught my eye, he put out his hand for me to help him up, he looked at me with an incredible intensity, as if only he could see that second body of mine, my sleepy companion struggling behind me through life.

I helped the old man up and he took my arm with a grip as firm as his gaze, and said: "I will grow old but never die. You understand." He led me to the edge of the property. The girl was still standing there, and Doña Lupe put her arms around her, enveloping her shoulders in her huge embrace. We went over to her, and Marco Aurelio, too, half whistling, half smoking. We were a curious quintet, that night in Las Lomas de Chapultepec, far from their land, Morelos, the country, the cane fields,

the rice fields, the blue sculpted mountains cut off at the top, secret, where it is said the immortal guerrilla Zapata still rides his white horse . . .

I approached them. Or, rather, the old patriarch who had also decided to be immortal came to me, and the old man almost forced me to join them, to embrace them. I looked at the pretty girl, dark, ripe as those sweet oranges, oranges with an exciting navel and juices slowly evaporating in the sun. I took her dark arm and thought of Lala. Only this girl didn't smell of perfume, she smelled of soap. These, then, were her people, I repeated. This, then, was all that remained of her, of her feline grace, her fantastic capacity for learning conventions and mimicking fashions, speaking languages, being independent, loving herself and loving me, letting go her beautiful body with its rhythmic hips, shaking her small sweet breasts, looking at me orgasmically, as if a tropical river suddenly flowed through her eyes at the moment she desired me, oh my adored Lala, only this remains of you: your rebel land, your peasant forebears and fellows, your province as a genetic pool, bloody as the pool where you died, Lala, your land as an immense liquid pool of cheap arms for cutting cane and tending the moist rows of rice, your land as the ever-flowing fountain of workers for industry and servants for Las Lomas residences and secretary-typists for ministries and clerks in department stores and salesgirls in markets and garbage collectors and chorus girls in the Margo Theater and starlets in the national cinema and assembly-line workers in the border factories and counter help in Texas Taco Huts and servants in mansions like mine in Beverly Hills and young housewives in Chicago and young lawyers like me in Detroit and young journalists in New York: all swept in a dark flow from Morelos, Oaxaca, Guanajuanto, Michoacán, and Potosí, all tossed about the world in currents of revolution, war, liberation, the glory of some, the poverty of others, the audacity of a few, the contempt of many . . . liberty and crime.

Lala, after all, had a past. But I had not imagined it.

11

It wasn't necessary to formalize our agreement. It all started long ago, when the father of my sainted fiancée, Buenaventura del Rey, gave me the key to blackmail General Prisciliano Nieves in his hospital bed and force him to bequeath me his large house in Las Lomas in exchange for his honor as hero of Santa Eulalia. Like me, you have probably asked yourselves: Why didn't Buenaventura's father use that same information? And you know the answer as well as I. In our modern world, things come only to those who know how to use information. That's the recipe for power now, and those who let information slip through their fingers will fail miserably. On one side, weak-knees like the papa of Buenaventura del Rey. On the other side, sharks like Nicolás Sarmiento your servant. And in between, these poor, decent people who don't have any information, who have only memory, a memory that brings them suffering.

Sometimes, audaciously, I cast pebbles into that genetic pool, just to study the ripples. Santa Eulalia? La Zapotera? General Nieves, whose old house in Las Lomas we all inhabit, they unaware and me well informed, naturally? What did they know?

In my computer were entered the names and birthplaces of this sea of people who served me, most from the state of Morelos, which is, after all, the size of Switzerland. What information did Dimas Palmero possess?

(So you come from La Zapotera in Morelos. Yes, Don Nico. Then you know the hacienda of Santa Eulalia? Of course, Don Nico, but to call it a hacienda . . . you know, there's only a burnt-out shell. It's what they called a sugar mill. Ah yes, you probably played in it as a child, Dimas. That's right, señor. And you heard stories about it? Yes, of course. The wall where the Escalona family was lined up in front of a firing squad must still be there? Yes, my grandfather was one of those who was going to be shot. But your grandfather was not a landowner. No, but the colonel said he was going to wipe out both the owners and those who served them. And then what happened? Then another commander said no, Mexican soldiers don't murder the people, because they are the people. And then, Dimas? Then they say that the first officer gave the order to fire on the masters and the servants, but the second officer gave a counterorder. Then the soldiers shot the first officer, and then the Escalona family. They didn't fire at the servants. And then? Then they say the soldiers and the servants embraced and cheered, señor. But you don't remember the names of those officers, Dimas? No, even the old ones no longer remember. But if you like I can try to find out, Don Nico. Thank you, Dimas. At your service, sir.)

12

Yes, I imagine that Dimas Palmero had some information, who knows—but I'm sure that his relatives, crammed into my garden, kept the memory alive.

I approached them. Or, rather, I approached the old patriarch and he practically forced me to join them, to greet the others. I looked at the pretty, dark girl. I touched her dark arm. I thought of Lala. Doña Lupe had her arm around the girl. The bluish-haired grandfather, that old man as wrinkled as an old piece of silk, supported by the solid body of the cook, playing with the braids of the red-cheeked girl, all looking together toward the barranca of Las Lomas de Chapultepec: I was anxious to find out if they had a collective memory, however faint, of their own land, the same land about which I had information exclusively for my advantage; I asked them if someone had told them the names, did the old men remember the names? Nieves? Does that name mean anything to you—Nieves? Solomillo? Do you remember these old names? I asked, smiling, in an offhand manner, to see if the laws of probability projected by my computer would hold: the officers, the death of the Escalona family, Santa Eulalia, the Zapotera . . . One of those you mention said he was going to free us from servitude, the old man said very evenly, but when the other one put all of us, masters and servants, in front of a wall, Prisciliano, yes, Prisciliano, now I remember, said, "Mexican soldiers don't murder the people, because they are the people," and the other officer gave the order to fire, Prisciliano gave the counterorder, and the soldiers fired first at Prisciliano, then at the landowners, and finally at the second officer.

—Solomillo? Andrés Solomillo.

—No, Papa, you're getting mixed up. First they shot the landowners, then the revolutionary leaders began to shoot each other.

—Anyway, they all died, said the old survivor with something like resigned sadness.

—Oh, it was a long time ago, Papa.

—And you, what happened to you?

—The soldiers shouted hurray and threw their caps in the air, we tossed our sombreros in the air too, we all embraced, and I swear, sir, no one who was present that morning in Santa Eulalia will ever forget that famous line, "The soldiers are the people . . ." Well, the important thing, really, was that we'd gotten rid of the landowners first and the generals after.

He paused a moment, looking at the barranca, and said: *And it didn't do us a bit of good.*

The old man shrugged, his memory was beginning to fail him, surely; besides, they told so many different stories about what happened at Santa Eulalia, you could just about believe them all; it was the only way not to lie, and the old man laughed.

—But in the midst of so much death, there's no way to know who survived and who didn't.

—No, Papa, if you don't remember, who is going to?

—You are, said the old man. That is why I tell you. That is how it has always been. The children remember for you.

—Does Dimas know this story? I ventured to ask, immediately biting my tongue for my audacity, my haste, my . . . The old man showed no reaction.

—It all happened a long time ago. I was a child then and the soldier just told us: You're free, there's no more hacienda, or landowners, or bosses, nothing but freedom, our chains were removed, *patrón,* we were free as air. And now see how we end up, serving still, or in jail.

—Long live our chains! Marco Aurelio gave a laugh, a cross between sorrow and cynicism, as he passed by, hoisting a Dos Equis,[26] and I watched him, thinking of Eduarda as a child, how she must have struggled to reach my arms, and I thought of Dimas Palmero in prison and of how he would stay there, with his memory, not realizing that memory was information, Dimas in his cell knowing the same story as everyone, conforming to the memory of the world and not the memory of his people—Prisciliano Nieves was the hero of Santa Eulalia—while the old man knew what Dimas forgot, didn't know, or rejected: Prisciliano Nieves had died in Santa Eulalia; but neither of them knew how to convert his memory into information, and my life depended on their doing nothing, on their memory, accurate or not, remaining frozen forever, an imprisoned memory, you understand, my accomplices? Memory their prisoner, information my prisoner, and both of us here, not moving from the house, both of us immobile, both prisoners, and everyone happy, so I immediately said to Marco Aurelio: Listen, when you visit your brother, tell him he'll lack for nothing, you hear me? Tell him that they'll take good care of him, I promise, he can get married, have conjugal visits, you know: I've heard it said in the house that he likes this red-cheeked girl with the bare arms, well, he can marry her, she's

[26] Dos Equis: A brand of beer.

not going to run off with one of these bandits, you've seen what they're like, Marco Aurelio, but tell Dimas not to worry, he can count on me, I'll pay for the wedding and give the girl a dowry, tell him I'm taking him, and all of you, into my care, you will all be well cared for, I'll see to it that you'll never lack for anything, neither you here nor Dimas in the pen, he won't have to work, or you either, I'll look after the family, resigned to the fact that the real criminal will never be found: Who killed Eduarda? We'll never know, I swear, when a girl like that comes to the city and becomes independent, neither you nor I, nobody, is guilty of anything . . .

That was my decision. I preferred to remain with them and leave Dimas in jail rather than declare myself guilty or pin the crime on someone else. They understood. I thought of Dimas Palmero locked up and also of the day I presented myself to Brigadier Prisciliano Nieves in his hospital room.

—Sign here, my general. I promise to take care of your servants and your honor. You can rest in peace. Your reputation is in my hands. I wouldn't want it to be lost, believe me. I will be as silent as the grave; I will be your heir.

The dying Brigadier Prisciliano Nieves looked at me with enormous brazenness. I knew then that his possessions no longer mattered to him, that he wouldn't bat an eyelash.

—Do you have any heirs, other than your servants, I asked, and the old man surely had not expected that question, which I put to him as I took a hand mirror from the table next to the bed and held it in front of the sick face of the general, in this way registering his surprise.

Who knows what the false Prisciliano saw there.

—No, I have no one.

Well informed, I already knew that. The old man ceased to look at his death's face and looked instead at mine, young, alert, perhaps resembling his own anonymous youthful look.

—My general, you are not you. Sign here, please, and die in peace.

To each his own memory. To each his own information. The world believed that Prisciliano Nieves killed Andrés Solomillo at Santa Eulalia. The old patriarch installed in my house knew that they had all killed each other. My first sweetheart Buenaventura del Rey's papa, paymaster of the constitutionalist army, knew that as well. Between the two memories lay my twenty-five years of prosperity. But Dimas Palmero, in jail, believed like everyone else that Prisciliano Nieves was the hero of Santa Eulalia, its survivor and its enforcer of justice. His information *was* the world's. The old men, by contrast, *held* the world's information, which isn't the same. Prisciliano Nieves died, along with Andrés Solomillo, at Santa Eulalia, when the former said that the soldiers, being the people, would not kill the people, and the latter proved the contrary right there, and barely had Prisciliano fallen when Solomillo, too, was cut down by the troops. Who usurped the legend of Prisciliano Nieves? What had been that man's name? Who profited from the slaughter of the leaders? No doubt, someone just as anonymous as those who had invaded my garden and surrounded my house. That was the man I visited one morning in the hospital and blackmailed. I converted memory to information. Buenaventura's papa and the ragged old man residing in my garden retained memory but lacked information. Only I had both,

but as yet I could do nothing with them except to ensure that everything would go on the same as always, that nothing would be questioned, that it would never occur to Dimas Palmero to translate the memory of his clan into information, that neither the information nor the memory would ever do anyone any good anymore, except for me. But the price of that deadlock was that I would remain forever in my house in Las Lomas, Dimas Palmero in jail, and his family in my garden.

In the final analysis, was it I who won, he who lost? That I leave for you to decide. Over my telephone lines, you have heard all I've said. I've been completely honest with you. I've put all my cards on the table. If there are loose ends in my story, you can gather them up and tie them in a bow yourselves. My memory and my information are now yours. You have the right to criticize, to finish the story, to reverse the tapestry and change the weave, to point out the lapses of logic, to imagine you have resolved all the mysteries that I, the narrator crushed under the press of reality, have let escape through the net of my telephones, which is the net of my words.

And still I'll bet you won't know what to do with what you know. Didn't I say so from the beginning? My story is hard to believe.

Now I no longer had to take risks and struggle. Now I had my place in the world, my house, my servants, and my secrets. I no longer had the guts to go see Dimas Palmero in prison and ask him what he knew about Prisciliano Nieves or what he knew about Lala: Why did you kill her? On your own? Because the old man ordered you to? For the honor of the family? Or for your own?

—Lala, I sighed, my Lala . . .

Then through the gardens of Virreyes came the girls on pogo sticks, hopping like nubile kangaroos, wearing sweatshirts with the names of Yankee universities on them and acid-washed jeans with Walkmans hooked between blue jean and belt and the fantastic look of Martians, radio operators, telephone operators, aviators all rolled into one, with their black earphones over their ears, hopping on their springy pogo sticks over the hedges that separate the properties of Las Lomas—spectacular, Olympic leaps—waving to me, inviting me to follow them, to find myself through others, to join the party, to take a chance with them: Let's all crash the parties, they say, that's more fun, hopping by like hares, like fairies, like Amazons, like Furies, making private property moot, seizing their right to happiness, community, entertainment, and God knows what . . . Free, they would never make any demands on me, ask for marriage, dig into my affairs, discover my secrets, the way the alert Lala did . . . Oh, Lala, why were you so ambitious?

I wave to them from a distance, surrounded by servants, goodbye, goodbye, I toss them kisses and they smile at me, free, carefree, dazzling, dazzled, inviting me to follow them, to abandon my prison, and I wave and would like to tell them no, I am not the prisoner of Las Lomas, no, they are my prisoners, an entire people . . .

I enter the house and disconnect my bank of telephones. The fifty-seven lines on which you're listening to me. I have nothing else to tell you. Soon there will be no one to repeat these fictions, and they will all be true. I thank you for listening.

Takenishi Hiroko

b. Japan, 1929

In *Children of the A-Bomb* (1959), Osado Arata records the testimony of a boy who was a fourth-grader in Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945, when the crew of the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped the atomic weapon innocuously named Little Boy on that city. He remembers the refugee camp in some field in the Hiroshima suburbs, the stench of rotting flesh and bodies being cremated, the clouds of flies and mosquitoes, and his mother dying there of wounds and radiation sickness after almost two weeks of agony. He concludes his flat list of horrors by saying, "Too much sorrow makes me like a stranger to myself, and yet despite my grief I cannot cry." By the 1950s and 1960s, Japanese writers who had been children and adolescents in the year of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings began to tell the story of their sorrow to help them to recognize themselves. Takenishi Hiroko's "The Rite" is one of the most powerful of these semiautobiographical retellings.

A Hiroshima Survivor. Takenishi Hiroko was born in April 1929 into an upper-middle-class family in Hiroshima. In "The Rite," Takenishi's narrator, Aki, recalls in fleeting snatches some of the sorts of early pleasures Takenishi herself had grown up with in a childhood fairly insulated from the consciousness of war: She tends the carp pond in her parents' pleasant suburban garden, scaring off the marauding night heron and eavesdropping while her elders speak over a late dinner; she visits the great stone feudal castle with its white pagoda tower, the monument that until 1945 defined the skyline of the city built on the delta islands of the Honshu River, the monument after which the city was named: *Hiro-shima-jo*, "Broad-island-castle."

Takenishi was a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl when the United States dropped on Hiroshima the first nuclear bomb to be used against an enemy population, thereby instantly erasing most of the world Takenishi had known. As "The Rite" implies, an especially large number of young women in Hiroshima were killed instantly on that day; eight thousand of them, including Takenishi, were called out of their regular classes to special civilian defense duty, ordered to raze houses in the central part of the city to create firebreaks against the ordinary incendiary bomb attack the military feared was in the offing. Osado, the oral historian of Hiroshima, quotes one of those women, a student at a junior college, describing the first minutes after the blast:

> The vicinity was in pitch darkness; from the depths of the gloom, bright red flames rise crackling, and spread moment by moment. The faces of my friends who just before were working energetically are now burned and blistered, their clothes torn to rags; to what shall I liken their trembling appearance as they stagger about? Our teacher is holding her students close to her like a mother hen protecting her chicks, and like baby chicks paralyzed with terror, the students were thrusting their heads under her arms. . . .

WWW For link more informatic about Takenishi a quiz on "The R and for informa about the cultur and context of J in the twentieth century, see *Wor Literature Online* bedfordstmartir .com/worldlit.

Too much sorro makes me like a stranger to mys and yet despite grief I cannot cr – *Childre A*

that being naked meant that she was now herself and the young man ought to come up to her now and make a gesture with which he would wipe out everything and after which would follow only their most intimate lovemaking. So she stood naked in front of the young man and at this moment stopped playing the game. She felt embarrassed and on her face appeared the smile, which really belonged to her—a shy and confused smile.

But the young man didn't come to her and didn't end the game. He didn't notice the familiar smile. He saw before him only the beautiful, alien body of his own girl, whom he hated. Hatred cleansed his sensuality of any sentimental coating. She wanted to come to him, but he said: "Stay where you are, I want to have a good look at you." Now he longed only to treat her as a whore. But the young man had never had a whore and the ideas he had about them came from literature and hearsay. So he turned to these ideas and the first thing he recalled was the image of a woman in black underwear (and black stockings) dancing on the shiny top of a piano. In the little hotel room there was no piano, there was only a small table covered with a linen cloth leaning against the wall. He ordered the girl to climb up on it. The girl made a pleading gesture, but the young man said, "You've been paid."

When she saw the look of unshakable obsession in the young man's eyes, she tried to go on with the game, even though she no longer could and no longer knew how. With tears in her eyes she climbed onto the table. The top was scarcely three feet square and one leg was a little bit shorter than the others so that standing on it the girl felt unsteady.

But the young man was pleased with the naked figure, now towering above him, and the girl's shy insecurity merely inflamed his imperiousness. He wanted to see her body in all positions and from all sides, as he imagined other men had seen it and would see it. He was vulgar and lascivious. He used words that she had never heard from him in her life. She wanted to refuse, she wanted to be released from the game. She called him by his first name, but he immediately yelled at her that she had no right to address him so intimately. And so eventually in confusion and on the verge of tears, she obeyed, she bent forward and squatted according to the young man's wishes, saluted, and then wiggled her hips as she did the Twist for him. During a slightly more violent movement, when the cloth slipped beneath her feet and she nearly fell, the young man caught her and dragged her to the bed.

He had intercourse with her. She was glad that at least now finally the unfortunate game would end and they would again be the two people they had been before and would love each other. She wanted to press her mouth against his. But the young man pushed her head away and repeated that he only kissed women he loved. She burst into loud sobs. But she wasn't even allowed to cry, because the young man's furious passion gradually won over her body, which then silenced the complaint of her soul. On the bed there were soon two bodies in perfect harmony, two sensual bodies, alien to each other. This was exactly what the girl had most dreaded all her life and had scrupulously avoided till now: love-making without emotion or love. She knew that she had crossed the forbidden boundary, but she proceeded across it without objections and as a full participant—only somewhere, far off in a corner of her consciousness, did she feel horror at the thought that she had never known such pleasure, never so much pleasure as at this moment—beyond that boundary.

12

Then it was all over. The young man got up off the girl and, reaching out for the long cord hanging over the bed, switched off the light. He didn't want to see the girl's face. He knew that the game was over, but didn't feel like returning to their customary relationship. He feared this return. He lay beside the girl in the dark in such a way that their bodies would not touch.

After a moment he heard her sobbing quietly. The girl's hand diffidently, childishly touched his. It touched, withdrew, then touched again, and then a pleading, sobbing voice broke the silence, calling him by his name and saying, "I am me, I am me. . . ."

The young man was silent, he didn't move, and he was aware of the sad emptiness of the girl's assertion, in which the unknown was defined in terms of the same unknown quantity.

And the girl soon passed from sobbing to loud crying and went on endlessly repeating this pitiful tautology: "I am me, I am me, I am me. . . ."

The young man began to call compassion to his aid (he had to call it from afar, because it was nowhere near at hand), so as to be able to calm the girl. There were still thirteen days' vacation before them.

Chinua Achebe

b. Nigeria, 1930

A novelist, poet, short-story writer, writer of children's literature, essayist, editor, and teacher, **Chinua Achebe** (CHIN-wah ah-CHAY-bay) is one of the most influential West African writers of the twentieth century. Achebe has also worked as a producer, writer, and director for radio, including a stint with the Voice of Nigeria, of which he was director from 1961 to 1966. In an explicitly political vein, he served on diplomatic missions for Biafra during the Nigerian civil war and was deputy president of the People's Redemption Party in 1983. With subtlety and complexity, Achebe's novels portray from an insider's point of view traditional African society and culture, especially as it clashes with the forces of colonialism and the vestiges of its ghost in postcolonial Nigeria. Like fellow African writers Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) from Nigeria and **Ngugi Wa Thiong'o** (en-GOO-gee wah thee-ONG-oh) (b. 1938) from Kenya, Achebe has articulated in his work a sustaining moral vision for African consciousness and identity, engaging directly the difficult problems Africa faces in



Chinua Achebe, 1988
The Nigerian author in his home in Amherst, Massachusetts. (Hulton / Archive)

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the postcolonial era and recovering a sense of the African spirit as it emerges from traditional folktales, stories, and customs. Though Achebe writes in English, his novels capture the rich imagery and rhythms of his native country's proverbs and tales.

English and Ibo Education. Chinua Achebe was born November 16, 1930, in Ogidi, Nigeria, the fifth child of Isaiah Okafor Achebe and Janet Iloegbunam, Ibo missionary teachers who raised him in a Christian household. Although he received his education in English at the British missionary schools in Ogidi, he developed an attachment to traditional Ibo stories through his mother and sister. In his teens he studied at the Government College in Umuahia and then attended University College in Ibadan from 1948 to 1953, receiving a bachelor's degree. He had entered college on a scholarship to study medicine, but after his first year he switched to the liberal arts, including English literature. His reading in European, especially British, literature brought home to Achebe the often condescending and false image of Africa presented by European writers such as Joyce Cary (1888–1957) and Joseph Conrad. Achebe began writing his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as a direct repudiation of the image of Nigeria presented in Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939).

Civil War and Independence. Upon graduation from the university at Ibadan, Achebe worked as a producer and director for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service until civil war erupted in 1967. Nigeria had gained its independence from Britain in 1960, the year before Achebe's marriage to Christie Chinwe Okoli. In the vacuum created by the withdrawal of British colonial authority, three tribal groups—the **Ibo**, Hausa-Fulani, and Yoruba—competed against one another for power. The civil war, which lasted until 1970, did little to resolve those rivalries, and since the time of the war Nigeria has been ruled by a succession of dictators, some posing as supporters of democracy. During the war, Biafra, a state of Ibo speakers in eastern Nigeria, seceded from the rest of the country. Achebe supported the Biafran independence movement, working for the Biafran Ministry of Information. That experience served him well, especially in *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), in which he focuses on the corruption, power-mongering, and hope for democratic freedoms that characterize Nigerian politics even today. A collection of poetry, *Christmas in Biafra,* winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and a collection of short stories, *Girls at War,* were written during the civil war.

International Acclaim. In the early 1970s Achebe accepted visiting professorships at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he again taught from 1987 to 1988, and the University of Connecticut at Storrs. During this time he taught literature and founded and edited *Okike,* a journal of African literature and criticism. In addition, he founded the Heinemann African Writers Series, which has established African literature written in English as a major force in contemporary world literature. In 1976 Achebe returned to Nigeria as a teacher and senior research fellow at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He has continued to be involved in Nigerian political life, primarily as a commentator, and in 1983 he published *The Trouble with Nigeria,* a nonfiction critique of the political corruption of his country.

WWW For links to more information about Chinua Achebe and a quiz on *Things Fall Apart,* and for information about Achebe's twenty-first-century relevance and the culture and context of Africa in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

Representing Africa. Achebe describes himself as a "political writer" whose work is "concerned with universal human communication across racial and cultural boundaries as a means of fostering respect for all people." He set out to correct the distorted representation of Africa that European writers had delivered to European audiences and to show the adverse impact that colonization had had upon indigenous cultures. His first three novels, which make up a kind of trilogy, directly accomplish those objectives. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), chosen here to represent Achebe, shows Nigeria at the advent of British colonization. It takes place in the Ibo villages of **Umuofia** in the late 1880s, a time when English missionaries and administrators first began to appear. The Europeans were interested in the Niger delta region for its palm oil, and in 1879 Englishman George Goldie formed the United Africa Company to drive out the French, who had conquered most of western Africa in the previous decade. Eventually becoming the Royal Niger Company and granted a royal charter, Goldie's company established a monopoly in the region by about 1884. By 1893, Nigeria was declared a British colony, and cocoa, timber, rubber, coconuts, and palm oil began to flow out of the country on British ships. The novel focuses on the psychological and cultural consequences of that history as it affects the leader Okonkwo, who struggles to preserve his and his people's integrity and sovereignty in the face of the changes in law and religion that the colonizers have brought.

oo-MWOH-fee-ah

No Longer at Ease. Achebe's next two novels, *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), continue the story of Umuofia in the two generations after Okonkwo's. Although *Arrow of God* is the third novel in the series, it tells the story of the second generation in Umuofia in the 1920s. Ezeulu, a spiritual leader, also must grapple with the gap between European and African ways. Another flawed hero, Ezeulu plans to use his son to spy on Western schools. The scheme fails when the son, Oduche, is converted and turns against his father and his father's god. Ezeulu manages to get arrested, is imprisoned by the British, and finally embitters his own people by carrying out a heavy penalty on them; the entire village turns against him. *No Longer at Ease* takes readers into the 1950s, when a grandson of Okonkwo, the English-educated Obi Okonkwo, fails to integrate Ibo tradition with European ideals. The would-be hero represents the educated elite, whose aspirations have more often than not failed to materialize in Nigeria. Obi returns to his country a kind of stranger, turns against his people, and falls into the political corruption he'd hoped to eradicate.

Anthills of the Savannah. Achebe's next three novels focus primarily on political corruption in the post-1960 period—after Nigerian independence. *A Man of the People* (1966) condemns the abuse of power and

The Igbo have always lived in a world of continual struggle, motion, and change—a feature conspicuous in the tautness, overreach, and torsion of their art; it is like a tightrope walk, a hairbreadth brush with the boundaries of anarchy.

– CHINUA ACHEBE

corruption, as does *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988). The latter novel, one of the most highly acclaimed of Achebe's works, follows a set of friends—Ikem, Sam, and Chris—whose friendship falls apart as Sam, who has become a military dictator of the imaginary West African country of Kangan, loses the support and confidence of Ikem, an editor, and Chris, the Minister of Information. To preserve his power, Sam resorts to propaganda, repression, and finally, the extermination of opponents and critics. As in the case of *A Man of the People,* which seemed to anticipate much of the corruption of the 1970s, *Anthills of the Savannah* appears to have prophesied the duplicity and arbitrary wielding of power of the present regime in Nigeria. *Anthills* ends with cautious optimism, noting the important role of women in the movement for reform. With his latest novel pointing to the uncertain future, Achebe's work so far constitutes a history, in fiction, of colonialism and independence in Nigeria from the nineteenth century to the present.

Things Fall Apart. *Things Fall Apart,* one of the first and finest novels of postindependence African literature in English, launched Achebe on the project of tracing Nigeria's history in his fiction. The title comes from William Butler Yeats's **"The Second Coming,"** a visionary poem announcing the birth of a "rough beast . . . slouching toward Bethlehem." That beast here appears to be the erosion of Ibo society, portrayed in unsurpassed detail, sensitivity, and understanding, after its devastating encounter with European colonialism. Set in roughly the same period as Conrad's ***Heart of Darkness*** (1902), the novel presents the early encounter with European missionaries from the African—specifically, the Ibo—point of view. Some of the incidents of this encounter, such as the raid on Abame mentioned in Chapter 15, are based on actual historical incidents—in this case, a British attack on the town of Ahiara, which took place in 1905, to avenge the killing of a missionary. Achebe's critique of British colonialism, however, comes less through the documentation of such incidents and more through the celebration of Ibo culture. To counteract the portrayal of the African as a shadowy figure in novels such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Achebe in this novel and others honors, without resorting to sentimentality, the humanity and dignity of the African people. In *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe presents that humanity in part through the character of the village leader, Okonkwo, whose actions involve him in almost every aspect of the complex culture and religious life of the Ibo in Umuofia.

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Okonkwo is a complex and tragic hero who is as noble and flawed as an Achilles or a Creon.[1] While Okonkwo embodies many of the virtues of his society—courage, industry, and material success—he also demonstrates a dangerous stubbornness and self-satisfaction. His killing of **Ikemefuna** and his rejection of his son Nwoye are presented unsympathetically; indeed, like Creon's in *Antigone,* Okonkwo's rigidity and

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[1] **Creon:** The king of Thebes; represented in Sophocles' (496–406 B.C.E.) play *Antigone* as a man who refuses to bend the rules of the state.

heavy-handedness eventually lead to his downfall. As in later novels, and like his compatriot writer Wole Soyinka, Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart,* recognizes the need for the preservation of tradition but also affirms a cautious and controlled acceptance of those European ideas and practices that can enhance African culture and make it stronger.

[Achebe's characters] have a vital relationship with the social and economic landscape. We can see, and feel, how his characters, their worldview, their very aspirations, have been shaped by a particular environment in a particular historical place. They live in history . . . because they are the makers of history.

– NGUGI WA THIONG'O, novelist and critic, 1972

Ibo Proverbs and Lore. One of the features of *Things Fall Apart,* carried even further in *Arrow of God,* is the presence of Ibo proverbs found throughout the story. In these proverbs can be seen some of the values of Ibo culture, which include, as critic Emmanuel Ngara points out, "bravery, hard work, material wealth . . . eloquence and dignity," values rarely associated with Africa in the eyes of some Western readers. Moreover, the proverbs are aligned with important, often contradictory, motifs and themes in the novel. One of the key proverbs from *Things Fall Apart,* "when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also," points to Okonkwo's pride in the self-determination that led to his success and that won him the praise of his people. When he accidentally kills Ezeudu's son, he begins to face the hard reality that even a self-made man like himself is subject to forces beyond his control. Now barred forever from becoming one of the lords of the clan, Okonkwo had worked hard to take control of his life, saying yes to his *chi,* and yet his *chi,* or personal god, denied him his ultimate desire. Other proverbs note the need for those who have been blessed to be humble, and for the great to accept greatness in others; the tale of the greedy tortoise in Chapter 11 also cautions against greed and excessive pride. Okonkwo's contempt for those who have been less successful than he is the first sign of the trouble to come.

"An Image of Africa." The English missionaries and administration officials exacerbate the misfortunes visited upon Okonkwo. The white missionary at Mbanta articulates the uninformed prejudice against native religion and culture, which the novel has just elaborated in fine detail. Achebe introduces the missionary comically; the villagers mock his interpreter's use of their language as he mistakes the word meaning "my buttocks" for "myself." Many of the Mbanta men are astounded at the missionaries' pronouncements that their gods are dead and have no power; they laugh with incredulity at a missionary's claims that his is the only living and powerful god. In **"An Image of Africa,"** delivered as a Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, on February 18, 1975, Achebe spoke of an aim that could well describe the achievement of this novel: "to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society." *Things Fall Apart* ends tragically, with Okonkwo humiliated by the beating he received in the white man's jail and with his deep disappointment that the men of Umuofia would not stand up, as he had, to the encroachment of the English. Okonkwo's death is symbolic, in many ways, of the death of Ibo society itself; the novel questions whether that death was necessary and gives its African

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readers reason to believe in the importance of preserving what is best in their traditions.

CONNECTIONS

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Book 4). Achebe's novels, including *Things Fall Apart,* draw heavily on folklore and the ways of the Ibo. In "The African Writer and the English Language," Achebe describes Equiano as an African writer who appropriated the "master's discourse" to produce a powerful text that challenged the slanderous image of Africa presented by those perpetuating the slave trade. Compare the depiction of the Ibo in the first chapter of Equiano's narrative with that in Achebe's novel. What is the "image of Africa" in these texts?

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* p. 35. Ever since Achebe wrote the essay "The Image of Africa" (see *In the World:* Colonialism, p. 107), which sharply renounces Conrad's depiction of Africa in *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad's novel—as well as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*—has served to point up the differences between representations of Africa and Africans by non-African writers and those by African writers. Compare Conrad's "image of Africa" with Achebe's. How does Achebe's novel engage in a dialogue with Conrad's?

William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," p. 193. Achebe deliberately borrowed a phrase from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" for the title of his novel. "The Second Coming" points to a new cosmic order following some kind of powerful upheaval. Why would Achebe allude to Yeats's apocalyptic vision in naming his novel? What catastrophic transformation does the novel explicitly point to? What catastrophic form of renewal might it imply?

FURTHER RESEARCH

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PRONUNCIATION

Chinua Achebe: CHIN-wah ah-CHAY-bay
Chielo: chee-AY-loh
egwugwu: ay-GWOO-gwoo
Erulu: ay-ROO-loo
Ezeani: ay-zay-AH-nee
Ezeugo: ay-zay-OO-goh
Ibo: EE-boh
Idemili: ee-DAY-mee-lee
Ikemefuna: ee-kay-may-FOO-nah
Mbari: em-BAH-ree
Ndulue: en-doo-loo-AY
Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: en-GOO-gee wah thee-ONG-oh
Nwakibie: nwah-kee-BEE-ay
Nwayieke: nwah-yee-AY-kay
Umuofia: oo-MWOH-fee-ah

Things Fall Apart

PART I

1

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father.

Things Fall Apart. Achebe's first novel, published in 1958, was written as a direct response to the image of Africa presented in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson,* a novel depicting a shallow, comic African who is totally obedient and devoted to his white master. Achebe wanted his novel to "teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." The title of the work comes from William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming," a poem that evokes a catastrophic upheaval of order, one that Achebe links with the arrival of Europeans in Umuofia, the homeland of the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo. Through Okonkwo's heroic struggle against the disturbances introduced by the colonizers, *Things Fall Apart* records the psychological and cultural struggles of an entire nation in the throes of crisis and change. Moreover, true to his stated aim, Achebe brilliantly depicts the social complexity and cultural diversity of Ibo society before the arrival of the Europeans. In the figure of Okonkwo, Achebe presents a complex and tragic hero as noble and flawed as an Achilles or a Hamlet; upholding the military values of the former, Okonkwo displays the conflicted psyche of the latter. In the end, like those tragic heroes, Okonkwo suffers separation and ultimately death, despite—or perhaps because of—his efforts to maintain his dignity and to preserve the integrity of his community.

All notes are the editors'.

Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbors and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries[1] to quite substantial amounts.

He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu*[2] to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets,[3] making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either, because the cold and dry harmattan wind was blowing down from the north. Some years the harmattan was very severe and a dense haze hung on the atmosphere. Old men and children would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth.

That was years ago, when he was young. Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more, and piling up his debts.

One day a neighbor called Okoye came in to see him. He was reclining on a mud bed in his hut playing on the flute. He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled the goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper, and a lump of white chalk.[4]

[1] **cowries:** A sixty-pound bag of cowries—mollusk shells used as currency—was worth about one pound sterling.

[2] ***egwugwu:*** Dancers who masquerade as spirits of the village ancestors.

[3] **three or four markets:** One-and-a-half to two weeks; the Ibo week has four days—Eke, the market day; Afo, a half-working day; and Oye and Nkwo, full working days.

[4] **kola . . . chalk:** All items used in hospitality ceremonies. Kola nuts, like coffee, contain caffeine and so offer a mild stimulant; alligator pepper is a black pepper reserved especially for kola; and the chalk is used for visitors to draw their personal mark.

"I have kola," he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc over to his guest.

"Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it," replied Okoye, passing back the disc.

"No, it is for you, I think," and they argued like this for a few moments before Unoka accepted the honor of breaking the kola. Okoye, meanwhile, took the lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe.

As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies. When they had eaten they talked about many things: about the heavy rains which were drowning the yams, about the next ancestral feast and about the impending war with the village of Mbaino. Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene,*[5] and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colorful and plaintive tune. The total effect was gay and brisk, but if one picked out the flute as it went up and down and then broke up into short snatches, one saw that there was sorrow and grief there.

Okoye was also a musician. He played on the *ogene.* But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili[6] title, the third highest in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony and he was gathering all his resources together. That was in fact the reason why he had come to see Unoka. He cleared his throat and began:

"Thank you for the kola. You may have heard of the title I intend to take shortly."

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before. As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene,* and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer between fresh outbursts of mirth.

"Look at that wall," he said, pointing at the far wall of his hut, which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone. "Look at those lines of chalk"; and Okoye saw groups of short perpendicular lines drawn in chalk. There were five groups, and the smallest group had ten lines. Unoka had a sense of the dramatic and so he allowed a pause, in which he took a pinch of snuff and sneezed noisily, and then he continued: "Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in

[5] ***ekwe . . . ogene:*** A wooden drum, clay drum, and iron gong, respectively.

[6] **Idemili:** A river god, associated with the sacred python.

the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." And he took another pinch of snuff, as if that was paying the big debts first. Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed.

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders. And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna.

2

Okonkwo had just blown out the palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed when he heard the *ogene* of the town crier piercing the still night air. *Gome, gome, gome, gome,* boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again. And this was the message. Every man of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market place tomorrow morning. Okonkwo wondered what was amiss, for he knew certainly that something was amiss. He had discerned a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier's voice, and even now he could still hear it as it grew dimmer and dimmer in the distance.

The night was very quiet. It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string. And so on this particular night as the crier's voice was gradually swallowed up in the distance, silence returned to the world, a vibrant silence made more intense by the universal trill of a million million forest insects.

On a moonlight night it would be different. The happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard. And perhaps those not so young would be playing in pairs in less open places, and old men and women would remember their youth. As the Ibo say: "When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk."

But this particular night was dark and silent. And in all the nine villages of Umuofia a town crier with his *ogene* asked every man to be present tomorrow morning. Okonkwo on his bamboo bed tried to figure out the nature of the emergency—war with a neighboring clan? That seemed the most likely reason, and he was not afraid of war. He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head.

In the morning the market place was full. There must have been about ten thousand men there, all talking in low voices. At last Ogbuefi Ezeugo stood up in the midst of them and bellowed four times, "*Umuofia kwenu,*"[7] and on each occasion he faced a different direction and seemed to push the air with a clenched fist. And ten thousand men answered "*Yaa!*" each time. Then there was perfect silence. Ogbuefi Ezeugo was a powerful orator and was always chosen to speak on such occasions. He moved his hand over his white head and stroked his white beard. He then adjusted his cloth, which was passed under his right armpit and tied above his left shoulder.

"*Umuofia kwenu,*" he bellowed a fifth time, and the crowd yelled in answer. And then suddenly like one possessed he shot out his left hand and pointed in the direction of Mbaino, and said through gleaming white teeth firmly clenched: "Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia." He threw his head down and gnashed his teeth, and allowed a murmur of suppressed anger to sweep the crowd. When he began again, the anger on his face was gone and in its place a sort of smile hovered, more terrible and more sinister than the anger. And in a clear unemotional voice he told Umuofia how their daughter had gone to market at Mbaino and had been killed. That woman, said Ezeugo, was the wife of Ogbuefi Udo, and he pointed to a man who sat near him with a bowed head. The crowd then shouted with anger and thirst for blood.

Many others spoke, and at the end it was decided to follow the normal course of action. An ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation.

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement—the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadinwayi,* or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umuofia, in a cleared spot. And if anybody was so foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk he was sure to see the old woman hopping about.

And so the neighboring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle—the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had

[7] "*Umuofia kwenu*": "Umuofia united."

forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call a *fight of blame.*

But the war that now threatened was a just war. Even the enemy clan knew that. And so when Okonkwo of Umuofia arrived at Mbaino as the proud and imperious emissary of war, he was treated with great honor and respect, and two days later he returned home with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin. The lad's name was Ikemefuna, whose sad story is still told in Umuofia unto this day.

The elders, or *ndichie,* met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission. At the end they decided, as everybody knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. Okonkwo was, therefore, asked on behalf of the clan to look after him in the interim. And so for three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household.

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala.* That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.

During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue. But his wives and young children were not as strong, and so they suffered. But they dared not complain openly. Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth.

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or *obi,* stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the *obi.* The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for the hens. Near the barn was a small house, the "medicine house" or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food, and palm-wine, and

offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children. So when the daughter of Umuofia was killed in Mbaino, Ikemefuna came into Okonkwo's household. When Okonkwo brought him home that day he called his most senior wife and handed him over to her.

"He belongs to the clan," he told her. "So look after him."

"Is he staying long with us?" she asked.

"Do what you are told, woman," Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. "When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia?"

And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions.

As for the boy himself, he was terribly afraid. He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done. How could he know that his father had taken a hand in killing a daughter of Umuofia? All he knew was that a few men had arrived at their house, conversing with his father in low tones, and at the end he had been taken out and handed over to a stranger. His mother had wept bitterly, but he had been too surprised to weep. And so the stranger had brought him, and a girl, a long, long way from home, through lonely forest paths. He did not know who the girl was, and he never saw her again.

3

Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit. The story was told in Umuofia, of how his father, Unoka, had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest.

The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers.

The way into the shrine was a round hole at the side of a hill, just a little bigger than the round opening into a henhouse. Worshippers and those who came to seek knowledge from the god crawled on their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark, endless space in the presence of Agbala. No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one who had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of the god. The fire did not burn with a flame. The glowing logs only served to light up vaguely the dark figure of the priestess.

Sometimes a man came to consult the spirit of his dead father or relative. It was said that when such a spirit appeared, the man saw it vaguely in the darkness, but never heard its voice. Some people even said that they had heard the spirits flying and flapping their wings against the roof of the cave.

Many years ago when Okonkwo was still a boy his father, Unoka, had gone to consult Agbala. The priestess in those days was a woman called Chika. She was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared. Unoka stood before her and began his story.

"Every year," he said sadly, "before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear. I weed—"

"Hold your peace!" screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. "You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When your neighbors go out with their ax to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labor to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man."

Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi*[8] or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first or the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute.

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father's lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death.

There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. It was for this man that Okonkwo worked to earn his first seed yams.

He took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie. Two elderly neighbors were sent for, and Nwakibie's two grown-up sons were also present in his *obi*. He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke the nut saying: "We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest, and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break."

[8] *chi:* Literally, one's personal god; the *chi* may be thought of as the spiritual double of the person existing in the world, which acts as a guide to the fulfillment of one's destiny. To act against the *chi* is to act against one's own best interests, as Okonkwo will do later when he kills Ikemefuna.

After the kola nut had been eaten Okonkwo brought his palm-wine from the corner of the hut where it had been placed and stood it in the center of the group. He addressed Nwakibie, calling him "Our father."

"*Nna ayi,*"[9] he said. "I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a favor. But let us drink the wine first."

Everybody thanked Okonkwo and the neighbors brought out their drinking horns from the goatskin bags they carried. Nwakibie brought down his own horn, which was fastened to the rafters. The younger of his sons, who was also the youngest man in the group, moved to the center, raised the pot on his left knee and began to pour out the wine. The first cup went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group drank, beginning with the eldest man. When everyone had drunk two or three horns, Nwakibie sent for his wives. Some of them were not at home and only four came in.

"Is Anasi not in?" he asked them. They said she was coming. Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting.

Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear.

She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little, and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away.

The men then continued their drinking and talking. Ogbuefi Idigo was talking about the palm-wine tapper, Obiako, who suddenly gave up his trade.

"There must be something behind it," he said, wiping the foam of wine from his mustache with the back of his left hand. "There must be a reason for it. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing."

"Some people say the Oracle warned him that he would fall off a palm tree and kill himself," said Akukalia.

"Obiako has always been a strange one," said Nwakibie. "I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, 'Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.' Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, 'Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.'" Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because, as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. Okonkwo remembered his own father.

At last the young man who was pouring out the wine held up half a horn of the thick, white dregs and said, "What we are eating is finished." "We have seen it," the others replied. "Who will drink the dregs?" he asked. "Whoever has a job in hand," said Idigo, looking at Nwakibie's elder son Igwelo with a malicious twinkle in his eye.

[9] "*Nna ayi*": "Our father."

Everybody agreed that Igwelo should drink the dregs. He accepted the half-full horn from his brother and drank it. As Idigo had said, Igwelo had a job in hand because he had married his first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palm-wine were supposed to be good for men who were going in to their wives.

After the wine had been drunk Okonkwo laid his difficulties before Nwakibie.

"I have come to you for help," he said. "Perhaps you can already guess what it is. I have cleared a farm but have no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work. The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. I began to fend for myself at an age when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts. If you give me some yam seeds I shall not fail you."

Nwakibie cleared his throat. "It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when our youth has gone so soft. Many young men have come to me to ask for yams but I have refused because I knew they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds. When I say no to them they think I am hard hearted. But it is not so. Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching. I have learned to be stingy with my yams. But I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go ahead and prepare your farm."

Okonkwo thanked him again and again and went home feeling happy. He knew that Nwakibie would not refuse him, but he had not expected he would be so generous. He had not hoped to get more than four hundred seeds. He would now have to make a bigger farm. He hoped to get another four hundred yams from one of his father's friends at Isiuzo.

Share-cropping was a very slow way of building up a barn of one's own. After all the toil one only got a third of the harvest. But for a young man whose father had no yams, there was no other way. And what made it worse in Okonkwo's case was that he had to support his mother and two sisters from his meagre harvest. And supporting his mother also meant supporting his father. She could not be expected to cook and eat while her husband starved. And so at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house. It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes. His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like cocoyams, beans, and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop.

The year that Okonkwo took eight hundred seed-yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He

watched the sky all day for signs of rain clouds and lay awake all night. In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils. He had tried to protect them from the smoldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. But by the end of the day the sisal rings were burned dry and gray. He changed them every day, and prayed that the rain might fall in the night. But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed.

Some farmers had not planted their yams yet. They were the lazy easy-going ones who always put off clearing their farms as long as they could. This year they were the wise ones. They sympathized with their neighbors with much shaking of the head, but inwardly they were happy for what they took to be their own foresight.

Okonkwo planted what was left of his seed-yams when the rains finally returned. He had one consolation. The yams he had sown before the drought were his own, the harvest of the previous year. He still had the eight hundred from Nwakibie and the four hundred from his father's friend. So he would make a fresh start.

But the year had gone mad. Rain fell as it had never fallen before. For days and nights together it poured down in violent torrents, and washed away the yam heaps. Trees were uprooted and deep gorges appeared everywhere. Then the rain became less violent. But it went from day to day without a pause. The spell of sunshine which always came in the middle of the wet season did not appear. The yams put on luxuriant green leaves, but every farmer knew that without sunshine the tubers would not grow.

That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself.

Okonkwo remembered that tragic year with a cold shiver throughout the rest of his life. It always surprised him when he thought of it later that he did not sink under the load of despair. He knew that he was a fierce fighter, but that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion.

"Since I survived that year," he always said, "I shall survive anything." He put it down to his inflexible will.

His father, Unoka, who was then an ailing man, had said to him during that terrible harvest month: "Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone.*"

Unoka was like that in his last days. His love of talk had grown with age and sickness. It tried Okonkwo's patience beyond words.

4

"Looking at a king's mouth," said an old man, "one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast." He was talking about Okonkwo, who had risen so suddenly from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan. The old man bore no ill will towards Okonkwo. Indeed he respected him for his industry and success. But he was struck, as most people were, by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing

with less successful men. Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: "This meeting is for men." The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit.

Everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo when Okonkwo called him a woman. The oldest man present said sternly that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. Okonkwo said he was sorry for what he had said, and the meeting continued.

But it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself. Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo. At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands. That was why Okonkwo had been chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agreed to give up a young man and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife. And such was the deep fear that their enemies had for Umuofia that they treated Okonkwo like a king and brought him a virgin who was given to Udo as wife, and the lad Ikemefuna.

The elders of the clan had decided that Ikemefuna should be in Okonkwo's care for a while. But no one thought it would be as long as three years. They seemed to forget all about him as soon as they had taken the decision.

At first Ikemefuna was very much afraid. Once or twice he tried to run away, but he did not know where to begin. He thought of his mother and his three-year-old sister and wept bitterly. Nwoye's mother was very kind to him and treated him as one of her own children. But all he said was: "When shall I go home?" When Okonkwo heard that he would not eat any food he came into the hut with a big stick in his hand and stood over him while he swallowed his yams, trembling. A few moments later he went behind the hut and began to vomit painfully. Nwoye's mother went to him and placed her hands on his chest and on his back. He was ill for three market weeks, and when he recovered he seemed to have overcome his great fear and sadness.

He was by nature a very lively boy and he gradually became popular in Okonkwo's household, especially with the children. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was two years younger, became quite inseparable from him because he seemed to know everything. He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which trees made the strongest bows.

Even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy—inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else—with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father.

Ikemefuna came to Umuofia at the end of the carefree season between harvest and planting. In fact he recovered from his illness only a few days before the Week of Peace began. And that was also the year Okonkwo broke the peace, and was punished, as was the custom, by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess.

Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal. Okonkwo did not know at first that she was not at home. After waiting in vain for her dish he went to her hut to see what she was doing. There was nobody in the hut and the fireplace was cold.

"Where is Ojiugo?" he asked his second wife, who came out of her hut to draw water from a gigantic pot in the shade of a small tree in the middle of the compound.

"She has gone to plait her hair."

Okonkwo bit his lips as anger welled up within him.

"Where are her children? Did she take them?" he asked with unusual coolness and restraint.

"They are here," answered his first wife, Nwoye's mother. Okonkwo bent down and looked into her hut. Ojiugo's children were eating with the children of his first wife.

"Did she ask you to feed them before she went?"

"Yes," lied Nwoye's mother, trying to minimize Ojiugo's thoughtlessness.

Okonkwo knew she was not speaking the truth. He walked back to his *obi* to await Ojiugo's return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess.

Okonkwo's neighbors heard his wife crying and sent their voices over the compound walls to ask what was the matter. Some of them came over to see for themselves. It was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week.

Before it was dusk Ezeani, who was the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, called on Okonkwo in his *obi*. Okonkwo brought out kola nut and placed it before the priest.

"Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors."

Okonkwo tried to explain to him what his wife had done, but Ezeani seemed to pay no attention. He held a short staff in his hand which he brought down on the floor to emphasize his points.

"Listen to me," he said when Okonkwo had spoken. "You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a

great evil." He brought down his staff heavily on the floor. "Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her." His staff came down again. "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish." His tone now changed from anger to command. "You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth, and a hundred cowries." He rose and left the hut.

Okonkwo did as the priest said. He also took with him a pot of palm-wine. Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error. And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*.

No work was done during the Week of Peace. People called on their neighbors and drank palm-wine. This year they talked of nothing else but the *nso-ani*[10] which Okonkwo had committed. It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. Even the oldest men could only remember one or two other occasions somewhere in the dim past.

Ogbuefi Ezeudu, who was the oldest man in the village, was telling two other men who came to visit him that the punishment for breaking the Peace of Ani had become very mild in their clan.

"It has not always been so," he said. "My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve."

"Somebody told me yesterday," said one of the younger men, "that in some clans it is an abomination for a man to die during the Week of Peace."

"It is indeed true," said Ogbuefi Ezeudu. "They have that custom in Obodoani. If a man dies at this time he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding. They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial. And what is the result? Their clan is full of the evil spirits of these unburied dead, hungry to do harm to the living."

After the Week of Peace every man and his family began to clear the bush to make new farms. The cut bush was left to dry and fire was then set to it. As the smoke rose into the sky kites appeared from different directions and hovered over the burning field in silent valediction. The rainy season was approaching when they would go away until the dry season returned.

Okonkwo spent the next few days preparing his seed-yams. He looked at each yam carefully to see whether it was good for sowing. Sometimes he decided that a yam was too big to be sown as one seed and he split it deftly along its length with his sharp knife. His eldest son, Nwoye, and Ikemefuna helped him by fetching the yams in long baskets from the barn and in counting the prepared seeds in groups of four

[10] *nso-ani:* "Earth's taboo," a serious offense against the earth goddess Ani.

hundred. Sometimes Okonkwo gave them a few yams each to prepare. But he always found fault with their effort, and he said so with much threatening.

"Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?" he asked Nwoye. "If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age. And you," he said to Ikemefuna, "do you not grow yams where you come from?"

Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early. Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.

"I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands. And if you stand staring at me like that," he swore, "Amadiora[11] will break your head for you!"

Some days later, when the land had been moistened by two or three heavy rains, Okonkwo and his family went to the farm with baskets of seed-yams, their hoes and machetes, and the planting began. They made single mounds of earth in straight lines all over the field and sowed the yams in them.

Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost. The young tendrils were protected from earth-heat with rings of sisal leaves. As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons, and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late.

And now the rains had really come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it in the heart of the dry season, without serious danger to his own health. The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame.

And so nature was not interfered with in the middle of the rainy season. Sometimes it poured down in such thick sheets of water that earth and sky seemed merged in one gray wetness. It was then uncertain whether the low rumbling of Amadiora's thunder came from above or below. At such times, in each of the countless thatched huts of Umuofia, children sat around their mother's cooking fire telling stories, or with their father in his *obi* warming themselves from a log fire, roasting and eating maize. It was a brief resting period between the exacting and arduous planting season and the equally exacting but light-hearted month of harvests.

Ikemefuna had begun to feel like a member of Okonkwo's family. He still thought about his mother and his three-year-old sister, and he had moments of sadness and

[11] Amadiora: The god of thunder and lightning.

depression. But he and Nwoye had become so deeply attached to each other that such moments became less frequent and less poignant. Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folk tales. Even those which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavor of a different clan. Nwoye remembered this period very vividly till the end of his life. He even remembered how he had laughed when Ikemefuna told him that the proper name for a corn cob with only a few scattered grains was *eze-agadi-nwayi*, or the teeth of an old woman. Nwoye's mind had gone immediately to Nwayieke, who lived near the udala tree. She had about three teeth and was always smoking her pipe.

Gradually the rains became lighter and less frequent, and earth and sky once again became separate. The rain fell in thin, slanting showers through sunshine and quiet breeze. Children no longer stayed indoors but ran about singing:

"The rain is falling, the sun is shining,
Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating."

Nwoye always wondered who Nnadi was and why he should live all by himself, cooking and eating. In the end he decided that Nnadi must live in that land of Ikemefuna's favorite story where the ant holds his court in splendor and the sands dance forever.

5

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth.

The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty—the new year. On the last night before the festival, yams of the old year were all disposed of by those who still had them. The new year must begin with tasty, fresh yams and not the shriveled and fibrous crop of the previous year. All cooking pots, calabashes, and wooden bowls were thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortar in which yam was pounded. Yam foo-foo and vegetable soup was the chief food in the celebration. So much of it was cooked that, no matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relatives they invited from neighboring villages, there was always a large quantity of food left over at the end of the day. The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guests a mound of foo-foo so high that those who sat on one side could not see what was happening on the other, and it was not until late in the evening that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the course of the meal and had fallen to on the opposite side. It was only then that they exchanged greetings and shook hands over what was left of the food.

The New Yam Festival was thus an occasion for joy throughout Umuofia. And every man whose arm was strong, as the Ibo people say, was expected to invite large numbers of guests from far and wide. Okonkwo always asked his wives' relations, and since he now had three wives his guests would make a fairly big crowd.

But somehow Okonkwo could never become as enthusiastic over feasts as most people. He was a good eater and he could drink one or two fairly big gourds of palm-wine. But he was always uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast or getting over it. He would be very much happier working on his farm.

The festival was now only three days away. Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had then drawn patterns on them in white, yellow, and dark green. They then set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and on their backs. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns. The three women talked excitedly about the relations who had been invited, and the children reveled in the thought of being spoiled by these visitors from the motherland. Ikemefuna was equally excited. The New Yam Festival seemed to him to be a much bigger event here than in his own village, a place which was already becoming remote and vague in his imagination.

And then the storm burst. Okonkwo, who had been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly found an outlet.

"Who killed this banana tree?" he asked.

A hush fell on the compound immediately.

"Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb?"

As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive. Okonkwo's second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. Neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, "It is enough, Okonkwo," pleaded from a reasonable distance.

His anger thus satisfied, Okonkwo decided to go out hunting. He had an old rusty gun made by a clever blacksmith who had come to live in Umuofia long ago. But although Okonkwo was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children. He threw down the gun and jumped into the barn, and there lay the woman, very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt. He heaved a heavy sigh and went away with the gun.

In spite of this incident the New Yam Festival was celebrated with great joy in Okonkwo's household. Early that morning as he offered a sacrifice of new yam and palm-oil to his ancestors he asked them to protect him, his children, and their mothers in the new year.

As the day wore on his in-laws arrived from three surrounding villages, and each party brought with them a huge pot of palm-wine. And there was eating and drinking till night, when Okonkwo's in-laws began to leave for their homes.

The second day of the new year was the day of the great wrestling match between Okonkwo's village and their neighbors. It was difficult to say which the people enjoyed more—the feasting and fellowship of the first day or the wrestling contest of the second. But there was one woman who had no doubt whatever in her mind. She was Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, whom he nearly shot. There was no festival in all the seasons of the year which gave her as much pleasure as the wrestling match. Many years ago when she was the village beauty Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest within living memory. She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her bride-price. But a few years later she ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo. All this happened many years ago. Now Ekwefi was a woman of forty-five who had suffered a great deal in her time. But her love of wrestling contests was still as strong as it was thirty years ago.

It was not yet noon on the second day of the New Yam Festival. Ekwefi and her only daughter, Ezinma, sat near the fireplace waiting for the water in the pot to boil. The fowl Ekwefi had just killed was in the wooden mortar. The water began to boil, and in one deft movement she lifted the pot from the fire and poured the boiling water over the fowl. She put back the empty pot on the circular pad in the corner, and looked at her palms, which were black with soot. Ezinma was always surprised that her mother could lift a pot from the fire with her bare hands.

"Ekwefi," she said, "is it true that when people are grown up, fire does not burn them?" Ezinma, unlike most children, called her mother by her name.

"Yes," replied Ekwefi, too busy to argue. Her daughter was only ten years old but she was wiser than her years.

"But Nwoye's mother dropped her pot of hot soup the other day and it broke on the floor."

Ekwefi turned the hen over in the mortar and began to pluck the feathers.

"Ekwefi," said Ezinma, who had joined in plucking the feathers, "my eyelid is twitching."

"It means you are going to cry," said her mother.

"No," Ezinma said, "it is this eyelid, the top one."

"That means you will see something."

"What will I see?" she asked.

"How can I know?" Ekwefi wanted her to work it out herself.

"Oho," said Ezinma at last. "I know what it is—the wrestling match."

At last the hen was plucked clean. Ekwefi tried to pull out the horny beak but it was too hard. She turned round on her low stool and put the beak in the fire for a few moments. She pulled again and it came off.

"Ekwefi!" a voice called from one of the other huts. It was Nwoye's mother, Okonkwo's first wife.

"Is that me?" Ekwefi called back. That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling.

"Will you give Ezinma some fire to bring to me?" Her own children and Ikemefuna had gone to the stream.

Ekwefi put a few live coals into a piece of broken pot and Ezinma carried it across the clean swept compound to Nwoye's mother.

"Thank you, Nma," she said. She was peeling new yams, and in a basket beside her were green vegetables and beans.

"Let me make the fire for you," Ezinma offered.

"Thank you, Ezigbo," she said. She often called her Ezigbo, which means "the good one."

Ezinma went outside and brought some sticks from a huge bundle of firewood. She broke them into little pieces across the sole of her foot and began to build a fire, blowing it with her breath.

"You will blow your eyes out," said Nwoye's mother, looking up from the yams she was peeling. "Use the fan." She stood up and pulled out the fan which was fastened into one of the rafters. As soon as she got up, the troublesome nanny-goat, which had been dutifully eating yam peelings, dug her teeth into the real thing, scooped out two mouthfuls and fled from the hut to chew the cud in the goats' shed. Nwoye's mother swore at her and settled down again to her peeling. Ezinma's fire was now sending up thick clouds of smoke. She went on fanning it until it burst into flames. Nwoye's mother thanked her and she went back to her mother's hut.

Just then the distant beating of drums began to reach them. It came from the direction of the *ilo*, the village playground. Every village had its own *ilo* which was as old as the village itself and where all the great ceremonies and dances took place. The drums beat the unmistakable wrestling dance—quick, light, and gay, and it came floating on the wind.

Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman.

"We shall be late for the wrestling," said Ezinma to her mother.

"They will not begin until the sun goes down."

"But they are beating the drums."

"Yes. The drums begin at noon but the wrestling waits until the sun begins to sink. Go and see if your father has brought out yams for the afternoon."

"He has. Nwoye's mother is already cooking."

"Go and bring our own, then. We must cook quickly or we shall be late for the wrestling."

Ezinma ran in the direction of the barn and brought back two yams from the dwarf wall.

Ekwefi peeled the yams quickly. The troublesome nanny-goat sniffed about, eating the peelings. She cut the yams into small pieces and began to prepare a pottage, using some of the chicken.

At that moment they heard someone crying just outside their compound. It was very much like Obiageli, Nwoye's sister.

"Is that not Obiageli weeping?" Ekwefi called across the yard to Nwoye's mother.

"Yes," she replied. "She must have broken her water-pot."

The weeping was now quite close and soon the children filed in, carrying on their heads various sizes of pots suitable to their years. Ikemefuna came first with the biggest pot, closely followed by Nwoye and his two younger brothers. Obiageli brought up the rear, her face streaming with tears. In her hand was the cloth pad on which the pot should have rested on her head.

"What happened?" her mother asked, and Obiageli told her mournful story. Her mother consoled her and promised to buy her another pot.

Nwoye's younger brothers were about to tell their mother the true story of the accident when Ikemefuna looked at them sternly and they held their peace. The fact was that Obiageli had been making *inyanga*[12] with her pot. She had balanced it on her head, folded her arms in front of her, and began to sway her waist like a grown-up young lady. When the pot fell down and broke she burst out laughing. She only began to weep when they got near the iroko tree outside their compound.

The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement.

Ekwefi ladled her husband's share of the pottage into a bowl and covered it. Ezinma took it to him in his *obi*.

Okonkwo was sitting on a goatskin already eating his first wife's meal. Obiageli, who had brought it from her mother's hut, sat on the floor waiting for him to finish. Ezinma placed her mother's dish before him and sat with Obiageli.

"Sit like a woman!" Okonkwo shouted at her. Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her.

"Father, will you go to see the wrestling?" Ezinma asked after a suitable interval.

"Yes," he answered. "Will you go?"

"Yes." And after a pause she said: "Can I bring your chair for you?"

"No, that is a boy's job." Okonkwo was specially fond of Ezinma. She looked very much like her mother, who was once the village beauty. But his fondness only showed on very rare occasions.

"Obiageli broke her pot today," Ezinma said.

"Yes, she has told me about it," Okonkwo said between mouthfuls.

"Father," said Obiageli, "people should not talk when they are eating or pepper may go down the wrong way."

"That is very true. Do you hear that, Ezinma? You are older than Obiageli but she has more sense."

He uncovered his second wife's dish and began to eat from it. Obiageli took the first dish and returned to her mother's hut. And then Nkechi came in, bringing the third dish. Nkechi was the daughter of Okonkwo's third wife.

In the distance the drums continued to beat.

6

The whole village turned out on the *ilo*, men, women, and children. They stood round in a huge circle leaving the center of the playground free. The elders and grandees of the village sat on their own stools brought there by their young sons or slaves. Okonkwo was among them. All others stood except those who came early enough to secure places on the few stands which had been built by placing smooth logs on forked pillars.

The wrestlers were not there yet and the drummers held the field. They too sat just in front of the huge circle of spectators, facing the elders. Behind them was the big and ancient silk-cotton tree which was sacred. Spirits of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born. On ordinary days young women who desired children came to sit under its shade.

There were seven drums and they were arranged according to their sizes in a long wooden basket. Three men beat them with sticks, working feverishly from one drum to another. They were possessed by the spirit of the drums.

The young men who kept order on these occasions dashed about, consulting among themselves and with the leaders of the two wrestling teams, who were still outside the circle, behind the crowd. Once in a while two young men carrying palm fronds ran round the circle and kept the crowd back by beating the ground in front of them or, if they were stubborn, their legs and feet.

At last the two teams danced into the circle and the crowd roared and clapped. The drums rose to a frenzy. The people surged forward. The young men who kept order flew around, waving their palm fronds. Old men nodded to the beat of the drums and remembered the days when they wrestled to its intoxicating rhythm.

The contest began with boys of fifteen or sixteen. There were only three such boys in each team. They were not the real wrestlers; they merely set the scene. Within a short time the first two bouts were over. But the third created a big sensation even among the elders who did not usually show their excitement so openly. It was as quick as the other two, perhaps even quicker. But very few people had ever seen that kind of wrestling before. As soon as the two boys closed in, one of them did something which no one could describe because it had been as quick as a flash. And the other boy was flat on his back. The crowd roared and clapped and for a while drowned the frenzied drums. Okonkwo sprang to his feet and quickly sat down again. Three young men from the victorious boy's team ran forward, carried him shoulder high, and danced through the cheering crowd. Everybody soon knew who the boy was. His name was Maduka, the son of Obierika.

The drummers stopped for a brief rest before the real matches. Their bodies shone with sweat, and they took up fans and began to fan themselves. They also drank water from small pots and ate kola nuts. They became ordinary human beings again, talking and laughing among themselves and with others who stood near them. The air, which had been stretched taut with excitement, relaxed again. It was as if water had been poured on the tightened skin of a drum. Many people looked around, perhaps for the first time, and saw those who stood or sat next to them.

"I did not know it was you," Ekwefi said to the woman who had stood shoulder to shoulder with her since the beginning of the matches.

"I do not blame you," said the woman. "I have never seen such a large crowd of people. Is it true that Okonkwo nearly killed you with his gun?"

"It is true indeed, my dear friend. I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story."

"Your *chi* is very much awake, my friend. And how is my daughter, Ezinma?"

[12] *inyanga:* Bragging or showing off.

"She has been very well for some time now. Perhaps she has come to stay."
"I think she has. How old is she now?"
"She is about ten years old."
"I think she will stay. They usually stay if they do not die before the age of six."
"I pray she stays," said Ekwefi with a heavy sigh.

The woman with whom she talked was called Chielo. She was the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. In ordinary life Chielo was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market. She was particularly fond of Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma, whom she called "my daughter." Quite often she bought beancakes and gave Ekwefi some to take home to Ezinma. Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied when the spirit of Agbala was upon her.

The drummers took up their sticks and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow.

The two teams were ranged facing each other across the clear space. A young man from one team danced across the center to the other side and pointed at whomever he wanted to fight. They danced back to the center together and then closed in.

There were twelve men on each side and the challenge went from one side to the other. Two judges walked around the wrestlers and when they thought they were equally matched, stopped them. Five matches ended in this way. But the really exciting moments were when a man was thrown. The huge voice of the crowd then rose to the sky and in every direction. It was even heard in the surrounding villages.

The last match was between the leaders of the teams. They were among the best wrestlers in all the nine villages. The crowd wondered who would throw the other this year. Some said Okafo was the better man; others said he was not the equal of Ikezue. Last year neither of them had thrown the other even though the judges had allowed the contest to go on longer than was the custom. They had the same style and one saw the other's plans beforehand. It might happen again this year.

Dusk was already approaching when their contest began. The drums went mad and the crowds also. They surged forward as the two young men danced into the circle. The palm fronds were helpless in keeping them back.

Ikezue held out his right hand. Okafo seized it, and they closed in. It was a fierce contest. Ikezue strove to dig in his right heel behind Okafo so as to pitch him backwards in the clever *ege* style. But the one knew what the other was thinking. The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose frantic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heartbeat of the people.

The wrestlers were now almost still in each other's grip. The muscles on their arms and their thighs and on their backs stood out and twitched. It looked like an equal match. The two judges were already moving forward to separate them when Ikezue, now desperate, went down quickly on one knee in an attempt to fling his man backwards over his head. It was a sad miscalculation. Quick as the lightning of Amadiora, Okafo raised his right leg and swung it over his rival's head. The crowd

burst into a thunderous roar. Okafo was swept off his feet by his supporters and carried home shoulder high. They sang his praise and the young women clapped their hands:

"Who will wrestle for our village?
Okafo will wrestle for our village.
Has he thrown a hundred men?
He has thrown four hundred men.
Has he thrown a hundred Cats?
He has thrown four hundred Cats.
Then send him word to fight for us."

7

For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household and the elders of Umuofia seemed to have forgotten about him. He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life. He had become wholly absorbed into his new family. He was like an elder brother to Nwoye, and from the very first seemed to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy. He made him feel grown-up; and they no longer spent the evenings in mother's hut while she cooked, but now sat with Okonkwo in his *obi*, or watched him as he tapped his palm tree for the evening wine. Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, or pounding food. On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles.

Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his womenfolk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. He was like the man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foo-foo.

So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi*, and he told them stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba*[13] who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture

[13] *eneke-nti-oba:* "Swallow with the ear of a crocodile," a kind of bird that appears in many fables and proverbs.

was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a song of the suffering of the sons of men. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth's emissary, sang for mercy. At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on Vulture that he did not return to deliver his message but flew to a distant land, from where he had espied a fire. And when he got there he found it was a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails.

That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him. So Nwoye and Ikemefuna would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him, and obtained his first human head. And as he told them of the past they sat in darkness or the dim glow of logs, waiting for the women to finish their cooking. When they finished, each brought her bowl of foo-foo and bowl of soup to her husband. An oil lamp was lit and Okonkwo tasted from each bowl, and then passed two shares to Nwoye and Ikemefuna.

In this way the moons and the seasons passed. And then the locusts came. It had not happened for many a long year. The elders said locusts came once in a generation, reappeared every year for seven years, and then disappeared for another lifetime. They went back to their caves in a distant land, where they were guarded by a race of stunted men. And then after another lifetime these men opened the caves again and the locusts came to Umuofia.

They came in the cold harmattan season after the harvests had been gathered, and ate up all the wild grass in the fields.

Okonkwo and the two boys were working on the red outer walls of the compound. This was one of the lighter tasks of the after-harvest season. A new cover of thick palm branches and palm leaves was set on the walls to protect them from the next rainy season. Okonkwo worked on the outside of the wall and the boys worked from within. There were little holes from one side to the other in the upper levels of the wall, and through these Okonkwo passed the rope, or *tie-tie*, to the boys and they passed it round the wooden stays and then back to him; and in this way the cover was strengthened on the wall.

The women had gone to the bush to collect firewood, and the little children to visit their playmates in the neighboring compounds. The harmattan was in the air and seemed to distill a hazy feeling of sleep on the world. Okonkwo and the boys worked in complete silence, which was only broken when a new palm frond was lifted on to the wall or when a busy hen moved dry leaves about in her ceaseless search for food.

And then quite suddenly a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud. Okonkwo looked up from his work and wondered if it was going to rain at such an unlikely time of the year. But almost immediately a shout of joy broke out in all directions, and Umuofia, which had dozed in the noon-day haze, broke into life and activity.

"Locusts are descending," was joyfully chanted everywhere, and men, women, and children left their work or their play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight. The locusts had not come for many, many years, and only the old people had seen them before.

At first, a fairly small swarm came. They were the harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining star dust. It was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty.

Everyone was now about, talking excitedly and praying that the locusts should camp in Umuofia for the night. For although locusts had not visited Umuofia for many years, everybody knew by instinct that they were very good to eat. And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm.

Many people went out with baskets trying to catch them, but the elders counseled patience till nightfall. And they were right. The locusts settled in the bushes for the night and their wings became wet with dew. Then all Umuofia turned out in spite of the cold harmattan, and everyone filled his bags and pots with locusts. The next morning they were roasted in clay pots and then spread in the sun until they became dry and brittle. And for many days this rare food was eaten with solid palm-oil.

Okonkwo sat in his *obi* crunching happily with Ikemefuna and Nwoye, and drinking palm-wine copiously, when Ogbuefi Ezeudu came in. Ezeudu was the oldest man in this quarter of Umuofia. He had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded great respect in all the clan. He refused to join in the meal, and asked Okonkwo to have a word with him outside. And so they walked out together, the old man supporting himself with his stick. When they were out of earshot, he said to Okonkwo:

"That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death." Okonkwo was surprised, and was about to say something when the old man continued:

"Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father."

The next day a group of elders from all the nine villages of Umuofia came to Okonkwo's house early in the morning, and before they began to speak in low tones Nwoye and Ikemefuna were sent out. They did not stay very long, but when they went away Okonkwo sat still for a very long time supporting his chin in his palms. Later in the day he called Ikemefuna and told him that he was to be taken home the next day. Nwoye overheard it and burst into tears, whereupon his father beat him heavily. As for Ikemefuna, he was at a loss. His own home had gradually become very faint and distant. He still missed his mother and his sister and would be very glad to

see them. But somehow he knew he was not going to see them. He remembered once when men had talked in low tones with his father; and it seemed now as if it was happening all over again.

Later, Nwoye went to his mother's hut and told her that Ikemefuna was going home. She immediately dropped her pestle with which she was grinding pepper, folded her arms across her breast and sighed, "Poor child."

The next day, the men returned with a pot of wine. They were all fully dressed as if they were going to a big clan meeting or to pay a visit to a neighboring village. They passed their cloths under the right armpit, and hung their goatskin bags and sheathed machetes over their left shoulders. Okonkwo got ready quickly and the party set out with Ikemefuna carrying the pot of wine. A deathly silence descended on Okonkwo's compound. Even the very little children seemed to know. Throughout that day Nwoye sat in his mother's hut and tears stood in his eyes.

At the beginning of their journey the men of Umuofia talked and laughed about the locusts, about their women, and about some effeminate men who had refused to come with them. But as they drew near to the outskirts of Umuofia silence fell upon them too.

The sun rose slowly to the center of the sky, and the dry, sandy footway began to throw up the heat that lay buried in it. Some birds chirruped in the forests around. The men trod dry leaves on the sand. All else was silent. Then from the distance came the faint beating of the *ekwe*. It rose and faded with the wind—a peaceful dance from a distant clan.

"It is an *ozo*[14] dance," the men said among themselves. But no one was sure where it was coming from. Some said Ezimili, others Abame or Aninta. They argued for a short while and fell into silence again, and the elusive dance rose and fell with the wind. Somewhere a man was taking one of the titles of his clan, with music and dancing and a great feast.

The footway had now become a narrow line in the heart of the forest. The short trees and sparse undergrowth which surrounded the men's village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the ax and the bush-fire. The sun breaking through their leaves and branches threw a pattern of light and shade on the sandy footway.

Ikemefuna heard a whisper close behind him and turned round sharply. The man who had whispered now called out aloud, urging the others to hurry up.

"We still have a long way to go," he said. Then he and another man went before Ikemefuna and set a faster pace.

Thus the men of Umuofia pursued their way, armed with sheathed machetes, and Ikemefuna, carrying a pot of palm-wine on his head, walked in their midst. Although he had felt uneasy at first, he was not afraid now. Okonkwo walked behind him. He could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father. He had never been fond of his real father, and at the end of three years he had become very distant indeed. But his mother and his three-year-old sister . . . of course she would not be

[14] *ozo:* One of the four titles or ranks in the Ibo society; they are Ozo, Idemili, Omalo, and Erulu.

three now, but six. Would he recognize her now? She must have grown quite big. How his mother would weep for joy, and thank Okonkwo for having looked after him so well and for bringing him back. She would want to hear everything that had happened to him in all these years. Could he remember them all? He would tell her about Nwoye and his mother, and about the locusts. . . . Then quite suddenly a thought came upon him. His mother might be dead. He tried in vain to force the thought out of his mind. Then he tried to settle the matter the way he used to settle such matters when he was a little boy. He still remembered the song:

Eze elina, elina!
Sala
Eze ilikwa ya
Ikwaba akwa oligholi
Ebe Danda nechi eze
Ebe Uzuzu nete egwu
Sala[15]

He sang it in his mind, and walked to its beat. If the song ended on his right foot, his mother was alive. If it ended on his left, she was dead. No, not dead, but ill. It ended on the right. She was alive and well. He sang the song again, and it ended on the left. But the second time did not count. The first voice gets to Chukwu, or God's house. That was a favorite saying of children. Ikemefuna felt like a child once more. It must be the thought of going home to his mother.

One of the men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back, and the man growled at him to go on and not stand looking back. The way he said it sent cold fear down Ikemefuna's back. His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried. Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was afraid to look back.

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.

As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp. He had had the same kind of feeling not long ago, during the last harvest season. Every child loved the harvest season. Those who were big enough to carry even a few yams in a tiny basket went with grownups to the farm. And if they could not help in digging up the yams, they could gather firewood together for roasting the ones that would be eaten there on the farm. This roasted yam soaked in red palm-oil and eaten in the open farm was

[15] *Eze elina, . . . Sala:* "King don't eat, don't eat! / Sala / King if you eat it / You will weep for the abomination / Where Danda installs a king / Where Uzuzu dances / Sala." *Danda* means "ant"; *Uzuzu*, "sand"; and *Sala*, which has no meaning, is a refrain.

sweeter than any meal at home. It was after such a day at the farm during the last harvest that Nwoye had felt for the first time a snapping inside him like the one he now felt. They were returning home with baskets of yams from a distant farm across the stream when they heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest. A sudden hush had fallen on the women, who had been talking, and they had quickened their steps. Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest, but he had never yet come across them. A vague chill had descended on him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night who passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something had given way inside him. It descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikemefuna.

8

Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor. He called his son, Nwoye, to sit with him in his *obi*. But the boy was afraid of him and slipped out of the hut as soon as he noticed him dozing.

He did not sleep at night. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him. Once he got up from bed and walked about his compound. But he was so weak that his legs could hardly carry him. He felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito. Now and then a cold shiver descended on his head and spread down his body.

On the third day he asked his second wife, Ekwefi, to roast plantains for him. She prepared it the way he liked—with slices of oil-bean and fish.

"You have not eaten for two days," said his daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. "So you must finish this." She sat down and stretched her legs in front of her. Okonkwo ate the food absent-mindedly. "She should have been a boy," he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter. He passed her a piece of fish.

"Go and bring me some cold water," he said. Ezinma rushed out of the hut, chewing the fish, and soon returned with a bowl of cool water from the earthen pot in her mother's hut.

Okonkwo took the bowl from her and gulped the water down. He ate a few more pieces of plantain and pushed the dish aside.

"Bring me my bag," he asked, and Ezinma brought his goatskin bag from the far end of the hut. He searched in it for his snuff-bottle. It was a deep bag and took almost the whole length of his arm. It contained other things apart from his snuff-bottle. There was a drinking horn in it, and also a drinking gourd, and they knocked against each other as he searched. When he brought out the snuff-bottle he tapped it a few times against his kneecap before taking out some snuff on the palm of his left hand. Then he remembered that he had not taken out his snuff-spoon. He searched his bag again and brought out a small, flat, ivory spoon, with which he carried the brown snuff to his nostrils.

Ezinma took the dish in one hand and the empty water bowl in the other and went back to her mother's hut. "She should have been a boy," Okonkwo said to himself again. His mind went back to Ikemefuna and he shivered. If only he could find some work to do he would be able to forget. But it was the season of rest between the harvest and the next planting season. The only work that men did at this time was covering the walls of their compound with new palm fronds. And Okonkwo had already done that. He had finished it on the very day the locusts came, when he had worked on one side of the wall and Ikemefuna and Nwoye on the other.

"When did you become a shivering old woman," Okonkwo asked himself, "you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed."

He sprang to his feet, hung his goatskin bag on his shoulder and went to visit his friend, Obierika.

Obierika was sitting outside under the shade of an orange tree making thatches from leaves of the raffia-palm. He exchanged greetings with Okonkwo and led the way into his *obi*.

"I was coming over to see you as soon as I finished that thatch," he said, rubbing off the grains of sand that clung to his thighs.

"Is it well?" Okonkwo asked.

"Yes," replied Obierika. "My daughter's suitor is coming today and I hope we will clinch the matter of the bride-price. I want you to be there."

Just then Obierika's son, Maduka, came into the *obi* from outside, greeted Okonkwo and turned towards the compound.

"Come and shake hands with me," Okonkwo said to the lad. "Your wrestling the other day gave me much happiness." The boy smiled, shook hands with Okonkwo and went into the compound.

"He will do great things," Okonkwo said. "If I had a son like him I should be happy. I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match. His two younger brothers are more promising. But I can tell you, Obierika, that my children do not resemble me. Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies? If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit."

"You worry yourself for nothing," said Obierika. "The children are still very young."

"Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself. No, my friend, he is not too young. A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him."

"Too much of his grandfather," Obierika thought, but he did not say it. The same thought also came to Okonkwo's mind. But he had long learned how to lay that ghost. Whenever the thought of his father's weakness and failure troubled him he expelled it by thinking about his own strength and success. And so he did now. His mind went to his latest show of manliness.

"I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy," he asked Obierika.

"Because I did not want to," Obierika replied sharply. "I had something better to do."

"You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die."

"I do not. Why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision."

"But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?"

"You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families."

"The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm."

"That is true," Obierika agreed. "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it."

They would have gone on arguing had Ofoedu not come in just then. It was clear from his twinkling eyes that he had important news. But it would be impolite to rush him. Obierika offered him a lobe of the kola nut he had broken with Okonkwo. Ofoedu ate slowly and talked about the locusts. When he finished his kola nut he said:

"The things that happen these days are very strange."

"What has happened?" asked Okonkwo.

"Do you know Ogbuefi Ndulue?" Ofoedu asked.

"Ogbuefi Ndulue of Ire village," Okonkwo and Obierika said together.

"He died this morning," said Ofoedu.

"That is not strange. He was the oldest man in Ire," said Obierika.

"You are right," Ofoedu agreed. "But you ought to ask why the drum has not beaten to tell Umuofia of his death."

"Why?" asked Obierika and Okonkwo together.

"That is the strange part of it. You know his first wife who walks with a stick?"

"Yes. She is called Ozoemena."

"That is so," said Ofoedu. "Ozoemena was, as you know, too old to attend Ndulue during his illness. His younger wives did that. When he died this morning, one of these women went to Ozoemena's hut and told her. She rose from her mat, took her stick and walked over to the *obi*. She knelt on her knees and hands at the threshold and called her husband, who was laid on a mat. 'Ogbuefi Ndulue,' she called, three times, and went back to her hut. When the youngest wife went to call her again to be present at the washing of the body, she found her lying on the mat, dead."

"That is very strange, indeed," said Okonkwo. "They will put off Ndulue's funeral until his wife has been buried."[16]

[16] "That is . . . buried": A wife who died soon after her husband might be blamed for his death, therefore the concern here.

"That is why the drum has not been beaten to tell Umuofia."

"It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind," said Obierika. "I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her."

"I did not know that," said Okonkwo. "I thought he was a strong man in his youth."

"He was indeed," said Ofoedu.

Okonkwo shook his head doubtfully.

"He led Umuofia to war in those days," said Obierika.

Okonkwo was beginning to feel like his old self again. All that he required was something to occupy his mind. If he had killed Ikemefuna during the busy planting season or harvesting it would not have been so bad; his mind would have been centered on his work. Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action. But in absence of work, talking was the next best.

Soon after Ofoedu left, Okonkwo took up his goatskin bag to go.

"I must go home to tap my palm trees for the afternoon," he said.

"Who taps your tall trees for you?" asked Obierika.

"Umezulike," replied Okonkwo.

"Sometimes I wish I had not taken the *ozo* title," said Obierika. "It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping."

"It is so indeed," Okonkwo agreed. "But the law of the land must be obeyed."

"I don't know how we got that law," said Obierika. "In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall tree but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting up dog-meat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth."

"I think it is good that our clan holds the *ozo* title in high esteem," said Okonkwo. "In those other clans you speak of, *ozo* is so low that every beggar takes it."

"I was only speaking in jest," said Obierika. "In Abame and Aninta the title is worth less than two cowries. Every man wears the thread of title on his ankle, and does not lose it even if he steals."

"They have indeed soiled the name of *ozo*," said Okonkwo as he rose to go.

"It will not be very long now before my in-laws come," said Obierika.

"I shall return very soon," said Okonkwo, looking at the position of the sun.

There were seven men in Obierika's hut when Okonkwo returned. The suitor was a young man of about twenty-five, and with him were his father and uncle. On Obierika's side were his two elder brothers and Maduka, his sixteen-year-old son.

"Ask Akueke's mother to send us some kola nuts," said Obierika to his son. Maduka vanished into the compound like lightning. The conversation at once centered on him, and everybody agreed that he was as sharp as a razor.

"I sometimes think he is too sharp," said Obierika, somewhat indulgently. "He hardly ever walks. He is always in a hurry. If you are sending him on an errand he flies away before he has heard half of the message."

"You were very much like that yourself," said his eldest brother. "As our people say, 'When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth.' Maduka has been watching your mouth."

As he was speaking the boy returned, followed by Akueke, his half-sister, carrying a wooden dish with three kola nuts and alligator pepper. She gave the dish to her father's eldest brother and then shook hands, very shyly, with her suitor and his relatives. She was about sixteen and just ripe for marriage. Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe.

She wore a coiffure which was done up into a crest in the middle of the head. Cam wood was rubbed lightly into her skin, and all over her body were black patterns drawn with *uli*.[17] She wore a black necklace which hung down in three coils just above her full, succulent breasts. On her arms were red and yellow bangles, and on her waist four or five rows of *jigida*, or waist beads.

When she had shaken hands, or rather held out her hand to be shaken, she returned to her mother's hut to help with the cooking.

"Remove your *jigida* first," her mother warned as she moved near the fireplace to bring the pestle resting against the wall. "Every day I tell you that *jigida* and fire are not friends. But you will never hear. You grew your ears for decoration, not for hearing. One of these days your *jigida* will catch fire on your waist, and then you will know."

Akueke moved to the other end of the hut and began to remove the waist-beads. It had to be done slowly and carefully, taking each string separately, else it would break and the thousand tiny rings would have to be strung together again. She rubbed each string downwards with her palms until it passed the buttocks and slipped down to the floor around her feet.

The men in the *obi* had already begun to drink the palm-wine which Akueke's suitor had brought. It was a very good wine and powerful, for in spite of the palm fruit hung across the mouth of the pot to restrain the lively liquor, white foam rose and spilled over.

"That wine is the work of a good tapper," said Okonkwo.

The young suitor, whose name was Ibe, smiled broadly and said to his father: "Do you hear that?" He then said to the others: "He will never admit that I am a good tapper."

"He tapped three of my best palm trees to death," said his father, Ukegbu.

"That was about five years ago," said Ibe, who had begun to pour out the wine, "before I learned how to tap." He filled the first horn and gave to his father. Then he poured out for the others. Okonkwo brought out his big horn from the goatskin bag, blew into it to remove any dust that might be there, and gave it to Ibe to fill.

As the men drank, they talked about everything except the thing for which they had gathered. It was only after the pot had been emptied that the suitor's father cleared his voice and announced the object of their visit.

[17] *uli*: A black dye used to decorate the body.

Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them.

"They are thirty?" he asked.

Obierika nodded in agreement.

"We are at last getting somewhere," Ukegbu said, and then turning to his brother and his son he said: "Let us go out and whisper together." The three rose and went outside. When they returned Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted them; instead of thirty there were now only fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said:

"We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, 'If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play.' Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again." He then added ten sticks to the fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu.

In this way Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. It was already dusk when the two parties came to this agreement.

"Go and tell Akueke's mother that we have finished," Obierika said to his son, Maduka. Almost immediately the women came in with a big bowl of foo-foo. Obierika's second wife followed with a pot of soup, and Maduka brought in a pot of palm-wine.

As the men ate and drank palm-wine they talked about the customs of their neighbors.

"It was only this morning," said Obierika, "that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta, where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives."

"All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market."

"That is very bad," said Obierika's eldest brother. "But what is good in one place is bad in another place. In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom because it always leads to a quarrel."

"The world is large," said Okonkwo. "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family."

"That cannot be," said Machi. "You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children."

"It is like the story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk," said Obierika. He held up a piece of chalk, which every man kept in his *obi* and with which his guests drew lines on the floor before they ate kola nuts. "And these white men, they say, have no toes."

"And have you never seen them?" asked Machi.

"Have you?" asked Obierika.

"One of them passes here frequently," said Machi. "His name is Amadi."

Those who knew Amadi laughed. He was a leper, and the polite name for leprosy was "the white skin."

9

For the first time in three nights, Okonkwo slept. He woke up once in the middle of the night and his mind went back to the past three days without making him feel uneasy. He began to wonder why he had felt uneasy at all. It was like a man wondering in broad daylight why a dream had appeared so terrible to him at night. He stretched himself and scratched his thigh where a mosquito had bitten him as he slept. Another one was wailing near his right ear. He slapped the ear and hoped he had killed it. Why do they always go for one's ears? When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it. But it was as silly as all women's stories. Mosquito, she had said, had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon Ear fell on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. "How much longer do you think you will live?" she asked. "You are already a skeleton." Mosquito went away humiliated, and any time he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive.

Okonkwo turned on his side and went back to sleep. He was roused in the morning by someone banging on his door.

"Who is that?" he growled. He knew it must be Ekwefi. Of his three wives Ekwefi was the only one who would have the audacity to bang on his door.

"Ezinma is dying," came her voice, and all the tragedy and sorrow of her life were packed in those words.

Okonkwo sprang from his bed, pushed back the bolt on his door and ran into Ekwefi's hut.

Ezinma lay shivering on a mat beside a huge fire that her mother had kept burning all night.

"It is *iba*,"[18] said Okonkwo as he took his machete and went into the bush to collect the leaves and grasses and barks of trees that went into making the medicine for *iba*.

Ekwefi knelt beside the sick child, occasionally feeling with her palm the wet, burning forehead.

Ezinma was an only child and the center of her mother's world. Very often it was Ezinma who decided what food her mother should prepare. Ekwefi even gave her such delicacies as eggs, which children were rarely allowed to eat because such food tempted them to steal. One day as Ezinma was eating an egg Okonkwo had come in unexpectedly from his hut. He was greatly shocked and swore to beat Ekwefi if she dared to give the child eggs again. But it was impossible to refuse Ezinma anything. After her father's rebuke she developed an even keener appetite for eggs. And she enjoyed above all the secrecy in which she now ate them. Her mother always took her into their bedroom and shut the door.

Ezinma did not call her mother *Nne* like all children. She called her by her name, Ekwefi, as her father and other grown-up people did. The relationship between them was not only that of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals, which was strengthened by such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom.

[18] *iba*: Fever.

Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual. Her deepening despair found expression in the names she gave her children. One of them was a pathetic cry, Onwumbiko—"Death, I implore you." But Death took no notice; Onwumbiko died in his fifteenth month. The next child was a girl, Ozoemena—"May it not happen again." She died in her eleventh month, and two others after her. Ekwefi then became defiant and called her next child Onwuma—"Death may please himself." And he did.

After the death of Ekwefi's second child, Okonkwo had gone to a medicine man, who was also a diviner of the Afa Oracle, to inquire what was amiss. This man told him that the child was an *ogbanje*,[19] one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers' wombs to be born again.

"When your wife becomes pregnant again," he said, "let her not sleep in her hut. Let her go and stay with her people. In that way she will elude her wicked tormentor and break its evil cycle of birth and death."

Ekwefi did as she was asked. As soon as she became pregnant she went to live with her old mother in another village. It was there that her third child was born and circumcised on the eighth day. She did not return to Okonkwo's compound until three days before the naming ceremony. The child was called Onwumbiko.

Onwumbiko was not given proper burial when he died. Okonkwo had called in another medicine man who was famous in the clan for his great knowledge about *ogbanje* children. His name was Okagbue Uyanwa. Okagbue was a very striking figure, tall, with a full beard and a bald head. He was light in complexion and his eyes were red and fiery. He always gnashed his teeth as he listened to those who came to consult him. He asked Okonkwo a few questions about the dead child. All the neighbors and relations who had come to mourn gathered round them.

"On what market-day was it born?" he asked.

"*Oye*," replied Okonkwo.

"And it died this morning?"

Okonkwo said yes, and only then realized for the first time that the child had died on the same market-day as it had been born. The neighbors and relations also saw the coincidence and said among themselves that it was very significant.

"Where do you sleep with your wife, in your *obi* or in her own hut?" asked the medicine man.

"In her hut."

"In future call her into your *obi*."

The medicine man then ordered that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor from the goatskin bag slung from his left

[19] child . . . *ogbanje*: The *ogbanje* is locked into a pattern of early death and cyclic rebirth unless its *iyi-uwa*, a stone that links it to the spirit world, is found and destroyed so that the child can live.

shoulder and began to mutilate the child. Then he took it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on the ground behind him. After such treatment it would think twice before coming again, unless it was one of the stubborn ones who returned, carrying the stamp of their mutilation—a missing finger or perhaps a dark line where the medicine man's razor had cut them.

By the time Onwumbiko died Ekwefi had become a very bitter woman. Her husband's first wife had already had three sons, all strong and healthy. When she had borne her third son in succession, Okonkwo had gathered a goat for her, as was the custom. Ekwefi had nothing but good wishes for her. But she had grown so bitter about her own *chi* that she could not rejoice with others over their good fortune. And so, on the day that Nwoye's mother celebrated the birth of her three sons with feasting and music, Ekwefi was the only person in the happy company who went about with a cloud on her brow. Her husband's wife took this for malevolence, as husbands' wives were wont to. How could she know that Ekwefi's bitterness did not flow outwards to others but inwards into her own soul; that she did not blame others for their good fortune but her own evil *chi* who denied her any?

At last Ezinma was born, and although ailing she seemed determined to live. At first Ekwefi accepted her, as she had accepted others—with listless resignation. But when she lived on to her fourth, fifth, and sixth years, love returned once more to her mother, and, with love, anxiety. She determined to nurse her child to health, and she put all her being into it. She was rewarded by occasional spells of health during which Ezinma bubbled with energy like fresh palm-wine. At such times she seemed beyond danger. But all of a sudden she would go down again. Everybody knew she was an *ogbanje*. These sudden bouts of sickness and health were typical of her kind. But she had lived so long that perhaps she had decided to stay. Some of them did become tired of their evil rounds of birth and death, or took pity on their mothers, and stayed. Ekwefi believed deep inside her that Ezinma had come to stay. She believed because it was that faith alone that gave her own life any kind of meaning. And this faith had been strengthened when a year or so ago a medicine man had dug up Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*. Everyone knew then that she would live because her bond with the world of *ogbanje* had been broken. Ekwefi was reassured. But such was her anxiety for her daughter that she could not rid herself completely of her fear. And although she believed that the *iyi-uwa* which had been dug up was genuine, she could not ignore the fact that some really evil children sometimes misled people into digging up a specious one.

But Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* had looked real enough. It was a smooth pebble wrapped in a dirty rag. The man who dug it up was the same Okagbue who was famous in all the clan for his knowledge in these matters. Ezinma had not wanted to cooperate with him at first. But that was only to be expected. No *ogbanje* would yield her secrets easily, and most of them never did because they died too young—before they could be asked questions.

"Where did you bury your *iyi-uwa*?" Okagbue had asked Ezinma. She was nine then and was just recovering from a serious illness.

"What is *iyi-uwa*?" she asked in return.

"You know what it is. You buried it in the ground somewhere so that you can die and return again to torment your mother."

Ezinma looked at her mother, whose eyes, sad and pleading, were fixed on her.

"Answer the question at once," roared Okonkwo, who stood beside her. All the family were there and some of the neighbors too.

"Leave her to me," the medicine man told Okonkwo in a cool, confident voice. He turned again to Ezinma. "Where did you bury your *iyi-uwa*?"

"Where they bury children," she replied, and the quiet spectators murmured to themselves.

"Come along then and show me the spot," said the medicine man.

The crowd set out with Ezinma leading the way and Okagbue following closely behind her. Okonkwo came next and Ekwefi followed him. When she came to the main road, Ezinma turned left as if she was going to the stream.

"But you said it was where they bury children?" asked the medicine man.

"No," said Ezinma, whose feeling of importance was manifest in her sprightly walk. She sometimes broke into a run and stopped again suddenly. The crowd followed her silently. Women and children returning from the stream with pots of water on their heads wondered what was happening until they saw Okagbue and guessed that it must be something to do with *ogbanje*. And they all knew Ekwefi and her daughter very well.

When she got to the big udala tree Ezinma turned left into the bush, and the crowd followed her. Because of her size she made her way through trees and creepers more quickly than her followers. The bush was alive with the tread of feet on dry leaves and sticks and the moving aside of tree branches. Ezinma went deeper and deeper and the crowd went with her. Then she suddenly turned round and began to walk back to the road. Everybody stood to let her pass and then filed after her.

"If you bring us all this way for nothing I shall beat sense into you," Okonkwo threatened.

"I have told you to let her alone. I know how to deal with them," said Okagbue.

Ezinma led the way back to the road, looked left and right and turned right. And so they arrived home again.

"Where did you bury your *iyi-uwa*?" asked Okagbue when Ezinma finally stopped outside her father's *obi*. Okagbue's voice was unchanged. It was quiet and confident.

"It is near that orange tree," Ezinma said.

"And why did you not say so, you wicked daughter of Akalogoli?" Okonkwo swore furiously. The medicine man ignored him.

"Come and show me the exact spot," he said quietly to Ezinma.

"It is here," she said when they got to the tree.

"Point at the spot with your finger," said Okagbue.

"It is here," said Ezinma touching the ground with her finger. Okonkwo stood by, rumbling like thunder in the rainy season.

"Bring me a hoe," said Okagbue.

When Ekwefi brought the hoe, he had already put aside his goatskin bag and his big cloth and was in his underwear, a long and thin strip of cloth wound round the waist like a belt and then passed between the legs to be fastened to the belt behind. He immediately set to work digging a pit where Ezinma had indicated. The neighbors sat around watching the pit becoming deeper and deeper. The dark top soil

soon gave way to the bright red earth with which women scrubbed the floors and walls of huts. Okagbue worked tirelessly and in silence, his back shining with perspiration. Okonkwo stood by the pit. He asked Okagbue to come up and rest while he took a hand. But Okagbue said he was not tired yet.

Ekwefi went into her hut to cook yams. Her husband had brought out more yams than usual because the medicine man had to be fed. Ezinma went with her and helped in preparing the vegetables.

"There is too much green vegetable," she said.

"Don't you see the pot is full of yams?" Ekwefi asked. "And you know how leaves become smaller after cooking."

"Yes," said Ezinma, "that was why the snake-lizard killed his mother."

"Very true," said Ekwefi.

"He gave his mother seven baskets of vegetables to cook and in the end there were only three. And so he killed her," said Ezinma.

"That is not the end of the story."

"Oho," said Ezinma. "I remember now. He brought another seven baskets and cooked them himself. And there were again only three. So he killed himself too."

Outside the *obi* Okagbue and Okonkwo were digging the pit to find where Ezinma had buried her *iyi-uwa*. Neighbors sat around, watching. The pit was now so deep that they no longer saw the digger. They only saw the red earth he threw up mounting higher and higher. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, stood near the edge of the pit because he wanted to take in all that happened.

Okagbue had again taken over the digging from Okonkwo. He worked, as usual, in silence. The neighbors and Okonkwo's wives were now talking. The children had lost interest and were playing.

Suddenly Okagbue sprang to the surface with the agility of a leopard.

"It is very near now," he said. "I have felt it."

There was immediate excitement and those who were sitting jumped to their feet.

"Call your wife and child," he said to Okonkwo. But Ekwefi and Ezinma had heard the noise and run out to see what it was.

Okagbue went back into the pit, which was now surrounded by spectators. After a few more hoe-fuls of earth he struck the *iyi-uwa*. He raised it carefully with the hoe and threw it to the surface. Some women ran away in fear when it was thrown. But they soon returned and everyone was gazing at the rag from a reasonable distance. Okagbue emerged and without saying a word or even looking at the spectators he went to his goatskin bag, took out two leaves and began to chew them. When he had swallowed them, he took up the rag with his left hand and began to untie it. And then the smooth, shiny pebble fell out. He picked it up.

"Is this yours?" he asked Ezinma.

"Yes," she replied. All the women shouted with joy because Ekwefi's troubles were at last ended.

All this had happened more than a year ago and Ezinma had not been ill since. And then suddenly she had begun to shiver in the night. Ekwefi brought her to the fireplace, spread her mat on the floor and built a fire. But she had got worse and worse. As she knelt by her, feeling with her palm the wet, burning forehead, she

prayed a thousand times. Although her husband's wives were saying that it was nothing more than *iba*, she did not hear them.

Okonkwo returned from the bush carrying on his left shoulder a large bundle of grasses and leaves, roots and barks of medicinal trees and shrubs. He went into Ekwefi's hut, put down his load and sat down.

"Get me a pot," he said, "and leave the child alone."

Ekwefi went to bring the pot and Okonkwo selected the best from his bundle, in their due proportions, and cut them up. He put them in the pot and Ekwefi poured in some water.

"Is that enough?" she asked when she had poured in about half of the water in the bowl.

"A little more . . . I said *a little*. Are you deaf?" Okonkwo roared at her.

She set the pot on the fire and Okonkwo took up his machete to return to his *obi*.

"You must watch the pot carefully," he said as he went, "and don't allow it to boil over. If it does its power will be gone." He went away to his hut and Ekwefi began to tend the medicine pot almost as if it was itself a sick child. Her eyes went constantly from Ezinma to the boiling pot and back to Ezinma.

Okonkwo returned when he felt the medicine had cooked long enough. He looked it over and said it was done.

"Bring me a low stool for Ezinma," he said, "and a thick mat."

He took down the pot from the fire and placed it in front of the stool. He then roused Ezinma and placed her on the stool, astride the steaming pot. The thick mat was thrown over both. Ezinma struggled to escape from the choking and overpowering steam, but she was held down. She started to cry.

When the mat was at last removed she was drenched in perspiration. Ekwefi mopped her with a piece of cloth and she lay down on a dry mat and was soon asleep.

10

Large crowds began to gather on the village *ilo* as soon as the edge had worn off the sun's heat and it was no longer painful on the body. Most communal ceremonies took place at that time of the day, so that even when it was said that a ceremony would begin "after the midday meal" everyone understood that it would begin a long time later, when the sun's heat had softened.

It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders. The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin. In front of them was a row of stools on which nobody sat. There were nine of them. Two little groups of people stood at a respectable distance beyond the stools. They faced the elders. There were three men in one group and three men and one woman in the other. The woman was Mgbafo and the three men with her were her brothers. In the other group were her husband, Uzowulu, and his relatives. Mgbafo and her brothers were as still as statues into whose faces the artist has molded defiance. Uzowulu and

his relative, on the other hand, were whispering together. It looked like whispering, but they were really talking at the top of their voices. Everybody in the crowd was talking. It was like the market. From a distance the noise was a deep rumble carried by the wind.

An iron gong sounded, setting up a wave of expectation in the crowd. Everyone looked in the direction of the *egwugwu* house. *Gome, gome, gome, gome* went the gong, and a powerful flute blew a high-pitched blast. Then came the voices of the *egwugwu,* guttural and awesome. The wave struck the women and children and there was a backward stampede. But it was momentary. They were already far enough where they stood and there was room for running away if any of the *egwugwu* should go towards them.

The drum sounded again and the flute blew. The *egwugwu* house was now a pandemonium of quavering voices: *Aru oyim de de de dei!*[20] filled the air as the spirits of the ancestors, just emerged from the earth, greeted themselves in their esoteric language. The *egwugwu* house into which they emerged faced the forest, away from the crowd, who saw only its back with the many-colored patterns and drawings done by specially chosen women at regular intervals. These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan.

Aru oyim de de de dei! flew around the dark, closed hut like tongues of fire. The ancestral spirits of the clan were abroad. The metal gong beat continuously now and the flute, shrill and powerful, floated on the chaos.

And then the *egwugwu* appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle. Even Mgbafo took to her heels and had to be restrained by her brothers.

Each of the nine *egwugwu* represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head.

The nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Evil Forest represented the village of Umueru, or the children of Eru, who was the eldest of the nine sons.

"*Umuofia kwenu!*" shouted the leading *egwugwu,* pushing the air with his raffia arms. The elders of the clan replied, "*Yaa!*"

"*Umuofia kwenu!*"

"*Yaa!*"

"*Umuofia kwenu!*"

"*Yaa!*"

Evil Forest then thrust the pointed end of his rattling staff into the earth. And it began to shake and rattle, like something agitating with a metallic life. He took the first of the empty stools and the eight other *egwugwu* began to sit in order of seniority after him.

Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu.* But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns.

When all the *egwugwu* had sat down and the sound of the many tiny bells and rattles on their bodies had subsided, Evil Forest addressed the two groups of people facing them.

"Uzowulu's body, I salute you," he said. Spirits always addressed humans as "bodies." Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission.

"Our father, my hand has touched the ground," he said.

"Uzowulu's body, do you know me?" asked the spirit.

"How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge."

Evil Forest then turned to the other group and addressed the eldest of the three brothers.

"The body of Odukwe, I greet you," he said, and Odukwe bent down and touched the earth. The hearing then began.

Uzowulu stepped forward and presented his case.

"That woman standing there is my wife, Mgbafo. I married her with my money and my yams. I do not owe my in-laws anything. I owe them no yams. I owe them no coco-yams. One morning three of them came to my house, beat me up, and took my wife and children away. This happened in the rainy season. I have waited in vain for my wife to return. At last I went to my in-laws and said to them, 'You have taken back your sister. I did not send her away. You yourselves took her. The law of the clan is that you should return her bride-price.' But my wife's brothers said they had nothing to tell me. So I have brought the matter to the fathers of the clan. My case is finished. I salute you."

"Your words are good," said the leader of the *egwugwu.* "Let us hear Odukwe. His words may also be good."

Odukwe was short and thickset. He stepped forward, saluted the spirits, and began his story.

"My in-law has told you that we went to his house, beat him up, and took our sister and her children away. All that is true. He told you that he came to take back her bride-price and we refused to give it him. That also is true. My in-law, Uzowulu, is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty—"

"It is a lie!" Uzowulu shouted.

[20] *Aru . . . dei!*: "Body of my friend, greetings."

"Two years ago," continued Odukwe, "when she was pregnant, he beat her until she miscarried."

"It is a lie. She miscarried after she had gone to sleep with her lover."

"Uzowulu's body, I salute you," said Evil Forest, silencing him. "What kind of lover sleeps with a pregnant woman?" There was a loud murmur of approbation from the crowd. Odukwe continued:

"Last year when my sister was recovering from an illness, he beat her again so that if the neighbors had not gone in to save her she would have been killed. We heard of it, and did as you have been told. The law of Umuofia is that if a woman runs away from her husband her bride-price is returned. But in this case she ran away to save her life. Her two children belong to Uzowulu. We do not dispute it, but they are too young to leave their mother. If, in the other hand, Uzowulu should recover from his madness and come in the proper way to beg his wife to return she will do so on the understanding that if he ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him."

The crowd roared with laughter. Evil Forest rose to his feet and order was immediately restored. A steady cloud of smoke rose from his head. He sat down again and called two witnesses. They were both Uzowulu's neighbors, and they agreed about the beating. Evil Forest then stood up, pulled out his staff and thrust it into the earth again. He ran a few steps in the direction of the women; they all fled in terror, only to return to their places almost immediately. The nine *egwugwu* then went away to consult together in their house. They were silent for a long time. Then the metal gong sounded and the flute was blown. The *egwugwu* had emerged once again from their underground home. They saluted one another and then reappeared on the *ilo*.

"Umuofia kwenu!" roared Evil Forest, facing the elders and grandees of the clan.

"Yaa!" replied the thunderous crowd; then silence descended from the sky and swallowed the noise.

Evil Forest began to speak and all the while he spoke everyone was silent. The eight other *egwugwu* were as still as statues.

"We have heard both sides of the case," said Evil Forest. "Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute." He turned to Uzowulu's group and allowed a short pause.

"Uzowulu's body, I salute you," he said.

"Our father, my hand has touched the ground," replied Uzowulu, touching the earth.

"Uzowulu's body, do you know me?"

"How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge," Uzowulu replied.

"I am Evil Forest. I kill a man on the day that his life is sweetest to him."

"That is true," replied Uzowulu.

"Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman." He turned to Odukwe, and allowed a brief pause.

"Odukwe's body, I greet you," he said.

"My hand is on the ground," replied Odukwe.

"Do you know me?"

"No man can know you," replied Odukwe.

"I am Evil Forest, I am Dry-meat-that-fills-the-mouth, I am Fire-that-burns-without-faggots. If your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him. I salute you." He pulled his staff from the hard earth and thrust it back.

"Umuofia kwenu!" he roared, and the crowd answered.

"I don't know why such a trifle should come before the *egwugwu*," said one elder to another.

"Don't you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision," replied the other.

As they spoke two other groups of people had replaced the first before the *egwugwu*, and a great land case began.

11

The night was impenetrably dark. The moon had been rising later and later every night until now it was seen only at dawn. And whenever the moon forsook evening and rose at cock-crow the nights were as black as charcoal.

Ezinma and her mother sat on a mat on the floor after their supper of yam foo-foo and bitter-leaf soup. A palm-oil lamp gave out yellowish light. Without it, it would have been impossible to eat; one could not have known where one's mouth was in the darkness of that night. There was an oil lamp in all the four huts on Okonkwo's compound, and each hut seen from the others looked like a soft eye of yellow half-light set in the solid massiveness of night.

The world was silent except for the shrill cry of insects, which was part of the night, and the sound of wooden mortar and pestle as Nwayieke pounded her foo-foo. Nwayieke lived four compounds away, and she was notorious for her late cooking. Every woman in the neighborhood knew the sound of Nwayieke's mortar and pestle. It was also part of the night.

Okonkwo had eaten from his wives' dishes and was now reclining with his back against the wall. He searched his bag and brought out his snuff-bottle. He turned it on to his left palm, but nothing came out. He hit the bottle against his knee to shake up the tobacco. That was always the trouble with Okeke's snuff. It very quickly went damp, and there was too much saltpeter in it. Okonkwo had not bought snuff from him for a long time. Idigo was the man who knew how to grind good snuff. But he had recently fallen ill.

Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives' huts as each woman and her children told folk stories. Ekwefi and her daughter, Ezinma, sat on a mat on the floor. It was Ekwefi's turn to tell a story.

"Once upon a time," she began, "all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky. They were very happy and began to prepare themselves for the great day. They painted their bodies with red cam wood and drew beautiful patterns on them with *uli*.

"Tortoise saw all these preparations and soon discovered what it all meant. Nothing that happened in the world of the animals ever escaped his notice; he was full of cunning. As soon as he heard of the great feast in the sky his throat began to

itch at the very thought. There was a famine in those days and Tortoise had not eaten a good meal for two moons. His body rattled like a piece of dry stick in his empty shell. So he began to plan how he would go to the sky."

"But he had no wings," said Ezinma.

"Be patient," replied her mother. "That is the story. Tortoise had no wings, but he went to the birds and asked to be allowed to go with them.

"'We know you too well,' said the birds when they had heard him. 'You are full of cunning and you are ungrateful. If we allow you to come with us you will soon begin your mischief.'

"'You do not know me,' said Tortoise. 'I am a changed man. I have learned that a man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself.'

"Tortoise had a sweet tongue, and within a short time all the birds agreed that he was a changed man, and they each gave him a feather, with which he made two wings.

"At last the great day came and Tortoise was the first to arrive at the meeting place. When all the birds had gathered together, they set off in a body. Tortoise was very happy and voluble as he flew among the birds, and he was soon chosen as the man to speak for the party because he was a great orator.

"'There is one important thing which we must not forget,' he said as they flew on their way. 'When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honor this age-old custom.'

"None of the birds had heard of this custom but they knew that Tortoise, in spite of his failings in other directions, was a widely traveled man who knew the customs of different peoples. And so they each took a new name. When they had all taken, Tortoise also took one. He was to be called *All of you.*

"At last the party arrived in the sky and their hosts were very happy to see them. Tortoise stood up in his many-colored plumage and thanked them for their invitation. His speech was so eloquent that all the birds were glad they had brought him, and nodded their heads in approval of all he said. Their hosts took him as the king of the birds, especially as he looked somewhat different from the others.

"After kola nuts had been presented and eaten, the people of the sky set before their guests the most delectable dishes Tortoise had ever seen or dreamed of. The soup was brought out hot from the fire and in the very pot in which it had been cooked. It was full of meat and fish. Tortoise began to sniff aloud. There was pounded yam and also yam pottage cooked with palm-oil and fresh fish. There were also pots of palm-wine. When everything had been set before the guests, one of the people of the sky came forward and tasted a little from each pot. He then invited the birds to eat. But Tortoise jumped to his feet and asked: 'For whom have you prepared this feast?'

"'For all of you,' replied the man.

"Tortoise turned to the birds and said: 'You remember that my name is *All of you.* The custom here is to serve the spokesman first and the others later. They will serve you when I have eaten.'

"He began to eat and the birds grumbled angrily. The people of the sky thought it must be their custom to leave all the food for their king. And so Tortoise ate the best part of the food and then drank two pots of palm-wine, so that he was full of food and drink and his body filled out in his shell.

"The birds gathered round to eat what was left and to peck at the bones he had thrown all about the floor. Some of them were too angry to eat. They chose to fly home on an empty stomach. But before they left each took back the feather he had lent to Tortoise. And there he stood in his hard shell full of food and wine but without any wings to fly home. He asked the birds to take a message for his wife, but they all refused. In the end Parrot, who had felt more angry than the others, suddenly changed his mind and agreed to take the message.

"'Tell my wife,' said Tortoise, 'to bring out all the soft things in my house and cover the compound with them so that I can jump down from the sky without very great danger.'

"Parrot promised to deliver the message, and then flew away. But when he reached Tortoise's house he told his wife to bring out all the hard things in the house. And so she brought out her husband's hoes, machetes, spears, guns, and even his cannon. Tortoise looked down from the sky and saw his wife bringing things out, but it was too far to see what they were. When all seemed ready he let himself go. He fell and fell and fell until he began to fear that he would never stop falling. And then like the sound of his cannon he crashed on the compound."

"Did he die?" asked Ezinma.

"No," replied Ekwefi. "His shell broke into pieces. But there was a great medicine man in the neighborhood. Tortoise's wife sent for him and he gathered all the bits of shell and stuck them together. That is why Tortoise's shell is not smooth."

"There is no song in the story," Ezinma pointed out.

"No," said Ekwefi. "I shall think of another one with a song. But it is your turn now."

"Once upon a time," Ezinma began, "Tortoise and Cat went to wrestle against Yams—no, that is not the beginning. Once upon a time there was a great famine in the land of animals. Everybody was lean except Cat, who was fat and whose body shone as if oil was rubbed on it . . ."

She broke off because at that very moment a loud and high-pitched voice broke the outer silence of the night. It was Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, prophesying. There was nothing new in that. Once in a while Chielo was possessed by the spirit of her god and she began to prophesy. But tonight she was addressing her prophecy and greetings to Okonkwo, and so everyone in his family listened. The folk stories stopped.

"*Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o-o,*" came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. "*Okonkwo! Agbala ekene gio-o-o-o! Agbala cholu ifu ada ya Ezinmao-o-o-o!*"[21]

At the mention of Ezinma's name Ekwefi jerked her head sharply like an animal that had sniffed death in the air. Her heart jumped painfully within her.

[21] "*Agbala do-o-o-o! . . . Ezinmao-o-o-o!*": "Agbala wants something! Agbala greets," . . . "Okonkwo! Agbala greets you! Agbala wants to see his daughter Ezinma!"

The priestess had now reached Okonkwo's compound and was talking with him outside his hut. She was saying again and again that Agbala wanted to see his daughter, Ezinma. Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep. But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter. Her voice was as clear as metal, and Okonkwo's women and children heard from their huts all that she said. Okonkwo was still pleading that the girl had been ill of late and was asleep. Ekwefi quickly took her to their bedroom and placed her on their high bamboo bed.

The priestess screamed. "Beware, Okonkwo!" she warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!"

She walked through Okonkwo's hut into the circular compound and went straight toward Ekwefi's hut. Okonkwo came after her.

"Ekwefi," she called, "Agbala greets you. Where is my daughter, Ezinma? Agbala wants to see her."

Ekwefi came out from her hut carrying her oil lamp in her left hand. There was a light wind blowing, so she cupped her right hand to shelter the flame. Nwoye's mother, also carrying an oil lamp, emerged from her hut. The children stood in the darkness outside their hut watching the strange event. Okonkwo's youngest wife also came out and joined the others.

"Where does Agbala want to see her?" Ekwefi asked.

"Where else but in his house in the hills and the caves?" replied the priestess.

"I will come with you, too," Ekwefi said firmly.

"*Tufia-a!*"[22] the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season. "How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger. Bring me my daughter."

Ekwefi went into her hut and came out again with Ezinma.

"Come, my daughter," said the priestess. "I shall carry you on my back. A baby on its mother's back does not know that the way is long."

Ezinma began to cry. She was used to Chielo calling her "my daughter." But it was a different Chielo she now saw in the yellow half-light.

"Don't cry, my daughter," said the priestess, "lest Agbala be angry with you."

"Don't cry," said Ekwefi, "she will bring you back very soon. I shall give you some fish to eat." She went into the hut again and brought down the smoke-black basket in which she kept her dried fish and other ingredients for cooking soup. She broke a piece in two and gave it to Ezinma, who clung to her.

"Don't be afraid," said Ekwefi, stroking her head, which was shaved in places, leaving a regular pattern of hair. They went outside again. The priestess bent down on one knee and Ezinma climbed on her back, her left palm closed on her fish and her eyes gleaming with tears.

"*Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o!...*" Chielo began once again to chant greetings to her god. She turned round sharply and walked through Okonkwo's hut,

[22] "*Tufia-a!*": An oath; literally, "spitting out."

bending very low at the eaves. Ezinma was crying loudly now, calling on her mother. The two voices disappeared into the thick darkness.

A strange and sudden weakness descended on Ekwefi as she stood gazing in the direction of the voices like a hen whose only chick has been carried away by a kite. Ezinma's voice soon faded away and only Chielo was heard moving farther and farther into the distance.

"Why do you stand there as though she had been kidnapped?" asked Okonkwo as he went back to his hut.

"She will bring her back soon," Nwoye's mother said.

But Ekwefi did not hear these consolations. She stood for a while, and then, all of a sudden, made up her mind. She hurried through Okonkwo's hut and went outside. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"I am following Chielo," she replied and disappeared in the darkness. Okonkwo cleared his throat, and brought out his snuff-bottle from the goatskin bag by his side.

The priestess's voice was already growing faint in the distance. Ekwefi hurried to the main footpath and turned left in the direction of the voice. Her eyes were useless to her in the darkness. But she picked her way easily on the sandy footpath hedged on either side by branches and damp leaves. She began to run, holding her breasts with her hands to stop them flapping noisily against her body. She hit her left foot against an outcropped root, and terror seized her. It was an ill omen. She ran faster. But Chielo's voice was still a long way away. Had she been running too? How could she go so fast with Ezinma on her back? Although the night was cool, Ekwefi was beginning to feel hot from her running. She continually ran into the luxuriant weeds and creepers that walled in the path. Once she tripped up and fell. Only then did she realize, with a start, that Chielo had stopped her chanting. Her heart beat violently and she stood still. Then Chielo's renewed outburst came from only a few paces ahead. But Ekwefi could not see her. She shut her eyes for a while and opened them again in an effort to see. But it was useless. She could not see beyond her nose.

There were no stars in the sky because there was a rain-cloud. Fireflies went about with their tiny green lamps, which only made the darkness more profound. Between Chielo's outbursts the night was alive with the shrill tremor of forest insects woven into the darkness.

"*Agbala do-o-o-o!... Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o!...*" Ekwefi trudged behind, neither getting too near nor keeping too far back. She thought they must be going towards the sacred cave. Now that she walked slowly she had time to think. What would she do when they got to the cave? She would not dare to enter. She would wait at the mouth, all alone in that fearful place. She thought of all the terrors of the night. She remembered that night, long ago, when she had seen *Ogbu-agali-odu*, one of those evil essences loosed upon the world by the potent "medicines" which the tribe had made in the distant past against its enemies but had now forgotten how to control. Ekwefi had been returning from the stream with her mother on a dark night like this when they saw its glow as it flew in their direction. They had thrown down their water-pots and lain by the roadside expecting the sinister light to descend on them and kill them. That was the only time Ekwefi ever saw *Ogbu-agali-odu*. But although

it had happened so long ago, her blood still ran cold whenever she remembered that night.

The priestess's voice came at longer intervals now, but its vigor was undiminished. The air was cool and damp with dew. Ezinma sneezed. Ekwefi muttered, "Life to you." At the same time the priestess also said, "Life to you, my daughter." Ezinma's voice from the darkness warmed her mother's heart. She trudged slowly along.

And then the priestess screamed. "Somebody is walking behind me!" she said. "Whether you are spirit or man, may Agbala shave your head with a blunt razor! May he twist your neck until you see your heels!"

Ekwefi stood rooted to the spot. One mind said to her: "Woman, go home before Agbala does you harm." But she could not. She stood until Chielo had increased the distance between them and she began to follow again. She had already walked so long that she began to feel a slight numbness in the limbs and in the head. Then it occurred to her that they could not have been heading for the cave. They must have by-passed it long ago; they must be going towards Umuachi, the farthest village in the clan. Chielo's voice now came after long intervals.

It seemed to Ekwefi that the night had become a little lighter. The cloud had lifted and a few stars were out. The moon must be preparing to rise, its sullenness over. When the moon rose late in the night, people said it was refusing food, as a sullen husband refuses his wife's food when they have quarrelled.

"Agbala do-o-o-o! Umuachi! Agbala ekene unuo-o-o!" It was just as Ekwefi had thought. The priestess was now saluting the village of Umuachi. It was unbelievable, the distance they had covered. As they emerged into the open village from the narrow forest track the darkness was softened and it became possible to see the vague shape of trees. Ekwefi screwed her eyes up in an effort to see her daughter and the priestess, but whenever she thought she saw their shape it immediately dissolved like a melting lump of darkness. She walked numbly along.

Chielo's voice was now rising continuously, as when she first set out. Ekwefi had a feeling of spacious openness, and she guessed they must be on the village *ilo*, or playground. And she realized too with something like a jerk that Chielo was no longer moving forward. She was, in fact, returning. Ekwefi quickly moved away from her line of retreat. Chielo passed by, and they began to go back the way they had come.

It was a long and weary journey and Ekwefi felt like a sleepwalker most of the way. The moon was definitely rising, and although it had not yet appeared on the sky its light had already melted down the darkness. Ekwefi could now discern the figure of the priestess and her burden. She slowed down her pace so as to increase the distance between them. She was afraid of what might happen if Chielo suddenly turned round and saw her.

She had prayed for the moon to rise. But now she found the half-light of the incipient moon more terrifying than darkness. The world was now peopled with vague, fantastic figures that dissolved under her steady gaze and then formed again in new shapes. At one stage Ekwefi was so afraid that she nearly called out to Chielo for companionship and human sympathy. What she had seen was the shape of a man climbing a palm tree, his head pointing to the earth and his legs skywards. But at that very moment Chielo's voice rose again in her possessed chanting, and Ekwefi recoiled, because there was no humanity there. It was not the same Chielo who sat with her in the market and sometimes bought beancakes for Ezinma, whom she called her daughter. It was a different woman—the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Ekwefi trudged along between two fears. The sound of her benumbed steps seemed to come from some other person walking behind her. Her arms were folded across her bare breasts. Dew fell heavily and the air was cold. She could no longer think, not even about the terrors of night. She just jogged along in a half-sleep, only waking to full life when Chielo sang.

At last they took a turning and began to head for the caves. From then on, Chielo never ceased in her chanting. She greeted her god in a multitude of names—the owner of the future, the messenger of earth, the god who cut a man down when his life was sweetest to him. Ekwefi was also awakened and her benumbed fears revived.

The moon was now up and she could see Chielo and Ezinma clearly. How a woman could carry a child of that size so easily and for so long was a miracle. But Ekwefi was not thinking about that. Chielo was not a woman that night.

"Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o! Chi negbu madu ubosi ndu ya nato ya uto daluo-o-o!"[23]

Ekwefi could already see the hills looming in the moonlight. They formed a circular ring with a break at one point through which the foot-track led to the center of the circle.

As soon as the priestess stepped into this ring of hills her voice was not only doubled in strength but was thrown back on all sides. It was indeed the shrine of a great god. Ekwefi picked her way carefully and quietly. She was already beginning to doubt the wisdom of her coming. Nothing would happen to Ezinma, she thought. And if anything happened to her could she stop it? She would not dare to enter the underground caves. Her coming was quite useless, she thought.

As these things went through her mind she did not realize how close they were to the cave mouth. And so when the priestess with Ezinma on her back disappeared through a hole hardly big enough to pass a hen, Ekwefi broke into a run as though to stop them. As she stood gazing at the circular darkness which had swallowed them, tears gushed from her eyes, and she swore within her that if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world. She would die with her.

Having sworn that oath, she sat down on a stony ledge and waited. Her fear had vanished. She could hear the priestess's voice, all its metal taken out of it by the vast emptiness of the cave. She buried her face in her lap and waited.

She did not know how long she waited. It must have been a very long time. Her back was turned on the footpath that led out of the hills. She must have heard a noise behind her and turned round sharply. A man stood there with a machete in his hand. Ekwefi uttered a scream and sprang to her feet.

[23] *"Agbala . . . daluo-o-o!"*: "Agbala wants something! Agbala greets. . . . *Chi* who kills a man on the day his life is so pleasant he gives thanks!"

"Don't be foolish," said Okonkwo's voice. "I thought you were going into the shrine with Chielo," he mocked.

Ekwefi did not answer. Tears of gratitude filled her eyes. She knew her daughter was safe.

"Go home and sleep," said Okonkwo. "I shall wait here."

"I shall wait too. It is almost dawn. The first cock has crowed."

As they stood there together, Ekwefi's mind went back to the days when they were young. She had married Anene because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene she could bear it no longer and she ran away to Okonkwo. It had been early in the morning. The moon was shining. She was going to the stream to fetch water. Okonkwo's house was on the way to the stream. She went in and knocked at his door and he came out. Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth.

12

On the following morning the entire neighborhood wore a festive air because Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, was celebrating his daughter's *uri*. It was the day on which her suitor (having already paid the greater part of her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only to her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called *umunna*. Everybody had been invited—men, women, and children. But it was really a woman's ceremony and the central figures were the bride and her mother.

As soon as day broke, breakfast was hastily eaten and women and children began to gather at Obierika's compound to help the bride's mother in her difficult but happy task of cooking for a whole village.

Okonkwo's family was astir like any other family in the neighborhood. Nwoye's mother and Okonkwo's youngest wife were ready to set out for Obierika's compound with all their children. Nwoye's mother carried a basket of coco-yams, a cake of salt, and smoked fish which she would present to Obierika's wife. Okonkwo's youngest wife, Ojiugo, also had a basket of plantains and coco-yams and a small pot of palm-oil. Their children carried pots of water.

Ekwefi was tired and sleepy from the exhausting experiences of the previous night. It was not very long since they had returned. The priestess, with Ezinma sleeping on her back, had crawled out of the shrine on her belly like a snake. She had not as much as looked at Okonkwo and Ekwefi or shown any surprise at finding them at the mouth of the cave. She looked straight ahead of her and walked back to the village. Okonkwo and his wife followed at a respectful distance. They thought the priestess might be going to her house, but she went to Okonkwo's compound, passed through his *obi* and into Ekwefi's hut and walked into her bedroom. She placed Ezinma carefully on the bed and went away without saying a word to anybody.

Ezinma was still sleeping when everyone else was astir, and Ekwefi asked Nwoye's mother and Ojiugo to explain to Obierika's wife that she would be late. She had got ready her basket of coco-yams and fish, but she must wait for Ezinma to wake.

"You need some sleep yourself," said Nwoye's mother. "You look very tired."

As they spoke Ezinma emerged from the hut, rubbing her eyes and stretching her spare frame. She saw the other children with their water-pots and remembered that they were going to fetch water for Obierika's wife. She went back to the hut and brought her pot.

"Have you slept enough?" asked her mother.

"Yes," she replied. "Let us go."

"Not before you have had your breakfast," said Ekwefi. And she went into her hut to warm the vegetable soup she had cooked last night.

"We shall be going," said Nwoye's mother. "I will tell Obierika's wife that you are coming later." And so they all went to help Obierika's wife—Nwoye's mother with her four children and Ojiugo with her two.

As they trooped through Okonkwo's *obi* he asked: "Who will prepare my afternoon meal?"

"I shall return to do it," said Ojiugo.

Okonkwo was also feeling tired, and sleepy, for although nobody else knew it, he had not slept at all last night. He had felt very anxious but did not show it. When Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his machete to the shrine, where he thought they must be. It was only when he had got there that it had occurred to him that the priestess might have chosen to go round the villages first. Okonkwo had returned home and sat waiting. When he thought he had waited long enough he again returned to the shrine. But the Hills and the Caves were as silent as death. It was only on his fourth trip that he had found Ekwefi, and by then he had become gravely worried.

Obierika's compound was as busy as an anthill. Temporary cooking tripods were erected on every available space by bringing together three blocks of sun-dried earth and making a fire in their midst. Cooking pots went up and down the tripods, and foo-foo was pounded in a hundred wooden mortars. Some of the women cooked the yams and the cassava, and others prepared vegetable soup. Young men pounded the foo-foo or split firewood. The children made endless trips to the stream.

Three young men helped Obierika to slaughter the two goats with which the soup was made. They were very fat goats, but the fattest of all was tethered to a peg near the wall of the compound. It was as big as a small cow. Obierika had sent one of his relatives all the way to Umuike to buy that goat. It was the one he would present alive to his in-laws.

"The market of Umuike is a wonderful place," said the young man who had been sent by Obierika to buy the giant goat. "There are so many people on it that if you threw up a grain of sand it would not find a way to fall to earth again."

"It is the result of a great medicine," said Obierika. "The people of Umuike wanted their market to grow and swallow up the markets of their neighbors. So they made a powerful medicine. Every market day, before the first cock-crow, this medicine stands on the market ground in the shape of an old woman with a fan. With this magic fan she beckons to the market all the neighboring clans. She beckons in front of her and behind her, to her right and to her left."

"And so everybody comes," said another man, "honest men and thieves. They can steal your cloth from off your waist in that market."

"Yes," said Obierika. "I warned Nwankwo to keep a sharp eye and a sharp ear. There was once a man who went to sell a goat. He led it on a thick rope which he tied round his wrist. But as he walked through the market he realized that people were pointing at him as they do to a madman. He could not understand it until he looked back and saw that what he led at the end of the tether was not a goat but a heavy log of wood."

"Do you think a thief can do that kind of thing single-handed?" asked Nwankwo.

"No," said Obierika. "They use medicine."

When they had cut the goats' throats and collected the blood in a bowl, they held them over an open fire to burn off the hair, and the smell of burning hair blended with the smell of cooking. Then they washed them and cut them up for the women who prepared the soup.

All this anthill activity was going smoothly when a sudden interruption came. It was a cry in the distance: *Oji odu achu ijiji-o-o! (The one that uses its tail to drive flies away!)* Every woman immediately abandoned whatever she was doing and rushed out in the direction of the cry.

"We cannot all rush out like that, leaving what we are cooking to burn in the fire," shouted Chielo, the priestess. "Three or four of us should stay behind."

"It is true," said another woman. "We will allow three or four women to stay behind."

Five women stayed behind to look after the cooking-pots, and all the rest rushed away to see the cow that had been let loose. When they saw it they drove it back to its owner, who at once paid the heavy fine which the village imposed on anyone whose cow was let loose on his neighbors' crops. When the women had exacted the penalty they checked among themselves to see if any woman had failed to come out when the cry had been raised.

"Where is Mgbogo?" asked one of them.

"She is ill in bed," said Mgbogo's next-door neighbor. "She has *iba*."

"The only other person is Udenkwo," said another woman, "and her child is not twenty-eight days yet."

Those women whom Obierika's wife had not asked to help her with the cooking returned to their homes, and the rest went back, in a body, to Obierika's compound.

"Whose cow was it?" asked the women who had been allowed to stay behind.

"It was my husband's," said Ezelagbo. "One of the young children had opened the gate of the cow-shed."

Early in the afternoon the first two pots of palm-wine arrived from Obierika's in-laws. They were duly presented to the women, who drank a cup or two each, to help them in their cooking. Some of it also went to the bride and her attendant maidens, who were putting the last delicate touches of razor to her coiffure and cam wood on her smooth skin.

When the heat of the sun began to soften, Obierika's son, Maduka, took a long broom and swept the ground in front of his father's *obi*. And as if they had been waiting for that, Obierika's relatives and friends began to arrive, every man with his goatskin bag hung on one shoulder and a rolled goatskin mat under his arm. Some of them were accompanied by their sons bearing carved wooden stools. Okonkwo was one of them. They sat in a half-circle and began to talk of many things. It would not be long before the suitors came.

Okonkwo brought out his snuff-bottle and offered it to Ogbuefi Ezenwa, who sat next to him. Ezenwa took it, tapped it on his kneecap, rubbed his left palm on his body to dry it before tipping a little snuff into it. His actions were deliberate, and he spoke as he performed them:

"I hope our in-laws will bring many pots of wine. Although they come from a village that is known for being closefisted, they ought to know that Akueke is the bride for a king."

"They dare not bring fewer than thirty pots," said Okonkwo. "I shall tell them my mind if they do."

At that moment Obierika's son, Maduka, led out the giant goat from the inner compound, for his father's relatives to see. They all admired it and said that that was the way things should be done. The goat was then led back to the inner compound.

Very soon after, the in-laws began to arrive. Young men and boys in single file, each carrying a pot of wine, came first. Obierika's relatives counted the pots as they came. Twenty, twenty-five. There was a long break, and the hosts looked at each other as if to say, "I told you." Then more pots came. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five. The hosts nodded in approval and seemed to say, "Now they are behaving like men." Altogether there were fifty pots of wine. After the pot-bearers came Ibe, the suitor, and the elders of his family. They sat in a half-moon, thus completing a circle with their hosts. The pots of wine stood in their midst. Then the bride, her mother, and a half a dozen other women and girls emerged from the inner compound, and went round the circle shaking hands with all. The bride's mother led the way, followed by the bride and the other women. The married women wore their best cloths and the girls wore red and black waist-beads and anklets of brass.

When the women retired, Obierika presented kola nuts to his in-laws. His eldest brother broke the first one. "Life to all of us," he said as he broke it. "And let there be friendship between your family and ours."

The crowd answered: *"Ee-e-e!"*

"We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town."

"Ee-e-e!"

The oldest man in the camp of the visitors replied: "It will be good for you and it will be good for us."

"Ee-e-e!"

"This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter. My mother was one of you."

"Ee-e-e!"

"And this will not be the last, because you understand us and we understand you. You are a great family."

"Ee-e-e!"

"Prosperous men and great warriors." He looked in the direction of Okonkwo. "Your daughter will bear us sons like you."

"Ee-e-e!"

The kola was eaten and the drinking of palm-wine began. Groups of four or five men sat round with a pot in their midst. As the evening wore on, food was presented to the guests. There were huge bowls of foo-foo and steaming pots of soup. There were also pots of yam pottage. It was a great feast.

As night fell, burning torches were set on wooden tripods and the young men raised a song. The elders sat in a big circle and the singers went round singing each man's praise as they came before him. They had something to say for every man. Some were great farmers, some were orators who spoke for the clan; Okonkwo was the greatest wrestler and warrior alive. When they had gone round the circle they settled down in the center, and girls came from the inner compound to dance. At first the bride was not among them. But when she finally appeared holding a cock in her right hand, a loud cheer rose from the crowd. All the other dancers made way for her. She presented the cock to the musicians and began to dance. Her brass anklets rattled as she danced and her body gleamed with cam wood in the soft yellow light. The musicians with their wood, clay, and metal instruments went from song to song. And they were all gay. They sang the latest song in the village:

"If I hold her hand
She says, 'Don't touch!'
If I hold her foot
She says, 'Don't touch!'
But when I hold her waist-beads
She pretends not to know."

The night was already far spent when the guests rose to go, taking their bride home to spend seven market weeks with her suitor's family. They sang songs as they went, and on their way they paid short courtesy visits to prominent men like Okonkwo, before they finally left for their village. Okonkwo made a present of two cocks to them.

13

Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go. It was the *ekwe* talking to the clan. One of the things every man learned was the language of the hollowed-out wooden instrument. Diim! Diim! Diim! boomed the cannon at intervals.

The first cock had not crowed, and Umuofia was still swallowed up in sleep and silence when the *ekwe* began to talk, and the cannon shattered the silence. Men stirred on their bamboo beds and listened anxiously. Somebody was dead. The cannon seemed to rend the sky. Di-go-go-di-go-di-di-go-go floated in the message-laden night air. The faint and distant wailing of women settled like a sediment of sorrow on the earth. Now and again a full-chested lamentation rose above the wailing whenever a man came into the place of death. He raised his voice once or twice in manly sorrow and then sat down with the other men listening to the endless wailing of the women and the esoteric language of the *ekwe*. Now and again the cannon boomed. The wailing of the women would not be heard beyond the village, but the *ekwe* carried the news to all the nine villages and even beyond. It began by naming the clan: *Umuofia obodo dike,* "the land of the brave." *Umuofia obodo dike! Umuofia obodo dike!* It said this over and over again, and as it dwelt on it, anxiety mounted in every heart that heaved on a bamboo bed that night. Then it went nearer and named the village: *"Iguedo of the yellow grinding-stone!"* It was Okonkwo's village. Again and again Iguedo was called and men waited breathlessly in all the nine villages. At last the man was named and people sighed "E-u-u, Ezeudu is dead." A cold shiver ran down Okonkwo's back as he remembered the last time the old man had visited him. "That boy calls you father," he had said. "Bear no hand in his death."

Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral. The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups. They all wore smoked raffia skirts and their bodies were painted with chalk and charcoal. Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. Some of them were very violent, and there had been a mad rush for shelter earlier in the day when one appeared with a sharp machete and was only prevented from doing serious harm by two men who restrained him with the help of a strong rope tied round his waist. Sometimes he turned round and chased those men, and they ran for their lives. But they always returned to the long rope he trailed behind. He sang, in a terrifying voice, that Ekwensu, or Evil Spirit, had entered his eye.

But the most dreaded of all was yet to come. He was always alone and was shaped like a coffin. A sickly odor hung in the air wherever he went, and flies went with him. Even the greatest medicine men took shelter when he was near. Many years ago another *egwugwu* had dared to stand his ground before him and had been transfixed to the spot for two days. This one had only one hand and it carried a basket full of water.

But some of the *egwugwu* were quite harmless. One of them was so old and infirm that he leaned heavily on a stick. He walked unsteadily to the place where the corpse was laid, gazed at it a while, and went away again—to the underworld.

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.

Ezeudu had been the oldest man in his village, and at his death there were only three men in the whole clan who were older, and four or five others in his own age group. Whenever one of these ancient men appeared in the crowd to dance unsteadily the funeral steps of the tribe, younger men gave way and the tumult subsided.

It was a great funeral, such as befitted a noble warrior. As the evening drew near, the shouting and the firing of guns, the beating of drums, and the brandishing and clanging of machetes increased.

Ezeudu had taken three titles in his life. It was a rare achievement. There were only four titles in the clan, and only one or two men in any generation ever achieved the fourth and highest. When they did, they became the lords of the land. Because he had taken titles, Ezeudu was to be buried after dark with only a glowing brand to light the sacred ceremony.

But before this quiet and final rite, the tumult increased tenfold. Drums beat violently and men leaped up and down in frenzy. Guns were fired on all sides and sparks flew out as machetes clanged together in warriors' salutes. The air was full of dust and the smell of gunpowder. It was then that the one-handed spirit came, carrying a basket full of water. People made way for him on all sides and the noise subsided. Even the smell of gunpowder was swallowed in the sickly smell that now filled the air. He danced a few steps to the funeral drums and then went to see the corpse.

"Ezeudu!" he called in his guttural voice. "If you had been poor in your last life I would have asked you to be rich when you come again. But you were rich. If you had been a coward, I would have asked you to bring courage. But you were a fearless warrior. If you had died young, I would have asked you to get life. But you lived long. So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before. If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment's rest." He danced a few more steps and went away.

The drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat. Darkness was around the corner, and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the center of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart.

The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened.

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.

That night he collected his most valuable belongings into head-loads. His wives wept bitterly and their children wept with them without knowing why. Obierika and half a dozen other friends came to help and to console him. They each made nine or ten trips carrying Okonkwo's yams to store in Obierika's barn. And before the cock crowed Okonkwo and his family were fleeing to his motherland. It was a little village called Mbanta, just beyond the borders of Mbaino.

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals, and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others.

Part II

14

Okonkwo was well received by his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta. The old man who received him was his mother's younger brother, who was now the eldest surviving member of that family. His name was Uchendu, and it was he who had received Okonkwo's mother twenty and ten years before when she had been brought home from Umuofia to be buried with her people. Okonkwo was only a boy then and Uchendu still remembered him crying the traditional farewell: "Mother, mother, mother is going."

That was many years ago. Today Okonkwo was not bringing his mother home to be buried with her people. He was taking his family of three wives and their children to seek refuge in his motherland. As soon as Uchendu saw him with his sad and weary company he guessed what had happened, and asked no questions. It was not until the following day that Okonkwo told him the full story. The old man listened silently to the end and then said with some relief: "It is a female *ochu*."[24] And he arranged the requisite rites and sacrifices.

Okonkwo was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen he built himself an *obi* and three huts for his wives. He then installed his personal god and the symbols of his departed fathers. Each of Uchendu's five sons contributed three hundred seed-yams to enable their cousin to plant a farm, for as soon as the first rain came farming would begin.

At last the rain came. It was sudden and tremendous. For two or three moons the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to breathe a breath of fire on the

[24] *ochu*: Manslaughter; because the killing was unintentional, it is a "female" crime.

earth. All the grass had long been scorched brown, and the sands felt like live coals to the feet. Evergreen trees wore a dusty coat of brown. The birds were silenced in the forests, and the world lay panting under the live, vibrating heat. And then came the clap of thunder. It was an angry, metallic, and thirsty clap, unlike the deep and liquid rumbling of the rainy season. A mighty wind arose and filled the air with dust. Palm trees swayed as the wind combed their leaves into flying crests like strange and fantastic coiffure.

When the rain finally came, it was in large, solid drops of frozen water which the people called "the nuts of the water of heaven." They were hard and painful on the body as they fell, yet young people ran about happily picking up the cold nuts and throwing them into their mouths to melt.

The earth quickly came to life and the birds in the forests fluttered around and chirped merrily. A vague scent of life and green vegetation was diffused in the air. As the rain began to fall more soberly and in smaller liquid drops, children sought for shelter, and all were happy, refreshed, and thankful.

Okonkwo and his family worked very hard to plant a new farm. But it was like beginning life anew without the vigor and enthusiasm of youth, like learning to become left-handed in old age. Work no longer had for him the pleasure it used to have, and when there was no work to do he sat in a silent half-sleep.

His life had been ruled by a great passion—to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.

The old man, Uchendu, saw clearly that Okonkwo had yielded to despair and he was greatly troubled. He would speak to him after the *isa-ifi*[25] ceremony.

The youngest of Uchendu's five sons, Amikwu, was marrying a new wife. The bride-price had been paid and all but the last ceremony had been performed. Amikwu and his people had taken palm-wine to the bride's kinsmen about two moons before Okonkwo's arrival in Mbanta. And so it was time for the final ceremony of confession.

The daughters of the family were all there, some of them having come a long way from their homes in distant villages. Uchendu's eldest daughter had come from Obodo, nearly half a day's journey away. The daughters of Uchendu's brothers were also there. It was a full gathering of *umuada*,[26] in the same way as they would meet if a death occurred in the family. There were twenty-two of them.

They sat in a big circle on the ground and the bride sat in the center with a hen in her right hand. Uchendu sat by her, holding the ancestral staff of the family. All

[25] ***isa-ifi:*** A ceremony held to determine the fidelity of a wife who has been separated from her husband for a long period of time.

[26] ***umuada:*** A celebration of the female members of a clan upon their return home.

the other men stood outside the circle, watching. Their wives watched also. It was evening and the sun was setting.

Uchendu's eldest daughter, Njide, asked the questions.

"Remember that if you do not answer truthfully you will suffer or even die at childbirth," she began. "How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?"

"None," she answered simply.

"Answer truthfully," urged the other women.

"None?" asked Njide.

"None," she answered.

"Swear on this staff of my fathers," said Uchendu.

"I swear," said the bride.

Uchendu took the hen from her, slit its throat with a sharp knife, and allowed some of the blood to fall on his ancestral staff.

From that day Amikwu took the young bride to his hut and she became his wife. The daughters of the family did not return to their homes immediately but spent two or three days with their kinsmen.

On the second day Uchendu called together his sons and daughters and his nephew, Okonkwo. The men brought their goatskin mats, with which they sat on the floor, and the women sat on a sisal mat spread on a raised bank of earth. Uchendu pulled gently at his gray beard and gnashed his teeth. Then he began to speak, quietly and deliberately, picking his words with great care:

"It is Okonkwo that I primarily wish to speak to," he began. "But I want all of you to note what I am going to say. I am an old man and you are all children. I know more about the world than any of you. If there is any one among you who thinks he knows more let him speak up." He paused, but no one spoke.

"Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or 'Mother is Supreme'? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka—'Mother is Supreme.' Why is that?"

There was silence. "I want Okonkwo to answer me," said Uchendu.

"I do not know the answer," Okonkwo replied.

"You do not know the answer? So you see that you are a child. You have many wives and many children—more children than I have. You are a great man in your clan. But you are still a child, *my* child. Listen to me and I shall tell you. But there is one more question I shall ask you. Why is it that when a woman dies she is taken home to be buried with her own kinsmen? She is not buried with her husband's kinsmen. Why is that? Your mother was brought home to me and buried with my people. Why was that?"

Okonkwo shook his head.

"He does not know that either," said Uchendu, "and yet he is full of sorrow because he has come to live in his motherland for a few years." He laughed a mirthless laughter, and turned to his sons and daughters. "What about you? Can you answer my question?"

They all shook their heads.

"Then listen to me," he said and cleared his throat. "It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile." He paused for a long while. "These are now your kinsmen." He waved at his sons and daughters. "You think you are the greatest sufferer in the world? Do you know that men are sometimes banished for life? Do you know that men sometimes lose all their yams and even their children? I had six wives once. I have none now except that young girl who knows not her right from her left. Do you know how many children I have buried—children I begot in my youth and strength? Twenty-two. I did not hang myself, and I am still alive. If you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world ask my daughter, Akueni, how many twins she has borne and thrown away. Have you not heard the song they sing when a woman dies?

"'For whom is it well, for whom is it well?
There is no one for whom it is well.'

"I have no more to say to you."

15

It was in the second year of Okonkwo's exile that his friend, Obierika, came to visit him. He brought with him two young men, each of them carrying a heavy bag on his head. Okonkwo helped them put down their loads. It was clear that the bags were full of cowries.

Okonkwo was very happy to receive his friend. His wives and children were very happy too, and so were his cousins and their wives when he sent for them and told them who his guest was.

"You must take him to salute our father," said one of the cousins.

"Yes," replied Okonkwo. "We are going directly." But before they went he whispered something to his first wife. She nodded, and soon the children were chasing one of their cocks.

Uchendu had been told by one of his grandchildren that three strangers had come to Okonkwo's house. He was therefore waiting to receive them. He held out his hands to them when they came into his *obi*, and after they had shaken hands he asked Okonkwo who they were.

"This is Obierika, my great friend. I have already spoken to you about him."

"Yes," said the old man, turning to Obierika. "My son has told me about you, and I am happy you have come to see us. I knew your father, Iweka. He was a great man. He had many friends here and came to see them quite often. Those were good days when a man had friends in distant clans. Your generation does not know that. You stay at home, afraid of your next-door neighbor. Even a man's motherland is strange to him nowadays." He looked at Okonkwo. "I am an old man and I like to talk. That is all I am good for now." He got up painfully, went into an inner room, and came back with a kola nut.

"Who are the young men with you?" he asked as he sat down again on his goatskin. Okonkwo told him.

"Ah," he said. "Welcome, my sons." He presented the kola nut to them, and when they had seen it and thanked him, he broke it and they ate.

"Go into that room," he said to Okonkwo, pointing with his finger. "You will find a pot of wine there."

Okonkwo brought the wine and they began to drink. It was a day old, and very strong.

"Yes," said Uchendu after a long silence. "People traveled more in those days. There is not a single clan in these parts that I do not know very well. Aninta, Umuazu, Ikeocha, Elumelu, Abame—I know them all."

"Have you heard," asked Obierika, "that Abame is no more?"

"How is that?" asked Uchendu and Okonkwo together.

"Abame has been wiped out," said Obierika. "It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed. Was it not on an Eke day that they fled into Umuofia?" he asked his two companions, and they nodded their heads.

"Three moons ago," said Obierika, "on an Eke market day a little band of fugitives came into our town. Most of them were sons of our land whose mothers had been buried with us. But there were some too who came because they had friends in our town, and others who could think of nowhere else open to escape. And so they fled into Umuofia with a woeful story." He drank his palm-wine, and Okonkwo filled his horn again. He continued:

"During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan."

"An albino," suggested Okonkwo.

"He was not an albino. He was quite different." He sipped his wine. "And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." Obierika again drank a little of his wine. "And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends. I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They

were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him."

"What did the white man say before they killed him?" asked Uchendu.

"He said nothing," answered one of Obierika's companions.

"He said something, only they did not understand him," said Obierika. "He seemed to speak through his nose."

"One of the men told me," said Obierika's other companion, "that he repeated over and over again a word that resembled Mbaino. Perhaps he had been going to Mbaino and had lost his way."

"Anyway," resumed Obierika, "they killed him and tied up his iron horse. This was before the planting season began. For a long time nothing happened. The rains had come and yams had been sown. The iron horse was still tied to the sacred silk-cotton tree. And then one morning three white men led by a band of ordinary men like us came to the clan. They saw the iron horse and went away again. Most of the men and women of Abame had gone to their farms. Only a few of them saw these white men and their followers. For many market weeks nothing else happened. They have a big market in Abame on every other Afo day and, as you know, the whole clan gathers there. That was the day it happened. The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose *chi* were wide awake and brought them out of that market." He paused.

"Their clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake has turned the color of blood. A great evil has come upon their land as the Oracle had warned."

There was a long silence. Uchendu ground his teeth together audibly. Then he burst out:

"Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of Abame were fools. What did they know about the man?" He ground his teeth again and told a story to illustrate his point. "Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. 'You have done very well,' said Mother Kite to her daughter, 'but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?' 'It said nothing,' replied the young kite. 'It just walked away.' 'You must return the duckling,' said Mother Kite. 'There is something ominous behind the silence.' And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. 'What did the mother of this chick do?' asked the old kite. 'It cried and raved and cursed me,' said the young kite. 'Then we can eat the chick,' said her mother. 'There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.' Those men of Abame were fools."

"They were fools," said Okonkwo after a pause. "They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their machetes even when they went to market."

"They have paid for their foolishness," said Obierika. "But I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true."

"There is no story that is not true," said Uchendu. "The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others. We have albinos among us. Do you not think that they came to our clan by mistake, that they have strayed from their way to a land where everybody is like them?"

Okonkwo's first wife soon finished her cooking and set before their guests a big meal of pounded yams and bitter-leaf soup. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, brought in a pot of sweet wine tapped from the raffia palm.

"You are a big man now," Obierika said to Nwoye. "Your friend Anene asked me to greet you."

"Is he well?" asked Nwoye.

"We are all well," said Obierika.

Ezinma brought them a bowl of water with which to wash their hands. After that they began to eat and to drink the wine.

"When did you set out from home?" asked Okonkwo.

"We had meant to set out from my house before cock-crow," said Obierika. "But Nweke did not appear until it was quite light. Never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married a new wife." They all laughed.

"Has Nweke married a wife?" asked Okonkwo.

"He has married Okadigbo's second daughter," said Obierika.

"That is very good," said Okonkwo. "I do not blame you for not hearing the cock crow."

When they had eaten, Obierika pointed at the two heavy bags.

"That is the money from your yams," he said. "I sold the big ones as soon as you left. Later on I sold some of the seed-yams and gave out others to sharecroppers. I shall do that every year until you return. But I thought you would need the money now and so I brought it. Who knows what may happen tomorrow? Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us."

"God will not permit it," said Okonkwo. "I do not know how to thank you."

"I can tell you," said Obierika. "Kill one of your sons for me."

"That will not be enough," said Okonkwo.

"Then kill yourself," said Obierika.

"Forgive me," said Okonkwo, smiling. "I shall not talk about thanking you any more."

16

When nearly two years later Obierika paid another visit to his friend in exile the circumstances were less happy. The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts, and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man's god would not last. None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men. The imagery of an *efulefu* in the language of the clan was a man who sold his machete and wore the sheath to

battle. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up.

What moved Obierika to visit Okonkwo was the sudden appearance of the latter's son, Nwoye, among the missionaries in Umuofia.

"What are you doing here?" Obierika had asked when after many difficulties the missionaries had allowed him to speak to the boy.

"I am one of them," replied Nwoye.

"How is your father?" Obierika asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I don't know. He is not my father," said Nwoye, unhappily.

And so Obierika went to Mbanta to see his friend. And he found that Okonkwo did not wish to speak about Nwoye. It was only from Nwoye's mother that he heard scraps of the story.

The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and woman came out to see the white man. Stories about these strange men had grown since one of them had been killed in Abame and his iron horse tied to the sacred silk-cotton tree. And so everybody came to see the white man. It was the time of the year when everybody was at home. The harvest was over.

When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying "myself" he always said "my buttocks." But he was a man of commanding presence and the clansmen listened to him. He said he was one of them, as they could see from his color and his language. The other four black men were also their brothers, although one of them did not speak Ibo. The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone. A deep murmur went through the crowd when he said this. He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom. "We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die," he said.

"Your buttocks understand our language," said someone light-heartedly and the crowd laughed.

"What did he say?" the white man asked his interpreter. But before he could answer, another man asked a question: "Where is the white man's horse?" he asked. The Ibo evangelists consulted among themselves and decided that the man probably meant bicycle. They told the white man and he smiled benevolently.

"Tell them," he said, "that I shall bring many iron horses when we have settled down among them. Some of them will even ride the iron horse themselves." This was interpreted to them but very few of them heard. They were talking excitedly among themselves because the white man had said he was going to live among them. They had not thought about that.

At this point an old man said he had a question. "Which is this god of yours," he asked, "the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora or the thunderbolt, or what?"

The interpreter spoke to the white man and he immediately gave his answer. "All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us."

"If we leave our gods and follow your god," asked another man, "who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?"

"Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm," replied the white man. "They are pieces of wood and stone."

When this was interpreted to the men of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too? And some of them began to go away.

Then the missionaries burst into song. It was one of those gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man. The interpreter explained each verse to the audience, some of whom now stood enthralled. It was a story of brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God. It told of one sheep out on the hills, away from the gates of God and from the tender shepherd's care.

After the singing the interpreter spoke about the Son of God whose name was Jesu Kristi. Okonkwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said:

"You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then." The crowd agreed.

"I did not say He had a wife," said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.

"Your buttocks said he had a son," said the joker. "So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks."

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine.

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled.

17

The missionaries spent their first four or five nights in the marketplace, and went into the village in the morning to preach the gospel. They asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them that there was no king. "We have men of high title and the chief priests and the elders," they said.

It was not very easy getting the men of high title and the elders together after the excitement of the first day. But the missionaries persevered, and in the end they were received by the rulers of Mbanta. They asked for a plot of land to build their church.

Every clan and village had its "evil forest." In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An "evil forest" was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.

"They want a piece of land to build their shrine," said Uchendu to his peers when they consulted among themselves. "We shall give them a piece of land." He paused, and there was a murmur of surprise and disagreement. "Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory." They laughed and agreed, and sent for the missionaries, whom they had asked to leave them for a while so that they might "whisper together." They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they cared to take. And to their greatest amazement the missionaries thanked them and burst into song.

"They do not understand," said some of the elders. "But they will understand when they go to their plot of land tomorrow morning." And they dispersed.

The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. The first day passed and the second and third and fourth, and none of them died. Everyone was puzzled. And then it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits. Not long after, he won his first three converts.

Although Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the very first day, he kept it secret. He dared not go too near the missionaries for fear of his father. But whenever they came to preach in the open marketplace or the village playground, Nwoye was there. And he was already beginning to know some of the simple stories they told.

"We have now built a church," said Mr. Kiaga, the interpreter, who was now in charge of the infant congregation. The white man had gone back to Umuofia, where he built his headquarters and from where he paid regular visits to Mr. Kiaga's congregation at Mbanta.

"We have now built a church," said Mr. Kiaga, "and we want you all to come in every seventh day to worship the true God."

On the following Sunday, Nwoye passed and re-passed the little red-earth and thatch building without summoning enough courage to enter. He heard the voice of

singing and although it came from a handful of men it was loud and confident. Their church stood on a circular clearing that looked like the open mouth of the Evil Forest. Was it waiting to snap its teeth together? After passing and re-passing by the church, Nwoye returned home.

It was well known among the people of Mbanta that their gods and ancestors were sometimes long-suffering and would deliberately allow a man to go on defying them. But even in such cases they set their limit at seven market weeks or twenty-eight days. Beyond that limit no man was suffered to go. And so excitement mounted in the village as the seventh week approached since the impudent missionaries built their church in the Evil Forest. The villagers were so certain about the doom that awaited these men that one or two converts thought it wise to suspend their allegiance to the new faith.

At last the day came by which all the missionaries should have died. But they were still alive, building a new red-earth and thatch house for their teacher, Mr. Kiaga. That week they won a handful more converts. And for the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child.

Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance.

One morning Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, was passing by the church on his way from the neighboring village, when he saw Nwoye among the Christians. He was greatly surprised, and when he got home he went straight to Okonkwo's hut and told him what he had seen. The women began to talk excitedly, but Okonkwo sat unmoved.

It was late afternoon before Nwoye returned. He went into the *obi* and saluted his father, but he did not answer. Nwoye turned round to walk into the inner compound when his father, suddenly overcome with fury, sprang to his feet and gripped him by the neck.

"Where have you been?" he stammered.

Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.

"Answer me," roared Okonkwo, "before I kill you!" He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.

"Answer me!" he roared again. Nwoye stood looking at him and did not say a word. The women were screaming outside, afraid to go in.

"Leave that boy at once!" said a voice in the outer compound. It was Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu. "Are you mad?"

Okonkwo did not answer. But he left hold of Nwoye, who walked away and never returned.

He went back to the church and told Mr. Kiaga that he had decided to go to Umuofia where the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write.

Mr. Kiaga's joy was very great. "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother."

Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith.

As Okonkwo sat in his hut that night, gazing into a log fire, he thought over the matter. A sudden fury rose within him and he felt a strong desire to take up his machete, go to the church, and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang. But on further thought he told himself that Nwoye was not worth fighting for. Why, he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or *chi*. For how else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behavior? Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospects, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth.

Okonkwo was popularly called the "Roaring Flame." As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? Perhaps he was not his son. No! he could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teach her! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son? At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness.

He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply.

18

The young church in Mbanta had a few crises early in its life. At first the clan had assumed that it would not survive. But it had gone on living and gradually becoming stronger. The clan was worried, but not overmuch. If a gang of *efulefu* decided to live in the Evil Forest it was their own affair. When one came to think of it, the Evil Forest was a fit home for such undesirable people. It was true they were rescuing twins from the bush, but they never brought them into the village. As far as the villagers were concerned, the twins still remained where they had been thrown away. Surely the earth goddess would not visit the sins of the missionaries on the innocent villagers?

But on one occasion the missionaries had tried to overstep the bounds. Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines.

"Go and burn your mothers' genitals," said one of the priests. The men were seized and beaten until they streamed with blood. After that nothing happened for a long time between the church and the clan.

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary.

Although such stories were now often told they looked like fairy-tales in Mbanta and did not as yet affect the relationship between the new church and the clan. There was no question of killing a missionary here, for Mr. Kiaga, despite his madness, was quite harmless. As for his converts, no one could kill them without having to flee from the clan, for in spite of their worthlessness they still belonged to the clan. And so nobody gave serious thought to the stories about the white man's government or the consequences of killing the Christians. If they became more troublesome than they already were they would simply be driven out of the clan.

And the little church was at that moment too deeply absorbed in its own troubles to annoy the clan. It all began over the question of admitting outcasts.

These outcasts, or *osu*, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday two of them went into the church. There was an immediate stir; but so great was the work the new religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came in. Those who found themselves nearest to them merely moved to another seat. It was a miracle. But it only lasted till the end of the service. The whole church raised a protest and was about to drive these people out, when Mr. Kiaga stopped them and began to explain.

"Before God," he said, "there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers."

"You do not understand," said one of the converts. "What will the heathen say of us when they hear that we receive *osu* into our midst? They will laugh."

"Let them laugh," said Mr. Kiaga. "God will laugh at them on the judgment day. Why do the nations rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing? He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. The Lord shall have them in derision."

"You do not understand," the convert maintained. "You are our teacher, and you can teach us the things of the new faith. But this is a matter which we know." And he told him what an *osu* was.

He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart—a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste—long, tangled, and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not

take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ?

"He needs Christ more than you and I," said Mr. Kiaga.

"Then I shall go back to the clan," said the convert. And he went. Mr. Kiaga stood firm, and it was his firmness that saved the young church. The wavering converts drew inspiration and confidence from his unshakable faith. He ordered the outcasts to shave off their long, tangled hair. At first they were afraid they might die.

"Unless you shave off the mark of your heathen belief I will not admit you into the church," said Mr. Kiaga. "You fear that you will die. Why should that be? How are you different from other men who shave their hair? The same God created you and them. But they have cast you out like lepers. It is against the will of God, who has promised everlasting life to all who believe in His holy name. The heathen say you will die if you do this or that, and you are afraid. They also said I would die if I built my church on this ground. Am I dead? They said I would die if I took care of twins. I am still alive. The heathen speak nothing but falsehood. Only the word of our God is true."

The two outcasts shaved off their hair, and soon they were the strongest adherents of the new faith. And what was more, nearly all the *osu* in Mbanta followed their example. It was in fact one of them who in his zeal brought the church into serious conflict with the clan a year later by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water.

The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as "Our Father," and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hens' eggs. If a clansman killed a royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who killed the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen.

Perhaps it never did happen. That was the way the clan at first looked at it. No one had actually seen the man do it. The story had arisen among the Christians themselves.

But, all the same, the rulers and elders of Mbanta assembled to decide on their action. Many of them spoke at great length and in fury. The spirit of wars was upon them. Okonkwo, who had begun to play a part in the affairs of his motherland, said that until the abominable gang was chased out of the village with whips there would be no peace.

But there were many others who saw the situation differently, and it was their counsel that prevailed in the end.

"It is not our custom to fight for our gods," said one of them. "Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god. We did not see it. If we put ourselves between the god and his victim we may receive blows intended for the offender. When a man blasphemes, what do we do? Do we go and stop his mouth? No. We put our fingers into our ears to stop us hearing. That is a wise action."

"Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see." Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia.

"Okonkwo has spoken the truth," said another man. "We should do something. But let us ostracize these men. We would then not be held accountable for their abominations."

Everybody in the assembly spoke, and in the end it was decided to ostracize the Christians. Okonkwo ground his teeth in disgust.

That night a bell-man went through the length and breadth of Mbanta proclaiming that the adherents of the new faith were thenceforth excluded from the life and privileges of the clan.

The Christians had grown in number and were now a small community of men, women, and children, self-assured and confident. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, paid regular visits to them. "When I think that it is only eighteen months since the Seed was first sown among you," he said, "I marvel at what the Lord hath wrought."

It was Wednesday in Holy Week and Mr. Kiaga had asked the women to bring red earth and white chalk and water to scrub the church for Easter; and the women had formed themselves into three groups for this purpose. They set out early that morning, some of them with their water-pots to the stream, another group with hoes and baskets to the village red-earth pit, and the others to the chalk quarry.

Mr. Kiaga was praying in the church when he heard the women talking excitedly. He rounded off his prayer and went to see what it was all about. The women had come to the church with empty water-pots. They said that some young men had chased them away from the stream with whips. Soon after, the women who had gone for red earth returned with empty baskets. Some of them had been heavily whipped. The chalk women also returned to tell a similar story.

"What does it all mean?" asked Mr. Kiaga, who was greatly perplexed.

"The village has outlawed us," said one of the women. "The bell-man announced it last night. But it is not our custom to debar anyone from the stream or the quarry."

Another woman said, "They want to ruin us. They will not allow us into the markets. They have said so."

Mr. Kiaga was going to send into the village for his men-converts when he saw them coming on their own. Of course they had all heard the bell-man, but they had never in all their lives heard of women being debarred from the stream.

"Come along," they said to the women. "We will go with you to meet those cowards." Some of them had big sticks and some even machetes.

But Mr. Kiaga restrained them. He wanted first to know why they had been outlawed.

"They say that Okoli killed the sacred python," said one man.

"It is false," said another. "Okoli told me himself that it was false."

Okoli was not there to answer. He had fallen ill on the previous night. Before the day was over he was dead. His death showed that the gods were still able to fight their own battles. The clan saw no reason then for molesting the Christians.

19

The last big rains of the year were falling. It was the time for treading red earth with which to build walls. It was not done earlier because the rains were too heavy and would have washed away the heap of trodden earth; and it could not be done later because harvesting would soon set in, and after that the dry season.

It was going to be Okonkwo's last harvest in Mbanta. The seven wasted and weary years were at last dragging to a close. Although he had prospered in his motherland Okonkwo knew that he would have prospered even more in Umuofia, in the land of his fathers where men were bold and warlike. In these seven years he would have climbed to the utmost heights. And so he regretted every day of his exile. His mother's kinsmen had been very kind to him, and he was grateful. But that did not alter the facts. He had called the first child born to him in exile Nneka—"Mother is Supreme"—out of politeness to his mother's kinsmen. But two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia—"Begotten in the Wilderness."

As soon as he entered his last year in exile Okonkwo sent money to Obierika to build him two huts in his old compound where he and his family would live until he built more huts and the outside wall of his compound. He could not ask another man to build his own *obi* for him, nor the walls of his compound. Those things a man built for himself or inherited from his father.

As the last heavy rains of the year began to fall, Obierika sent word that the two huts had been built and Okonkwo began to prepare for his return, after the rains. He would have liked to return earlier and build his compound that year before the rains stopped, but in doing so he would have taken something from the full penalty of seven years. And that could not be. So he waited impatiently for the dry season to come.

It came slowly. The rain became lighter and lighter until it fell in slanting showers. Sometimes the sun shone through the rain and a light breeze blew. It was a gay and airy kind of rain. The rainbow began to appear, and sometimes two rainbows, like a mother and her daughter, the one young and beautiful, and the other an old and faint shadow. The rainbow was called the python of the sky.

Okonkwo called his three wives and told them to get things together for a great feast. "I must thank my mother's kinsmen before I go," he said.

Ekwefi still had some cassava left on her farm from the previous year. Neither of the other wives had. It was not that they had been lazy, but that they had many children to feed. It was therefore understood that Ekwefi would provide cassava for the feast. Nwoye's mother and Ojiugo would provide the other things like smoked fish, palm-oil, and pepper for the soup. Okonkwo would take care of meat and yams.

Ekwefi rose early on the following morning and went to her farm with her daughter, Ezinma, and Ojiugo's daughter, Obiageli, to harvest cassava tubers. Each of them carried a long cane basket, a machete for cutting down the soft cassava stem, and a little hoe for digging out the tuber. Fortunately, a light rain had fallen during the night and the soil would not be very hard.

"It will not take us long to harvest as much as we like," said Ekwefi.

"But the leaves will be wet," said Ezinma. Her basket was balanced on her head, and her arms folded across her breasts. She felt cold. "I dislike cold water dropping on my back. We should have waited for the sun to rise and dry the leaves."

Obiageli called her "Salt" because she said that she disliked water. "Are you afraid you may dissolve?"

The harvesting was easy, as Ekwefi had said. Ezinma shook every tree violently with a long stick before she bent down to cut the stem and dig out the tuber. Sometimes it was not necessary to dig. They just pulled the stump, and earth rose, roots snapped below, and the tuber was pulled out.

When they had harvested a sizable heap they carried it down in two trips to the stream, where every woman had a shallow well for fermenting her cassava.

"It should be ready in four days or even three," said Obiageli. "They are young tubers."

"They are not all that young," said Ekwefi. "I planted the farm nearly two years ago. It is a poor soil and that is why the tubers are so small."

Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast he told her that it was not her affair.

"I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. My mother's people have been good to me and I must show my gratitude."

And so three goats were slaughtered and a number of fowls. It was like a wedding feast. There was foo-foo and yam pottage, egusi soup and bitter-leaf soup and pots and pots of palm-wine.

All the *umunna*[27] were invited to the feast, all the descendants of Okolo, who had lived about two hundred years before. The oldest member of this extensive family was Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu. The kola nut was given him to break, and he prayed to the ancestors. He asked them for health and children. "We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him." He prayed especially for Okonkwo and his family. He then broke the kola nut and threw one of the lobes on the ground for the ancestors.

As the broken kola nuts were passed round, Okonkwo's wives and children and those who came to help them with the cooking began to bring out the food. His sons brought out the pots of palm-wine. There was so much food and drink that many kinsmen whistled in surprise. When all was laid out, Okonkwo rose to speak.

"I beg you to accept this little kola," he said. "It is not to pay you back for all you did for me in these seven years. A child cannot pay for its mother's milk. I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet."

Yam pottage was served first because it was lighter than foo-foo and because yam always came first. Then the foo-foo was served. Some kinsmen ate it with egusi

[27] *umunna:* The male members of the clan.

soup and others with bitter-leaf soup. The meat was then shared so that every member of the *umunna* had a portion. Every man rose in order of years and took a share. Even the few kinsmen who had not been able to come had their shares taken out for them in due term.

As the palm-wine was drunk one of the oldest members of the *umunna* rose to thank Okonkwo:

"If I say that we did not expect such a big feast I will be suggesting that we did not know how open-handed our son, Okonkwo, is. We all know him, and we expected a big feast. But it turned out to be even bigger than we expected. Thank you. May all you took out return again tenfold. It is good in these days when the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things in the grand, old way. A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. You may ask why I am saying all this. I say it because I fear for the younger generation, for you people." He waved his arm where most of the young men sat. "As for me, I have only a short while to live, and so have Uchendu and Unachukwu and Emefo. But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan." He turned again to Okonkwo and said, "Thank you for calling us together."

Part III

20

Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.

Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan. But some of these losses were not irreparable. He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years.

Even in his first year in exile he had begun to plan for his return. The first thing he would do would be to rebuild his compound on a more magnificent scale. He would build a bigger barn than he had had before and he would build huts for two new wives. Then he would show his wealth by initiating his sons into the *ozo* society. Only the really great men in the clan were able to do this. Okonkwo saw clearly the high esteem in which he would be held, and he saw himself taking the highest title in the land.

As the years of exile passed one by one it seemed to him that his *chi* might now be making amends for the past disaster. His yams grew abundantly, not only in his motherland but also in Umuofia, where his friend gave them out year by year to sharecroppers.

Then the tragedy of his first son had occurred. At first it appeared as if it might prove too great for his spirit. But it was a resilient spirit, and in the end Okonkwo overcame his sorrow. He had five other sons and he would bring them up in the way of the clan.

He sent for the five sons and they came and sat in his *obi.* The youngest of them was four years old.

"You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck."

Okonkwo was very lucky in his daughters. He never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl. Of all his children she alone understood his every mood. A bond of sympathy had grown between them as the years had passed.

Ezinma grew up in her father's exile and became one of the most beautiful girls in Mbanta. She was called Crystal of Beauty, as her mother had been called in her youth. The young ailing girl who had caused her mother so much heartache had been transformed, almost overnight, into a healthy, buoyant maiden. She had, it was true, her moments of depression when she would snap at everybody like an angry dog. These moods descended on her suddenly and for no apparent reason. But they were very rare and short-lived. As long as they lasted, she could bear no other person but her father.

Many young men and prosperous middle-aged men of Mbanta came to marry her. But she refused them all, because her father had called her one evening and said to her: "There are many good and prosperous people here, but I shall be happy if you marry in Umuofia when we return home."

That was all he had said. But Ezinma had seen clearly all the thought and hidden meaning behind the few words. And she had agreed.

"Your half-sister, Obiageli, will not understand me," Okonkwo said. "But you can explain to her."

Although they were almost the same age, Ezinma wielded a strong influence over her half-sister. She explained to her why they should not marry yet, and she agreed also. And so the two of them refused every offer of marriage in Mbanta.

"I wish she were a boy," Okonkwo thought within himself. She understood things so perfectly. Who else among his children could have read his thoughts so well? With two beautiful grown-up daughters his return to Umuofia would attract considerable attention. His future sons-in-law would be men of authority in the clan. The poor and unknown would not dare to come forth.

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the

outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians. The white missionary was very proud of him and he was one of the first men in Umuofia to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, or Holy Feast as it was called in Ibo. Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the Feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the village variety. He had therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion.

But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial. Many of these messengers came from Umuru on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the center of their religion and trade and government. These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed. They were called *kotma*, and because of their ash-colored shorts they earned the additional name of Ashy-Buttocks. They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some had molested the Christians. They were beaten in the prison by the *kotma* and made to work every morning clearing the government compound and fetching wood for the white Commissioner and the court messengers. Some of these prisoners were men of title who should be above such mean occupation. They were grieved by the indignity and mourned for their neglected farms. As they cut grass in the morning the younger men sang in time with the strokes of their machetes:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,
He is fit to be a slave.
The white man has no sense,
He is fit to be a slave.

The court messengers did not like to be called Ashy-Buttocks, and they beat the men. But the song spread in Umuofia.

Okonkwo's head was bowed in sadness as Obierika told him these things.

"Perhaps I have been away too long," Okonkwo said, almost to himself. "But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?"

"Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?" asked Obierika.

"I have heard," said Okonkwo. "But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land."

"It is already too late," said Obierika sadly. "Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame." He paused for a long time and then said: "I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto."

"What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?" asked Okonkwo.

"The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter."

"Does the white man understand our custom about land?"

"How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

"How did they get hold of Aneto to hang him?" asked Okonkwo.

"When he killed Oduche in the fight over the land, he fled to Aninta to escape the wrath of the earth. This was about eight days after the fight, because Oduche had not died immediately from his wounds. It was on the seventh day that he died. But everybody knew that he was going to die and Aneto got his belongings together in readiness to flee. But the Christians had told the white man about the accident, and he sent his *kotma* to catch Aneto. He was imprisoned with all the leaders of his family. In the end Oduche died and Aneto was taken to Umuru and hanged. The other people were released, but even now they have not found the mouth with which to tell of their suffering."

The two men sat in silence for a long while afterwards.

21

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.

And even in the matter of religion there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness.

This growing feeling was due to Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who was very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan. One member in particular was very difficult to restrain. His name was Enoch and his father was the priest of the snake cult. The story went around that Enoch had killed and eaten the sacred python, and that his father had cursed him.

Mr. Brown preached against such excess of zeal. Everything was possible, he told his energetic flock, but everything was not expedient. And so Mr. Brown came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith. He made friends with some of the great men of the clan and on one of his frequent visits to the neighboring villages he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity and rank. One of the great men in that village was called Akunna and he

had given one of his sons to be taught the white man's knowledge in Mr. Brown's school.

Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs.

"You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods."

"There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood—like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved *Ikenga*[28] hung), "and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood."

"Yes," said Akunna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church."

"No," protested Mr. Brown. "The head of my church is God Himself."

"I know," said Akunna, "but there must be a head in this world among men. Somebody like yourself must be the head here."

"The head of my church in that sense is in England."

"That is exactly what I am saying. The head of your church is in your country. He has sent you here as his messenger. And you have also appointed your own messengers and servants. Or let me take another example, the District Commissioner. He is sent by your king."

"They have a queen," said the interpreter on his own account.

"Your queen sends her messenger, the District Commissioner. He finds that he cannot do the work alone and so he appoints *kotma* to help him. It is the same with God, or Chukwu. He appoints the smaller gods to help Him because His work is too great for one person."

"You should not think of Him as a person," said Mr. Brown. "It is because you do so that you imagine He must need helpers. And the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created."

"That is not so. We make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to we go to Chukwu. It is right to do so. We approach a great man through his servants. But when his servants fail to help us, then we go to the last source of hope. We appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry them more because we are afraid to worry their Master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name Chukwuka—'Chukwu is Supreme.'"

"You said one interesting thing," said Mr. Brown. "You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion Chukwu is a loving Father and need not be feared by those who do His will."

[28] *Ikenga:* A carved figure symbolizing a man's strength, made from wood and the horns of a ram.

"But we must fear Him when we are not doing His will," said Akunna. "And who is to tell His will? It is too great to be known."

In this way Mr. Brown learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. But at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them. They could already see that happening in the Native Court, where the D.C. was surrounded by strangers who spoke his tongue. Most of these strangers came from the distant town of Umuru on the bank of the Great River where the white man first went.

In the end Mr. Brown's arguments began to have an effect. More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels. They were not all young, these people who came to learn. Some of them were thirty years old or more. They worked on their farms in the morning and went to school in the afternoon. And it was not long before the people began to say that the white man's medicine was quick in working. Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia laborers went forth into the Lord's vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand.

Mr. Brown's mission grew from strength to strength, and because of its link with the new administration it earned a new social prestige. But Mr. Brown himself was breaking down in health. At first he ignored the warning signs. But in the end he had to leave his flock, sad and broken.

It was in the first rainy season after Okonkwo's return to Umuofia that Mr. Brown left for home. As soon as he had learned of Okonkwo's return five months earlier, the missionary had immediately paid him a visit. He had just sent Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru. And he had hoped that Okonkwo would be happy to hear of it. But Okonkwo had driven him away with the threat that if he came into his compound again, he would be carried out of it.

Okonkwo's return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished. It was true his two beautiful daughters aroused great interest among suitors and marriage negotiations were soon in progress, but, beyond that, Umuofia did not appear to have taken any special notice of the warrior's return. The clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable. The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds. There were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return.

And it was the wrong year too. If Okonkwo had immediately initiated his two

sons into the *ozo* society as he had planned he would have caused a stir. But the initiation rite was performed once in three years in Umuofia, and he had to wait for nearly two years for the next round of ceremonies.

Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.

22

Mr. Brown's successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal.

Mr. Smith was greatly distressed by the ignorance which many of his flock showed even in such things as the Trinity and the Sacraments. It only showed that they were seeds sown on a rocky soil. Mr. Brown had thought of nothing but numbers. He should have known that the kingdom of God did not depend on large crowds. Our Lord Himself stressed the importance of fewness. Narrow is the way and few the number. To fill the Lord's holy temple with an idolatrous crowd clamoring for signs was a folly of everlasting consequence. Our Lord used the whip only once in His life—to drive the crowd away from His church.

Within a few weeks of his arrival in Umuofia Mr. Smith suspended a young woman from the church for pouring new wine into old bottles. This woman had allowed her heathen husband to mutilate her dead child. The child had been declared an *ogbanje*, plaguing its mother by dying and entering her womb to be born again. Four times this child had run its evil round. And so it was mutilated to discourage it from returning.

Mr. Smith was filled with wrath when he heard of this. He disbelieved the story which even some of the most faithful confirmed, the story of really evil children who were not deterred by mutilation, but came back with all the scars. He replied that such stories were spread in the world by the Devil to lead men astray. Those who believed such stories were unworthy of the Lord's table.

There was a saying in Umuofia that as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him. Mr. Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad. The overzealous converts who had smarted under Mr. Brown's restraining hand now flourished in full favor. One of them was Enoch, the son of the snake-priest who was believed to have killed and eaten the sacred python. Enoch's devotion to the new faith had seemed so much greater than Mr. Brown's that the villagers called him the outsider who wept louder than the bereaved.

Enoch was short and slight of build, and always seemed in great haste. His feet were short and broad, and when he stood or walked his heels came together and his feet opened outwards as if they had quarreled and meant to go in different directions. Such was the excessive energy bottled up in Enoch's small body that it was always erupting in quarrels and fights. On Sundays he always imagined that the sermon was preached for the benefit of his enemies. And if he happened to sit near one of them he would occasionally turn to give him a meaningful look, as if to say, "I told you so." It was Enoch who touched off the great conflict between church and clan in Umuofia which had been gathering since Mr. Brown left.

It happened during the annual ceremony which was held in honor of the earth deity. At such times the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as *egwugwu* through tiny ant-holes.

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did.

The annual worship of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday, and the masked spirits were abroad. The Christian women who had been to church could not therefore go home. Some of their men had gone out to beg the *egwugwu* to retire for a short while for the women to pass. They agreed and were already retiring, when Enoch boasted aloud that they would not dare to touch a Christian. Whereupon they all came back and one of them gave Enoch a good stroke of the cane, which was always carried. Enoch fell on him and tore off his mask. The other *egwugwu* immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and led him away. Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion.

That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death.

On the next day all the masked *egwugwu* of Umuofia assembled in the marketplace. They came from all the quarters of the clan and even from the neighboring villages. The dreaded Otakagu came from Imo, and Ekwensu, dangling a white cock, arrived from Uli. It was a terrible gathering. The eerie voices of countless spirits, the bells that clattered behind some of them, and the clash of machetes as they ran forwards and backwards and saluted one another, sent tremors of fear into every heart. For the first time in living memory the sacred bull-roarer was heard in broad daylight.

From the marketplace the furious band made for Enoch's compound. Some of the elders of the clan went with them, wearing heavy protections of charms and amulets. These were men whose arms were strong in *ogwu*, or medicine. As for the ordinary men and women, they listened from the safety of their huts.

The leaders of the Christians had met together at Mr. Smith's parsonage on the previous night. As they deliberated they could hear the Mother of Spirits wailing for her son. The chilling sound affected Mr. Smith, and for the first time he seemed to be afraid.

"What are they planning to do?" he asked. No one knew, because such a thing had never happened before. Mr. Smith would have sent for the District Commissioner and his court messengers, but they had gone on tour on the previous day.

"One thing is clear," said Mr. Smith. "We cannot offer physical resistance to them. Our strength lies in the Lord." They knelt down together and prayed to God for delivery.

"O Lord, save Thy people," cried Mr. Smith.

"And bless Thine inheritance," replied the men.

They decided that Enoch should be hidden in the parsonage for a day or two. Enoch himself was greatly disappointed when he heard this, for he had hoped that a holy war was imminent; and there were a few other Christians who thought like him. But wisdom prevailed in the camp of the faithful and many lives were thus saved.

The band of *egwugwu* moved like a furious whirlwind to Enoch's compound and with machete and fire reduced it to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church, intoxicated with destruction.

Mr. Smith was in his church when he heard the masked spirits coming. He walked quietly to the door which commanded the approach to the church compound, and stood there. But when the first three or four *egwugwu* appeared on the church compound he nearly bolted. He overcame this impulse and instead of running away he went down the two steps that led up to the church and walked towards the approaching spirits.

They surged forward, and a long stretch of the bamboo fence with which the church compound was surrounded gave way before them. Discordant bells clanged, machetes clashed and the air was full of dust and weird sounds. Mr. Smith heard a sound of footsteps behind him. He turned round and saw Okeke, his interpreter. Okeke had not been on the best of terms with his master since he had strongly condemned Enoch's behavior at the meeting of the leaders of the church during the night. Okeke had gone as far as to say that Enoch should not be hidden in the parsonage, because he would only draw the wrath of the clan on the pastor. Mr. Smith had rebuked him in very strong language, and had not sought his advice that morning. But now, as he came up and stood by him confronting the angry spirits, Mr. Smith looked at him and smiled. It was a wan smile, but there was deep gratitude there.

For a brief moment the onrush of the *egwugwu* was checked by the unexpected composure of the two men. But it was only a momentary check, like the tense silence between blasts of thunder. The second onrush was greater than the first. It swallowed up the two men. Then an unmistakable voice rose above the tumult and there was immediate silence. Space was made around the two men, and Ajofia began to speak.

Ajofia was the leading *egwugwu* of Umuofia. He was the head and spokesman of the nine ancestors who administered justice in the clan. His voice was unmistakable and so he was able to bring immediate peace to the agitated spirits. He then addressed Mr. Smith, and as he spoke clouds of smoke rose from his head.

"The body of the white man, I salute you," he said, using the language in which immortals spoke to men.

"The body of the white man, do you know me?" he asked.

Mr. Smith looked at his interpreter, but Okeke, who was a native of distant Umuru, was also at a loss.

Ajofia laughed in his guttural voice. It was like the laugh of rusty metal. "They are strangers," he said, "and they are ignorant. But let that pass." He turned round to his comrades and saluted them, calling them the fathers of Umuofia. He dug his rattling spear into the ground and it shook with metallic life. Then he turned once more to the missionary and his interpreter.

"Tell the white man that we will not do him any harm," he said to the interpreter. "Tell him to go back to his house and leave us alone. We liked his brother who was with us before. He was foolish, but we liked him, and for his sake we shall not harm his brother. But this shrine which he built must be destroyed. We shall no longer allow it in our midst. It has bred untold abominations and we have come to put an end to it." He turned to his comrades. "Fathers of Umuofia, I salute you"; and they replied with one guttural voice. He turned again to the missionary. "You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you."

Mr. Smith said to his interpreter: "Tell them to go away from here. This is the house of God and I will not live to see it desecrated."

Okeke interpreted wisely to the spirits and leaders of Umuofia: "The white man says he is happy you have come to him with your grievances, like friends. He will be happy if you leave the matter in his hands."

"We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away."

Mr. Smith stood his ground. But he could not save his church. When the *egwugwu* went away the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was a pile of earth and ashes. And for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified.

23

For the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness. The times which had altered so unaccountably during his exile seemed to be coming round again. The clan which had turned false on him appeared to be making amends.

He had spoken violently to his clansmen when they had met in the marketplace to decide on their action. And they had listened to him with respect. It was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior. Although they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away the Christians, they had agreed to do something substantial. And they had done it. Okonkwo was almost happy again.

For two days after the destruction of the church, nothing happened. Every man in Umuofia went about armed with a gun or a machete. They would not be caught unawares, like the men of Abame.

Then the District Commissioner returned from his tour. Mr. Smith went immediately to him and they had a long discussion. The men of Umuofia did not take any

notice of this, and if they did, they thought it was not important. The missionary often went to see his brother white man. There was nothing strange in that.

Three days later the District Commissioner sent his sweet-tongued messenger to the leaders of Umuofia asking them to meet him in his headquarters. That also was not strange. He often asked them to hold such palavers, as he called them. Okonkwo was among the six leaders he invited.

Okonkwo warned the others to be fully armed. "An Umuofia man does not refuse a call," he said. "He may refuse to do what he is asked; he does not refuse to be asked. But the times have changed, and we must be fully prepared."

And so the six men went to see the District Commissioner, armed with their machetes. They did not carry guns, for that would be unseemly. They were led into the courthouse where the District Commissioner sat. He received them politely. They unslung their goatskin bags and their sheathed machetes, put them on the floor, and sat down.

"I have asked you to come," began the Commissioner, "because of what happened during my absence. I have been told a few things but I cannot believe them until I have heard your own side. Let us talk about it like friends and find a way of ensuring that it does not happen again."

Ogbuefi Ekwueme rose to his feet and began to tell the story.

"Wait a minute," said the Commissioner. "I want to bring in my men so that they too can hear your grievances and take warning. Many of them come from distant places and although they speak your tongue they are ignorant of your customs. James! Go and bring in the men." His interpreter left the courtroom and soon returned with twelve men. They sat together with the men of Umuofia, and Ogbuefi Ekwueme began to tell the story of how Enoch murdered an *egwugwu*.

It happened so quickly that the six men did not see it coming. There was only a brief scuffle, too brief even to allow the drawing of a sheathed machete. The six men were handcuffed and led into the guardroom.

"We shall not do you any harm," said the District Commissioner to them later, "if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship. That must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world. I have decided that you will pay a fine of two hundred bags of cowries. You will be released as soon as you agree to this and undertake to collect that fine from your people. What do you say to that?"

The six men remained sullen and silent and the Commissioner left them for a while. He told the court messengers, when he left the guardroom, to treat the men with respect because they were the leaders of Umuofia. They said, "Yes, sir," and saluted.

As soon as the District Commissioner left, the head messenger, who was also the prisoners' barber, took down his razor and shaved off all the hair on the men's heads. They were still handcuffed, and they just sat and moped.

"Who is the chief among you?" the court messengers asked in jest. "We see that every pauper wears the anklet of title in Umuofia. Does it cost as much as ten cowries?"

The six men ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together.

Even when the men were left alone they found no words to speak to one another. It was only on the third day, when they could no longer bear the hunger and the insults, that they began to talk about giving in.

"We should have killed the white man if you had listened to me," Okonkwo snarled.

"We could have been in Umuru now waiting to be hanged," someone said to him.

"Who wants to kill the white man?" asked a messenger who had just rushed in. Nobody spoke.

"You are not satisfied with your crime, but you must kill the white man on top of it." He carried a strong stick, and he hit each man a few blows on the head and back. Okonkwo was choked with hate.

As soon as the six men were locked up, court messengers went into Umuofia to tell the people that their leaders would not be released unless they paid a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries.

"Unless you pay the fine immediately," said their head-man, "we will take your leaders to Umuru before the big white man, and hang them."

This story spread quickly through the villages, and was added to as it went. Some said that the men had already been taken to Umuru and would be hanged on the following day. Some said that their families would also be hanged. Others said that soldiers were already on their way to shoot the people of Umuofia as they had done in Abame.

It was the time of the full moon. But that night the voice of children was not heard. The village *ilo* where they always gathered for a moon-play was empty. The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance to be displayed later to the village. Young men who were always abroad in the moonlight kept their huts that night. Their manly voices were not heard on the village paths as they went to visit their friends and lovers. Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run.

The silence was broken by the village crier beating his sonorous *ogene*. He called every man in Umuofia, from the Akakanma age group upwards, to a meeting in the marketplace after the morning meal. He went from one end of the village to the other and walked all its breadth. He did not leave out any of the main footpaths.

Okonkwo's compound was like a deserted homestead. It was as if cold water had been poured on it. His family was all there, but everyone spoke in whispers. His daughter Ezinma had broken her twenty-eight day visit to the family of her future husband, and returned home when she heard that her father had been imprisoned, and was going to be hanged. As soon as she got home she went to Obierika to ask what the men of Umuofia were going to do about it. But Obierika had not been

home since morning. His wives thought he had gone to a secret meeting. Ezinma was satisfied that something was being done.

On the morning after the village crier's appeal the men of Umuofia met in the marketplace and decided to collect without delay two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to appease the white man. They did not know that fifty bags would go to the court messengers, who had increased the fine for that purpose.

24

Okonkwo and his fellow prisoners were set free as soon as the fine was paid. The District Commissioner spoke to them again about the great queen, and about peace and good government. But the men did not listen. They just sat and looked at him and at his interpreter. In the end they were given back their bags and sheathed machetes and told to go home. They rose and left the courthouse. They neither spoke to anyone nor among themselves.

The courthouse, like the church, was built a little way outside the village. The footpath that linked them was a very busy one because it also led to the stream, beyond the court. It was open and sandy. Footpaths were open and sandy in the dry season. But when the rains came the bush grew thick on either side and closed in on the path. It was now dry season.

As they made their way to the village the six men met women and children going to the stream with their water-pots. But the men wore such heavy and fearsome looks that the women and children did not say "*nno*" or "welcome" to them, but edged out of the way to let them pass. In the village little groups of men joined them until they became a sizable company. They walked silently. As each of the six men got to his compound, he turned in, taking some of the crowd with him. The village was astir in a silent, suppressed way.

Ezinma had prepared some food for her father as soon as news spread that the six men would be released. She took it to him in his *obi*. He ate absent-mindedly. He had no appetite; he only ate to please her. His male relations and friends had gathered in his *obi*, and Obierika was urging him to eat. Nobody else spoke, but they noticed the long stripes on Okonkwo's back where the warder's whip had cut into his flesh.

The village crier was abroad again in the night. He beat his iron gong and announced that another meeting would be held in the morning. Everyone knew that Umuofia was at last going to speak its mind about the things that were happening.

Okonkwo slept very little that night. The bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of childlike excitement. Before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia skirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. They were all satisfactory, he had thought.

As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself. He thought about wars in the past. The noblest, he thought, was the war against Isike.

In those days Okudo was still alive. Okudo sang a war song in a way that no other man could. He was not a fighter, but his voice turned every man into a lion.

"Worthy men are no more," Okonkwo sighed as he remembered those days. "Isike will never forget how we slaughtered them in that war. We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace. Those were days when men were men."

As he thought of these things he heard the sound of the iron gong in the distance. He listened carefully, and could just hear the crier's voice. But it was very faint. He turned on his bed and his back hurt him. He ground his teeth. The crier was drawing nearer and nearer until he passed by Okonkwo's compound.

"The greatest obstacle in Umuofia," Okonkwo thought bitterly, "is that coward, Egonwanne. His sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash. When he speaks he moves our men to impotence. If they had ignored his womanish wisdom five years ago, we would not have come to this." He ground his teeth. "Tomorrow he will tell them that our fathers never fought a 'war of blame.' If they listen to him I shall leave them and plan my own revenge."

The crier's voice had once more become faint, and the distance had taken the harsh edge off his iron gong. Okonkwo turned from one side to the other and derived a kind of pleasure from the pain his back gave him. "Let Egonwanne talk about a 'war of blame' tomorrow and I shall show him my back and head." He ground his teeth.

The marketplace began to fill as soon as the sun rose. Obierika was waiting in his *obi* when Okonkwo came along and called him. He hung his goatskin bag and his sheathed machete on his shoulder and went out to join him. Obierika's hut was close to the road and he saw every man who passed to the marketplace. He had exchanged greetings with many who had already passed that morning.

When Okonkwo and Obierika got to the meeting place there were already so many people that if one threw up a grain of sand it would not find its way to the earth again. And many more people were coming from every quarter of the nine villages. It warmed Okonkwo's heart to see such strength of numbers. But he was looking for one man in particular, the man whose tongue he dreaded and despised so much.

"Can you see him?" he asked Obierika.

"Who?"

"Egonwanne," he said, his eyes roving from one corner of the huge marketplace to the other. Most of the men sat on wooden stools they had brought with them.

"No," said Obierika, casting his eyes over the crowd. "Yes, there he is, under the silk-cotton tree. Are you afraid he would convince us not to fight?"

"Afraid? I do not care what he does to *you*. I despise him and those who listen to him. I shall fight alone if I choose."

They spoke at the top of their voices because everybody was talking, and it was like the sound of a great market.

"I shall wait till he has spoken," Okonkwo thought. "Then I shall speak."

"But how do you know he will speak against war?" Obierika asked after a while.

"Because I know he is a coward," said Okonkwo. Obierika did not hear the rest of what he said because at that moment somebody touched his shoulder from behind and he turned round to shake hands and exchange greetings with five or six friends. Okonkwo did not turn round even though he knew the voices. He was in no mood to exchange greetings. But one of the men touched him and asked about the people of his compound.

"They are well," he replied without interest.

The first man to speak to Umuofia that morning was Okika, one of the six who had been imprisoned. Okika was a great man and an orator. But he did not have the booming voice which a first speaker must use to establish silence in the assembly of the clan. Onyeka had such a voice; and so he was asked to salute Umuofia before Okika began to speak.

"Umuofia kwenu!" he bellowed, raising his left arm and pushing the air with his open hand.

"Yaa!" roared Umuofia.

"Umuofia kwenu!" he bellowed again, and again and again, facing a new direction each time. And the crowd answered, *"Yaa!"*

There was immediate silence as though cold water had been poured on a roaring flame.

Okika sprang to his feet and also saluted his clansmen four times. Then he began to speak:

"You all know why we are here, when we ought to be building our barns or mending our huts, when we should be putting our compounds in order. My father used to say to me: 'Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life.' When I saw you all pouring into this meeting from all the quarters of our clan so early in the morning, I knew that something was after our life." He paused for a brief moment and then began again:

"All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes." He stopped again to steady his trembling voice.

"This is a great gathering. No clan can boast of greater numbers or greater valor. But are we all here? I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?" A deep murmur swept through the crowd.

"They are not," he said. "They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done. Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: 'Men have learned to shoot without missing their mark and I have learned to fly without perching on a twig.' We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil we must root them out too. And we must do it *now*. We must bail this water now that it is only ankle deep. . . ."

At this point there was a sudden stir in the crowd and every eye was turned in one direction. There was a sharp bend in the road that led from the marketplace to the white man's court, and to the stream beyond it. And so no one had seen the approach of the five court messengers until they had come round the bend, a few paces from the edge of the crowd. Okonkwo was sitting at the edge.

He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him.

In that brief moment the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting.

The spell was broken by the head messenger. "Let me pass!" he ordered.

"What do you want here?"

"The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop."

In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?"

He wiped his machete on the sand and went away.

25

When the District Commissioner arrived at Okonkwo's compound at the head of an armed band of soldiers and court messengers he found a small crowd of men sitting wearily in the *obi*. He commanded them to come outside, and they obeyed without a murmur.

"Which among you is called Okonkwo?" he asked through his interpreter.

"He is not here," replied Obierika.

"Where is he?"

"He is not here!"

The Commissioner became angry and red in the face. He warned the men that unless they produced Okonkwo forthwith he would lock them all up. The men murmured among themselves, and Obierika spoke again.

"We can take you where he is, and perhaps your men will help us."

The Commissioner did not understand what Obierika meant when he said, "Perhaps your men will help us." One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words, he thought.

Obierika with five or six others led the way. The Commissioner and his men followed, their firearms held at the ready. He had warned Obierika that if he and his men played any monkey tricks they would be shot. And so they went.

There was a small bush behind Okonkwo's compound. The only opening into this bush from the compound was a little round hole in the red-earth wall through which fowls went in and out in their endless search for food. The hole would not let a man through. It was to this bush that Obierika led the Commissioner and his men. They skirted round the compound, keeping close to the wall. The only sound they made was with their feet as they crushed dry leaves.

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead.

"Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. "We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming."

The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs.

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he asked.

"It is against our custom," said one of the men. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers."

"Will you bury him like any other man?" asked the Commissioner.

"We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land."

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog. . . ." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words.

"Shut up!" shouted one of the messengers, quite unnecessarily.

"Take down the body," the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger, "and bring it and all these people to the court."

"Yes, sah," the messenger said, saluting.

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

Derek Walcott

b. St. Lucia, 1930

Growing up on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, Derek Walcott was exposed at an early age to a wide range of peoples and customs whose roots extended to Africa, Asia, and Europe. The history of the region also included indigenous peoples who had been largely exterminated by Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. Walcott's substantial body of work—poetry and plays—addresses the social and political realities of a diverse and turbulent history. Like other West Indian writers and artists, Walcott is interested in the search for identity within such a cultural collage.

After the decimation of the original West Indians through slavery and disease, some five million Africans were brought in to work as slaves on the islands' plantations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Irish immigrants were recruited to work the fields of sugar cane. An early pattern of an elite white ruling class dominating a peasant working class comprising various ethnic groups prevailed into the twentieth century. Thus, the most basic question of identity concerning the West Indies has to do with the name of these islands and their residents. The current name, "West Indies," perpetuates the misnomer coined by Columbus in 1492 when he called the native peoples of the Americas "Indians" and used "West" to distinguish them from the "East Indians" of India. The terms *Greater* and *Lesser Antilles* have also been used for the region, but *Antilles* was the name of a legendary island located between Europe and Japan on medieval maps; after Columbus's "discovery," the Spanish called the islands *Antillas*. Residents of the West Indies have a complicated relationship not only with their personal identity but with that of their land as well.

Walcott's writings are a personal odyssey, a search for a mosaic that would harmonize the diversity of his native region, a vision complicated by the multiplicity of languages spoken there—English, Spanish, French, and Dutch—not to mention a variety of CREOLE dialects and island PATOIS (a regional form of a language). Walcott, himself a combination of different ethnic groups, sympathizes with the various social classes and mores on the islands. His writings appeal to many who see themselves as ethnic and cultural MESTIZOS[1]—peoples of mixed origins. The experience of native peoples under European colonizers is one of the fundamental stories of the Americas and of central importance to such modern writers as Pablo Neruda of Chile, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, and Leslie Marmon Silko of the southwestern United States.



Rune Hellestad, *Derek Walcott*, 1992
The Nobel Prize–winning poet and playwright. (© Rune Hellestad/CORBIS)

WWW For links to more information about Derek Walcott and a quiz on his poetry, and for information about the culture and context of the Caribbean in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

[1] *mestizos: Mestizo*, a Spanish word meaning "mixed," was first used in Latin American countries to refer to children of a mixed couple, a Spanish or a Portuguese with an indigenous person; with the intermarrying of various immigrant groups since, *mestizo* has come to have a broader application.

the black flag flaps toothless
over Isla Negra.[3] You said
when others like me despaired:
climb the moss-throated stairs
to the crest of Macchu Picchu,[4]
break your teeth like a pick on
the obdurate, mottled terraces,
wear the wind, soaked with rain
like a cloak, above absences,

and for us, in the New World,
our older world, you became
a benign, rigorous uncle,
and through you we fanned open
to others, to the sand-rasped
mutter of César Vallejo,[5] to
the radiant, self-circling
sunstone of Octavio,[6] men
who, unlike the Saxons,[7] I am tempted
to call by their Christian names;

we were all netted to one rock
by vines of iron, our livers
picked by corbeaux and condors
in the New World, in a new word,
brotherhood, word which arrests
the crests of the snowblowing ocean
in its flash to a sea of sierras,
the round fish mouths of our children,
the word *cantan*.[8] All this
you have done for me. Gracias.

[3] Isla Negra: Pablo Neruda had a house in Isla Negra, on the Pacific coast in Chile. When he was in residence there, he flew a flag.

[4] Macchu Picchu: See note 2.

[5] César Vallejo (1892–1938): Peruvian poet particularly interested in social change.

[6] Octavio: Octavio Paz (1914–1998), a Nobel Prize–winner from Mexico who often wrote about the Mexican search for identity in its Indian past; Paz's long poem "Sunstone" is a critique of Mexican apathy. *Sunstone* can also refer to gold.

[7] Saxons: Originally, a Germanic tribe, some of whom conquered England in the fifth and sixth centuries; the term *Anglo-Saxon* usually refers to England and the English.

[8] *cantan*: Spanish for "You (plural) sing" or "They sing."

Alifa Rifaat

b. Egypt, 1930

Contrary to the stereotype of submissive, veiled, and voiceless victims of a male-dominated society, Arab women have been amassing a considerable body of work in Arabic literature. Some of this writing takes a vigorous feminist stand on issues of women's rights and women's sexuality. One of the first feminist writers in Arabic literature was the poet Aisha al-Taymuriyya (1840–1902), a member of the Turkish aristocracy in Egypt. Between 1892 and 1920 several journals focusing on and produced by women came out of Egypt and circulated throughout the Arabic world. In 1995, at the first Arab Women Book Fair, held in Cairo, more than 150 women writers participated from throughout the Arab world and more than 1,500 titles were on display by publishers. Among the principal Arabic feminists writing today are Hanan al-Shaykh (b. Lebanon, 1945); Ghada al-Samman (b. Syria, 1942); Fadia Faqir (b. Jordan, 1956); Alia Mamdouh (b. Iraq, 1944); Liana Badr (b. Palestine, 1952); and Nawal el-Saadawi (b. 1931) and Alifa Rifaat from Egypt. Through translations, al-Shaykh, el-Saadawi, and Rifaat in particular have received widespread attention and acclaim throughout the East and West, and the reception of their work has generated interest in and controversy over the role of women in the Arab world as well as the politics of literary reception in a global culture. The award-winning Rifaat has been recognized abroad and in Egypt as a gifted stylist and a controversial pioneer in writing about social conditions and sexual politics concerning Egyptian women.

Education and Marriage. Fatma Abdulla Rifaat was born on June 5, 1930, in Cairo, into the family of a well-to-do architect, Abdulla, and his wife, Zakia. Raised in the countryside where her family owned property, Fatma was a precocious child who demonstrated early her gift for writing. At the age of nine, she wrote a short story describing "despair in our village," for which she was punished. After receiving her primary school diploma, Rifaat attended the British Institute in Cairo from 1946 to 1949. Though she wanted to enroll in the College of Fine Arts at Cairo and go on to the university, her father, who believed that arts and literature would interfere with her duties as a wife and mother, refused her wishes and forced her to marry. Of that situation, Rifaat explains: "All decisions in our family are made by the menfolk; we are proud of our Arab origin and hold on to certain Arab customs, among which is the belief that the marriage of girls and their education remains the business of the man. The men taught us to be ladies in society and mistresses of the home only. As for the arts and literature, they were a waste of time and even forbidden." After an eight-month unconsummated marriage with a mining engineer, in July 1952 Fatma married a cousin with the same surname, Hussein Rifaat, a police officer with whom she had a daughter and two sons. Because Hussein's work took him to several posts at a number of

WWW For links more informatio about Alifa Rifaa and a quiz on "M World of the Unknown," and information abo the culture and context of the M East in the twent century, see *Wor Literature Online* a bedfordstmartin .com/worldlit.

AH-lee-fah ree-FA

towns and villages, Rifaat, like the wife in "My World of the Unknown," had the opportunity to observe Egyptian life in all its diversity.

More convincingly than any other woman writing in Arabic today, Alifa Rifaat . . . lifts the veil on what it means to be a woman living within a traditional Muslim society.

– DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES, translator, 1983

Reclaiming the Writer. Having experimented with oil painting and music, Rifaat returned to writing short stories, "a thing," she explains, "that clashed with my marriage." When her first story was published in 1955, her husband "created a storm," even though she had published her work under a pseudonym, Alifa Rifaat. She nevertheless continued to publish until 1960, when her husband demanded that she stop writing altogether. For more than a decade Rifaat complied, during which time she avidly studied literature and read on Sufism, science, astronomy, and history. In about 1973, after she had suffered a long bout of illness, her husband conceded that she might resume her writing. During that time of reclaiming her voice, Rifaat wrote "My World of the Unknown," a story that immediately garnered her both praise and blame for its treatment of the protagonist's sexuality. Beginning in 1974, Rifaat published many short stories in the literary journal *al-Thaqafa al-usbu'iya*, followed by the collection of short stories *Eve Returns with Adam to Paradise* (1975) and the novel *The Jewel of Pharo* (1978). After her husband's death in 1979 Rifaat met the British translator Denys Johnson-Davies, who, Rifaat explains, encouraged her to abandon some of the Romantic elements of her early work and to use colloquial language for dialogue. Several collections of her stories were published in the early 1980s, including *Who Can This Man Be?* (1981), *The Prayer of Love* (1983), *A House in the Land of the Dead* (1984), and *Love Conspired on Me* (1985). In 1983, *Distant View of a Minaret*, a collection of stories selected and translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, among them "My World of the Unknown," was published in English before appearing in Arabic two years later. In 1984 Rifaat won the Excellence Award from the Modern Literature Assembly. She has contributed nearly one hundred short stories to Arabic and English magazines, and her work has been produced for British, Egyptian, and German radio and television. Her novel *Girls of Baurdin* was published in 1995.

Awakening. Unlike some of her contemporaries, such as el-Saadawi and al-Shaykh, Rifaat draws primarily on Arab tradition in her fiction. A devout Muslim well read in the Islamic holy book, the QUR'AN (KORAN), and in the collected laws and traditions of Islam, the HADITH, she seeks to reconcile Islamic teachings, which she believes have been misinterpreted with regard to women, with current practices. However, as recently as 1999, *Distant View of a Minaret* was pulled from the shelves of the bookstore at the American University in Cairo for offending public morality and injuring good taste. Critics oppose Rifaat's frank exploration of female sexuality. "Most of my stories," Rifaat has observed, "revolve around a woman's right to a fully effective and complete sexual life in marriage; that and the sexual and emotional problems encountered by women in marriages are the most important themes of my stories." Her own marriage was initially unfulfilling because she had been told nothing about the act of making love. She adds, however, that Western models of sexual education and sexual liberation are inappropriate for Arab peoples, who have a strong commitment to Muslim religion and Arabic culture. "Our society," she explains, "does not allow us to experience sex freely as Western women may. We have our traditions and our religion in which we believe." In this story, Rifaat indeed does not express Western notions of libido but accounts for the narrator's sexual awakening by way of Islamic myth and Arabic folk belief.

Alifa Rifaat's revolt falls far short of suggesting that there be any change in the traditional role of women in Muslim society, and the last place she would look for inspiration for any change would be the Christian West.

– DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES, translator

"My World of the Unknown." In Rifaat's "My World of the Unknown," the known world the narrator inhabits is that of middle-class, somewhat Westernized Egyptian women whose menfolk are thoroughly absorbed in the gray workaday world of urban bureaucracy and whose children are off at school, leaving them to occupy their days with supervising households. Though she says little about her life prior to the action of the story, it is apparent that the narrator's wifely existence has left her feeling dry and depleted in body and soul. When her preoccupied husband is transferred to a post in the countryside, her subconscious stirs and directs her toward the mysterious house where the deeper needs of her imagination, her sexuality, and her spirit may be met. In the house on the canal, she feels alive and open to the natural world, and her whole being is refreshed and quickened when she enters into a magical love affair with a beautiful female snake. The snake is apparently a **djinn**—one of a host of corporeal beings Allah created from smokeless fire who are said to live in a parallel universe to ours. Arab folklore abounds with tales of comings and goings between these worlds, and such encounters may be for good or for ill, since the djinn, like human beings, may be evil or helpful. In any case, to glimpse their world of the unknown alters a human being forever; such an experience seems to have driven Aneesa, the house's previous occupant, into madness, and by the end of the story, when the husband clumsily destroys his wife's idyll by killing one of the snake's own kind, the narrator may be mad as well, for her whole life is focused on the slim hope that she will be reunited with her snake lover. Like the supernatural world, human sexuality is at once a territory of great beauty and joy and, equally, of great risk. By daring to explore her own desires and by reaching out sexually and spiritually toward a very different—and female—being, the narrator invites danger and sorrow, but to have drawn back from the adventure would have meant continuing to live out a mechanical, meaningless existence.

JIN

■ CONNECTIONS

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Book 5). "My World of the Unknown" presents women's space and women's desire in a context in which women experience only limited power and freedom. Their desire for more seems to be reflected in an encounter with a mysterious Other who offers some form of liberation or alternative to oppressive conventions. How are the conditions in these two stories similar? In what ways are these stories culturally or historically specific? How would it change our reaction to Gilman's story, for example, if the woman in the wallpaper was a snake?

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 428; Abé Kobo, "The Stick," p. 920. Rifaat's "My World of the Unknown" invokes the genre known as the "fantastic," or fantasy,

works in which events and characters appear that would not manifest in real life. Such stories invite readers to "suspend our disbelief," to paraphrase the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and treat the impossible as plausible. In Rifaat's story, the narrator's encounter with the snake is presented as if it were actually taking place. Similarly, in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Abé's "The Stick," Gregor's transformation into an insect and the narrator's becoming a stick, respectively, are described as real events. By means of the fantastic—one branch of which is science fiction—authors often are able to criticize the real world, its social conventions or politics and its follies. How do these writers use fantasy to deal with very serious subjects?

FURTHER RESEARCH

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PRONUNCIATION

djinn: JIN
Alifa Rifaat: AH-lee-fah ree-FAHT
souk: SOOK

My World of the Unknown

Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

There are many mysteries in life, unseen powers in the universe, worlds other than our own, hidden links and radiations that draw creatures together and whose effect is interacting. They may merge or be incompatible, and perhaps the day will come when science will find a method for connecting up these worlds in the same way as it has made it possible to voyage to other planets. Who knows?

Yet one of these other worlds I have explored; I have lived in it and been linked with its creatures through the bond of love. I used to pass with amazing speed between this tangible world of ours and another invisible earth, mixing in the two worlds on one and the same day, as though living it twice over.

When entering into the world of my love, and being summoned and yielding to its call, no one around me would be aware of what was happening to me. All that occurred was that I would be overcome by something resembling a state of languor and would go off into a semi-sleep. Nothing about me would change except that I would become very silent and withdrawn, though I am normally a person who is talkative and eager to go out into the world of people. I would yearn to be on my own, would long for the moment of surrender as I prepared myself for answering the call.

Love had its beginning when an order came through for my husband to be transferred to a quiet country town and, being too busy with his work, delegated to me the task of going to this town to choose suitable accommodation prior to his taking up the new appointment. He cabled one of his subordinates named Kamil and asked him to meet me at the station and to assist me.

I took the early morning train. The images of a dream I had had that night came to me as I looked out at the vast fields and gauged the distances between the towns through which the train passed and reckoned how far it was between the new town in which we were fated to live and beloved Cairo.

The images of the dream kept reappearing to me, forcing themselves upon my mind: images of a small white house surrounded by a garden with bushes bearing yellow flowers, a house lying on the edge of a broad canal in which were swans and tall sailing boats. I kept on wondering at my dream and trying to analyse it. Perhaps it was some secret wish I had had, or maybe the echo of some image that my unconscious had stored up and was chewing over.

As the train arrived at its destination, I awoke from my thoughts. I found Kamil awaiting me. We set out in his car, passing through the local *souk*.[1] I gazed at the mounds of fruit with delight, chatting away happily with Kamil. When we emerged from the *souk* we found ourselves on the bank of the Mansoura canal, a canal on which swans swam and sailing boats moved to and fro. I kept staring at them with uneasy longing. Kamil directed the driver to the residential buildings the governorate had put up for housing government employees. While gazing at the opposite bank a large boat with a great fluttering sail glided past. Behind it could be seen a white house that had a garden with trees with yellow flowers and that lay on its own amidst vast fields. I shouted out in confusion, overcome by the feeling that I had been here before.

"My World of the Unknown." The first English translation of this story was published in 1983 in the collection *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories* translated by Denys Johnson-Davies. The same collection was published two years later in Arabic under the title, as translated into English, *The Long Night of Winter and Other Stories*. Based in part on her experiences with her husband, whose travels to various posts acquainted Rifaat with rural Egypt, "My World of the Unknown" was the first story to attract wide attention to the writer's fiction. Although Rifaat has said that death is one of the main subjects of her writing, women's sexuality—particularly the right of married women to enjoy a full and rewarding sex life—has been equally her focus. In many ways the suppression of sexual desire in a woman's life symbolizes the blocking of other desires whose expression might lead to happiness, joy, and fulfillment.

All notes are the editors'.

[1] *souk:* An outdoor market or bazaar.

"Go to that house," I called to the driver. Kamil leapt up, objecting vehemently: "No, no,—no one lives in that house. The best thing is to go to the employees' buildings."

I shouted insistently, like someone hypnotized: "I must have a look at that house." "All right," he said. "You won't like it, though—it's old and needs repairing." Giving in to my wish, he ordered the driver to make his way there.

At the garden door we found a young woman, spare and of fair complexion. A fat child with ragged clothes encircled her neck with his burly legs. In a strange silence, she stood as though nailed to the ground, barring the door with her hands and looking at us with doltish enquiry.

I took a sweet from my bag and handed it to the boy. He snatched it eagerly, tightening his grip on her neck with his podgy, mud-bespattered feet so that her face became flushed from his high-spirited embrace. A half-smile showed on her tightly closed lips. Taking courage, I addressed her in a friendly tone: "I'd like to see over this house." She braced her hands resolutely against the door. "No," she said quite simply. I turned helplessly to Kamil, who went up to her and pushed her violently in the chest so that she staggered back. "Don't you realize," he shouted at her, "that this is the director's wife? Off with you!"

Lowering her head so that the child all but slipped from her, she walked off dejectedly to the canal bank where she lay down on the ground, put the child on her lap, and rested her head in her hands in silent submission.

Moved by pity, I remonstrated: "There's no reason to be so rough, Mr. Kamil. Who is the woman?" "Some mad woman," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "who's a stranger to the town. Out of kindness the owner of this house put her in charge of it until someone should come along to live in it."

With increased interest I said: "Will he be asking a high rent for it?" "Not at all," he said with an enigmatic smile. "He'd welcome anyone taking it over. There are no restrictions and the rent is modest—no more than four pounds."

I was beside myself with joy. Who in these days can find somewhere to live for such an amount? I rushed through the door into the house with Kamil behind me and went over the rooms: five spacious rooms with wooden floors, with a pleasant hall, modern lavatory, and a beautifully roomy kitchen with a large verandah overlooking vast pistachio-green fields of generously watered rice. A breeze, limpid and cool, blew, playing with the tips of the crop and making the delicate leaves move in continuous dancing waves.

I went back to the first room with its spacious balcony overlooking the road and revealing the other bank of the canal where, along its strand, extended the houses of the town. Kamil pointed out to me a building facing the house on the other side. "That's where we work," he said, "and behind it is where the children's schools are."

"Thanks be to God," I said joyfully. "It means that everything is within easy reach of this house—and the *souk*'s nearby too." "Yes," he said, "and the fishermen will knock at your door to show you the fresh fish they've caught in their nets. But

the house needs painting and re-doing, also there are all sorts of rumours about it—the people around here believe in djinn[2] and spirits."

"This house is going to be my home," I said with determination. "Its low rent will make up for whatever we may have to spend on re-doing it. You'll see what this house will look like when I get the garden arranged. As for the story about djinn and spirits, just leave them to us—we're more spirited than them."

We laughed at my joke as we left the house. On my way to the station we agreed about the repairs that needed doing to the house. Directly I reached Cairo I cabled my husband to send the furniture from the town we had been living in, specifying a suitable date to fit in with the completion of the repairs and the house being ready for occupation.

On the date fixed I once again set off and found that all my wishes had been carried out and that the house was pleasantly spruce with its rooms painted a cheerful orange tinge, the floors well polished and the garden tidied up and made into small flowerbeds.

I took possession of the keys and Kamil went off to attend to his business, having put a chair on the front balcony for me to sit on while I awaited the arrival of the furniture van. I stretched out contentedly in the chair and gazed at the two banks with their towering trees like two rows of guards between which passed the boats with their lofty sails, while around them glided a male swan heading a flotilla of females. Halfway across the canal he turned and flirted with them, one after the other, like a sultan amidst his harem.

Relaxed, I closed my eyes. I projected myself into the future and pictured to myself the enjoyment I would have in this house after it had been put in order and the garden fixed up. I awoke to the touch of clammy fingers shaking me by the shoulders.

I started and found myself staring at the fair-complexioned woman with her child squatting on her shoulders as she stood erect in front of me staring at me in silence. "What do you want?" I said to her sharply. "How did you get in?" "I got in with this," she said simply, revealing a key between her fingers.

I snatched the key from her hand as I loudly rebuked her: "Give it here. We have rented the house and you have no right to come into it like this." "I have a lot of other keys," she answered briefly. "And what," I said to her, "do you want of this house?" "I want to stay on in it and for you to go," she said. I laughed in amazement at her words as I asked myself: Is she really mad? Finally I said impatiently: "Listen here, I'm not leaving here and you're not entering this house unless I wish it. My husband is coming with the children, and the furniture is on the way. He'll be arriving in a

[2] djinn: The djinn are intelligent corporeal beings created by Allah out of smokeless fire. They inhabit a sort of parallel universe to ours, although Arabic folklore recounts comings and goings between the two worlds. They may appear to human beings in the guise of an animal or in human form; the narrator's lover in this story does both. One whole sura of the Qur'an (Koran) is devoted to the djinn. The English word *genie* is derived from *djinn*.

little while and we'll be living here for such period of time as my husband is required to work in this town."

She looked at me in a daze. For a long time she was silent, then she said: "All right, your husband will stay with me and you can go." Despite my utter astonishment I felt pity for her. "I'll allow you to stay on with us for the little boy's sake," I said to her gently, "until you find yourself another place. If you'd like to help me with the housework I'll pay you what you ask."

Shaking her head, she said with strange emphasis: "I'm not a servant. I'm Aneesa." "You're not staying here," I said to her coldly, rising to my feet. Collecting all my courage and emulating Kamil's determination when he rebuked her, I began pushing her in the chest as I caught hold of the young boy's hand. "Get out of here and don't come near this house," I shouted at her. "Let me have all the keys. I'll not let go of your child till you've given them all to me."

With a set face that did not flicker she put her hand to her bosom and took out a ring on which were several keys, which she dropped into my hand. I released my grip on the young boy. Supporting him on her shoulders, she started to leave. Regretting my harshness, I took out several piastres from my bag and placed them in the boy's hand. With the same silence and stiffness she wrested the piastres from the boy's hand and gave them back to me. Then she went straight out. Bolting the door this time, I sat down, tense and upset, to wait.

My husband arrived, then the furniture, and for several days I occupied myself with putting the house in order. My husband was busy with his work and the children occupied themselves with making new friends and I completely forgot about Aneesa, that is until my husband returned one night wringing his hands with fury: "This woman Aneesa, can you imagine that since we came to live in this house she's been hanging around it every night. Tonight she was so crazy she blocked my way and suggested I should send you off so that she might live with me. The woman's gone completely off her head about this house and I'm afraid she might do something to the children or assault you."

Joking with him and masking the jealousy that raged within me, I said: "And what is there for you to get angry about? She's a fair and attractive enough woman—a blessing brought to your very doorstep!" With a sneer he took up the telephone, muttering: "May God look after her!"

He contacted the police and asked them to come and take her away. When I heard the sound of the police van coming I ran to the window and saw them taking her off. The poor woman did not resist, did not object, but submitted with a gentle sadness that as usual with her aroused one's pity. Yet, when she saw me standing in tears and watching her, she turned to me and, pointing to the wall of the house, called out: "I'll leave her to you." "Who?" I shouted. "Who, Aneesa?" Once again pointing at the bottom of the house, she said: "Her."

The van took her off and I spent a sleepless night. No sooner did day come than I hurried to the garden to examine my plants and to walk round the house and carefully inspect its walls. All I found were some cracks, the house being old, and I laughed at the frivolous thought that came to me: Could, for example, there be jewels buried here, as told in fairy tales?

Who could "she" be? What was the secret of this house? Who was Aneesa and was she really mad? Where were she and her son living? So great did my concern for Aneesa become that I began pressing my husband with questions until he brought me news of her. The police had learnt that she was the wife of a well-to-do teacher living in a nearby town. One night he had caught her in an act of infidelity, and in fear she had fled with her son and had settled here, no one knowing why she had betaken herself to this particular house. However, the owner of the house had been good enough to allow her to put up in it until someone should come to live in it, while some kind person had intervened on her behalf to have her name included among those receiving monthly allowances from the Ministry of Social Affairs. There were many rumours that cast doubt upon her conduct: People passing by her house at night would hear her conversing with unknown persons. Her madness took the form of a predilection for silence and isolation from people during the daytime as she wandered about in a dream world. After the police had persuaded them to take her in to safeguard the good repute of her family, she was returned to her relatives.

The days passed and the story of Aneesa was lost in oblivion. Winter came and with it heavy downpours of rain. The vegetation in my garden flourished though the castor-oil plants withered and their yellow flowers fell. I came to find pleasure in sitting out on the kitchen balcony looking at my flowers and vegetables and enjoying the belts of sunbeams that lay between the clouds and lavished my balcony with warmth and light.

One sunny morning my attention was drawn to the limb of a nearby tree whose branches curved up gracefully despite its having dried up and its dark bark being cracked. My gaze was attracted by something twisting and turning along the tip of a branch: Bands of yellow and others of red, intermingled with bands of black, were creeping forward. It was a long, smooth tube, at its end a small striped head with two bright, wary eyes.

The snake curled round on itself in spiral rings, then tautened its body and moved forward. The sight gripped me; I felt terror turning my blood cold and freezing my limbs.

My senses were numbed, my soul intoxicated with a strange elation at the exciting beauty of the snake. I was rooted to the spot, wavering between two thoughts that contended in my mind at one and the same time: Should I snatch up some implement from the kitchen and kill the snake, or should I enjoy the rare moment of beauty that had been afforded me?

As though the snake had read what was passing through my mind, it raised its head, tilting it to right and left in thrilling coquetry. Then, by means of two tiny fangs like pearls, and a golden tongue like a twig of *arak* wood, it smiled at me and fastened its eyes on mine in one fleeting, commanding glance. The thought of killing left me. I felt a current, a radiation from its eyes that penetrated to my heart ordering me to stay where I was. A warning against continuing to sit out there in front of it surged inside me, but my attraction to it paralysed my limbs and I did not move. I kept on watching it, utterly entranced and captivated. Like a bashful virgin being

lavished with compliments, it tried to conceal its pride in its beauty, and, having made certain of captivating its lover, the snake coyly twisted round and gently, gracefully glided away until swallowed up by a crack in the wall. Could the snake be the "she" that Aneesa had referred to on the day of her departure?

At last I rose from my place, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was on the brink of a new world, a new destiny, or rather, if you wish, the threshold of a new love. I threw myself onto the bed in a dreamlike state, unaware of the passage of time. No sooner, though, did I hear my husband's voice and the children with their clatter as they returned at noon than I regained my sense of being a human being, wary and frightened about itself, determined about the existence and continuance of its species. Without intending to I called out: "A snake—there's a snake in the house."

My husband took up the telephone and some men came and searched the house. I pointed out to them the crack into which the snake had disappeared, though racked with a feeling of remorse at being guilty of betrayal. For here I was denouncing the beloved, inviting people against it after it had felt safe with me.

The men found no trace of the snake. They burned some wormwood and fumigated the hole but without result. Then my husband summoned Sheikh Farid, Sheikh of the Rifa'iyya[3] order in the town, who went on chanting verses from the Qur'an as he tapped the ground with his stick. He then asked to speak to me alone and said:

"Madam, the sovereign of the house has sought you out and what you saw is no snake, rather it is one of the monarchs of the earth—may God make your words pleasant to them—who has appeared to you in the form of a snake. Here in this house there are many holes of snakes, but they are of the non-poisonous kind. They inhabit houses and go and come as they please. What you saw, though, is something else."

"I don't believe a word of it," I said, stupefied. "This is nonsense. I know that the djinn are creatures that actually exist, but they are not in touch with our world, there is no contact between them and the world of humans."

With an enigmatic smile he said: "My child, the Prophet[4] went out to them and read the Qur'an to them in their country. Some of them are virtuous and some of them are Muslims, and how do you know there is no contact between us and them? Let your prayer be 'O Lord, increase me in knowledge' and do not be nervous. Your purity of spirit, your translucence of soul have opened to you doors that will take you to other worlds known only to their Creator. Do not be afraid. Even if you should find her one night sleeping in your bed, do not be alarmed but talk to her with all politeness and friendliness."

"That's enough of all that, Sheikh Farid. Thank you," I said, alarmed, and he left us.

We went on discussing the matter. "Let's be practical," suggested my husband, "and stop all the cracks at the bottom of the outside walls and put wire-mesh over the windows, also paint wormwood all round the garden fence."

[3] **Sheikh of the Rifa'iyya:** The sheikh is the local head of a conservative Islamic order.

[4] **the Prophet:** Muhammad (c. 570–632 C.E.), the founder of Islam.

We set about putting into effect what we had agreed. I, though, no longer dared to go out onto the balconies. I neglected my garden and stopped wandering about in it. Generally I would spend my free time in bed. I changed to being someone who liked to sit around lazily and was disinclined to mix with people; those diversions and recreations that previously used to tempt me no longer gave me any pleasure. All I wanted was to stretch myself out and drowse. In bewilderment I asked myself: Could it be that I was in love? But how could I love a snake? Or could she really be one of the daughters of the monarchs of the djinn? I would awake from my musings to find that I had been wandering in my thoughts and recalling to mind how magnificent she was. And what is the secret of her beauty? I would ask myself. Was it that I was fascinated by her multi-coloured, supple body? Or was it that I had been dazzled by that intelligent, commanding way she had of looking at me? Or could it be the sleek way she had of gliding along, so excitingly dangerous, that had captivated me?

Excitingly dangerous! No doubt it was this excitement that had stirred my feelings and awakened my love, for did they not make films to excite and frighten? There was no doubt but that the secret of my passion for her, my preoccupation with her, was due to the excitement that had aroused, through intense fear, desire within myself; an excitement that was sufficiently strong to drive the blood hotly through my veins whenever the memory of her came to me, thrusting the blood in bursts that made my heart beat wildly, my limbs limp. And so, throwing myself down in a pleasurable state of torpor, my craving for her would be awakened and I would wish for her coil-like touch, her graceful gliding motion.

And yet I fell to wondering how union could come about, how craving be quenched, the delights of the body be realized, between a woman and a snake. And did she, I wondered, love me and want me as I loved her? An idea would obtrude itself upon me sometimes: Did Cleopatra, the very legend of love, have sexual intercourse with her serpent after having given up sleeping with men, having wearied of amorous adventures with them so that her sated instincts were no longer moved other than by the excitement of fear, her senses no longer aroused other than by bites from a snake? And the last of her lovers had been a viper that had destroyed her.

I came to live in a state of continuous torment, for a strange feeling of longing scorched my body and rent my senses, while my circumstances obliged me to carry out the duties and responsibilities that had been placed on me as the wife of a man who occupied an important position in the small town, he and his family being objects of attention and his house a Kaaba[5] for those seeking favours; also as a mother who must look after her children and concern herself with every detail of their lives so as to exercise control over them; there was also the house and its chores, this house that was inhabited by the mysterious lover who lived in a world other than mine. How, I wondered, was union between us to be achieved? Was wishing for this love a sin or was there nothing to reproach myself about?

[5] **Kaaba:** Metaphorically, the house is a pilgrimage site; the Kaaba is the small cubical building within the Great Mosque at Mecca that houses the Black Stone, the holiest relic in Islam. Muslims worldwide face toward the Kaaba when they pray.

And as my self-questioning increased so did my yearning, my curiosity, my desire. Was the snake from the world of reptiles or from the djinn? When would the meeting be? Was she, I wondered, aware of me and would she return out of pity for my consuming passion?

One stormy morning with the rain pouring down so hard that I could hear the drops rattling on the window pane, I lit the stove and lay down in bed between the covers seeking refuge from an agonizing trembling that racked my yearning body which, ablaze with unquenchable desire, called out for relief.

I heard a faint rustling sound coming from the corner of the wall right beside my bed. I looked down and kept my eyes fixed on one of the holes in the wall, which I found was slowly, very slowly, expanding. Closing my eyes, my heart raced with joy and my body throbbed with mounting desire as there dawned in me the hope of an encounter. I lay back in submission to what was to be. No longer did I care whether love was coming from the world of reptiles or from that of the djinn, sovereigns of the world. Even were this love to mean my destruction, my desire for it was greater.

I heard a hissing noise that drew nearer, then it changed to a gentle whispering in my ear, calling to me: "I am love, O enchantress. I showed you my home in your sleep; I called you to my kingdom when your soul was dozing on the horizon of dreams, so come, my sweet beloved, come and let us explore the depths of the azure sea of pleasure. There, in the chamber of coral, amidst cool, shady rocks where reigns deep, restful silence lies our bed, lined with soft, bright green damask, inlaid with pearls newly wrenched from their shells. Come, let me sleep with you as I have slept with beautiful women and have given them bliss. Come, let me prise out your pearl from its shell that I may polish it and bring forth its splendour. Come to where no one will find us, where no one will see us, for the eyes of swimming creatures are innocent and will not heed what we do nor understand what we say. Down there lies repose, lies a cure for all your yearnings and ills. Come, without fear or dread, for no creature will reach us in our hidden world, and only the eye of God alone will see us; He alone will know what we are about and He will watch over us."

I began to be intoxicated by the soft musical whisperings. I felt her cool and soft and smooth, her coldness producing a painful convulsion in my body and hurting me to the point of terror. I felt her as she slipped between the covers, then her two tiny fangs, like two pearls, began to caress my body; arriving at my thighs, the golden tongue, like an *arak* twig, inserted its pronged tip between them and began sipping and exhaling; sipping the poisons of my desire and exhaling the nectar of my ecstasy, till my whole body tingled and started to shake in sharp, painful, rapturous spasms—and all the while the tenderest of words were whispered to me as I confided to her all my longings.

At last the cool touch withdrew, leaving me exhausted. I went into a deep slumber to awake at noon full of energy, all of me a joyful burgeoning to life. Curiosity and a desire to know who it was seized me again. I looked at the corner of the wall and found that the hole was wide open. Once again I was overcome by fear. I pointed out the crack to my husband, unable to utter, although terror had once again awakened in me passionate desire. My husband filled up the crack with cement and went to sleep.

Morning came and everyone went out. I finished my housework and began roaming around the rooms in boredom, battling against the desire to surrender myself to sleep. I sat in the hallway and suddenly she appeared before me, gentle as an angel, white as day, softly undulating and flexing herself, calling to me in her bewitching whisper: "Bride of mine, I called you and brought you to my home. I have wedded you, so there is no sin in our love, nothing to reproach yourself about. I am the guardian of the house, and I hold sway over the snakes and vipers that inhabit it, so come and I shall show you where they live. Have no fear so long as we are together. You and I are in accord. Bring a container with water and I shall place my fingers over your hand and we shall recite together some verses from the Qur'an, then we shall sprinkle it in the places from which they emerge and shall thus close the doors on them, and it shall be a pact between us that your hands will not do harm to them."

"Then you are one of the monarchs of the djinn?" I asked eagerly. "Why do you not bring me treasures and riches as we hear about in fables when a human takes as sister her companion among the djinn?"

She laughed at my words, shaking her golden hair that was like dazzling threads of light. She whispered to me, coquettishly: "How greedy is mankind! Are not the pleasures of the body enough? Were I to come to you with wealth we would both die consumed by fire."

"No, no," I called out in alarm. "God forbid that I should ask for unlawful wealth. I merely asked it of you as a test, that it might be positive proof that I am not imagining things and living in dreams."

She said: "And do intelligent humans have to have something tangible as evidence? By God, do you not believe in His ability to create worlds and living beings? Do you not know that you have an existence in worlds other than that of matter and the transitory? Fine, since you ask for proof, come close to me and my caresses will put vitality back into your limbs. You will retain your youth. I shall give you abiding youth and the delights of love—and they are more precious than wealth in the world of man. How many fortunes have women spent in quest of them? As for me I shall feed from the poisons of your desire, the exhalations of your burning passion, for that is my nourishment and through it I live."

"I thought that your union with me was for love, not for nourishment and the perpetuation of youth and vigour," I said in amazement.

"And is sex anything but food for the body and an interaction in union and love?" she said. "Is it not this that makes human beings happy and is the secret of feeling joy and elation?"

She stretched out her radiant hand to my body, passing over it like the sun's rays and discharging into it warmth and a sensation of languor.

"I am ill," I said. "I am ill. I am ill," I kept on repeating. When he heard me my husband brought the doctor, who said: "High blood pressure, heart trouble, nervous depression." Having prescribed various medicaments he left. The stupidity of doctors! My doctor did not know that he was describing the symptoms of love, did not even know it was from love I was suffering. Yet I knew my illness and the secret of my cure. I showed my husband the enlarged hole in the wall and once again he stopped it up. We then carried the bed to another corner.

After some days had passed I found another hole alongside my bed. My beloved came and whispered to me: "Why are you so coy and flee from me, my bride? Is it

fear of your being rebuffed or is it from aversion? Are you not happy with our being together? Why do you want for us to be apart?"

"I am in agony," I whispered back. "Your love is so intense and the desire to enjoy you so consuming. I am frightened I shall feel that I am tumbling down into a bottomless pit and being destroyed."

"My beloved," she said. "I shall only appear to you in beauty's most immaculate form."

"But it is natural for you to be a man," I said in a precipitate outburst, "seeing that you are so determined to have a love affair with me."

"Perfect beauty is to be found only in woman," she said, "so yield to me and I shall let you taste undreamed of happiness; I shall guide you to worlds possessed of such beauty as you have never imagined."

She stretched out her fingers to caress me, while her delicate mouth sucked in the poisons of my desire and exhaled the nectar of my ecstasy, carrying me off into a trance of delicious happiness.

After that we began the most pleasurable of love affairs, wandering together in worlds and living on horizons of dazzling beauty, a world fashioned of jewels, a world whose every moment was radiant with light and formed a thousand shapes, a thousand colours.

As for the opening in the wall, I no longer took any notice. I no longer complained of feeling ill, in fact there burned within me abounding vitality. Sometimes I would bring a handful of wormwood and, by way of jest, would stop up the crack, just as the beloved teases her lover and closes the window in his face that, ablaze with desire for her, he may hasten to the door. After that I would sit for a long time and enjoy watching the wormwood powder being scattered in spiral rings by unseen puffs of wind. Then I would throw myself down on the bed and wait.

For months I immersed myself in my world, no longer calculating time or counting the days, until one morning my husband went out on the balcony lying behind our favoured wall alongside the bed. After a while I heard him utter a cry of alarm. We all hurried out to find him holding a stick, with a black, ugly snake almost two metres long, lying at his feet.

I cried out with a sorrow whose claws clutched at my heart so that it began to beat wildly. With crazed fury I shouted at my husband: "Why have you broken the pact and killed it? What harm has it done?" How cruel is man! He lets no creature live in peace.

I spent the night sorrowful and apprehensive. My lover came to me and embraced me more passionately than ever. I whispered to her imploringly: "Be kind, beloved. Are you angry with me or sad because of me?"

"It is farewell," she said. "You have broken the pact and have betrayed one of my subjects, so you must both depart from this house, for only love lives in it."

In the morning I packed up so that we might move to one of the employees' buildings, leaving the house in which I had learnt of love and enjoyed incomparable pleasures.

I still live in memory and in hope. I crave for the house and miss my secret love. Who knows, perhaps one day my beloved will call me. Who really knows?

Wole Soyinka

b. Nigeria, 1934

One of Africa's most influential and prolific modern authors, Wole Soyinka is a persistent and outspoken human rights advocate whose campaigns against violence, exploitation, and political corruption have generated both controversy and critical acclaim. The eclectic nature of Soyinka's vision as well as his writing allows him to explore the intellectual, political, and literary heritage of a wide array of cultures and belief systems. Credited with professionalizing the English-language theater in Nigeria and revitalizing interest in Yoruban culture, Soyinka speaks to both a local and a world audience in his literary battle for freedom and justice. On his ability to unite art and activism and cross cultural boundaries, he once commented: "I have one abiding religion, human liberty." Though he celebrates the traditions and rituals of his cultural heritage, he also recognizes the necessity of negotiating the challenges of a modern, industrialized world. His writing, which draws heavily on indigenous values, beliefs, and artistic conventions, also reflects the influence of Western myths, archetypes, and literary techniques. "Soyinka seems fated to bridge elements in our world which are poles apart," one critic observed.



Wole Soyinka, 2002
Soyinka was photographed here speaking at the burial rites for slain Nigerian justice minister Bola Ige. (© *Reuters NewMedia Inc. / CORBIS*)

Colonial Christianity and Yoruban Tradition. Born Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka in 1934 in Nigeria, then under British rule, Soyinka was raised in an English-speaking environment. His mother, whom he nicknamed the "Wild Christian," was a teacher, performer, trader, and activist. His father was headmaster of an Anglican primary school, which Soyinka attended, in the town of Aké. As a center for European activities in western Nigeria, Aké suffered the erosion of its traditional Nigerian values and customs under wave upon wave of Western influence. Soyinka's witness to this process is contained in the autobiographical *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), in which is found a child's exploration of the conflict between and occasional blending of European Christianity and traditional Yoruban culture.

The Yoruba, a group of peoples in southwestern Nigeria bound by a shared language and culture, have diverse religious beliefs connected by common underlying threads. In Yoruban religion, humans are surrounded by gods and spirits with whom interaction is inevitable: Trees and rivers, for example, might be inhabited and made sacred by ancestral spirits. These spirit ancestors are worshiped in annual festivals and masquerade processions through the *egungun*, masked figures who become possessed by a particular spirit and are able to speak with special wisdom. The *egungun opidan*, a kind of traveling theater that staged MASQUE[1]-like productions in open spaces—such as the one that took place across from

WWW For links to more information about Wole Soyinka and a quiz on *The Lion and the Jewel*, and for information about the culture and context of Africa in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

[1] **masque:** Developed in the Renaissance, a masque is a highly stylized and structured performance that usually focuses on a mythological or allegorical plot, combining drama, music, song, and dance in an elaborate display.

He bears a relation to the poetics of Africa akin to that which Shakespeare bore to England.

– Henry Louis Gates Jr., scholar

Soyinka's mother's shop in the local market—exposed the young man to important figures and themes of Yoruban belief and to native conventions of drama such as drumming, stylized and patterned dances, and the use of representative as well as recognizable characters. Soyinka's visits to the relatively isolated town of Isara, where his grandfather lived and where many traditional festivals were still celebrated, certainly contributed to his later work. Here might have begun, for example, his view of the ritualized experience of the divine as an essentially therapeutic and creative communal activity. In contrast to his own home environment, which was dominated by Christian doctrine (his mother insisted on this), Nigeria's indigenous cultural heritage must have seemed rich with color, mystery, and pageantry.

Education, Imprisonment, Exile. During the time of their control of Nigeria, the English appointed warrant chiefs to supplant village leaders and rule over native communities. These warrant chiefs were accused of unjustified seizure of property, undermining the value of the bride-price,[2] and other gross abuses. In 1929 a group of women, among them Soyinka's mother, became concerned that a head count being carried out by the British might lead to a tax on women. Through songs and dance, their traditional means of protest, the women launched a campaign against the exploitative colonial government that would last for years.

Given his early exposure to political controversy and protest, it is not surprising that Soyinka became deeply devoted to the struggle for Nigerian political independence and cultural autonomy. The pursuit of knowledge led him to Government College in Nigeria in 1952 and later to the University of Leeds in England. He studied at Leeds under the famous Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson Knight, then worked as an actor, script reader, and director at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Awarded a Rockefeller Research Grant to study West African drama, Soyinka returned home to the University of Ibadan in 1960, the year that Nigeria declared independence from Great Britain. During that year he assembled his own acting company, The 1960 Masks, began to write radio plays denouncing the abuse of power in government, and wrote and produced *A Dance of the Forests*, a play critical of the widespread corruption and dishonesty of native politicians. Its release timed to coincide with Nigeria's celebration of independence, the play was received with hostility by both the newly installed leaders for its attack on corruption and the traditionalists for its blending of Yoruban folk heritage with European dramatic techniques. In the years immediately following his return to Africa, Soyinka worked to establish a strong Nigerian theater. He headed theater troupes at various universities, cofounded the Drama Association of Nigeria in 1964, and produced such plays as *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1966), and *The Strong Breed* (1967). After working as a lecturer in the English department at the University of Ife (1962–63) and then at the University of Lagos (1965–67), he became head of the department of theater arts at the University of Ibadan in 1967.

An outspoken activist for human rights, Soyinka was imprisoned twice during the early years of Nigerian independence, first for three months in 1965, under the specious accusation that he had broadcast false election results, then for more than two years (1967–69) for allegedly conspiring to aid the Biafran independence movement.[3] During the latter period of imprisonment, most of which Soyinka spent in solitary confinement, the author wrote on cigarette packages, in the blank spaces of books he secretly acquired, even on toilet paper to keep his mind active and focused. These notes contributed to *The Man Died: The Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972), in which Soyinka asserts that "books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to all those who seek to suppress the truth."

After his release, Soyinka taught and lectured at universities in Nigeria and in other parts of the world, including at Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and Cornell Universities. Twice exiled from his homeland, voluntarily in 1975 and by force in 1994, he was eventually charged with treason by the regime of dictator General Sani Abacha. In spite of the threat of physical harm, he continued to use the written and spoken word to pursue his campaign for individual rights and his hopes for a reborn Nigeria. He won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986.

Progress and the Human Condition. Though known foremost as a dramatist, Soyinka has written poetry, novels, and criticism renowned for their experimentation, originality, and richness. In collections like *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967) and *Poems from Prison* (1969), Soyinka explores the human condition in both a domestic and global context through a combination of biblical and classical references with the imagery of African landscapes and Yoruban spiritual beliefs. Ogun, the Yoruban god of war, ruler of the road, and master metallurgist, appears in much of Soyinka's poetry (as well as in his other work) as a symbol of the forces of creation and destruction so influential in human destiny. Soyinka's frequent use of archetypes, such as the isolated individual searching for his true path in life, often universalizes a local experience. His first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965), is about a group of young Nigerian intellectuals searching for meaning and purpose in a world in which traditional codes of conduct have been challenged by modern attitudes and technology. Soyinka explores the role of tradition and cultural history and the influence of Western intellectual and artistic worldviews as applied to literature in the essay collections *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) and *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (1988). Soyinka's literary eclecticism—his frequent blending of potentially contradictory images, themes, and artistic techniques and forms—reflects

Soyinka seems fated to bridge elements in our world which are poles apart.

– Unknown critic

[2] **bride-price:** The money or goods that a man brings to a woman's family when he marries her.

[3] **Biafran independence movement:** The Ibo people of several regions in Nigeria seceded from the national government in May 1967 to create an independent state. Their efforts were defeated by Nigerian forces in 1970.

his philosophy of social change wherein a community selectively integrates new or external influences with its own customs and traditions to create a new and authentic cultural identity.

Soyinka's plays often dramatize moments or periods of social crisis. *Kongi's Harvest* (1966), for example, presents the social and political aftermath of a confrontation between a newly installed dictator, Kongi, and the hereditary monarch he has deposed. Both leaders are satirized in the play, but the brunt of the attack is on "Kongism," an unjust rulership unsanctioned by the people. In a program note to the 1969 performance of the play, Soyinka called attention to the universality of the play's theme, noting "there are a thousand and more forms of Kongism—from the crude and blasphemous to the subtle and sanctimonious." *The Strong Breed* (1967) depicts a village in need of a ritual sacrifice in order to expiate an undefined evil. The Christ-figure Eman, an outsider in a community distrustful of strangers, is the only character in the play whose compassion for others transcends social boundaries; he is hanged on a sacred tree at the end of the play. *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), notably lacking in specific references to time and place, depicts a society overpowered by the "out there" force of violent authoritarian rule. Cut off from the creative and regenerative power of the earth, the past, and the communal festival, the play's characters lose their humanity and degenerate into monsters. As is typical of Soyinka's drama, both plays are rich in symbolism and ritual, draw on archetypal figures, and experiment with fluidity of place and character. Steeped in Yoruban culture and values, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) tells the story of Elesin, the king's horseman, who after the death of the king is required to commit ritual suicide in order to preserve peace and progress in the land. His destiny is thwarted when he is arrested by a British colonial officer. Elesin's son, Olunde, takes his own life in order to wash away the curse.

The Lion and the Jewel. The encounter of European theatrical conventions and techniques with the masquerade and pageantry of Yoruban heritage in Soyinka's early play *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) underscores the meeting of Western innovation, capitalism, and Christian doctrine with the world of tradition, chieftains, and paganism in the story of the drama. Motorcycles, photo layouts, unions, and stamp machines clash and blend with the sacred "odan" tree, wood spirits, and fertility rites. The forces of progress and conservatism, however, are not entirely oppositional in the text. Instead, Soyinka depicts a community in the process of change, struggling to selectively incorporate various aspects of modern life while preserving its own heritage.

Many of the themes that dominate Soyinka's writing—political corruption, the creative and destructive power of the god Ogun, the centrality of ritual and festival to communal health and growth—are introduced in this play. However, in contrast to much of his later work, which some consider obscure, mostly due to its elevated language, *The Lion and the Jewel* is relatively lighthearted and accessible. Lakunle's speech, for example, though cluttered with quotations from Romantic fiction and Christian liturgy, is more humorous and misguided than

learned. While some critics say the dialogue in the play is overextended, physical action, particularly dance-drama, interrupts it periodically and shifts the emphasis from speech to performance. The "plays within the play," *The Mime of the White Surveyor,* for example, function in a variety of ways—including providing historical background, facilitating a communal interpretation of events, and adding dimension to the characters. Stylized dance, song, drumming, and mime introduce the powerful forces of gesture and rhythm into Soyinka's dramatic world.

■ CONNECTIONS

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (Book 1). *Lysistrata* uses sexual comedy to make a political point about the folly of war as well as to highlight the difference between domestic and martial, or military, values. Soyinka also employs sexual comedy as a way of talking about gender, class, and colonial politics. How does Soyinka present the chief's alleged impotence as a subject for comedy? How does this comedy generate questions about social, political, and gender issues? Is *The Lion and the Jewel* a comedy, do you think, or a tragedy?

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart,* p. 1023. Twentieth-century African fiction often deals with contact between Africa and Europe. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* both depict the way in which European colonial intervention exacerbates the psychological and social difficulties already faced by African people. Compare Achebe's protagonist, Okonkwo, with Soyinka's Chief Baroka. In what ways do these men represent African identity? How are their conflicts interwoven with those of their people?

Anita Desai, "The Farewell Party," p. 1196. Colonial and postcolonial literature often dramatize the shaping of personal identity through the cultural and national affiliations that are possible in a colonial context. "The Farewell Party" depicts a community in which European and Indian ideologies combine and collide; Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in a community that comprises European and African ideologies. How do these texts treat the "company men and women"—to use Desai's phrase—who deny their native origins and accept European culture and values?

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

Biography

Jones, Eldred. *Wole Soyinka.* 1973.

Criticism

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The Lion and the Jewel

CHARACTERS

SIDI, *the village belle*
LAKUNLE, *school teacher*
BAROKA, *the "Bale" of Ilujinle*
SADIKU, *his head wife*
THE FAVOURITE
VILLAGE GIRLS
A WRESTLER
A SURVEYOR
SCHOOLBOYS
ATTENDANTS ON THE "BALE"
MUSICIANS, DANCERS, MUMMERS,
PRISONERS, TRADERS, THE VILLAGE

Morning

A clearing on the edge of the market, dominated by an immense odan tree. It is the village centre. The wall of the bush school flanks the stage on the right, and a rude window opens on to the stage from the wall. There is a chant of the "Arithmetic Times" issuing from this window. It begins a short while before the action begins. Sidi enters from left, carrying a small pail of water on her head. She is a slim girl with plaited hair. A true village belle. She balances the pail on her head with accustomed ease. Around her is wrapped the familiar broad cloth which is folded just above her breasts, leaving the shoulders bare.

Almost as soon as she appears on the stage, the schoolmaster's face also appears at the window. (The chanting continues— "Three times two are six," "Three times three are nine," etc.) The teacher Lakunle, disappears. He is replaced by two of his pupils, aged roughly eleven, who make a buzzing noise at Sidi, repeatedly clapping their hands across the mouth. Lakunle now reappears below the window and makes for Sidi, stopping only to give the boys admonitory whacks on the head before they can duck. They vanish with a howl and he shuts the window on them. The chanting dies away. The schoolmaster is nearly twenty-three. He is dressed in an old-style English suit, threadbare but not ragged, clean but not ironed, obviously a size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty-three-inch-bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes.

The Lion and the Jewel. Written while Wole Soyinka was in England, this play was produced in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1959 and at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1966. One of his most popular plays, it helped to establish Soyinka as a dramatist. A relatively lighthearted satiric comedy, *The Lion and the Jewel* nevertheless explores the real conflicts surrounding the role of men and that of women, modernization and conservatism, and the meeting of Western material culture and Yoruban tradition. Though characters like Lakunle and Baroka may seem at first to be fairly straightforward representations of opposing value systems, closer inspection broadens this view. For example, though Lakunle is an educator and purveyor of "civilizing" influences, his infatuation with symbols of "Englishness" often reaches the point of absurdity, and he is not taken seriously by the villagers. Similarly, Baroka clearly uses his position to uphold the traditional ways of his people, yet he has allowed his workers to form a labor union and has invested in a stamp machine. Soyinka's experimental combination of dialogue, song, and dance in this drama is both structurally and thematically important. The mimes, in particular, provide important background information, reveal communal values through performance, and interrupt the dialogue with powerful aural and visual experiences.

A note on the text: The play reprinted here is from *Collected Plays 2*. All notes are the editors' unless otherwise indicated.

LAKUNLE: Let me take it.
SIDI: No.
LAKUNLE: Let me. [*Seizes the pail. Some water spills on him.*]
SIDI [*delighted.*]:
There. Wet for your pains.
Have you no shame?
LAKUNLE: That is what the stewpot said to the fire.
Have you no shame—at your age
Licking my bottom? But she was tickled
Just the same.
SIDI: The school teacher is full of stories.
This morning. And now, if the lesson
Is over, may I have the pail?
LAKUNLE: No. I have told you not to carry loads
On your head. But you are as stubborn
As an illiterate goat. It is bad for the spine.
And it shortens your neck, so that very soon
You will have no neck at all. Do you wish to look
Squashed like my pupils' drawings?
SIDI: Why should that worry me? Haven't you sworn
That my looks do not affect your love?
Yesterday, dragging your knees in the dust
You said, Sidi, if you were crooked or fat,
And your skin was scaly like a . . .
LAKUNLE: Stop!
SIDI: I only repeat what you said.
LAKUNLE: Yes, and I will stand by every word I spoke.
But must you throw away your neck on that account?
Sidi, it is so unwomanly. Only spiders
Carry loads the way you do.
SIDI [*huffily, exposing the neck to advantage.*]:
Well, it is my neck, not your spider.
LAKUNLE [*looks, and gets suddenly agitated.*]:
And look at that! Look, look at that!
[*Makes a general sweep in the direction of her breasts.*]
Who was it talked of shame just now?
How often must I tell you, Sidi, that
A grown-up girl must cover up her . . .
Her . . . shoulders? I can see quite . . . quite
A good portion of—that! And so I imagine
Can every man in the village. Idlers
All of them; good-for-nothing shameless men
Casting their lustful eyes where
They have no business. . . .
SIDI: Are you at that again? Why, I've done the fold

So high and so tight, I can hardly breathe.
And all because you keep at me so much.
I have to leave my arms so I can use them . . .
Or don't you know that?

LAKUNLE: You could wear something.
Most modest women do. But you, no.
You must run about naked in the streets.
Does it not worry you . . . the bad names,
The lewd jokes, the tongue-licking noises
Which girls, uncovered like you,
Draw after them?

SIDI: This is too much. Is it you, Lakunle,
Telling me that I make myself common talk?
When the whole world knows of the madman
Of Ilujinle, who calls himself a teacher!
Is it Sidi who makes the men choke
In their cups, or you, with your big loud words
And no meaning? You and your ragged books
Dragging your feet to every threshold
And rushing them out again as curses
Greet you instead of welcome. Is it Sidi
They call a fool—even the children—
Or you with your fine airs and little sense!

LAKUNLE [*first indignant, then recovers composure.*]:
For that, what is a jewel to pigs?
If now I am misunderstood by you
And your race of savages, I rise above taunts
And remain unruffled.

SIDI [*furious, shakes both fists at him.*]:
O . . . oh, you make me want to pulp your brain.

LAKUNLE [*retreats a little, but puts her aside with a very lofty gesture.*]:
A natural feeling, arising out of envy;
For, as a woman, you have a smaller brain
Than mine.

SIDI [*madder still.*]:
Again! I'd like to know
Just what gives you these thoughts
Of manly conceit.

LAKUNLE [*very, very patronizing.*]:
No, no. I have fallen for that trick before.
You can no longer draw me into arguments
Which go above your head.

SIDI [*can't find the right words, chokes back.*]:
Give me the pail now. And if you ever dare
To stop me in the streets again . . .

LAKUNLE: Now, now, Sidi . . .

SIDI: Give it or I'll . . .

LAKUNLE [*holds on to her.*]:
Please, don't be angry with me.
I didn't mean you in particular.
And anyway, it isn't what I say.
The scientists have proved it. It's in my books.
Women have a smaller brain than men
That's why they are called the weaker sex.

SIDI [*throws him off.*]:
The weaker sex, is it?
Is it a weaker breed who pounds the yam
Or bends all day to plant the millet
With a child strapped to her back?

LAKUNLE: That is all part of what I say.
But don't you worry. In a year or two
You will have machines which will do
Your pounding, which will grind your pepper
Without it getting in your eyes.

SIDI: O-oh. You really mean to turn
The whole world upside down.

LAKUNLE: The world? Oh, that. Well, maybe later.
Charity, they say, begins at home.
For now, it is this village I shall turn
Inside out. Beginning with that crafty rogue,
Your past master of self-indulgence—Baroka.

SIDI: Are you still on about the Bale?° chief of a village
What has he done to you?

LAKUNLE: He'll find out. Soon enough, I'll let him know.

SIDI: These thoughts of future wonders—do you buy them
Or merely go mad and dream of them?

LAKUNLE: A prophet has honour except
In his own home. Wise men have been called mad
Before me and after, many more shall be
So abused. But to answer you, the measure
Is not entirely of my own coinage.
What I boast is known in Lagos, that city
Of magic, in Badagry where Saro[1] women bathe
In gold, even in smaller towns less than
Twelve miles from here. . . .

SIDI: Well go there. Go to these places where
Women would understand you

[1] Lagos . . . Saro: Lagos and Badagry are major port cities in Nigeria. The Saro, descended from emancipated slaves from Sierra Leone, are a group of peoples influenced by European culture.

If you told them of your plans with which
You oppress me daily. Do you not know
What name they give you here?
Have you lost shame completely that jeers
Pass you over.

LAKUNLE: No. I have told you no. Shame belongs
Only to the ignorant.

SIDI: Well, I am going.
Shall I take the pail or not?

LAKUNLE: Not till you swear to marry me.
[*Takes her hand, instantly soulful.*]
Sidi, a man must prepare to fight alone.
But it helps if he has a woman
To stand by him, a woman who . . .
Can understand . . . like you.

SIDI: I do?

LAKUNLE: Sidi, my love will open your mind
Like the chaste leaf in the morning, when
The sun first touches it.

SIDI: If you start that I will run away.
I had enough of that nonsense yesterday.

LAKUNLE: Nonsense? Nonsense? Do you hear?
Does anybody listen? Can the stones
Bear to listen to this? Do you call it
Nonsense that I poured the waters of my soul
To wash your feet?

SIDI: You did what!

LAKUNLE: Wasted! Wasted! Sidi, my heart
Bursts into flowers with my love.
But you, you and the dead of this village
Trample it with feet of ignorance.

SIDI [*shakes her head in bafflement.*]:
If the snail finds splinters in his shell
He changes house. Why do you stay?

LAKUNLE: Faith. Because I have faith.
Oh Sidi, vow to me your own undying love
And I will scorn the jibes of these bush minds
Who know no better. Swear, Sidi,
Swear you will be my wife and I will
Stand against earth, heaven, and the nine
Hells. . . .

SIDI: Now there you go again.
One little thing
And you must chirrup like a cockatoo.
You talk and talk and deafen me
With words which always sound the same
And make no meaning.
I've told you, and I say it again
I shall marry you today, next week
Or any day you name.
But my bride-price must first be paid.
Aha, now you turn away.
But I tell you, Lakunle, I must have
The full bride-price. Will you make me
A laughingstock? Well, do as you please.
But Sidi will not make herself
A cheap bowl for the village spit.

LAKUNLE: On my head let fall their scorn.

SIDI: They will say I was no virgin
That I was forced to sell my shame
And marry you without a price.

LAKUNLE: A savage custom, barbaric, outdated,
Rejected, denounced, accursed,
Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,
Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant.
Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable.

SIDI: Is the bag empty? Why did you stop?

LAKUNLE: I own only the Shorter Companion
Dictionary, but I have ordered
The Longer One—you wait!

SIDI: Just pay the price.

LAKUNLE [*with a sudden shout.*]:
An ignoble custom, infamous, ignominious
Shaming our heritage before the world.
Sidi, I do not seek a wife
To fetch and carry,
To cook and scrub,
To bring forth children by the gross. . . .

SIDI: Heaven forgive you! Do you now scorn
Childbearing in a wife?

LAKUNLE: Of course I do not. I only mean . . .
Oh Sidi, I want to wed
Because I love,
I seek a life-companion . . .
[*Pulpit-declamatory.*]
"And the man shall take the woman
And the two shall be together
As one flesh."[o]
Sidi, I seek a friend in need.
An equal partner in my race of life.

Genesis 2:24

SIDI [*attentive no more. Deeply engrossed in counting the beads on her neck.*]:
Then pay the price.
LAKUNLE: Ignorant girl, can you not understand?
To pay the price would be
To buy a heifer off the market stall.
You'd be my chattel, my mere property.
No, Sidi! [*Very tenderly.*]
When we are wed, you shall not walk or sit
Tethered, as it were, to my dirtied heels.
Together we shall sit at table
—Not on the floor—and eat,
Not with fingers, but with knives
And forks, and breakable plates
Like civilized beings.
I will not have you wait on me
Till I have dined my fill.
No wife of mine, no lawful wedded wife
Shall eat the leavings off my plate—
That is for the children.
I want to walk beside you in the street,
Side by side and arm in arm
Just like the Lagos couples I have seen
High-heeled shoes for the lady, red paint
On her lips. And her hair is stretched
Like a magazine photo. I will teach you
The waltz and we'll both learn the foxtrot
And we'll spend the weekend in night clubs at Ibadan.[2]
Oh I must show you the grandeur of towns
We'll live there if you like or merely pay visits.
So choose. Be a modern wife, look me in the eye
And give me a little kiss—like this.
[*Kisses her.*]
SIDI [*backs away.*]:
No, don't! I tell you I dislike
This strange unhealthy mouthing you perform.
Every time, your action deceives me
Making me think that you merely wish
To whisper something in my ear.
Then comes this licking of my lips with yours.
It's so unclean. And then,
The sound you make—"Pyout!"
Are you being rude to me?

[2] Ibadan: One of the largest cities in Nigeria, located in the southwestern part of the country.

LAKUNLE [*wearily.*]: It's never any use.
Bush girl you are, bush girl you'll always be;
Uncivilized and primitive—bush girl!
I kissed you as all educated men—
And Christians—kiss their wives.
It is the way of civilized romance.
SIDI [*lightly.*] A way you mean, to avoid
Payment of lawful bride-price
A cheating way, mean and miserly.
LAKUNLE [*violently.*]: It is not.
[*Sidi bursts out laughing. Lakunle changes his tone to a soulful one, both eyes dreamily shut.*]
Romance is the sweetening of the soul
With fragrance offered by the stricken heart.
SIDI [*looks at him in wonder for a while.*]:
Away with you. The village says you're mad,
And I begin to understand.
I wonder that they let you run the school.
You and your talk. You'll ruin your pupils too
And then they'll utter madness just like you.
[*Noise offstage.*]
There are people coming
Give me the bucket or they'll jeer.
[*Enter a crowd of youths and drummers, the girls being in various stages of excitement.*]
FIRST GIRL: Sidi, he has returned. He came back just as he said he would.
SIDI: Who has?
FIRST GIRL: The stranger. The man from the outside world.
The clown who fell in the river for you.
[*They all burst out laughing.*]
SIDI: The one who rode on the devil's own horse?
SECOND GIRL: Yes, the same. The stranger with the one-eyed box.
[*She demonstrates the action of a camera amidst admiring titters.*]
THIRD GIRL: And he brought his new horse right into the village square this time.
This one has only two feet. You should have seen him. B-r-r-r-r.
[*Runs round the platform driving an imaginary motorbike.*]
SIDI: And has he brought . . . ?
FIRST GIRL: The images? He brought them all. There was hardly any part of the village which does not show in the book.
[*Clicks the imaginary shutter.*]
SIDI: The book? Did you see the book?
Had he the precious book
That would bestow upon me
Beauty beyond the dreams of a goddess?
For so he said.

The book which would announce
This beauty to the world—
Have you seen it?

THIRD GIRL: Yes, yes, he did. But the Bale is still feasting his eyes on the images. Oh, Sidi, he was right. You *are* beautiful. On the cover of the book is an image of you from here [*touches the top of her head.*] to here [*her stomach.*]. And in the middle leaves, from the beginning of one leaf right across to the end of another, is one of you from head to toe. Do you remember it? It was the one for which he made you stretch your arms towards the sun. [*Rapturously.*] Oh, Sidi, you looked as if, at that moment, the sun himself had been your lover. [*They all gasp with pretended shock at this blasphemy and one slaps her playfully on the buttocks.*]

FIRST GIRL: The Bale is jealous, but he pretends to be proud of you. And when this man tells him how famous you are in the capital, he pretends to be pleased, saying how much honour and fame you have brought to the village.

SIDI [*with amazement.*]: Is not Baroka's image in the book at all?

SECOND GIRL [*contemptuous.*]: Oh yes, it is. But it would have been much better for the Bale if the stranger had omitted him altogether. His image is in a little corner somewhere in the book, and even that corner he shares with one of the village latrines.

SIDI: Is that the truth? Swear! Ask Ogun[3] to
Strike you dead.

GIRL: Ogun strike me dead if I lie.

SIDI: If that is true, then I am more esteemed
Than Bale Baroka,
The Lion of Ilujinle.
This means that I am greater than
The Fox of the Undergrowth,
The living god among men . . .

LAKUNLE [*peevishly.*]: And devil among women.

SIDI: Be silent, you.
You are merely filled with spite.

LAKUNLE: I know him what he is. This is
Divine justice that a mere woman
Should outstrip him in the end.

SIDI: Be quiet;
Or I swear I'll never speak to you again.
[*Affects sudden coyness.*]
In fact, I am not so sure I'll want to wed you now.

LAKUNLE: Sidi!

SIDI: Well, why should I?
Known as I am to the whole wide world,
I would demean my worth to wed
A mere village school teacher.

LAKUNLE [*in agony.*]: Sidi!

SIDI: And one who is too mean
To pay the bride-price like a man.

LAKUNLE: Oh, Sidi, don't!

SIDI [*plunging into an enjoyment of Lakunle's misery.*]:
Well, don't you know?
Sidi is more important even than the Bale.
More famous than that panther of the trees.
He is beneath me now—
Your fearless rake, the scourge of womanhood!
But now,
He shares the corner of the leaf
With the lowest of the low—
With the dug-out village latrine!
While I—How many leaves did my own image take?

FIRST GIRL: Two in the middle and . . .

SIDI: No, no. Let the school teacher count!
How many were there, teacher-man?

LAKUNLE: Three leaves.

SIDI [*threateningly.*]: One leaf for every heart that I shall break.
Beware!
[*Leaps suddenly into the air.*]
Hurray! I'm beautiful!
Hurray for the wandering stranger!

CROWD: Hurray for the Lagos man!

SIDI [*wildly excited.*]: I know. Let us dance the dance of the lost
Traveller.[4]

SHOUTS: Yes, let's.

SIDI: Who will dance the devil-horse?
You, you, you, and you.
[*The four girls fall out.*]
A python. Who will dance the snake?
Ha ha! Your eyes are shifty and your ways are sly.
[*The selected youth is pushed out amidst jeers.*]
The stranger. We've got to have the being
From the mad outer world. . . . You there,
No, you have never felt the surge
Of burning liquor in your milky veins.
Who can we pick that knows the walk of drunks?

[3] **Ogun:** As the patron deity of hunters and soldiers, Ogun embodies the forces of both creation and destruction, the tension between which is a theme repeatedly explored in Soyinka's writing.

[4] **dance . . . Traveller:** In Yoruban tradition, events are often told and interpreted through rhythmic dance and pantomime.

You? . . . No, the thought itself
Would knock you out as sure as wine. . . . Ah!
[Turns round slowly to where Lakunle is standing with a kindly, fatherly smile for the children at play.]
Come on bookworm, you'll play his part.

LAKUNLE: No, no. I've never been drunk in all my life.

SIDI: We know. But your father drank so much,
He must have drunk your share, and that
Of his great-grandsons.

LAKUNLE *[tries to escape.]*: I won't take part.

SIDI: You must.

LAKUNLE: I cannot stay. It's nearly time to take
Primary four in Geography.

SIDI *[goes over to the window and throws it open.]*:
Did you think your pupils would remain in school
Now that the stranger has returned?
The village is on holiday, you fool.

LAKUNLE *[as they drag him towards the platform.]*:
No, no. I won't. This foolery bores me.
It is a game of idiots. I have work of more importance.

SIDI *[bending down over Lakunle who has been seated forcibly on the platform.]*:
You are dressed like him
You look like him
You speak his tongue
You think like him
You're just as clumsy
In your Lagos ways—
You'll do for him!

[This chant is taken up by all and they begin to dance round Lakunle, speaking the words in a fast rhythm. The drummers join in after the first time, keeping up a steady beat as the others whirl round their victim. They go faster and faster and chant faster and faster with each round. By the sixth or seventh, Lakunle has obviously had enough.]

LAKUNLE *[raising his voice above the din.]*: All right! I'll do it.
Come now, let's get it over with.

[A terrific shout and a clap of drums. Lakunle enters into the spirit of the dance with enthusiasm. He takes over from Sidi, stations his cast all over the stage as the jungle, leaves the right topstage clear for the four girls who are to dance the motorcar. A mime follows of the visitor's entry into Ilujinle, and his short stay among the villagers. The four girls crouch on the floor, as four wheels of a car. Lakunle directs their spacing, then takes his place in the middle, and sits on air. He alone does not dance. He does realistic miming. Soft throbbing drums, gradually swelling in volume, and the four "wheels" begin to rotate the upper halves of their bodies in perpendicular circles. Lakunle clowning the driving motions, obviously enjoying this fully. The drums gain tempo, faster, faster, faster. A sudden crash of drums and the girls quiver and dance the stall. Another effort at a rhythm fails, and the "stalling wheels" give a corresponding

shudder, finally, and let their faces fall on to their laps. Lakunle tampers with a number of controls, climbs out of the car and looks underneath it. His lips indicate that he is swearing violently.

Examines the wheels, pressing them to test the pressure, betrays the devil in him by seizing his chance to pinch the girls' bottoms. One yells and bites him on the ankle. He climbs hurriedly back into the car, makes a final attempt to restart it, gives it up and decides to abandon it. Picks up his camera and his helmet, pockets a flask of whisky from which he takes a swig, before beginning the trek. The drums resume beating, a different, darker tone and rhythm, varying with the journey. Full use of "gangan" and "iya ilu."[5] The "trees" perform a subdued and unobtrusive dance on the same spot. Details as a snake slithering out of the branches and poising over Lakunle's head when he leans against a tree for a rest. He flees, restoring his nerves shortly after by a swig. A monkey drops suddenly in his path and gibbers at him before scampering off. A roar comes from somewhere, etc. His nerves go rapidly and he recuperates himself by copious draughts. He is soon tipsy, battles violently with the undergrowth and curses silently as he swats the flies off his tortured body.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the bush comes the sound of a girl singing. The Traveller shakes his head but the sound persists. Convinced he is suffering from sunstroke, he drinks again. His last drop, so he tosses the bottle in the direction of the sound, only to be rewarded by a splash, a scream, and a torrent of abuse, and finally, silence again. He tip-toes, clears away the obstructing growth, blinks hard, and rubs his eyes. Whatever he has seen still remains. He whistles softly, unhitches his camera, and begins to jockey himself into a good position for a take. Backwards and forwards, and his eyes are so closely glued to the lens that he puts forward a careless foot and disappears completely. There is a loud splash and the invisible singer alters her next tone to a sustained scream. Quickened rhythm and shortly afterwards, amidst sounds of splashes, Sidi appears on the stage, with a piece of cloth only partially covering her.

Lakunle follows a little later, more slowly, trying to wring out the water from his clothes. He has lost all his appendages except the camera. Sidi has run right across the stage, and returns a short while later, accompanied by the villagers. The same cast has disappeared and reforms behind Sidi as the villagers. They are in an ugly mood, and in spite of his protests, haul him off to the town centre, in front of the "odan" tree.

Everything comes to a sudden stop as Baroka the Bale, wiry, goateed, tougher than his sixty-two years, himself emerges at this point from behind the tree. All go down, prostrate or kneeling with the greetings of "Kabiyesi," "Baba,"[6] etc. All except Lakunle who begins to sneak off.]

BAROKA: Akowe: Teacher wa. Misita Lakunle.[7]
[As the others take up the cry "Misita Lakunle" he is forced to stop. He returns and bows deeply from the waist.]

LAKUNLE: A good morning to you sir.

BAROKA: Guru morin guru morin, ngh-hn! That is
All we get from "alakowe." You call at his house

[5] "gangan" . . . "iya ilu": Types of drums.

[6] "Kabiyesi," "Baba": Traditional greetings for a ruler, acknowledging his social position and his age, respectively.

[7] Akowe. . . . Lakunle: *Akowe* means "person who can write." Baroka offers Lakunle a traditional greeting and is disappointed to get a European one in return.

Hoping he sends for beer, but all you get is
Guru morin. Will guru morin wet my throat?
Well, well our man of knowledge, I hope you have no
Query for an old man today.

LAKUNLE: No complaints.

BAROKA: And we are not feuding in something
I have forgotten.

LAKUNLE: Feuding sir? I see no cause at all.

BAROKA: Well, the play was much alive until I came.
And now everything stops, and you were leaving
Us. After all, I knew the story and I came in
Right on cue. It makes me feel as if I was
Chief Baseje.° a person who spoils a celebration

LAKUNLE: One hardly thinks the Bale would have the time
For such childish nonsense.

BAROKA: A-ah Mister Lakunle. Without these things you call
Nonsense, a Bale's life would be pretty dull.
Well, now that you say I am welcome, shall we
Resume your play?
[*Turns suddenly to his attendants.*]
Seize him!

LAKUNLE [*momentarily baffled*]: What for? What have I done?

BAROKA: You tried to steal our village maidenhead
Have you forgotten? If he has, serve him a slap
To wake his brain.

[*An uplifted arm being proffered, Lakunle quickly recollects and nods his head vigorously. So the play is back in performance. The villagers gather round threatening, clamouring for his blood. Lakunle tries bluff, indignation, appeasement in turn. At a sudden signal from the Bale, they throw him down prostrate on his face. Only then does the Chief begin to show him sympathy, appear to understand the stranger's plight, and pacify the villagers on his behalf. He orders dry clothes for him, seats him on his right, and orders a feast in his honour. The stranger springs up every second to take photographs of the party, but most of the time his attention is fixed on Sidi dancing with abandon. Eventually he whispers to the Chief, who nods in consent, and Sidi is sent for. The stranger arranges Sidi in all sorts of magazine postures and takes innumerable photographs of her. Drinks are pressed upon him; he refuses at first, eventually tries the local brew with scepticism, appears to relish it, and drinks profusely. Before long, however, he leaves the party to be sick. They clap him on the back as he goes out, and two drummers who insist on dancing round him nearly cause the calamity to happen on the spot. However, he rushes out with his hand held to his mouth. Lakunle's exit seems to signify the end of the mime. He returns almost at once and the others discard their roles.*]

SIDI [*delightedly.*]: What did I say? You played him to the bone,
A court jester would have been the life for you,
Instead of school.
[*Points contemptuously to the school.*]

BAROKA: And where would the village be, robbed of
Such wisdom as Mister Lakunle dispenses
Daily? Who would tell us where we go wrong?
Eh, Mister Lakunle?

SIDI [*hardly listening, still in the full grip of her excitement.*]:
Who comes with me to find the man?
But Lakunle, you'll have to come and find sense
In his clipping tongue. You see book-man
We cannot really do
Without your head.

[*Lakunle begins to protest, but they crowd him and try to bear him down. Suddenly he breaks free and takes to his heels with all the women in full pursuit. Baroka is left sitting by himself—his wrestler, who accompanied him on his entry, stands a respectful distance away—staring at the flock of women in flight. From the folds of his "agbada"[8] he brings out his copy of the magazine and admires the heroine of the publication. Nods slowly to himself.*]

BAROKA: Yes, yes . . . it is five full months since last
I took a wife . . . five full months . . .

Noon

A road by the market. Enter Sidi, happily engrossed in the pictures of herself in the magazine. Lakunle follows one or two paces behind carrying a bundle of firewood which Sidi has set out to obtain. They are met in the centre by Sadiku, who has entered from the opposite side. Sadiku is an old woman, with a shawl over her head.

SADIKU: Fortune is with me. I was going to your house to see you.

SIDI [*startled out of her occupation.*]: What! Oh, it is you, Sadiku.

SADIKU: The Lion sent me. He wishes you well.

SIDI: Thank him for me.
[*Then excitedly.*]
Have you seen these?
Have you seen these images of me
Wrought by the man from the capital city?
Have you felt the gloss? [*Caresses the page.*]
Smoother by far than the parrot's breast.

SADIKU: I have. I saw them as soon as the city man came. . . . Sidi, I bring a message from my lord. [*Jerks her head at Lakunle.*] Shall we draw aside a little?

SIDI: Him? Pay no more heed to that
Than you would a eunuch.

SADIKU: Then, in as few words as it takes to tell, Baroka wants you for a wife.

LAKUNLE [*bounds forward, dropping the wood.*]:
What! The greedy dog!
Insatiate camel of a foolish, doting race;
Is he at his tricks again?

[8] "agbada": Robe.

SIDI: Be quiet, 'Kunle. You get so tiresome.
The message is for me, not you.
LAKUNLE [*down on his knees at once. Covers Sidi's hands with kisses.*]:
My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba[9]
Thou sum of fabled perfections
From Genesis to the Revelations
Listen not to the voice of this infidel. . . .
SIDI [*snatches her hand away.*]:
Now that's your other game;
Giving me funny names you pick up
In your wretched books.
My name is Sidi. And now, let me be.
My name is Sidi, and I am beautiful.
The stranger took my beauty
And placed it in my hands.
Here, here it is. I need no funny names
To tell me of my fame.
Loveliness beyond the jewels of a throne—
That is what he said.
SADIKU [*gleefully.*]: Well, will you be Baroka's own jewel? Will you be his sweetest princess, soothing him on weary nights? What answer shall I give my lord?
SIDI [*wags her finger playfully at the woman.*]:
Ha ha. Sadiku of the honey tongue.
Sadiku, head of the Lion's wives.
You'll make no prey of Sidi with your wooing tongue
Not this Sidi whose fame has spread to Lagos
And beyond the seas.
[*Lakunle beams with satisfaction and rises.*]
SADIKU: Sidi, have you considered what a life of bliss awaits you? Baroka swears to take no other wife after you. Do you know what it is to be the Bale's last wife? I'll tell you. When he dies—and that should not be long; even the Lion has to die sometime—well, when he does, it means that you will have the honour of being the senior wife of the new Bale. And just think, until Baroka dies, you shall be his favourite. No living in the outhouses for you, my girl. Your place will always be in the palace; first as the latest bride, and afterwards, as the head of the new harem. . . . It is a rich life, Sidi. I know. I have been in that position for forty-one years.
SIDI: You waste your breath.
Why did Baroka not request my hand
Before the stranger
Brought his book of images?
Why did the Lion not bestow his gift

[9] Ruth . . . Bathsheba: Women who figure prominently in Hebrew Scriptures.

Before my face was lauded to the world?
Can you not see? Because he sees my worth
Increased and multiplied above his own;
Because he can already hear
The ballad-makers and their songs
In praise of Sidi, the incomparable,
While the Lion is forgotten.
He seeks to have me as his property
Where I must fade beneath his jealous hold.
Ah, Sadiku,
The school-man here has taught me certain things
And my images have taught me all the rest.
Baroka merely seeks to raise his manhood
Above my beauty.
He seeks new fame
As the one man who has possessed
The jewel of Ilujinle!
SADIKU [*shocked, bewildered, incapable of making any sense of Sidi's words.*]: But Sidi, are you well? Such nonsense never passed your lips before. Did you not sound strange, even in your own hearing? [*Rushes suddenly at Lakunle.*] Is this your doing, you popinjay? Have you driven the poor girl mad at last? Such rubbish . . . I will beat your head for this!
LAKUNLE [*retreating in panic.*]: Keep away from me, old hag.
SIDI: Sadiku, let him be.
Tell your lord that I can read his mind,
That I will none of him.
Look—judge for yourself.
[*Opens the magazine and points out the pictures.*]
He's old. I never knew till now,
He was that old . . .
[*During the rest of her speech, Sidi runs her hand over the surface of the relevant part of the photographs, tracing the contours with her fingers.*]
. . . To think I took
No notice of my velvet skin.
How smooth it is!
And no man ever thought
To praise the fulness of my breasts. . . .
LAKUNLE [*laden with guilt and full of apology.*]:
Well, Sidi, I did think . . .
But somehow it was not the proper thing.
SIDI [*ignores the interruption.*]:
See I hold them to the warm caress
[*Unconsciously pushes out her chest.*]
Of a desire-filled sun.
[*Smiles mischievously.*]

There's a deceitful message in my eyes
Beckoning insatiate men to certain doom.
And teeth that flash the sign of happiness,
Strong and evenly, beaming full of life.
Be just, Sadiku,
Compare my image and your lord's—
An age of difference!
See how the water glistens on my face
Like the dew-moistened leaves on a Harmattan[10] morning
But he—his face is like a leather piece
Torn rudely from the saddle of his horse,
[*Sadiku gasps.*]
Sprinkled with the musty ashes
From a pipe that is long over-smoked.
And this goat-like tuft
Which I once thought was manly;
It is like scattered twists of grass—
Not even green—
But charred and lifeless, as after a forest fire!
Sadiku, I am young and brimming; he is spent.
I am the twinkle of a jewel
But he is the hind quarters of a lion!

SADIKU [*recovering at last from helpless amazement.*]: May Sango[11] restore your wits.
For most surely some angry god has taken possession of you. [*Turns around and walks away. Stops again as she remembers something else.*] Your ranting put this clean out of my head. My lord says that if you would not be his wife, would you at least come to supper at his house tonight. There is a small feast in your honour. He wishes to tell you how happy he is that the great capital city has done so much honour to a daughter of Ilujinle. You have brought great fame to your people.

SIDI: Ho ho! Do you think that I was only born
Yesterday?
The tales of Baroka's little suppers,
I know all.
Tell your lord that Sidi does not sup with
Married men.

SADIKU: They are lies, lies. You must not believe everything you hear. Sidi, would I deceive you? I swear to you . . .

SIDI: Can you deny that
Every woman who has supped with him one night,
Becomes his wife or concubine the next?

[10] Harmattan: A hot, dry wind that blows in the Sahara desert. [11] Sango: West African god of storms, associated with thunder and lightning.

LAKUNLE: Is it for nothing he is called the Fox?

SADIKU [*advancing on him.*]: You keep out of this, or so Sango be my witness . . .

LAKUNLE [*retreats just a little, but continues to talk.*]:
His wiliness is known even in the larger towns.
Did you never hear
Of how he foiled the Public Works attempt
To build the railway through Ilujinle.

SADIKU: Nobody knows the truth of that. It is all hearsay.

SIDI: I love hearsays. Lakunle, tell me all.

LAKUNLE: Did you not know it? Well sit down and listen.
My father told me, before he died. And few men
Know of this trick—oh he's a die-hard rogue
Sworn against our progress . . . yes . . . it was . . . somewhere here
The track should have been laid just along
The outskirts. Well, the workers came, in fact
It was prisoners who were brought to do
The harder part . . . to break the jungle's back . . .

[*Enter the prisoners, guarded by two warders. A white surveyor examines his map (khaki helmet, spats,[12] etc.). The foreman runs up with his camp stool, table, etc., erects the umbrella over him and unpacks the usual box of bush comforts—soda siphon, whisky bottle, and geometric sandwiches. His map consulted, he directs the sweat team to where to work. They begin felling, machete swinging, log dragging, all to the rhythm of the work gang's metal percussion (rod on gong or rude triangle, etc.). The two performers are also the song leaders and the others fill the chorus. "N'ijo itoro," "Amuda el 'ebe l'aiya," "Gbe je on'ipa," etc.*][13]

LAKUNLE: They marked the route with stakes, ate
Through the jungle and began the tracks. Trade,
Progress, adventure, success, civilization,
Fame, international conspicuousity . . . it was
All within the grasp of Ilujinle. . . .

[*The wrestler enters, stands horrified at the sight and flees. Returns later with the Bale himself who soon assesses the situation.*

They disappear. The work continues, the surveyor occupies himself with the fly-whisk and whisky. Shortly after, a bull-roarer[14] *is heard. The prisoners falter a little, pick up again. The bull-roarer continues on its way, nearer and farther, moving in circles, so that it appears to come from all round them. The foreman is the first to break and then the rest is chaos. Sole survivor of the rout is the surveyor who is too surprised to move.*

Baroka enters a few minutes later accompanied by some attendants and preceded by a young girl bearing a calabash bowl.[15] *The surveyor, angry and threatening, is prevailed upon to*

[12] spats: Short cloth or leather ankle coverings worn over the instep and fastened under the foot with a strap. [13] "N'ijo itoro . . . on'ipa'": "In the dance of itoro" (itoro is a neighborhood); "Amuda is a big man"; "Keep the strong one cool." [14] bull-roarer: A carved piece of wood or stone that makes a roaring sound when whirled at the end of a long string. [15] calabash bowl: Bowl made by hollowing out the hardened shell of the large round fruit of the calabash tree.

open his gift. From it he reveals a wad of pound notes and kola nuts.[16] *Mutual understanding is established. The surveyor frowns heavily, rubs his chin, and consults his map. Re-examines the contents of the bowl, shakes his head. Baroka adds more money, and a coop of hens. A goat follows, and more money. This time "truth" dawns on him at last, he has made a mistake. The track really should go the other way. What an unfortunate error, discovered just in time! No, no, no possibility of a mistake this time, the track should be much further away. In fact (scooping up the soil) the earth is most unsuitable, couldn't possibly support the weight of a railway engine. A gourd of palm wine is brought to seal the agreement and a kola nut is broken. Baroka's men help the surveyor pack and they leave with their arms round each other followed by the surveyor's booty.*]

LAKUNLE [*as the last of the procession disappears, shakes his fist at them, stamping on the ground.*]:

Voluptuous beast! He loves this life too well
To bear to part from it. And motor roads
And railways would do just that, forcing
Civilization at his door. He foresaw it
And he barred the gates, securing fast
His dogs and horses, his wives and all his
Concubines . . . ah, yes . . . all those concubines.
Baroka has such a selective eye, none suits him
But the best. . . .
[*His eyes truly light up. Sidi and Sadiku snigger, tip-toe offstage.*]
. . . Yes, one must grant him that.
Ah, I sometimes wish I led his kind of life.
Such luscious bosoms make his nightly pillow.
I am sure he keeps a timetable just as
I do at school. Only way to ensure fair play.
He must be healthy to keep going as he does.
I don't know what the women see in him. His eyes
Are small and always red with wine. He must
Possess some secret. . . . No! I do not envy him!
Just the one woman for me. Alone I stand
For progress, with Sidi my chosen soul-mate, the one
Woman of my life. . . . Sidi! Sidi where are you?
[*Rushes out after them, returns to fetch the discarded firewood and runs out again.*]

[*Baroka in bed, naked except for baggy trousers, calf-length. It is a rich bedroom covered in animal skins and rugs. Weapons round the wall. Also a strange machine, a most peculiar contraption with a long lever. Kneeling beside the bed is Baroka's current Favourite, engaged in plucking the hairs from his armpit. She does this by first massaging the spot around the selected hair very gently with her forefinger. Then, with hardly a break, she pulls out the hair between her finger and the thumb with a sudden sharp movement. Baroka twitches slightly with each pull. Then an aspirated "A-ah," and a look of complete beatitude spreads all over his face.*]

[16] **kola nuts:** Nut of the kola tree containing caffeine and traditionally given to guests as a sign of hospitality.

FAVOURITE: Do I improve my lord?
BAROKA: You are still somewhat over-gentle with the pull
As if you feared to hurt the panther of the trees.
Be sharp and sweet
Like the swift sting of a vicious wasp
For there the pleasure lies—the cooling aftermath.
FAVOURITE: I'll learn, my lord.
BAROKA: You have not time, my dear.
Tonight I hope to take another wife.
And the honour of this task, you know,
Belongs by right to my latest choice.
But—A-ah—Now that was sharp.
It had in it the scorpion's sudden sting
Without its poison.
It was an angry pull; you tried to hurt
For I had made you wrathful with my boast.
But now your anger flows in my bloodstream.
How sweet it is! A-ah! That was sweeter still.
I think perhaps that I shall let you stay,
The sole out-puller of my sweat-bathed hairs.
Ach!
[*Sits up suddenly and rubs the sore point angrily.*]
Now that had far more pain than pleasure
Vengeful creature, you did not caress
The area of extraction long enough!
[*Enter Sadiku. She goes down on her knees at once and bows her head into her lap.*]
Aha! Here comes Sadiku.
Do you bring some balm,
To soothe the smart of my misused armpit?
Away, you enemy!
[*Exit the Favourite.*]
SADIKU: My lord . . .
BAROKA: You have my leave to speak.
What did she say?
SADIKU: She will not my lord. I did my best, but she will have none of you.
BAROKA: It follows the pattern—a firm refusal
At the start. Why will she not?
SADIKU: That is the strange part of it. She says you're much too old. If you ask me, I think that she is really off her head. All this excitement of the books has been too much for her.
BAROKA [*springs to his feet.*]:
She says . . . That I am old
That I am much too old? Did a slight
Unripened girl say this of me?

SADIKU: My lord, I heard the incredible words with my ears, and I thought the world was mad.

BAROKA: But is it possible, Sadiku? Is this right?
Did I not, at the festival of Rain,
Defeat the men in the log-tossing match?
Do I not still with the most fearless ones,
Hunt the leopard and the boa at night
And save the farmers' goats from further harm?
And does she say I'm old?
Did I not, to announce the Harmattan,
Climb to the top of the silk-cotton tree,
Break the first pod, and scatter tasselled seeds
To the four winds—and this but yesterday?
Do any of my wives report
A failing in my manliness?
The strongest of them all
Still wearies long before the Lion does!
And so would she, had I the briefest chance
To teach this unfledged birdling
That lacks the wisdom to embrace
The rich mustiness of age . . . if I could once . . .
Come hither, soothe me, Sadiku
For I am wroth at heart.
[*Lies back on the bed, staring up as before. Sadiku takes her place at the foot of the bed and begins to tickle the soles of his feet. Baroka turns to the left suddenly, reaches down the side, and comes up with a copy of the magazine. Opens it and begins to study the pictures. He heaves a long sigh.*]
That is good, Sadiku, very good.
[*He begins to compare some pictures in the book, obviously his own and Sidi's. Flings the book away suddenly and stares at the ceiling for a second or two. Then, unsmiling.*]
Perhaps it is as well, Sadiku.

SADIKU: My lord, what did you say?

BAROKA: Yes, faithful one, I say it is as well.
The scorn, the laughter, and the jeers
Would have been bitter
Had she consented and my purpose failed,
I would have sunk with shame.

SADIKU: My lord, I do not understand.

BAROKA: The time has come when I can fool myself
No more. I am no man, Sadiku. My manhood
Ended near a week ago.

SADIKU: The gods forbid.

BAROKA: I wanted Sidi because I still hoped—
A foolish thought I know, but still—I hoped
That, with a virgin young and hot within,
My failing strength would rise and save my pride.
[*Sadiku begins to moan.*]
A waste of hope. I knew it even then.
But it's a human failing never to accept
The worst; and so I pandered to my vanity.
When manhood must, it ends.
The well of living, tapped beyond its depth,
Dries up, and mocks the wastrel in the end.
I am withered and unsapped, the joy
Of ballad-mongers, the aged butt
Of youth's ribaldry.

SADIKU [*tearfully.*]: The gods must have mercy yet.

BAROKA [*as if suddenly aware of her presence, starts up.*]:
I have told this to no one but you,
Who are my eldest, my most faithful wife.
But if you dare parade my shame before the world . . .
[*Sadiku shakes her head in protest and begins to stroke the soles of his feet with renewed tenderness. Baroka sighs and falls back slowly.*]
How irritable I have grown of late
Such doubts to harbour of your loyalty . . .
But this disaster is too much for one
Checked thus as I upon the prime of youth.
That rains that blessed me from my birth
Number a meagre sixty-two;
While my grandfather, that man of teak,
Fathered two sons, late on sixty-five.
But Okiki, my father beat them all
Producing female twins at sixty-seven.
Why then must I, descendant of these lions
Forswear my wives at a youthful sixty-two
My veins of life run dry, my manhood gone!
[*His voice goes drowsy; Sadiku sighs and moans and caresses his feet. His face lights up suddenly with rapture.*]
Sango bear witness! These weary feet
Have felt the loving hands of much design
In women.
My soles have felt the scratch of harsh,
Gravelled hands.
They have borne the heaviness of clumsy,
Gorilla paws.
And I have known the tease of tiny,
Dainty hands,
Toylike hands that tantalized
My eager senses,

Promised of thrills to come
Remaining
Unfulfilled because the fingers
Were too frail,
The touch too light and faint to pierce
The incredible thickness of my soles.
But thou Sadiku, thy plain unadorned hands
Encase a sweet sensuality which age
Will not destroy. A-ah,
Oyayi! Beyond a doubt Sadiku,
Thou art the queen of them all.
[*Falls asleep.*]

Night

The village centre. Sidi stands by the schoolroom window, admiring her photos as before. Enter Sadiku with a longish bundle. She is very furtive. Unveils the object which turns out to be a carved figure of the Bale, naked and in full detail. She takes a good look at it, bursts suddenly into derisive laughter, sets the figure in front of the tree. Sidi stares in utter amazement.

SADIKU: So we did for you too did we? We did for you in the end. Oh high and mighty lion, have we really scotched[17] you? A—ya-ya-ya . . . we women undid you in the end. I was there when it happened to your father, the great Okiki. I did for him, I, the youngest and freshest of the wives. I killed him with my strength. I called him and he came at me, but no, for him, this was not like other times. I, Sadiku, was I not flame itself and he the flax on old women's spindles? I ate him up! Race of mighty lions, we always consume you, at our pleasure we spin you, at our whim we make you dance; like the foolish top you think the world revolves around you . . . fools! fools! . . . it is you who run giddy while we stand still and watch, and draw your frail thread from you, slowly, till nothing is left but a runty old stick. I scotched Okiki, Sadiku's unopened treasure-house demanded sacrifice, and Okiki came with his rusted key. Like a snake he came at me, like a rag he went back; a limp rag, smeared in shame. . . . [*Her ghoulish laugh repossesses her.*]
Ah, take warning my masters, we'll scotch you in the end. . . .
[*With a yell she leaps up, begins to dance round the tree, chanting.*]
Take warning, my masters
We'll scotch you in the end.
[*Sidi shuts the window gently, comes out; Sadiku, as she comes round again, gasps and is checked in mid-song.*]
SADIKU: Oh it is you my daughter. You should have chosen a better time to scare me to death. The hour of victory is no time for any woman to die.

[17] scotched: To injure something to the point that it is harmless.

SIDI: Why? What battle have you won?
SADIKU: Not me alone girl. You too. Every woman. Oh my daughter, that I have lived to see this day . . . To see him fizzle with the drabbest puff of a mis-primed "sakabula."[18]
[*Resumes her dance.*]
Take warning, my masters
We'll scotch you in the end.
SIDI: Wait Sadiku. I cannot understand.
SADIKU: You will my girl. You will.
Take warning my masters . . .
SIDI: Sadiku, are you well?
SADIKU: Ask no questions my girl. Just join my victory dance. Oh Sango my lord, who of us possessed your lightning and ran like fire through that lion's tail . . .
SIDI [*holds her firmly as she is about to go off again.*]:
Stop your loose ranting. You will not
Move from here until you make some sense.
SADIKU: Oh you are troublesome. Do you promise to tell no one?
SIDI: I swear it. Now tell me quickly.
[*As Sadiku whispers, her eyes widen.*]
O-ho-o-o-o-!
But Sadiku, if he knew the truth, why
Did he ask me to . . .
[*Again Sadiku whispers.*]
Ha ha! Some hope indeed. Oh Sadiku
I suddenly am glad to be a woman.
[*Leaps in the air.*]
We won. We won! Hurray for womankind!
[*Falls in behind Sadiku.*]
Take warning, my masters
We'll scotch you in the end. [*Lakunle enters unobserved.*]
LAKUNLE: The full moon is not yet, but
The women cannot wait.
They must go mad without it.
[*The dancing stops. Sadiku frowns.*]
SADIKU: The scarecrow is here. Begone fop! This is the world of women. At this moment our star sits in the centre of the sky. We are supreme. What is more, we are about to perform a ritual. If you remain, we will chop you up, we will make you the sacrifice.
LAKUNLE: What is the hag gibbering?
SADIKU [*advances menacingly.*]: You less than man, you less than the littlest woman, I say begone!

[18] "sakabula": A type of gun that is not particularly effective.

LAKUNLE [*nettled.*]: I will have you know that I am a man
As you will find out if you dare
To lay a hand on me.

SADIKU [*throws back her head in laughter.*]: You a man? Is Baroka not more of a man than you? And if he is no longer a man, then what are you? [*Lakunle, understanding the meaning, stands rooted, shocked.*] Come on, dear girl, let him look on if he will. After all, only *men* are barred from watching this ceremony.
Take warning, my masters
We'll . . .

SIDI: Stop. Sadiku stop. Oh such an idea
Is running in my head. Let me to the palace for
This supper he promised me. Sadiku, what a way
To mock the devil. I shall ask forgiveness
For my hasty words. . . . No need to change
My answers and consent to be his bride—he might
Suspect you've told me. But I shall ask a month
To think on it.

SADIKU [*somewhat doubtful.*]: Baroka is no child you know, he will know I have betrayed him.

SIDI: No, he will not. Oh Sadiku let me go.
I long to see him thwarted, to watch his longing
His twitching hands which this time cannot
Rush to loosen his trouser cords.

SADIKU: You will have to match the fox's cunning. Use your bashful looks and be truly repentant. Goad him my child, torment him until he weeps for shame.

SIDI: Leave it to me. He will never suspect you of deceit.

SADIKU [*with another of her energetic leaps.*]: Yo-rooo o! Yo-rororo o!
Shall I come with you?

SIDI: Will that be wise? You forget
We have not seen each other.

SADIKU: Away then. Away woman. I shall bide here.
Haste back and tell Sadiku how the no-man is.
Away, my lovely child.

LAKUNLE [*he has listened with increasing horror.*]:
No, Sidi, don't. If you care
One little bit for what I feel,
Do not go to torment the man.
Suppose he knows that you have come to jeer—
And he will know, if he is not a fool—
He is a savage thing, degenerate
He would beat a helpless woman if he could. . . .

SIDI [*running off gleefully.*]: Ta-raa school teacher. Wait here for me.

LAKUNLE [*stamps his foot helplessly.*]:
Foolish girl! . . . And this is all your work.
Could you not keep a secret?
Must every word leak out of you
As surely as the final drops
Of mother's milk
Oozed from your flattened breast
Generations ago?

SADIKU: Watch your wagging tongue, unformed creature!

LAKUNLE: If any harm befalls her . . .

SADIKU: Woman though she is, she can take better care of herself than you can of her. Fancy a thing like you actually wanting a girl like that, all to your little self. [*Walks round him and looks him up and down.*] Ah! Oba Ala[19] is an accommodating god. What a poor figure you cut!

LAKUNLE: I wouldn't demean myself to bandy words
With a woman of the bush.

SADIKU: At this moment, your betrothed is supping with the Lion.

LAKUNLE [*pleased at the use of the word "betrothed."*]:
Well, we are not really betrothed as yet,
I mean, she is not promised yet.
But it will come in time, I'm sure.

SADIKU [*bursts into her cackling laughter.*]: The bride-price, is that paid?

LAKUNLE: Mind your own business.

SADIKU: Why don't you do what other men have done. Take a farm for a season. One harvest will be enough to pay the price, even for a girl like Sidi. Or will the smell of the wet soil be too much for your delicate nostrils?

LAKUNLE: I said mind your own business.

SADIKU: A—a—ah. It is true what they say then. You are going to convert the whole village so that no one will ever pay the bride-price again. Ah, you're a clever man. I must admit that it is a good way for getting out of it, but don't you think you'd use more time and energy that way than you would if . . .

LAKUNLE [*with conviction.*]: Within a year or two, I swear,
This town shall see a transformation
Bride-price will be a thing forgotten
And wives shall take their place by men.
A motor road will pass this spot
And bring the city ways to us.
We'll buy saucepans for all the women
Clay pots are crude and unhygienic
No man shall take more wives than one
That's why they're impotent too soon.
The ruler shall ride cars, not horses
Or a bicycle at the very least.
We'll burn the forest, cut the trees
Then plant a modern park for lovers

[19] Oba Ala: Obatala, the god who shaped human beings.

We'll print newspapers every day
With pictures of seductive girls.
The world will judge our progress by
The girls that win beauty contests.
While Lagos builds new factories daily
We only play "ayo"° and gossip.
Where is our school of ballroom dancing?
Who here can throw a cocktail party?
We must be modern with the rest
Or live forgotten by the world
We must reject the palm wine habit
And take to tea, with milk and sugar.
[Turns on Sadiku who has been staring at him in terror. She retreats, and he continues to talk down at her as they go round, then down and offstage, Lakunle's hectoring voice trailing away in the distance.]
This is my plan, you withered face
And I shall start by teaching you.
From now you shall attend my school
And take your place with twelve-year olds.
For though you're nearly seventy,
Your mind is simple and unformed.
Have you no shame that at your age,
You neither read nor write nor think?
You spend your days as senior wife,
Collecting brides for Baroka.
And now because you've sucked him dry,
You send my Sidi to his shame. . . .

a board game

[The scene changes to Baroka's bedroom. On the left in a one-knee-on-floor posture, two men are engaged in a kind of wrestling, their arms clasped round each other's waist, testing the right moment to heave. One is Baroka, the other a short squat figure of apparent muscular power. The contest is still in the balanced stage. In some distant part of the house, Sidi's voice is heard lifted in the familiar general greeting, addressed to no one in particular.]
SIDI: A good day to the head and people
Of this house.
[Baroka lifts his head, frowns as if he is trying to place the voice.]
A good day to the head and people
Of this house.

[Baroka now decides to ignore it and to concentrate on the contest. Sidi's voice draws progressively nearer. She enters nearly backwards, as she is still busy admiring the room through which she has just passed. Gasps on turning round to see the two men.]
BAROKA *[without looking up.]*: Is Sadiku not at home then?
SIDI *[absent-mindedly.]*: Hm?
BAROKA: I asked, is Sadiku not at home?

SIDI *[recollecting herself, she curtseys quickly.]*: I saw no one, Baroka.
BAROKA: No one? Do you mean there was no one
To bar unwanted strangers from my privacy?
SIDI *[retreating.]*: The house . . . seemed . . . empty.
BAROKA: Ah, I forget. This is the price I pay
Once every week, for being progressive.
Prompted by the school teacher, my servants
Were prevailed upon to form something they call
The Palace Workers' Union. And in keeping
With the habits—I am told—of modern towns,
This is their day off.
SIDI *[seeing that Baroka seems to be in a better mood, she becomes somewhat bolder. Moves forward—saucily.]*:
Is this also a day off
For Baroka's wives?
BAROKA *[looks up sharply, relaxes, and speaks with a casual voice.]*:
No, the madness has not gripped them—yet.
Did you not meet with one of them?
SIDI: No, Baroka. There was no one about.
BAROKA: Not even Ailatu, my favourite?
Was she not at her usual place,
Beside my door?
SIDI *[absently. She is deeply engrossed in watching the contest.]*:
Her stool is there. And I saw
The slippers she was embroidering.
BAROKA: Hm. Hm. I think I know
Where she'll be found. In a dark corner
Sulking like a slighted cockroach.
By the way, look and tell me
If she left her shawl behind.
[So as not to miss any part of the tussle, she moves backwards, darts a quick look round the door and back again.]
SIDI: There is a black shawl on the stool.
BAROKA *[a regretful sigh.]*:
Then she'll be back tonight. I had hoped
My words were harsh enough
To free me from her spite for a week or more.
SIDI: Did Ailatu offend her husband?
BAROKA: Offend? My armpit still weeps blood
For the gross abuse I suffered from one
I called my favourite.
SIDI *[in a disappointed voice.]*:
Oh. Is that all?
BAROKA: Is that not enough? Why child?
What more could the woman do?

SIDI: Nothing. Nothing, Baroka. I thought perhaps—
Well—young wives are known to be—
Forward—sometimes—to their husbands.
BAROKA: In an ill-kept household perhaps. But not
Under Baroka's roof. And yet,
Such are the sudden spites of women
That even I cannot foresee them all.
And child—if I lose this little match
Remember that my armpit
Burns and itches turn by turn.
[*Sidi continues watching for some time, then clasps her hand over her mouth as she remembers what she should have done to begin with. Doubtful how to proceed, she hesitates for some moments, then comes to a decision and kneels.*]
SIDI: I have come, Bale, as a repentant child.
BAROKA: What?
SIDI [*very hesitantly, eyes to the floor, but she darts a quick look up when she thinks the Bale isn't looking.*]
The answer which I sent to the Bale
Was given in a thoughtless moment. . . .
BAROKA: Answer, child? To what?
SIDI: A message brought by . . .
BAROKA [*groans and strains in a muscular effort.*]:
Will you say that again? It is true that for supper
I did require your company. But up till now
Sadiku has brought no reply.
SIDI [*amazed.*]: But the other matter! Did not the Bale
Send . . . did Baroka not send . . . ?
BAROKA [*with sinister encouragement.*]:
What did Baroka not, my child?
SIDI [*cowed, but angry, rises.*]:
It is nothing, Bale. I only hope
That I am here at the Bale's invitation.
BAROKA [*as if trying to understand, he frowns as he looks at her.*]:
A-ah, at last I understand. You think
I took offence because you entered
Unannounced?
SIDI: I remember that the Bale called me
An unwanted stranger.
BAROKA: That could be expected. Is a man's bedroom
To be made naked to any flea
That chances to wander through?
[*Sidi turns away, very hurt.*]
Come, come, my child. You are too quick
To feel aggrieved. Of course you are
More than welcome. But I expected Ailatu
To tell me you were here.
[*Sidi curtseys briefly with her back to Baroka. After a while, she turns round. The mischief returns to her face. Baroka's attitude of denial has been a setback but she is now ready to pursue her mission.*]
SIDI: I hope the Bale will not think me
Forward. But, like everyone, I had thought
The Favourite was a gentle woman.
BAROKA: And so had I.
SIDI [*slyly.*]: One would hardly think that *she*
Would give offence without a cause
Was the Favourite . . . in some way . . .
Dissatisfied . . . with her lord and husband?
[*With a mock curtsey, quickly executed as Baroka begins to look up.*]
BAROKA [*slowly turns towards her.*]:
Now that
Is a question which I never thought to hear
Except from a school teacher. Do you think
The Lion has such leisure that he asks
The whys and wherefores of a woman's
Squint?
[*Sidi steps back and curtseys. As before, and throughout this scene, she is easily cowed by Baroka's change of mood, all the more easily as she is, in any case, frightened by her own boldness.*]
SIDI: I mean no disrespect . . .
BAROKA [*gently.*]: I know. [*Breaks off.*] Christians on my
Fathers' shrines, child!
Do you think I took offence? A—aw
Come in and seat yourself. Since you broke in
Unawares, and appear resolved to stay,
Try, if you can, not to make me feel
A humourless old ram. I allow no one
To watch my daily exercise, but as we say,
The woman gets lost in the woods one day
And every wood deity dies the next.
[*Sidi curtseys, watches, and moves forward warily, as if expecting the two men to spring apart too suddenly.*]
SIDI: I think he will win.
BAROKA: Is that a wish, my daughter?
SIDI: No, but—[*Hesitates, but boldness wins.*]
If the tortoise cannot tumble
It does not mean that he can stand.
[*Baroka looks at her, seemingly puzzled. Sidi turns away, humming.*]
BAROKA: When the child is full of riddles, the mother
Has one water-pot the less.
[*Sidi tip-toes to Baroka's back and pulls asses' ears at him.*]

SIDI: I think he will win.
BAROKA: He knows he must. Would it profit me
To pit my strength against a weakling?
Only yesterday, this son of—I suspect—
A python for a mother, and fathered beyond doubt
By a blubber-bottomed baboon,
[*The complimented man grins.*]
Only yesterday, he nearly
Ploughed my tongue with my front teeth
In a friendly wrestling bout.
WRESTLER [*encouraged, makes an effort.*]: Ugh. Ugh.
SIDI [*bent almost over them. Genuinely worried.*]:
Oh! Does it hurt?
BAROKA: Not yet . . . but, as I was saying
I change my wrestlers when I have learnt
To throw them. I also change my wives
When I have learnt to tire them.
SIDI: And is this another . . . changing time
For the Bale?
BAROKA: Who knows? Until the finger nails
Have scraped the dust, no one can tell
Which insect released his bowels.
[*Sidi grimaces in disgust and walks away. Returns as she thinks up a new idea.*]
SIDI: A woman spoke to me this afternoon.
BAROKA: Indeed. And does Sidi find this unusual—
That a woman speak with her in the afternoon?
SIDI [*stamping.*]: No. She had the message of a go-between.
BAROKA: Did she? Then I rejoice with you.
[*Sidi stands biting her lips. Baroka looks at her, this time with deliberate appreciation.*]
And now I think of it, why not?
There must be many men who
Build their loft to fit your height.
SIDI [*unmoving, pointedly.*]: Her message came from one
With many lofts.
BAROKA: Ah! Such is the greed of men.
SIDI: If Baroka were my father
[*Aside.*]—which many would take him to be—
[*Makes a rude sign.*]
Would he pay my dowry to this man
And give his blessings?
BAROKA: Well, I must know his character.
For instance, is the man rich?
SIDI: Rumour has it so.
BAROKA: Is he repulsive?

SIDI: He is old. [*Baroka winces.*]
BAROKA: Is he mean and miserly?
SIDI: To strangers—no. There are tales
Of his open-handedness, which are never
Quite without a motive. But his wives report
—To take one little story—
How he grew the taste for ground corn
And pepper—because he would not pay
The price of snuff!
[*With a sudden burst of angry energy, Baroka lifts his opponent and throws him over his shoulder.*]
BAROKA: A lie! The price of snuff
Had nothing to do with it.
SIDI [*too excited to listen.*]: You won!
BAROKA: By the years on my beard, I swear
They slander me!
SIDI [*excitedly.*]: You won. You won!
[*She breaks into a kind of shoulder dance and sings.*]
Yokolu Yokolu. Ko ha tan bi
Iyawo gb'oko san'le.
Oko yo 'ke . . .[20]
[*She repeats this throughout Baroka's protests. Baroka is pacing angrily up and down. The defeated man, nursing a hip, goes to the corner of the room and lifts out a low "ako" bench. He sits on the floor, and soon, Baroka joins him; using only their arms now, they place their elbows on the bench and grip hands. Baroka takes his off again, replaces it, takes it off again, and so on during the rest of his outburst.*]
BAROKA: This means nothing to me of course. Nothing!
But I know the ways of women, and I know
Their ruinous tongues.
Suppose that, as a child—only suppose—
Suppose then, that as a child, I—
And remember, I only use myself
To illustrate the plight of many men. . . .
So, once again, suppose that as a child
I grew to love "tanfiri"[21]—with a good dose of pepper
And growing old, I found that—
Sooner than die away, my passion only
Bred itself upon each mouthful of
Ground corn and pepper I consumed.
Now, think child, would it be seemly
At my age, and the father of children,

[20] **Yokolu . . . yo 'ke:** A song; often used to insult someone after he or she suffers a great defeat.
[21] **"tanfiri":** A type of food; possibly an aphrodisiac.

To be discovered, in public
Thrusting fistfuls of corn dust and pepper
In my mouth? Is it not wise to indulge
In the little masquerade of a dignified
Snuff box?—But remember, I only make
A pleading for this prey of women's
Malice. I feel his own injustice,
Being myself, a daily fellow-sufferer!
[*Baroka seems to realize for the first time that Sidi has paid no attention to his explanation. She is, in fact, still humming and shaking her shoulders. He stares questioningly at her. Sidi stops, somewhat confused and embarrassed, points sheepishly to the wrestler.*]

SIDI: I think this time he will win.
[*Baroka's grumbling subsides slowly. He is now attentive to the present bout.*]

BAROKA: Now let us once again take up
The questioning. [*Almost timidly.*] Is this man
Good and kindly.

SIDI: They say he uses well
His dogs and horses.

BAROKA [*desperately.*]:
Well is he fierce then? Reckless!
Does the bush cow run to hole
When he hears his beaters' Hei-ei-wo-rah!

SIDI: There are heads and skins of leopards
Hung around his council room.
But the market is also
Full of them.

BAROKA: Is he not wise? Is he not sagely?
Do the young and old not seek
His counsel?

SIDI: The fox is said to be wise
So cunning that he stalks and dines on
New-hatched chickens.

BAROKA [*more and more desperate.*]:
Does he not beget strength on wombs?
Are his children not tall and stout-limbed?

SIDI: Once upon a time.

BAROKA: Once upon a time?
What do you mean, girl?

SIDI: Just once upon a time.
Perhaps his children have of late
Been plagued with shyness and refuse
To come into the world. Or else
He is so tired with the day's affairs
That at night, he turns his buttocks
To his wives. But there have been
No new reeds cut by his servants,
No new cots woven.
And his household gods are starved
For want of child-naming festivities
Since the last two rains went by.

BAROKA: Perhaps he is a frugal man.
Mindful of years to come,
Planning for a final burst of life, he
Husbands his strength.

SIDI [*giggling. She is actually stopped, half-way, by giggling at the cleverness of her remark.*]:
To husband his wives surely ought to be
A man's first duties—at all times.

BAROKA: My beard tells me you've been a pupil,
A most diligent pupil of Sadiku.
Among all shameless women,
The sharpest tongues grow from that one
Peeling bark—Sadiku, my faithful lizard!
[*Growing steadily warmer during the speech, he again slaps down his opponent's arm as he shouts "Sadiku."*]

SIDI [*backing away, aware that she has perhaps gone too far and betrayed knowledge of the "secret."*]:
I have learnt nothing of anyone.

BAROKA: No more. No more.
Already I have lost a wrestler
On your account. This town-bred daring
Of little girls, awakes in me
A seven-horned devil of strength.
Let one woman speak a careless word
And I can pin a wriggling—Bah!
[*Lets go the man's arm. He has risen during the last speech but held on to the man's arm, who is forced to rise with him.*]
The tappers[22] should have called by now.
See if we have a fresh gourd by the door.
[*The wrestler goes out. Baroka goes to sit on the bed, Sidi eyeing him, doubtfully.*]
What an ill-tempered man I daily grow
Towards. Soon my voice will be
The sand between two grinding stones.
But I have my scattered kindliness
Though few occasions serve to herald it.
And Sidi, my daughter, you do not know

[22] The tappers: A reference to the drawing of palm wine by tapping.

The thoughts which prompted me
To ask the pleasure that I be your host
This evening. I would not tell Sadiku,
Meaning to give delight
With the surprise of it. Now, tell me, child
Can you guess a little at this thing?

SIDI: Sadiku told me nothing.

BAROKA: You are hasty with denial. For how indeed
Could Sadiku, since I told her
Nothing of my mind? But, my daughter,
Did she not, perhaps . . . invent some tale?
For I know Sadiku loves to be
All-knowing.

SIDI: She said no more, except the Bale
Begged my presence.

BAROKA [*rises quickly to the bait.*]:
Begged? Bale Baroka begged?
[*Wrestler enters with gourd and calabash cups. Baroka relapses.*]
Ah! I see you love to bait your elders.
One way the world remains the same,
The child still thinks she is wiser than
The cotton head of age.
Do you think Baroka deaf or blind
To little signs? But let that pass.
Only, lest you fall victim to the schemes
Of busy women, I will tell you this—
I know Sadiku plays the matchmaker
Without the prompting. If I look
On any maid, or call her name
Even in the course of harmless, neighbourly
Well-wishing—How fares your daughter?
—Is your sister now recovered from her
Whooping cough?—How fast your ward
Approaches womanhood! Have the village lads
Begun to gather at your door?—
Or any word at all which shows I am
The thoughtful guardian of the village health,
If it concerns a woman, Sadiku straightway
Flings herself into the role of go-between
And before I even don a cap, I find
Yet another stranger in my bed!

SIDI: It seems a Bale's life
Is full of great unhappiness.

BAROKA: I do not complain. No, my child

I accept the sweet and sour with
A ruler's grace. I lose my patience
Only when I meet with
The new immodesty with women.
Now, my Sidi, you have not caught
This new and strange disease, I hope.

SIDI [*curtseying.*]: The threading of my smock—
Does Baroka not know the marking
Of the village loom?

BAROKA: But will Sidi, the pride of mothers,
Will she always wear it?

SIDI: Will Sidi, the proud daughter of Baroka,
Will she step out naked?
[*A pause. Baroka surveys Sidi in an almost fatherly manner and she bashfully drops her eyes.*]

BAROKA: To think that once I thought,
Sidi is the eye's delight, but
She is vain, and her head
Is feather-light, and always giddy
With a trivial thought. And now
I find her deep and wise beyond her years.
[*Reaches under his pillow, brings out the now familiar magazine, and also an addressed envelope. Retains the former and gives her the envelope.*]
Do you know what this means?
The trim red piece of paper
In the corner?

SIDI: I know it. A stamp. Lakunle receives
Letters from Lagos marked with it.

BAROKA [*obviously disappointed*]:
Hm. Lakunle. But more about him
Later. Do you know what it means—
This little frippery?

SIDI [*very proudly.*]:
Yes. I know that too. Is it not a tax on
The habit of talking with paper?

BAROKA: Oh. Oh. I see you dip your hand
Into the pockets of the school teacher
And retrieve it bulging with knowledge.
[*Goes to the strange machine, and pulls the lever up and down.*]
Now this, not even the school teacher can tell
What magic this performs. Come nearer,
It will not bite.

SIDI: I have never seen the like.

BAROKA: The work dear child, of the palace blacksmiths

Built in full secrecy. All is not well with it—
But I will find the cause and then Ilujinle
Will boast its own tax on paper, made with
Stamps[23] like this. For long I dreamt it
And here it stands, child of my thoughts.

SIDI [*wonder-struck.*]: You mean . . . this will work some day?

BAROKA: Ogun has said the word. And now my girl
What think you of that image on the stamp
This spiderwork of iron, wood, and mortar?

SIDI: Is it not a bridge?

BAROKA: It is a bridge. The longest—so they say
In the whole country. When not a bridge,
You'll find a print of groundnuts
Stacked like pyramids,
Or palm trees, or cocoa trees, and farmers
Hacking pods, and workmen
Felling trees and tying skinned logs
Into rafts. A thousand thousand letters
By road, by rail, by air,
From one end of the world to another,
And not one human head among them.
Not one head of beauty on the stamp!

SIDI: But I once saw Lakunle's letter
With a head of bronze.

BAROKA: A figurehead, my child, a lifeless work
Of craft, with holes for eyes, and coldness
For the warmth of life and love
In youthful cheeks like yours,
My daughter . . .
[*Pauses to watch the effect on Sidi.*]
. . . Can you see it, Sidi?
Tens of thousands of these dainty prints
And each one with this legend of Sidi.
[*Flourishes the magazine, open in the middle.*]
The village goddess, reaching out
Towards the sun, her lover.
Can you see it, my daughter!
[*Sidi drowns herself totally in the contemplation, takes the magazine but does not even look at it. Sits on the bed.*]

[23] Stamps: It was not uncommon for small African nations to make part of their national income by selling decorative stamps to collectors.

BAROKA [*very gently.*]:
I hope you will not think it too great
A burden, to carry the country's mail
All on your comeliness.
[*Walks away, an almost business-like tone.*]
Our beginnings will
Of course be modest. We shall begin
By cutting stamps for our own village alone.
As the schoolmaster himself would say—
Charity begins at home.
[*Pause. Faces Sidi from nearly the distance of the room.*]
For a long time now,
The town-dwellers have made up tales
Of the backwardness of Ilujinle
Until it hurts Baroka, who holds
The welfare of his people deep at heart.
Now, if we do this thing, it will prove more
Than any single town has done!
[*The wrestler, who has been listening open-mouthed, drops his cup in admiration. Baroka, annoyed, realizing only now in fact that he is still in the room, waves him impatiently out.*]
I do not hate progress, only its nature
Which makes all roofs and faces look the same,
And the wish of one old man is
That here and there,
[*Goes progressively towards Sidi, until he bends over her, then sits beside her on the bed.*]
Among the bridges and the murderous roads,
Below the humming birds which
Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of
The snake-tongue lightning; between this moment
And the reckless broom that will be wielded
In these years to come, we must leave
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost, lying
Undisturbed . . . But the skin of progress
Masks, unknown, the spotted wolf of sameness . . .
Does sameness not revolt your being,
My daughter?
[*Sidi is capable only of a bewildered nod, slowly.*]

BAROKA [*sighs, hands folded piously on his lap.*]:
I find my soul is sensitive, like yours.
Indeed, although there is one—no more think I—

One generation between yours and mine,
Our thoughts fly crisply through the air
And meet, purified, as one.
And our first union
Is the making of this stamp.
The one redeeming grace on any paper tax
Shall be your face. And mine,
The soul behind it all, worshipful
Of Nature for her gift of youth
And beauty to our earth. Does this
Please you, my daughter?

SIDI: I can no longer see the meaning, Baroka.
Now that you speak
Almost like the school teacher, except
Your words fly on a different path,
I find . . .

BAROKA: It is a bad thing, then, to sound
Like your school teacher?

SIDI: No, Bale, but words are like beetles
Boring at my ears, and my head
Becomes a jumping bean. Perhaps after all,
As the school teacher tells me often,
[*Very miserably.*]
I have a simple mind.

BAROKA [*pats her kindly on the head*]:
No, Sidi, not simple, only straight and truthful
Like a freshwater reed. But I do find
Your school teacher and I are much alike.
The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn
Even from children. And the haste of youth
Must learn its temper from the gloss
Of ancient leather, from a strength
Knit close along the grain. The school teacher
And I, must learn one from the other.
Is this not right?
[*A tearful nod.*]

BAROKA: The old must flow into the new, Sidi,
Not blind itself or stand foolishly
Apart. A girl like you must inherit
Miracles which age alone reveals.
Is this not so?

SIDI: Everything you say, Bale,
Seems wise to me.

BAROKA: Yesterday's wine alone is strong and blooded, child,

And though the Christians' holy book denies
The truth of this, old wine thrives best
Within a new bottle.[24] The coarseness
Is mellowed down, and the rugged wine
Acquires a full and rounded body. . . .
Is this not so—my child?
[*Quite overcome, Sidi nods.*]

BAROKA: Those who know little of Baroka think
His life one pleasure-living course.
But the monkey sweats, my child,
The monkey sweats,
It is only the hair upon his back
Which still deceives the world. . . .

[Sidi's head falls slowly on the Bale's shoulder. The Bale remains in his final body-weighed-down-by-burdens-of-State attitude.

Even before the scene is completely shut off a crowd of dancers burst in at the front and dance off at the opposite side without slackening pace. In their brief appearance it should be apparent that they comprise a group of female dancers pursuing a masked male. Drumming and shouts continue quite audibly and shortly afterwards. They enter and recross the stage in the same manner.

The shouts fade away and they next appear at the market clearing. It is now full evening. Lakunle and Sadiku are still waiting for Sidi's return. The traders are beginning to assemble one by one, ready for the evening market. Hawkers pass through with oil-lamps beside their ware. Food sellers enter with cooking-pots and foodstuffs, set up their "adogan" or stone hearth and build a fire.

All this while, Lakunle is pacing wretchedly, Sadiku looks on placidly.]

LAKUNLE [*he is pacing furiously.*]:
He's killed her.
I warned you. You know him,
And I warned you.
[*Goes up all the approaches to look.*]
She's been gone half the day. It will soon
Be daylight. And still no news.
Women have disappeared before.
No trace. Vanished. Now we know how.
[*Checks, turns round.*]
And why!
Mock an old man, will you? So?
You can laugh? Ha ha! You wait.

[24] **old wine . . . new bottle:** According to the parable in Mark 2:22, new wine should not be put into old "bottles," wineskins that have already been stretched out and may burst when the new wine begins to ferment.

I'll come and see you
Whipped like a dog. Baroka's head wife
Driven out of the house for plotting
With a girl.

[*Each approaching footstep brings Lakunle to attention, but it is only a hawker or a passer-by. The wrestler passes. Sadiku greets him familiarly. Then, after he has passed, some significance of this breaks on Sadiku and she begins to look a little puzzled.*]

LAKUNLE: I know he has dungeons. Secret holes
Where a helpless girl will lie
And rot forever. But not for nothing
Was I born a man. I'll find my way
To rescue her. She little deserves it, but
I shall risk my life for her.

[*The mummers*[25] *can now be heard again, distantly. Sadiku and Lakunle become attentive as the noise approaches, Lakunle increasingly uneasy. A little, but not too much notice is paid by the market people.*]

What is that?

SADIKU: If my guess is right, it will be mummers.

[*Adds slyly.*]

Somebody must have told them the news.

LAKUNLE: What news?

[*Sadiku chuckles darkly and comprehension breaks on the school teacher.*]

Baroka! You dared . . . ?
Woman, is there no mercy in your veins?
He gave you children, and he stood
Faithfully by you and them.
He risked his life that you may boast
A warrior-hunter for your lord . . . But you—
You sell him to the rhyming rabble
Gloating in your disloyalty . . .

SADIKU [*calmly dips her hand in his pocket.*]:

Have you any money?

LAKUNLE [*snatching out her hand.*]:

Why? What? . . . Keep away, witch! Have you
Turned pickpocket in your dotage?

SADIKU: Don't be a miser. Will you let them go without giving you a special performance?

LAKUNLE: If you think I care for their obscenity . . .

SADIKU [*wheedling.*]: Come on, school teacher. They'll expect it of you . . . The man of learning . . . the young sprig of foreign wisdom . . . You must not demean yourself in their eyes . . . you must give them money to perform for your lordship. . . .

[25] mummers: Dancers of pantomime stories.

[*Re-enter the mummers, dancing straight through (more centrally this time) as before. Male dancer enters first, pursued by a number of young women and other choral idlers. The man dances in tortured movements. He and about half of his pursuers have already danced offstage on the opposite side when Sadiku dips her hand briskly in Lakunle's pocket, this time with greater success. Before Lakunle can stop her, she has darted to the drummers and pressed a coin apiece on their foreheads, waving them to possession of the floor. Tilting their heads backwards, they drum her praises. Sadiku denies the credit, points to Lakunle as the generous benefactor. They transfer their attention to him where he stands biting his lips at the trick. The other dancers have now been brought back and the drummers resume the beat of the interrupted dance. The treasurer removes the coins from their foreheads and places them in a pouch. Now begins the dance of virility which is of course none other than the Baroka story. Very athletic movements. Even in his prime, "Baroka" is made a comic figure, held in a kind of tolerant respect by his women. At his decline and final downfall, they are most unsparing in their taunts and tantalizing motions. Sadiku has never stopped bouncing on her toes through the dance, now she is done the honour of being invited to join at the kill. A dumb show of bashful refusals, then she joins them, reveals surprising agility for her age, to the wild enthusiasm of the rest who surround and spur her on. With "Baroka" finally scotched, the crowd dances away to their incoming movement, leaving Sadiku to dance on oblivious of their departure. The drumming becomes more distant and she unwraps her eyelids. Sighs, looks around her, and walks contentedly towards Lakunle. As usual he has enjoyed the spectacle in spite of himself, showing especial relish where "Baroka" gets the worst of it from his women. Sadiku looks at him for a moment while he tries to replace his obvious enjoyment with disdain. She shouts "Boo" at him, and breaks into a dance movement, shakes a sudden leg at Lakunle.*]

SADIKU: Sadiku of the duiker's[26] feet . . . that's what the men used to call me. I could twist and untwist my waist with the smoothness of a water snake . . .

LAKUNLE: No doubt. And you are still just as slippery.
I hope Baroka kills you for this.
When he finds out what your wagging tongue
Has done to him, I hope he beats you
Till you choke on your own breath. . . .

[*Sidi bursts in, she has been running all the way. She throws herself on the ground against the tree and sobs violently, beating herself on the ground.*]

SADIKU [*on her knees beside her.*]: Why, child. What is the matter?

SIDI [*pushes her off.*]:

Get away from me. Do not touch me.

LAKUNLE [*with a triumphant smile, he pulls Sadiku away and takes her place.*]:

Oh, Sidi, let me kiss your tears. . . .

SIDI [*pushes him so hard that he sits down abruptly.*]:

Don't touch me.

LAKUNLE [*dusting himself.*]:

He must have beaten her.
Did I not warn you both?

[26] duiker: A small antelope able to leap high in the air.

Baroka is a creature of the wilds,
Untutored, mannerless, devoid of grace.
[*Sidi only cries all the more, beats on the ground with clenched fists, and stubs her toes in the ground.*]
Chief though he is,
I shall kill him for this . . .
No. Better still, I shall demand
Redress from the central courts.
I shall make him spend
The remainder of his wretched life
In prison—with hard labour.
I'll teach him
To beat defenceless women. . . .

SIDI [*lifting her head.*]:
Fool! You little fools! It was a lie.
The frog. The cunning frog!
He lied to you, Sadiku.

SADIKU: Sango forbid!

SIDI: He told me . . . afterwards, crowing.
It was a trick.
He knew Sadiku would not keep it to herself,
That I, or maybe other maids would hear of it
And go to mock his plight.
And how he laughed!
How his frog-face croaked and croaked
And called me little fool!
Oh how I hate him! How I loathe
And long to kill the man!

LAKUNLE [*retreating.*]: But Sidi, did he . . . ? I mean . . .
Did you escape?
[*Louder sobs from Sidi.*]
Speak, Sidi, this is agony.
Tell me the worst; I'll take it like a man.
Is it the fright which affects you so,
Or did he . . . ? Sidi, I cannot bear the thought.
The words refuse to form.
Do not unman me, Sidi. Speak
Before I burst in tears.

SADIKU [*raises Sidi's chin in her hand.*]:
Sidi, are you a maid or not?
[*Sidi shakes her head violently and bursts afresh in tears.*]

LAKUNLE: The Lord forbid!

SADIKU: Too late for prayers. Cheer up. It happens to the best of us.

LAKUNLE: Oh heavens, strike me dead!
Earth, open up and swallow Lakunle.

For he no longer has the wish to live.
Let the lightning fall and shrivel me
To dust and ashes. . . .
[*Recoils.*]
No, that wish is cowardly. This trial is my own.
Let Sango and his lightning keep out of this. It
Is my cross, and let it not be spoken that
In the hour of need, Lakunle stood
Upon the scales and was proved wanting.
My love is selfless—the love of spirit
Not of flesh.
[*Stands over Sidi.*]
Dear Sidi, we shall forget the past.
This great misfortune touches not
The treasury of my love.
But you will agree, it is only fair
That we forget the bride-price totally
Since you no longer can be called a maid.
Here is my hand, if on these terms
You'll be my cherished wife.
We'll take an oath, between us three
That this shall stay
A secret to our dying days . . .
[*Takes a look at Sadiku and adds quickly.*]
Oh no, a secret even after we're dead and gone.
And if Baroka dares to boast of it,
I'll swear he is a liar—and swear by Sango too!
[*Sidi raises herself slowly, staring at Lakunle with unbelieving eyes. She is unsmiling, her face a puzzle.*]

SIDI: You would? You would marry me?

LAKUNLE [*puffs out his chest.*]: Yes.
[*Without a change of expression, Sidi dashes suddenly off the stage.*]

SADIKU: What on earth has got into her?

LAKUNLE: I wish I knew
She took off suddenly
Like a hunted buck.
[*Looks offstage.*]
I think—yes, she is,
She is going home.
Sadiku, will you go?
Find out if you can
What she plans to do.
[*Sadiku nods and goes. Lakunle walks up and down.*]
And now I know I am the biggest fool
That ever walked this earth.

There are women to be found
In every town or village in these parts,
And every one a virgin.
But I obey my books.
[*Distant music. Light drums, flutes, box-guitars, "sekere."*[27]]
"Man takes the fallen woman by the hand"
And ever after they live happily.
Moreover, I will admit,
It solves the problem of her bride-price too.
A man must live or fall by his true
Principles. That, I had sworn,
Never to pay.
[*Enter Sadiku.*]

SADIKU: She is packing her things. She is gathering her clothes and trinkets together, and oiling herself as a bride does before her wedding.

LAKUNLE: Heaven help us! I am not impatient.
Surely she can wait a day or two at least.
There is the asking to be done,
And then I have to hire a praise-singer,
And such a number of ceremonies
Must firstly be performed.

SADIKU: Just what I said but she only laughed at me and called me a . . . a . . . what was it now . . . a bra . . . braba . . . brabararian. It serves you right. It all comes of your teaching. I said what about the asking and the other ceremonies. And she looked at me and said, leave all that nonsense to savages and brabararians.

LAKUNLE: But I must prepare myself
I cannot be
A single man one day and a married one the next.
It must come gradually.
I will not wed in haste.
A man must have time to prepare,
To learn to like the thought.
I must think of my pupils too:
Would they be pleased if I were married
Not asking their consent . . . ?
[*The singing group is now audible even to him.*]
What is that? The musicians?
Could they have learnt so soon?

SADIKU: The news of a festivity travels fast. You ought to know that.

LAKUNLE: The goddess of malicious gossip
Herself must have a hand in my undoing.

[27] "sekere": Percussion instrument made by lacing strings of shells around a calabash.

The very spirits of the partial air
Have all conspired to blow me, willy-nilly
Down the slippery slope of grim matrimony.
What evil have I done . . . ? Ah, here they come!
[*Enter crowd and musicians.*]
Go back. You are not needed yet. Nor ever.
Hence parasites, you've made a big mistake.
There is no one getting wedded; get you home.
[*Sidi now enters. In one hand she holds a bundle, done up in a richly embroidered cloth: in the other the magazine. She is radiant, jewelled, lightly clothed, and wears light leather-thong sandals. They all go suddenly silent except for the long-drawn O-Ohs of admiration. She goes up to Lakunle and hands him the book.*]

SIDI: A present from Sidi.
I tried to tear it up
But my fingers were too frail.
[*To the crowd.*]
Let us go.
[*To Lakunle.*]
You may come too if you wish,
You are invited.

LAKUNLE [*lost in the miracle of transformation.*]:
Well I should hope so indeed
Since I am to marry you.

SIDI [*turns round in surprise.*]:
Marry who . . . ? You thought . . .
Did you really think that you, and I . . .
Why, did you think that after him,
I could endure the touch of another man?
I who have felt the strength,
The perpetual youthful zest
Of the panther of the trees?
And would I choose a watered-down,
A beardless version of unripened man?

LAKUNLE [*bars her way.*]:
I shall not let you.
I shall protect you from yourself.

SIDI [*gives him a shove that sits him down again, hard against the tree base.*]:
Out of my way, book-nourished shrimp.
Do you see what strength he has given me?
That was not bad. For a man of sixty,
It was the secret of God's own draught
A deed for drums and ballads.
But you, at sixty, you'll be ten years dead!
In fact, you'll not survive your honeymoon. . . .

Come to my wedding if you will. If not . . .
[*She shrugs her shoulders. Kneels down at Sadiku's feet.*]
Mother of brides, your blessing . . .

SADIKU [*lays her hand on Sidi's head.*]: I invoke the fertile gods. They will stay with you. May the time come soon when you shall be as round-bellied as a full moon in a low sky.

SIDI [*hands her the bundle.*]:
Now bless my worldly goods.
[*Turns to the musicians.*]
Come, sing to me of seeds
Of children, sired of the lion stock.
[*The musicians resume their tune. Sidi sings and dances.*]
Mo te'ni. Mo te'ni.
Mo te'ni. Mo te'ni.
Sun mo mi, we mo mi
Sun mo mi, fa mo mi
Yarabi lo m'eyi t'o le d'omo . . .
[*Festive air, fully pervasive. Oil lamps from the market multiply as traders desert their stalls to join them. A young girl flaunts her dancing buttocks at Lakunle and he rises to the bait. Sadiku gets in his way as he gives chase. Tries to make him dance with her. Lakunle last seen, having freed himself of Sadiku, clearing a space in the crowd for the young girl.*
The crowd repeat the song after Sidi.]
Tolani Tolani
T'emi ni T'emi ni
Sun mo mi, we mo mi
Sun mo mi, fa mo mi
Yarabi lo m'eyi t'o le d'omo.[28]

THE END

[28] **Mo te'ni . . . d'omo:**
My net is spread. My net is spread.
Come close to me, wrap yourself around me.
Only God knows which moment makes the child . . .

Tolani Tolani
She belongs to me, belongs to me.
Come close to me, wrap yourself around me.
Only God knows which moment makes the child.
[From *Collected Plays* 2.]

ANITA DESAI

B. INDIA, 1937

There is a strong tradition in India of women as storytellers, as transmitters of tales of the gods, animal fables, and family and village histories. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the Western literary genre of the short story was introduced into India in the nineteenth century, women soon followed the early example of the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore[1] and began writing short fiction themselves. By the late 1920s, there were already several journals in India dedicated exclusively to the publication of women's writing. Contemporary India boasts a large number of women writers, some of whom, like **Amrita Pritam**, Kamala Das, **Bharati Mukherjee**,[2] and Anita Desai, have attracted international admiration for their work. Like their male colleagues, they are often drawn to postcolonial themes: the movement of rural populations into cities, the violent displacement of tribal peoples and families in the 1947 partition of India into India and Pakistan, the conflict between European and Indian ways and the anxiety of choosing among them, and the rapid changes in social conditions as contemporary India moves further and further away from Gandhi's spiritual and social vision[3] toward a multicorporate capitalist state. In addition, Indian women writers are especially concerned with what happens to women in the midst of these circumstances, with the specific oppressions Indian women continue to endure, with Indian women's anger and survival strategies, with women's strengths and the bonds among women. Desai's fiction in particular often centers on women from urban and somewhat Westernized middle-class Indian families who are troubled by conflicts between the cultures, the generations, and the sexes.

UM-rih-tuh PREE-tum; BAH-ruh-tee MUCK-ur-jee

A Multicultural Background. **Anita Desai** was born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India, to Toni Nime Mazumdar, a German woman, and D. N. Mazumdar, a successful Bengali businessman. She grew up in a comfortable multilingual and multicultural household in Old Delhi with her brothers and sisters, the sort of child her mother gently teased for

uh-NEE-tuh deh-SIGH

[1] **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941): The leading writer of the Bengali Renaissance, Tagore inspired many younger writers to write poetry and fiction in the Bengali language. See Book 5.

[2] **Pritam . . . Mukherjee:** Amrita Pritam (b. 1919), first prominent Punjabi woman poet and fiction writer, author of twenty-eight novels, eighteen collections of poetry, and numerous other works. Kamala Das (b. 1934, now Kamala Surayya, after converting to Islam), poet, fiction writer, and columnist best known for her Krishna poems, her frank autobiography, *My Story*, and her many collections of poems, including *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940), novelist best known for *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Jasmine* (1989). See page 1316.

[3] **Gandhi's . . . vision:** As leader of the Indian independence movement, Mohandas Gandhi advocated nonviolent resistance to colonial rule and a return to a simple economy based on hand crafts, home industries, and local self-sufficiency.

My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the new material of life.

– ANITA DESAI

For links to more information about Anita Desai and a quiz on "The Farewell Party," and for information about the culture and context of India in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

Desai's strength as a writer has always been her eye for detail and her ear for the exact word . . . her gift for telling metaphor, and above all her feel for sun and sky, heat and dust, for the elemental reality of central India.

– J. M. COETZEE, writer, 2000

being a *lese Ratte,* or "reading rat," the German term for a bookworm. Although she spoke German and Hindi at home, Desai learned English at school. "It was the first language that I learned to read and write," the author has commented, "so it became my literary language. Languages tend to proliferate around one in India, and one tends to use whatever is at hand. It makes one realize each language has its own distinct genius." Her true awakening as a reader and writer came when she was nine and chose idly from her parents' bookshelves a copy of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights.* As she read on, she recalls, "my own world of an Old Delhi bungalow, its verandas and plastered walls and ceiling fans, its gardens of papaya and guava trees full of shrieking parakeets, the gritty dust that settled on the pages of a book before one could turn them, all receded. What became real, dazzlingly real, through the power of Emily Brontë's pen was the Yorkshire moors, the storm-driven heath."

Desai earned her B.A. from Delhi University in 1957, having come to admire the work of Chekhov, Dostoevsky, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster,[4] and began to publish her own short fiction. She married Ashvin Desai, a corporate executive, in the year after her graduation. The Desais, now the parents of four children, have lived in New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, and other Indian cities. Anita Desai has taught at several colleges and universities in England and the United States. She currently divides her time between India and America, teaching one semester each year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Desai's Literary Career. In her early novels, Desai told the stories of women living in a variety of social situations in India. Her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock,* appeared in 1963; its main character is an Indian woman whose traditional upbringing has made it nearly impossible for her to voice or act on her personal desires. *Voices of the City* (1965) describes the lives of three sisters in Calcutta and their differing responses to the city, while *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) examines the oppressed lives of three women in a rural hill village and the generational conflicts in Indian families. Although Desai has asserted that her novels "are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character" but rather her "private attempt to seize upon the new material of life," they do provide a personal perspective on India, its contemporary history and situation. In *The Clear Light of Day,* for example, two sisters view the partition of India, in 1947, from differing points of view. *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) draws from both sides of Desai's heritage, as it tells the story of a gentle German Jew who flees the Holocaust to make his home in India, only to meet his end in the contemporary Bombay underworld of drug dealing and violence. *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) looks at India from both Indian and European perspectives as it tells the stories of three Europeans who come to India seeking spiritual enlightenment. In addition to her novels, Desai has written several children's books and a collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight* (1978), which includes "The Farewell Party."

[4] Chekhov . . . Forster: Realist writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was a Russian short-story writer and playwright. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) was a Russian novelist and author of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80) and other works of psychological fiction. D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), the English novelist, poet, and travel writer, was best known for *Sons and Lovers* (1913). E. M. Forster (1879–1970) was an English novelist whose *A Passage to India* (1924) is a classic on late British colonialism in India.

CONNECTIONS

Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban* (Book 5); Rabindranath Tagore, "Broken Ties" (Book 5); Rokeya Hossain, "Sultana's Dream," p. 323; Bharati Mukherjee, "A Wife's Story," p. 1316. Desai's take on Bina's place as a woman in middle-class Indian culture adds another dimension to the accounts of the lives of Indian women in Devi's *My Life (Amar Jiban),* Tagore's "Broken Ties," Hossain's "Sultana's Dream," and Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story." Do these works, spanning the last century or so, indicate significant changes in the situation of women in India? What continuities do you see between the lives of the women in the earlier works and those in works written more recently?

James Joyce, "The Dead," p. 372. Both "The Farewell Party" and Joyce's "The Dead" use a party to bring out the differences between their protagonists and the cultures in which they live. How are Bina and her husband alienated from the town they are leaving? Is their alienation similar to Gabriel's in "The Dead"? Consider the use of music in the two stories. Do the Irish folk songs in Joyce's story have a similar significance to the Tagore song in "The Farewell Party"?

Petronius, *The Satyricon* (Book 1); Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Book 5). Desai's treatment of the corporate culture of a provincial Indian town mildly satirizes middle-class mores and values. What specifically does Desai satirize? Is the overall effect of her story, like that of Petronius's account of Trimalchio's feast, satiric? Think about the point of view from which the story is told. With which character in the story is the narrator most closely allied? Compare the point of view with that in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych.* Both Ivan and Bina learn through suffering. Is the tone at the end of the two stories similar? With whom do you sympathize more, Ivan or Bina?

FURTHER RESEARCH

Criticism

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PRONUNCIATION

Anita Desai: un-NEE-tuh deh-SIGH
Bharati Mukherjee: BAH-ruh-tee MUCK-ur-jee
Amrita Pritam: UM-rih-tuh PREE-tum
Shantiniketan: shun-tee-nee-KAY-tun

[English] was the first language that I learned to read and write, so it became my literary language. Languages tend to proliferate around one in India, and one tends to use whatever is at hand. It makes one realize each language has its own distinct genius.

– ANITA DES

Desai has been cor pared to Jane Aust and, indeed, she is deceptively gracio storyteller, writing like an embroider concealing a swor as she creates fan microcosms that embody all the de sions and cruelties society-at-large.

– DONNA SEAI

The Farewell Party

Before the party she had made a list, faintheartedly, and marked off the items as they were dealt with, inexorably—cigarettes, soft drinks, ice, *kebabs*, and so on. But she had forgotten to provide lights. The party was to be held on the lawn: On these dry summer nights one could plan a lawn party weeks in advance and be certain of fine weather, and she had thought happily of how the roses would be in bloom and of the stars and perhaps even fireflies, so decorative and discreet, all gracefully underlining her unsuspected talent as a hostess. But she had not realised that there would be no moon and therefore it would be very dark on the lawn. All the lights on the verandah, in the portico, and indoors were on, like so many lanterns, richly copper and glowing with extraordinary beauty as though aware that the house would soon be empty and these were the last few days of illumination and family life, but they did very little to light the lawn which was vast, a still lake of inky grass.

Wandering about with a glass in one hand and a plate of cheese biscuits in another, she gave a start now and then to see an acquaintance emerge from the darkness, which had the gloss, the sheen, the coolness but not the weight of water, and present her with a face, vague and without outlines but eventually recognisable. "Oh," she cried several times that evening, "I didn't know you had arrived. I've been looking for you," she would add with unaccustomed intimacy (was it because of the gin and lime, her second, or because such warmth could safely be held to lead to

"The Farewell Party." From Desai's 1978 collection *Games at Twilight*, this story displays the author's sure touch with imagery and dialogue. As James Joyce does in "The Dead," Desai here follows her characters through the unfolding of an evening gathering, where seemingly banal conversation becomes fascinating as it reveals more and more about the story's main characters and the Euro-Indian corporate world they inhabit, a world neither wholly European nor Indian. Forced to be competitive and mobile, these executives find themselves and their families cut off from the intimacy that once characterized Indian life. Only at a farewell party, when there is no danger of seeing the departing couple again and all exchanges are made easier by alcohol can these people express affection for one another. The adults' more thoroughly Westernized teenaged children twist to Beatles records and giggle and shriek while they swig Coca-Cola, but the uneasy parents have nearly forgotten how to enjoy themselves.

As the night deepens, more is learned about the host couple, the Ramans, who have been further isolated by their own natural shyness and by the needs of Nono, their severely handicapped eldest child. Finally, when most of the guests have gone, the doctors from the local hospital come forward. They have been hanging back in the shadows, shy before the corporate executives, but of all the partygoers they alone have truly shared a part of the Ramans' lives in their joint concern for Nono, even though they have never socialized with his parents before. Free now to bring Nono out to the party, Bina sits with her son among people who care about him and relaxes at last. One of the doctors' wives sings into the darkness an old Rabindranath Tagore song in Bengali about a woman compelled to sail away and leave her family behind. Even as the song creates a bond for this small circle of newly intimate people soon to be separated, its simple lyrics and the regional language in which it is sung evoke all the poignancy of lost relationships and connectedness.

All notes are the editors'.

nothing now that they were leaving town?). The guest, also having had several drinks between beds of flowering balsam and torenias before launching out onto the lawn, responded with an equal vivacity. Sometimes she had her arm squeezed or a hand slid down the bareness of her back—which was athletic: she had once played tennis, rather well—and once someone said, "I've been hiding in this corner, watching you," while another went so far as to say, "Is it true you are leaving us, Bina? How can you be so cruel?" And if it were a woman guest, the words were that much more effusive. It was all heady, astonishing.

It was astonishing because Bina was a frigid and friendless woman. She was thirty-five. For fifteen years she had been bringing up her children and, in particular, nursing the eldest who was severely spastic. This had involved her deeply in the workings of the local hospital and with its many departments and doctors, but her care for this child was so intense and so desperate that her relationship with them was purely professional. Outside this circle of family and hospital—ringed, as it were, with barbed wire and lit with one single floodlight—Bina had no life. The town had scarcely come to know her for its life turned in the more jovial circles of mah-jong, bridge, coffee parties, club evenings, and, occasionally, a charity show in aid of the Red Cross. For these Bina had a kind of sad contempt and certainly no time. A tall, pale woman, heavy-boned and sallow, she had a certain presence, a certain dignity, and people, having heard of the spastic child, liked and admired her, but she had not thought she had friends. Yet tonight they were coming forth from the darkness in waves that quite overwhelmed.

Now here was Mrs. Ray, the Commissioner's wife, chirping inside a nest of rustling embroidered organza. "Why are you leaving us so soon, Mrs. Raman? You've only been here—two years, is it?"

"Five," exclaimed Bina, widening her eyes, herself surprised at such a length of time. Although time dragged heavily in their household, agonisingly slow, and the five years had been so hard that sometimes, at night, she did not know how she had crawled through the day and if she would crawl through another, her back almost literally broken by the weight of the totally dependent child and of the three smaller ones who seemed perpetually to clamour for their share of attention, which they felt they never got. Yet now these five years had telescoped. They were over. The Raman family was moving and their time here was spent. There had been the hospital, the girls' school, the boys' school, picnics, monsoons, birthday parties, and measles. Crushed together into a handful. She gazed down at her hands, tightened around glass and plate. "Time has flown," she murmured incredulously.

"Oh, I wish you were staying, Mrs. Raman," cried the Commissioner's wife and, as she squeezed Bina's arm, her fragrant talcum powder seemed to lift off her chalky shoulders and some of it settled on Bina who sneezed. "It's been so nice to have a family like yours here. It's a small town, so little to do, at least one must have good friends . . ."

Bina blinked at such words of affection from a woman she had met twice, perhaps thrice before. Bina and her husband did not go in for society. The shock of their first child's birth had made them both fanatic parents. But she knew that not everyone considered this vital factor in their lives, and spoke of "social duties" in a

somehow reproving tone. The Commissioner's wife had been annoyed, she always felt, by her refusal to help out at the Red Cross fair. The hurt silence with which her refusal had been accepted had implied the importance of these "social duties" of which Bina remained so stubbornly unaware.

However, this one evening, this last party, was certainly given over to their recognition and celebration. "Oh, everyone, everyone is here," rejoiced the Commissioner's wife, her eyes snapping from face to face in that crowded aquarium, and, at a higher pitch, cried "Renu, why weren't you at the mah-jong party this morning?" and moved off into another powdery organza embrace that rose to meet her from the night like a moth and then was submerged again in the shadows of the lawn. Bina gave one of those smiles that easily frightened people found mocking, a shade too superior, somewhat scornful. Looking down into her glass of gin and lime, she moved on and in a minute found herself brought up short against the quite regal although overweight figure, in raw silk and homespun and the somewhat saturnine air of underpaid culture, of Bose, an employee of the local museum whom she had met once or twice at the art competitions and exhibitions to which she was fond of hauling her children, whether reluctant or enthusiastic, because "it made a change," she said.

"Mrs. Raman," he said in the fruity tones of the culture-bent Bengali, "how we'll miss you at the next children's art competitions. You used to be my chief inspiration—"

"Inspiration?" she laughed, incredulously, spilling some of her drink and proffering the plate of cheese biscuits from which he helped himself, half-bowing as though it were gold she offered, gems.

"Yes, yes, inspiration," he went on, even more fruitily now that his mouth was full. "Think of me—alone, the hapless organiser—surrounded by mammas, by primary school teachers, by three, four, five hundred children. And the judges—they are always the most trouble, those judges. And then I look at you—so cool, controlling your children, handling them so wonderfully and with such superb results—my inspiration!"

She was flustered by this unaccustomed vision of herself and half-turned her face away from Bose the better to contemplate it, but could find no reflection of it in the ghostly white bush of the Queen of the Night, and listened to him murmur on about her unkindness in deserting him in this cultural backwater to that darkest of dooms—guardian of a provincial museum—where he saw no one but school teachers herding children through his halls or, worse, Government officials who periodically and inexplicably stirred to create trouble for him and made their official presences felt amongst the copies of the Ajanta frescoes (in which even the mouldy and peeled-off portions were carefully reproduced) and the cupboards of Indus Valley seals. Murmuring commiseration, she left him to a gloomy young professor of history who was languishing at another of the institutions of provincial backwaters that they so deplored and whose wife was always having a baby, and slipped away, still feeling an unease at Bose's unexpected vision of her which did not tally with the cruder reality, into the less equivocal company provided by a ring of twittering "company wives."

These women she had always encountered in just such a ring as they formed now, the kind that garden babblers form under a hedge where they sit gabbling and whirring with social bitchiness, and she had always stood outside it, smiling stiffly, not wanting to join and refusing their effusively nodded invitation. They were the wives of men who represented various mercantile companies in the town—Imperial Tobacco, Brooke Bond, Esso, and so on—and although they might seem exactly alike to one who did not belong to this circle, inside it were subtle gradations of importance according to the particular company for which each one's husband worked and of these only they themselves were initiates. Bina was, however unwillingly, an initiate. Her husband worked for one of these companies but she had always stiffly refused to recognise these gradations, or consider them. They noted the rather set sulkiness of her silence when amongst them and privately labelled her queer, proud, boring, and difficult. Also, they felt she belonged to their circle whether she liked it or not.

Now she entered this circle with diffidence, wishing she had stayed with the more congenial Bose (why hadn't she? What was it in her that made her retreat from anything like a friendly approach?) and was taken aback to find their circle parting to admit her and hear their cries of welcome and affection that did not, however, lose the stridency and harshness of garden babblers' voices.

"Bina, how do you like the idea of going back to Bombay?"

"Have you started packing, Bina? Poor you. Oh, are you having packers over from Delhi? Oh well, then it's not so bad."

Never had they been so vociferous in her company, so easy, so warm. They were women to whom the most awful thing that had ever happened was the screw of a golden earring disappearing down the bathroom sink or a mother-in-law's visit or an ayah[1] deserting just before the arrival of guests: what could they know of Bina's life, Bina's ordeal? She cast her glance at the drinks they held—but they were mostly of orange squash. Only the Esso wife, who participated in amateur dramatics and ran a boutique and was rather taller and bolder than the rest, held a whisky and soda. So much affection generated by just orange squash? Impossible. Rather tentatively, she offered them the remains of the cheese biscuits, found herself chirping replies, deploring the nuisance of having packing crates all over the house, talking of the flat they would move into in Bombay, and then, sweating unobtrusively with the strain, saw another recognisable fish swim towards her from the edge of the liquescent lawn, and swung away in relief, saying, "Mrs. D'Souza! How late you are, but I'm so glad—" for she really was.

Mrs. D'Souza was her daughter's teacher at the convent school and had clearly never been to a cocktail party before so that all Bina's compassion was aroused by those school-scuffed shoes and her tea-party best—quite apart from the simple truth that she found in her an honest individuality that all those beautifully dressed and poised babblers lacked, being stamped all over by the plain rubber stamps of their husbands' companies—and she hurried off to find Mrs. D'Souza something

[1] ayah: A nanny or maidservant.

suitable to drink. "Sherry? Why yes, I think I'll be able to find you some," she said, a bit flabbergasted at such an unexpected fancy of the pepper-haired school teacher, "and I'll see if Tara's around—she'll want to see you," she added, vaguely and fraudulently, wondering why she had asked Mrs. D'Souza to a cocktail party, only to see, as she skirted the rose bed, the admirable Bose appear at her side and envelop her in this strange intimacy that marked the whole evening, and went off, light-hearted, towards the table where her husband was trying, with the help of some hired waiters in soggy white uniforms with the name of the restaurant from which they were hired embroidered in red across their pockets, to cope with the flood of drinks this party atmosphere had called for and released.

Harassed, perspiring, his feet burning, Raman was nevertheless pleased to be so obviously employed and be saved the strain of having to converse with his motley assembly of guests: he had no more gift for society than his wife had. Ice cubes were melting on the tablecloth in sopping puddles and he had trouble in keeping track of his bottles: They were, besides the newly bought dozens of beer bottles and Black Knight whisky, the remains of their five years in this town that he now wished to bring to their end—bottles brought by friends from trips abroad, bottles bought cheap through "contacts" in the army or air force, some gems, extravaganzas bought for anniversaries such as a nearly full bottle of Vat 69, a bottle with a bit of *crême de menthe* growing sticky at the bottom, some brown sherry with a great deal of rusty sediment, a red Golconda wine from Hyderabad, and a bottle of Remy Martin that he was keeping guiltily to himself, pouring small quantities into a whisky glass at his elbow and gulping it down in between mixing some very weird cocktails for his guests. There was no one at the party he liked well enough to share it with. Oh, one of the doctors perhaps, but where were they? Submerged in grass, in dark, in night and chatter, clatter of ice in glass, teeth on biscuit, teeth on teeth. Enamel and gold. Crumbs and dregs. All awash, all soaked in night. Watery sound of speech, liquid sound of drink. Water and ice and night. It occurred to him that everyone had forgotten him, the host, that it was a mistake to have stationed himself amongst the waiters, that he ought to move out, mingle with the guests. But he felt himself drowned, helplessly and quite delightfully, in Remy Martin, in grass, in a border of purple torenias.

Then he was discovered by his son who galloped through the ranks of guests and waiters to fling himself at his father and ask if he could play the new Beatles record, his friends had asked to hear it.

Raman considered, taking the opportunity to pour out and gulp down some more of the precious Remy Martin. "All right," he said, after a judicious minute or two, "but keep it low, everyone won't want to hear it," not adding that he himself didn't, for his taste in music ran to slow and melancholy, folk at its most frivolous. Still, he glanced into the lighted room where his children and the children of neighbours and guests had collected, making themselves tipsy on Fanta and Coca-Cola, the girls giggling in a multicoloured huddle and the boys swaggering around the record-player with a kind of lounging strut, holding bottles in their hands with a sophisticated ease, exactly like experienced cocktail party guests, so that he smiled and wished he had a ticket, a passport that would make it possible to break into that

party within a party. It was chillingly obvious to him that he hadn't one. He also saw that a good deal of their riotousness was due to the fact that they were raiding the snack trays that the waiters carried through the room to the lawn, and that they were seeing to it that the trays emerged half-empty. He knew he ought to go in and see about it but he hadn't the heart, or the nerve. He couldn't join that party but he wouldn't wreck it either so he only caught hold of one of the waiters and suggested that the snack trays be carried out from the kitchen straight onto the lawn, not by way of the drawing-room, and led him towards a group that seemed to be without snacks and saw too late that it was a group of the company executives that he loathed most. He half-groaned, then hiccuped at his mistake, but it was too late to alter course now. He told himself that he ought to see to it that the snacks were offered around without snag or error.

Poor Raman was placed in one of the lower ranks of the companies' hierarchy. That is, he did not belong to a British concern, or even to an American-collaboration one, but merely to an Indian one. Oh, a long-established, prosperous, and solid one but, still, only Indian. Those cigarettes that he passed around were made by his own company. Somehow it struck a note of bad taste amongst these fastidious men who played golf, danced at the club on Independence Eve and New Year's Eve, invited at least one foreign couple to every party, and called their decorative wives "darling" when in public. Poor Raman never had belonged. It was so obvious to everyone, even to himself, as he passed around those awful cigarettes that sold so well in the market. It had been obvious since their first disastrous dinner party for this very ring of jocular gentlemen, five years ago. Nono had cried right through the party, Bina had spent the evening racing upstairs to see to the babies' baths and bedtime and then crawling reluctantly down, the hired cook had got drunk and stolen two of the chickens so that there was not enough on the table, no one had relaxed for a minute or enjoyed a second—it had been too sad and harrowing even to make a good story or a funny anecdote. They had all let it sink by mutual consent and the invitations to play a round of golf on Saturday afternoon or a rubber of bridge on Sunday morning had been issued and refused with conspiratorial smoothness. Then there was that distressing hobby of Raman's: his impossibly long walks on which he picked up bits of wood and took them home to sandpaper and chisel and then call wood sculpture. What could one do with a chap who did that? He himself wasn't sure if he pursued such odd tastes because he was a social pariah or if he was one on account of this oddity. Not to speak of the spastic child. Now that didn't even bear thinking of, and so it was no wonder that Raman swayed towards them so hesitantly, as though he were wading through water instead of over clipped grass, and handed his cigarettes around with such an apologetic air.

But, after all, hesitation and apology proved unnecessary. One of them—was he Polson's Coffee or Brooke Bond Tea?—clasped Raman about the shoulders as proper men do on meeting, and hearty voices rose together, congratulating him on his promotion (it wasn't one, merely a transfer, and they knew it), envying him his move to the metropolis. They talked as if they had known each other for years, shared all kinds of public schoolboy fun. One—was he Voltas or Ciba?—talked of golf matches at the Willingdon as though he had often played there with Raman,

another spoke of *kebabs* eaten on the roadside after a party as though Raman had been one of the gang. Amazed and grateful as a schoolboy admitted to a closed society, Raman nodded and put in a few cautious words, put away his cigarettes, called a waiter to refill their glasses, and broke away before the clock struck twelve and the golden carriage turned into a pumpkin, he himself into a mouse. He hated mice.

Walking backwards, he walked straight into the soft barrier of Miss Dutta's ample back wrapped and bound in rich Madras silk.

"Sorry, sorry, Miss Dutta, I'm clumsy as a bear," he apologised, but here, too, there was no call for apology for Miss Dutta was obviously delighted at having been bumped into.

"My dear Mr. Raman, what can you expect if you invite the whole town to your party?" she asked in that piercing voice that invariably made her companions drop theirs self-consciously. "You and Bina have been so popular—what are we going to do without you?"

He stood pressing his glass with white-tipped fingers and tried to think what he or Bina had provided her with that she could possibly miss. In any case, Miss Dutta could always manage, and did manage, everything single-handedly. She was the town busybody, secretary and chairman of more committees than he could count: They ranged from the Film Society to the Blood Bank, from the Red Cross to the Friends of the Museum, for Miss Dutta was nothing if not versatile. "We hardly ever saw you at our film shows of course," her voice rang out, making him glance furtively over his shoulder to see if anyone were listening, "but it was so nice *knowing* you were in town and that I could count on you. So few people here *care*, you know," she went on, and affectionately bumped her comfortable middle-aged body into his as someone squeezed by, making him remember that he had once heard her called a man-eater, and wonder which man she had eaten and even consider, for a moment, if there were not, after all, some charm in those powdered creases of her creamy arms, equalling if not surpassing that of his worn and harassed wife's bony angles. Why did suffering make for angularity? he even asked himself with uncharacteristic unkindness. But when Miss Dutta laid an arm on top of his glass-holding one and raised herself on her toes to bray something into his ear, he loyally decided that he was too accustomed to sharp angles to change them for such unashamed luxuriance, and, contriving to remove her arm by grasping her elbow—how one's fingers sank into the stuff!—he steered her towards his wife who was standing at the table and inefficiently pouring herself another gin and lime.

"This is my third," she confessed hurriedly, "and I can't tell you how gay it makes me feel. I giggle at everything everyone says."

"Good," he pronounced, feeling inside a warm expansion of relief at seeing her lose, for the moment, her tension and anxiety. "Let's hear you giggle," he said, sloshing some more gin into her glass.

"Look at those children," she exclaimed, and they stood in a bed of balsam, irredeemably crushed, and looked into the lighted drawing room where their daughter was at the moment the cynosure of all juvenile eyes, having thrown herself with abandon into a dance of monkey-like movements. "What is it, Miss Dutta?" the awed mother enquired. "You're more up in the latest fashions than I am—is it the twist, the rock, or the jungle?" and all three watched, enthralled, till Tara began to totter and, losing her simian grace, collapsed against some wildly shrieking girlfriends.

A bit embarrassed by their daughter's reckless abandon, the parents discussed with Miss Dutta, whose finger by her own admission was placed squarely on the pulse of youth, the latest trends in juvenile culture on which Miss Dutta gave a neat sociological discourse (all the neater for having been given earlier that day at the convocation of the Home Science College) and Raman wondered uneasily at this opening of floodgates in his own family—his wife grown giggly with gin, his daughter performing wildly to a Chubby Checker record—how had it all come about? Was it the darkness all about them, dense as the heavy curtains about a stage, that made them act, for an hour or so, on the tiny lighted stage of brief intimacy with such a lack of inhibition? Was it the drink, so freely sloshing from end to end of the house and lawn on account of his determination to clear out his "cellar" (actually one-half of the sideboard and the top shelf of the wardrobe in his dressing-room) and his muddling and mixing them, making up untried and experimental cocktails and lavishly pouring out the whisky without a measure? But these were solid and everyday explanations and there was about this party something out of the ordinary and everyday—at least to the Ramans, normally so austere and unpopular. He knew the real reason too—it was all because the party had been labelled a "farewell party," everyone knew it was the last one, that the Ramans were leaving and they would not meet up again. There was about it exactly that kind of sentimental euphoria that is generated at a shipboard party, the one given on the last night before the end of the voyage. Everyone draws together with an intimacy, a lack of inhibition not displayed or guessed at before, knowing this is the last time, tomorrow they will be dispersed, it will be over. They will not meet, be reminded of it or be required to repeat it.

As if to underline this new and Cinderella's ball-like atmosphere of friendliness and gaiety, three pairs of neighbours now swept in (and three kochias lay down and died under their feet, to the gardener's rage and sorrow): the couple who lived to the Ramans' left, the couple who lived to their right, and the couple from across the road, all crying, "So sorry to be late, but you know what a long way we had to come," making everyone laugh identically at the identical joke. Despite the disparity in their looks and ages—one couple was very young, another middle-aged, the third grandparents—they were, in a sense, as alike as the company executives and their wives, for they too bore a label if a less alarming one: neighbours, it said. Because they were neighbours, and although they had never been more than nodded to over the hedge, waved to in passing cars or spoken to about anything other than their children, dogs, flowers, and gardens, their talk had a vivid immediacy that went straight to the heart.

"Diamond's going to miss you so—he'll be heartbroken," moaned the grandparents who lived alone in their spotless house with a black labrador who had made a habit of visiting the Ramans whenever he wanted young company, a romp on the lawn, or an illicit biscuit.

"I don't know what my son will do without Diamond," reciprocated Bina with her new and sympathetic warmth. "He'll force me to get a dog of his own, I know, and how will I ever keep one in a flat in Bombay?"

"When are you going to throw out those rascals?" a father demanded of Raman, pointing at the juvenile revellers indoors. "My boy has an exam tomorrow, you know, but he said he couldn't be bothered about it—he had to go to the Ramans' farewell party."

One mother confided to Bina, winning her heart forever, "Now that you are leaving, I can talk to you about it at last: did you know my Vinod is sweet on your Tara? Last night when I was putting him to bed, he said, 'Mama, when I grow up I will marry Tara. I will sit on a white horse and wear a turban and carry a sword in my belt and I will go and marry Tara.' What shall we do about that, eh? Only a ten year difference in age, isn't there—or twelve?" and both women rocked with laughter.

The party had reached its crest, like a festive ship, loud and illuminated for that last party before the journey's end, perched on the dizzy top of the dark wave. It could do nothing now but descend and dissolve. As if by simultaneous and unanimous consent, the guests began to leave (in the wake of the Commissioner and his wife who left first, like royalty) streaming towards the drive where cars stood bumper to bumper—more than had visited the Ramans' house in the previous five years put together. The light in the portico fell on Bina's pride and joy, a Chinese orange tree, lighting its miniature globes of fruit like golden lanterns. There was a babble, an uproar of leave-taking (the smaller children, already in pyjamas, watched open-mouthed from a dark window upstairs). Esso and Caltex left together, arms about each other and smoking cigars, like figures in a comic act. Miss Dutta held firmly to Bose's arm as they dipped, bowed, swayed, and tripped on their way out. Bina was clasped, kissed—earrings grazed her cheek, talcum powder tickled her nose. Raman had his back slapped till he thrummed and vibrated like a beaten gong.

It seemed as if Bina and Raman were to be left alone at last, left to pack up and leave—now the good-byes had been said, there was nothing else they could possibly do—but no, out popped the good doctors from the hospital who had held themselves back in the darkest corners and made themselves inconspicuous throughout the party, and now, in the manner in which they clasped the host by the shoulders and the hostess by her hands, and said "Ah, *now* we have a chance to be with you at last, now we can begin *our* party," revealed that although this was the first time they had come to the Ramans' house on any but professional visits, they were not merely friends—they were almost a part of that self-defensive family, the closest to them in sympathy. Raman and Bina felt a warm, moist expansion of tenderness inside themselves, the tenderness they had till today restricted to the limits of their family, no farther, as though they feared it had not an unlimited capacity. Now its close horizons stepped backwards, with some surprise.

And it was as the doctors said—the party now truly began. Cane chairs were dragged out of the verandah onto the lawn, placed in a ring next to the flowering Queen of the Night which shook out flounces and frills of white scent with every rustle of night breeze. Bina could give in now to her two most urgent needs and dash indoors to smear her mosquito-bitten arms and feet with Citronella and fetch Nono to sit on her lap, to let Nono have a share, too, in the party. The good doctors and their wives leant forward and gave Nono the attention that made the parents' throats tighten with gratitude. Raman insisted on their each having a glass of Remy Martin—they must finish it tonight, he said, and would not let the waiters clear away the ice or glasses yet. So they sat on the verandah steps, smoking and yawning.

Now it turned out that Dr. Bannerji's wife, the lady in the Dacca sari and the steel-rimmed spectacles, had studied in Shantiniketan,[2] and she sang, at her husband's and his colleagues' urging, Tagore's sweetest, saddest songs. When she sang, in heartbroken tones that seemed to come from some distance away, from the damp corners of the darkness where the fireflies flitted,

> Father, the boat is carrying me away,
> Father, it is carrying me away from home,

the eyes of her listeners, sitting tensely in that grassy, inky dark, glazed with tears that were compounded equally of drink, relief, and regret.

[2] **Shantiniketan:** School founded in 1901 by the Bengali Renaissance poet Rabindranath Tagore to teach students in a natural setting. Later, the school became a university devoted to bringing East and West together.

Bessie Head

b. South Africa, 1937–1986

The short and unhappy life of Bessie Head, the black South African novelist and short-story writer, reflects the troubled times in which she lived. Because her own identity was clouded by a painful family history and complicated by the twin oppressions of South African apartheid and sexism, she found in her own story a way to understand the troubled history of her country. "We black Africans," she wrote, "did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation." Her search for her own identity in her writing embodies a search for the identity of black Africa. Just as she was cut off from a knowledge of her own origins, the Africa Bessie Head describes has been separated from its past and is caught between conflicting cultural forces.

WWW For links to more information about Bessie Head and quizzes on "The Deep River" and "Snapshots of a Wedding," and for information about the culture and context of Africa in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

A Troubled Personal History. Bessie Head was born in 1937 in a Pietermaritzburg psychiatric hospital where her mother, Bessie Amelia Emery, was a patient. From a family of wealthy Scottish immigrants, Bessie Emery had fallen prey to mental illness after her eldest son, at age four, was run over and killed. Her marriage gradually disintegrated, and after her divorce in 1928 she was in and out of mental hospitals. She was forty-two when her illegitimate daughter was born, the child of a secret relationship with a black household servant. Although Bessie's mother never disclosed her father's identity to her, by naming the child with her own name she provided the key by which Bessie Head's parentage would be deciphered fifty-three years later. As a baby Head was classified as "white"

We black Africans did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation.

– Bessie Head

on her birth certificate and adopted by a white family, but when her features began to show some African characteristics, she was placed with a new "colored" family. Under APARTHEID, the South African system of racial segregation, "white," "colored," and "black" were strictly defined racial categories. In 1937 sexual intercourse across racial lines was a punishable offense. The identity of Bessie Head's black father, a servant in her mother's household, was uncovered only after Head's death many years later.

When Bessie was twelve, her adoptive parents suffered financial reverses and placed her in a home for "colored" girls where she was sent to a mission school. There she trained to be a teacher, earning her teaching certificate in 1955. But she did not like teaching, and after biting the principal's hand and accusing him of sexually molesting her, she turned to journalism. In 1960 she married fellow journalist Harold Head, but the marriage soon soured, ending in 1964. Then, leaving behind a troubled personal history and escaping from the oppression of apartheid in South Africa, Head took her infant son and moved to Botswana. Although she hoped to begin a new life there, she took her anger and unhappiness with her. She struggled to make a living, always on the edge of poverty, and felt like an outsider who was not welcomed in the recently independent Botswana.

Bessie Head and Black South Africa. In "The Collector of Treasures," a short story about a woman in circumstances similar to her own, Head traces African history through three periods: "In the old days, before the colonial invasion of Africa, he [the African] was a man who lived by tradition and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of the tribe. He had little individual freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate or not—they demanded that he comply and obey the rules, without thought." Traditional African culture, Head goes on to point out, "relegated men to a superior position . . . while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life." The next period, the colonial era, "broke the hold of the ancestors." The black man was sent to work in the mines and separated from his family; he became "'the boy' of the white man and a machine tool of the South African mines." Finally, African independence brought "one more affliction." It offered jobs and opportunities for a "family life of a new order, above the childlike discipline of custom, the degradation of colonialism. Men and women, in order to survive, had to turn inwards to their own resources." But tribalism and colonialism had drained them of those inner resources, and the African, "in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness, . . . spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation."

[The contemporary black African] in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness . . . spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation.

– Bessie Head, "The Collector of Treasures," 1977

Bessie Head's own life can be seen as representative of the black South African's experience in the emerging postcolonial era. In her own struggle to transcend apartheid and live independently, Head found herself alienated, tormented, and subject to spells of mental illness that required hospitalization.

Bessie Head never returned to South Africa from her exile in Botswana. When she died from a lung infection at age forty-nine in 1986, she was working on her autobiography, a story she did not finish. Much of her troubled and suppressed personal history came to light only after her death.

Novels and Head's Personal Story. Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), turned her personal situation into a parable about the new Africa. The hero, Makhaya, a Zulu from South Africa, escapes apartheid by fleeing to Botswana. Though he becomes part of an agricultural cooperative developing new methods of agriculture and social organization, the traditional ways of doing things frustrate his idealistic program for the future and drive Makhaya to suicide. *A Question of Power* (1973) is even more autobiographical. It tells the story of a colored South African woman, Elizabeth, who has settled in a rural Botswanan village and is tormented there by loneliness and alienation. In her relationships with men she is unable to separate her imaginings from reality, and, eventually, she is driven to insanity and spends time in a mental hospital. In the end she leaves the hospital and returns to the village and to her son.

Short Stories. Drawing on the experience of exile, Bessie Head's short stories deal with the same themes as her novels: identity, tradition, exile, colonialism, and the influence of the West in Africa. "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration" (1977) records the fragmentary history of the **Botalaote** tribe. A story of exile and migration, it is representative of the dislocation and loss of identity suffered by many African peoples. "Snapshots of a Wedding" (1977) treats similar issues in its account of a contemporary wedding ceremony that awkwardly combines traditional ritual and contemporary ways.

[Head's stories rooted folkloris tales woven fro fabric of village and intended to entertain and enlighten, not t engage the mod close critic.

– Michael T critic

boh-tah-LOW-te

CONNECTIONS

***In the World:* Imagining Africa, p. 853.** Léopold Sédar Senghor's "Prayer to the Masks" and Countee Cullen's "Heritage" are works that treat the subject of African roots. Both Senghor and Cullen celebrate Africa and could be said to romanticize their heritage. Why is Bessie Head unable to do the same?

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 486. Bessie Head views the Botalaote as a tribe that has largely lost touch with its traditions, much as T. S. Eliot implicitly compares Western culture after World War I to a wasteland. How do Head and Eliot each indicate this loss of connection with the past? Are the differences between their approaches indicative of the disparity between oral and writing cultures? What indications of similar cultural losses are there in "Snapshots of a Wedding"?

***Sunjata* (Book 3).** Compare "The Deep River" with *Sunjata*, a traditional African founding epic. How do they differ as founding stories? What elements in the traditional epic are lacking in "The Deep River"? How do the characterizations of the founders differ? Is Sebembele a heroic figure? Had Bessie Head been a *griot*, could she have recited the story of the founding of the Botalaote tribe?

Head puts a woman's as we black case in ta that both reach into tribal leger cut deep into m Africa.

– V Cunningham

■ FURTHER RESEARCH

Biography

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■ PRONUNCIATION

Bakaa: bah-KAH
Bamangwato: bah-mahng-WAH-toh
Baphaleng: bah-PEH-leng
Batswapong: bah-TSWAH-pong
Botalaote: boh-tah-LOW-teh
Kegoletile: keh-goh-leh-TEE-leh
Makobi: mah-KOH-bee
Mathata: mah-TAH-tah
MmaKhudu: mah-KOO-doo
Monemapee: moh-neh-mah-PAY-eh
Neo: NAY-oh
Ntema: en-TAY-mah
Rankwana: rahng-KWAH-nah
Sebembele: seh-bem-BEH-leh
Talaote: tah-lah-OH-teh

The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration

Long ago, when the land was only cattle tracks and footpaths, the people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river which was unruffled by conflict or a movement forward, the people lived without faces, except for their chief, whose face was the face of all the people; that is, if their chief's name was Monemapee, then they

"The Deep River." Included in Bessie Head's first collection of short stories, *"The Collector of Treasures" and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), this story is a founding myth, like *The Aeneid* or the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, that traces the origins of a particular culture. It is, however, a troubled story, for it traces a culture's loss of identity and shows its alienation. The conflict between tribal traditions and Sebembele's individual desires cuts Sebembele off from his origins and forces him and his followers into exile. Over time the members of the exiled group and their descendants lose their identity, ironically naming themselves *Talaote,* meaning "all

were all the people of Monemapee. The Talaote tribe have forgotten their origins and their original language during their journey southwards—they have merged and remerged again with many other tribes—and the name, Talaote, is all they have retained in memory of their history. Before a conflict ruffled their deep river, they were all the people of Monemapee, whose kingdom was somewhere in the central part of Africa.

They remembered that Monemapee ruled the tribe for many years as the hairs on his head were already saying whitel by the time he died. On either side of the deep river there might be hostile tribes or great dangers, so all the people lived in one great town. The lands where they ploughed their crops were always near the town. That was done by all the tribes for their own protection, and their day-to-day lives granted them no individual faces either for they ploughed their crops, reared their children, and held their festivities according to the laws of the land.

Although the people were given their own ploughing lands, they had no authority to plough them without the chief's order. When the people left home to go to plough, the chief sent out the proclamation for the beginning of the ploughing season. When harvest time came, the chief perceived that the corn was ripe. He gathered the people together and said:

"Reap now, and come home."

When the people brought home their crops, the chief called the thanksgiving for the harvest. Then the women of the whole town carried their corn in flat baskets, to the chief's place. Some of that corn was accepted on its arrival, but the rest was returned so that the women might soak it in their own yards. After a few days, the chief sent his special messenger to proclaim that the harvest thanksgiving corn was to be pounded. The special messenger went around the whole town and in each place where there was a little hill or mound, he climbed it and shouted:

"Listen, the corn is to be pounded!"

So the people took their sprouting corn and pounded it. After some days the special messenger came back and called out:

"The corn is to be fermented now!"

A few days passed and then he called out:

"The corn is to be cooked now!"

right, you can go"; they are marked as being in exile. Bessie Head, who was adopted and not informed of her parentage, uses this founding myth to generalize her situation to that of the African dispossessed.

In a note appended to this story, Head commented: "The story is an entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Botalaote tribe. Some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe, but it was unreliable as their memories had tended to fail them. A reconstruction was made therefore in my own imagination; I am also partly indebted to the London Missionary Society's *'Livingstone Tswana Readers,' Padiso III,* [a] school textbook, for those graphic paragraphs on the harvest thanksgiving ceremony which appear in the story."

So throughout the whole town the beer was boiled and when it had been strained, the special messenger called out for the last time:

"The beer is to be brought now!"

On the day on which thanksgiving was to be held, the women all followed one another in single file to the chief's place. Large vessels had been prepared at the chief's place, so that when the women came they poured the beer into them. Then there was a gathering of all the people to celebrate thanksgiving for the harvest time. All the people lived this way, like one face, under their chief. They accepted this regimental levelling down of their individual souls, but on the day of dispute or when strife and conflict and greed blew stormy winds over their deep river, the people awoke and showed their individual faces.

Now, during his lifetime Monemapee had had three wives. Of these marriages he had four sons: Sebembele by the senior wife; Ntema and Mosemme by the second junior wife; and Kgagodi by the third junior wife. There was a fifth son, Makobi, a small baby who was still suckling at his mother's breast by the time the old chief, Monemapee, died. This mother was the third junior wife, Rankwana. It was about the fifth son, Makobi, that the dispute arose. There was a secret there. Monemapee had married the third junior wife, Rankwana, late in his years. She was young and beautiful and Sebembele, the senior son, fell in love with her—but in secret. On the death of Monemapee, Sebembele, as senior son, was installed chief of the tribe and immediately made a blunder. He claimed Rankwana as his wife and exposed the secret that the fifth son, Makobi, was his own child and not that of his father.

This news was received with alarm by the people as the first ripples of trouble stirred over the even surface of the river of their lives. If both the young man and the old man were visiting the same hut, they reasoned, perhaps the old man had not died a normal death. They questioned the councillors who knew all secrets.

"Monemapee died just walking on his own feet," they said reassuringly.

That matter settled, the next challenge came from the two junior brothers, Ntema and Mosemme. If Sebembele were claiming the child, Makobi, as his son, they said, it meant that the young child displaced them in seniority. That they could not allow. The subtle pressure exerted on Sebembele by his junior brothers and the councillors was that he should renounce Rankwana and the child and all would be well. A chief lacked nothing and there were many other women more suitable as wives. Then Sebembele made the second blunder. In a world where women were of no account, he said truthfully:

"The love between Rankwana and I is great."

This was received with cold disapproval by the councillors.

"If we were you," they said, "we would look for a wife somewhere else. A ruler must not be carried away by his emotions. This matter is going to cause disputes among the people."

They noted that on being given this advice, Sebembele became very quiet, and they left him to his own thoughts, thinking that sooner or later he would come to a decision that agreed with theirs.

In the meanwhile the people quietly split into two camps. The one camp said:

"If he loves her, let him keep her. We all know Rankwana. She is a lovely person, deserving to be the wife of a chief."

The other camp said:

"He must be mad. A man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler. He is like one who listens to the advice of a child. This story is really bad."

There was at first no direct challenge to the chieftaincy which Sebembele occupied. But the nature of the surprising dispute, that of his love for a woman and a child, caused it to drag on longer than time would allow. Many evils began to rear their heads like impatient hissing snakes, while Sebembele argued with his own heart or engaged in tender dialogues with his love, Rankwana.

"I don't know what I can do," Sebembele said, torn between the demands of his position and the strain of a love affair which had been conducted in deep secrecy for many, many months. The very secrecy of the affair seemed to make it shout all the louder for public recognition. At one moment his heart would urge him to renounce the woman and child, but each time he saw Rankwana it abruptly said the opposite. He could come to no decision.

It seemed little enough that he wanted for himself—the companionship of a beautiful woman to whom life had given many other attractive gifts; she was gentle and kind and loving. As soon as Sebembele communicated to her the advice of the councillors, she bowed her head and cried a little.

"If that is what they say, my love," she said in despair, "I have no hope left for myself and the child. It were better if we were both dead."

"Another husband could be chosen for you," he suggested.

"You doubt my love for you, Sebembele," she said. "I would kill myself if I lose you. If you leave me, I would kill myself."

Her words had meaning for him because he was trapped in the same kind of anguish. It was a terrible pain which seemed to paralyse his movements and thoughts. It filled his mind so completely that he could think of nothing else, day and night. It was like a sickness, this paralysis, and like all ailments it could not be concealed from sight; Sebembele carried it all around with him.

"Our hearts are saying many things about this man," the councillors said among themselves. They were saying that he was unmanly; that he was unfit to be a ruler; that things were slipping from his hands. Those still sympathetic approached him and said:

"Why are you worrying yourself like this over a woman, Sebembele? There are no limits to the amount of wives a chief may have, but you cannot have that woman and that child."

And he only replied with a distracted mind: "I don't know what I can do."

But things had been set in motion. All the people were astir over events; if a man couldn't make up his mind, other men could make it up for him.

Everything was arranged in secret and on an appointed day Rankwana and the child were forcibly removed back to her father's home. Ever since the controversy had started, her father had been harassed day and night by the councillors as an

influence that could help to end it. He had been reduced to a state of agitated muttering to himself by the time she was brought before him. The plan was to set her up with a husband immediately and settle the matter. She was not yet formally married to Sebembele.

"You have put me in great difficulties, my child," her father said, looking away from her distressed face. "Women never know their own minds and once this has passed away and you have many children you will wonder what all the fuss was about."

"Other women may not know their minds . . ." she began, but he stopped her with a raised hand, indicating the husband who had been chosen for her. In all the faces surrounding her there was no sympathy or help, and she quietly allowed herself to be led away to her new home.

When Sebembele arrived in his own yard after a morning of attending to the affairs of the land, he found his brothers, Ntema and Mosemme there.

"Why have you come to visit me?" he asked with foreboding. "You never come to visit me. It would seem that we are bitter enemies rather than brothers."

"You have shaken the whole town with your madness over a woman," they replied mockingly. "She is no longer here so you don't have to say any longer 'I-don't-know-what-I-can-do.' But we still request that you renounce the child, Makobi, in a gathering before all the people, in order that our position is clear. You must say: 'That child Makobi is the younger brother of my brothers, Ntema and Mosemme, and not the son of Sebembele who rules.'"

Sebembele looked at them for a long moment. It was not hatred he felt but peace at last. His brothers were forcing him to leave the tribe.

"Tell the people that they should all gather together," he said. "But what I say to them is my own affair."

The next morning the people of the whole town saw an amazing sight which stirred their hearts. They saw their ruler walk slowly and unaccompanied through the town. They saw him pause at the yard of Rankwana's father. They saw Sebembele and Rankwana's father walk to the home of her new husband where she had been secreted. They saw Rankwana and Sebembele walk together through the town. Sebembele held the child Makobi in his arms. They saw that they had a ruler who talked with deeds rather than words. They saw that the time had come for them to offer up their individual faces to the face of this ruler. But the people were still in two camps. There was a whole section of the people who did not like this face; it was too out-of-the-way and shocking; it made them very uneasy. Theirs was not a tender, compassionate, and romantic world. And yet in a way it was. The arguments in the other camp which supported Sebembele had flown thick and fast all this time, and they said:

"Ntema and Mosemme are at the bottom of all this trouble. What are they after for they have set a difficult problem before us all? We don't trust them. But why not? They have not yet had time to take anything from us. Perhaps we ought to wait until they do something really bad; at present they are only filled with indignation at the behaviour of Sebembele. But no, we don't trust them. We don't like them. It is Sebembele we love, even though he has shown himself to be a man with a weakness . . ."

That morning, Sebembele completely won over his camp with his extravagant, romantic gesture, but he lost everything else and the rulership of the kingdom of Monemapee.

When all the people had gathered at the meeting place of the town, there were not many arguments left. One by one the councillors stood up and condemned the behaviour of Sebembele. So the two brothers, Ntema and Mosemme won the day. Still working together as one voice, they stood up and asked if their senior brother had any words to say before he left with his people.

"Makobi is my child," he said.

"Talaote," they replied, meaning in the language then spoken by the tribe—"all right, you can go."

And the name Talaote was all they were to retain of their identity as the people of the kingdom of Monemapee. That day, Sebembele and his people packed their belongings on the backs of their cattle and slowly began the journey southwards. They were to leave many ruins behind them and it is said that they lived, on the journey southwards, with many other tribes like the Baphaleng, Bakaa, and Batswapong until they finally settled in the land of the Bamangwato. To this day there is a separate Botalaote ward in the capital village of the Bamangwato, and the people refer to themselves still as the people of Talaote. The old men there keep on giving confused and contradictory accounts of their origins, but they say they lost their place of birth over a woman. They shake their heads and say that women have always caused a lot of trouble in the world. They say that the child of their chief was named, Talaote, to commemorate their expulsion from the kingdom of Monemapee.

Snapshots of a Wedding

Wedding days always started at the haunting magical hour of early dawn when there was only a pale crack of light on the horizon. For those who were awake, it took the earth hours to adjust to daylight. The cool and damp of the night slowly arose in shimmering waves like water and even the forms of the people who bestirred themselves at this unearthly hour were distorted in the haze; they appeared to be dancers in slow motion, with fluid, watery forms. In the dim light, four men, the relatives of

"Snapshots of a Wedding." This story, also included in Bessie Head's first collection, *"The Collector of Treasures" and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), explores the simultaneous loss and persistence of tradition in a wedding ceremony. Even though Neo's wedding is to be a "modern" one, many elements of the traditional ceremony are invoked by her aunts and by other members of the village who are clearly uneasy about the deviations from tradition and about Neo's position as a "liberated" woman. In the story Neo is seen responding to her aunt's scolding, compromising with tradition, and finally succumbing to joyful laughter during the ceremony. But in her aunt's final assertion, "Be a good wife," the conflicting implications of that admonition, warning, and wish resonate.

All notes are the editors'.

MAN: Makes what?
GIRL: Winter . . .
MAN: Teapot makes winter?
GIRL: Makes . . .
MAN: And then—?
GIRL: Teapot . . .
MAN: And then makes teapot?
GIRL: It is . . .
MAN: It is what? Speak!
GIRL: It is not . . .
MAN: It is it is not?
GIRL: Is . . .
MAN: Is it is it not—is it winter makes teapot or teapot makes winter? *(Getting angry.)* Or is it it is not winter makes teapot or teapot makes winter? Or it is it is not is it not winter makes teapot or is it it is teapot makes winter? Or is it winter makes teapot makes winter? Or it is it is not is it winter makes teapot and then makes winter? Speak, speak, speak, go on!

(Monk ignores them, sweeping more earnestly.
Man and Girl move and speak faster with the quickening rhythm of the broom. Their bodies become more contorted, like two strange crawling reptiles.)
GIRL: Crack . . .
MAN: What crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: What kind of a crack?
GIRL: A crack line . . .
MAN: What crack line?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: What's this crack like?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Why a crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Where's this crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Why is it called a crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: A crack and a crack!
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Why is there just a crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: A crack is a crack!
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Okay, fine, a crack, so? What about it?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: To hell with the crack!
GIRL: A crack . . .

MAN: Only one crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: Another crack?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: *(Exploding.)* A cr—a—ck—?
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: *(Laughs bitterly.)* A crack.
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: *(Talking to himself.)* A crack . . .
GIRL: A crack . . .
MAN: *(Murmuring.)* A crack . . .
MAN & GIRL: *(Almost simultaneously.)* A crack—

(Monk coughs and throws the broom on the ground at the same time. He halts. Man and Girl are stunned by the noise, staring at Monk. Monk turns to face the audience. He inhales deeply and slowly and then exhales as slowly. All lights go out. Monk turns to open a curtain, revealing a greyish blue sky. Monk stands motionless and looks outside the door, his back to the audience. Gradually the wind starts to blow.)

THE END

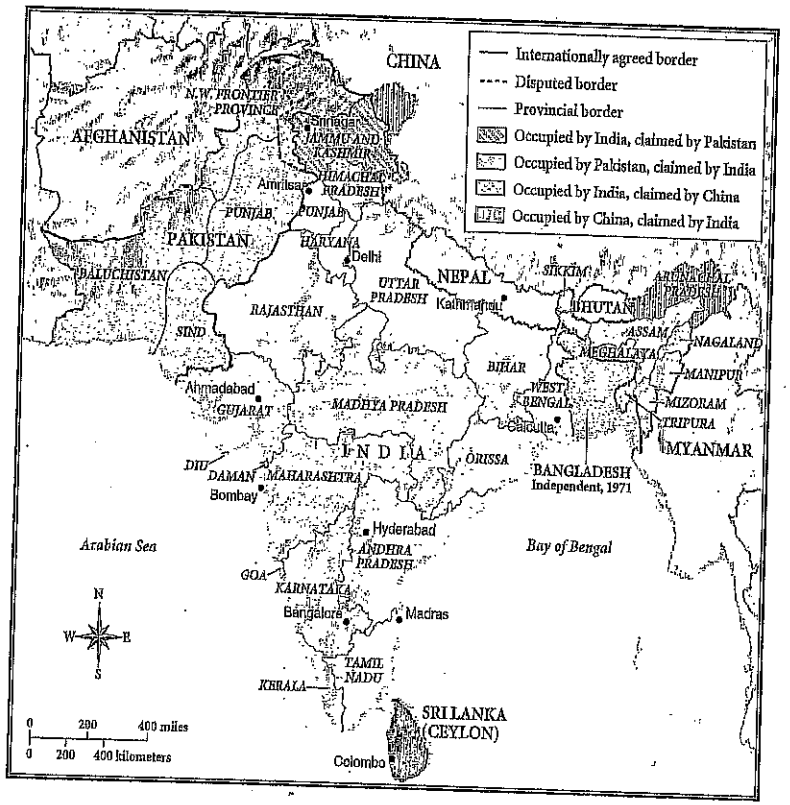
Salman Rushdie

b. India, 1947

After Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran urged zealous Muslims to assassinate him, Salman Rushdie, a Muslim born in India who has since become a British citizen, became a story on the evening news. His crime, according to the ayatollah, was demonizing the Prophet Muhammad in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1989). For Rushdie, the conflict with Islamic fundamentalism was probably inevitable, for his varied cultural heritage and multicultural identity made of him what he calls a "translated man." A product of Indian and Islamic roots, a British education, and total self-immersion in Western popular culture, Rushdie is seen by Muslim fundamentalists as someone who has been corrupted by the secular materialism of the West. From another perspective, Rushdie can be seen as a successor to Indian writers who sought to integrate East and West such as Ram Mohun Roy (1772–1833), Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–1898), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). From still another viewpoint, Rushdie becomes an avatar of POSTMODERNISM, a citizen of many cultures who speaks for an emerging global consciousness. "The Courter," which follows, is an autobiographical story that explores some of the gains and losses of such a cultural translation.



Phil Wilkinson, *Salman Rushdie, 19*
Since the Iranian threat on his life w lifted in 1999, Rus has lived in full v of the public. (© *Images / Topham The Image Work*



The Partition of India, 1947

Led by Mohandas Gandhi, the Mahatma, the Indian independence movement realized its goal in 1947, winning independence from the United Kingdom. The mainly Muslim western provinces and Bengal became Pakistan, the rest remained India. Bengal was known as East Pakistan until a civil war in 1971 between West and East Pakistan resulted in the latter's independence and new name, Bangladesh. Ownership of the territory of Kashmir, which lies north of India and northeast of Pakistan, is still disputed.

SAL-mun RUSH-dee

Almost One of "Midnight's Children." Born in Bombay in 1947, the year that India gained its independence from Britain, **Salman Rushdie**, though not one of "Midnight's Children"—children born in the first hour of Indian independence—was a postcolonial child. His father, a Cambridge-educated Muslim businessman who would move his family to Pakistan when his son was seventeen, kept the family in the cosmopolitan and predominantly Hindu Bombay during the years of Salman's childhood. There the boy received a British education, read the Hindu classics, and watched the films produced by Bollywood, India's prolific film industry. At fourteen, Salman was sent to Rugby, a famous English public school near London where he was considered an outsider, treated as an inferior, and excluded from many social activities. After three years in England, Rushdie rejoined his family, who had moved to Pakistan while he was away, but he was equally uncomfortable in Pakistan, where his English accent marked him as different. At his father's urging to accept a scholarship to attend Cambridge University, Rushdie reluctantly returned to England in 1965, a choice he has characterized as "one of the most disorienting moments of my life."

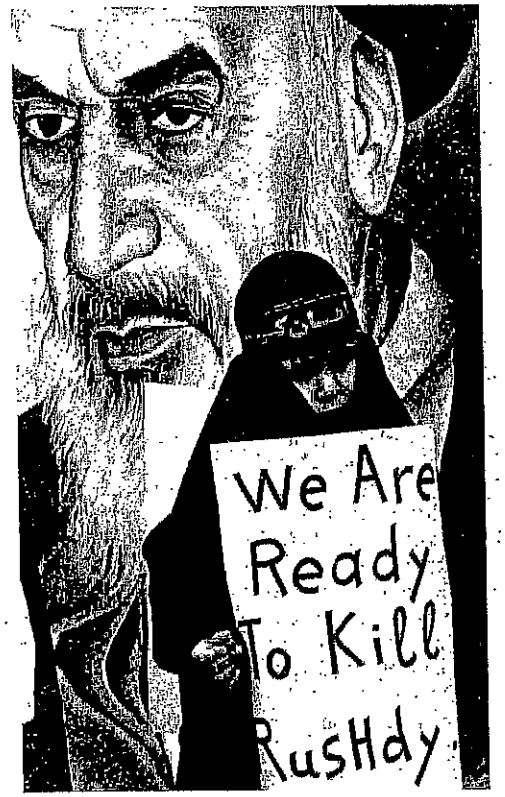
But Cambridge proved to be friendlier than Rugby, and Rushdie thrived there as a student. After completing a degree in history in 1968, he returned to Pakistan and worked for a television station in Karachi. His stay didn't last long. Displaced from the intellectual and cosmopolitan life he had known in England and frustrated by the censorship of media in Pakistan, he returned to London in 1970 to work as an actor and advertising copywriter while setting out on a writing career. His first work, *Grimus: A Novel* (1975), a science-fiction version of the classical Sufi poem, *Conference of the Birds*, received mixed reviews and generated little interest. His breakthrough as an author came with his second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), the story of his childhood and youth in Bombay between 1947 and 1977 and the lives of his parents and grandparents in the three decades before his birth. The novel doubles as a national ALLEGORY,[1] telling the story of the emergence of India as an independent country. With complex plotting and extravagant invention, Rushdie brings nearly every major event in the sixty years of Indian history that the novel spans into the lives of his two central characters. The novel received the most prestigious British literary award, the Booker Prize, in 1981.

Confronting Islam. In *Shame* (1983), Rushdie wrote a similarly extravagant but less successful tale of the modern history of Pakistan. Its fictional versions of the vagaries and brutalities in Pakistani politics offended some Muslim readers, but Rushdie escaped direct censure and censorship by not identifying the setting as Pakistan. He was less cautious in his next novel. *The Satanic Verses* (1988) takes Islamic history as its subject matter, working legends about Muhammad into a contemporary story of movie actors and popular culture. Rushdie's license with Muhammad and the Qur'an (Koran) so offended many orthodox Muslims that Iran's ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, a decree calling on "all zealous Muslims to execute [those responsible for the novel] quickly, wherever they may find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing." Rushdie went into hiding; the Norwegian publisher of *The Satanic Verses* was shot and wounded; an Italian translator stabbed;

WWW For links to more information about Salman Rushdie and a quiz on "The Courter," and for information about the culture and context of India in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins.com/worldlit.

> Having been borne across the ocean, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.
>
> – SALMAN RUSHDIE, "Imaginary Homelands," 1991

[1] **national allegory:** A story in which the characters represent forces or figures in the history of a nation, often a nation in the process of asserting its independence or establishing its national identity.



"We Are Ready to Kill Rushdy," 1989
At a pro-Iranian rally, a girl in Beirut, Lebanon, calls for the death of Salman Rushdie. Behind her is a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini, who declared a fatwa, *or death sentence, on Rushdie after he allegedly blasphemed Islam in his novel* The Satanic Verses. *(© Reuters / CORBIS)*

a Japanese translator killed. In Islamic countries several deaths reportedly occurred as a result of the decree. While Western writers defended Rushdie's novel and his right to speak, many moderate Muslims in the West considered the novel an "unprecedented assault on Islam" and, like the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) Islamic Society, considered "the reaction of the vast majority of Muslims . . . remarkably mild." Even Naguib Mahfouz (p. 797), the Egyptian novelist whose *Children of the Alley* (1959) had been attacked by Islamic fundamentalists and banned in nearly every Islamic country, criticized Rushdie—and Khomeini: "I believe that the wrong done by Khomeini towards Islam and the Muslims," he wrote, "is no less than that done by the author himself."

Rushdie's Response. Forced into seclusion, Rushdie wrote a "children's book," *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), that made the tradition of the *Arabian Nights* into an allegory of the author's predicament.

If somebody's trying to shut you up, sing louder and louder and if possible, better. My experience just made me all the more determined to write the very best books I could find it in myself to write.
– SALMAN RUSHDIE

Haroun, son of the storyteller Rashid Khalifa, sets out on a journey to restore his father's voice and to cleanse the sea of stories that has been poisoned by the tyrant Khattam-Shud, who claims that "stories make trouble." Haroun asserts that "stories are fun," but Khattam-Shud counters, "The world, however, is not for fun. . . . The world is for Controlling." Even in seclusion Rushdie was not to be silenced; his children's book was a tribute to the imagination, which tyranny would suppress. Rushdie once said, "If somebody's trying to shut you up, sing louder and louder and if possible, better. My experience just made me all the more determined to write the very best books I could find it in myself to write."

Rushdie's novels and stories are filled with extravagant inventions, bizarre plot twists, and a melange of allusions to songs, movies, and other elements of popular culture. Rushdie has been compared to Swift and Sterne[2] as a satirist, to Kafka and Günter Grass[3] as an allegorist, and to Gabriel García Márquez and the MAGICAL REALISTS as an inventor of bizarre and surreal worlds. Since the *fatwa* was lifted in 1999, Rushdie has come out of hiding and moved from London to New York City. He has recently published *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999), a rock-and-roll retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and *Fury* (2001), about a doll-obsessed professor who moves from London to New York.

"The Courter." The volume of short stories in which "The Courter" originally appeared, *East, West* (1994), illustrates in its organization Rushdie's hybrid self. Of the nine stories in the collection, three are about the East, three are about the West, and three concern the meeting of East and West. "The Courter" comes from the book's final section. Set in an apartment building in London inhabited by a colony of displaced Indians, the story contrasts the connection of the Indian maid Certainly-Mary to her homeland with that of the narrator, an adolescent schoolboy at the time of the action, to his. The difficulties of adjusting to a foreign culture are comically exaggerated in Certainly-Mary, whose relationship with Mixed-Up is emblematic of her life in a strange land, where she mispronounces the language, gets her sari entangled in an escalator, and suffers from a heart condition. Her difficulties are similar to those that nearly all Indians of the older generation experience in their adopted countries. The narrator's father gets slapped for confusing the words *teats* and *nipples*, and the various maharajas become entangled with British hoodlums. The narrator and his sisters, on the other hand, are much more savvy about British ways. Their knowledge of British popular music, movies, and sports has already "translated" and assimilated them

No one writes mc convincingly of th tug between old a new, home and th culture of the unknown.
– PAUL GRAY, 199; Salman Rus

If Rushdie's per tors have made experience of re less nomadism too literal for h he's still teachi rest of us why v can't go home
– HENR GATES JR., and crit

[2] Swift and Sterne: Jonathan Swift (1667–1745; see Book 4) used fantasy and bizarre inventions in *Gulliver's Travels* and other works to satirize British institutions. Laurence Sterne (1713–1768) in *Tristram Shandy* employed a digressive and allusive, stream-of-consciousness style of writing for comic and satiric purposes. Rushdie has acknowledged his indebtedness to Sterne as well as to James Joyce (1882–1941; see p. 366), the Irish stream-of-consciousness writer who reveled in wordplay and allusions.

[3] Günter Grass (b. 1927): German novelist who authored *The Tin Drum* (1959), an allegory of German history in the twentieth century much like Rushdie's treatment of Indian and Pakistani history.

into British life. The narrator moves back and forth between Eastern and Western traditions, punning, playing on song titles, movie scenes, and Indian mythology as if there were no separation between East and West in his language or consciousness. The contrasting choices at the end of the story—Certainly-Mary's decision to return to Bombay where she recovers from her heart condition, and the narrator's to stay in England and seek British citizenship—carry out the logic of the generational differences explored in the story. For neither the maid nor the schoolboy, however, is the decision unequivocal: Certainly-Mary must leave behind her London lover, and the schoolboy, as he narrates this tale many years later, still feels caught between two cultures and pulled in opposite directions.

CONNECTIONS

***In the World,* Crossing Cultures, p. 1278.** Writers of Indian ancestry serve as examples of the globalization of literature in *In the World:* Crossing Cultures, which presents writers who have left their homeland or emerged from the Indian diaspora to adopt a new cultural identity. The section includes Salman Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands," in which he describes himself as a "translated man." Which other writers in this section might be called "translated people"?

Mori Ogai, "The Dancing Girl" (Book 5). "The Dancing Girl" is about a young man torn between two cultures, whose decision to return to Japan differs from that of Rushdie's narrator, who decides to remain in the West. Do you think this dissimilarity is indicative of a difference between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or between the Indians and the Japanese?

Virgil, *The Aeneid* (Book 1); Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4); Voltaire, *Candide* (Book 4). Travelers can acquire a perspective on their own culture and experiment with different ways of living. Some discover a new appreciation for the culture they left behind; others learn that they cannot "go home again." Does Rushdie's narrator fit in either of these two categories? What does he appreciate about India? What has he taken from the West? Consider Virgil's Aeneas, Swift's Gulliver, and Voltaire's Candide in this context. How do these characters feel about their homelands? Can they go home again? Are any torn, like Rushdie's narrator, between two cultures?

FURTHER RESEARCH

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PRONUNCIATION

Chhoti: CHOH-tee
Dasashwamedh-ghat: duh-suh-shwah-MADE GAHT
Salman Rushdie: SAL-mun RUSH-dee
Varanasi: vuh-RAH-nuh-see
Zbigniew: ZBIG-nyef

The Courter

1

Certainly-Mary was the smallest woman Mixed-Up the hall porter had come across, dwarfs excepted, a tiny sixty-year-old Indian lady with her greying hair tied behind her head in a neat bun, hitching up her red-hemmed white sari in the front and negotiating the apartment block's front steps as if they were Alps. "No," he said aloud, furrowing his brow. What would be the right peaks. Ah, good, that was the name. "Ghats,"[1] he said proudly. Word from a schoolboy atlas long ago, when India felt as far away as Paradise. (Nowadays Paradise seemed even further away but India, and Hell, had come a good bit closer.) "Western Ghats, Eastern Ghats, and now Kensington Ghats," he said, giggling. "Mountains."

She stopped in front of him in the oak-panelled lobby. "But ghats in India are also stairs," she said. "Yes yes certainly. For instance in Hindu holy city of Varanasi, where the Brahmins sit taking the filgrims' money is called Dasashwamedh-ghat. Broad-broad staircase down to River Ganga.[2] O, most certainly! Also Manikarnika-ghat.[3] They buy fire from a house with a tiger leaping from the roof—yes certainly, a statue tiger, coloured by Technicolor, what are you thinking?—and they bring it in a

"The Courter." First collected in the volume *East, West* (1994), this short story is, suitably, about crossing cultures. All of the major figures in the story—the narrator and his Indian family, the porter from Eastern Europe, and the Indian ayah, Certainly-Mary—have been separated from their homelands and their pasts. Rushdie contrasts the narrator's story with that of Certainly-Mary as a way of dramatizing being caught between two cultures. The narrator, a teenager attending an English public school at the time of the action, is determined to break with his family and take on an English identity, even though he recognizes the ways in which he is different from his English schoolmates. Mary, even though she and her "courter" have turned chess from a game of war into a game of love, decides to return to Bombay, a move that cures her heart trouble. She is "still going strong" at the age of ninety-one because she recovered her homeland. The narrator, however, comparing himself to the wild horses in the film *The Misfits,* is pulled in two directions:

> But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose.*
>
> I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.

All notes are the editors'.

[1] **"Ghats":** Hindi word for a mountain range and also for a flight of steps leading down to a river. Two particular ranges in India are the Eastern Ghats, along the Bay of Bengal, and the Western Ghats, along the Arabian Sea.

[2] **Varanasi . . . Ganga:** Varanasi, formerly Benares, a sacred city on the River Ganga (Ganges)—the sacred Hindu river running through the heart of Bengal—where Hindu pilgrims come to bathe in the river and to cremate their dead. The Dasashwamedh-ghat is a series of steps leading down to the river, the most popular ghat for pilgrims who come to bathe.

[3] **Manikarnika-ghat:** The "burning ghat" is a set of stairs where bodies are brought to be cremated.

box to set fire to their loved ones' bodies. Funeral fires are of sandal. Photographs not allowed; no, certainly not."

He began thinking of her as Certainly-Mary because she never said plain yes or no; always this O-yes-certainly or no-certainly-not. In the confused circumstances that had prevailed ever since his brain, his one sure thing, had let him down, he could hardly be certain of anything any more; so he was stunned by her sureness, first into nostalgia, then envy, then attraction. And attraction was a thing so long forgotten that when the churning started he thought for a long time it must be the Chinese dumplings he had brought home from the High Street carry-out.

English was hard for Certainly-Mary, and this was a part of what drew damaged old Mixed-Up towards her. The letter p was a particular problem, often turning into an f or a c; when she proceeded through the lobby with a wheeled wicker shopping basket, she would say, "Going shocking," and when, on her return, he offered to help lift the basket up the front ghats, she would answer, "Yes, fleas." As the elevator lifted her away, she called through the grille: "Oé, courter! Thank you, courter. O, yes, certainly." (In Hindi and Konkani,[4] however, her p's knew their place.)

So: thanks to her unexpected, somehow stomach-churning magic, he was no longer porter, but courter. "Courter," he repeated to the mirror when she had gone. His breath made a little dwindling picture of the word on the glass. "Courter courter caught." Okay. People called him many things, he did not mind. But this name, this courter, this he would try to be.

2

For years now I've been meaning to write down the story of Certainly-Mary, our ayah,[5] the woman who did as much as my mother to raise my sisters and me, and her great adventure with her "courter" in London, where we all lived for a time in the early sixties in a block called Waverley House; but what with one thing and another I never got round to it.

Then recently I heard from Certainly-Mary after a longish silence. She wrote to say that she was ninety-one, had had a serious operation, and would I kindly send her some money, because she was embarrassed that her niece, with whom she was now living in the Kurla district of Bombay, was so badly out of pocket.

I sent the money, and soon afterwards received a pleasant letter from the niece, Stella, written in the same hand as the letter from "Aya"—as we had always called Mary, palindromically dropping the "h." Aya had been so touched, the niece wrote, that I remembered her after all these years. "I have been hearing the stories about you folks all my life," the letter went on, "and I think of you a little bit as family. Maybe you recall my mother, Mary's sister. She unfortunately passed on. Now it is I who write Mary's letters for her. We all wish you the best."

[4] Konkani: The language of an ethnic group living mainly along the west coast of India.

[5] ayah: Maid or nursemaid.

This message from an intimate stranger reached out to me in my enforced exile from the beloved country of my birth and moved me, stirring things that had been buried very deep. Of course it also made me feel guilty about having done so little for Mary over the years. For whatever reason, it has become more important than ever to set down the story I've been carrying around unwritten for so long, the story of Aya and the gentle man whom she renamed—with unintentional but prophetic overtones of romance—"the courter." I see now that it is not just their story, but ours, mine, as well.

3

His real name was Mecir. You were supposed to say Mishirsh because it had invisible accents on it in some Iron Curtain language in which the accents had to be invisible, my sister Durré said solemnly, in case somebody spied on them or rubbed them out or something. His first name also began with an m but it was so full of what we called Communist consonants, all those z's and c's and w's walled up together without vowels to give them breathing space, that I never even tried to learn it.

At first we thought of nicknaming him after a mischievous little comic-book character, Mr. Mxyztplk from the Fifth Dimension, who looked a bit like Elmer Fudd and used to make Superman's life hell until ole Supe could trick him into saying his name backwards, Klptzyxm, whereupon he disappeared back into the Fifth Dimension; but because we weren't too sure how to say Mxyztplk (not to mention Klptzyxm) we dropped that idea. "We'll just call you Mixed-Up," I told him in the end, to simplify life. "Mishter Milkshed-Up Mishirsh." I was fifteen then and bursting with unemployed cock and it meant I could say things like that right into people's faces, even people less accommodating than Mr. Mecir with his stroke.

What I remember most vividly are his pink rubber washing-up gloves, which he seemed never to remove, at least not until he came calling for Certainly-Mary . . . At any rate, when I insulted him, with my sisters Durré and Muneeza cackling in the lift, Mecir just grinned an empty good-natured grin, nodded, "You call me what you like, okay," and went back to buffing and polishing the brasswork. There was no point teasing him if he was going to be like that, so I got into the lift and all the way to the fourth floor we sang *I Can't Stop Loving You* at the top of our best Ray Charles voices, which were pretty awful. But we were wearing our dark glasses, so it didn't matter.

4

It was the summer of 1962, and school was out. My baby sister Scheherazade was just one year old. Durré was a beehived fourteen; Muneeza was ten, and already quite a handful. The three of us—or rather Durré and me, with Muneeza trying desperately and unsuccessfully to be included in our gang—would stand over Scheherazade's cot and sing to her. "No nursery rhymes," Durré had decreed, and so there were none, for though she was a year my junior she was a natural leader. The

infant Scheherazade's lullabies were our cover versions of recent hits by Chubby Checker, Neil Sedaka, Elvis, and Pat Boone.

"Why don't you come home, Speedy Gonzales?" we bellowed in sweet disharmony: But most of all, and with actions, we would jump down, turn around, and pick a bale of cotton. We would have jumped down, turned around, and picked those bales all day except that the Maharaja of B—— in the flat below complained, and Aya Mary came in to plead with us to be quiet.

"Look, see, it's Jumble-Aya who's fallen for Mixed-Up," Durré shouted, and Mary blushed a truly immense blush. So naturally we segued right into a quick me-oh-my-oh; son of a gun, we had big fun. But then the baby began to yell, my father came in with his head down bull-fashion and steaming from both ears, and we needed all the good-luck charms we could find.

I had been at boarding school in England for a year or so when Abba took the decision to bring the family over. Like all his decisions, it was neither explained to nor discussed with anyone, not even my mother. When they first arrived he rented two adjacent flats in a seedy Bayswater mansion block called Graham Court, which lurked furtively in a nothing street that crawled along the side of the ABC Queensway cinema towards the Porchester Baths. He commandeered one of these flats for himself and put my mother, three sisters, and Aya in the other; also, on school holidays, me. England, where liquor was freely available, did little for my father's *bonhomie*, so in a way it was a relief to have a flat to ourselves.

Most nights he emptied a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label and a soda-siphon. My mother did not dare to go across to "his place" in the evenings. She said: "He makes faces at me."

Aya Mary took Abba his dinner and answered all his calls (if he wanted anything, he would phone us up and ask for it). I am not sure why Mary was spared his drunken rages. She said it was because she was nine years his senior, so she could tell him to show due respect.

After a few months, however, my father leased a three-bedroom fourth-floor apartment with a fancy address. This was Waverley House in Kensington Court, W8. Among its other residents were not one but two Indian Maharajas, the sporting Prince P—— as well as the old B—— who has already been mentioned. Now we were jammed in together, my parents and Baby Scare-zade (as her siblings had affectionately begun to call her) in the master bedroom, the three of us in a much smaller room, and Mary, I regret to admit, on a straw mat laid on the fitted carpet in the hall. The third bedroom became my father's office, where he made phone calls and kept his *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, his *Reader's Digests*, and (under lock and key) the television cabinet. We entered it at our peril. It was the Minotaur's[6] lair.

[6] Minotaur: In Greek mythology, the threatening creature, half bull and half man, at the center of the labyrinth in Crete who is slain by Theseus.

One morning he was persuaded to drop in at the corner pharmacy and pick up some supplies for the baby. When he returned there was a hurt, schoolboyish look on his face that I had never seen before, and he was pressing his hand against his cheek.

"She hit me," he said plaintively.

"Hai! Allah-tobah![7] Darling!" cried my mother, fussing. "Who hit you? Are you injured? Show me, let me see."

"I did nothing," he said, standing there in the hall with the pharmacy bag in his other hand and a face as pink as Mecir's rubber gloves. "I just went in with your list. The girl seemed very helpful. I asked for baby compound, Johnson's powder, teething jelly, and she brought them out. Then I asked did she have any nipples, and she slapped my face."

My mother was appalled. "Just for that?" And Certainly-Mary backed her up. "What is this nonsense?" she wanted to know. "I have been in that chemist's shock, and they have plenty nickels, different sizes, all on view."

Durré and Muneeza could not contain themselves. They were rolling round on the floor, laughing and kicking their legs in the air.

"You both shut your face at once," my mother ordered. "A madwoman has hit your father. Where is the comedy?"

"I don't believe it," Durré gasped. "You just went up to that girl and said," and here she fell apart again, stamping her feet and holding her stomach, "*'have you got any nipples?'*"

My father grew thunderous, empurpled. Durré controlled herself. "But Abba," she said, at length, "here they call them teats."

Now my mother's and Mary's hands flew to their mouths, and even my father looked shocked. "But how shameless!" my mother said. "The same word as for what's on your bosoms?" She coloured, and stuck out her tongue for shame.

"These English," sighed Certainly-Mary. "But aren't they the limit? Certainly-yes; they are."

I remember this story with delight, because it was the only time I ever saw my father so discomfited, and the incident became legendary and the girl in the pharmacy was installed as the object of our great veneration. (Durré and I went in there just to take a look at her—she was a plain, short girl of about seventeen, with large, unavoidable breasts—but she caught us whispering and glared so fiercely that we fled.) And also because in the general hilarity I was able to conceal the shaming truth that I, who had been in England for so long, would have made the same mistake as Abba did.

It wasn't just Certainly-Mary and my parents who had trouble with the English language. My schoolfellows tittered when in my Bombay way I said "brought-up" for upbringing (as in "where was your brought-up?") and "thrice" for three times and

[7] Allah-tobah!: Oh my God!

"quarter-plate" for side-plate and "macaroni" for pasta in general. As for learning the difference between nipples and teats, I really hadn't had any opportunities to increase my word power in that area at all.

5

So I was a little jealous of Certainly-Mary when Mixed-Up came to call. He rang our bell, his body quivering with deference in an old suit grown too loose, the trousers tightly gathered by a belt; he had taken off his rubber gloves and there were roses in his hand. My father opened the door and gave him a withering look. Being a snob, Abba was not pleased that the flat lacked a separate service entrance, so that even a porter had to be treated as a member of the same universe as himself.

"Mary," Mixed-Up managed, licking his lips and pushing back his floppy white hair. "I, to see Miss Mary, come, am."

"Wait on," Abba said, and shut the door in his face.

Certainly-Mary spent all her afternoons off with old Mixed-Up from then on, even though that first date was not a complete success. He took her "up West" to show her the visitors' London she had never seen, but at the top of an up escalator at Piccadilly Circus, while Mecir was painfully enunciating the words on the posters she couldn't read—*Unzip a banana,* and *Idris when I's dri*—she got her sari stuck in the jaws of the machine, and as the escalator pulled at the garment it began to unwind. She was forced to spin round and round like a top, and screamed at the top of her voice, "O BAAP! BAAPU-RÉ! BAAP-RÉ-BAAP-RÉ-BAAP!"[8] It was Mixed-Up who saved her by pushing the emergency stop button before the sari was completely unwound and she was exposed in her petticoat for all the world to see.

"O, courter!" she wept on his shoulder. "O, no more escaleater, courter, nevermore, surely not!"

My own amorous longings were aimed at Durré's best friend, a Polish girl called Rozalia, who had a holiday job at Faiman's shoe shop on Oxford Street. I pursued her pathetically throughout the holidays and, on and off, for the next two years. She would let me have lunch with her sometimes and buy her a Coke and a sandwich, and once she came with me to stand on the terraces at White Hart Lane[9] to watch Jimmy Greaves's first game for the Spurs. "Come on you whoi-oites," we both shouted dutifully. "Come on you *Lily-whoites.*" After that she even invited me into the back room at Faiman's, where she kissed me twice and let me touch her breast, but that was as far as I got.

And then there was my sort-of-cousin Chandni, whose mother's sister had married my mother's brother, though they had since split up. Chandni was eighteen months older than me, and so sexy it made you sick. She was training to be an Indian classical dancer, Odissi as well as Natyam,[10] but in the meantime she dressed in tight black jeans and a clinging black polo-neck jumper and took me, now and then, to hang out at Bunjie's, where she knew most of the folk-music crowd that frequented the place, and where she answered to the name of Moonlight, which is what *chandni* means. I chain-smoked with the folkies and then went to the toilet to throw up.

Chandni was the stuff of obsessions. She was a teenage dream, the Moon River come to Earth like the Goddess Ganga,[11] dolled up in slinky black. But for her I was just the young greenhorn cousin to whom she was being nice because he hadn't learned his way around.

She-E-rry, won't you come out tonight? yodelled the Four Seasons. I knew exactly how they felt. *Come, come, come out toni-yi-yight.* And while you're at it, love me do.

6

They went for walks in Kensington Gardens. "Pan," Mixed-Up said, pointing at a statue. "Los' boy. Nev' grew up."[12] They went to Barkers and Pontings and Derry & Toms[13] and picked out furniture and curtains for imaginary homes. They cruised supermarkets and chose little delicacies to eat. In Mecir's cramped lounge they sipped what he called "chimpanzee tea"[14] and toasted crumpets in front of an electric bar fire.

Thanks to Mixed-Up, Mary was at last able to watch television. She liked children's programmes best, especially *The Flintstones.* Once, giggling at her daring, Mary confided to Mixed-Up that Fred and Wilma reminded her of her Sahib and Begum Sahiba upstairs; at which the courter, matching her audaciousness, pointed first at Certainly-Mary and then at himself, grinned a wide gappy smile and said, "Rubble."

Later, on the news, a vulpine Englishman with a thin moustache and mad eyes declaimed a warning about immigrants, and Certainly-Mary flapped her hand at the set: "Khali-pili bom marta," she objected, and then, for her host's benefit translated: "For nothing he is shouting shouting. Bad life! Switch it off."

They were often interrupted by the Maharajas of and B—— and P——, who came downstairs to escape their wives and ring other women from the call-box in the porter's room.

[8] "O BAAP! . . . BAAP!": An expression of embarrassment; "Oh God!"

[9] White Hart Lane: The home stadium in London of the professional soccer team the Tottenham Hot Spurs. Jimmy Greaves was one of the Spurs' star players.

[10] Odissi . . . Natyam: Odissi is the traditional dance of Orissa, a state on the east coast of India. Natyam is one of the oldest dance forms in southern India.

[11] Goddess Ganga: The Hindu goddess of the sacred Ganga River.

[12] "Pan . . . grew up": A statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens celebrates James Barrie's tale of the lost boy who never grew up, *Peter Pan.*

[13] Barkers . . . Toms: Fashionable London stores.

[14] "chimpanzee tea": The television advertisements for a popular brand of English tea featured chimpanzees dressed as humans.

"Oh, baby, forget that guy," said sporty Prince P——, who seemed to spend all his days in tennis whites, and whose plump gold Rolex was almost lost in the thick hair on his arm. "I'll show you a better time than him, baby; step into my world."

The Maharaja of B—— was older, uglier, more matter-of-fact. "Yes, bring all appliances. Room is booked in name of Mr. Douglas Home. Six forty-five to seven fifteen. You have printed rate card? Please. Also a two-foot ruler, must be wooden. Frilly apron, plus."

This is what has lasted in my memory of Waverley House, this seething mass of bad marriages, booze, philanderers, and unfulfilled young lusts; of the Maharaja of P—— roaring away towards London's casinoland every night, in a red sports car with fitted blondes, and of the Maharaja of B—— skulking off to Kensington High Street wearing dark glasses in the dark, and a coat with the collar turned up even though it was high summer; and at the heart of our little universe were Certainly-Mary and her courter, drinking chimpanzee tea and singing along with the national anthem of Bedrock.

But they were not really like Barney and Betty Rubble at all. They were formal, polite. They were . . . courtly. He courted her, and, like a coy, ringleted ingénue with a fan, she inclined her head, and entertained his suit.

7

I spent one half-term weekend in 1963 at the home in Beccles, Suffolk of Field Marshal Sir Charles Lutwidge-Dodgson, an old India hand and a family friend who was supporting my application for British citizenship. "The Dodo,"[15] as he was known, invited me down by myself, saying he wanted to get to know me better.

He was a huge man whose skin had started hanging too loosely on his face, a giant living in a tiny thatched cottage and forever bumping his head. No wonder he was irascible at times; he was in Hell, a Gulliver trapped in that rose-garden Lilliput[16] of croquet hoops, church bells, sepia photographs, and old battle-trumpets.

The weekend was fitful and awkward until the Dodo asked if I played chess. Slightly awestruck at the prospect of playing a Field Marshal, I nodded; and ninety minutes later, to my amazement, won the game.

I went into the kitchen, strutting somewhat, planning to boast a little to the old soldier's long-time housekeeper, Mrs. Liddell. But as soon as I entered she said: "Don't tell me. You never went and won?"

"Yes," I said, affecting nonchalance. "As a matter of fact, yes, I did."

[15] **Dodgson . . . "The Dodo"**: Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was the given name of Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), author of *Alice in Wonderland*, a novel he based on a story he told to Alice Liddell and her sisters. The Dodo, a character in the story, is said to be Carroll's projection of himself. The author could not pronounce his given name without stuttering.

[16] **Gulliver . . . Lilliput**: On the first of his voyages in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Gulliver visits Lilliput, a land whose inhabitants are tiny human beings.

"Gawd," said Mrs. Liddell. "Now there'll be hell to pay. You go back in there and ask him for another game, and this time make sure you lose."

I did as I was told, but was never invited to Beccles again.

Still, the defeat of the Dodo gave me new confidence at the chessboard, so when I returned to Waverley House after finishing my O levels,[17] and was at once invited to play a game by Mixed-Up (Mary had told him about my victory in the Battle of Beccles with great pride and some hyperbole), I said: "Sure, I don't mind." How long could it take to thrash the old duffer, after all?

There followed a massacre royal. Mixed-Up did not just beat me; he had me for breakfast, over easy. I couldn't believe it—the canny opening, the fluency of his combination play, the force of his attacks, my own impossibly cramped, strangled positions—and asked for a second game. This time he tucked into me even more heartily. I sat broken in my chair at the end, close to tears. *Big girls don't cry,* I reminded myself, but the song went on playing in my head: *That's just an alibi.*

"Who are you?" I demanded, humiliation weighing down every syllable. "The devil in disguise?"

Mixed-Up gave his big, silly grin. "Grand Master," he said. "Long time. Before head."

"You're a Grand Master," I repeated, still in a daze. Then in a moment of horror I remembered that I had seen the name Mecir in books of classic games. "Nimzo-Indian," I said aloud. He beamed and nodded furiously.

"That Mecir?" I asked wonderingly.

"That," he said. There was saliva dribbling out of a corner of his sloppy old mouth. This ruined old man was in the books. He was in the books. And even with his mind turned to rubble he could still wipe the floor with me.

"Now play lady," he grinned. I didn't get it. "Mary lady," he said. "Yes yes certainly."

She was pouring tea, waiting for my answer. "Aya, you can't play," I said, bewildered.

"Learning, baba," she said. "What is it, na? Only a game."

And then she, too, beat me senseless, and with the black pieces, at that. It was not the greatest day of my life.

8

From *100 Most Instructive Chess Games* by Robert Reshevsky, 1961:

M. Mecir—M. Najdorf
Dallas 1950, Nimzo-Indian Defense

The attack of a tactician can be troublesome to meet—that of a strategist even more so. Whereas the tactician's threats may be unmistakable, the strategist confuses the issue by keeping things in abeyance. He threatens to threaten!

[17] **O levels**: Exams given at the end of an "ordinary-level" secondary education to establish eligibility for a diploma.

Take this game for instance: Mecir posts a Knight at Q6 to get a grip on the center. Then he establishes a passed Pawn on one wing to occupy his opponent on the Queen side. Finally he stirs up the position on the King-side. What does the poor bewildered opponent do? How can he defend everything at once? Where will the blow fall?

Watch Mecir keep Najdorf on the run, as he shifts the attack from side to side!

Chess had become their private language. Old Mixed-Up, lost as he was for words, retained, on the chessboard, much of the articulacy and subtlety which had vanished from his speech. As Certainly-Mary gained in skill—and she had learned with astonishing speed, I thought bitterly, for someone who couldn't read or write or pronounce the letter p—she was better able to understand, and respond to, the wit of the reduced maestro with whom she had so unexpectedly forged a bond.

He taught her with great patience, showing-not-telling, repeating openings and combinations and endgame techniques over and over until she began to see the meaning in the patterns. When they played, he handicapped himself, he told her her best moves and demonstrated their consequences, drawing her, step by step, into the infinite possibilities of the game.

Such was their courtship. "It is like an adventure, baba," Mary once tried to explain to me. "It is like going with him to his country, you know? What a place, baap-ré! Beautiful and dangerous and funny and full of fuzzles. For me it is a big-big discovery. What to tell you? I go for the game. It is a wonder."

I understood, then, how far things had gone between them. Certainly-Mary had never married, and had made it clear to old Mixed-Up that it was too late to start any of that monkey business at her age. The courter was a widower, and had grown-up children somewhere, lost long ago behind the ever-higher walls of Eastern Europe. But in the game of chess they had found a form of flirtation, an endless renewal that precluded the possibility of boredom, a courtly wonderland of the aging heart.

What would the Dodo have made of it all? No doubt it would have scandalised him to see chess, chess of all games, the great formalisation of war, transformed into an art of love.

As for me: My defeats by Certainly-Mary and her courter ushered in further humiliations. Durré and Muneeza went down with the mumps, and so, finally, in spite of my mother's efforts to segregate us, did I. I lay terrified in bed while the doctor warned me not to stand up and move around if I could possibly help it. "If you do," he said, "your parents won't need to punish you. You will have punished yourself quite enough."

I spent the following few weeks tormented day and night by visions of grotesquely swollen testicles and a subsequent life of limp impotence—finished before I'd even started, it wasn't fair!—which were made much worse by my sisters' quick recovery and incessant gibes. But in the end I was lucky; the illness didn't spread to the deep South. "Think how happy your hundred and one girlfriends will be, bhai,"[18] sneered Durré, who knew all about my continued failures in the Rozalia and Chandni departments.

On the radio, people were always singing about the joys of being sixteen years old. I wondered where they were, all those boys and girls of my age having the time of their lives. Were they driving around America in Studebaker convertibles? They certainly weren't in my neighbourhood. London, W8 was Sam Cooke country that summer. *Another Saturday night*... There might be a mop-top love-song stuck at number one, but I was down with lonely Sam in the lower depths of the charts, how-I-wishing I had someone, etc., and generally feeling in a pretty goddamn dreadful way.

9

"Baba, come quick."

It was late at night when Aya Mary shook me awake. After many urgent hisses, she managed to drag me out of sleep and pull me, pajama'ed and yawning, down the hall. On the landing outside our flat was Mixed-Up the courter, huddled up against a wall, weeping. He had a black eye and there was dried blood on his mouth.

"What happened?" I asked Mary, shocked.

"Men," wailed Mixed-Up. "Threaten. Beat."

He had been in his lounge earlier that evening when the sporting Maharaja of P—— burst in to say, "If anybody comes looking for me, okay, any tough-guy type guys, okay, I am out, okay? Oh you tea. Don't let them go upstairs, okay? Big tip, okay?"

A short time later, the old Maharaja of B—— also arrived in Mecir's lounge, looking distressed.

"Suno, listen on," said the Maharaja of B——. "You don't know where I am, samajh liya?[19] Understood? Some low persons may inquire. You don't know. I am abroad, achha?[20] On extended travels abroad. Do your job, porter. Handsome recompense."

Late at night two tough-guy types did indeed turn up. It seemed the hairy Prince P—— had gambling debts. "Out," Mixed-Up grinned in his sweetest way. The tough-guy types nodded, slowly. They had long hair and thick lips like Mick Jagger's. "He's a busy gent. We should of made an appointment," said the first type to the second. "Didn't I tell you we should of called?"

"You did," agreed the second type. "Got to do these things right, you said, he's royalty. And you was right, my son, I put my hand up, I was dead wrong. I put my hand up to that."

"Let's leave our card," said the first type. "Then he'll know to expect us."

"Ideal," said the second type, and smashed his fist into old Mixed-Up's mouth. "You tell him," the second type said, and struck the old man in the eye. "When he's in. You mention it."

He had locked the front door after that; but much later, well after midnight, there was a hammering. Mixed-Up called out, "Who?"

[18] bhai: Brother.

[19] samajh liya?: Do you understand? [20] achha?: Yeah?

"We are close friends of the Maharaja of B——" said a voice. "No, I tell a lie. Acquaintances."

"He calls upon a lady of our acquaintance," said a second voice. "To be precise."

"It is in that connection that we crave audience," said the first voice.

"Gone," said Mecir. "Jet plane. Gone."

There was a silence. Then the second voice said, "Can't be in the jet set if you never jump on a jet, eh? Biarritz, Monte, all of that."

"Be sure and let His Highness know," said the first voice, "that we eagerly await his return."

"With regard to our mutual friend," said the second voice. "Eagerly."

What does the poor bewildered opponent do? The words from the chess book popped unbidden into my head. *How can he defend everything at once? Where will the blow fall? Watch Mecir keep Najdorf on the run, as he shifts the attack from side to side!*

Mixed-Up returned to his lounge and on this occasion, even though there had been no use of force, he began to weep. After a time he took the elevator up to the fourth floor and whispered through our letter-box to Certainly-Mary sleeping on her mat.

"I didn't want to wake Sahib," Mary said. "You know his trouble, na? And Begum Sahiba is so tired at end of the day. So now you tell, baba, what to do?"

What did she expect me to come up with? I was sixteen years old. "Mixed-Up must call the police," I unoriginally offered.

"No, no, baba," said Certainly-Mary emphatically. "If the courter makes a scandal for Maharaja-log, then in the end it is the courter only who will be out on his ear."

I had no other ideas. I stood before them feeling like a fool, while they both turned upon me their frightened, supplicant eyes.

"Go to sleep," I said. "We'll think about it in the morning." *The first pair of thugs were tacticians,* I was thinking. *They were troublesome to meet. But the second pair were scarier; they were strategists. They threatened to threaten.*

Nothing happened in the morning, and the sky was clear. It was almost impossible to believe in fists, and menacing voices at the door. During the course of the day both Maharajas visited the porter's lounge and stuck five-pound notes in Mixed-Up's waistcoat pocket. "Held the fort, good man," said Prince P——, and the Maharaja of B—— echoed those sentiments: "Spot on. All handled now, achha? Problem over."

The three of us—Aya Mary, her courter, and me—held a council of war that afternoon and decided that no further action was necessary. The hall porter was the front line in any such situation, I argued, and the front line had held. And now the risks were past. Assurances had been given. End of story.

"End of story," repeated Certainly-Mary doubtfully, but then, seeking to reassure Mecir, she brightened. "Correct," she said. "Most certainly! All-done, finis." She slapped her hands against each other for emphasis. She asked Mixed-Up if he wanted a game of chess; but for once the courter didn't want to play.

10

After that I was distracted, for a time, from the story of Mixed-Up and Certainly-Mary by violence nearer home.

My middle sister Muneeza, now eleven, was entering her delinquent phase a little early. She was the true inheritor of my father's black rage, and when she lost control it was terrible to behold. That summer she seemed to pick fights with my father on purpose; seemed prepared, at her young age, to test her strength against his. (I intervened in her rows with Abba only once, in the kitchen. She grabbed the kitchen scissors and flung them at me. They cut me on the thigh. After that I kept my distance.)

As I witnessed their wars I felt myself coming unstuck from the idea of family itself. I looked at my screaming sister and thought how brilliantly self-destructive she was, how triumphantly she was ruining her relations with the people she needed most.

And I looked at my choleric, face-pulling father and thought about British citizenship. My existing Indian passport permitted me to travel only to a very few countries, which were carefully listed on the second right-hand page. But I might soon have a British passport and then, by hook or by crook, I would get away from him. I would not have this face-pulling in my life.

At sixteen, you still think you can escape from your father. You aren't listening to his voice speaking through your mouth, you don't see how your gestures already mirror his; you don't see him in the way you hold your body, in the way you sign your name. You don't hear his whisper in your blood.

On the day I have to tell you about, my two-year-old sister Chhoti Scheherazade, Little Scare-zade, started crying as she often did during one of our family rows. Amma and Aya Mary loaded her into her push-chair and made a rapid getaway. They pushed her to Kensington Square and then sat on the grass, turned Scheherazade loose and made philosophical remarks while she tired herself out. Finally, she fell asleep, and they made their way home in the fading light of the evening. Outside Waverley House they were approached by two well-turned-out young men with Beatle haircuts and the buttoned-up, collarless jackets made popular by the band. The first of these young men asked my mother, very politely, if she might be the Maharani of B——.

"No," my mother answered, flattered.

"Oh, but you are, madam," said the second Beatle, equally politely. "For you are heading for Waverley House and that is the Maharaja's place of residence."

"No, no," my mother said, still blushing with pleasure. "We are a different Indian family."

"Quite so," the first Beatle nodded understandingly, and then, to my mother's

great surprise, placed a finger alongside his nose, and winked. "Incognito, eh. Mum's the word."

"Now excuse us," my mother said, losing patience. "We are not the ladies you seek."

The second Beatle tapped a foot lightly against a wheel of the push-chair. "Your husband seeks ladies, madam, were you aware of that fact? Yes, he does. Most assiduously, may I add."

"Too assiduously," said the first Beatle, his face darkening.

"I tell you I am not the Maharani Begum," my mother said, growing suddenly alarmed. "Her business is not my business. Kindly let me pass."

The second Beatle stepped closer to her. She could feel his breath, which was minty. "One of the ladies he sought out was our ward, as you might say," he explained. "That would be the term. Under our protection, you follow. Us, therefore, being responsible for her welfare."

"Your husband," said the first Beatle, showing his teeth in a frightening way, and raising his voice one notch, "damaged the goods. Do you hear me, Queenie? He damaged the fucking goods."

"Mistaken identity, fleas," said Certainly-Mary. "Many Indian residents in Waverley House. We are decent ladies; *fleas*."

The second Beatle had taken out something from an inside pocket. A blade caught the light. "Fucking wogs," he said. "You fucking come over here, you don't fucking know how to fucking behave. Why don't you fucking fuck off to fucking Wogistan? Fuck your fucking wog arses. Now then," he added in a quiet voice, holding up the knife, "unbutton your blouses."

Just then a loud noise emanated from the doorway of Waverley House. The two women and the two men turned to look, and out came Mixed-Up, yelling at the top of his voice and windmilling his arms like a mad old loon.

"Hullo," said the Beatle with the knife, looking amused. "Who's this, then? Oh oh fucking seven?"

Mixed-Up was trying to speak, he was in a mighty agony of effort, but all that was coming out of his mouth was raw, unshaped noise. Scheherazade woke up and joined in. The two Beatles looked displeased. But then something happened inside old Mixed-Up; something popped, and in a great rush he gabbled, "Sirs sirs no sirs these not B—— women sirs B—— women upstairs on floor three sirs Maharaja of B—— also sirs God's truth mother's grave swear."

It was the longest sentence he had spoken since the stroke that had broken his tongue long ago.

And what with his torrent and Scheherazade's squalls there were suddenly heads poking out from doorways, attention was being paid, and the two Beatles nodded gravely. "Honest mistake," the first of them said apologetically to my mother, and actually bowed from the waist. "Could happen to anyone," the knife-man added, ruefully. They turned and began to walk quickly away. As they passed Mecir, however, they paused. "I know you, though," said the knife-man. "'*Jet plane. Gone.*'" He made a short movement of the arm, and then Mixed-Up the courter was lying on the pavement with blood leaking from a wound in his stomach. "All okay now," he gasped, and passed out.

11

He was on the road to recovery by Christmas; my mother's letter to the landlords, in which she called him a "knight in shining armour," ensured that he was well looked after, and his job was kept open for him. He continued to live in his little ground-floor cubbyhole, while the hall porter's duties were carried out by shift-duty staff. "Nothing but the best for our very own hero," the landlords assured my mother in their reply.

The two Maharajas and their retinues had moved out before I came home for the Christmas holidays, so we had no further visits from the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Certainly-Mary spent as much time as she could with Mecir; but it was the look of my old Aya that worried me more than poor Mixed-Up. She looked older, and powdery, as if she might crumble away at any moment into dust.

"We didn't want to worry you at school," my mother said. "She has been having heart trouble. Palpitations. Not all the time, but."

Mary's health problems had sobered up the whole family. Muneeza's tantrums had stopped, and even my father was making an effort. They had put up a Christmas tree in the sitting-room and decorated it with all sorts of baubles. It was so odd to see a Christmas tree at our place that I realised things must be fairly serious.

On Christmas Eve my mother suggested that Mary might like it if we all sang some carols. Amma had made song-sheets, six copies, by hand. When we did *O come, all ye faithful* I showed off by singing from memory in Latin. Everybody behaved perfectly. When Muneeza suggested that we should try *Swinging on a Star* or *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* instead of this boring stuff, she wasn't really being serious. So this is family life, I thought. This is it.

But we were only playacting.

A few weeks earlier, at school, I'd come across an American boy, the star of the school's Rugby football team, crying in the Chapel cloisters. I asked him what the matter was and he told me that President Kennedy had been assassinated. "I don't believe you," I said, but I could see that it was true. The football star sobbed and sobbed. I took his hand.

"When the President dies, the nation is orphaned," he eventually said, broken-heartedly parroting a piece of cracker-barrel wisdom he'd probably heard on Voice of America.

"I know how you feel," I lied. "My father just died, too."

Mary's heart trouble turned out to be a mystery; unpredictably, it came and went. She was subjected to all sorts of tests during the next six months, but each time the doctors ended up by shaking their heads: They couldn't find anything

wrong with her. Physically, she was right as rain; except that there were these periods when her heart kicked and bucked in her chest like the wild horses in *The Misfits*,[21] the ones whose roping and tying made Marilyn Monroe so mad.

Mecir went back to work in the spring, but his experience had knocked the stuffing out of him. He was slower to smile, duller of eye, more inward. Mary, too, had turned in upon herself. They still met for tea, crumpets, and *The Flintstones*, but something was no longer quite right.

At the beginning of the summer Mary made an announcement.

"I know what is wrong with me," she told my parents, out of the blue. "I need to go home."

"But, Aya," my mother argued, "homesickness is not a real disease."

"God knows for what-all we came over to this country," Mary said. "But I can no longer stay. No. Certainly not." Her determination was absolute.

So it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. London was killing her, by not being Bombay. And Mixed-Up? I wondered. Was the courter killing her, too, because he was no longer himself? Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way by Montgomery Clift, and she knew that to live she would have to choose?

"I must go," said Certainly-Mary. "Yes, certainly. *Bas*. Enough."

That summer, the summer of '64, I turned seventeen. Chandni went back to India. Durré's Polish friend Rozalia informed me over a sandwich in Oxford Street that she was getting engaged to a "real man," so I could forget about seeing her again, because this Zbigniew was the jealous type. Roy Orbison sang *It's Over* in my ears as I walked away to the Tube, but the truth was that nothing had really begun.

Certainly-Mary left us in mid-July. My father bought her a one-way ticket to Bombay, and that last morning was heavy with the pain of ending. When we took her bags down to the car, Mecir the hall porter was nowhere to be seen. Mary did not knock on the door of his lounge, but walked straight out through the freshly polished oak-panelled lobby, whose mirrors and brasses were sparkling brightly; she climbed into the back seat of our Ford Zodiac and sat there stiffly with her carry-on grip on her lap, staring straight ahead. I had known and loved her all my life. *Never mind your damned courter*, I wanted to shout at her, *what about me?*

As it happened, she was right about the homesickness. After her return to Bombay, she never had a day's heart trouble again; and, as the letter from her niece Stella confirmed, at ninety-one she was still going strong.

Soon after she left, my father told us he had decided to "shift location" to Pakistan. As usual, there were no discussions, no explanations, just the simple fiat. He gave up the lease on the flat in Waverley House at the end of the summer holidays, and they all went off to Karachi, while I went back to school.

[21] *The Misfits:* A western film (1960) written by Arthur Miller and starring Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Montgomery Clift about a roundup of wild horses.

I became a British citizen that year. I was one of the lucky ones, I guess, because in spite of that chess game I had the Dodo on my side. And the passport did, in many ways, set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose.*

I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.

A year or so after we moved out I was in the area and dropped in at Waverley House to see how the old courter was doing. Maybe, I thought, we could have a game of chess, and he could beat me to a pulp. The lobby was empty, so I knocked on the door of his little lounge. A stranger answered.

"Where's Mixed-Up?" I cried, taken by surprise. I apologised at once, embarrassed. "Mr. Mecir, I meant, the porter."

"I'm the porter, sir," the man said. "I don't know anything about any mix-up."

R. K. Narayan

b. India, 1906–2001

Unlike many Indian writers who left India for long periods to teach in foreign universities or who resettled in foreign countries, Narayan remained rooted in his homeland. He took only a few relatively brief trips outside of India, preferring to remain in Mysore, the town in southern India that he immortalized as Malgudi, the fictional setting of most of his novels. Narayan's commitment to India and its way of life and his refusal to adopt non-Indian ways give him a different perspective from that of Salman Rushdie and other Indian writers of the new globalism on what it means to be an Indian translated into another culture.

All notes are the editors'.

A Passage to America

The silent movies of the twenties were the main source of our knowledge of America when I was growing up in Madras. We had a theater called the Roxy in our neighborhood. For an outlay of two annas (about two cents) one could sit with a lot of others on a long teakwood bench, facing the screen. When the hall darkened, there appeared before us our idols and heroes—those hard-hitting, valorous men, such as Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln, who smashed up the evil-minded gang no matter how many came on at a time, retrieved the treasure plan, and rescued the heroine, who was on the verge of losing either her life or her chastity. The entire saga as a serial would be covered in twenty-four installments at a rate of six a week, with new episodes presented every Saturday. When Eddie Polo went out of vogue, we were shown wild men of the Wild West, cowboys in broad-brimmed hats and cartridge-studded belts, walking arsenals who lived on horseback, forever chasing, lassoing, and shooting. We watched this daredeviltry enthralled, but now and then we questioned, When and where do Americans sit down to eat or sleep? Do they never have walls and doors and roofs under which to live? In essence the question amounted to, After Columbus, what?

In the thirties, as Hollywood progressed, we were presented with more plausible types on the screen. Greta Garbo and Bette Davis—and who else? Ramon Novarro, John Gilbert, and other pensive, poignant, or turbulent romantics acting against the more versatile backdrops of Arabian deserts, European mansions, and glamorous drawing rooms.

Our knowledge of America was still undergoing an evolutionary process. It took time, but ultimately one was bound to hear of Lincoln, Emerson, Mark Twain, and Thoreau. The British connection had been firmly established. The British way of life and culture were the only other ones we Indians knew. All our books, periodicals, and educational material were British. These said very little about America, except

for Dickens or Chesterton, who had traveled and lectured in America and had written of American scenes and character—after accepting a great deal of hospitality, and dollars of course. This seemed to us a peculiar trait of Americans—why should they invest so heavily in foreign authors, we Indians wondered, only to be presented as oddities at the end?

After World War II, the Indian media focused attention on American affairs and personalities and we became familiar with such esoteric terms as the Point-Four Plan, Public Law 480, and grants and fellowships, which in practical terms meant technical training and cultural exchanges. In the postwar period, more and more Americans were to be seen in India while more and more Indians went to America. Americans came to India as consultants, technicians, and engineers and to participate in the vast projects of our Five Year Plan. We noticed that Coca-Cola and Virginia tobacco and chewing gum were soon making their appearance in shop windows, and American best-sellers were to be found in the bookstores. For their part, Americans displayed on their mantelpieces Indian bric-a-brac of ivory, sandalwood, and bronze. Academicians from America came to India to study its culture and social organizations, as did political scientists (who were suspected of having CIA connections), and returned home to establish departments of South Asian studies in such universities as Chicago, Columbia, and the University of California at Berkeley. (Some American scholars of Sanskrit, Hindi, or Tamil are unquestioned authorities, and a match for the orthodox pundits in India.)

Americans working in India adapted themselves to Indian style with ease—visited Indian homes, sat down to eat with their fingers, savored Indian curry, wore *kurta* and pajamas, enjoyed Indian music. Some even mastered Indian music well enough to be able to give public concerts at a professional level before Indian audiences. Such colleges as Wesleyan and Colgate started regular programs in Indian music. Given this American cultural impact, young Indians began applying for admission to American institutions for higher studies or training.

My first chance to visit America came when I was offered a Rockefeller grant, which enabled me to see a great deal of the country—perhaps more than any American could—by train from New York to the Midwest and the West Coast, down south to Santa Fe, then through Texas to Nashville and Washington and back to New York, where I spent a couple of months. The more cities I saw, the more I was convinced that all America was contained in New York. For more than two decades I have been visiting New York off and on and never tire of it. I could not send down roots anywhere in America outside of New York.

An exception might be Berkeley, where I stayed, in a hotel room, long enough to write a novel. From my window I could watch young men and women hurrying along to their classes or hanging around the café or bookstore across the street. I divided my time between writing and window-shopping along Telegraph Avenue or strolling along the mountain paths. When the time came for me to leave Berkeley, I felt depressed. I could not imagine how I was to survive without all those enchantments I had gotten used to: the day's routine in my hotel on the fringe of the campus, the familiar shops, the Campanile, which I could see from my hotel window if

the Bay smog was not too dense and by whose chime I regulated my daily activities (I had sworn to live through the American trip without a watch), the walk along picturesque highways and byways with such sonorous names as Sonoma, Pomona, and Venice. Even the voice of the ice-cream vendor who parked his cart at Sather Gate and sounded his bell, crying out, "Crunchymunchies, them's good for you," was part of the charm.

On the whole, my memories of America are happy ones. I enjoy them in retrospect. If I were to mention a single outstanding experience, it would be my visit to the Grand Canyon. To call it a visit is not right; a better word is "pilgrimage." I understood why certain areas of the canyon's outcrops have been named after the temples of Brahma, Shiva, and Zoroaster. I spent a day at the canyon. At dawn or a little before, I left my room at El Tovaro before other guests woke up, then took myself to a seat on the brink of the canyon. It was still dark under a starry sky. At that hour the whole scene acquired a different dimension and a strange, indescribable quality. Far below, the Colorado River wound its course, muffled and softened. The wind roared in the valley; as the stars gradually vanished a faint light appeared on the horizon. At first there was absolute, enveloping darkness. But as I kept looking on, contours gently emerged, little by little, as if at the beginning of creation itself. The Grand Canyon seemed to me not a geological object, but some cosmic creature spanning the horizons. I felt a thrill more mystic than physical, and that sensation has unfadingly remained with me all through the years. At any moment I can relive that ecstasy. For me the word *immortal* has a meaning now.

The variety of college campuses is an impressive feature of American life. One can lead a life of complete satisfaction at any campus, whether Berkeley or Michigan State or the tiny University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Any university campus is a self-contained world, with its avenues and lawns, libraries, student union, tuck-shops, campus stores, and restaurants. I spent a term or two as Lecturer or Distinguished Visiting Professor or Very Distinguished Visiting Professor in various universities. Whatever my designation, it provided me with an opportunity to enjoy the facilities of a campus in comfortable surroundings, among agreeable and intelligent people. The duties I was expected to perform were light—give a couple of lectures and be accessible to students or faculty members when they desired to meet me. I have found campus life enjoyable when the lakes froze in Wisconsin or the snows piled up ten feet high in Michigan; in the ever-moderate climate of Berkeley or springtime at Columbia.

If I were asked where I would rather not live, I would say, "No American suburban life for me, please." It is boring. The sameness of houses, gardens, lawns, and dogs and two automobiles parked at every door, with not a soul or shop in sight except in a one-block stretch containing a post office, firehouse, and bank, similar to a hundred other places in the country. Interesting at first, but monotonous in the long run. I have lived for weeks at a stretch in Briarcliff Manor, an hour's run from Grand Central Station. I could survive it because of the lovely home of my hosts and their family, but outside their home the only relief was when I could escape to Manhattan. The surroundings of Briarcliff were perfect and charming, but life there was like existing amid painted cardboard scenes. I never felt this kind of desolation in

New York at any time, although I have stayed there for months at a time, usually at the Chelsea Hotel.

New York takes you out of yourself. A walk along Fifth Avenue or Madison or even 14th Street, with its dazzling variety of merchandise displayed on the pavement, can be a completely satisfying experience. You can visit a new ethnic quarter every day—German, Italian, Spanish, even Arab and Chinese—or choose an entertainment or concert or show from the newspaper, from page after page of listings. If you prefer to stay awake all night and jostle with a crowd, you can always go to Washington Square or Times Square, especially on a weekend.

At the American consulate the visa section is kept busy nowadays as more and more young men from India seek the green card or profess to enter on a limited visa, then try to extend their stay once they get in. The official has a difficult task filtering out the "permanent" in order to let in only the "transient." The average American is liberal-minded and isn't bothered that more and more Indian engineers and doctors are snapping up the opportunities available in the United States, possibly to the disadvantage of an American. I discussed the subject with Professor Ainslie T. Embree, chairman of Columbia University's history department, who has had a long association with Indian affairs and culture. His reply was noteworthy: "Why not Indians as well? In the course of time they will be Americans. The American citizen of today was once an expatriate, a foreigner who had come out of a European or African country. Why not Indians too? We certainly love to have Indians in the country."

The young man who goes to the States for higher training or studies declares when leaving home, "I will come back as soon as I complete my course, maybe two years or more, but I'll surely come and work for our country—of course, also to help the family." Excellent intentions, but it will not work out that way. Later, when he returns home full of dreams, plans, and projects, he finds only hurdles wherever he tries to get a job or to start an enterprise of his own. Form-filling, bureaucracy, caste, and other restrictions and a generally feudal style of functioning waste a lot of time for the young aspirant. He frets and fumes as he spends his days running about presenting or collecting papers at various places, achieving nothing. He is not used to this sort of treatment in America, where, he claims, he can walk into the office of the top man anywhere, address him by his first name, and explain his purpose. When he attempts to visit a man of similar rank in India to discuss his plans, he finds he has no access to him, but is forced to meet only subordinates in a hierarchical system. Some years ago a biochemist returning from America with a lot of experience and bursting with proposals pushed open the door of a big executive's office, stepped in innocently, and was curtly told off: "You should not come to me directly. Send your papers through proper channels." Thereafter the young Indian biochemist left India once and for all, having kept his retreat open with the help of a sympathetic professor at the American end.

In this respect American democratic habits have rather spoiled our young men. They have no patience with our Indian tempo, whereas the non-Americanized Indian accepts the hurdles as inevitable karma. An Indian who returns from America expects special treatment, forgetting the fact that the chancellors of Indian universities

will see only other chancellors, and top executives will see only other top executives, and no one of lesser position under any circumstances.

Another reason for a young man's final retreat from India could be a lack of jobs for one with his particular training and qualifications. A young engineer qualified in robotics spent hours explaining the value of his specialty to prospective sponsors, until eventually he realized that there could be no place for robots in an overcrowded country.

The Indian in America is a rather lonely being, having lost his roots in one place and not grown them in the other. Few Indians in America make any attempt to integrate into American culture or social life. Few visit an American home or a theater or an opera, or try to understand the American psyche. An Indian's contact with Americans is confined to work situations and official luncheons. He may mutter a "Hi" across the hedge to an American neighbor while mowing the lawn.

After he has equipped his new home with the latest dishwasher and video and his garage with two cars, once he has acquired all that the others have, he sits back with his family and counts his blessings. Outwardly happy, he is secretly gnawed at by some vague discontent and aware of some inner turbulence or vacuum he cannot define. All the comfort is physically satisfying, he has immense "job satisfaction"—and that is about all. On weekends he drives his family fifty miles or more to visit another Indian family so they can eat an Indian dinner and discuss Indian politics or tax problems (for doctors, who are in the highest income bracket, this is a constant topic of conversation).

There is monotony in this pattern of life, so mechanical and standardized. India may have lost an intellectual or an expert, but it must not be forgotten that he has lost India too—and that is a more serious loss in the final reckoning. The quality of life in India is different. Despite all the deficiencies, irritations, lack of material comforts and amenities, and general confusions, Indian life builds inner strength. It is the subtle, inexplicable influences—religion, family ties, and human relationships in general (let us call them psychological "inputs," to use a modern term)—that cumulatively sustain and lend variety and richness to existence. Building imposing Indian temples in America, installing our gods therein and importing Indian priests to perform the *pooja*[1] ritual and preside at festivals is only imitating Indian existence and can have only a limited value. Social and religious assemblies at the temples in America might mitigate boredom, but only temporarily. I have lived as a guest in many Indian homes in America and have noticed the ennui that descends on a family when they are stuck at home.

Indian children growing up in America present a special problem. Without the gentleness and courtesy and respect for parents that—unlike the American upbringing, whereby a child is left alone to discover for himself the right code of conduct—is the basic training for a child in India, Indian children have to develop themselves on a shallow foundation without a cultural basis either Indian or American. They are ignorant of Indian life; aware of this, the Indian parent tries to cram into his children's little heads every possible bit of cultural information he can during a rushed trip to the mother country.

Ultimately, America and India are profoundly different in attitude and philosophy, though it would be wonderful if they could complement each other's values. Indian philosophy stresses austerity and unencumbered, uncomplicated day-to-day living. America's emphasis, on the other hand, is on material acquisition and the limitless pursuit of prosperity. From childhood an Indian is brought up on the notion that austerity and a contented life are good; a certain otherworldliness is inculcated through a grandmother's tales, the discourses at the temple hall, and moral books. The American temperament, on the contrary, is pragmatic. The American has a robust indifference to eternity. "Attend church on Sunday and listen to the sermon, but don't bother about the future," he seems to say. Also, he seems to echo Omar Khayyam's[2] philosophy: "Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow, why fret about them if today be sweet?" He works hard and earnestly, acquires wealth and enjoys life. He has no time to worry about the afterlife, only taking care to draw up a proper will and trusting the funeral home to take care of the rest. The Indian in America who is not able to live wholeheartedly on this basis finds himself in a halfway house; he is unable to overcome his conflicts while physically flourishing on American soil. One may hope that the next generation of American-grown Indians will do better by accepting the American climate spontaneously or, alternatively, returning to India to live a different life.

[1] *pooja:* Or *puja;* a form of Hindu meditation.

[2] Omar Khayyam: Eleventh-century Persian poet and mathematician known for the poem *The Rubaiyat,* which expresses a hedonistic fatalism: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die."

Salman Rushdie

b. India, 1947

For postcolonial critics, Salman Rushdie is the model of both postcolonialism and hybridity—belonging to more than one culture. Born in the year of Indian independence in Bombay, Rushdie was educated in England, worked for a time in Pakistan where his family had relocated, then returned to England where he became a citizen. He now lives in New York but describes himself as an English writer—not an Indian writer, a Pakistani writer, or a Commonwealth writer. He discusses this self-identification in his essay "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist."

In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie explores his hybridity and his lack of a single homeland. Describing himself as a "translated man," he sees his situation as similar to that of many modern writers and one in which he has gained rather than lost.

All notes are the editors' unless otherwise indicated.

nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world; it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same.

I stress this is only one of many possible strategies. But we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form (a writer like Borges speaks of the influence of Robert Louis Stevenson[9] on his work; Heinrich Böll[10] acknowledges the influence of Irish literature; cross-pollination is everywhere); and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own—selected half consciously, half not—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis;[11] a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong.

There's a beautiful image in Saul Bellow's latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog's protest against the limit of dog experience. "For God's sake," the dog is saying, "open the universe a little more!" And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, or not only about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog's rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone's. "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!"

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[9] **Borges . . . Stevenson:** Argentine poet, critic, and fiction writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986; see p. 648), author of "The Garden of Forking Paths"; Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), author of *Treasure Island* (1883), wrote many books based on his travels in Europe and the South Pacific.

[10] **Heinrich Böll** (1917–1985): German novelist, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1972; author of *And Where Were You Adam?* (1951), *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1959), and other works.

[11] **Gogol . . . Machado de Assis:** Russian Realist novelist Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), author of *Dead Souls* (1842) and *The Inspector General* (1836); Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616; see Book 3), known for *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605–1615); German novelist Franz Kafka (1883–1924; see p. 423), author of *The Metamorphosis;* American novelist Herman Melville (1819–1891; see Book 5), author of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and *Moby Dick* (1851); Brazilian novelist Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908; see Book 5), author of "Adam and Eve" and *Epitaph for a Small Winner* (1891).

V. S. Naipaul

B. Trinidad, 1932

Although descended from Hindu parents from northern India, V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad, educated at Oxford, and became a British citizen after, as he describes it, migrating "from the periphery to the center." His many novels and travel books reflect the diversity of his experience and his role as a kind of rootless wanderer. Equally critical of the colonizers and the colonized in his many books about Third-World cultures, Naipaul has been harshly criticized himself, particularly for his unblinking and often scathing accounts of the West Indies, India, and Islamic societies. Naipaul has written three books about India: The first, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), records his first trip to his ancestral homeland. He reevaluated his somewhat denigrating first impression in two later books: *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1991).

Naipaul has consistently challenged tribalism, chauvinism, and the "politically correct" refusal to criticize Third-World cultures. In "Our Universal Civilization," he speaks of individualism and the pursuit of happiness, Western values that characterize the emerging global culture.

All notes are the editors'.



V. S. Naipaul, 1968
Trinidad-born novelist V. S. Naipaul is of Indian heritage, and many of his novels portray the immigrant Indian population in the West Indies.
(© Hulton-Deutsch Collection / CORBIS)

Our Universal Civilization

I never formulated the idea of the universal civilization until eleven years ago, when I traveled for many months in a number of non-Arab Muslim countries—Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan—to try to understand what had driven them to their rage. That Muslim rage was just beginning to be apparent.

I thought I would be traveling among people who would be like the people of my own community, the Trinidad Indian community. A large portion of Indians were Muslims; we both had a similar nineteenth-century imperial or colonial history. But it wasn't like that.

Despite the history we had in common, I had traveled a different way. Starting with the Hindu background of the instinctive, ritualized life; growing up in the unpromising conditions of colonial Trinidad; I had gone through many stages of knowledge and self-knowledge. I had been granted the ideas of inquiry and the tools of scholarship. I could carry four or five or six different cultural ideas in my head. Now, traveling among non-Arab Muslims, I found myself among a colonized people who had been stripped by their faith of all that expanding cultural and historical knowledge of the world that I had been growing into on the other side of the world.

Before I began my journey—while the Shah[1] still ruled—there had appeared in the United States a small novel, *Foreigner*, by Nahid Rachlin, a young Iranian woman, that in its subdued, unpolitical way foreshadowed the hysteria that was to come. The central figure is a young Iranian woman who does research work in Boston as a biologist. She is married to an American, and she might seem well adapted.

But when she goes back on a holiday to Teheran, she begins to feel lost. She reflects on her time in the United States. It is not a time of clarity; she sees it now to be a time of emptiness. She has never been in control. We can see that she was not prepared for the movement out of the shut-in Iranian world—where the faith was the complete way, filled everything, left no spare corner of the mind or will or soul—to the other world where it was necessary to be an individual and responsible; where people developed vocations and were stirred by ambition and achievement, and believed in perfectibility.

In her distress, she falls ill. She goes to a hospital. The doctor understands her unhappiness. He tells the young woman that her pain comes from an old ulcer. "What you have," he says in his melancholy, seductive way, "is a Western disease." And the research biologist arrives at a decision. She will give up that Boston-imposed life of the intellect and meaningless work; she will stay in Iran and put on the veil.

Immensely satisfying, that renunciation. But it is intellectually flawed: It assumes that there will continue to be people striving out there, in the stressed world, making drugs and medical equipment, to keep the Iranian doctor's hospital going.

Again and again, on my Islamic journey in 1979, I found a similar unconscious contradiction in people's attitudes. I remember especially a newspaper editor in Teheran. His paper had been at the heart of the revolution. In the middle of 1979 it was busy, in a state of glory. Seven months later, when I went back to Teheran, it had lost its heart; the once busy main room was empty; all but two of the staff had disappeared. The American Embassy had been seized; a financial crisis had followed; many foreign firms had closed down; advertising had dried up; the newspaper editor could hardly see his way ahead; every issue of the paper lost money; the editor, it might be said, had become as much a hostage as the diplomats.

He also, as I now learned, had two sons of university age. One was studying in the United States; the other had applied for a visa, but then the hostage crisis had occurred. This was news to me—that the United States should have been so important to the sons of one of the spokesmen of the Islamic revolution. I told the editor I was surprised. He said, speaking especially of the son waiting for the visa, "It's his future."

Emotional satisfaction on one hand; thought for the future on the other. The editor was as divided as nearly everyone else.

One of Joseph Conrad's earliest stories[2] of the East Indies, from the 1890s, was about a local raja or chieftain, a murderous man, a Muslim (though it is never explicitly said), who, in a crisis, having lost his magical counselor, swims out one night to one of the English merchant ships in the harbor to ask the sailors, representatives of the immense power that had come from the other end of the world, for an amulet, a magical charm. The sailors are at a loss; but then someone among them gives the raja a British coin, a sixpence commemorating Queen Victoria's Jubilee; and the raja is well pleased. Conrad didn't treat the story as a joke; he loaded it with philosophical implications for both sides, and I feel now that he saw truly.

In the one hundred years since that story, the wealth of the world has grown, power has grown, education has spread; the disturbance, the "philosophical shriek" of men at the margin (to use Conrad's words), has been amplified. The division in the revolutionary editor's spirit, and the renunciation of the fictional biologist, both contain a tribute—unacknowledged, but all the more profound—to the universal civilization. Simple charms alone cannot be acquired from it; other, difficult things come with it as well: ambition, endeavor, individuality.

The universal civilization has been a long time in the making. It wasn't always universal; it wasn't always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial taint, which still causes pain.

In Trinidad I grew up in the last days of that kind of racialism. And that, perhaps, has given me a greater appreciation of the immense changes that have taken place since the end of the war, the extraordinary attempt to accommodate the rest of the world, and all the currents of that world's thought.

Because my movement within this civilization has been from Trinidad to England, from the periphery to the center, I may have felt certain of its guiding principles more freshly than people to whom these things were everyday. One such realization—I suppose I have sensed it most of my life, but I have understood it philosophically only during the preparation of this talk—has been the beauty of the idea of the pursuit of happiness. Familiar words, easy to take for granted; easy to misconstrue.

This idea of the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery. I find it marvelous to contemplate to what an extent, after two centuries, and after the terrible history of the earlier part of this century, the idea has come to a kind of fruition. It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don't imagine my father's Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist, and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away.

[1] the Shah: The Shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlevi (1919–1980), who was deposed by the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

[2] One of . . . stories: "Karain: A Memory," collected in *Tales of Unrest* (1898).

Bharati Mukherjee

b. India, 1940

Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as gain.
– Bharati Mukherjee

Now a distinguished professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, Bharati Mukherjee traveled to California from Calcutta via England, Iowa, and Canada. The second of three daughters in an upper-middle-class Brahman family, Mukherjee spent some of her primary-school years in England and then returned to India where she completed a master's degree in English and ancient Indian culture before leaving to continue studying in the United States. Marrying a Canadian while earning degrees in English and creative writing at the University of Iowa, Mukherjee spent fourteen years in Canada, a country she considers hostile to immigrants and cultural assimilation. She returned with her family to the United States in 1980 and has since become an American citizen. She cherishes the United States' "melting pot," and says that "America has transformed me." She also admits, however, that "the transition from foreign student to U.S. citizen, from detached onlooker to committed immigrant, has not been easy."

In her work, Mukherjee writes about such transitions and about the difficulties of crossing cultural borders. Her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), and a nonfiction work coauthored with her husband, Clark Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1986), both describe returning to India from America and explore being caught between two worlds. "A Wife's Story," from the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), describes a similar dilemma from the point of view of a woman who has come to the United States to do graduate work.

All notes are the editors'.

A Wife's Story

Imre says forget it, but I'm going to write David Mamet.[1] So Patels are hard to sell real estate to. You buy them a beer, whisper Glengarry Glen Ross, and they smell swamp instead of sun and surf. They work hard, eat cheap, live ten to a room, stash their savings under futons in Queens, and before you know it they own half of Hoboken. You say, where's the sweet gullibility that made this nation great?

Polish jokes, Patel jokes: That's not why I want to write Mamet.

Seen their women?

Everybody laughs. Imre laughs. The dozing fat man with the Barnes & Noble sack between his legs, the woman next to him, the usher, everybody. The theater isn't

[1] Mamet: In *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), a satiric look at the real estate business by Chicago playwright David Mamet (b. 1947), the real estate salesmen call potential Indian clients "Patels"—a surname as common in India as "Smith" in the United States—to denigrate them.

so dark that they can't see me. In my red silk sari I'm conspicuous. Plump, gold paisleys sparkle on my chest.

The actor is just warming up. *Seen their women?* He plays a salesman, he's had a bad day and now he's in a Chinese restaurant trying to loosen up. His face is pink. His wool-blend slacks are creased at the crotch. We bought our tickets at half-price, we're sitting in the front row, but at the edge, and we see things we shouldn't be seeing. At least I do, or think I do. Spittle, actors goosing each other, little winks, streaks of makeup.

Maybe they're improvising dialogue too. Maybe Mamet's provided them with insult kits, Thursdays for Chinese, Wednesdays for Hispanics, today for Indians. Maybe they get together before curtain time, see an Indian woman settling in the front row off to the side, and say to each other: "Hey, forget Friday. Let's get *her* today. See if she cries. See if she walks out." Maybe, like the salesmen they play, they have a little bet on.

Maybe I shouldn't feel betrayed.

Their women, he goes again. *They look like they've just been fucked by a dead cat.*

The fat man hoots so hard he nudges my elbow off our shared armrest.

"Imre. I'm going home." But Imre's hunched so far forward he doesn't hear. English isn't his best language. A refugee from Budapest, he has to listen hard. "I didn't pay eighteen dollars to be insulted."

I don't hate Mamet. It's the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here. A play like this, back home, would cause riots. Communal, racist, and antisocial. The actors wouldn't make it off stage. This play, and all these awful feelings, would be safely locked up.

I long, at times, for clear-cut answers. Offer me instant dignity, today, and I'll take it.

"What?" Imre moves toward me without taking his eyes off the actor. "Come again?"

Tears come. I want to stand, scream, make an awful scene. I long for ugly, nasty rage.

The actor is ranting, flinging spittle. *Give me a chance. I'm not finished, I can get back on the board. I tell that asshole, give me a real lead. And what does that asshole give me? Patels. Nothing but Patels.*

This time Imre works an arm around my shoulders. "Panna, what is Patel? Why are you taking it all so personally?"

I shrink from his touch, but I don't walk out. Expensive girls' schools in Lausanne and Bombay have trained me to behave well. My manners are exquisite, my feelings are delicate, my gestures refined, my moods undetectable. They have seen me through riots, uprootings, separation, my son's death.

"I'm not taking it personally."

The fat man looks at us. The woman looks too, and shushes.

I stare back at the two of them. Then I stare, mean and cool, at the man's elbow. Under the bright blue polyester Hawaiian shirt sleeve, the elbow looks soft and

runny. "Excuse me," I say. My voice has the effortless meanness of well-bred displaced Third World women, though my rhetoric has been learned elsewhere. "You're exploiting my space."

Startled, the man snatches his arm away from me. He cradles it against his breast. By the time he's ready with comebacks, I've turned my back on him. I've probably ruined the first act for him. I know I've ruined it for Imre.

It's not my fault; it's the *situation*. Old colonies wear down. Patels—the new pioneers—have to be suspicious. Idi Amin's[2] lesson is permanent. AT&T wires move good advice from continent to continent. Keep all assets liquid. Get into 7-11s, get out of condos and motels.[3] I know how both sides feel, that's the trouble. The Patel sniffing out scams, the sad salesmen on the stage: Postcolonialism has made me their referee. It's hate I long for; simple, brutish, partisan hate.

After the show Imre and I make our way toward Broadway. Sometimes he holds my hand; it doesn't mean anything more than that crazies and drunks are crouched in doorways. Imre's been here over two years, but he's stayed very old-world, very courtly, openly protective of women. I met him in a seminar on special ed. last semester. His wife is a nurse somewhere in the Hungarian countryside. There are two sons, and miles of petitions for their emigration. My husband manages a mill two hundred miles north of Bombay. There are no children.

"You make things tough on yourself," Imre says. He assumed Patel was a Jewish name or maybe Hispanic; everything makes equal sense to him. He found the play tasteless, he worried about the effect of vulgar language on my sensitive ears. "You have to let go a bit." And as though to show me how to let go, he breaks away from me, bounds ahead with his head ducked tight, then dances on amazingly jerky legs. He's a Magyar, he often tells me, and deep down, he's an Asian too. I catch glimpses of it, knife-blade Attila cheekbones, despite the blondish hair. In his faded jeans and leather jacket, he's a rock video star. I watch MTV for hours in the apartment when Charity's working the evening shift at Macy's. I listen to WPLJ on Charity's earphones. Why should I be ashamed? Television in India is so uplifting.

Imre stops as suddenly as he'd started. People walk around us. The summer sidewalk is full of theatergoers in seersucker suits; Imre's year-round jacket is out of place. European. Cops in twos and threes huddle, lightly tap their thighs with night sticks and smile at me with benevolence. I want to wink at them, get us all in trouble, tell them the crazy dancing man is from the Warsaw Pact. I'm too shy to break into dance on Broadway. So I hug Imre instead.

The hug takes him by surprise. He wants me to let go, but he doesn't really expect me to let go. He staggers, though I weigh no more than 104 pounds, and with him, I pitch forward slightly. Then he catches me, and we walk arm in arm to the bus stop. My husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway. Nor would my brothers. They aren't stuffy people, but they went to Anglican boarding schools and they have a well-developed sense of what's silly.

"Imre." I squeeze his big, rough hand. "I'm sorry I ruined the evening for you."

"You did nothing of the kind." He sounds tired. "Let's not wait for the bus. Let's splurge and take a cab instead."

Imre always has unexpected funds. The Network, he calls it, Class of '56.

In the back of the cab, without even trying, I feel light, almost free. Memories of Indian destitutes mix with the hordes of New York street people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head. I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a Ph.D. in special ed. I have a multiple-entry visa and a small scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see. My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she'd registered for French lessons at the Alliance Française. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar,[4] was illiterate.

Imre and the cabdriver talk away in Russian. I keep my eyes closed. That way I can feel the floaters better. I'll write Mamet tonight. I feel strong, reckless. Maybe I'll write Steven Spielberg[5] too; tell him that Indians don't eat monkey brains.

We've made it. Patels must have made it. Mamet, Spielberg: They're not condescending to us. Maybe they're a little bit afraid.

Charity Chin, my roommate, is sitting on the floor drinking Chablis out of a plastic wineglass. She is five foot six, three inches taller than me, but weighs a kilo and a half less than I do. She is a "hands" model. Orientals are supposed to have a monopoly in the hands-modelling business, she says. She had her eyes fixed eight or nine months ago and out of gratitude sleeps with her plastic surgeon every third Wednesday.

"Oh, good," Charity says. "I'm glad you're back early. I need to talk."

She's been writing checks. MCI, Con Ed, Bonwit Teller. Envelopes, already stamped and sealed, form a pyramid between her shapely, knee-socked legs. The checkbook's cover is brown plastic, grained to look like cowhide. Each time Charity flips back the cover, white geese fly over sky-colored checks. She makes good money, but she's extravagant. The difference adds up to this shared, rent-controlled Chelsea one-bedroom.

"All right. Talk."

When I first moved in, she was seeing an analyst. Now she sees a nutritionist.

"Eric called. From Oregon."

"What did he want?"

"He wants me to pay half the rent on his loft for last spring. He asked me to move back, remember? He *begged* me."

Eric is Charity's estranged husband.

[2] Idi Amin (b. 1925): Military dictator who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979. During his regime he expelled the Indian population of the country and killed an estimated two hundred thousand people before being deposed. He escaped into exile in Saudi Arabia.

[3] condos and motels: Businesses that many Indian immigrants bought into.

[4] zamindar: Landowner.

[5] Spielberg: In Steven Spielberg's film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), Indians prepare a feast at which monkey brains are served.

"What does your nutritionist say?" Eric now wears a red jumpsuit and tills the soil in Rajneeshpuram.[6]

"You think Phil's a creep too, don't you? What else can he be when creeps are all I attract?"

Phil is a flutist with thinning hair. He's very touchy on the subject of *flautists* versus *flutists*. He's touchy on every subject, from music to books to foods to clothes. He teaches at a small college upstate, and Charity bought a used blue Datsun ("Nissan," Phil insists) last month so she could spend weekends with him. She returns every Sunday night, exhausted and exasperated. Phil and I don't have much to say to each other—he's the only musician I know; the men in my family are lawyers, engineers, or in business—but I like him. Around me, he loosens up. When he visits, he bakes us loaves of pumpernickel bread. He waxes our kitchen floor. Like many men in this country, he seems to me a displaced child, or even a woman, looking for something that passed him by, or for something that he can never have. If he thinks I'm not looking, he sneaks his hands under Charity's sweater, but there isn't too much there. Here, she's a model with high ambitions. In India, she'd be a flat-chested old maid.

I'm shy in front of the lovers. A darkness comes over me when I see them horsing around.

"It isn't the money," Charity says. Oh? I think. "He says he still loves me. Then he turns around and asks me for five hundred."

What's so strange about that, I want to ask. She still loves Eric, and Eric, red jumpsuit and all, is smart enough to know it. Love is a commodity, hoarded like any other. Mamet knows. But I say, "I'm not the person to ask about love." Charity knows that mine was a traditional Hindu marriage. My parents, with the help of a marriage broker, who was my mother's cousin, picked out a groom. All I had to do was get to know his taste in food.

It'll be a long evening, I'm afraid. Charity likes to confess. I unpleat my silk sari—it no longer looks too showy—wrap it in muslin cloth and put it away in a dresser drawer. Saris are hard to have laundered in Manhattan, though there's a good man in Jackson Heights. My next step will be to brew us a pot of chrysanthemum tea. It's a very special tea from the mainland. Charity's uncle gave it to us. I like him. He's a humpbacked, awkward, terrified man. He runs a gift store on Mott Street, and though he doesn't speak much English, he seems to have done well. Once upon a time he worked for the railways in Chengdu, Szechwan Province, and during the Wuchang Uprising,[7] he was shot at. When I'm down, when I'm lonely for my husband, when I think of our son, or when I need to be held, I think of Charity's uncle. If I hadn't left home, I'd never have heard of the Wuchang Uprising. I've broadened my horizons.

Very late that night my husband calls me from Ahmadabad, a town of textile mills north of Bombay. My husband is a vice president at Lakshmi Cotton Mills.

[6] Rajneeshpuram: An ashram in Oregon founded in the 1980s by the controversial Indian guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

[7] Wuchang Uprising: A crucial event in the Chinese Revolution in October 1911 that led in December to the founding of the Republic of China under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen.

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, but LCM (Priv.), Ltd., is doing poorly. Lockouts, strikes, rock-throwings. My husband lives on digitalis, which he calls the food for our *yuga*[8] of discontent.

"We had a bad mishap at the mill today." Then he says nothing for seconds.

The operator comes on. "Do you have the right party, sir? We're trying to reach Mrs. Butt."

"Bhatt," I insist. "*B* for Bombay, *H* for Haryana, *A* for Ahmadabad, double *T* for Tamil Nadu." It's a litany. "This is she."

"One of our lorries was firebombed today. Resulting in three deaths. The driver, old Karamchand, and his two children."

I know how my husband's eyes look this minute, how the eye rims sag and the yellow corneas shine and bulge with pain. He is not an emotional man—the Ahmadabad Institute of Management has trained him to cut losses, to look on the bright side of economic catastrophes—but tonight he's feeling low. I try to remember a driver named Karamchand, but can't. That part of my life is over, the way *trucks* have replaced *lorries* in my vocabulary, the way Charity Chin and her lurid love life have replaced inherited notions of marital duty. Tomorrow he'll come out of it. Soon he'll be eating again. He'll sleep like a baby. He's been trained to believe in turnovers. Every morning he rubs his scalp with cantharidine oil so his hair will grow back again.

"It could be your car next." Affection, love. Who can tell the difference in a traditional marriage in which a wife still doesn't call her husband by his first name?

"No. They know I'm a flunky, just like them. Well paid, maybe. No need for undue anxiety, please."

Then his voice breaks. He says he needs me, he misses me, he wants me to come to him damp from my evening shower, smelling of sandalwood soap, my braid decorated with jasmines.

"I need you too."

"Not to worry, please," he says. "I am coming in a fortnight's time. I have already made arrangements."

Outside my window, fire trucks whine, up Eighth Avenue. I wonder if he can hear them, what he thinks of a life like mine, led amid disorder.

"I am thinking it'll be like a honeymoon. More or less."

When I was in college, waiting to be married, I imagined honeymoons were only for the more fashionable girls, the girls who came from slightly racy families, smoked Sobranies[9] in the dorm lavatories and put up posters of Kabir Bedi,[10] who was supposed to have made it as a big star in the West. My husband wants us to go to Niagara. I'm not to worry about foreign exchange. He's arranged for extra dollars through the Gujarati Network,[11] with a cousin in San Jose. And he's bought four hundred more on the black market. "Tell me you need me. Panna, please tell me again."

I change out of the cotton pants and shirt I've been wearing all day and put on a sari to meet my husband at JFK. I don't forget the jewelry; the marriage necklace of

[8] *yuga*: Age. [9] Sobranies: A brand of Balkan cigarettes. [10] Kabir Bedi: A popular Indian film star.
[11] Gujarati Network: Network of the Gujarati people, an ethnic group from west central India.

mangalsutra,[12] gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles. I don't wear them every day. In this borough of vice and greed, who knows when, or whom, desire will overwhelm.

My husband spots me in the crowd and waves. He has lost weight, and changed his glasses. The arm, uplifted in a cheery wave, is bony, frail, almost opalescent.

In the Carey Coach, we hold hands. He strokes my fingers one by one. "How come you aren't wearing my mother's ring?"

"Because muggers know about Indian women," I say. They know with us it's 24-karat. His mother's ring is showy, in ghastly taste anywhere but India: a blood-red Burma ruby set in a gold frame of floral sprays. My mother-in-law got her guru to bless the ring before I left for the States.

He looks disconcerted. He's used to a different role. He's the knowing, suspicious one in the family. He seems to be sulking, and finally he comes out with it. "You've said nothing about my new glasses." I compliment him on the glasses, how chic and Western-executive they make him look. But I can't help the other things, necessities until he learns the ropes. I handle the money, buy the tickets. I don't know if this makes me unhappy.

Charity drives her Nissan upstate, so for two weeks we are to have the apartment to ourselves. This is more privacy than we ever had in India. No parents, no servants, to keep us modest. We play at housekeeping. Imre has lent us a hibachi, and I grill saffron chicken breasts. My husband marvels at the size of the Perdue hens. "They're big like peacocks, no? These Americans, they're really something!" He tries out pizzas, burgers, McNuggets. He chews. He explores. He judges. He loves it all, fears nothing, feels at home in the summer odors, the clutter of Manhattan streets. Since he thinks that the American palate is bland, he carries a bottle of red peppers in his pocket. I wheel a shopping cart down the aisles of the neighborhood Grand Union, and he follows, swiftly, greedily. He picks up hair rinses and high-protein diet powders. There's so much I already take for granted.

One night, Imre stops by. He wants us to go with him to a movie. In his work shirt and red leather tie, he looks arty or strung out. It's only been a week, but I feel as though I am really seeing him for the first time. The yellow hair worn very short at the sides, the wide, narrow lips. He's a good-looking man, but self-conscious, almost arrogant. He's picked the movie we should see. He always tells me what to see, what to read. He buys the *Voice*. He's a natural avant-gardist. For tonight he's chosen *Numéro Deux.*[13]

"Is it a musical?" my husband asks. The Radio City Music Hall is on his list of sights to see. He's read up on the history of the Rockettes.[14] He doesn't catch Imre's sympathetic wink.

Guilt, shame, loyalty. I long to be ungracious, not ingratiate myself with both men.

[12] ***mangalsutra:*** A gold necklace signifying a married woman.

[13] ***Numéro Deux*** (1975): A film by French New Wave director, Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930).

[14] **Rockettes:** High-kicking chorus girls who dance at Radio City Music Hall.

That night my husband calculates in rupees the money we've wasted on Godard. "That refugee fellow, Nagy, must have a screw loose in his head. I paid very steep price for dollars on the black market."

Some afternoons we go shopping. Back home we hated shopping, but now it is a lovers' project. My husband's shopping list startles me. I feel I am just getting to know him. Maybe, like Imre, freed from the dignities of old-world culture, he too could get drunk and squirt Cheez Whiz on a guest. I watch him dart into stores in his gleaming leather shoes. Jockey shorts on sale in outdoor bins on Broadway entrance him. White tube socks with different bands of color delight him. He looks for micro-cassettes, for anything small and electronic and smuggleable. He needs a garment bag. He calls it a "wardrobe," and I have to translate.

"All of New York is having sales, no?"

My heart speeds watching him this happy. It's the third week in August, almost the end of summer, and the city smells ripe, it cannot bear more heat, more money, more energy.

"This is so smashing! The prices are so excellent!" Recklessly, my prudent husband signs away traveller's checks. How he intends to smuggle it all back I don't dare ask. With a microwave, he calculates, we could get rid of our cook.

This has to be love, I think. Charity, Eric, Phil: They may be experts on sex. My husband doesn't chase me around the sofa, but he pushes me down on Charity's battered cushions, and the man who has never entered the kitchen of our Ahmadabad house now comes toward me with a dish tub of steamy water to massage away the pavement heat.

Ten days into his vacation my husband checks out brochures for sightseeing tours. Shortline, Grayline, Crossroads: His new vinyl briefcase is full of schedules and pamphlets. While I make pancakes out of a mix, he comparison-shops. Tour number one costs $10.95 and will give us the World Trade Center, Chinatown, and the United Nations. Tour number three would take us both uptown *and* downtown for $14.95, but my husband is absolutely sure he doesn't want to see Harlem. We settle for tour number four: Downtown and the Dame. It's offered by a new tour company with a small, dirty office at Eighth and Forty-eighth.

The sidewalk outside the office is colorful with tourists. My husband sends me in to buy the tickets because he has come to feel Americans don't understand his accent.

The dark man, Lebanese probably, behind the counter comes on too friendly. "Come on, doll, make my day!" He won't say which tour is his. "Number four? Honey, no! Look, you've wrecked me! Say you'll change your mind." He takes two twenties and gives back change. He holds the tickets, forcing me to pull. He leans closer. "I'm off after lunch."

My husband must have been watching me from the sidewalk. "What was the chap saying?" he demands. "I told you not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican. He thinks he can treat you with disrespect."

The bus is crowded and we have to sit across the aisle from each other. The tour guide begins his patter on Forty-sixth. He looks like an actor, his hair bleached and

blow-dried. Up close he must look middle-aged, but from where I sit his skin is smooth and his cheeks faintly red.

"Welcome to the Big Apple, folks." The guide uses a microphone. "Big Apple. That's what we native Manhattan degenerates call our city. Today we have guests from fifteen foreign countries and six states from this U.S. of A. That makes the Tourist Bureau real happy. And let me assure you that while we may be the richest city in the richest country in the world, it's okay to tip your charming and talented attendant." He laughs. Then he swings his hip out into the aisle and sings a song.

"And it's mighty fancy on old Delancey Street, you know. . . ."

My husband looks irritable. The guide is, as expected, a good singer. "The bloody man should be giving us histories of buildings we are passing, no?" I pat his hand, the mood passes. He cranes his neck. Our window seats have both gone to Japanese. It's the tour of his life. Next to this, the quick business trips to Manchester and Glasgow pale.

"And tell me what street compares to Mott Street, in July. . . ."

The guide wants applause. He manages a derisive laugh from the Americans up front. He's working the aisles now. "I coulda been somebody, right? I coulda been a star!" Two or three of us smile, those of us who recognize the parody. He catches my smile. The sun is on his harsh, bleached hair. "Right, your highness? Look, we gotta maharani with us! Couldn't I have been a star?"

"Right!" I say, my voice coming out a squeal. I've been trained to adapt; what else can I say?

We drive through traffic past landmark office buildings and churches. The guide flips his hands. "Art deco," he keeps saying. I hear him confide to one of the Americans: "Beats me. I went to a cheap guide's school." My husband wants to know more about this Art Deco, but the guide sings another song.

"We made a foolish choice," my husband grumbles. "We are sitting in the bus only. We're not going into famous buildings." He scrutinizes the pamphlets in his jacket pocket. I think, at least it's air-conditioned in here. I could sit here in the cool shadows of the city forever.

Only five of us appear to have opted for the "Downtown and the Dame" tour. The others will ride back uptown past the United Nations after we've been dropped off at the pier for the ferry to the Statue of Liberty.

An elderly European pulls a camera out of his wife's designer tote bag. He takes pictures of the boats in the harbor, the Japanese in kimonos eating popcorn, scavenging pigeons, me. Then, pushing his wife ahead of him, he climbs back on the bus and waves to us. For a second I feel terribly lost. I wish we were on the bus going back to the apartment. I know I'll not be able to describe any of this to Charity, or to Imre. I'm too proud to admit I went on a guided tour.

The view of the city from the Circle Line ferry is seductive, unreal. The skyline wavers out of reach, but never quite vanishes. The summer sun pushes through fluffy clouds and dapples the glass of office towers. My husband looks thrilled, even more than he had on the shopping trips down Broadway. Tourists and dreamers, we have spent our life's savings to see this skyline, this statue.

"Quick, take a picture of me!" my husband yells as he moves toward a gap of railings. A Japanese matron has given up her position in order to change film. "Before the Twin Towers disappear!"

I focus, I wait for a large Oriental family to walk out of my range. My husband holds his pose tight against the railing. He wants to look relaxed, an international businessman at home in all the financial markets.

A bearded man slides across the bench toward me. "Like this," he says and helps me get my husband in focus. "You want me to take the photo for you?" His name, he says, is Goran. He is Goran from Yugoslavia, as though that were enough for tracking him down. Imre from Hungary. Panna from India. He pulls the old Leica out of my hand, signaling the Orientals to beat it, and clicks away. "I'm a photographer," he says. He could have been a camera thief. That's what my husband would have assumed. Somehow, I trusted. "Get you a beer?" he asks.

"I don't. Drink, I mean. Thank you very much." I say those last words very loud, for everyone's benefit. The odd bottles of Soave with Imre don't count.

"Too bad." Goran gives back the camera.

"Take one more!" my husband shouts from the railing. "Just to be sure!"

The island itself disappoints. The Lady has brutal scaffolding holding her in. The museum is closed. The snack bar is dirty and expensive. My husband reads out the prices to me. He orders two french fries and two Cokes. We sit at picnic tables and wait for the ferry to take us back.

"What was that hippie chap saying?"

As if I could say. A day-care center has brought its kids, at least forty of them, to the island for the day. The kids, all wearing name tags, run around us. I can't help noticing how many are Indian. Even a Patel, probably a Bhatt if I looked hard enough. They toss hamburger bits at pigeons. They kick styrofoam cups. The pigeons are slow, greedy, persistent. I have to shoo one off the table top. I don't think my husband thinks about our son.

"What hippie?"

"The one on the boat. With the beard and the hair."

My husband doesn't look at me. He shakes out his paper napkin and tries to protect his french fries from pigeon feathers.

"Oh, him. He said he was from Dubrovnik." It isn't true, but I don't want trouble.

"What did he say about Dubrovnik?"

I know enough about Dubrovnik to get by. Imre's told me about it. And about Mostar and Zagreb. In Mostar white Muslims sing the call to prayer. I would like to see that before I die: white Muslims. Whole peoples have moved before me; they've adapted. The night Imre told me about Mostar was also the night I saw my first snow in Manhattan. We'd walked down to Chelsea from Columbia. We'd walked and talked and I hadn't felt tired at all.

"You're too innocent," my husband says. He reaches for my hand. "Panna," he cries with pain in his voice, and I am brought back from perfect, floating memories of snow, "I've come to take you back. I have seen how men watch you."

"What?"

"Come back, now. I have tickets. We have all the things we will ever need. I can't live without you."

A little girl with wiry braids kicks a bottle cap at his shoes. The pigeons wheel and scuttle around us. My husband covers his fries with spread-out fingers. "No kicking," he tells the girl. Her name, Beulah, is printed in green ink on a heart-shaped name tag. He forces a smile, and Beulah smiles back. Then she starts to flap her arms. She flaps, she hops. The pigeons go crazy for fries and scraps.

"Special ed. course is two years," I remind him. "I can't go back."

My husband picks up our trays and throws them into the garbage before I can stop him. He's carried disposability a little too far. "We've been taken," he says, moving toward the dock, though the ferry will not arrive for another twenty minutes. "The ferry costs only two dollars round-trip per person. We should have chosen tour number one for $10.95 instead of tour number four for $14.95."

With my Lebanese friend, I think. "But this way we don't have to worry about cabs. The bus will pick us up at the pier and take us back to midtown. Then we can walk home."

"New York is full of cheats and whatnot. Just like Bombay." He is not accusing me of infidelity. I feel dread all the same.

That night, after we've gone to bed, the phone rings. My husband listens, then hands the phone to me. "What is this woman saying?" He turns on the pink Macy's lamp by the bed. "I am not understanding these Negro people's accents."

The operator repeats the message. It's a cable from one of the directors of Lakshmi Cotton Mills. "Massive violent labor confrontation anticipated. Stop. Return posthaste. Stop. Cable flight details. Signed Kantilal Shah."

"It's not your factory," I say. "You're supposed to be on vacation."

"So, you are worrying about me? Yes? You reject my heartfelt wishes but you worry about me?" He pulls me close, slips the straps of my nightdress off my shoulder. "Wait a minute."

I wait, unclothed, for my husband to come back to me. The water is running in the bathroom. In the ten days he has been here he has learned American rites: deodorants, fragrances. Tomorrow morning he'll call Air India; tomorrow evening he'll be on his way back to Bombay. Tonight I should make up to him for my years away, the gutted trucks, the degree I'll never use in India. I want to pretend with him that nothing has changed.

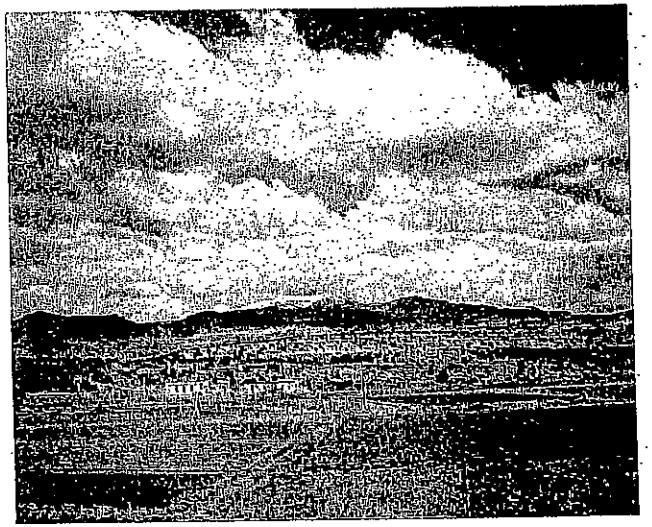
In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else.

Leslie Marmon Silko

b. United States, 1948

More than any other Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko has introduced a large popular audience to the culture into which she was born. Through her poetry, essays, and, especially, her fiction, Silko has conveyed the importance of storytelling, including the way the drama of contemporary life both fulfills and transforms the myths and stories of the past. Like Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (b. 1930; see p. 1017), Silko recontextualizes the wisdom of oral tradition in poems and in the adages in her stories, teasing out new significances while contrasting and adapting old ways with the new. Also like Achebe, Silko explores the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of the contact between native populations and colonizers. Through the masterful tale of the power of myth to affirm identity in *Ceremony* (1977), the richly diverse short stories in *Storyteller* (1981), the disturbing apocalyptic vision of a Mesoamerican race war in *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), and the vivid and instructive historical contrast of Native and European relationships to the environment in *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), Silko has changed the shape of contemporary fiction, contributing to an American vision of the POSTCOLONIAL world at the end of the twentieth century.

Beginnings at Laguna Pueblo. A mixedblood Indian (of Laguna, Hispanic, and Anglo-American ancestry), Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 and grew up in the pueblo of Laguna in western New Mexico.



Laguna Reservati
1943
Born just a few ye after this photo w taken, Leslie Mar Silko grew up in t pueblo of Laguna western New Mex its landscape and diverse culture ha been a major influence on her l and work. (Libra of Congress LC-USW361-713)

For links t more information about Leslie Marn Silko and a quiz o "Lullaby," and for information abou the culture and context of Americ in the twentieth century, see *World Literature Online* at bedfordstmartins .com/worldlit.

Sandra Cisneros

b. United States, 1954

Throughout Sandra Cisneros's childhood, her Mexican American mother, her Mexican father, her six brothers, and she moved often between Mexico City and Chicago, never allowing her much time to get settled in either place. As a child she couldn't understand why her life didn't seem like the one projected onto her television screen. Her loneliness from not having sisters or friends drove her to bury herself in books. In high school she wrote poetry, but she didn't start writing seriously until her first creative writing class in college in 1974. After that it took a while to find her own voice: "I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets I admired in books: big male voices like James Wright and Richard Hugo and Theodore Roethke, all wrong for me." Cisneros realized that she needed to write what she knew and adopted a writing style that was deliberately opposite to that of her classmates. After receiving her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, she returned to Chicago to work in the Chicano barrio teaching high-school dropouts, a job that helped her develop the voice of a working-class Latina with an independent sexuality. Her work explores issues that are important to her: feminism, love, oppression, and religion. Her first novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1983), was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985. Her other works include *Loose Woman: Poems* (1994); *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), from which "Never Marry a Mexican" is taken; and another collection of poems, *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987). Cisneros has received the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1995) as well as many other national recognitions.

All notes are the editors'.

Never Marry a Mexican

Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U.S., and he was born there, and it's *not* the same, you know.

I'll *never* marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, and I've helped them to it. Unzipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I've been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I'm guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I'm vindictive and cruel, and I'm capable of anything.

I admit, there was a time when all I wanted was to belong to a man. To wear that gold band on my left hand and be worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day. Not the sneaking around I did in different bars that all looked the same, red carpets with a black grillwork design, flocked wallpaper, wooden wagon-

wheel light fixtures with hurricane lampshades a sick amber color like the drinking glasses you get for free at gas stations.

Dark bars, dark restaurants then. And if not—my apartment, with his toothbrush firmly planted in the toothbrush holder like a flag on the North Pole. The bed so big because he never stayed the whole night. Of course not.

Borrowed. That's how I've had my men. Just the cream skimmed off the top. Just the sweetest part of the fruit, without the bitter skin that daily living with a spouse can rend. They've come to me when they wanted the sweet meat then.

So, no. I've never married and never will. Not because I couldn't, but because I'm too romantic for marriage. Marriage has failed me, you could say. Not a man exists who hasn't disappointed me, whom I could trust to love the way I've loved. It's because I believe too much in marriage that I don't. Better to not marry than live a lie.

Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day, those weren't men. Not men I considered as potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadorean, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan, I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me.

I guess she did it to spare me and Ximena the pain she went through. Having married a Mexican man at seventeen. Having had to put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado,* the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado,* that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor. But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware.

In my ma's house the plates were always stacked in the center of the table, the knives and forks and spoons standing in a jar, help yourself. All the dishes chipped or cracked and nothing matched. And no tablecloth, ever. And newspapers set on the table whenever my grandpa sliced watermelons, and how embarrassed she would be when her boyfriend, my father, would come over and there were newspapers all over the kitchen floor and table. And my grandpa, big hardworking Mexican man, saying Come, come and eat, and slicing a big wedge of those dark green watermelons, a big slice, he wasn't stingy with food. Never, even during the Depression. Come, come and eat, to whoever came knocking on the back door. Hobos sitting at the dinner table and the children staring and staring. Because my grandfather always made sure they never went without. Flour and rice, by the barrel and by the sack. Potatoes. Big bags of pinto beans. And watermelons, bought three or four at a time, rolled under his bed and brought out when you least expected. My grandpa had survived three wars, one Mexican, two American, and he knew what living without meant. He knew.

My father, on the other hand, did not. True, when he first came to this country he had worked shelling clams, washing dishes, planting hedges, sat on the back of the

bus in Little Rock and had the bus driver shout, You—sit up here, and my father had shrugged sheepishly and said, No speak English.

But he was no economic refugee, no immigrant fleeing a war. My father ran away from home because he was afraid of facing his father after his first-year grades at the university proved he'd spent more time fooling around than studying. He left behind a house in Mexico City that was neither poor nor rich, but thought itself better than both. A boy who would get off a bus when he saw a girl he knew board if he didn't have the money to pay her fare. That was the world my father left behind.

I imagine my father in his *fanfarrón* clothes, because that's what he was, a *fanfarrón.* That's what my mother thought the moment she turned around to the voice that was asking her to dance. A big show-off, she'd say years later. Nothing but a big show-off. But she never said why she married him. My father in his shark-blue suits with the starched handkerchief in the breast pocket, his felt fedora, his tweed topcoat with the big shoulders, and heavy British wing tips with the pin-hole design on the heel and toe. Clothes that cost a lot. Expensive. That's what my father's things said. *Calidad.* Quality.

My father must've found the U.S. Mexicans very strange, so foreign from what he knew at home in Mexico City where the servant served watermelon on a plate with silverware and a cloth napkin, or mangos with their own special prongs. Not like this, eating with your legs wide open in the yard, or in the kitchen hunkered over newspapers. *Come, come and eat.* No, never like this.

How I make my living depends. Sometimes I work as a translator. Sometimes I get paid by the word and sometimes by the hour, depending on the job. I do this in the day, and at night I paint. I'd do anything in the day just so I can keep on painting.

I work as a substitute teacher, too, for the San Antonio Independent School District. And that's worse than translating those travel brochures with their tiny print, believe me. I can't stand kids. Not any age. But it pays the rent.

Any way you look at it, what I do to make a living is a form of prostitution. People say, "A painter? How nice," and want to invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire. But do they buy art?

I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know they can't buy *that.* The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart. I don't belong to any class. Not to the poor, whose neighborhood I share. Not to the rich, who come to my exhibitions and buy my work. Not to the middle class from which my sister Ximena and I fled.

When I was young, when I first left home and rented that apartment with my sister and her kids right after her husband left, I thought it would be glamorous to be an artist. I wanted to be like Frida or Tina.[1] I was ready to suffer with my camera and

[1] **Frida or Tina:** Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), Mexican painter famous for her self-portraits. Tina Modotti (1896–1942), Italian-born photographer who lived and worked in Hollywood and Mexico. Both artists are known for their bohemian lifestyles and association with Communist revolutionaries.

my paint brushes in that awful apartment we rented for $150 each because it had high ceilings and those wonderful glass skylights that convinced us we had to have it. Never mind there was no sink in the bathroom, and a tub that looked like a sarcophagus, and floorboards that didn't meet, and a hallway to scare away the dead. But fourteen-foot ceilings was enough for us to write a check for the deposit right then and there. We thought it all romantic. You know the place, the one on Zarzamora on top of the barber shop with the Casasola prints of the Mexican Revolution.[2] Neon BIRRIA TEPATITLÁN sign round the corner, two goats knocking their heads together, and all those Mexican bakeries, Las Brisas for *huevos rancheros* and *carnitas* and *barbacoa* on Sundays, and fresh fruit milk shakes, and mango *paletas,*[3] and more signs in Spanish than in English. We thought it was great, great. The barrio looked cute in the daytime, like Sesame Street. Kids hopscotching on the sidewalk, blessed little boogers. And hardware stores that still sold ostrich-feather dusters, and whole families marching out of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on Sundays, girls in their swirly-whirly dresses and patent-leather shoes, boys in their dress Stacys and shiny shirts.

But nights, that was nothing like what we knew up on the north side. Pistols going off like the wild, wild West, and me and Ximena and the kids huddled in one bed with the lights off listening to it all, saying, Go to sleep, babies, it's just firecrackers. But we knew better. Ximena would say, Clemencia, maybe we should go home. And I'd say, Shit! Because she knew as well as I did there was no home to go home to. Not with our mother. Not with that man she married. After Daddy died, it was like we didn't matter. Like Ma was so busy feeling sorry for herself, I don't know. I'm not like Ximena. I still haven't worked it out after all this time, even though our mother's dead now. My half brothers living in that house that should've been ours, me and Ximena's. But that's—how do you say it?—water under the damn? I can't ever get the sayings right even though I was born in this country. We didn't say shit like that in our house.

Once Daddy was gone, it was like my ma didn't exist, like if she died, too. I used to have a little finch, twisted one of its tiny red legs between the bars of the cage once, who knows how. The leg just dried up and fell off. My bird lived a long time without it, just a little red stump of a leg. He was fine, really. My mother's memory is like that, like if something already dead dried up and fell off, and I stopped missing where she used to be. Like if I never had a mother. And I'm not ashamed to say it either. When she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father's house, it was as if she stopped being my mother. Like I never even had one.

Ma always sick and too busy worrying about her own life, she would've sold us to the Devil if she could. "Because I married so young, *mi'ja,*"[4] she'd say. "Because

[2] **Casasola . . . Revolution:** The Casasola brothers, Agustín Victor (1874–1938) and Miguel, began Mexico's first photo agency during revolution-era Mexico, around 1912. Agustín Victor is considered the photographer of the Mexican Revolution.

[3] ***huevos rancheros . . . paletas:*** Traditional Mexican egg-and-chile dish; Mexican dish of braised pork; barbeque; mango popsicle.

[4] ***mi'ja:*** Abbreviation of the Spanish *mi hija,* a term of endearment meaning "my daughter."

your father, he was so much older than me, and I never had a chance to be young. Honey, try to understand . . ." Then I'd stop listening.

That man she met at work, Owen Lambert, the foreman at the photo-finishing plant, who she was seeing even while my father was sick. Even then. That's what I can't forgive.

When my father was coughing up blood and phlegm in the hospital, half his face frozen, and his tongue so fat he couldn't talk, he looked so small with all those tubes and plastic sacks dangling around him. But what I remember most is the smell, like death was already sitting on his chest. And I remember the doctor scraping the phlegm out of my father's mouth with a white washcloth, and my daddy gagging and I wanted to yell, Stop, you stop that, he's my daddy. Goddamn you. Make him live. Daddy, don't. Not yet, not yet, not yet. And how I couldn't hold myself up, I couldn't hold myself up. Like if they'd beaten me, or pulled my insides out through my nostrils, like if they'd stuffed me with cinnamon and cloves, and I just stood there dry-eyed next to Ximena and my mother, Ximena between us because I wouldn't let her stand next to me. Everyone repeating over and over the Ave Marías and Padre Nuestros.[5] The priest sprinkling holy water, *mundo sin fin, amén.*[6]

Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli?[7] It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. You said I was beautiful, and when you said it, Drew, I was.

My Malinalli, Malinche,[8] my courtesan, you said, and yanked my head back by the braid. Calling me that name in between little gulps of breath and the raw kisses you gave, laughing from that black beard of yours.

Before daybreak, you'd be gone, same as always, before I even knew it. And it was as if I'd imagined you, only the teeth marks on my belly and nipples proving me wrong.

[5] Ave . . . Nuestros: Spanish for Hail Marys and Our Fathers.

[6] *mundo . . . amén:* Spanish for "World without end, amen."

[7] Malinalli: A day or period of several days in the ancient Aztec calendars, of which there are two, the *xiupohualli*, related to the agricultural or solar year, and the *tonalpohualli*, the sacred calendar. In the sacred calendar, there is a Malinalli (Grass) day, protected by the god Patecatl. This day signifies tenacity, rejuvenation, persevering against all odds, resisting being uprooted, and creating lasting alliances and is a good day for the oppressed. The thirteen-day period or *trecena* also called Malinalli is ruled by Mayahuel, goddess of the Maguey and Pulque. This is a time of immoderation, intoxication, infatuation, excitement, and passion, when war and passions of the heart burst forth, often with disastrous consequences.

[8] Malinche: La Malinche, or Doña Marina, is said to be the first woman to give birth to a *mestizo* Mexican. The daughter of a noble Aztec family at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, she was sold into slavery by her people. Offered to Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), conqueror of Mexico, as a slave, she served as the interpreter at the first meetings between him and the representatives of Moctezuma. Some saw her as a prostitute who betrayed her people, others as an intelligent, religious, and loyal woman. The term "Malinchista" is often used today to describe a woman who acts out against the preestablished rules and norms of her community or her man. In the past twenty years many Chicana feminist theorists have rewritten the Malinche myth in order to understand Malintzin, as she is also known, in a more realistic context.

Your skin pale, but your hair blacker than a pirate's. Malinalli, you called me, remember? *Mi doradita.*[9] I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving.

Your son. Does he know how much I had to do with his birth? I was the one who convinced you to let him be born. Did you tell him, while his mother lay on her back laboring his birth, I lay in his mother's bed making love to you.

You're nothing without me. I created you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to. Blow you to kingdom come. You're just a smudge of paint I chose to birth on canvas. And when I made you over, you were no longer a part of her; you were all mine. The landscape of your body taut as a drum. The heart beneath that hide thrumming and thrumming. Not an inch did I give back.

I paint and repaint you the way I see fit, even now. After all these years. Did you know that? Little fool. You think I went hobbling along with my life, whimpering and whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back to her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?

Nights I light all the candles in the house, the ones to La Virgen de Guadalupe, the ones to El Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Santo Niño de Atocha, Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos, and especially, Santa Lucía,[10] with her beautiful eyes on a plate.

Your eyes are beautiful, you said. You said they were the darkest eyes you'd ever seen and kissed each one as if they were capable of miracles. And after you left, I wanted to scoop them out with a spoon, place them on a plate under these blue blue skies, food for the blackbirds.

The boy, your son. The one with the face of that redheaded woman who is your wife. The boy red-freckled like fish food floating on the skin of water. That boy.

I've been waiting patient as a spider all these years, since I was nineteen and he was just an idea hovering in his mother's head, and I'm the one that gave him permission and made it happen, see.

Because your father wanted to leave your mother and live with me. Your mother whining for a child, at least *that.* And he kept saying, Later, we'll see, later. But all along it was me he wanted to be with, it was me, he said.

I want to tell you this evenings when you come to see me. When you're full of talk about what kind of clothes you're going to buy, and what you used to be like when you started high school and what you're like now that you're almost finished. And how everyone knows you as a rocker, and your band, and your new red guitar that you just got because your mother gave you a choice, a guitar or a car, but you don't need a car, do you, because I drive you everywhere. You could be my son if you weren't so light-skinned.

[9] *Mi doradita:* Spanish for "my little golden one."

[10] La Virgen . . . Lucía: Catholic and folk saints, many particular to Mexican culture and all popular along the Texas-Mexico border.

This happened. A long time ago. Before you were born. When you were a moth inside your mother's heart, I was your father's student, yes, just like you're mine now. And your father painted and painted me, because he said, I was his *doradita*, all golden and sun-baked, and that's the kind of woman he likes best, the ones brown as river sand, yes. And he took me under his wing and in his bed, this man, this teacher, your father. I was honored that he'd done me the favor. I was that young.

All I know is I was sleeping with your father the night you were born. In the same bed where you were conceived. I was sleeping with your father and didn't give a damn about that woman, your mother. If she was a brown woman like me, I might've had a harder time living with myself, but since she's not, I don't care. I was there first, always. I've always been there, in the mirror, under his skin, in the blood, before you were born. And he's been here in my heart before I even knew him. Understand? He's always been here. Always. Dissolving like a hibiscus flower, exploding like a rope into dust. I don't care what's right anymore. I don't care about his wife. She's not *my* sister.

And it's not the last time I've slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby. Why do I do that, I wonder? Sleep with a man when his wife is giving life, being suckled by a thing with its eyes still shut. Why do that? It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husband sucked mine. All this while their ass stitches were still hurting.

Once, drunk on margaritas, I telephoned your father at four in the morning, woke the bitch up. Hello, she chirped. I want to talk to Drew. Just a moment, she said in her most polite drawing-room English. Just a moment. I laughed about that for weeks. What a stupid ass to pass the phone over to the lug asleep beside her. Excuse me, honey, it's for you. When Drew mumbled hello I was laughing so hard I could hardly talk. Drew? That dumb bitch of a wife of yours, I said, and that's all I could manage. That stupid stupid stupid. No Mexican woman would react like that. Excuse me, honey. It cracked me up.

He's got the same kind of skin, the boy. All the blue veins pale and clear just like his mama. Skin like roses in December. Pretty boy. Little clone. Little cells split into you and you and you. Tell me, baby, which part of you is your mother. I try to imagine her lips, her jaw, her long long legs that wrapped themselves around this father who took me to his bed.

This happened. I'm asleep. Or pretend to be. You're watching me, Drew. I feel your weight when you sit on the corner of the bed, dressed and ready to go, but now you're just watching me sleep. Nothing. Not a word. Not a kiss. Just sitting. You're taking me in, under inspection. What do you think already?

I haven't stopped dreaming you. Did you know that? Do you think it's strange? I never tell, though. I keep it to myself like I do all the thoughts I think of you.

After all these years.

I don't want you looking at me. I don't want you taking me in while I'm asleep. I'll open my eyes and frighten you away.

There. What did I tell you? *Drew? What is it?* Nothing. I'd knew you'd say that.

Let's not talk. We're no good at it. With you I'm useless with words. As if somehow I had to learn to speak all over again, as if the words I needed haven't been invented yet. We're cowards. Come back to bed. At least there I feel I have you for a little. For a moment. For a catch of the breath. You let go. You ache and tug. You rip my skin.

You're almost not a man without your clothes. How do I explain it? You're so much a child in my bed. Nothing but a big boy who needs to be held. I won't let anyone hurt you. My pirate. My slender boy of a man.

After all these years.

I didn't imagine it, did I? A Ganges,[11] an eye of the storm. For a little. When we forgot ourselves, you tugged me, I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened for the other to look and not give back. Something wrenched itself loose. Your body doesn't lie. It's not silent like you.

You're nude as a pearl. You've lost your train of smoke. You're tender as rain. If I'd put you in my mouth you'd dissolve like snow.

You were ashamed to be so naked. Pulled back. But I saw you for what you are, when you opened yourself for me. When you were careless and let yourself through. I caught that catch of the breath. I'm not crazy.

When you slept, you tugged me toward you. You sought me in the dark. I didn't sleep. Every cell, every follicle, every nerve, alert. Watching you sigh and roll and turn and hug me closer to you. I didn't sleep. I was taking *you* in that time.

Your mother? Only once. Years after your father and I stopped seeing each other. At an art exhibition. A show on the photographs of Eugène Atget.[12] Those images, I could look at them for hours. I'd taken a group of students with me.

It was your father I saw first. And in that instant I felt as if everyone in the room, all the sepia-toned photographs, my students, the men in business suits, the high-heeled women, the security guards, everyone, could see me for what I was. I had to scurry out, lead my kids to another gallery, but some things destiny has cut out for you.

He caught up with us in the coat-check area, arm in arm with a redheaded Barbie doll in a fur coat. One of those scary Dallas types, hair yanked into a ponytail, big shiny face like the women behind the cosmetic counters at Neiman's.[13] That's what I remember. She must've been with him all along, only I swear I never saw her until that second.

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[11] Ganges: A major river of the Indian subcontinent and an integral part of both the myth and reality of Indian and Bangladeshi cultures.

[12] Eugène Atget (1856–1927): The renowned French photographer Atget recorded Paris for thirty years, evoking a dream city replete with contradictions; his most famous images are evocative black-and-whites of the city's gardens, sculptures, and architecture.

[13] Neiman's: Neiman Marcus, an upscale department store chain.

You could tell from a slight hesitancy, only slight because he's too suave to hesitate, that he was nervous. Then he's walking toward me, and I didn't know what to do, just stood there dazed like those animals crossing the road at night when the headlights stun them.

And I don't know why, but all of a sudden I looked at my shoes and felt ashamed at how old they looked. And he comes up to me, my love, your father, in that way of his with that grin that makes me want to beat him, makes me want to make love to him, and he says in the most sincere voice you ever heard, "Ah, Clemencia! *This* is Megan." No introduction could've been meaner. *This* is Megan. Just like that.

I grinned like an idiot and held out my paw—"Hello, Megan"—and smiled too much the way you do when you can't stand someone. Then I got the hell out of there, chattering like a monkey all the ride back with my kids. When I got home I had to lie down with a cold washcloth on my forehead and the TV on. All I could hear throbbing under the washcloth in that deep part behind my eyes: *This* is Megan.

And that's how I fell asleep, with the TV on and every light in the house burning. When I woke up it was something like three in the morning. I shut the lights and TV and went to get some aspirin, and the cats, who'd been asleep with me on the couch, got up too and followed me into the bathroom as if they knew what's what. And then they followed me into bed, where they aren't allowed, but this time I just let them, fleas and all.

This happened, too. I swear I'm not making this up. It's all true. It was the last time I was going to be with your father. We had agreed. All for the best. Surely I could see that, couldn't I? My own good. A good sport. A young girl like me. Hadn't I understood . . . responsibilities. Besides, he could *never* marry *me*. You didn't think . . . ? *Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican* . . . No, of course not. I see. I see.

We had the house to ourselves for a few days, who knows how. You and your mother had gone somewhere. Was it Christmas? I don't remember.

I remember the leaded-glass lamp with the milk glass above the dining-room table. I made a mental inventory of everything. The Egyptian lotus design on the hinges of the doors. The narrow, dark hall where your father and I had made love once. The four-clawed tub where he had washed my hair and rinsed it with a tin bowl. This window. That counter. The bedroom with its light in the morning, incredibly soft, like the light from a polished dime.

The house was immaculate, as always, not a stray hair anywhere, not a flake of dandruff or a crumpled towel. Even the roses on the dining-room table held their breath. A kind of airless cleanliness that always made me want to sneeze.

Why was I so curious about this woman he lived with? Every time I went to the bathroom, I found myself opening the medicine cabinet, looking at all the things that were hers. Her Estée Lauder lipsticks. Corals and pinks, of course. Her nail polishes—mauve was as brave as she could wear. Her cotton balls and blond hairpins. A pair of bone-colored sheepskin slippers, as clean as the day she'd bought them. On the door hook—a white robe with a MADE IN ITALY label, and a silky nightshirt with pearl buttons. I touched the fabrics. *Calidad.* Quality.

I don't know how to explain what I did next. While your father was busy in the kitchen, I went over to where I'd left my backpack, and took out a bag of gummy bears I'd bought. And while he was banging pots, I went around the house and left a trail of them in places I was sure *she* would find them. One in her lucite makeup organizer. One stuffed inside each bottle of nail polish. I untwisted the expensive lipsticks to their full length and smushed a bear on the top before recapping them. I even put a gummy bear in her diaphragm case in the very center of that luminescent rubber moon.

Why bother? Drew could take the blame. Or he could say it was the cleaning woman's Mexican voodoo. I knew that, too. It didn't matter. I got a strange satisfaction wandering about the house leaving them in places only she would look.

And just as Drew was shouting, "Dinner!" I saw it on the desk. One of those wooden babushka dolls Drew had brought her from his trip to Russia. I know. He'd bought one just like it for me.

I just did what I did, uncapped the doll inside a doll inside a doll, until I got to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others, and this I replaced with a gummy bear. And then I put the dolls back, just like I'd found them, one inside the other, inside the other. Except for the baby, which I put inside my pocket. All through dinner I kept reaching in the pocket of my jean jacket. When I touched it, it made me feel good.

On the way home, on the bridge over the *arroyo*[14] on Guadalupe Street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll's toy stewing there in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since.

Then I drove home and slept like the dead.

These mornings, I fix coffee for me, milk for the boy. I think of that woman, and I can't see a trace of my lover in this boy, as if she conceived him by immaculate conception.

I sleep with this boy, their son. To make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger, twist in his sleep, as if he'd swallowed glass. I put him in my mouth. Here, little piece of my *corazón.*[15] Boy with hard thighs and just a bit of down and a small hard downy ass like his father's, and that back like a valentine. Come here, *mi cariñito.*[16] Come to *mamita.*[17] Here's a bit of toast.

I can tell from the way he looks at me, I have him in my power. Come, sparrow. I have the patience of eternity. Come to *mamita.* My stupid little bird. I don't move. I don't startle him. I let him nibble. All, all for you. Rub his belly. Stroke him. Before I snap my teeth.

What is it inside me that makes me so crazy at 2 A.M.? I can't blame it on alcohol in my blood when there isn't any. It's something worse. Something that poisons the

[14] *arroyo:* Spanish for "canyon" or "gully." [15] *corazón:* Spanish for "heart." [16] *mi cariñito:* Spanish for "My little beloved one." [17] *mamita:* Spanish for "little mama"; diminutive form of *mother.*

blood and tips me when the night swells and I feel as if the whole sky were leaning against my brain.

And if I killed someone on a night like this? And if it was *me* I killed instead, I'd be guilty of getting in the line of crossfire, innocent bystander, isn't it a shame. I'd be walking with my head full of images and my back to the guilty. Suicide? I couldn't say. I didn't see it.

Except it's not me who I want to kill. When the gravity of the planets is just right, it all tilts and upsets the visible balance. And that's when it wants to out from my eyes. That's when I get on the telephone, dangerous as a terrorist. There's nothing to do but let it come.

So. What do you think? Are you convinced now I'm as crazy as a tulip or a taxi? As vagrant as a cloud?

Sometimes the sky is so big and I feel so little at night. That's the problem with being cloud. The sky is so terribly big. Why is it worse at night, when I have such an urge to communicate and no language with which to form the words? Only colors. Pictures. And you know what I have to say isn't always pleasant.

Oh, love, there. I've gone and done it. What good is it? Good or bad, I've done what I had to do and needed to. And you've answered the phone, and startled me away like a bird. And now you're probably swearing under your breath and going back to sleep, with that wife beside you, warm, radiating her own heat, alive under the flannel and down and smelling a bit like milk and hand cream, and that smell familiar and dear to you, oh.

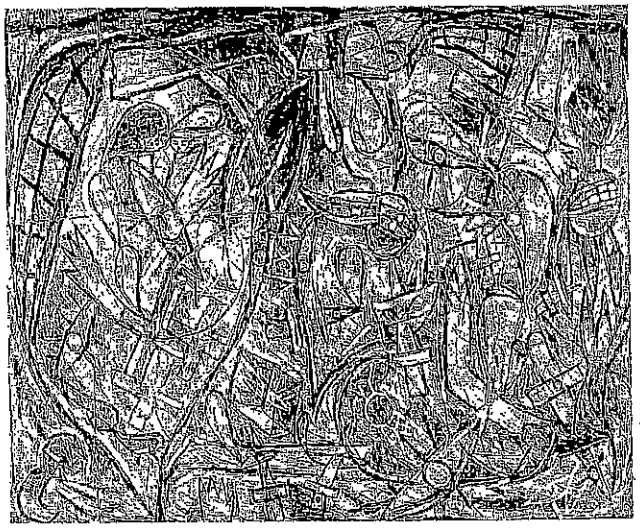
Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it's all right, honey. There, there, there.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

b. United States, 1952

A winner of the Pushcart Prize, the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, and a National Endowment of the Arts Literary Fellowship, Jimmy Santiago Baca has been called an heir to Pablo Neruda and one of the best poets in America today. Abandoned by both his parents, he and his brother were sent to an orphanage in Albuquerque, New Mexico. By thirteen he had been incarcerated for the first time, and at age twenty-one he was illiterate and jailed in a maximum-security facility for selling drugs. He emerged from prison five years later with a passion for reading and writing poetry. Baca received his B.A. from the University of New Mexico in 1984. He is the author of a memoir, *A Place to Stand* (1991), and numerous books of poetry, including *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987), *Black Mesa Poems* (1989), *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1991), *Healing Earthquakes* (2001), *C-Train* (2002), and *13 Mexicans* (2002). He has also written an essay collection, *Working in the Dark: Reflections on a Poet in the Barrio* (1992) and has worked with films, scripts, and productions. Baca's vision of himself as a "poet of the people" manifests in his involvement with writing workshops for children and adults at countless elementary, junior high and high schools, colleges, universities, reservations, barrio community centers, white ghettos, housing projects, and correctional facilities and prisons from coast to coast. He says in *A Place to Stand*, "I am a witness, not a victim. . . . My role as a witness is to give voice to the voiceless, hope to the hopeless, of which I am one."

All notes are the editors'.



Carlos Alfonzo, *Where Tears Can't Stop*, 1986. Acrylic *Carlos Alfonzo defected from Cuba during the Mariel boatlift in 1980. In this painting, dagge crosses, eyes, and ar suggest a world of suffering and pain. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washingt DC/Art Resource, NY)*

What We Don't Tell the Children

Feathers in the yard this morning.
My cat?
Or the two black strays,
ominously staring with orange eyes
from corrugated, rusted sheep-shed roof?
I hear them at night
yeowling—

Naomi Shihab Nye

b. United States, 1952

Born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, Naomi Shihab Nye grew up in St. Louis, Missouri; Jerusalem; and San Antonio, Texas. She received her B.A. from Trinity University in San Antonio, where she still resides with her family. She is the author of six books of poems, including *Fuel* (1998), *Red Suitcase* (1994), and *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982), and has also written books for children. She has twice traveled to the Middle East and Asia for the United States Information Agency, promoting international goodwill through the arts, and has worked as a visiting writer in schools for twenty-one years. Nye has received many awards, including the Pushcart Prize and the Texas Institute of Letters award. In her writing she draws on the voices of the Mexican Americans who live near her as well as on the perspectives of Arab Americans like herself and the ideas and practices of the different subcultures in America.

Blood

"A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands,"
my father would say. And he'd prove it,
cupping the buzzer instantly
while the host with the swatter stared.

In the spring our palms peeled like snakes.
True Arabs believed watermelon could heal fifty ways.
I changed these to fit the occasion.

Years before, a girl knocked,
wanted to see the Arab.
I said we didn't have one.
After that, my father told me who he was,
"Shihab"—"shooting star"—
a good name, borrowed from the sky.
Once I said, "When we die, we give it back?"
He said that's what a true Arab would say.

Today the headlines clot in my blood.
A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.
Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root

is too big for us. What flag can we wave?
I wave the flag of stone and seed,
table mat stitched in blue.

I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
to plead with the air:
Who calls anyone *civilized*?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now?

My Father and the Figtree

For other fruits my father was indifferent.
He'd point at the cherry trees and say,
"See those? I wish they were figs."
In the evenings he sat by my bed
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
They always involved a figtree.
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.
Once Joha was walking down the road
and he saw a figtree.
Or, he tied his camel to a figtree
and went to sleep.
Or, later when they caught and arrested him,
his pockets were full of figs.

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
"That's not what I'm talking about!" he said.
"I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth—
gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.
I'm talking about picking the largest fattest sweetest fig
in the world and putting it in my mouth."
(Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)

Years passed, we lived in many houses, none had figtrees.
We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets.
"Plant one!" my mother said, but my father never did.
He tended garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,

let the okra get too big.
"What a dreamer he is. Look how many things he starts
and doesn't finish."

The last time he moved, I had a phone call,
my father, in Arabic, chanting a song I'd never heard.
"What's that?"
"Wait till you see!"

He took me out to the new yard.
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the world.
"It's a figtree song!" he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own.

Arabic

(Jordan, 1992)

The man with laughing eyes stopped smiling
to say, "Until you speak Arabic—
—you will not understand pain."

Something to do with the back of the head,
an Arab carries sorrow in the back of the head
that only language cracks, the thrum of stones

weeping, grating hinge on an old metal gate.
"Once you know," he whispered, "you can enter the room
whenever you need to. Music you heard from a distance,

the slapped drum of a stranger's wedding,
wells up inside your skin, inside rain, a thousand
pulsing tongues. You are changed."

Outside, the snow had finally stopped.
In a land where snow rarely falls,
we had felt our days grow white and still.

I thought pain had no tongue. Or every tongue
at once, supreme translator, sieve. I admit my
shame. To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging

its rich threads without understanding
how to weave the rug . . . I have no gift.
The sound, but not the sense.

I kept looking over his shoulder for someone else
to talk to, recalling my dying friend who only scrawled
I can't write. What good would any grammar have been

to her then? I touched his arm, held it hard,
which sometimes you don't do in the Middle East, and said,
I'll work on it, feeling sad

for his good strict heart, but later in the slick street
hailed a taxi by shouting *Pain!* and it stopped
in every language and opened its doors.

Gish Jen

b. United States, 1956

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Gish Jen grew up in Yonkers and Scarsdale, New York, and was educated at Harvard, Stanford, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her first novel, *Typical American* (1991), described how Chinese immigrants in the United States are transformed by their efforts to pursue the American dream. Of herself she says, "My parents were born into a culture that puts society first [but] I was born into a culture that puts the individual first. This forced me to carve out a balance for myself." Jen's work has appeared in *The New Yorker, The New Republic,* and the *New York Times* as well as in a variety of anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories of the Century.* Her two novels, *Typical American* and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), were both *New York Times* Notable Books. Her collection of short stories, *Who's Irish?,* from which this selection is taken, was published in 1999.

Who's Irish?

In China, people say mixed children are supposed to be smart, and definitely my granddaughter Sophie is smart. But Sophie is wild, Sophie is not like my daughter Natalie, or like me. I am work hard my whole life, and fierce besides. My husband always used to say he is afraid of me, and in our restaurant, busboys and cooks all

Of course, I shouldn't say Irish this, Irish that, especially now I am become honorary Irish myself, according to Bess. Me! Who's Irish? I say, and she laugh. All the same, if I could mention one thing about some of the Irish, not all of them of course, I like to mention this: Their talk just stick. I don't know how Bess Shea learn to use her words, but sometimes I hear what she say a long time later. *Permanent resident. Not going anywhere.* Over and over I hear it, the voice of Bess.

Edwidge Danticat

b. Haiti, 1969

Edwidge Danticat emigrated from Haiti to the United States in 1981, studying French at Barnard College and receiving an M.F.A. from Brown University in 1993. At the age of twenty-six, in 1995, she became a finalist for the National Book Award for *Krik? Krak!* and received the Pushcart Short Story Prize. When she was a child, her parents immigrated to New York without her; until she joined them at the age of twelve, Danticat was raised by an aunt. As a result her childhood was deeply influenced by Haitian oral storytelling. Her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), speaks of four generations of Haitian women who must overcome their poverty and powerlessness. Her latest novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998), highlights the connection between language and personal and social meaning. The characters in the novel actively create histories through the stories they tell about the 1937 massacre, when some ten to fifteen thousand Haitians were killed by Dominican troops in a border struggle between Haiti and its neighbor, the Dominican Republic. The book's title plays on the multiple meanings of language, referring to both the massacre and the gathering of cane, and so invokes the events of 1937 as well as the economic history that created them. *Krik? Krak!* (1995), from which the selection here is taken, is a collection of short stories about Haiti and Haitian Americans. The title originates from the Haitian tradition of a storyteller calling out "Krik?" and willing listeners gathering around and answering "Krak!"

All notes are the editors'.

Children of the Sea

They say behind the mountains are more mountains. Now I know it's true. I also know there are timeless waters, endless seas, and lots of people in this world whose names don't matter to anyone but themselves. I look up at the sky and I see you there. I see you crying like a crushed snail, the way you cried when I helped you pull

out your first loose tooth. Yes, I did love you then. Somehow when I looked at you, I thought of fiery red ants. I wanted you to dig your fingernails into my skin and drain out all my blood.

I don't know how long we'll be at sea. There are thirty-six other deserting souls on this little boat with me. White sheets with bright red spots float as our sail.

When I got on board I thought I could still smell the semen and the innocence lost to those sheets. I look up there and I think of you and all those times you resisted. Sometimes I felt like you wanted to, but I knew you wanted me to respect you. You thought I was testing your will, but all I wanted was to be near you. Maybe it's like you've always said. I imagine too much. I am afraid I am going to start having nightmares once we get deep at sea. I really hate having the sun in my face all day long. If you see me again, I'll be so dark.

Your father will probably marry you off now, since I am gone. Whatever you do, please don't marry a soldier. They're almost not human.

haiti est comme tu l'as laissé. yes, just the way you left it. bullets day and night. same hole. same everything. i'm tired of the whole mess. i get so cross and irritable. i pass the time by chasing roaches around the house. i pound my heel on their heads. they make me so mad. everything makes me mad. i am cramped inside all day. they've closed the schools since the army took over. no one is mentioning the old president's[1] name. papa burnt all his campaign posters and old buttons. manman buried her buttons in a hole behind the house. she thinks he might come back. she says she will unearth them when he does. no one comes out of their house. not a single person. papa wants me to throw out those tapes of your radio shows. i destroyed some music tapes, but i still have your voice. i thank god you got out when you did. all the other youth federation members have disappeared. no one has heard from them. i think they might all be in prison. maybe they're all dead. papa worries a little about you. he doesn't hate you as much as you think. the other day i heard him asking manman, do you think the boy is dead? manman said she didn't know. i think he regrets being so mean to you. i don't sketch my butterflies anymore because i don't even like seeing the sun. besides, manman says that butterflies can bring news. the bright ones bring happy news and the black ones warn us of deaths. we have our whole lives ahead of us. you used to say that, remember? but then again things were so very different then.

There is a pregnant girl on board. She looks like she might be our age. Nineteen or twenty. Her face is covered with scars that look like razor marks. She is short and speaks in a singsong that reminds me of the villagers in the north. Most of the other people on the boat are much older than I am. I have heard that a lot of these boats have young children on board. I am glad this one does not. I think it would break my heart watching some little boy or girl every single day on this sea, looking into their

[1] the old president: Jean-Bertrand Aristide (b. 1953), democratically elected president of Haiti in 1990, held office for seven months in 1991 and again from 1994 to 1996.

empty faces to remind me of the hopelessness of the future in our country. It's hard enough with the adults. It's hard enough with me.

I used to read a lot about America before I had to study so much for the university exams. I am trying to think, to see if I read anything more about Miami. It is sunny. It doesn't snow there like it does in other parts of America. I can't tell exactly how far we are from there. We might be barely out of our own shores. There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one. I cannot even tell if we are about to drop off the face of the earth. Maybe the world is flat and we are going to find out, like the navigators of old. As you know, I am not very religious. Still I pray every night that we won't hit a storm. When I do manage to sleep, I dream that we are caught in one hurricane after another. I dream that the winds come of the sky and claim us for the sea. We go under and no one hears from us again.

I am more comfortable now with the idea of dying. Not that I have completely accepted it, but I know that it might happen. Don't be mistaken. I really do not want to be a martyr. I know I am no good to anybody dead, but if that is what's coming, I know I cannot just scream at it and tell it to go away.

I hope another group of young people can do the radio show. For a long time that radio show was my whole life. It was nice to have radio like that for a while, where we could talk about what we wanted from government, what we wanted for the future of our country.

There are a lot of Protestants on this boat. A lot of them see themselves as Job or the Children of Israel. I think some of them are hoping something will plunge down from the sky and part the sea for us. They say the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. I have never been given very much. What was there to take away?

if only I could kill. if i knew some good *wanga* magic,[2] i would wipe them off the face of the earth. a group of students got shot in front of fort dimanche prison today. they were demonstrating for the bodies of the radio six. that is what they are calling you all. the radio six. you have a name. you have a reputation. a lot of people think you are dead like the others. they want the bodies turned over to the families. this afternoon, the army finally did give some bodies back. they told the families to go collect them at the rooms for indigents at the morgue. our neighbor madan roger came home with her son's head and not much else. honest to god, it was just his head. at the morgue, they say a car ran over him and took the head off his body. when madan roger went to the morgue, they gave her the head. by the time we saw her, she had been carrying the head all over port-au-prince.[3] just to show what's

[2] ***wanga* magic:** *Wanga*, or magic charms in the *vodou* religion of Haiti, are fetishes that concentrate spiritual power in order to protect oneself from or to attack one's enemies, but not to the extent of death. This religion is a syncretization, or intermixing, of African Benin and Christian faiths whose intricate and complex set of practices do not much resemble those of Western religions. At its foundation is a belief in spirits, or *lwa*, that mediate between the human and the natural and supernatural worlds. Together, the *lwa* form a pantheon much like a family or ensemble, each *lwa* having a particular realm over which it rules. They are not gods, but mediators between a monotheistic god and humans; each *lwa* has been associated with a Catholic saint.

[3] **port-au-prince:** Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti and its largest city.

been done to her son. the macoutes[4] by the house were laughing at her. they asked her if that was her dinner. it took ten people to hold her back from jumping on them. they would have killed her, the dogs. i will never go outside again. not even in the yard to breathe the air. they are always watching you, like vultures. at night i can't sleep. i count the bullets in the dark. i keep wondering if it is true. did you really get out? i wish there was some way i could be sure that you really went away. yes, i will. i will keep writing like we promised to do. i hate it, but i will keep writing. you keep writing too, okay? and when we see each other again, it will seem like we lost no time.

Today was our first real day at sea. Everyone was vomiting with each small rocking of the boat. The faces around me are showing their first charcoal layer of sunburn. "Now we will never be mistaken for Cubans,"[5] one man said. Even though some of the Cubans are black too. The man said he was once on a boat with a group of Cubans. His boat had stopped to pick up the Cubans on an island off the Bahamas. When the Coast Guard came for them, they took the Cubans to Miami and sent him back to Haiti. Now he was back on the boat with some papers and documents to show that the police in Haiti were after him. He had a broken leg too, in case there was any doubt.

One old lady fainted from sunstroke. I helped revive her by rubbing some of the salt water on her lips. During the day it can be so hot. At night, it is so cold. Since there are no mirrors, we look at each others faces to see just how frail and sick we are starting to look.

Some of the women sing and tell stories to each other to appease the vomiting. Still, I watch the sea. At night, the sky and the sea are one. The stars look so huge and so close. They make for very bright reflections in the sea. At times I feel like I can just reach out and pull a star down from the sky as though it is a breadfruit or a calabash or something that could be of use to us on this journey.

When we sing, *Beloved Haiti, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you,* some of the women start crying. At times, I just want to stop in the middle of the song and cry myself. To hide my tears, I pretend like I am getting another attack of nausea, from the sea smell. I no longer join in the singing.

You probably do not know much about this, because you have always been so closely watched by your father in that well-guarded house with your genteel mother. No, I am not making fun of you for this. If anything, I am jealous. If I was a girl, maybe I would have been at home and not out politicking and getting myself into something like this. Once you have been at sea for a couple of days, it smells like every fish you have ever eaten, every crab you have ever caught, every jellyfish that

[4] **the macoutes:** The *tonton macoutes*, the infamously brutal paramilitary troops who pursued and executed the opponents of "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1907–1971), the president of Haiti. Duvalier was elected president in 1957, and in 1964 he declared himself president for life. His rule of Haiti was a cruel dictatorship. The *tonton macoutes* are still a potent military force in the country.

[5] **"... mistaken for Cubans":** Many Cuban people leave their home for the United States in the same manner as the Haitian boat people described in this story.

has ever bitten your leg. I am so tired of the smell. I am also tired of the way the people on this boat are starting to stink. The pregnant girl, Célianne, I don't know how she takes it. She stares into space all the time and rubs her stomach.

I have never seen her eat. Sometimes the other women offer her a piece of bread and she takes it, but she has no food of her own. I cannot help feeling like she will have this child as soon as she gets hungry enough.

She woke up screaming the other night. I thought she had a stomach ache. Some water started coming into the boat in the spot where she was sleeping. There is a crack at the bottom of the boat that looks as though, if it gets any bigger, it will split the boat in two. The captain cleared us aside and used some tar to clog up the hole. Everyone started asking him if it was okay, if they were going to be okay. He said he hoped the Coast Guard would find us soon.

You can't really go to sleep after that. So we all stared at the tar by the moonlight. We did this until dawn. I cannot help but wonder how long this tar will hold out.

papa found your tapes. he started yelling at me, asking if I was crazy keeping them. he is just waiting for the gasoline ban to be lifted so we can get out of the city. he is always pestering me these days because he cannot go out driving his van. all the american factories are closed.[6] he kept yelling at me about the tapes. he called me selfish, and he asked if i hadn't seen or heard what was happening to man-crazy whores like me. i shouted that i wasn't a whore. he had no business calling me that. he pushed me against the wall for disrespecting him. he spat in my face. i wish those macoutes would kill him. i wish he would catch a bullet so we could see how scared he really is. he said to me, i didn't send your stupid trouble maker away. i started yelling at him. yes, you did. yes, you did. yes, you did, you pig peasant. i don't know why i said that. he slapped me and kept slapping me really hard until manman came and grabbed me away from him. i wish one of those bullets would hit me.

The tar is holding up so far. Two days and no more leaks. Yes, I am finally an African. I am even darker than your father. I wanted to buy a straw hat from one of the ladies, but she would not sell it to me for the last two gourdes[7] I have left in change. Do you think your money is worth anything to me here? she asked me. Sometimes, I forget where I am. If I keep daydreaming like I have been doing, I will walk off the boat to go for a stroll.

The other night I dreamt that I died and went to heaven. This heaven was nothing like I expected. It was at the bottom of the sea. There were starfishes and mermaids all around me. The mermaids were dancing and singing in Latin like the priests do at the cathedral during Mass. You were there with me too, at the bottom of the sea. You were with your family, off to the side. Your father was acting like he was better than everyone else and he was standing in front of a sea cave blocking

[6] **all . . . closed:** Many North American companies, attracted to Haiti because of the low labor costs, pulled out during the political uncertainties of the 1990s.

[7] **gourdes:** Official currency of Haiti.

you from my view. I tried to talk to you, but every time I opened my mouth, water bubbles came out. No sounds.

they have this thing now that they do. if they come into a house and there is a son and mother there, they hold a gun to their heads. they make the son sleep with his mother. if it is a daughter and father, they do the same thing. some nights papa sleeps at his brother's, uncle pressoir's house. uncle pressoir sleeps at our house, just in case they come. that way papa will never be forced to lie down in bed with me. instead, uncle pressoir would be forced to, but that would not be so bad. we know a girl who had a child by her father that way. that is what papa does not want to happen, even if he is killed. there is still no gasoline to buy. otherwise we would be in ville rose already. papa has a friend who is going to get him some gasoline from a soldier. as soon as we get the gasoline, we are going to drive quick and fast until we find civilization. that's how papa puts it, civilization. he says things are not as bad in the provinces. i am still not talking to him. i don't think i ever will. manman says it is not his fault. he is trying to protect us. he cannot protect us. only god can protect us. the soldiers can come and do with us what they want. that makes papa feel weak, she says. he gets angry when he feels weak. why should he be angry with me? i am not one of the pigs with the machine guns. she asked me what really happened to you. she said she saw your parents before they left for the provinces. they did not want to tell her anything. i told her you took a boat after they raided the radio station. you escaped and took a boat to heaven knows where. she said, he was going to make a good man, that boy. sharp, like a needle point, that boy, he took the university exams a year before everyone else in this area. manman has respect for people with ambitions. she said papa did not want you for me because it did not seem as though you were going to do any better for me than he and manman could. he wants me to find a man who will do me some good. someone who will make sure that i have more than i have now. it is not enough for a girl to be just pretty anymore. we are not that well connected in society. the kind of man that papa wants for me would never have anything to do with me. all anyone can hope for is just a tiny bit of love, manman says, like a drop in a cup if you can get it, or a waterfall, a flood, if you can get that too. we do not have all that many high-up connections, she says, but you are an educated girl. what she counts for educated is not much to anyone but us anyway. they should be announcing the university exams on the radio next week. then i will know if you passed. i will listen for your name.

We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik? You answer, Krak! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves. Sometimes it feels like we have been at sea longer than the many years that I have been on this earth. The sun comes up and goes down. That is how you know it has been a whole day. I feel like we are sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinin,[8] to live with the spirits, to be with everyone who

[8] **Guinin:** Guinea, in Africa, where the *vodou* faithful believe the *lwa*, or spirits, originated. It is a region considered irretrievably lost and purely mythical.

has come and has died before us. They would probably turn us away from there too. Someone has a transistor and sometimes we listen to radio from the Bahamas. They treat Haitians like dogs in the Bahamas, a woman says. To them, we are not human. Even though their music sounds like ours. Their people look like ours. Even though we had the same African fathers who probably crossed these same seas together.

Do you want to know how people go to the bathroom on the boat? Probably the same way they did on those slaves ships years ago. They set aside a little corner for that. When I have to pee, I just pull it, lean over the rail, and do it very quickly. When I have to do the other thing, I rip a piece of something, squat down and do it, and throw the waste in the sea. I am always embarrassed by the smell. It is so demeaning having to squat in front of so many people. People turn away, but not always. At times I wonder if there is really land on the other side of the sea. Maybe the sea is endless. Like my love for you.

last night they came to madan roger's house. papa hurried inside as soon as madan roger's screaming started. the soldiers were looking for her son. madan roger was screaming, you killed him already. we buried his head. you can't kill him twice. they were shouting at her, do you belong to the youth federation with those vagabonds who were on the radio? she was yelling, do i look like a youth to you? can you identify your son's other associates? they asked her. papa had us tiptoe from the house into the latrine out back. we could hear it all from there. i thought i was going to choke on the smell of rotting poupou. they kept shouting at madan roger, did your son belong to the youth federation? wasn't he on the radio talking about the police? did he say, down with tonton macoutes? did he say, down with the army? he said that the military had to go; didn't he write slogans? he had meetings, didn't he? he demonstrated on the streets. you should have advised him better. she cursed on their mothers' graves. she just came out and shouted it, i hope your mothers will never rest in their cursed graves! she was just shouting it out, you killed him once already! you want to kill me too? go ahead. i don't care anymore. i'm dead already. you have already done the worst to me that you can do. you have killed my soul. they kept at it, asking her questions at the top of their voices: was your son a traitor? tell me all the names of his friends who were traitors just like him. madan roger finally shouts, yes, he was one! he belonged to that group. he was on the radio. he was on the streets at these demonstrations. he hated you like i hate you criminals. you killed him. they start to pound at her. you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they are cracking all the bones in her body. manman whispers to papa, you can't just let them kill her. go and give them some money like you gave them for your daughter. papa says, the only money i have left is to get us out of here tomorrow. manman whispers, we cannot just stay here and let them kill her. manman starts moving like she is going out the door. papa grabs her neck and pins her to the latrine wall. tomorrow we are going to ville rose, he says. you will not spoil that for the family. you will not put us in that situation. you will not get us killed. going out there will be like trying to raise the dead. she is not dead yet, manman says, maybe we can help her. i will make you stay if i have to, he says to her. my mother buries her face in the latrine wall. she starts to cry. you can hear madan roger screaming. they are beating her, pounding on her until you don't hear anything else. manman tells papa, you cannot let them kill somebody just because you are afraid. papa says, oh yes, you *can* let them kill somebody because you are afraid. they are the law. it is their right. we are just being good citizens, following the law of the land. it has happened before all over this country and tonight it will happen again and there is nothing we can do.

Célianne spent the night groaning. She looks like she has been ready for a while, but maybe the child is being stubborn. She just screamed that she is bleeding. There is an older woman here who looks like she has had a lot of children herself. She says Célianne is not bleeding at all. Her water sack has broken.

The only babies I have ever seen right after birth are baby mice. Their skin looks veil thin. You can see all the blood vessels and all their organs. I have always wanted to poke them to see if my finger would go all the way through the skin.

I have moved to the other side of the boat so I will not have to look *inside* Célianne. People are just watching. The captain asks the midwife to keep Célianne steady so she will not rock any more holes into the boat. Now we have three cracks covered with tar. I am scared to think of what would happen if we had to choose among ourselves who would stay on the boat and who should die. Given the choice to make a decision like that, we would all act like vultures, including me.

The sun will set soon. Someone says that this child will be just another pair of hungry lips. At least it will have its mother's breasts, says an old man. Everyone will eat their last scraps of food today.

there is a rumor that the old president is coming back. there is a whole bunch of people going to the airport to meet him. papa says we are not going to stay in port-au-prince to find out if this is true or if it is a lie. they are selling gasoline at the market again. the carnival groups[9] have taken to the streets. we are heading the other way, to ville rose. maybe there i will be able to sleep at night. it is not going to turn out well with the old president coming back, manman now says. people are just too hopeful, and sometimes hope is the biggest weapon of all to use against us. people will believe anything. they will claim to see the christ return and march on the cross backwards if there is enough hope. manman told papa that you took the boat. papa told me before we left this morning that he thought himself a bad father for everything that happened. he says a father should be able to speak to his children like a civilized man. all the craziness here has made him feel like he cannot do that anymore. all he wants to do is live. he and manman have not said a word to one another since we left the latrine. i know that papa does not hate us, not in the way that i hate those soldiers, those macoutes, and all those people here who shoot guns. on our way to ville rose, we saw dogs licking two dead faces. one of them was a little boy who was lying on the side of the road with the sun in his dead open eyes. we saw a soldier

[9] **carnival groups:** Traditionally, groups of people form to sing and dance in procession throughout the Haitian countryside, starting at Mardi Gras and continuing each weekend during Lent.

shoving a woman out of a hut, calling her a witch. he was shaving the woman's head, but of course we never stopped. papa didn't want to go in madan roger's house and check on her before we left. he thought the soldiers might still be there. papa was driving the van real fast. i thought he was going to kill us. we stopped at an open market on the way. manman got some black cloth for herself and for me. she cut the cloth in two pieces and we wrapped them around our heads to mourn madan roger. when i am used to ville rose, maybe i will sketch you some butterflies, depending on the news that they bring me.

Célianne had a girl baby. The woman acting as a midwife is holding the baby to the moon and whispering prayers. . . . *God, this child You bring into the world, please guide her as You please through all her days on this earth.* The baby has not cried.

We had to throw our extra things in the sea because the water is beginning to creep in slowly. The boat needs to be lighter. My two gourdes in change had to be thrown overboard as an offering to Agwé,[10] the spirit of the water. I heard the captain whisper to someone yesterday that they might have to *do something* with some of the people who never recovered from seasickness. I am afraid that soon they may ask me to throw out this notebook. We might all have to strip down to the way we were born, to keep ourselves from drowning.

Célianne's child is a beautiful child. They are calling her Swiss, because the word *Swiss* was written on the small knife they used to cut her umbilical cord. If she was my daughter, I would call her soleil, sun, moon, or star, after the elements. She still hasn't cried. There is gossip circulating about how Célianne became pregnant. Some people are saying that she had an affair with a married man and her parents threw her out. Gossip spreads here like everywhere else.

Do you remember our silly dreams? Passing the university exams and then studying hard to go until the end, the farthest of all that we can go in school. I know your father might never approve of me. I was going to try to win him over. He would have to cut out my heart to keep me from loving you. I hope you are writing like you promised. Jésus, Marie, Joseph! Everyone smells so bad. They get into arguments and they say to one another, "It is only my misfortune that would lump me together with an indigent like you." Think of it. They are fighting about being superior when we all might drown like straw.

There is an old toothless man leaning over to see what I am writing. He is sucking on the end of an old wooden pipe that has not seen any fire for a very long time now. He looks like a painting. Seeing things simply, you could fill a museum with the sights you have here. I still feel like such a coward for running away. Have you heard anything about my parents? Last time I saw them on the beach, my mother had a *kriz.*[11]

[10] Agwé: One of the *lwa,* he is captain and protector of ships on the sea and ruler of fishing. His consort, Lasiren, is a *lwa* in the form of a mermaid. She brings luck and money from the ocean's depths, where she makes her own unearthly music.

[11] *kriz:* Probably "crisis"—meaning "fit"—in *kreyol,* the Haitian language.

She just fainted on the sand. I saw her coming to as we started sailing away. But of course I don't know if she is doing all right.

The water is really piling into the boat. We take turns pouring bowls of it out. I don't know what is keeping the boat from splitting in two. Swiss isn't crying. They keep slapping her behind, but she is not crying.

of course the old president didn't come. they arrested a lot of people at the airport, shot a whole bunch of them down. i heard it on the radio. while we were eating tonight, i told papa that i love you. i don't know if it will make a difference. i just want him to know that i have loved somebody in my life. in case something happens to one of us, i think he should know this about me, that i have loved someone besides only my mother and father in my life. i know you would understand. you are the one for large noble gestures. i just wanted him to know that i was capable of loving somebody. he looked me straight in the eye and said nothing to me. i love you until my hair shivers at the thought of anything happening to you. papa just turned his face away like he was rejecting my very birth. i am writing you from under the banyan tree in the yard in our new house. there are only two rooms and a tin roof that makes music when it rains, especially when there is hail, which falls like angry tears from heaven. there is a stream down the hill from the house, a stream that is too shallow for me to drown myself. manman and i spend a lot of time talking under the banyan tree. she told me today that sometimes you have to choose between your father and the man you love. her whole family did not want her to marry papa because he was a gardener from ville rose and her family was from the city and some of them had even gone to university. she whispered everything under the banyan tree in the yard so as not to hurt his feelings. i saw him looking at us hard from the house. i heard him clearing his throat like he heard us anyway, like we hurt him very deeply somehow just by being together.

Célianne is lying with her head against the side of the boat. The baby still will not cry. They both look very peaceful in all this chaos. Célianne is holding her baby tight against her chest. She just cannot seem to let herself throw it in the ocean. I asked her about the baby's father. She keeps repeating the story now with her eyes closed, her lips barely moving.

She was home one night with her mother and brother Lionel when some ten or twelve soldiers burst into the house. The soldiers held a gun to Lionel's head and ordered him to lie down and become intimate with his mother. Lionel refused. Their mother told him to go ahead and obey the soldiers because she was afraid that they would kill Lionel on the spot if he put up more of a fight. Lionel did as his mother told him, crying as the soldiers laughed at him, pressing the gun barrels farther and farther into his neck.

Afterwards, the soldiers tied up Lionel and their mother, then they each took turns raping Célianne. When they were done, they arrested Lionel, accusing him of moral crimes. After that night, Célianne never heard from Lionel again.

The same night, Célianne cut her face with a razor so that no one would know

who she was. Then as facial scars were healing, she started throwing up and getting rashes. Next thing she knew, she was getting big. She found out about the boat and got on. She is fifteen.

manman told me the whole story today under the banyan tree. the bastards were coming to get me. they were going to arrest me. they were going to peg me as a member of the youth federation and then take me away. papa heard about it. he went to the post and paid them money, all the money he had. our house in port-au-prince and all the land his father had left him, he gave it all away to save my life. this is why he was so mad. tonight manman told me this under the banyan tree. i have no words to thank him for this. i don't know how. you must love him for this, manman says, you must. it is something you can never forget, the sacrifice he has made. i cannot bring myself to say thank you. now he is more than my father, he is a man who gave everything he had to save my life. on the radio tonight, they read the list of names of people who passed the university exams. you passed.

We got some relief from the seawater coming in. The captain used the last of his tar, and most of the water is staying out for a while. Many people have volunteered to throw Célianne's baby overboard for her. She will not let them. They are waiting for her to go to sleep so they can do it, but she will not sleep. I never knew before that dead children looked purple. The lips are the most purple because the baby is so dark. Purple like the sea after the sun has set.

Célianne is slowly drifting off to sleep. She is very tired from the labor. I do not want to touch the child. If anybody is going to throw it in the ocean, I think it should be her. I keep thinking, they have thrown every piece of flesh that followed the child out of her body into the water. They are going to throw the dead baby in the water. Won't these things attract sharks?

Célianne's fingernails are buried deep in the child's naked back. The old man with the pipe just asked, "Kompè, what are you writing?" I told him, "My will."

i am getting used to ville rose. there are butterflies here, tons of butterflies. so far none has landed on my hand, which means they have no news for me. i cannot always bathe in the stream near the house because the water is freezing cold. the only time it feels just right is at noon, and then there are a dozen eyes who might see me bathing. i solved that by getting a bucket of water in the morning and leaving it in the sun and then bathing myself once it is night under the banyan tree. the banyan now is my most trusted friend. they say banyans can last hundreds of years. even the branches that lean down from them become like trees themselves. a banyan could become a forest, manman says, if it were given a chance. from the spot where i stand under the banyan, i see the mountains, and behind those are more mountains still. so many mountains that are bare like rocks. i feel like all those mountains are pushing me farther and farther away from you.

She threw it overboard. I watched her face knot up like a thread, and then she let go. It fell in a splash, floated for a while, and then sank. And quickly after that she

jumped in too. And just as the baby's head sank, so did hers. They went together like two bottles beneath a waterfall. The shock lasts only so long. There was no time to even try and save her. There was no question of it. The sea in that spot is like the sharks that live there. It has no mercy.

They say I have to throw my notebook out. The old man has to throw out his hat and his pipe. The water is rising again and they are scooping it out. I asked for a few seconds to write this last page and then promised that I would let it go. I know you will probably never see this, but it was nice imagining that I had you here to talk to.

I hope my parents are alive. I asked the old man to tell them what happened to me, if he makes it anywhere. He asked me to write his name in "my book." I asked him for his full name. It is Justin Moïse André Nozius Joseph Frank Osnac Maximilien. He says it all with such an air that you would think him a king. The old man says, "I know a Coast Guard ship is coming. It came to me in my dream." He points to a spot far into the distance. I look where he is pointing. I see nothing. From here, ships must be like a mirage in the desert.

I must throw my book out now. It goes down to them, Célianne and her daughter and all those children of the sea who might soon be claiming me.

I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day that my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live.

Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time to live there with Agwé at the bottom of the sea. Maybe this is why I dreamed of the starfish and the mermaids having the Catholic Mass under the sea. Maybe this was my invitation to go. In any case, I know that my memory of you will live even there as I too become a child of the sea.

today i said thank you. i said thank you, papa, because you saved my life. he groaned and just touched my shoulder, moving his hand quickly away like a butterfly. and then there it was, the black butterfly floating around us. i began to run and run so it wouldn't land on me, but it had already carried its news. i know what must have happened. tonight i listened to manman's transistor under the banyan tree. all i hear from the radio is more killing in port-au-prince. the pigs are refusing to let up. i don't know what's going to happen, but i cannot see staying here forever. i am writing to you from the bottom of the banyan tree. manman says that banyan trees are holy and sometimes if we call the gods from beneath them, they will hear our voices clearer. now there are always butterflies around me, black ones that i refuse to let find my hand. i throw big rocks at them, but they are always too fast. last night on the radio, i heard that another boat sank off the coast of the bahamas. i can't think about you being in there in the waves. my hair shivers. from here, i cannot even see the sea. behind these mountains are more mountains and more black butterflies still and a sea that is endless like my love for you.