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THE CHESHIRE CAT
(El gato de Cheshire)

(If you are looking for a particular story in this book, you can find it by using Control f,
and then filling in the title of the story.)

Part II

IN THE FENCING PISTE
(En la Pedana)

Macedonio Fernandez and Alejandro Korn were close friends. They were both philosophers, and they were also fencers.

As philosophers, both said they believed in solipsism: that is, each one said that they disbelieved in the existence of the other.

“You are merely an image that my consciousness has created,” Macedonio said as he was laughing.

“And you,” Alejandro answered, while also laughing, “are a person whom I have just invented when you told me that you invented me.”

As fencers, they were members of the same Fencing Club. Every Saturday they went to the armory and saluted each other in the piste. Dressed in white, with the same breastplate, their faces hidden by a black mask, on guard with their foils held in the same posture, Macedonio and Alejandro were identical. So identical that, as each one looked at the other, they seemed to be looking in a mirror. In the open abyss between these two mirrors, the feints of their match are repeatedly cancelled. Then, one night they cancelled each other and the piste was empty.

INSTANTANEOUS
(Instantáneo)

I was then only a normal man. I refused to believe in mysteries: things were what they were, nothing more, and if men disappeared from the universe, things would still be the same. Just imagine, then, what my intellectual reaction was one night when I was walking along a deserted beach and, suddenly, a naked woman emerged from the waves; she came up to me and, realizing I was a real person, told me (as I looked at my watch) that time had nothing to do with a watch, and then she kept on talking:

“You and I, and everyone else, try very hard to surpass ourselves and also make a difference in the world. Then, as we do that, not the world but a simulation of the world, makes an imprint on our soul, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to comprehend it. Pay more attention to the things you think you see around you. You always have them entangled inside of you: it is like one of these waves that seems to come out of the sea and splashes on the beaches and the cliffs, but is never separated from the sea. In this wave there is a cluster of interior visions that expand in every direction. Some of these

visions seem to lead from the present to the possibility of something new. Others stretch from what has happened now, to what is just beginning to happen. Others deal with a past that is connected to a previous past. Others revive a past that was lost, they revive it and become part of the moment in which this past is no longer past, but a sign of the future. Others, after waiting for a while, go backward and remember how something continues to exist, and then changes so that it suddenly appears in the present. Visions so diaphanous that some see themselves through others, in the expansion of some great vision, pure time that is continuous, indivisible, unique, diverse, and unchangeable, in spite of being part of a fluctuating multitude. If you throw away your watch, nothing will change, because we will keep on watching the movement of the stars. Without consciousness, the world would stop functioning and become an unchangeable, simultaneous mass. Without man's metaphorical madness, the moon, which is unaware of itself, would no longer shift its golden body in the changing mirror of night. Without this madness, the trees would no longer be an assembly of prestidigitators who, in the spring, throw out green serpents between their fingers or, in the fall, drop their dry leaves in a gust of wind. Without this madness, no one would be able to remember that the elephant's trunk is the pseudopodium for a vestige left from the time it was an amoeba. Without this metaphorical madness of man, the moon, the tree, and the elephant would all be the same immobile, black mass. Our consciousness invents things, and makes them fit different categories that slowly follow each other. All this would take place just once, in the same instant, if it wasn't because you, and I, and everyone else, make it slow down, or speed up.

As she said "all this" the woman (who, because she was naked, may have thought she was Greek), began to envelop the entire world with a sweeping gesture of her arms, as though she was trying to draw the entire sphere of Parmenides. It must have been some type of forbidden magic, because her body vanished, and her consciousness floated for a second, like a soap bubble in the air, and then exploded in the night without leaving a trace. With a feeling of apprehension, I looked around to see if anything else was missing. After what I had just heard, I wondered if it could be possible that, when she disappeared she might have taken with her a piece of the universe. I was relieved. Everything—the waves, the wind, the trees, the moonlight—was still there like it was before I saw her. Everything except my materialism, since I realized that if things continued to be as they were, it was because I, who was in some way there as a substitute for that woman, still had a bubble of consciousness inside me.

NARCISSUS (Narciso)

One day, as he leaned over the fountain, Narcissus could no longer see his face. It was as though he had fallen into the depths of the fountain and had somehow dissolved there. Enraged by the idea of his vanished face, he sat down at the edge. "What is happening to me?" he thought; "how can it be that I see the water, and do not see my face?" He cast a glance at the things around him and, for the first time, realized that they were beautiful. And then he discovered still more beauty; a beautiful girl was approaching him. The girl

leaned over him, Narcissus, and silently started making faces; she leaned back, or looked sideways to see the edge of her cheeks, she made different expressions with her eyes, she smoothed her hair and, with a rapid motion of her lips, she threw a kiss herself.

Narcissus, meanwhile, hidden behind himself like a perfect mirror, began to tremble like water trembles when it is touched.

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The nymph, Echo, listened affectionately to the beautiful Narcissus and then repeated his last words. Hearing himself in the words of Echo, Narcissus enjoyed that as much as when he looked at himself in the pond.

It took a while for Echo to realize that, in reality, Narcissus was ignoring her, and that for him, she was little more than a sonorous mirror. She came to this realization only when Narcissus said “goodbye,” and Echo answered, “goodbye,” thinking that it was her he was speaking to; then, she understood that Narcissus was saying goodbye to himself, since he was now going to die.

UPWARDS (Hacia arriba)

The bus full of tourists stopped at the foot of the hill; we all got out on the slope and the entire group started to ascend. In the lead was a strange looking man, tall and slender, blonde and agile, with movements like a bird or an angel. I had not noticed him while we were in the bus. Now, I saw that he was forging ahead of the rest of us, with quick and sure steps, always upwards. He climbed and climbed, while I, along with the rest of the tourists, followed without taking our eyes off him. When we got to a rock that he had passed without any effort as if it were no obstacle, we had to slow down and work our way around it with great difficulty. Even if we had wanted to, we wouldn't have been able to catch up with him, or even get closer. I saw him reach the top and climb up on the tallest rock. I waited for him to go on rising into the clear blue sky; but I guess he decided not to make us feel any more ashamed, and he stayed right there.

THE DURATION AND THE HOURS (La Duración y las Horas)

Joel met two women at a party: Alicia and Zulema. He fell in love at first sight with Alicia. And also at first sight, he could tell that Zulema, whom he liked much less, would be an easy conquest. Still, he decided to try his luck with both of them. He wrote letters to them. On reading their response, he noted that Alicia did not return his affection, which made him more eager than ever to woo her, and that Zulema, on the other hand, was so eager that she seemed ready to give herself to him, both body and soul. He made a date with both of them: with Zulema, apprehensively, on Saturday, and with Alicia, out of timidity, on the following day. The place of the date was the same: the rose garden in the Palermo Woods. Both dates were at five o'clock in the afternoon.

On Saturday he left his house at four, feeling half-hearted, uninterested, and empty inside. When he got there, Zulema had not arrived. Joel shrugged his shoulders, and he decided to go to a movie. "It's strange," he thought; "while I came to the rose garden no time seemed to pass; however, if I tried to describe my trip now, I could only say that it must have taken several minutes."

On Sunday at four o'clock he set out to meet Alicia full of love, feeling anxious and impatient, and afraid of not succeeding. When he got there, Alicia had not arrived. Joel waited there in vain until it got dark. "It's strange," he thought; "while I was coming to the rose garden, time seemed to fly; but if I were to try and describe coming there now, I would have so many things to recall that it would seem like it lasted for hours."

Two days later he received letters from both Zulema and Alicia, saying they had been waiting for him in the rose garden at the hour they agreed on, but he never arrived: and they would appreciate it if he did not bother them any more.

FAIRIES (Hadas)

That morning I left my house in Santa Catalina and I started walking. On one of the mountain ranges there must have been a crystal and its reflection was turning the entire sky blue; a sapphire crystal, that other rocks must be forcibly holding back so it could not return to the sky. I came to a ridge, and from it I could see that on the bank of the river there was a man dressed in black, with his back to me. He had his hands behind his back and was standing very still. However, the air around him was moving rapidly. At least that's the way it seemed to me, until I realized that it wasn't the air that was moving, but several almost transparent creatures that were flying around him. They were spirits of light, with bodies as delicate as silk and tulle. On one of the creatures I could distinguish an expression of joyfulness. I did not hear any laughter (I don't hear flowers either), but I could tell that they were laughing.

As I was walking, my foot accidentally bumped into a stone that rolled down the hill. When he heard it, the man turned around, and from the front I could see that his suit was shining with a rainbow of colors, while his jacket was checkered with black and white. When he saw me, he made an expression of annoyance and the creatures around him flew into his body and disappeared.

The man looked at me again and muttered something that must have been an insult; after that, he started walking through the valley until he passed behind a rock and disappeared from sight.

ICARUS (Icaro)

Daedalus never understood his son, the imaginative Icarus. He did not understand when he saw him imitate the movements of land animals. Nor did he understand when they were flying together, each one with a pair of wings fastened to their shoulders, and

his son started chirping like a bird. He understood even less (he thought the sun had melted the wax of his feathers) when Icarus, tired of being a bird, let go of his his wings and happily plunged head first into the sea, to start a new game of being a fish.

ROMAN ANECDOTES (Gesta Romanorum)

The Emperor Salus, who had the reputation of being erotic, wanted to find a talented artist who would be able to make a painting of the world's most beautiful female face. They looked for a painter who would be willing to try and do that, until they finally found one in a remote village.

"That would be very, very difficult," the painter said, trying to take precautions, after he heard what was requested, "but I will attempt it. Of course, it would mean that the most beautiful women in the empire must be brought to the palace, so that I can see them when I go there."

That was done, and the painter went to the palace. From the fifty women who were invited, he chose ten who impressed him most and, making a copy of the eyes from one, the mouth, the forehead, and the nose from others, he composed a portrait that was the sum of all these perfections.

The emperor was pleased; he rewarded the painter generously, and he hung the portrait in his bedroom.

The painter returned to his home, and he said to his wife: "We will have to move away from here; we wouldn't want the emperor to see you some day and then carry you off, now that he has a portrait of you in his bedroom."

*

The people rebelled against the Emperor Jovinian, who had governed with cruelty. They dragged him out of his palace and were about to hang him; Jovinian was eventually able to make himself heard, and he told them:

"You are making a mistake. Until now, I have permitted you to treat me this way, in order to see what extremes you were capable of going to. But you can't hang me like just any emperor. I am not who you think I am. The Emperor Jovinian was drowned a year ago when he was swimming in the river, and the current carried his body away. I put on the clothes he had left on the bank and, taking his place since then, I have governed like he did. But now it's time for you to know the truth: I am the emperor's guardian angel. That is why you see me looking like him. Now that you know that, I will leave you and return to heaven."

He tried to fly, but was unable. When he had taken the emperor's place, he not only adopted his face, but also his cruelty. For that, heaven took away his angelic nature.

The people did not believe a word that the angel told them, and they went ahead and hanged him as if he were the emperor. He was just like the emperor, even his language.

*

A great crackling was heard, and the surface of the earth broke apart: there was a deep opening, right in the middle of Rome. People felt they could not rest as long as the city was torn open like this. But what should be done? The Pope said that it was undoubtedly God's will to leave the abyss open until somebody would make a sacrifice by throwing himself into it. As soon as his body hits the bottom, the edges of the precipice would close, like a wound that leaves a scar after a stabbing, or a furrow becomes smooth after a seed is planted. Proclamations were issued: Is there anyone who is willing to sacrifice himself? It must be the sacrifice of someone who enjoys life, not the suicide of a desolate person, or an accidental fall. Time passed, and no one offered to do it. Then, one day Marcus Curtius said he would be willing to do it, but on one condition: that for a year he would be permitted to do whatever he felt like, with complete freedom. His offer was accepted. Marcus Curtius then began to live wildly; he robbed, he killed, he violated women, he burned temples.

Marcus Curtius was worse than the abyss.

People decided not to wait until a year passed, and one afternoon Marcus Curtius was assassinated, and his body thrown into the abyss. So, with this first piece of refuse they began to fill it up.

*

The Emperor Vespasian created a ring with an image of Memory and Oblivion. If he turned the ring to the right, he remembered; to the left, he forgot. But remembering and forgetting only worked halfway; neither the vast amount of memories was ever complete (like the stars that appear on a cloudless night), nor did his amnesias erase everything (like a blanket of clouds covering the sky at night). What Vespasian felt, if the ring were moved to the right or left, was more like moments of vision and moments of blindness that competed with each other (like clouds that are blown by the wind cover some stars, and uncover others). For a while Vespasian played with the ring, watching as some images emerged from his memory, and others were immersed in oblivion, until he tired of it, and exclaimed:

“Bah! It's always the same. With the ring, or without the ring, it's always the same: some memories comes back, and others are forgotten; in the final analysis, the number of things I remember is always the same. The magic of the ring doesn't add anything to the magic of consciousness.”

And he threw the ring into the river.

SHADOWS (Sombras)

Yahiel walked down the street in broad daylight like a somnambulist; he went along smiling to himself on the inside, with his eyes looking at himself from outside, as if he had borrowed some free space from the previous night and was using it at some other time in order to dream. Under the sun, however, he did not lose track of the shadows. At least, not what we consider a shadow, when our body passes through a ray of sunlight.

What Yahiel did do, was project a shadow. He emitted one, like a lamp emits light. Like some human cinematography, he projected black shadows (like the violet shadows of tulips which are so dark they look black). The shape of these shadows did not look like his own body: they had the shape of a spider, a giraffe, or a heron.

THE UNREALITY OF HELL (Irrealidd del Inferno)

I have suffered under the weight of the eyelids of all the sleepy people in the world, under that of velvet curtains, of languid caresses, of dead birds, of stagnant water, of grey afternoons, of collapsed walls, of branches broken by a heavy snowfall. Now I'm in hell. I know that this hell is unreal, and that these torments are imaginary: after all, my only crime is having murdered a ghost in this nightmare. Accursed luck! If only I had killed a real man while I was awake! Then, not only would my victim be real, but it would be my real self, as well as my real homicidal impulse, and my real weapon. If everything were real, this hell would not exist, and I would not be suffering.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES (Sentencia nominum)

The summer of the year eleven sixteen. The house of Monseigneur Fulbert, in Paris. Pierre Abelard saw that Heloise was approaching. He goes to embrace her, but she stops him, saying:
"Be careful; don't make a mistake. I am only an image that you are carrying inside your heart."
Abelard replies:
"According to that, I must be the image of me that Heloise is carrying in her own heart. So we're both the same."
Then the images glided over the carpet and joined each other.

THE RIVAL (El Rival)

King Arthur had known Guinevere since she was a child. He also watched her while she was growing up. One morning in April when she was passing under the branch of a rose bush, he saw how the petal of a rose made her look rosy. At that point he decided to marry this maiden.

She was certainly a maiden. However, a few days after they were married King Arthur heard her talk in her sleep about a former husband, who was more handsome than he was, more capable than he was, more loving than he was. King Arthur became jealous and

wanted to look for him to find out. He got on his horse and let it travel freely until he dismounted on the banks of a river. He got into a small boat without a sail, without oars, and without a rudder, then he disembarked on a beach covered with golden sand. He traveled through a dense forest, he went over a bridge and passed an island, he climbed up a mountain, and at the top, he saw a glass castle that was turning like a mill in the wind, while four griffins perched on four marble pillars batted their wings. King Arthur made a huge jump, grabbed hold of a drawbridge and was able to reach the castle. When he entered, he found his rival, who had a head in the form of an omega, and whose face was empty; from him he learned that on certain nights Guinevere was his wife.

Realizing that all this was in another world and that, therefore, nothing happening here affected his honor, King Arthur returned to the arms of Guinevere who was now awake, and he was happy.

DANSE MACABRE (Danza macabra)

With a description of what really happened that night, the legend of Don Juan has been greatly improved.

Don Juan Tenorio ate a sumptuous meal, and during the entire meal he spoke with a person who was invisible. (The servant who saw his master directing glances, phrases, smiles, and gestures toward an empty chair, was disturbed and worried.) Don Juan spoke of his life, and of his boredom. "I have invited you here," he said at one point, "to ask you a favor." When he finished his meal, he extinguished his cigar in a cup of wine, offered a toast to the vacant chair, and drank. After a moment Don Juan fell down flat on the ground. The servant rushed to the lifeless body, embraced it, and as he expressed his sorrow, he repeated—without wanting to, and without knowing it—the name of the invisible guest.

*

As if he was afraid to arrive late for a date—roar, rumble, roar—the motorcyclist is riding at full speed down the road with his wife on the seat behind him, her hair forming a wake in the wind. Unexpectedly, the wheel strikes a rock and both the man and woman somersault through the air; the motorcycle keeps on going and crashes into a post; a cable breaks loose like an electric eel. The man and woman are miraculously unharmed. They look at each other, and smile.

"That was close, eh? Yes, what a scare!" she says and goes to retrieve her pocketbook which had fallen next to the motorcycle. She touches the cable and is electrocuted. The man tries to rescue her and is also electrocuted.

They were late for their date.

*

It is a cloudy, overcast night. Oswald is riding on a horse. His ears, not his eyes, tell him that the darkness is full of trees and puddles: branches are waving in the wind, and

hooves splashing in the mud. He would have to dismount as soon as he gets out of this quagmire, and wait until it clears up. He can't see anything. "The blind see better than I can," he thinks; "I can see more inside my eyelids, than outside of my eyes." At that moment his face bumps into something that is rocking in the air. He tugs the reins, raises the other hand, and begins to rub his cold feet. Oswald closes his eyes to see if, in that way, he can see the hanged man.

*

When Pablo was ten years old, he went down to the cellar and saw his father hanging from the ceiling. It was a terrible shock; he was saddened, shaken, and speechless. Then, ten years passed, and he married a girl he had met on the beach during the summer. On his wedding night he discovered that his wife was suffering from a subluxation in her cervical column, and her vertebrae were pressing on her nerves. The sad, shaken, and speechless Pablo had to learn how to alleviate her pain. He bound her neck and her chin, and pulling on a cord that ran through a pulley on the ceiling, he raised her up until she was standing on her toes. Every night he created tiny abysses under the feet of his wife. Very tiny abysses. With them he was filling the larger abyss that had haunted him for ten years, since he saw one under the feet of his father. He got used to using his gallows. Even the idea of a gallows cheered him. Seeing his wife hanging like a cherry raised his spirits. In the end, he lost his sadness, his shaking, his speechlessness, and also his wife.

*

The woman bought a dress and tried it on in front of mirror. Perfect. But she wasn't able to wear it for the first time that night, because she died with a heart attack, leaving her ten year old daughter an orphan.

Very soon after her mother was buried, the girl put on the dress and looked at herself in the same mirror where her mother had looked at herself for the last time.

The dress was quite large for her; even when she lifted the waist with a belt, the skirt still touched the floor.

"I will have to shorten the skirt," the girl thought to herself, "but I will wait a few days. By shortening it now I wouldn't want mama to have to walk through the afterlife with a skirt that barely covers her knees."

*

The old woman steps down from the sidewalk and is about to cross the street when she is run over by a car. She is left lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Then, the woman reabsorbs her blood and stands up. She gets back on the sidewalk, she waits a moment, and tries to cross the street again. Another car (or maybe the same one?) runs over her. She is dead again. And she gets up, and falls down... gets up, and falls down... Those who pass by, do so without looking at her. The cars keep on speeding by as fast as ever.

*

On the first of November Armando went to the cemetery to put flowers on the grave of Laura, who had died in July, when the bus she was riding on collided with another one. One of those accidents that happen every day. When he got off the bus, he saw Laura with the people who had gathered because of the blood. Armando started to approach her in order to speak with her, but she made a sign for him to stop and then disappeared.

“What about that! I have seen my dead darling alive!” he thought, and that was when, all at once, he realized why.

VIOLET (Violeta)

I am riding on a bus. A young girl has taken a seat in front of me. When I happen to see her handkerchief, which has a remarkable violet color, I remember something from my infancy. I am intrigued by that surprising memory and ask her to sit with me. While I am thinking of that memory, the girl of the bus wavers, and disappears. (Reader: don't continue, or you'll get lost.)

I am left alone with my memory. Now I see myself: my self when I was still a child, the child who will become the man I am now. I must be about nine years old. I was playing with my toy theater, when I saw the violet dress of one of the marionettes, and I was visited by another memory of the same color. Just like the violet of the girl's handkerchief had evoked the memory of the marionette, this one had evoked an even earlier memory of violet. Except when I was only nine years old, I did not know how to control my mind, so the secret of this past was lost forever. My desire to play with that little theater must have been so strong that I wanted to stay in my room that very day, enjoying the ordinary things around me. A memory had come to me and I—a nine year old child—had let it slip away. As for that older memory, and the memory of the marionette, I chose the latter. That's why the memory of the marionette has not vanished, covered by other images from the past, like the memory of the girl with the violet handkerchief covered by the one from my infancy (who is now rearranging herself in the seat in front of me).

I suppose that as I grow old I will get even better at remembering things. Once I have actually become old, when I see a violet color that is identical to this one, perhaps I will be able to explore my memories and find the one I want. I will, for example, remember this one from the bus. It is even possible that some day I may be able to recover the one I lost track of that day when I was playing with my little theater.

But there is still one thing that bothers me: the girl with the handkerchief disappeared (only for a moment, it's true, but she disappeared); and what if, thanks to a greater ability to remember and understand myself, I might recall a memory so powerful that it recreates the original moment so I am trapped by it and can no longer perceive the present which is completely obliterated? In order to free myself from the past and return to the present I would have to learn something new: to turn the lens of my inner camera from the past toward the future. Let's imagine, for instance, something violet has made me go back to one of the many violets in my life, abandoning me there, like some shipwrecked person lost on a desert island; in order to return to dry land I would have to look at that violet,

and while I see it from the point of my amnesia, know how to predict the violet of many years in the future that would shift me (that had actually shifted me) toward the past.

THE MOUNTAIN (La Montaña)

The little boy began to climb over the large body of his father who was drowsing on an easy chair during his siesta on the patio. When he felt him, his father chuckled without opening his eyes, and stiffened himself to make himself feel hard, so that his son would feel like he was climbing on a mountain. As the boy climbed up on him, he stepped on the foothills of his legs, on the slope of his chest, on the arms and shoulders that were immobile like rocks. When he finally arrived at the snowy peak of the head, the boy did not see anyone.

“Papa, Papa!” he called, about to break into tears.

A cold wind was blowing there in the heights, and the little boy tried to walk through the deep snow without success.

“Papa, Papa!”

The boy was crying helplessly, all by himself on the desolate peak of a mountain.

THE SKELETON (El Esqueleto)

Since it was my day to write an article and I was supposed to wait until the rotatory press was ready to begin printing, I went to the newspaper office even later than usual. The sun had already fallen behind the houses, but the city (or at least the plaza I was crossing) was still filled with light that did not seem to darken. On one side of the fountain they had dug a wide hole that was not there the day before. I don't know, it was probably done to try and repair a drain pipe. But when I looked down into the hole, I saw several scattered human bones. “Hmm, this plaza,” I thought, “must have once been a cemetery, or a place where a murder was committed; and now this trench made by the municipal workers has exhumed the bones.”

Either the workers must have separated the bones, or some dogs had dropped them out of their mouth when they found they were dry, but the fact is that they were spread out so that it took some imagination to see how they could have formed a skeleton. I looked from one side of the plaza to the other, to make sure I was alone. Then, I jumped into the hole, examined the bones, and began to spread them out even further: I gave a kick to a femur, and another to a shoulder blade; I grabbed a skull (Yorick!) and make it roll like a ball, and I picked up a phalanx and stuck it in my jacket pocket.

I arrived at the newspaper, I wrote my editorial, and I went down to the printing room. It must have been almost 2 in the morning when the rotary press began to move.

Tired, and almost falling asleep, I returned to my home. As I was crossing the plaza that was filled with the cold light of the moon, I saw someone had rearranged the bones.

There was now a whole skeleton; it seemed to be lying tranquilly in a comfortable position. I first thought that some medical student had come by there and had not been able to resist the urge to assemble this macabre jigsaw puzzle. But as I was walking away, I could hear that the skeleton was following me, and I understood that a lost soul cared about its bones and it had come back to reconnect them; now it wanted to scare me. So I would not give it that pleasure, I did not look back, nor did I speed up my pace. However, I took the phalanx out of my pocket and, with a flick over my shoulder, I gave the skeleton some alms.

A DECK OF CARDS (Baraja)

Seated at a round table, five people were playing cards. They were all motionless, as though the amber light of the lamp was a drop of resin which had stuck them together. There was no attempt to hurry. While the person, whose turn it was to lay down a card slowly studied the other cards, there was enough time to sleep. And, in fact, they did sleep. Sometimes one, sometimes several, sometimes all of them. Was it Alfa who, after a moment of silence, laid down a card and said, “straight flush”? Or did Beta dream that Alfa said it? Or was the sleeper Gamma, who dreams that Beta dreamt that Alfa said it? Or is it Delta, or Epsilon...? Each player is holding several cards in his hand. But the five players are, at the same time, like the five fingers of another, larger hand. It is this larger hand that is holding the deck. Although it has already dealt the cards, the deck remembers everything. It knows exactly where each one of its cards is: it is aware of all of the possible combinations of the game, except that it could never tell anyone. Meanwhile, the five players continue to be motionless, and sleep. The dreams of one player enter into those of one of his companions. In the shuffling of cards and dreams, the game gets more complicated. Eventually, the deck also goes to sleep: it dreams that the men-cards now form a hand, without a game.

DEATH (La Muerte)

Not having anything to do, Death was passing through the city, when it heard some angry voices behind it. It turned around and saw that, on the corner, there were two friends who were having a violent discussion.

Out of curiosity, it moved closer to the corner. The two friends took out their knives.

*

They gathered around the bed of their friend who was dying, and they broke out in laughter that was so loud that he wouldn't be able to hear the footsteps of Death when, in a moment or two, he entered the room.

*

“I hate you,” Death told him, with a gesture of impotence.

“I already know that,” said the Wandering Jew.

*

While he was walking at night through a deserted, narrow street, he suffered a heart attack. When he started to fall, someone emerged from the shadows and raised him up. He was about to say “Thank you,” but as he straightened up and felt only bones, he knew that they weren’t helping him; they were carrying him.

*

“Please,” said Death, “do not confuse me with sickness, or pain, or fear. I don’t make anyone suffer. Only those who are alive suffer, and if they are alive, what do I have to do with their suffering? There is no one who can say he has met me. And if some worriers decide to live for me, and invent a philosophy of their own death, that’s their business. Why don’t they live their own life? I’m not trying to pursue them, and they shouldn’t rush out to find me. We’re traveling together, that’s all. They are waiting. I am also waiting. But they don’t have any reason to wait in the same way I am waiting, since I accompany them discreetly, without even existing.

A PULSATING UNIVERSE (Universo pulsátil)

That night of insomnia, back in 1720 the man had a sudden intuition: that the world was expanding and contracting, that all things were growing at the same speed, and shrinking at the same speed, with a rhythm that was so perfect and continuous that no one noticed this phenomenon. The pen he was using to write was growing and shrinking; and he was growing and shrinking, like everything around him, so that everything continued to coincide.

Then, another intuition followed this one: in a mystical rapture man jumped out of step with these great fluxes and refluxes, and for a few seconds he was a dwarf in the midst of the objects that became gigantic, then a giant in the midst of objects that had shrunk.

He started to write about his strange experience, but he knew that in the Age of Reason in which he was living, they would think he was crazy: so in order to pretend, he wrote the first two parts of Gulliver’s Travels.

A REPORT (Informe)

At the request of Dr. Wyatt, one of the doctors at the Institute, I am writing this report about the drug they had administered to me. I know the experience lasted for four hours;

but even if it lasted for only one hour, I wouldn't be able to explain it. I am only able, therefore, to describe a few of the effects.

First, there was some nausea and a few chills. A little later, reality began to vibrate, and lighten, and abound with skill and elegance. Meanwhile, I was acquiring a delightful sense of freedom. "I have wings, but they haven't started to flap yet," I said to myself, and I began to blink; "with this batting of eyelids and eyelashes I will be able to fly." While looking out the window, I broke out laughing. The chimneys were iridescent over the roofs of the nearby houses. Out of this iridescence came a vibrant green which darkened my hands and notebooks, like when I am in the forest reading at the foot of a tree and the sunlight filters through the foliage and covers me with a liquid emerald color. After that, other colors filled the air. The sunlight had hit the floor of my room with a golden pin; the pin sank down, revealing a well where the water was shimmering. I wanted to rest my eyes, but when I tried to close them, I discovered they were already closed. I stretched out in the bed and experienced a feeling of disgust. The bed was the grave for the body; the body, the grave for the skeleton. Time to get up! I returned to the window, my morning lookout. My eyes had just acquired the power of a telescope. Only it was a telescope that pointed right, and then in reverse. If to the right, the distance was cut so it seemed like my hand, which was gigantic, had clustered the clouds to the left of the sun. When the telescope was inverted, my hand, which was now tiny, seemed to be flying over the horizon. I held my arms to the side of my body; I didn't want them to be torn off in some disaster; while they were motionless like that, they looked like the arms of the Pharaoh which, with the slightest movement, would make the world tremble. I looked down at my feet; first, they were distant, and then near. Like a human accordion. My nausea was unbearable, and I wanted to vomit. Then, I saw the monstrous insect. It did not exist, and I knew that; nevertheless, there it was, grotesquely moving its large feelers and feet, and I became frightened; not of the insect, but of myself. "My soul is communicating with hell," I thought, "and because of the contact of my soul with hell, I have seen this insect." I went back to the window, and a set of teeth fell out. It spun in the air with a noise like scissors. I knew that it wanted to bite something, and I was glad that no bird was flying by at that moment. Then, I was suddenly in two places at once. There were two of me. The other self challenged me: "Why don't you jump out of the window?" And I replied: "Are you crazy?" One of us jumped out and began to dance all over the world and, by moving the toes of his feet, had separated the sky and the sea. Immediately, everything was silent, and out of the silence of light and water, a charming island emerged: it was because the horizon had wrapped around the waist of a woman. The woman was illusory, but not the satisfaction it gave me. I was bathed in her wise influence. But then, the illusion vanished. I saw that the clock seemed to have stopped. "If the clock were stopped, two times a day it would indicate the exact time of the stars, but even then the clock would not know it. In contrast, my hours are always the exact time, because I am time itself and do not have to coincide with anything outside me. I coincide with myself, by auto-contemplating myself." What I would not have been able to say was whether time was passing rapidly or slowly. Judging by the dizzying flow of images, time was carrying me away; however, if I wanted to evoke those images, I would have to pause with each one of them, and it would never end: how quickly one can deposit a check in the bank, and after withdrawing it, how slowly one must let the cold hard cash pass through one's fingers! With my senses so aroused, I perceived so many

things that it seemed like I could go on perceiving them forever. It would even have been possible for me to hear the vertical noise that passes through a grove of trees, to see clearly that there was no one at the bottom of a clearing, to smell the botanical mutation of a perfect rose, to feel the sweetness of a baby that was about to be born. To perceive it all, but mistakenly. In the distance, for example, a whole tree seemed to have the shape of a single leaf. These illusions gave me so much delight that I could have shouted, and perhaps I did shout. It was as if the things that were difficult and lasting at other times, had now dissolved in a current of metaphysical waters which were falling in a turbulent cataract toward a silent, hidden world. At that point my body, but not I myself, felt an urge to cry. From outside, I witnessed this strange feeling painlessly. Crying only to cry. "Ah, if it would rain," I thought, "I could go out and raise my face up toward the rain, happy that no one could see my tears." An empty desire filled my muscles, a gymnastic urge that was just to show off. I wouldn't have wanted to work. For what? With all that exuberance, there was no need to exert myself. I felt resistant to any practical action, which, on the other hand, rapidly stimulated my imagination, so rapidly that I was able to see this madness on all sides, like I was running around a tower that is always round. I have never felt myself so self-centered, or so egotistical as I was at that moment. There was nothing, nor anyone, that was important to me. I felt more like a round tower of Solipsism. I would not only have been incapable of having faith in God and in believing in the real presence of another man, but it was also difficult for me not to feel doubt about all the things around me; and when I finally stumbled and realized the chair I stumbled against existed, I felt like adoring it, as though it were sacred. My notebook, open and expectant, was still empty; and I, full of myself, as though I were about to create a poem. I knew I would not be able to communicate with anyone. And if I did, it would be like telling stories about burning salamanders to some cold fish in a pond. As I thought about this, I suspected that I was talking to myself. I raised a finger to my lips, and yes, they were moving. But what foolishness were they uttering? Because my time was swift, and my lips were sluggish: my accelerated sensations could never coincide with the rhythm of these morose phrases. They were probably hackneyed phrases, bits of incoherent syntax, or the angry words of a long insult. I knew that I had been talking just to be speaking; like before, I had cried just to be crying. I was speaking only to fill the hollow that was left by my fleeting sensations, like when you are traveling through a bed of reeds, and the reeds come back to fill the gap that your legs have left. "I won't write," I said to myself, "until after I can invent a match-pencil that sets the page on fire with burning metaphors." Now, I understand that the drug has only confirmed what I am, and that without the drug, I see the same thing, and I write even better.

THE OPAL (El Ópalo)

Sanchez was in the shop of an antique dealer where he saw a gorgeous black ball. "Perhaps I could use it as a paperweight," he thought. He asked how much it would cost. The antique dealer took it in his hand, and gazing at it fondly, he said:

"I can't say how much; it is impossible to name a price. It's worth an eye from your face, especially because in it is the hidden eye of a face, an eye from the face of God."

He hastened to explain that the person who left it here in pawn insisted that inside the sphere there was an opal where one could see every moment from the past; he also said he had no doubt the owner had told the truth about that magic; it was unfortunate that there was no way to break open the ball and recover the opal, because no one would want to pay what it is worth, just to have a useless ball.

“Just imagine,” the antique dealer added, as he continued to look at it. “Just imagine how amazing it would be to be able to see all of history.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” Sanchez said. “I just want to have a paperweight.”

COURTESY

(Cortesía)

I have never seen anything as courteous as that wall. I was talking in the lounge at the Club with Norberto, that blind fellow. Norberto had not wanted to believe that the “horrible screeching”—those were his words—he had just heard, was coming from a beautiful peacock. To humiliate him, I described the tail; I concluded by saying: “the peacock opens his tail like a museum opens its rooms.” Angered, Norberto turned toward where he thought the door was, and he walked toward the wall. The wall courteously moved its door and put it in front of him, open. Norberto walked through it confidently.

BESTIARY

(Bestiario)

The desert extended as far as the eye could see, open, and smooth, and scorched.

At first, I thought the only thing I could see from a distance was a bare tree. As I came closer, it appeared to be a post. From closer still, it looked like two posts that were slightly separated. Then, from even closer I saw they were doorjambs supporting a lintel: the opening of a large doorway. Instead of a door, in a quadrangle of light was a mirror that did not reflect anything. The empty frame extended up high and wide, in the middle of the desert.

I went through as easily as one passes through the Arch of Triumph, and I was scarcely on the other side when I encountered another world, a hidden, green world, populated by unicorns, dragons, and hippogriffs.

I was astonished to see that, in the center of that fantastical zoology, looking like it was chimerical, was a rhinoceros. How had it managed to transfer its ordinary body into this world of mythical creatures? Did I bring it with me, from the ordinary world, when I entered this one?

*

The horse was moving its tail, like it was shooing away horseflies. Then I realized that it was whipping itself for asceticism. To assist in the mortification of his body, I tied a wire of barbs to his tail. He whipped himself until he was bleeding, and looked at me thankfully. I don’t know if he ever found his god.

*

Someone knocked on the door; I opened it and saw only an eye, a huge eye that filled the entire doorway.

“I am the Dragon,” I heard it say, and I thought that its friendly expression must be accompanied by another gesture of friendliness, farther away on its tail. The entire room was filled with blue reflections; the dragon was bringing in the color of the sea.

“Come in, come in,” I said, as I looked at the room and felt rather ashamed that it was in such disorder. I put a cushion on the divan and, turning toward the dragon, whose eye remained in the same spot, looking at me graciously, and I said again:

“Come in, come in: you’re very welcome. Make yourself comfortable. Please, feel like you are at home.”

“I would be very happy to do that,” and I heard him laugh timidly, “but I can’t. I am way too large. My tail is still out in the street, and I am afraid to come any further. I might break the boards on your stairway. But we can talk from right here.”

I never saw all of him, but we had an interesting conversation. He told me, among other things, that he was descended from the dragon who took part in Trojan War.

*

“I use my tail when and how I wish,” the monkey said proudly. “In contrast, look at that tail over there; it is one that the squirrel has to carry wherever it goes. And look at that other tail that had to carry itself—it ended up being a snake.”

*

I entered a forest in the province of Chaco; the trees, like a flock of eagles, took hold of the earth and lifted it up to the sky. Suddenly, I heard a pleasant, affectionate, human voice that was speaking in some unknown language. I tried in vain to see the person who was speaking. He or she evidently didn’t want to be seen. While I made my way through the thicket, a rapid noise of branches and footsteps told me that the person was running away to keep hidden. Was he playing with me? I made a plan, and about two hours later I surprised him from behind: it was some kind of monster, with the wings of a penguin, the hindquarters of a dog, the torso of a turkey, the tail of a mackerel, the ears of a rabbit, the eyes of a horse, the nose of a monkey, and a neck adorned with feathers. It was speaking without saying anything; unable to think with words, its voice only imitated the sound of human conversation. When he realized that he had been seen, he bowed his head, approached me, and licked my hands. I let him go in peace.

*

“All people, you, and I, and everyone, are under the constant vigilance of animals that are watching everything we do from a distance, and sometimes they approach us and take on a false appearance. Is it because they think we are dangerous, and they are getting ready to fight us? I don’t know, but what I am certain of is that, positioning their bodies in all the possible positions of the zoological scale, they keep an eye on us. There are some

who let themselves be caught, and then, from their cage in the Zoological Garden, they watch us out of the corner of their eye. Then, there are those who act distracted or indifferent, but are like a detective who disguises himself as some unoccupied person who walks down the street with an air of boredom. Once a squirrel, who was young and inexperienced, began to play with me, and I realized what he wanted was to teach me. When I refused to imitate him, he went away. I am sure they are plotting something against us. The only hope is that sooner or later some dog will reveal the secret of what they intend to do to us. The dog is the only animal who would betray the others in favor of us; haven't you ever noticed how a dog acts like he is trying to tell us something?"

*

It's strange that a visionary like William Blake would be so ignorant about the gracious agility of a flea. His painting, "The Ghost of a Flea" (1819), shows a large, robust human figure, with his muscular legs firmly planted on the ground.

Blake understood the way angels fly through the sky, but not the beautiful moment of freedom when a flea departs from its irritating terrestrial activity and, with a leap, executes a majestic curve in the air; the air is more like heaven than what is known by the angels, because a flea sees it from below, during its ascent toward the sky.

*

The dog said: "Men put in a lot of work in order to attend to my needs. Thinking of my comfort they have constructed houses, and they come to live with me in order to serve me better. I sleep, I eat. From time to time, so that they don't forget about me, or to make sure that things go smoothly, I run after the machines they use to work, and I bark. I feel sorry for those men. They envy my tail, and my freedom. Some—I think they are called Kynikos, or cynics—pay me homage by imitating me. Others put a leash on me, because they are afraid that I will leave them, or reject them, and sometimes they even pet me: I know that is because they love me so much. If they see me raise my head and sniff, they also try to smell what it is, in order to understand me. But with their puny noses, they can hardly smell anything. They are incapable of imagining these palaces of air that I see stretching out into the distance, as part of my domain.

*

He went into the Zoological Garden and stopped in front of the cage of monkeys. How miserable they look..., this orangutan, this chimpanzee, and this gorilla! Undoubtedly, being separated from their families makes them despondent, and now they have become

"These poor creatures are as unhappy as I am in the open air," I exclaimed suddenly because, when I looked at the sky I saw it was also encaged by cumulus and cirrus clouds that reminded me of bars.

*

A flying fish emerged from the water and it flew happily up into the sky; then, a pelican dove into the water and began to swim to the bottom of the sea.

Both were scorned, as much by fish, as by birds: they had ceased to be what they are, and wanted to be what they were not. They had committed a sin against Nature.

Neither the flying fish nor the pelican had the consolation of mutual esteem because, by crossing the dividing line between the water and the air—the roof of the sea, and the floor of the atmosphere—they were unable to see each other.

THE PERFECT CRIME (El Crimen Perfecto)

“I thought I had committed the perfect crime. The plan was perfect, and its execution was perfect. So that nobody would find the body, I hid it in a place where no one would ever think of looking for it: in a cemetery. I knew that the Convent of Saint Eulalia had been abandoned many years ago, and that there were no longer any nuns who would bury other nuns in its cemetery. It was a deserted cemetery that was still quite pretty, with its cypress trees on the banks of the river. Its gravestones, all the same size, and located in flowerbeds around a beautiful statue of Jesus Christ, were so clean they looked like the dead nuns were still taking care of them. My mistake: I forgot that my victim was a vehement atheist. Horrified by the new companion who had been placed by their side, that night the dead nuns decided to leave; they crossed over to the other side of the river, with their tombstones, and with the statue of Christ, and set up the cemetery there. The next day some people, who were traveling on the river by boat to the town of Fray Bizco saw, on their right, the cemetery they had always seen on their left. At first they thought they must be mistaken, and that instead of traveling in the direction of Fray Bizco, they were returning from it. But then they realized that was not the case, and that something had been changed. So they notified the authorities. After that, the police went to inspect the site where the cemetery had been and, digging in a place where it looked like the ground had been disturbed, they removed a body that had recently been buried there. That night the nuns crossed back to the other side of the river, taking the cemetery with them. After that, one investigation led to another and, well... all right..., you already know the rest, Your Honor.”

POETRY, AND A SWAN (La poesía, Un Cisne)

As he walked away complaining in a loud voice, Cygnus sprouted feathers, his neck stretched longer, he grew wings, his mouth took the form of a beak, and in this way he was transformed into a strange new bird: a swan.

(Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book 2)

“What signs do you make, oh Swan, with your curved neck when you witness the passage of dreamers who wander by?)

(Ruben Dario. “The Swans,” *Songs of Life and Hope*.)

The swan took refuge in the ponds and, ever since then it glides happily over the quiet waters under the shade of the willows.

“It is indeed quite beautiful, but its aristocratic elegance appears rather superficial,” some people said.

These people did not understand that the swan had taken refuge there, not because of frivolity or egotism, but on the contrary, because it remembered very well all the horrible things that had happened. It was aware how both the earth and the sky had burned when Phaeton let the sun horses bolt; it knew how Zeus had charred Phaeton with one of his rays. It was then that he, Cynus, the king of Liberia, abandoned everything while he wandered sadly through the forests and was transformed into a swan. He became a swan because of an excess of sorrow: he suffered because of the injustice of the powerful, the disappointment of seeing the failure of human ambitions, his compassion for those who survived the threat of death, and his fear the world would return to chaos. His serenity was, in reality, a chill of fear.

THE EXODUS OF THE GODS

(El Destierro de los Dioses)

Some gods let themselves be worshipped because of the respect that men gave them. Others who wanted to be remembered as beautiful, but not worshiped as real, departed. They had lived near the earth, entertained by the myths of some imaginative Greeks, but now they thought it best if they left. As they were leaving, they looked at their former home: from the moon they saw the earth as much larger and more illuminated than the moon seen from the Earth; they recognized oceans, fertile fields, and deserts in the blue, green, and orange places drifting in the air. Afterwards, although they were not able to resist the habit of thinking of the Earth, they turned toward other spectacles. From one of its moons—Phobos—they looked at nearby Mars, seven thousand times brighter than the full Moon men see. From one of its moons—Amalthea—they saw Jupiter, surrounded by other moons even larger than Mars seen from Phobos. From one of its circling planetoids—Phoebe—they observed Saturn with its moving rings. But these worlds were uninhabited. So the gods left the solar system and then traveled to Alpha Centauri, where they dispersed and went to other more remote stars: one went to Sirius, one to Capella, and one to Betelgeuse, until none of them could see the Sun again. They remembered that those imaginative Greeks whom they knew so well had divided the few stars they saw into different constellations, giving them the names of different myths. Now as the gods in exodus passed through the center of the Galaxy, they were able to see other stars that had been invisible before and were now shining inside those constellations, as well as creatures that believed in other gods. The gods in exodus separated from one another; they searched not for the companionship of these creatures, but for that of other gods.

SEED, ROOT, FLOWER, FRUIT (Semilla, Raíz, Flor, Fruto)

Our world was never older than it was on the day of creation, because God looked beyond it and saw it all the way to the end. A totality. Like a recently created song supported by a long-standing tradition, the world appeared full-grown. The mountains with hidden deposits of coal, the plains with their hidden pools of oil; with forests that contained many places that had not existed before; with animals that opened their eyes for the first time and formed couples, ready to have children. “Non erat febris, et iam erat antidotum; nulla an huc naturae defectio, et iam languorum remedia germinabant.” God created the world as a model for the world: He conceived of it with all of the marks of an age that had still not flourished, but which would flourish. Since God had created the world, the laws of nature have done nothing more than copy the meaning of that first day. But after that day the world was young. It began to evolve slowly, and it evolved—it still continues evolving—toward that resplendent old age. There are nights when one can picture the entire creation, rich in history and prophecy. We are accustomed to the idea that the stars are ancient and that the light which we have been seeing has traveled so far that, in reality, what we are seeing is not the present, but the past. Nevertheless, there are nights when we have the impression that all of the constellations are appearing for the first time. It seems to us like it is possible that the universe has originated in that exact moment, and that our memory is illusory. Then, we understand what really happened at the moment of creation: a tiny drop of eternity emerged, and then it gradually began to remember, and expand.

APOLLO (Apolo)

Pan was playing his flute—his cheeks puffed out grotesquely, and his face reddened with the effort—and he was considered the best musician in the world. When his mouth was unoccupied (as long as he was playing the flute he could neither laugh nor speak) he exclaimed sarcastically:

“So there; let Apollo come and try to play better than I can! I can already imagine him strumming on his lyre.”

So Apollo took the challenge. With the god of Mount Tmolus as judge the competition took place. Pan blew the flute, Apollo strummed the lyre.

“The lyre wins,” the judge declared.

Enraged, Pan threw away his flute and ran into the forest.

Apollo picked the flute up from the ground and examined it curiously. He didn’t want to raise it to his mouth and then deform the beauty of his face or the nobility of his proud countenance, but he started pressing his fingers on the small holes. Although no sound was produced, it was evident from the expression of his eyes that, as he was caressing the flute, he was enjoying some music that only he could hear.

Armed with a bow and a quiver, the young Eurytus happened to run into Apollo, who was also armed.

With the confidence of youth, Eurytus challenged Apollo:

“Let’s see who can shoot an arrow the farthest.”

Irritated by this insolence, Apollo not only refused to accept the challenge, but he also killed Eurytus.

Since then, Apollo never shot arrows again. The space and the distance no longer tempted him. Now he lacked the true incentive, which Eurytus had felt with the bowshot that he was never able to shoot

*

Proud of his divine heritage, of the temples that men consecrated to him, of his skill as an archer, and of his harmonious songs, Apollo decided to wear a crown. A crown that was neither from a vine, nor from an olive tree or an oak. He therefore looked for a new plant whose leaves he could use as a crown. He saw one (it was called a laurel), as it was waving in the wind, covering its stem with the green cloak of its foliage. Apollo took it in his hands. It seemed to him that the plant was trembling, and that there was even a heart beating inside it. He gave it the name of a woman: Daphne. After that, he cut off a garland, wrapped it around his head, and walked quite contentedly toward the festivities.

KANT’S DOVE (La Paloma de Kant)

Tired of all his efforts to prepare for the exams, a student jumped out into the patio, he stretched, and with the posture of a ballet dancer, attempted to make a long jump. But it was not very long. He felt like his legs were wearing chains and, turning toward a dove that he saw through the window, he commented with a smile:

“Oh, how well I could dance, if it weren’t for the law of gravity!”

“I have also protested that the air disturbs my effort to fly,” said the voice of the dove, “and you already know the lesson I received from Kant.”

“Yes, I have read Kant,” the student hastened to respond: “The swift dove, that passes through the air and feels its resistance, could imagine an airless space where he could fly with even greater speed and freedom.”

“I’ll bet,” the dove continued, “that Kant, like you and like me, also complained about obstacles. I’ll bet that he complained about the difficulties in the language he had to use. He must have also complained about the things, and his ideas about things, that resisted his effort to think. This had to be the reason why, in order to think, he decided to discard his world, and his human reason. His deductive type of reasoning was abandoned. He eliminated the impurities of his reality. His unreal “self”, therefore: is it not a golden dream, like his own discourse without language, like a ballet without gravitation, like my flight with no air?”

“Good for the dove!” exclaimed the student ballet dancer, and ventriloquist.

THE REVOLVER AND THE STARS (El Revólver y las Estrellas)

Cirilo was traveling through a dark and gloomy suburb of Buenos Aires. A sinister place full of garbage and potholes, so that he had to be very careful where he put his feet. As he passed through a vacant lot, he got a glimpse of the stars, but it was so short that he had no time to recognize them. Now it would be pointless to raise his eyes, because the street was covered with trees and he could only see a few stars through the branches. It didn't matter. He hadn't recognized any of the constellations, but it was enough to know that they were up there, moving across the sky. And there was no doubt that they were moving. If he managed to keep going without incident, when he came back through the vacant lot, he would look up there again: by that time Centaurus, The Southern Cross, and Orion, would have traveled through the sky across the pampa. Elemental astronomy. But the ceaseless movement of the constellations across the sky at night was extremely slow. He could verify that they had moved, but he could never actually see them moving. Perhaps, because the constellations were nearer to the First Unmoved Mover, or at least closer than men were, so that all they could do was to move slowly, and as they moved, communicate their movement to us. Eventually, their movement reached man, the most mobile creature of all, because man was the only one who was aware that he was moving. The constellations, grave, eternal, and senseless, were spinning. "I don't see them spin, because I am dizzy, a free, light-headed, neurotic, solitary mortal," Cirilo said, as he reached the corner of the mill. He smiled nervously, he scrutinized the darkness, and just in case, he took out his revolver.

THE WILLOW (El Sauce)

I walked through the park several times, because it was becoming interesting. At first, I thought the park had realized I was planning to write about it, but then I saw that it was not trying to interest me, but rather a painter, who was setting up his easel next to the blue of the sky and the lake, and was now dipping his brush into the green paint on his palette. I approached him from behind, very respectfully. He heard my footsteps, and without looking at me, and without ceasing to paint, he started talking:

"Yes, I know. You must be one of those typical, curious people who wonder why I am superfluously reproducing something that already exists. I could try to explain what I am doing. I could, for example, tell you that I am painting that willow tree like one plays or dreams, only to forget myself. Or that I am not painting that willow, but my vision of the willow. Or that I am painting in order to glorify God with one of His creations, a willow. Or that I am painting the willow in a way that other artists haven't been able to see it. Or that I am painting it for people from other countries, who have never seen a willow. Or that I am painting it because I can't resist painting it. Or that I am painting it because it makes me feel good, and I hope to awaken the same good feelings in others. Or that I am painting it in order to achieve one of many spiritual values through the medium of its color and shape. Or that it has asked me to paint it, because this willow is a vain creature,

because things change with the passage of time, and because it wants to be preserved for posterity. Or that I am painting the willow because...

"Your remarks," I interrupted, "are giving me a condensed history of the theories of art, and I thank you for that. The question I want to ask, however, would be much more simple. You are speaking of a willow: what willow?" and I looked at the green clusters on the canvas, and at the blueness of the lake and the sky which was vast and empty, without a single tree.

LYCAON (Licaón)

"At that time," Lycaon said to Callisto, "I ruled the forest. One night an old man appeared, and some shepherds began to worship him. The old man let himself be worshipped. "I have to test that man," I thought, "to see if he is a man or a god." I gave him human flesh to eat and was about to kill him, when the old man—who turned out to be Zeus—was furious, and struck me with a bolt of lightning. I escaped through the ruins of my palace, and started to run away through the forest. While I was running, hair began to grow all over my body, my hands were transformed into wolf paws, my mouth grew into a muzzle that was flecked with foam, and my curses sounded like howls. Since then, I am more violent than ever. I have never been happier. Everything is easier for me: my way of life not only has meaning, but it is also my destiny. That imbecile Zeus believed he would punish me by making my violence more violent, my strength more strong, and my bestiality more bestial. He would have punished me even more if he had changed my constitution and made me a god.

HINTS OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE (Esquemas de lo Posible)

After the the last one of the birds had died, the cage rose out of the patio, and began to fly through the sky. "He is coming to ask for forgiveness," the surprised angels thought.

*

The cat, Anthony, still preserved the memory of when he had been a man and, because of that, he was able to recall Cleopatra, who also vaguely remembered her previous existence as a cat.

*

Applause. Tapping. Songs. Laughter. If only he could see what was happening during the celebration! A prisoner inside the darkness of the guitar, he raised his eyes and looked at the large, round hole, and the only thing he could see were some enormous fingers that stretched out and plucked the strings.

*

He found a postcard in his pocket that he had never seen it before. It was not addressed to him. Someone must have put it in the wrong mailbox. Or was it because he was the mailbox?

*

They were speaking animatedly in the parlor.

“I don’t believe it,” Estela interrupted. Before that, she had been silent, because she still had not been born.

*

“I am different from what you are,” one ghost said to another, as they were seated on a divan in an old house. “I didn’t ever die; I started pretending I was a ghost, and this is what happened.”

*

Other amnesiacs forgot their name, their profession, and their family. Samuel forgot that, because he was a man, he could not fly: he jumped up in order to pluck a fig, and he kept on rising until he disappeared in the clouds.

*

“Yes, I killed it,” Rafael confessed when, having invited the priest to eat, he told them to bring the head of mutton that had been especially prepared for that occasion. When he removed the lid from the serving dish, he saw with horror that it was the head of a neighbor who the ground had swallowed years ago, and who had now returned under these very strange circumstances.

*

Uriel was able to use his hands and open the water like one opens a book: the water, without losing its fluidity, became separated into sheets which, with delicate fingers, he leafed through and looked at attentively with a smile on his face.

*

A bright space, containing Abel and everything else entered the mirror; it moved to the back and around the corners and came out again, leaving Abel inside the mirror.

From his confinement Abel said, “That brightness is not real, and it doesn’t let me see. It must be a piece of darkness: it only looks bright to me, because I am looking at it with weakened eyes.”

*

He ran and ran, and when he turned around what he saw was the Universe itself..., but from behind. Too late: without wanting to, he had crossed the point of no return. He could not retrace his steps and come back again. He would never again be able to see the universe from in front. And he kept on moving without knowing where he was going, now turning his back on the back of the Universe.

*

Nobody knew how the statues had spread the word through plazas, museums, temples, and palaces in faraway cities, but it was a general agreement. At the same time, they all let what they were wearing fall off—clothing, weapons, and even children—until they were completely naked. Those that had always been naked were shocked by this sudden shamelessness.

*

In just one second Calisto lost the reputation as a prophet which he had kept for many years. It happened when he tossed a carnation to a damsel who smiled at him as she was coming down the stairs of the palace. But the carnation shot out like bullet and went all the way through the bosom of the damsel, then passed through walls and ceilings and, finally, rose out of the ground and began to spin around the sun like a new born planet.

*

On one side of the road Clement saw a white cat; it was so white that it lit up the night which he had just entered. The cat and the man looked at each other. Clement who was quite tall and dark-skinned, saw that the cat was beginning to grow and become darker. The larger it grew, the weaker he became. When it was gigantic and completely black, the cat vanished into the night. Clement was left confused, and white.

*

The doctor said he didn't see anything abnormal.

"But doctor," the patient protested, "I don't have a heart, or a stomach, or lungs, or anything. All I have is a nervous system."

The doctor thought he was a hypochondriac. However, when he took X-rays he found that the man was completely empty: in the light that came through the blackened sheets was a shape that looked like a walnut tree with leaves and branches, and here and there a flower, above which was a huge nut.

FAME
(La Fama)

The poet saw her pass by in a hurry, and in a hurry he went after her and complained:
“And nothing for me? There, are all those other poets who are worth less than I am, whom you have distinguished. But what about me?”

Without stopping, Fame looked over her shoulder at the poet, and answered him while she hurried even faster:

“In exactly two years, at five o’clock in the afternoon, in the Library of Philosophy and Letters a young newspaper reporter will open the first book you published and will begin to make notes for a congratulatory study; and I promise you I will be there.”

“Ah, I will thank you so much!”

“Thank me now, because after two years, you will no longer be alive.”

THE PORTER
(El Portero)

Gustavo wanted to enter the palace for an urgent matter of business, but the porter stopped him, and told him to wait. Gustavo sat down in front of the porter and waited. In the meantime, people entered and left. As they did so they greeted the porter with smiles. Gustavo asked, timidly:

“And me?”

“Not yet.”

“Gustavo waited. He waited for weeks and months. One day the porter asked him to do him the favor of taking his place for a while. Then, in a while the porter came back.

On another day the porter repeated his request, but this time he disappeared and did not come back. Gustavo continued waiting. For weeks and months. The people who entered and left began to smile at him with increasing familiarity.

Gustavo finally began to realize that he was now the porter, and did not know whether he should allow himself to enter the palace where he still needed to deal with an urgent matter of business.

THE FALL
(La Caída)

Trying to imitate a dove (or perhaps to mock him), Ambrosio climbed up to the highest point of a skyscraper and, once he was there, he began to wave his arms like wings. When she saw him perched on the edge of an abyss, his girlfriend screamed. Surprised and startled, Ambrosio turned around, lost his balance, and fell. As he was falling, he thought that this was a flight, a flight downward like that of the archangel Gabriel, or of the constellation Orion, or at any rate, a flight. For once in his life he had really been

able to imitate a dove. "I am not heavy, and so far I'm all right," he said; the wind made him feel lighter, but as he began to fall faster, he realized he was going to crash headfirst into the asphalt pavement. But as time went by, he kept on falling and never crashed.

TOWARD ETERNITY (Hacia la Eternidad)

The angel put a hand on his shoulder and, with a silent gesture, gave him an indication that it was time to leave.

Still trying to get used to the idea that he was dead, Enrique began to follow the angel, while he looked fondly, for the last time, at the furniture in his room. As he looked through the window at the jacaranda blossoming on the patio, he asked:

"Where I am going now, will there be any jacarandas?"

"No," the angel answered, but after glancing through the window at the jacaranda, the angel added, condescendingly: "Well, from there you will be able to see this one here, as long as it lasts."

TIME (El Tiempo)

Time felt regretful when he saw what he had done to this poor man, who was covered with wrinkles, with white hair and no teeth, hunched over and arthritic. He decided to help him in some way. He passed his hand over everything that was in his home: furniture, books, paintings, dishes... After that the old man could live (during the rest of the time he still had) seeing the great value of his possessions, since they were now all priceless antiques.

*

When Time used to enter houses (the clocks saluted him ironically by sounding the hour) he would bathe in the consciousness of men. When men disappeared, Time saw that since there was no longer any consciousness, he would always have to flow like a dirty river, with all the extraneous memories they had left with him. Then he decided to flow into the river Lethe, in order to merge with its waters, and forget about himself.

THE END OF A SERENADE (Velorio de la Serenata)

Daniel dreamed that he was going back and forth between a labyrinth of images, and a labyrinth of sounds. A labyrinth of images: mirrors that widened like aquariums with a confused fleet of mercurial fish. A labyrinth of sounds: melodies with synchronized

notes, with cords in different keys that formed disconcerting aviaries where they were trapped. The agitation in these labyrinths was so extreme that Daniel eventually woke up. The clock said three o'clock in the morning! Still half asleep, he peered through the venetian blinds to see what it was that caused him to wake up. He saw the backs of some boys who, accompanied by an accordion and a guitar, were singing under a balcony on the sidewalk across the street. Seen in the glow of a streetlamp, the boys, who were completely caught up in their music, looked almost like ghosts: they were like other boys who had done the same thing and, at the same time were like others, who were like others, who were like others, until they were lost in the mystery of the night. In each one of these cycles the boys had always sung under a balcony, in a similar way. What was different in these cycles was the timing. First they sang each night, then for half a week, then once a week, once a month, once a year, once every five years, and once every ten years: the beats of a heart that was beating more and more slowly, until it finally stopped. Daniel remembered that, once when he was a child, he had witnessed a similar scene. When the boys finished their song, he understood that right here, in this place, the old Serenade had finally died, and that he had now been able to hear it for the last time. Respectfully, Daniel did not go back to sleep, and stayed up until dawn.

TOKYO (Tokio)

The poet Yuriwaka had lived for eighteen years in the same neighborhood. He knew that his was only one neighborhood, among the infinite number of neighborhoods in the universe; he knew that he was only one of the infinite number of men in one of the largest cities in the universe. Because he was timid, he feared his identity would be lost, and he tried to hold onto his neighborhood, as well as his identity. One night he had to go out. There was now a full moon. All the things that were lit by the light of the full moon were scorned by Yuriwaka, like things that the sun was incapable of illuminating. After walking a short distance, Yuriwaka was lost in a labyrinth of twisted streets without names, with an endless number of darkened houses. Finally, after wandering around for some time, as if by chance, he came across the little street he had been looking for: it looked yellow in the moonlight. As soon as he stepped into it, it was the moonstruck street that was lost.

MELUSINE AND HER NEST (Melusina y su Nidal)

Because of its bad reputation, almost everyone avoided entering that forest. Those who were fainthearted looked at it from afar and thought they saw an elf passing through it, and were frightened imagining there was a dragon lurking in its depths. There were, nevertheless, a few men who were attracted by the danger, and entered further and further into the trees.

Melusine counted on some men having this adventurous spirit.

After wandering for a long time, one courageous explorer was able to reach the river. Melusine was already there, bathing in the waters. She acted like she was surprised and, emerging from the water on the opposite bank, like a beautiful naked flash of light, she vanished among the trees. The man waded through the water and followed the woman's trail until he came to a palace. He entered and found her lying down, where they made love over and over. A lascivious glow lit up the room day and night, filling it with sweetness and music. She was insatiable, and replenished the man's energy with elixirs. Eventually, the man tired and was unable to continue responding to Melusine's charms. He told her he would like to leave the palace, "to take a rest and get a bit of fresh air."

"Through there," Melusine said, pointing to a marble doorway.

The man passed through the doorway, entered a patio, and was converted into a short, fat, flaccid snake. The entire patio was filled with short, fat, flaccid snakes that twisted around on top of each other.

ARGOS

While Zeus was telling a story, the other gods kept their eyes on him and were listening attentively to all that he said. Hermes envied the power the narrator exercised over his audience of multiple eyes. He was therefore happy, when he received a request to visit Argos. It was twilight when Hermes sat down on a meadow in front of Argos, whose huge head had a hundred eyes; he began to tell a story, flattered by the illusion that a vast audience was listening to him. But Hermes was not Zeus, and he suffered the greatest humiliation in his life when, one after another, the eyes began to close, and Argos fell asleep. Then, filled with anger, Hermes accepted the idea that he must be a creature of deeds and not words; he decapitated Argos with his sword, and over the meadow there was a night without stars.

THE GODS (Dioses)

From the benches we could only see the head of the preacher above the tall lectern: when he smiled, the tail of the smile stretched out on each side and went around to the back of his head, and severed it. The head said:

"Man does not know anything about God, and he gains nothing by trying to solve the insoluble problem of His existence, nor can he formulate a single theological proposition that really means something. But God exists. He exists outside of the awareness of man. The fact is that one of the perfections of God is His modesty: because of this admirable trait, when He created man, he did not permit Himself to be seen by him. You should have seen the modesty, the humility, with which He said, 'I don't exist,' when I happened to stumble across Him!"

Esteban said: “So the new physicists have come out with the theory that the universe was created in an instant with the explosion of an atom and then continued to expand? My faith is still unchangeable: for me it was God who caused the Big Bang, and that’s all there is to it. Then, they give us the theory that the universe was never created, and that it will never end because it is an endless vortex? With renewed faith, I answer that it is only natural that Creation participates in the same eternity as the Creator. As you see, there is nothing that is going to destroy my faith. The main thing that angers me is that these cosmologies ignore God when they try to explain the universe because, on doing that, they destroy the essential attribute of God, which is that He is an essential part of all the explanations of all the cosmologies.”

*

This madman does not have a feeling of guilt before God, but a feeling of resentment *against* God.

“God,” he said, “must have thought about it very carefully before making the decision to create the world. Creation was, therefore, the result of a meticulous thought process. He put an end to Chaos and gave origin to the Cosmos. But if He was the origin of everything, why then much later, did He accuse Adam and Eve of having committed the original sin? The sin of Adam and Eve was a secondary sin, and nothing very terrible. Paradise can not have been so wonderful: it took very little to destroy it! And why talk so much about all the other human peccadillos that followed? If we humans sin, it is only because God lets us. We don’t sin contrary to God’s will—nothing can happen against divine will—; it is God who sins against Himself by means of mankind. Why does He torment Himself? He wants to punish Himself for His own original sin: Creation.”

*

“Can you imagine how empty God would feel if men stopped thinking about Him?” the scholar said. “Before there were men, God was a Being without attributes: He was not eternal, nor ubiquitous, nor omniscient, nor all powerful, nor perfect, nor personal, nor transcendent. God was a Being, nothing more. But men who are full of themselves, cannot conceive of the absolute as something empty. Of necessity, we must fill it with our own nature. Ah, if we were only able to denature God! If, in a dizzy moment of ecstasy, we were able to empty ourselves and throw ourselves into the emptiness of God! If we did that, we would put our emptiness into the emptiness of God like a child takes his pencil and traces a zero over a zero that is already written. But consciousness, with so many voices and ideas that are within it, would not permit us to identify ourselves with God. It would, however, permit us to speak about God.”

*

“God,” said the old man, with a smile that trembled in his beard like a bird perched on the branch of a tree, “is much more complex than all the religions could ever comprehend or explain. He is a transcendent being, and everything depends on Him. But He is so different, and so superior, that human consciousness will never be able to imagine what

He is like. Sometimes, God stops being God. He extends himself, He multiplies, and changes form, so that He sees Himself and can come down to observe his own creatures, speak with some of them, and even intervene in their lives. It is only then, when God ceases to be God, that men can imagine what He is like, and then worship Him. When that happens, annoyed that He is being praised when He is not His best, God rises up and resumes His superior state of being in its fathomless absence. It is this absence of God that makes even the most religious men seem like we are atheists.

*

He had made several trips around the world preaching that the world is not round. So they could not say that he was contradicting himself, he added that these trips were not geodesic, but just plain geometry. He made a number of small jumps in order to show that, after being in the air for a second, he landed in the same place, not many kilometers from there, which showed that the earth was not moving. He then went on to say that the North Pole was in the center, and the South Pole was located on the edge, on a wall of ice that keeps boats from sliding into the abyss. His religion was also flat.

According to him, God was bound to an ice floe on the North Pole. He was a shy, nervous God who, on those boreal nights, filled the sky with the gods of his imagination, and believed in them more than in Himself. Afterward, like a novelist who was searching through the streets for his own characters, seeing himself as just a shadow of their bodies, this God looked through the sky for the gods He Himself had put there. Except that, since he was God and not a novelist, His creations had taken on a real existence. The gods who were conceived in this way were centered around the Pole Star, where they ignored each other, they envied each other, they admired each other, and they destroyed each other. They seemed like part of a family: their light had given them the appearance of God the Father. Some, having inherited His nervousness, searched around for another superior God. Those, who were most like God the Father were those who searched the most, and because they searched very far away, they were lost from sight and were forgotten. Others boasted of being the one and only god: they did not realize that the cause of their pride was that, when He imagined them God had seen them more clearly, with more affection and realism. God, remaining on the ice floe, continued supporting their existence as gods. And then he was humiliated when men, who had learned of the other gods, thought nothing of Him.

This is the Theology which was taught by the man who traveled around the world, preaching that the world is not round.

(End of Part Two)