

**ALEXIS IPARRAGUIRRE**

**NOT A FABLE**

**TRANSLATED BY EMILY TODER**

## Not a Fable

It ought to go something like this, although it isn't a fable: "A few years ago, a young man returned to his native city and inquired about a job with his former mentor, a freethinking liberal. The latter asked him about his recent employment in the neighboring town. The young man replied: 'I was a professor at a large, rural university that paid quite well. But the books of the prophets and the wise men were hidden away in a guarded chest sealed with seven locks because the professors feared their knowledge would corrupt the people. For that reason, I decided to resign my post and return to my native city.' His old mentor praised the idealistic act, extolled the indifference to money, and pledged to do all he could for his former disciple. A few days later, the young man learned that his mentor had offered his services to the neighboring university, the well-paying one, and naturally, was of no help to him in finding work in his native city." That's how I came to understand how the university worked in my country.

The fable, or what might be a fable, doesn't end there; it could go on to include further similar episodes, just as an album always has room for a few more photos. Some might throw in my own misfortunes: times I accepted posts for which I was overqualified, times I served over and over as teaching assistant on useless courses, times I monitored students, for miserable wages, verifying that they weren't copying one another during exams given at remote departments. Until I found out that my former mentor had grown too senile to carry on making any decisions, and that the new go-getting academics on the upswing amidst their downfall didn't understand quite what to do with the minor detail of their old debts, pranks, and betrayals. Then I went back to suffering all the ceremonies of a sluggish novice, and effectively did everything I never did the first time by virtue of youth. I was low-key when fellowships were awarded to unqualified favorites, kept quiet when preferences were expressed on the basis of sex, race, or political orientation, criticized others only behind their backs, in the civilly fervent manner of the young teachers getting into gear. In fact, one of the new academics, when faced with my cultivated dullness, pointed out enthusiastically that I'd matured.

I felt at peace, because after all, I'd been able to devote myself, at a meager – but stable – wage, to the two things that fulfilled me most: reading and teaching. I know that teaching requires a certain degree of idealism, and surely I believe that such a notion has stayed intact in the text of my classes (on occasion, text means truth, only sometimes lending it a posthumous, and therefore cowardly, nod). But, as is always the case, every paradise,

even those built in secret, has its serpent, and in this instance it came in the form of a little academic, that of one of my rotating bosses who gradually grew to understand what my old freethinking mentor had known all along: that false friendship wins more battles in rivalry, that rivals are best when they don't realize they're enemies, and that the only loyalty truly possible lies in a five-second smile and a firm handshake.

I won't spend too much time on her. But a little description is necessary in order to understand how I arrived at this point, at this slightly sinister professorial post, at a place of forced exile within the voluntary exile of the world which lives and breathes outside the university walls. The viper, with an almost genuine smile on certain sunny days, made an unexpected move. She managed to team up with old adversaries from the prehistoric era of formalist criticism on the basis of the promise of bigger budgets, resorted to the familiar kindness of old classmates who might support her in a series of elections, invited friends of hers out of their golden exiles to postulate to snazzy professors who embodied a blend of exoticism and novelty. And with the affirmative backing of dead dinosaurs, she achieved the readmission of the cast-out, and with the additional votes from the trusted ex-classmates, she achieved an overwhelming majority within the council of professors, to the extent that she was met with a prominence not seen even during the most lucid years of our senile patriarch who, by the by, retired with the title of emeritus professor and a sloppy kiss on the forehead. Then she arranged for excursions to fine eateries in an exquisite gesture towards her new star professors; she met ceaselessly with university presidents, deans, and various authorities, switching off between exhibiting a refined dexterity and integrity; and when even old colleagues from her college days complained of the subtle but nonstop emergence of the principal department heads around her person, and of the gang of ousted pop-academics, the chains of power were so solid in the hierarchies of the heavens and the earth, that it was all one could do to mimic her half-true smile when bidding her goodbye, all the while appreciating, intellectually, that she actually allowed one to carry on in her employ.

As far as I'm concerned, she owed me the same treatment. I was obliged to remain unruffled before all her imperfections borne of a fondness for power that the world's finest literature illustrates much better than I ever could. I had to ignore her cheesily bigoted and telenovela-inspired melodrama: the privilege and renown that she, in an old-fashioned manner somewhere between miserable and moving, bestowed upon the student with the foreign or noble-sounding last name, in the dolled-up garb and inflected drawl of a heavily made-up stepmother on General Hospital. I had to have more faith in poetic justice. Or in myself. Or in my own strategy, whereby my dullness blended right in with the dark walls

of the department halls, or at least stayed far enough away from her so that no indication of my opinion ever reached her.

I know that it didn't happen. I know that I haven't learned anything, as it's obvious that we can learn only very little once a certain temperament is fixed in our genes. Genes are also to blame for all of this. The fact is that very kindly, one summer afternoon, she told me that my professional training wasn't a good fit with what the department was promoting (I recall that she smiled patiently at my unease) and that, in any case, the prospect of my staying on was contingent upon my performance in an elective course offered at an insufferable hour, nine p.m., in a semi-dilapidated lecture hall, that somehow suited me on the basis of my "adherence to orthodoxy in these times of shocking revolution." In short, she assigned me a course in Spanish Meter and Rhythm, a subject so arcane as to drive the pop-scholars away, and which the students, spellbound by how sex and evil capitalists could be so relevant in the writings of El Quixote, never wanted to take. That is to say, it wasn't just an exile within a land of exile, but a slow and grueling death: eventually the course would disappear from the curriculum due to a lack of willing registrants, and I would be fired; it was only a matter of time. I must confess that I ended up appreciating the care which the viper, now looking like a satisfied anaconda, took with my execution (my old mentor, most likely, would have gone to such efforts only for someone of a higher status; but there's no denying that my boss exacted my punishment with a level of devotion of which only woman is capable).

I threw myself into preparing for my classes and reviving the old curse of Oldrich Bělič, who understood the nuanced music of Spanish feet that nobody appreciated anymore. Once all the metaphors for my situation had been explored, it was fine to die in uniform, right there, giving a lecture. I needn't say that I would impart my dignity with the greatest respect for my students, for their commitment to classic Spanish letters, their heartfelt melodies and ominous cacophonies. I don't think I write for any other reason. The tyrant has made me careless. Her final intervention was only an additional confirmation that my country's university, that my country itself, and my very genes, were as I'd always seen them: half-blind, and in pieces.

I met Mario Venza my first year and he was perhaps the most intelligent of them all. He had transferred from the Law program, a discipline his parents had futilely pressured him to pursue. In the end, he got out of it because he convinced himself that it wasn't quite his thing during a creative writing workshop that he took with Paco Trigoso, a former student who later told him about me. He went on faith. I don't know if the students went

on faith to the other literature classes that discussed the phallus, the vagina, and a host of symbolic penetrations. But this kid came on faith to mine. He started off almost rickety, with Rastafarian hairdo, but without disavowing his convictions, little by little he began to adapt to the shirt-and-pant combination in the palette of grays that we young professors typically avail ourselves of, more from a lack of imagination when it comes to fashion than on account of any pre-accorded understanding. In his first paper, he managed to figure out that a poem by Góngora to the city of Toledo presented a rhythmic regularity that configured, in a Cartesian diagram, an analogy with the plateau upon which the old Hispanic urbane sat. To me, his interpretation was exaggerated, but that was well in the spirit of a true researcher. We worked on a few Machado poems that required the detailed analysis of a rhythm which was highly unique but generally regarded as being slightly problematic (that is to say, predictable in terms of the poet's habitual lyricism). Whenever I left work from my office, which is where I always ended my classes with him, we'd go and have a coffee at García's, a little bohemian joint where everyone took me for a journalist because my tortoise-shell glasses seemed like something a show-biz paparazzo would wear and not just a pair of frames salvaged from my father's belongings, which of course they were. Venza was shy and, in the beginning, only spoke to me in variations of my own specialized old-fashioned half-Spanish, half-modern formalisms. But later he let loose a bit. He lived alone with his older brother, where the ways of rural life were carried on by both brothers in a little pension near the university. He liked poems because they sounded to him like mysteries whose charms rationally escaped him and which he tried to reproduce in his own verses, which he never entrusted me with (but I knew they existed, and his squinty, narrow eyes and beakish mouth eventually tried to express his will to share them with me, but there was never that translucent vibe in the air that forewarned of an imminent poetic confession). He had a cute and poor girlfriend who worked as a tightrope walker, like many lost youths who devote themselves to sword-swallowing or street performance. But she had to make money some way or another. It was a delight to see Venza when his dark black and brilliant eyes lit up while analyzing the poetic rhythms of the works of Góngora, his favorite. Góngora seemed to him an awfully intelligent priest, a true "little gem" who had "escaped all the while from the evils of the Church" to push buttons and to write "splendid and sad magic." Sometimes he would tell me, lost in thought: "But how does the beloved in Góngora turn into nothing," and I believe he was picturing, in his frequent pauses, his beautiful tightrope walker tumbling ever forward. He told me that one night, as if inspired by the nearing onset of a nervous fit, he detected that the Petrarchian poems of the national poet Ernesto Amézquita had copied certain metric and rhythmic structures which corresponded, respectively and alternatively, to the compositions of Francesco himself. That was going

to be his bachelor's thesis. He didn't wind up using it in the end, because one day he felt fear, a greater fear than usual, a tachycardia or just a horrible kind of exhaustion from so much reading or studying. Or maybe it was the ailment of poetry itself, on which such a great deal had already been written, which exposed him as a sickly man, or perhaps a more lucid one. The fact is that the panic came over him after hours of thinking, surrounded by poems, just before the dawn. I still have his papers, and I can't accept that the solution for Venza's blend of audacity and shyness, of brilliance and submission, was that sad fact, that coarse and uncouth act of spending the entire day in bed out of photophobia, agoraphobia, or side effects suffered from copious doses of pharmacological drugs. I still remember when he wanted to buy my coffees for me but didn't have any money. The truth is he never hallucinated or heard any voices. It was just that he was "afraid... of understanding more," he told me, the time I went to see him, and he was skinnier than ever, and much quieter. "In poetry there was a secret that I couldn't see clearly anymore," he told me. "I understand it, but it makes me too frightened." He was almost crying. I, to be frank, only half understood.

Samanta Varas showed up in the fifth year (it seems incredible that the course could carry on with a mere half a dozen literature students sitting around at midnight, but so it was). I saw right from the beginning that she couldn't care less about meter and rhyme, she just wanted to see how poetry could be distilled in its purest state. She had registered for the course because she'd been told that I was the only one who'd be able to explain how poems came to be, unlike the others, who talked about Marx's balls or the small alpha object (the nickname they'd given to the Lacanian professor for his discreet stature and dependence on platform shoes). Really, her mistake was displaying a surprising ingenuity in how much she believed in the power of verse to rouse people, and in fact, she emotionally broke down from the work of Blake, whose poems I was able to include in the syllabus, by dint of pleading and conceit, when we were stuck on some anomalous French poetic foot, or perhaps it was English, by some minor author from the Generation of '27. She managed it by embellishing her former Anglican school student sweetness with a Goth-girl style, enhanced by an Egyptian cross necklace, an ashen paleness, and strokes of eyeliner that thickened the leonine lines of her eyes. She was intentionally clumsy when assigning merit to a certain poem by Calderón; when he was good, it was "What a motherfucker"; and Lope, "So fucking hot"; and Lorca, "Damn that shit's fine"; and Pedro Salinas, "I'll take it lying down any day of the week." But more than the street-savvy posturing, what prevailed in Samanta was that desire to share an experience that seemed to touch her only through extreme effusions of pleasure, which she delivered with every good poem we read before proceeding with her formal analysis. Later she'd lose herself rifling through her little books

of visionary English verse which was, without fail, the arbitrary conclusion which all my explanations led her to. To confront it directly, and without changing the subject, I introduced her to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and on a whim, expounded my theory on their rhythmical innovations (it was undoubtedly a weird class, particularly for those expecting the articulate analysis of Bécquer, as promised on the course syllabus). But I managed to capture her attention for the class and for myself in an absorbing manner when I referred to the project of representing Nothingness in a collection of Mallarmé's sonnets. Then she enrolled in intensive French courses, she told me, and she read the complete works of the poet, meditating deeply on the Nothingness in each of his verses. She was also roused by efforts to spot a certain constellation described in those short songs that aspired to extract even space and time from the world. Her candor moved me, with that sickly tenderness that often drives men of letters straight into states of platonic enchantment. If nothing ever happened, it's because, one, I was her professor, and two, I preferred to think myself well beyond achieving any state of infatuation after having read tons of novels to the point of absolute boredom and knowing that that kind of attractive girl in all her defenselessness and vitality was already a known entity: she was half Natasha Rostov and half Nadja, with a little bit of the La Maga from Cortázar (or I fell in love with the young and wild Samanta. Who am I kidding. But I did so at an age at which one knows very well that such a mental effusion is useless, an age at which one can see love as no more than a flare of light that sparks and trembles in the shaky hand of a diabetic, before the limb is irremediably amputated). We ended up becoming good friends because Samanta had a job working as a seller at an enormous bookstore that was impossible to avoid, and while I looked for books she talked to me about Swedenborg's angels, about Mallarmé's pytx sonnet, about how maybe she was better off falling for girls who attracted her awfully in her lonely nights when she lay between her Winnie-the-Pooh sheets, about how horribly frustrated she was that she couldn't sit down and write the beautiful verses that she heard as clear as kettle drums in her heart and mind, but that she was trying to live as though her entire life were a poem, because she wanted that to be her only and vibrant work of art. She also told me she was nervous because, as is often the case with a big bookstore, most of the university students would steal the books and the managers, guided by a keen sense of the abundantly obvious, thought her suspect and had her under strict supervision. Naturally, she was the thief, but it didn't occur to me consciously then because Samanta left me no time to think: she'd go on about her musician boyfriend who played keyboard like Chick Corea and her lesbian lover who was the most beautiful Palestinian Arab in town, and the nude health spas of the legendary south, and what did I think about drag queens, being the García Lorca expert that I was. The only time she slowed down a bit was when I asked her about her

family. She would switch off between explaining that she was very happy with dad, mom and her two brothers, or that she was terribly cursed by her step-father, a fat clumsy man of dark coats who went to pick her up at the gates of the university when it got to be late at night and whom the class had nicknamed Umberto Eco. The fact is, one day when she failed to finish the exam and stayed after in the classroom grumbling on about her own slacking, she ended up confessing to me, perhaps in a call for help, or as an onslaught of sincerity, or maybe as an act of pure exhibitionism, that her biological father had been a cocaine addict. He had died of cardiac complications when she was twelve and they lived in a happy Portuguese city with beaches and thousands of different ethnic groups, and that her step-father had appeared in her room at midnight to molest her, or she had tempted him when she'd first met him, she admitted to the contradiction, to show that she was an adolescent with an uninhibited sense of sexuality, but, be that as it may, now he disgusted her, and he never failed to appear at midnight, and threatened to walk out on her mother if she didn't let him touch her or if she told anyone. That idea seemed awful to her and she'd thought it over about a million times, not so much as a conscious notion, but rather as a sensation that sometimes manifested itself in an electric numbness or in chest palpitations, or simply threw her into states of anxiety that forced her to crawl out and hide under the bed. On one occasion, when she was going out and getting dressed and taking ice-cold showers, she told me, she felt as though someone had stolen her feelings and stowed them on the other side of glass shower door. The rest of the day she read English and American poetry, or French, or she studied for my course on Meter and Rhythm without much interest, and later she went to work or went out dancing, but, another time, in the nightclub full of lights and lovers, life seemed like a movie to her, playing itself out in an empty theater. In that state, she sabotaged my course at her whim, listening intently to the images that led her adrift, as they issued from the mouths of others, and repeating them to herself in faint whispers, leading her still further astray. A single verse by Aleixandre could bring her into the stratosphere: "In your beating mouth his sky-blue quill." She relished them. But the rest of the day was devoid of images at all as potent, and her project of making her life into a poem was of lower priority because the beauty of her life of meditation, transgressions, and astonishments, seemed too instantaneous or suppressed by pain's control, or by the pain's imperfection. Besides, the kettle drums in her head had no more verses in them, they were intolerable echoes in her chest and only kept her up at night, as did the fingering of her step-father or the trembling which was itself an uncontrollable fright. At last, in her despair, she ended up drinking a bottle of toilet cleaner. "It will be a party of liquid phonemes," she scribbled in a written exam for the course and for me, but damn me to hell if I had any idea then of what I know now. She also wrote that poetry was rotten somehow



or had something wrong with it, and when I reread that after finding everything out, it wasn't only as though my quaking, flare-laden limb had been amputated, but a fair chunk of my mind, as well.

Miguel Kuwae took my course in the seventh year, after two years of classes without Samanta, in which everything was at first a blur to me, then a fog, the kind from which voices and even whole topics emerge, but certainly nothing human. I taught year after year using the same tattered notes and I myself grew sick of delivering monologues in class (my lectures during those years were far from inspiring enthusiasm, to say nothing of attracting avid followers). But Miguel Kuwae renewed some sense of brilliance in me, from his mere apparition alone, because it was immediately evident that he hadn't come to learn anything. He was ten years older than the average student in class and had finished his degree five years earlier. If he hadn't been my student before, it's likely because the gang of exiled pop-academics had lured him into graduate programs whose names were unpronounceable, with the promise of letters of recommendation, taking care to artfully dissuade him from taking any courses featuring the dinosaurs of formalist criticism or the like, hoping to save him from falling into such a mistake. He had lived abroad for five years, in a teeming metropolis of underground subways that stopped up dark tunnels, with tumults of people emerging from stations bisected diagonally by a sort of daylight which didn't seem to come quite from the sun, but rather from some alien star. On top of all this, he felt little empathy for anyone because his new graduate classmates didn't want to know a thing about literature outside of class, while he was himself propelled by an insatiable passion for poetic expression. In addition, his university was set in the middle of a meticulous city grid packed with bars where one had to drink like a fish in order to simply participate in a society that taught one nothing. Plus, he was trying to save money. He lived outside of the student housing because it was expensive, even with his fellowship (in a city that unpredictable, it was the norm to be only partially funded). Before bed, he read Whitman, or Faulkner or Miller, because he thought he'd likely be able to understand that country better by getting to know the works of the geniuses of its native tongue. He failed, however, with each attempt, because his level of literary English was a bit poor and because his housemates were amateur rappers who liked to freestyle into the early-morning hours, and his own Dominican landlady, trapped in the misery of charging rent, was in the habit of hosting raucous parties on any given Saturday. In the context of that routine, the seminars of his graduate program quickly became an amorphous blob of images and voices that seemed ever-fleeting, and most of his time was spent traipsing through the sudden snowfall only to arrive abruptly at empty dining halls, wondering what the hell he was doing there, why he wasn't warm and cozy at home, like everybody else, with their brothers and sisters and parents.

“I gave in to stupefaction,” Kuwae told me. In my classes on Meter and Rhythm, he delivered spontaneous and subtle reflections on the poetry of Whitman and Vallejo while taking long drags on his cigarette, which I didn’t prohibit because honestly, using tobacco seemed just as stupid to me as not using it (the students, like me, paid more attention to Kuwae’s musings; he thought that avant-garde poetry ought to contain the tight coherence that he introduced in his analysis; most times I was unable to follow him, but on certain occasions, the metaphors he used approached the most illuminating of hypotheses). He told me that in order to not understand himself, or to not lose himself, he’d tire himself out walking up and down the streets in the heart of the party-going city (amongst 500-inch screens, multitudinous 50-block parks and a half a dozen gentlemen’s clubs). He spent money he didn’t have to forget himself in the rooms of washed-out over-stylized nudists from Eastern Europe and sharp, eloquent ones from Southeast Asia. He even found confirmation, which the days had instilled in him, that losing himself was like being stuck in a traffic jam that delivers you to the same spot, because the sensitive contortionist whose body he chose to fondle was obsessed with whispering the writings of Whitman. She wasn’t a day over twenty-five, he later learned, she had left India a few years prior and had studied Old English, for beginners, purely for the pleasure of the sound of its verse. That was the most unusual thing about her, because aside from the poems, she had almost nothing whatsoever to say, and she focused on the bare necessities: food, money, and clothing. It seemed only natural to Kuwae when she told him that she loved taking Cloud Nine because the verses always kept better tempo when they were reverberating without other distractions in her head. The animal brain freed her of her inhibition, the most primitive part of the animal brain, it produced a mounting perspiration and a need to walk quickly around in circles. And then both of them would take their clothes off, because the heat gave way to a reciprocal suffocation, and they ran around throwing their clothes all over the place, out of the irrepressible desire to simply move around. And they recited Whitman’s Song of Myself like dueling rivals. Kuwae screamed softly whole passages of its verses. They crawled up the walls of a room in whose center their eyes met, at the same time scattering their glances any which way, as though hunting antelopes or toads. And the Indian girl would read from Leaves of Grass without missing a beat, taking it in as if she was earning a degree in it, in that or in talking. “You understand?” she asked him. “One’s-self I sing, a simple separate person!” And he understood. Vociferous multitudes rose up from the poem.

“A work by Picasso or Juan Gris,” Kuwae noted. “Each voice had its own unique, distinctive rhythmical sequence.” He was returning to the room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art on that other planet which was the graduate land of exile, his fifth visit, so that he could learn

the marvel by heart. The first time he mentioned it, I wasn't sure if he was serious or if he was just a victim of loneliness, or of addiction, or of love for the nudist Indian and of general stupefaction, but it was completely reasonable when one recalled that Whitman, on more than one occasion, wrote that in his verses, he was singing to the multitudes he contained within him. Kuwae explained that the voices sang in unison, but each was unique, like the planes traced by a Cubist, and that the meeting of a glance, like the blending of different voices, produced a chorus identical to that of a symphonic hymn. He did not ignore the fact that affirming as much was almost akin to suggesting that any rhythmical analysis made previously lacked any basis. He was experiencing time in the frenzied way it sped by in the halls of the Metropolitan. He saw in the poems an invisible polyphony that multiplied itself in verses composed deliberately like works by Picasso or Juan Gris. He introduced me to the nudist at a little table at García's, one day after class. He said she was his partner or his wife, or his escape to poetry without anyone after we read César Vallejo's *Trilce*. "In those poems, he made everything up," I explained to them. He held his Indian's hand. Vallejo had put himself in the center of a cube called reality and discerned various scenes without actually separating them: a claustrophobic prison, an isle on which the sun sets, a bird in the fog of the sea. "Pure Cubism," noted Kuwae. "Just some of the poems," I corrected him. "Let's the three of us read *Trilce* in unison," he said, squeezing his Indian's hand. The idea was simple: just reading it aloud with our three voices would unleash all the resonance of the multitudes in each of the three planes. "*Trilce*, just as Vallejo imagined it." And every echo of that time went motionless into the room that Kuwae shared with his partner. Cloud Nine, cigars, the four whitening walls of the cell. How was it possible? I myself didn't even care. And under the effects of Cloud Nine, an almost unknowable synchronicity in thinking and speaking came about. Perhaps it was poetry at the center of life at last, in some way? And the three of us with the power to utter it and enjoy it. Or was it just a hallucination induced by Cloud Nine? For practical purposes, it didn't matter. In that room that two poor lovers used only to read in, we shouted in unison that the future was made of montages, close-ups and panoramic shots, lines inhabited by rain, by thousands of voices of a strange and unknown people. Lacking all control, we shared the poetry of the brute. Soaked, like Vallejo says, "in the water that stokes all fires." "This piano travels within," we crooned in the whirlwind of rain of a thousand fingers, of a thousand bodies. We could perceive that Vallejo was talking about us when he presaged a glass that waited to be drunk from by a coming mouth. That mouth was our mouth. And the glass was the poem that lay clearly in the future and that had finally arrived, today. But the future was ending as well. The last poem came in an instant. "And then what?" asked the Indian, and asked Kuwae. I didn't pause for a second: "Spain, take this cup from me," I told them. "Vallejo writes for the new

man who vanquishes death because it is all men at once.” That’s what it was, or so I wanted to think, or Cloud Nine was allowing me to understand that that’s what was happening in those poems with a greater lucidity than I’d had in all my years of teaching: Vallejo had chosen, in Spain, each sound, each word in each verse as if it were a complete and perfect thesis in and of itself, and the next verse, the next word, the next sound, as though it were its antithesis, and the result in the new verse was the complete synthesis of the new word, of the sound, of the new man, which in turn was the thesis of the next verse, of the next word, of the next sound, of a new man dialectically always superior to the anterior. It was an ascent of glances that could cross all conceivable voices and planes in all their teeming variety!

“Volunteer of Spain, militiaman,” we called out to the new man, “of trustworthy bones, when your heart marches off to die.” But that night, nobody came. Nor the next night. Nor in the naked mind that shot potent glances at the infinity of rafters holding up the darkened room. “Poetry doesn’t fail,” said Kuwae. However, we were still on the edge of darkness. We were the same, the same voices, the same vertiginous confinement of rhythms. The difference, and it couldn’t be anything else, was the potency of the songs. They were simply shocking. The poem flung our voices afar. Kuwae was the first to realize. We weren’t quite naked enough. We still hadn’t lived off the same marrow of the brain like the brute, and the vestiges of a domesticated human consciousness were impeding our access to the vision of the poem in all its purity, a vision of the new human being. We had to break free of all that residue. The next night, Kuwae increased the dose of Cloud Nine and recited Vallejo’s last poem and it wasn’t as though a veil had fallen, but more like a quick and precise movement. He had the vision of the bird, the instinct to hunt, the sensation of the vociferous cannibal, and the thirst for water undrunk, of the mind uncorrupted. It was with that movement that he drove into the middle of the Indian’s face the kitchen knife that had been left on the table, and then used it for leverage, and burst it open, and chewed up her sphenoids, and swallowed her tongue, and chomped hard on her bone and conjunctive tissue, and he choked on her brains until finally taking deep breaths and almost suffocating on the sacs of coagulated blood that had emerged from the pressure. Then he ran to the kitchen. Smashing the cabinets to bits, he found a meat cleaver and drove it swinging into his forehead.

That same night, Mario Venza threw himself out of the ninth floor of the clinic in which he lived murmuring.

That night I wasn't with Kuwae because I had to go back to my classes. I had almost abandoned them, but the survival instinct drove me to hold onto them because a nebulous anxiety like mine called for a malleable beneficiary. My classes had always been for me like a fundamental room, even more than the little room for Kuwae's rhythmical delirium. In this other room, my bones were docile: I expanded, I contracted, I dilated, I seemed to pass out and then again I swelled. I was overinflated like a balloon blown up by a mischievous, invisible child, perhaps the child was in fact myself, or even poetry. The room always saved me and it also saved me from that night, after which all the organs of my body did a 180. I hadn't been able to look anywhere without seeing the panicked expression of death, but I had just stopped giving my class and the rhymes were rhythms, just for a few more hours. The administrative assistant who gave me the abominable, incomprehensible, latest gossip, went back to her desk. The other details I know by way of the cultured psychosis of the trifles of the sensationalist press of my country, of its police, which drops information and leaks sensational photos strategically in exchange for grisly crime tips. And they return like the atmosphere of a surgical intervention in the midst of a battlefield. That night, I took a cab home. In the morning, I still didn't understand, I couldn't hold onto any part of the scene of the crime, which I believed I'd experienced with complete abundance, with joy, or with the miracle of the verses themselves. But I gave my class. I received the new day with an anxiety which grew in time with the light, but without any expectations. I got dressed and headed to the university. I was told that the viper who was my boss, that victorious anaconda, wanted to see me immediately. I walked towards the administrative building with a chill in my spine. She received me, equipped with an arsenal of arms for Armageddon, I foresaw it all, or what in her understanding she had on deck, the smile for the sunny day. Her tone progressively shifted into nuances of cordiality and she admitted to a professional solvency. My classes had acquired questionable standing at the university. It wasn't that my approach was conservative, she explained. But she couldn't ignore the lamentable amount of guys registered in my course who'd made fatal decisions. These kids are impressionable, and I understand that you have nothing to do with it; I even realize that your conversations with some of them in that passé little café are part of the anecdotal university experience that old-school professors tend to have, and which young romantics feel the need to cultivate. But they aren't advisable, because the kids have a tendency to conflate the study of poetry with their own personal troubles. The students lose sight of the fact that the study of literature is a professional track, and not a sentimental journey. I find it hideous that that girl Samanta, the niece of the poet Sandra Varas, my friend, ended up believing in hallucinations that arose from an overactive imagination. And that boy Miguel, who was so promising, and came to us so highly recommended by Danielle Protheroe, my graduate professor at the

New School, how could he have committed such an atrocity. This morning I had to deal with police officers who wanted to see you for questioning. Luckily, you know how criminal investigation works in this country, and the name of our university does hold some weight. But I'm sure you'll understand that it's rather inconvenient for both the department and for yourself to maintain any relations that lend themselves to such suspicions.

Of course I understood. I had broken out in a cold sweat. It was moving to see how she emphasized the most ridiculous aspects of it all. Her oration was a hodgepodge of clichés and prejudices. Characteristically, she left out any mention of Mario Venza, who we both knew was nobody's relative or friend (I went to his funeral, and saw his tightrope-walking girlfriend, who had fallen into a nothingness, of which he used to speak, and now inhabited. Or was it a conscious fear of poetry?) And in the half-light of words that never appealed to reason nor led to any requests, my boss was magnificent: she exposed the possible consequences of my insubordination and laid out the threats of ordinary slander. I signed the resignation papers she handed to me with an emotional convulsion. But I had nothing to complain about. The pencil ran across the page mechanically bidding my farewell of its own accord. But I had always known. That's how these things work. Perhaps I'd nourished the illusion (no, I definitely believed it) that, if sent to my lonely building to give my classes in my own way, they'd leave me alone. But I knew that all my actions and my classes were devoid of reason, even if they led every now and then to that sensation of mutilation and to all those dead kids.

While I headed home through that confusing city behind my eyes, like the emotion and impetus of the classes, I was sure that I was experiencing what Samanta had told me about before dying, that my feelings were hanging on the other side of a glass shower door, plainly visible but still out of reach. I wanted to sneak into the first open door and I realized that nothing was working properly. Was this, in the end, photophobia, agoraphobia, the disease of poetry? I don't know how I got home with one leg trembling frenetically and one eye completely out of focus, with an electric current that ran from the base of my spine to the tip of my cranium.

The fable would go like that, but this isn't a fable: "The middle-aged teacher who didn't believe in wise men nor in the books of wise men but rather in the gold of kings and in the grand mirrors of courts, or in the tight-fisted shine of the skin of noblemen receiving the visit of the young professor who returns after being sold at a slave auction, or traded to butchers getting ready to feed the beasts in the pens of the coliseum. The young professor

explained that he had returned thanks to those wise men, and to madness. She thought it was a nightmare from which she'd soon wake up. He woke her up with a dry bullet to the head and explained that it was the revenge of the God of Poets." But it didn't go like that. It would be fitting, but I'm not like that, and the fable should have a bit more truth to it, like genes or like the imaginations of my dead kids. Like Samanta, whose voice I sometimes hear from afar, in a static early morning, as I write this memorial. The fable should say that there is no such thing as poetic justice, or that its pursuit is violent or thoughtless, depending on who's watching. But it's not a fable, or it would have to be a wholly new kind of fable, one which captures the movement of the present. The young professor wouldn't be so young, he should have a PhD in unpronounceable matters, wear platform shoes, and be known as the little alpha object. And she would receive him with the welcoming smile she bestows on all her favorites. But he had just arisen from a bad bender, and had pledged himself a radical Communist before the feces amongst his Lacanian friends in a bar with art deco lighting, and the DTs had given him all he needed to go, with a loaded gun, to kill that ugly and mediocre woman, whom he had served only because she'd paid attention to his fantasies, omitting that he was good for nothing when it came to everything else, and that any civilized country on earth would have only granted him a guaranteed slow and starving death.