Childhood

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Sao Bernardo

Graciliano Ramos

Childhood

Translated from the Portuguese
by Celso de Oliveira
and with an Introduction by
Ashley Brown

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Graciliano Ramos, the author of *Childhood,* was born on 27 October, 1892, at Quebrângulo in the interior of the Brazilian state of Alagoas.

His father, Sebastiao Ramos de Oliveira, was from the middle class: a small merchant of Portuguese extraction. It was his mistake to set up as a cattle rancher in the terribly uncertain conditions of the North-east. Accordingly Ramos was taken as an infant to his maternal grandparents' ranch in the neighbouring state of Pernambuco, and that is where *Childhood* begins. Within a few years his father was all but ruined by one of the droughts that occur periodically in the *sertao* or backlands, and at this point the family settled briefly in Buíque, a small town that is vividly evoked in this book. In 1900 they returned to Alagoas, this time to the municipality of Viçosa. *Childhood* ends about 1904, which also marks the end of Ramos' primary education.

The boy continued his schooling at Maceió, the capital of Alagoas, but this lasted only a short time, and he returned to Viçosa, where he had to educate himself. It is interesting to know that he read Dostoevsky in this remote place at such an early date; Zola and even the Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz seem unlikely enough. What is really remarkable is that he hoped to be a novelist from the age of twelve and managed to sustain this ambition through the most unpromising circumstances.

In 1910 the family moved again to the *sertao,* this time to a small town called Palmeira dos Indios in Alagoas, which was to be Ramos' home until 1930. Around 1915, rebelling against his family, he went to Rio de Janeiro to work as a journalist, but he failed in this career and returned, no doubt in humiliation, to Palmeira. He became a merchant, like his forebears, and went into politics. By the end of the 1920s he was mayor of the community, thus repeating another phase of his father's life (his father, as we learn in *Childhood,* was at one time a judge in Viçosa). As a public figure he was incorruptible, and the legendary account of his emergence into literature turns on

this fact. It seems that one of his municipal reports, sent to the state government, greatly impressed the authorities with its honesty of statement and simple precision of language. (Official Portuguese is apt to be ornate and anything but colloquial.) The small fame he gained from this drew him to the attention of the businessman-poet Augusto Frederico Schmidt in Rio de Janeiro, and his first novel, *Caetés,* which had been finished since 1928, was eventually published through Schmidt's auspices in 1933.

Graciliano Ramos was not yet prepared to retire from his public career. In 1930 he went to Maceió to become director of the Alagoas state press. Two years later he returned briefly to Palmeira to establish a school and write the first chapters of his novel *Sao Bernardo,* and in 1933, back in Maceió, he was appointed state director of public instruction. After the publication of *Sao Bernardo* in 1934 he had a considerable reputation in literary circles in Rio and Sao Paulo, but there is no reason to think he would have given up his post in Alagoas. The mid-'thirties, however, were a dangerous period in Brazilian public life. It was the era of Getulio Vargas' dictatorship, and men in high office were frequently denounced and arrested. In 1936 Graciliano Ramos was dismissed, incarcerated in a prison ship, and sent to Rio, where he was held in prison without trial for some time. In the same year his novel *Anguish* was published.

He was released in circumstances as mysterious as those surrounding his imprisonment. His health ruined, he emerged to a sad and uncertain existence in Rio, and then, astonishingly, he was given an appointment as a federal inspector of education. By this time (1938) his last and best-known novel, *Barren Lives,* had been published, and he was generally recognized as one of Brazil's outstanding writers. But he wrote only one more work of the first rank, *Childhood,* which came out in 1945. As a professional writer, he could turn his hand to a variety of genres; his minor works include children's books, short stories, a travel book about Eastern Europe, literary journalism, and a two-volume account of his imprisonment. (Most of these were published posthumously.) He died in 1953, greatly honoured by official Brazil. Today one of the lecture rooms in the University of Rio de Janeiro is called the 'Sala Graciliano Ramos', and almost every university student has read *Barren Lives* in preparation for his entrance examinations. Graciliano Ramos' books have by now gone through many editions in Brazil and they have been translated into at least ten languages. It was, despite its sadness, a successful career.

The Brazilian North-east of Graciliano Ramos' youth was not a literary centre. To say this is not to criticize it. Rather surprisingly, there has been no outstanding novelist from either Rio or Sao Paulo for many years, not since the death of Machado de Assis in 1908. (Poets, on the other hand, usually are drawn to Rio if they haven't been born there.) The two metropolitan centres would seem to have every advantage that Brazil can offer, and Sao Paulo especially has been the scene of a great historic change: not too long ago a small city whose chief concern was the marketing of coffee, it is now the largest industrial complex in South America. But as we know in the United States, literary achievement does not always follow industrial wealth. Since about 1930 a group of novelists in the North-east, including José Lins do Rêgo (1901-1957), Rachel de Queiroz (1910-), and Jorge Amado (1912-), as well as Graciliano Ramos, have been important.

This is the part of Brazil which most resembles the South in the United States – say the coastal plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana falling away towards the dry lands of Texas and Oklahoma. Salvador, the old colonial capital, recalls New Orleans in various ways (cooking, architecture, popular culture), and nothing reminds you more of Louisiana than the oil-drilling operations along the Bahían coast. In the North-east the plantation economy has been slowly deteriorating for several generations now, and the 'new men' have challenged the power of the old patriarchs and their system without necessarily improving things. In short, we have a situation similar to that in the American South during the 1930s, the Agrarian decade, when novelists as different as Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell and Caroline Gordon dramatized the regional crisis.

In 1954 an American scholar, Fred P. Ellison, published a very useful study of the literary *nordestinos* in *Brazil's New Novel.* Professor Ellison is perhaps too generous in his praise of this regional movement. He has a way of separating the 'sociology' from the 'psychology' which is not altogether convincing. A novel of permanent value should never have to be justified according to its documentation, and I think it likely, according to Professor Ellison's own account, that many of the novels of the North-east have only this interest – they are 'about' a certain phase of Brazilian history. Critics and readers in Rio and Sao Paulo were, as they should have been, shocked by the revelations of social failure – starvation, brutality, and ignorance on every hand. But the sociological (not to say the didactic) intentions of some of these writers often flaw their work. I should exempt Graciliano Ramos entirely from this criticism.

His four novels exhibit a masterly development of form; one might say that in each case the subject is discovered *through* the form. In *Caetés* the narrator, Joao Valério, is writing a historical novel about the Caeté Indians, who lived in Alagoas at the time of the Portuguese conquest; cannibals, they were said to have devoured the first bishop of Brazil. (Ralph Edward Dimmock, the translator of *Barren Lives,* notes that Graciliano Ramos may have borrowed the device of the historical novel from Eça de Queiroz.) But Joao Valério abandons his work; he rightly claims that he cannot fathom the savage mind. And as the novel proceeds, he thinks that *he* is a savage. Graciliano Ramos actually sets his story in Palmeira dos Indios. The action has Joao Valério, a clerk in a store, starting an affair with Luisa, the wife of his employer and friend Adriao Teixeira. During her husband's absence she gives herself to Joao. When the husband is informed of this he commits suicide. The unscrupulous Joao and Luisa, however, discover that they no longer have any use for each other and they part. To mention Eça de Queiroz is perhaps to think of his master Flaubert, and indeed this novel is a kind of *Madame Bovary,* if one could imagine the story told from the point of view of one of Emma's lovers. It is, in the last analysis, the drama of a mind, and the perspective afforded by the abandoned historical novel gives us just the ironic complication that we need to see the savagery that cuts across civilized values. Technically, at least, this is as advanced as Conrad; certainly it is no mean achievement for a first novel, and it will not quite do to say, with Professor Ellison, that 'There is no sustained interest in the sociological'.

Sao Bernardo also has a strong-minded narrator, Paulo Honório, a poor youth who aspires to become the owner of Sao Bernardo, the plantation where he was once a labourer. He achieves his end through the most extreme methods, including murder. (The novel is set near Viçosa, whose brutality is sardonically described in *Childhood.*) The complication here comes with his marriage to a young schoolteacher, Madalena, a woman quite unlike himself. Eventually his cruel and jealous nature proves too much for her (he imagines that she, in her despair, is betraying him with the former owner of Sao Bernardo), and she poisons herself. The novel is really about his attempt to come to terms with his life, which he tries to put down in a narrative. Unlike the protagonist of *Caetés,* he has no historical imagination; he has to face himself with the utmost candour.

If this novel is more characteristic of Graciliano Ramos, that may be because the style is closer to the vernacular. I have heard Brazilians describe him as *sêco,* which means not 'dry' or 'barren' in this case

but something like 'laconic'. The language is pruned away sometimes to the bare utterance, dialogue is gradually abandoned (in *Childhood* it hardly appears), the sentences are often remarkably short for Portuguese. Certainly by the time he wrote *Sao Bernardo* Ramos had taken the language of prose fiction some distance from the ironic inflections of Machado de Assis, and perhaps his importance for the Brazilian novel was that he showed how it could proceed without being dependent on the stylistic devices of the late nineteenth century. In this respect he resembles Hemingway.

The most extraordinary of the novels, and the masterpiece in my opinion, is *Anguish* (*Angústia*). Here Graciliano Ramos shows himself to be the Brazilian writer who has most successfully absorbed certain technical devices of the modern European novel, for instance the 'interior monologue'. But he must also be indebted to Machado de Assis (especially in *Dom Casmurro*), who, by concentrating on a single consciousness and its shifting contradictory moods, brings us to the centre of a psychological drama. (The difference between them, however, is that Machado de Assis, like many great comic writers, plays a game with the reader about the illusion of his art.) Thus *Anguish* is not only the story of Luís da Silva, it is the projection of his paranoia as it draws him towards insanity. His early experience, involving the ruin of a way of life on the family plantation, has scarred him, and he obsessively rehearses the painful images of his childhood. Again we have the story told by the protagonist, this time a petty bureaucrat with literary ambitions, reduced to near-poverty in Maceió. Again we have the jealousy that destroys. Luís da Silva is undone by his thwarted desire for the faithless girl next door, Marina, and his jealousy of the rival Juliao Tavares. He eventually murders Juliao. Three of Graciliano Ramos' novels, then, turn on much the same action, but here it has been carried forward to an excruciating pitch.

Although the story is not in itself remarkable, its mode of rendition is, with the past erupting into the present in a kind of continuum as the narrator broods over his wrongs:

> I enter the room and seek a refuge in the past. But I cannot hide myself completely in it. In the first place, I am no longer what I was then. I lack the tranquillity, the innocence; I have become a rag that the city has worn out and defiled.

Much of the narration occurs in the present tense, as we follow Luís da Silva out of his dark room with its view of a garbage heap, on his

futile streetcar ride to the seaside (symbolically, his only attempt to escape the self-centred existence of his room). We listen with him to the noises of a sexual encounter through the wall which separates him from the adjoining house. We feel his humiliation at the hands of Marina, who spends his money on her 'trousseau'. And we follow him on the night when he strangles the odious Juliao. The final paragraph, ten pages long, is a crescendo of madness. Lurking in the background is the old servant Vitória, burying her savings in the yard and digging them up to count them: a passive counterpart to the death-in-life which has its chief focus in Luís da Silva.

In *Anguish* Graciliano Ramos has more boldly than before used characters and scenes from his own life, and many of these appear later in *Childhood*: Amaro the cowboy and José Baia, Antônio Justino and his school, Father Inácio berating his parishioners, André Laerte the barber, Sergeant José da Luz in his uniform, the frogs on the Penha dam, the noise of the cotton gin in the Cavalo-Morto, and the terrible droughts of the *sertao.* His protagonist here, unlike those in the earlier novels, has nothing to look forward to; he is imprisoned by the past. The close 'existential' observation of psychic life is a nightmare.

I use the term 'existential' deliberately. *Anguish* resembles in certain ways another novel of the 1930s, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea,* and I mention this in order to indicate how far Graciliano Ramos has come into the mainstream of modern fiction. (Walker Percy once said to me, 'A novel like Sartre's *La Nausée* is a revolution in its technique for rendering a concrete situation, and it has certainly influenced me.') There can be no possibility of Sartre's having influenced Ramos, whose novel was published two years earlier. In each case we have the distraught narrator viewing the world from his room in a provincial seaport (Sartre's Bouville is Le Havre). We have the constant eruption of the past, the presentation of events as if they were happening now, the acute feeling that civilized life has broken down. Both narrators look upon the townspeople with amused contempt if not loathing. Neither has any connection with family or colleagues (who in fact don't exist in the foreground). The effect of this odd kind of restricted vision is to make us see things as though for the first time; it is the perception, not the action, that counts.

Nausea, which is Sartre's chief contribution to modern fiction, is important, but I regard Graciliano Ramos' novel as the more powerful. It has a completed action, it doesn't draw back from the horrific implications of the situation. At the end of *Nausea* we find Roquentin attaining a rather dubious salvation through hearing for the last

time an American song, 'Some of These Days', which purifies his existence. We are even led to believe that he will write a novel: 'It would be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence.' The nightmare of *Anguish* never relents.

How did Ramos in Maceió and Sartre in Le Havre write novels so similar in technique and theme? The explanation is that both of them are descended from Dostoevsky, and specifically *Notes from Underground.* Ramos and Sartre don't have the apocalyptic tone of their great forerunner – indeed Sartre can be almost comic – but the Dostoevsky strategy should be clear. *Anguish* was written in a 'minor' language, Portuguese, and of course has not had the prestige which French can still confer on a book (in Brazil almost as much as in France). But it will gradually make its way. The English translation, by L. C. Kaplan, was published by Knopf in 1946 and should certainly be reissued.

With *Barren Lives* (*Vidas Sêcas*) Graciliano Ramos turns to the enclosed world of the poor inhabitants of the *sertao,* somewhat like Faulkner in moving from Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* to the Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying.* The technique of this novel is not as original as Faulkner's, but the problem is much the same: how to give dignity to a family who can scarcely articulate themselves. It is the mark of a superior writer, I think, to be able to deal with such a subject without being patronizing. That is where Faulkner and Ramos succeed and Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* fails. Faulkner solves the problem in part by contriving an intricate point of view that allows the narration to pass rapidly from one member of the family to another. (Caroline Gordon once compared the form of *As I Lay Dying* to a football game 'in which each player, even while he dazzles the spectator with the brilliance of his play, is nevertheless carrying the ball forward a certain number of yards.')

Ramos solves the problem, to begin with, by working without a narrator for the first time in his novel-writing career. The author hovers, as it were, over the action and follows events with a movie camera. This is a strikingly visual book in which very little lies outside the pictorial framework:

> The jujube trees spread in two green stains across the reddish plain. The drought victims had been walking all day; they were tired and hungry. Generally they did not get very far, but after a long rest on the sands of the riverbed they had gone a good three leagues. For hours now they had been looking for some sign of shade. The foliage of the jujubes loomed in the distance, through the bare twigs of the sparse brush.

So the novel begins. (I quote from the excellent translation by Ralph Edward Dimmick, published in 1965 by the University of Texas Press.) A great deal follows from this first paragraph, and when Nelson Pereira dos Santos made his beautiful film of *Barren Lives* (which has been shown in the United States as well as in Brazil), his camera angles were already set up by the author. This is not to say that Ramos is completely external to the psychology of his characters – we see what they see – but we infer the complications of mind from the small events that compose the book – things as poignant as the death of the family dog. The human lives are simply part of the events.

The family who are the subject of the novel have no name: they are simply Fabiano the herdsman, his wife Vitória, and two young sons. They come out of nowhere, driven across the *sertao* by the drought, settle for a time on an abandoned ranch, survive various disasters and humiliations, and at the end they are ruined once more by the drought and start out on another journey. The book thus has a simple cyclical form. The author perhaps 'forces' his last sentence out of the pictorial framework: 'And to the city from the backland would come ever more and more of its sons, a never-ending stream of strong, strapping brutes like Fabiano, Vitória, and the two boys.' But this is the generalization which the informed reader – at least in Brazil – would draw from the events. In recent years a popular singer, Maria Bethania, has made a great success of a song called 'Carcará', the Brazilian name for a vulture-like hawk, a symbol of the social distress of the North-east. In Graciliano Ramos' book (which is not a 'protest' work like the song) the vultures are very real and fearful as the wretched farm animals die slowly under the heat. It is a graphic and substantial little novel.

The world of *Childhood* (*Infância*) is Brazil not long after the end of the Empire in 1889. (Unlike other South American countries, Brazil, after its independence in 1822, maintained a monarchy.) In 1891, the year before Graciliano Ramos was born, Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca became the first president of the Republic, but he assumed dictatorial powers and was forced to resign. In *Childhood* he and other political figures of the 1890s are occasionally mentioned in the conversation of the older generation, but we feel that the North-east is far from the centre of revolt and power in Rio de Janeiro. The other great event of the period was the abolition of slavery (by an edict issued by Princess Isabel), which occurred in 1888 and in fact brought down

the Empire. This had a drastic effect on the great landowners of the North-east. Although the ethos of the slavery era lingered on in Graciliano Ramos' boyhood, racial attitudes are not easy to assess by his account of them. Antagonism undoubtedly existed, but the overt racialism that developed in the United States during the late nineteenth century was not a feature of Brazilian public life. I suspect that miscegenation had already gone too far for that to happen.

But public events are only the enveloping action of the book. This is the story of a child's finding his vocation as a writer: a theme which is familiar in the fiction of Europe and the United States. To some North Americans and Europeans Brazil is an oral culture where people are always in groups, always talking, gossiping, arguing. Life is spent out of doors in this fashion much of the time, and I have often observed that the printed word does not count so much for even educated Brazilians, who can be very sophisticated indeed. It is significant that Graciliano Ramos as a child is always *hearing* the letters of the alphabet or the snatches of poetry and song that are his introduction to the literary art. How different his childhood was from Jean-Paul Sartre's. The latter tells us in *Les Mots*:

> I began my life as I shall no doubt end it: amidst books. In my grandfather's study there were books everywhere. It was forbidden to dust them, except once a year, before the beginning of the October term. Though I did not yet know how to read, I already revered those standing stones: upright or leaning over, close together like bricks on the book-shelves or spaced out nobly in lanes of menhirs. I felt that our family's prosperity depended on them. I disported myself in a tiny sanctuary, surrounded by ancient, heavy-set monuments which had seen me into the world, which would see me out of it, and whose permanence guaranteed me a future as calm as the past.

Childhood is, among other things, the best account that we have of the North-east of Brazil in the 1890s. (The only comparable book is *The Diary of 'Helena Morley'* that Elizabeth Bishop introduced to American readers in 1957: the diary kept by a young girl in a remote part of Minas Gerais during the same period.) But we get into the life of the family and community only gradually, as the adult Ramos attempts to penetrate the infant's clouded vision:

> A new interruption. The shadows enveloped me, almost impenetrable, broken by vague flashes of light: the earrings and the dark complexion of Miss Leopoldina, the leather jacket of Amaro the

cowboy, the white teeth of José Baía, a face of a pretty girl (my natural sister), harsh voices, the bellowing of animals almost like human speech. The rascal José still hadn't made himself known. My father and mother remained large, fearful, unknown. I see again only fragments of them, wrinkles, angry eyes, irritated mouths without lips, hands – some hard and calloused, others fine and gentle, transparent. I hear knocks, shots, curses, and jingling of spurs, the stamping of shoes on worn bricks. Shreds of cloth and sounds were scattered about. Fear. It was fear that guided me through my first years, real terror.

Out of this welter of sensations some human images emerge which endure through a lifetime. There is the ranch hand José Baía, his first friend, who sings the slightly tall tale about his origins:

I was born in seven months,
I was raised but never weaned.
I drank milk from a hundred cows
At the gate of our corral.

There is 'the rascal José', the small black boy who has a chapter to himself later on – a rather painful lesson for Graciliano. There are the grandfathers, especially the maternal one, a strong figure who stands out against the *sertao*:

His gestures were slow. A man of immense vigour, he survived the dry seasons, sometimes in prosperity, sometimes in despair, courageously reconstructing the fortune that generally didn't materialize. He listened peacefully to conversation, his red handkerchief on his shoulder or knees, his blue eyes lost in the familiar rough land covered by a second growth of trees, perceiving signs unfamiliar to the common observer.

Most of all there are the parents, the father unpredictable and stern, the mother neurotic and sometimes violent. It is not the happiest childhood, at least in its human aspects, but even at the beginning there is a kind of celebration of living that I think of as typically Brazilian. The glazed china vase filled with pitomba fruit, the dam that blocked 'the great expanse of water where ducks and teals were swimming,' the incredible plague of pumpkins, 'looking like a beautiful shifting pavement' – these images from the first chapter alone build up the sense of a natural world that sustains the spirit through the most painful human encounters.

The human encounters, however, are the substance of the book, and after the first few chapters the narrative is less of a prose-poem. Ramos' relationship with his father is difficult. This handsome man, so authoritative, on horseback 'very swanky, as though he were riding in a joust, executing his part according to the rules,' can sink into total despondency and then lash out in a single-minded anger. The incident of the broad belt is painful enough – 'the first contact that I had with justice.' Then there is the occasion when 'the rascal José' is beaten and Graciliano intervenes – this ends with Graciliano receiving the punishment. But at an important moment the father, no doubt ashamed because his son is almost illiterate at the age of nine, commands him to fetch a book and open it. The boy reads it aloud in his painful way, 'moaning, like a car on a road filled with holes.'

> Perhaps the businessman had collected some lost debt: in the middle of the chapter he started talking to me; he asked me if I understood what I had read. He explained that this was a story, a novel; he demanded attention and summarized the part already read. A couple with children walked through a forest on a winter night, pursued by wolves and wild dogs. After much running, these creatures arrived at the shack of a woodsman. Was it or wasn't it? He translated for me in kitchen talk several literary expressions. I was encouraged to chat. Yes, there really was something in the book, but it was difficult to know everything.

This is his effective entrance into the world of printed pages; it is a difficult process. But his mind is taken over by a book for the first time, and soon he works his way through the ridiculous Samuel Smiles to better things. Within three years he is a contributor to a little magazine called *Dawn* in Maceió; his literary career is under way.

Childhood is in my opinion the most attractive of Ramos' books. Always extremely honest as a writer, Ramos has, as I have suggested, drawn directly on his own experience for his fiction. *Childhood* is a memoir written like a novel, episodic in structure but beautiful in its cumulative force and 'felt life', and perhaps he has here the form most congenial to his nature. Few writers have told us so acutely what it means to grow up, to find one's 'identity'. This is already a classic work in Brazil, and I am pleased to see it go out into the larger world of literature.

University of South Carolina Ashley Brown

Childhood

Clouds

The first thing that remained in my memory was a glazed china vase, filled with pitomba fruit, hidden behind a door. I don't know where I saw it, or when, and if part of this remote event hadn't ebbed into a later time, I would have to consider it a dream. Perhaps I don't remember the vase very well: it is possible that the image, bright and distinct, stayed with me because I had communicated it to other people who confirmed it. And so I don't keep the memory of an exquisite ornament, but the copy of it, corroborated by individuals who fixed the contents and the form. Nevertheless the apparition must have been real. The idea of the pitomba fruit was impressed upon my mind at this time – in fact the pitombas designated to me all spherical objects. Later, people explained that the generalization was an error, and this puzzled me.

There was a second opening in the thick clouds that covered my vision: I perceived many faces, foolish words. How old would I be? By my mother's reckoning I was two or three years old. The memory of a moment or a few remote minutes doesn't make me suppose that my mind was accurate about these things. No. I was, insofar as I could imagine, quite ordinary. I think that my mind was just inadequate. But I remember perfectly that early moment, those minutes.

I found myself in a vast room whose walls were dirty. It was not really vast, as I presumed: I have visited similar rooms, equally mean. Nevertheless it seemed enormous to me. In front there extended a patio, also enormous, and at the end of the patio grew large trees, loaded with pitombas. Somebody told me that the pitombas were oranges. I didn't like the change: oranges, which I had probably already seen, meant nothing.

The room was filled with people. An old man with a long beard was

the dominating presence at a black table, and several children, sitting on benches without backs, were holding sheets of paper and shouting:

'A *b* with an *a* – *b*, *a*: *ba*; a *b* with an *e* – *b*, *e*: *be*.'

It went on like this until the letter *u*. In primary schools in the country I have heard the spelling lesson being sung in various ways. But never one like that, and the unique tone, the letters and the pitombas convinced me that the room, the trees (transformed into orange trees), the benches, the table, the teacher and the pupils really existed. Everything is very clear, much clearer than the vase. Standing up, close to the bearded man, a tall girl (who in the future was to acquire the features of my natural sister) held in her hand a primer and mumbled:

'A, B, C, D, E.'

Suddenly I felt myself far away, at the back of a house, but I ignore the way in which I was taken there, or who took me. Two or three faces descended to the back yard, where the earth was red and moist; somebody slipped and made a deep cut in the ground. I was told to descend too. I resisted: the step that separated me from the terrace was too high for my legs. I was transported – and I fell asleep, and I didn't get to step on the red mud. I woke up in a sort of kitchen under a low roof of straw, among some men wearing white shirts. One of them asked how to bake codfish and the other answered:

'You should make a wooden rack.'

Rack? What could rack be? I fell into sleep again, a very long sleep.

I was told later that the school served as an inn for travellers. We had left the little town where we lived, in Alagoas, and reached the backlands of Pernambuco, I, my father, my mother, my two sisters. My father and mother (loving but strong-minded parents) and my two sisters (one illegitimate, older than I, the other legitimate, upright, two years younger) were almost motionless figures. Surely there were pitombas and a tall china vase, hidden behind a piece of furniture that later I would call 'door'. Suddenly the wide room, the old man, the children, the girl, benches, table, trees, people in white shirts came before me. And strange sounds also emerged: letters of the alphabet, syllables, mysterious words. Nothing else.

And the deep sleep continued, an inertia rarely disturbed by the tremblings that seem to me today like the tearing of a black fabric. Indistinct faces emerge through these tatters: Amaro the cowboy, sad

fellow, clad in his ragged leather jacket; Miss Leopoldina, his companion, pretty in burgundy cotton; ladies who smoked pipes. Standing out from the others was a strong, erect young man; his eyes were bright, he was always smiling. He was wearing sandals and the white cotton shirt that poor people of the North-eastern backlands usually wear; the rough sandals were soiled and usually unbuttoned; they were held together by two knots. He was called José Baía and he became my friend; to do so he resorted to noise, sudden exclamations, onomatopoeic effects and deep laughter. Sitting down, he would hold me between his legs and swing me, tapping his foot and imitating the gallop of a horse; standing up, he would hold me by the arms; he would spin in a circle, singing:

I was born in seven months,
I was raised but never weaned.
I drank milk from a hundred cows
At the gate of our corral.

When he turned me loose, I tottered away, dizzy. One day, as he set me free on the ground, I tumbled around until I collided with a post and received a large bump on the forehead.

From this moment date my oldest memories of the environment where I was brought up like a small animal. Until then a few people, or fragmentary apparitions of people, revealed themselves, but to tell the truth they were floating in space. Little by little they began to locate themselves, and that disturbed me. They appeared in vacant places, but there was no continuity between them. Nebulous points, islands, outlined themselves in an empty universe.

Once loose from José Baía's hands, then, I bravely bumped my head on the post that supported the porch – these strong columns were made of pepper wood or sucupira. Near the porch was a large room, whose windows were always closed; there one saw firearms and agricultural tools in the corners, saddles suspended from hooks, rude green boxes, and deposits of grain, if I remember correctly. From the hallway one could see the small bedrooms, always dark, and the dining-room. The kitchen disappeared from my memory, but the yard remained, hard and bare, without flowers, without verdure; its only ornament, at the far end, close to a pile of garbage, was a Turkish tree, very good for playing hide-and-seek in. On this side of

the yard the Turkish tree marked the limit of my world. On the other side the ground extended a long way. The house, made of sturdy material, was completed inside. But the outside was somewhat unfinished. The wall on the left side was incredibly high; on the right side the wall was missing; I don't know how the roof was balanced. Perhaps the corral and the pigsty (as was the custom in our neighbourhood) hid one of the walls. The pigsty and the corral have vanished.

Once during a strong whirlwind I noticed something unusual. Clouds of dust entangled themselves in an ugly formation and became darker. A noise different from other noises arose and rapidly increased, and in the middle of a terrible disorder the skin of a bull, stretched out to dry, broke loose from the rawhide thong that tied it to a branch and flew into the whirlwind. A slim lady, indistinct, who was my mother, tried in despair to close a door that was swinging in the wind. Leaves and twigs swirled into the room like an angry beast blowing or whistling; the woman swayed, hanging onto the key. As soon as this absurdity ended, I saw a small girl with her hand wrapped in cloth. One finger was greatly swollen, and it would be necessary to cut her ring with a file. I quickly lost sight of the girl. And the liturgy continued.

The patio, which unfolded in front of the porch, was immense; I don't think I would have dared to go through it. At the end it seemed to meet the sky. One day, however, I found myself beyond the patio and beyond the sky. How I got there I don't know. Men were digging the ground; a great hole opened, a precipice that caused me to shrink in fear among the hills of dirt that had been thrown up. Why were they digging such a deep burrow? Why were they constructing such hills of dust that blew aimlessly like smoke? I drew back in admiration from what seemed an extraordinary ant-hill. The ants sweated, their white shirts grew dark; their tools drove into the ground; others threw in the air the clouds of dust that formed the hills.

A new interruption. The shadows enveloped me, almost impenetrable, broken by vague flashes of light: the earrings and the dark complexion of Miss Leopoldina, the leather jacket of Amaro the cowboy, the white teeth of José Baía, a face of a pretty girl (my natural sister), harsh voices, the bellowing of animals almost like human speech. The rascal José still hadn't made himself known. My father and mother remained large, fearful, unknown. I see again only frag-

ments of them, wrinkles, angry eyes, irritated mouths without lips, hands – some hard and calloused, others fine and gentle, transparent. I hear knocks, shots, curses, the jingling of spurs, the stamping of shoes on worn bricks. Shreds of cloth and sounds were scattered about. Fear. It was fear that guided me during my first years, real terror. After the gentle hands distinguished themselves from the calloused ones, they slowly emerged as two beings that imposed obedience and respect. As these hands became familiar, I even grew to love them. They never treated me with any special consideration, but sometimes they were wet with tears – and my fears were dispersed. The calloused hands, so rough, softened at certain moments. The thundering voice that commanded them lost its harshness, a hollow laugh resounded – and the hidden fears in every corner vanished, leaving in peace the small living creatures: some dogs, a couple of urchins, two girls, and myself. Suddenly a third sister appeared, insignificant in the arms of Miss Leopoldina. I paid very little attention to her.

What then amazed me was the dam, so marvellous, and the great expanse of water where ducks and teals were swimming. It astonished me that these creatures could live in the water. The world was complicated indeed. The largest volume of water that I had known before then was contained in the bulge of a pot – and that enormous vase placed on the ground, covered with green leaves and flowers, and birds that dived into the vase, upset my sense of reality. With difficulty I established a connection between this singular phenomenon and the hole filled with smoke. This, however, had been dug some distance away, and the dam stretched out in front of the house. The hole was certainly there, but it was inconstant; it changed places, it didn't stay still, it was a vagrant thing.

The low-lying ground where pumpkins grew stretched farther away. It would not be possible for me to reach it by myself. Ten or twenty pumpkin vines on the alluvial soil. Amaro had said that one vine was enough. When winter came, such an excess would be a waste; with the arrival of the dry season, not a single pumpkin would be harvested, even if all the seeds were buried in the mud. My father disregarded Amaro's advice – and the result was a plague of pumpkins. At the beginning some tender shoots twisted along the ground, ornamented with the yellow buds of little pumpkins. A surly man was examining them, walking slowly. It was one of my uncles, a guest who

was invited to be godfather of the insignificant being who was crying in her diapers. He offered me a box of firecrackers and disappeared – at the time I met him the flowering shoots were already thick, becoming robust fuzzy vines. And the pumpkins grew, so much so that people walking in the field had to step on them. They piled up, two or three entangled together, looking like a beautiful shifting pavement. Great wicker baskets were quickly filled with them. A pair of baskets hung across the back of an animal, where there was room for me, and we went jogging along, the animal and I, over a path filled with holes. Bins of pumpkins were piled up in the living-room; the porch and even the bedrooms were turned into a storehouse for pumpkins. And the production of pumpkins increased to the point where they no longer had any value. The gates were then wide open for everybody in the neighbourhood to help himself. But to tell the truth, once the small local population were sated and half a dozen of the farm pigs were stuffed, the rest of the useless crop rotted in the field.

Around this time my father and mother began to assume their identity for me: a serious man with a large forehead (one of the most handsome foreheads I have ever seen), strong teeth, a sturdy chin, a tremendous voice; an angry lady who was aggressive, cranky, always on the move, and who had various notions in her head which was not too well protected by her thinning hair; she had an ugly mouth and evil eyes that in moments of anger would blaze with the brilliance of madness. These two difficult beings gradually became distinct to me. In their conjugal harmony his voice lost its violence and would assume strange inflections as it whispered caressingly. She would grow softer, her rough edges were rounded, her fingers became flexible, but when she clenched them and hit the top of our heads they had the hardness of a hammer. Any little thing that went wrong and disturbed her – the squeaking of a hinge or the crying of a child – restored her sourness and her anxiety.

She would get angry at anyone who withdrew from her curious way of talking. I suppose that there never was another like her. Her syntax and vocabulary also differed considerably from our customary usage. In this distorted way of talking, Dona Maria compulsively repeated the contents of a long novel of four volumes, which she carefully read, reread, and took to pieces, and some short stories which seemed absurd to me. From one of them she derived some vague expressions: *'tribute, rat-eater,* foolish things like these that come and

go and return in my memory. I try to put them aside and think about the dam and the birds diving into the vase and the songs of José Baía, but these absurdities pursue me. Slowly they acquire a meaning and a little story outlines itself:

Wake up, you eater . . .

Eater of what? I believed at first that it was about a *fig-eater* or *bogeyman,* but I see that I was mistaken; I remember *rat-eater* and finally *host-eater* or excessively devout communicant. It is *host-eater* without doubt:

Wake up, you Host-eater,
In the arms of . . .

A new pause. Three or four wily syllables obstinately seek to fit into the phrase. A few of them emerge that I try to abandon as useless. While I attempt to divert the ideas that occur to me, the irrevelance of it all drags me to a dark room filled with pumpkins. Suddenly the fugitive words emerge and with them the beginning of the narrative:

Wake up, you Host-eater,
In the arms of Merriment.

Here we have a change:

Get up, you Host-eater,
From the arms of Merriment.

Another correction. The habit of correcting spoken language causes me to fix the first line:

Get yourself up, Host-eater.

I hesitate a minute, searching for the exact form of the composition. I persuade myself then that my mother used to say:

Get yourself up, Host-eater.

And the following incident occurs to me: Dona Maria mumbling some favourite passages from her book while rocking herself in the hammock near the green bins. A poor boy was received charitably in the house of a certain parish priest who kept a mistress. Not wanting his private vices to be seen in the street, the reverend taught the boy an extravagant slang phrase that would refute any possible indiscretion. He said that his name was *Host-eater* and to his mistress he gave the name of *Merriment*; the cat was the *rat-eater,* the fire was the *tribute.* I forget the rest, and I cannot divine the reason why tribute should designate fire. Once assured that the boy wouldn't denounce them, the priest and his mistress started to mistreat him. The kind of mistreatment wasn't mentioned, but I think it resembled what my father inflicted on me: beating on the palm of my hand, whipping, rapping on my head with his knuckles, pulling my ears. I grew accustomed to this very early in life – and consequently I sympathized with the poor boy, who, after much suffering, was driven to this despicable act: he tied to the tail of a cat a cloth dipped in kerosene, lit it, and ran away shouting:

Get up, you Host-eater,
From the arms of Merriment.
Come to see the rat-eater
With a tribute on his tail.

Half a dozen lines are missing; I can't seem to reconstruct them. I know that the story ends, furiously, with the burning of clothes and furniture:

Help with all the devils!

This popular literary art is considered original even today, I think. It was very difficult for me to remember it because the boy's deed perhaps shamed me and I thought I should put it out of my mind. If I heard this modest epic, surely I must have had strong feelings about it. Unfortunately I am not given to violence. Shrinking in silence, as I was being rapped on the head, I vicariously approved of the bravery of this vindictive boy. Later on, when I was growing up, I continued to admire his decisive heroism, and now I am putting this down on paper and the cats are transformed into rat-eaters. Now, if I am close

to people who are able to tie torches on the tails of cats, I have no admiration for them. Really they are dreadful, but it is necessary for me to see them at a distance, modified.

Morning

I plunged into a long winter morning. The rising water behind the dam, the green, yellow and red yard, the narrow paths turning into brooks – all these remained in my soul. Then came the dry season. Trees shed their leaves, animals died, the sun grew larger, drinking up the water, and warm winds spread a grey cloud of dust over the scorched earth. Looking into myself, I perceived with disgust a second landscape. Devastation, the land burned to powder. In this slow life I feel caught between two contrary situations – a long night, and an immense and enervating day, favourable to drowsiness. Cold and hot, dense darkness, and dazzling clarity.

At that time the darkness slowly disappeared. I woke up, collected fragments of people and things, fragments of myself that floated up from the confused past, articulated all of this, and created my small incongruous world. Sometimes the fragments dislocated themselves – and strange things occurred. Objects became unrecognizable, and mankind, composed of individuals who tormented me and those who did not, lost its characteristics.

Good and bad still did not exist; there was no reason why we should be tormented with blows and cries. Even though the blows and cries figured in the order of events, they were always associated with certain sources, like the rain and the sun coming from the sky. And the sky was terrible, and the owners of the house were strong. Well, it just happened that my mother suddenly became less severe, and my father, silent, explosive, started telling me stories. I was surprised that I accepted this change in their attitude; naïve, I thought that nature had changed its course. The sweet moment was soon over – and this disorientated me.

On winter mornings the fences and plants were almost dissolved, the fog covered the field, smoke would rise from the piles of garbage, drops of water occasionally fell from the gutters, the intensely cold

wind bit us. The large shoes worn by the cowboys deposited thick layers of mud on the brick floor. Wet clothes left big spots on the benches that were placed along the porch. The walls grew dark from the moisture. I would lie huddled in the hammock, swinging to and fro on the verandah. A kerosene lamp licked the mist with a tremulous flame.

Some old people appeared and disappeared, and then emerged again after long absences. Of one of them, my paternal grandfather, the only thing that remained was a fading photograph that was kept in a trunk. It left me perhaps with an absurd attachment to useless things. He was a timid old man, who didn't enjoy, I suppose, much prestige in the family. He owned some mills in the woods; cheated by friends and shrewd relatives, he was ruined and depended on his children. Sometimes he would straighten his back, the ancient proprietor would emerge again, but this, the peevishness of infirmity, soon ended and the poor man slid back into insignificance and his hammock. A good musician, he specialized in singing. With my imprecise memory, I see again women kneeling around an oratory. My grandfather, standing up, was singing – and he seemed enormous. How could a person shout in such a way? The great noise and the strange harmony today disclose a scanty, wailing figure, usually busy, in spite of his illness, at making small odds and ends. He had a remarkable ability and lots of patience. It is a concentrated obstinacy, a drawn-out tranquillity that exterior events don't disturb. His senses are fading, his body grows somewhat stiff and bent, his whole life is concentrated at a few points – in the eye that glitters and dims, in the hand that drops the cigarette and continues its task, in the lips that murmur imperceptible and discontented words. We feel dejected or irritated, but this reveals itself only by the trembling of the fingers, by the wrinkles that furrow the skin. In appearance we are tranquil. If people talk to us, we hear nothing or we ignore the meaning of what they say. And since we sometimes suspend our work, they will certainly imagine that we are lazy. We really want to abandon it. Nevertheless we spend an eternity arranging the most trifling things that happen to come together, and the result is a tortuous and useless effort. My grandfather never mastered any special skill. He knew several, however, and his lack of mastery was no disadvantage. He put his best effort into making fibre sieves for manioc meal. If he decided to take one of them apart, he could easily study its components: the

fibre, the framework, the fabric. He usually judged it a poor imitation. A careful and honest worker, he had his own ways of doing things and built his fibre sieves strong and safe. Other people probably didn't like them: they preferred them to be traditional and conventional, decorated and fragile. The creator, indifferent to criticism, persevered with his sturdy plain sieves, not because he liked them, but because it was a way of expressing himself that seemed more reasonable to him.

My maternal grandfather, who was tall and thin, with hair and beard as white as cotton, sharply differentiated himself from that hypochondriac, the paternal grandfather: he didn't waste any time singing or tiring himself with trivial things. With leggings and a leather jacket and a wide leather hat pulled to the back of his neck, ornamenting his red face, he looked very dignified indeed. His slow, nasal voice, hoarse with too much tobacco, rolled out with a discontented purr that scratched our ears; then he insinuated himself and his voice grew as soft as the consistency of rubber. We had the impression that the peevish voice caressed and reprehended us. His gestures were slow. A man of immense vigour, he survived the dry seasons, sometimes in prosperity, sometimes in despair, courageously reconstructing the fortune that generally didn't materialize. He listened peacefully to conversation, his red handkerchief on his shoulder or knees, his blue eyes lost in the familiar rough land covered by a second growth of trees, perceiving signs unfamiliar to the common observer. He possessed a great deal of knowledge about animals: he always knew where the cows were giving birth to their offspring in the woods; he could always predict the weight of the bulls that he would be taking to the butcher. He never needed a scale when he sold his cattle. This barbarian of a grandfather, an artisan, paid great deference to the civilized world – partly out of disdain, partly to avoid hurting it or spoiling it with his hard hands.

My grandmother, dignified and bony, had protuberances on her forehead and large eyeballs. Years later she told me about her intimate sorrows: her husband, who was jealous, had tormented her a great deal. Only then did I take an interest in her suffering. She was a good woman, but at the time of the jealousy and torment I didn't notice her kindness.

A couple of great-grandparents were still alive: a saintly dark-complexioned woman, and a little authoritative old man who took a

strong dislike to my father.

Aside from these people and the ones who lived on the farm, groups of gypsies sometimes appeared in the courtyard, or leather-clad cowboys, shouting at the cattle, or on some rare occasions, a traveller. Two travellers remained in my family's memory. The first one, a moody untrustworthy fellow, was not welcomed. My mother went looking in the neighbourhood for Amaro or José Baía, and sat down in a corner of the room close to where the guns were kept. The fellow was crouching at the door. And so they remained, he striking a flint with a musket, sucking a cigarette, she, observing his movements, protected by those worthless fellows Amaro and José Baía, trusting in the steadiness of her hand and her aim. Later on the moody fellow told my father that the lady was ill-tempered.

The other visitor appeared on two or three occasions, whispered for some time at the porch, and disappeared after taking twenty milreis. This money represented the tax that rural landowners had to pay the numerous groups of outlaws who wandered over the backlands at that time, demanding little compared with some of their predecessors. By means of a few banknotes or a young cow or sow, the tributes were paid and profitable friendships established. Later, when we moved to the village, five or six bandits who were passing by the vicinity left the path and hid themselves in the mean, stunted woods in order not to frighten the woman and her children.

Once the guests and travellers were gone, we would fall into a dull everyday routine. The same old tasks of shoeing the horse and milking the cow; the squeaking of bolts at dawn and sunset; harsh, demanding voices and incomprehensible orders. Everywhere the remains of dead animals: bones bleaching on the path, skulls of bulls impaled on sticks, leather stretched out to dry, old leather trunks, bags of the sort carried by shepherds, leather clothes suspended to dry, cow bells with clappers of horn, piles of rawhide straps, whips, saddles, halters made of horsehair.

Now the world stretched out beyond the pile of garbage in the yard, but we didn't dare to wander there. The Turkish tree was my refuge. The little girls crawled on the porch and in the kitchen. That rascal José started to reveal himself. My natural sister also began to emerge; I became more aware of her, since her feelings were frequently hurt. I remember her with some aversion because of her taunts and disapproving sounds; when she became annoyed, she was aggressive and

tried to hit us. If it weren't for the same defect, I am sure that my mother would have been more human. My father, however, behaved well. But the evidence of my sister's faults was very strong indeed; it was associated with her dark hair, red lips, and provocative eyes. My mother didn't have these advantages. And she certainly became upset, poor woman, seeing herself again in us, understanding that out there, free from her, remnants of her own flesh were liable to corruption. She hurt herself in hurting us. I believe that we stood the raps on the head because we didn't have the beauty of a young girl.

Summer

From this old summer which changed my life very few traces remain. And I really couldn't say for sure that I remember them. Habit makes me create an atmosphere in which I imagine facts that become reality. Undoubtedly trees lost their leaves and grew darker, the water stopped running over the dam, the gates of the corrals were left open, useless. It is always like that. Nevertheless I ignore the withered plants that looked dark at this time or in the previous dry season, and I keep in my memory a flowing dam, covered with white birds and flowers. As for the corrals, there is a strange gap. They were probably in the neighbourhood, but this is conjecture. Perhaps even the minimum effort necessary to characterize the half-destroyed farm is something I have not been able to muster. Certain things exist by derivation and association; they repeat themselves, impose themselves – and in print they take consistency, gain roots. We can scarcely picture a North-eastern summer in which the branches wouldn't be dark and the waterholes empty. We combine elements considered indispensable, we play with them, and if we disregard some, the frame would seem incomplete.

My summer is incomplete. What is left to me is the memory of important changes in people. Usually sluggish, they became as irritated as flying ants, and as dizzy. The long conversations on the porch, the visitors and sonorous laughter, the slow negotiations, these all ended; shadowy faces and muted noises emerged. Tremendous heat, clouds of dust. And in the heat and dust men coming and going with-

out resting, soaked in sweat, shouting like cowboys, monotonously.

For the first time I was told about the devil. It is possible that I had been told about him earlier, but only then did I retain the name of this evil spirit; without really recognizing him, I knew that he walked loose in the whirlwinds that swept the patio, caught up in the flying leaves and twigs.

One day there was no water in the house. I was thirsty and I was told to be patient. A load of small water kegs would arrive soon. It took a long time, the spring was at some distance – and I stayed in agony for hours, prowling around the jug with embers on my tongue. This exquisite pain disturbed me excessively. In all this suffering I perceived unreasonable gestures and angry words. My life was a prolonged entanglement that was agitated by a series of starts. To put it in a better way, I floated along, small and light. Suddenly a shock, new shocks, painful tremblings. It is impossible for me to complain now. People didn't really direct threats at me, they were sweet enough, and their demands seemed almost gentle. In a minute we would have many mugs of water. I cried, I lulled myself with consolations, and the minutes were leaking away, slowly. My dry mouth, my cracked lips, my dimmed eyes, my burning insides. Sleep, lassitude – and I threw myself on a hot mattress. My eyelids drooped, toughened; the obsessive liquid that ran in the voices that lulled me, moistening my skin, suddenly vanished. And all the objects in the vicinity seemed deformed and tremulous. Then came immobility, then forgetfulness. I don't know how long this suffering lasted.

I lived in the midst of surprises. And the surprises multiplied. Amaro and José Baía, armed with large knives, were they filling baskets with pieces of cactus tree? My senses were telling me that this was so, but it was not their customary task. I tried to clear my mind, but I was left with these crazy questions. I didn't ask why baskets were being filled; I wondered if they *could* be filled. In case my observation was confirmed, I would go on bothering the workers, and I would find out that it was food for the animals. They didn't pay any attention to me at all. Amaro sniffed, mumbled, wrinkled his hairy face; José Baía played jokes. Why? Was it possible to assert that they were cutting the cactus tree and putting it into baskets? I needed an authority, a support. I distrusted everything at hand, whether seen, heard, or felt, but in general I admitted without effort everything that was told me.

I accepted, then, the great spider called the 'dog's horse', the animal that the devil rides when he makes a tumult in the world. There is another kind of spider, a noisy black insect with large wings. The one that the devil used on his trips should be like this, black, noisy, and even larger. I believed in it, in my docile way, because the name 'dog's horse' gave it some character, because the voice of experience said it was so, and finally because in the whirlwinds that lashed the bare backlands there was probably a furious spirit, blowing, whistling, twisting dry sticks and breaking branches. This creature of dream and disorder, a horse with wings, didn't frighten me at all.

A great fear was what I felt when I saw my father prostrate and discouraged in the room. I was accustomed to seeing him serious, silent, accumulating energy for dreadful shouts. Merely vulgar shouts would be lost; his caused unique reactions: people thus affected lowered their heads, humbled, or ran to execute orders. I was still too young to understand that the farm belonged to him. I observed the difference between the individuals who were sitting in the hammocks and those who were squatting on the porch. My father's leather jacket had various ornaments; Amaro's had numerous holes and patches. Our coarse clothes seemed to me luxurious compared with the printed cotton of Miss Leopoldina and the unbleached shirt of José Baía. The farm hands exhausted themselves, sweated, nailed barbed wire to the stakes. My father kept an eye on them, ordering them to move this way or that; he showed his disapproval of everything with insults and irrational epithets. This antipathy often became reasonable and translated itself into action: he would bend his spine, stiffen his muscles, dig into the shale and clay the dam that would later be covered with ducks, diving birds and water lilies. My father was terribly strong, I mean really powerful. It didn't occur to me that this strength was not really his and would suddenly abandon him, leaving him weak and in his natural state, his torn leather jacket over his short shirt.

Seated near the firearms and the agricultural tools, deeply discouraged, his hands inert, pale, a countryman murmured a sad confession to the woman beside him. The springs were drying up, the cattle were dying of ticks and murrain. The murrain and the ticks seemed strange to me, but they were evidently stronger than my father. I didn't understand the sad murmuring, but I guessed that a

transformation would come. A *village,* a *store,* and *money* came to my ears. The despondency and the sadness touched me. These words explained the gravity, the habitual disappointment, the wrinkles, the explosions of plagues and grievances. But this explanation didn't occur to me until years later. In the street I noticed a solid creature, who was harsh with the workers, but so graceful riding his horses in a tournament. I saw him arrogant, submissive, agitated, apprehensive – a despotism that sometimes contracted, impotent and tearful. The impotence and the tears didn't affect us. Today I think the violence that blinded him was natural. Had he been lowly, free from ambitions, or at the height of prosperity, I and the rascal José would have lived in peace. But in the middle, fearing to fall, pushing forward with difficulty, persecuted by the summer, ruined by spizooty, indecisive, obedient to the political leader, to justice and the tax collector, he needed to open his heart and release the concentrated anger. He annoyed the debtor and, afraid of being cheated, made himself miserable. He venerated the creditor and, punctual in his own payments, he economized to the point of avarice. The only thing he didn't economize on was blows and rebukes. We were all rebuked and struck by him.

A Broad Belt

My first encounters with justice were painful, and they made a deep impression on me. I must have been around four or five years old, and I figured in the role of defendant. Certainly people had already made me play this part, but nobody made me aware that it was to be a trial. They beat me because they could beat me, and this was natural.

The blows I received before they used the broad belt on me were purely physical and disappeared when the pain ended. Once my mother beat me so hard with a knotted rope that my back was painted with bloody spots. Crushed, turning my head with difficulty, I distinguished red cuts on my ribs. They laid me in bed and wrapped me in cloths soaked in salted water – and there was a family argument. My grandmother, who was visiting us, condemned the behaviour of her daughter and she in turn was distressed. Irritated, my mother had

hurt me for no reason, without meaning to. I didn't hate my mother for this: the guilty one was the knot. If it wasn't for the knot, the punishment would have caused less damage. And it would be forgotten. The incident of the broad belt, which occurred a bit later, revived the punishment.

My father slept in a hammock stretched across an enormous room. Everything is nebulous. Walls extraordinarily distant from each other, the infinite hammock suspended from its hooks, my father awaking, getting up in a bad mood, hitting his slippers on the floor, his face rusty. Naturally I don't remember the rust, the harsh voice, the time when he languished, muttering his demands. I know that he was quite angry, and this caused my habitual cowardice. I wanted to see him address my mother and José Baía, grown-up people, who would not be beaten. I tried anxiously to hang onto this fragile hope. My father's strength would encounter resistance and would waste itself in words.

Weak and ignorant, incapable of talking or defending myself, I shrank into a corner, beyond the green boxes. If fear didn't hold me back, I would escape: through the front door I could reach the dam, through the corridors I could reach the Turkish tree. I must have thought of this, motionless, behind the boxes. All I wanted was for my mother, Miss Leopoldina, Amaro, and José Baía to appear suddenly to save me from the danger.

Nobody came, my father found me crouching and breathless, leaning against the wall, and he pushed me violently away, complaining about a broad belt. Where was the broad belt? I didn't know, but it was difficult for me to explain myself: I was confused, I grew stupid, unable to discover the reason for his anger. The brutal manners left me shocked; the harsh sounds died out, deprived of any significance.

I can't reproduce all of this scene. Joining vague memories from it to facts that occurred afterwards, I imagine my father's shouts, his terrible anger, and my unhappy trembling. Probably I was shaken. Fear froze my blood, my eyes were wide open.

Where was the broad belt? It was impossible to answer. Even if I had hidden the infamous object, I would not have told him, I was so frightened. Situations of this kind composed the main torments of my childhood, and their consequences followed me.

The man didn't ask me if I had kept the miserable belt: he ordered me to give it to him immediately. His shouts penetrated my head; no

one had ever shouted in such a violent way.

Where was the broad belt? Today I cannot bear to hear anybody talking loudly. My heart beats fast, so discouraged that it wants to stop, my voice sticks, my sight grows dim, a strange anger stirs up dormant things inside me. A horrible sensation as though my eardrums were being penetrated by points of iron.

Where was the broad belt? The reiterated question remained in my memory: it seems as though it was hammered into my head.

The furious anger was going to increase, causing me serious grief. I would remain there fainting, shrinking, moving my cold fingers, my lips trembling and silent. If the rascal José or a dog entered the room, perhaps the blows would be transferred. The rascal and the dogs were innocent, but that made no difference. If he made one of them responsible, my father would forget me and let me escape to hide at the edge of the dam or in the yard.

My mother, José Baía, Amaro, Miss Leopoldina, the rascal and the farm dogs all abandoned me. A knot in my throat, the house spinning, my body falling slowly, flying, bees from their hives filling my ears – and, in this buzzing, the terrible question. Nausea, sleep. Where was the broad belt? I slept a long time, behind the big boxes, free from martyrdom.

There was a fog, and I didn't correctly perceive my father's movements. I didn't see him approaching the lathe to pick up the whip. The hairy hand seized me, dragged me to the centre of the room, the leather strap flogged me on the back. Howls, useless clamour, death rattle. By now I should have known that pleas and flattery only infuriated the hangman. No one helped. José Baía, my friend, poor devil, couldn't do a thing.

I found myself in a desert. The house was dark, sad; the people were sad. I think with horror of this waste land, and I remember cemeteries and haunted ruins. The doors and windows were closed; cobwebs were hanging from the dark ceiling. My little sister was crawling through the dismal bedrooms; her painful learning process was beginning.

At my side a furious man, holding my arm, was whipping me. Perhaps the lashes of the whip were not so strong: compared with what I felt later, when they taught me the ABC, this was nothing. Certainly my crying, my leaps, my attempts to spin in the room like a top were less a sign of pain than the explosion of a repressed fear. I was not

moving, almost not breathing. Now I emptied my lungs, I moved in despair.

The torment lasted a long time, but, prolonged though it was, it was nothing compared with the mortification of the preliminary phase: the hard eye that magnetized me, the threatening gestures, the hoarse voice musing on an incomprehensible question.

Once free, I crawled near the big boxes, rubbing my bruises, swallowing my sobs, moaning softly, and lulling myself with my groans. Before falling asleep, exhausted, I saw my father walking towards the hammock, moving away from the verandah, sitting down, getting up right away, grabbing a leather strap, the damned broad belt, from which the buckle came loose when he flung it down. He muttered and came back in the house restlessly. I had the impression that he was going to tell me something: he lowered his head, his wrinkled face became serene, his eyes grew soft, searching for the refuge where I lay, defeated.

It seemed to me that the imposing figure diminished – and my disgrace receded. If my father had come to me, I would have received him without the shiver that his presence always caused in me. He didn't come near: he remained at a distance, prowling about anxiously. Then he walked away.

Alone, I saw him again, cruel and harsh, mumbling, foaming at the mouth. And there I remained, minute, insignificant, as insignificant and minute as the spiders spinning their black web.

This was the first contact I had with justice.

A Drunken Spree

We rode about three leagues on horseback: my mother was sitting sideways, dressed in a long, loose skirt, with one leg placed in the hook of the sidesaddle; my father very swanky, as though he were riding in a joust, executing his part according to the rules; he was holding me on the pommel of the saddle, because I was far too young to sit behind him on the back of the horse.

We were going to visit a neighbouring farmer, a prominent man whose habits deserved the reprobation of prudent people. On this

day I didn't particularly notice him. I saw him some years later in the nearby village, dressed in white trousers, cashmere coat, a Chilean hat, shining boots, an expensive umbrella, a pound sterling coin hanging from a golden chain, scandalously prosperous. And after a long interval I met him again; he was already in decline, drinking the cheap brandy called *aguardente,* playing cards with the police on the counters at low taverns and on the sidewalks. My relatives, who economized to excess, attributed his decline to the umbrella and the pound sterling. And also to the superfluities which he displayed on that summer morning: the strange furniture; white hammocks with thick smooth fringes woven like lace; clean-smelling cloth; the little red bottle in reserve, surrounded by little glasses, objects that provoked my admiration.

In this strange milieu I became bashful – and this afflicted me. Still free of responsibilities, I wilted in front of unknown people. Certainly they had already accustomed me to judge myself as a trivial being. My short clothes were common. I tried to hide and dragged myself under the ends of the hammocks, limping and stumbling, because my shoes were hurting me. In the house I wore cheap sandals – two leather soles with straps. When they made me wear shoes there was some difficulty: my feet would take on an odd shape as they resisted being put into these hard narrow prisons. They somehow adjusted themselves by force, and during the resistance I would hear shouts, I was slapped, and I cried. A pair of yellow boots – which meant hell for me – marked me for the rest of my life.

I don't remember our arrival at the farm: my memory dates from the hour when we entered the room. My father and the proprietor disappeared, they went to take care of business in one of those conversations filled with shouts. My mother and I stayed behind, surrounded by skirts.

The walls were white and perhaps the brightness of the room added to my embarrassment. In front of the house an ox-cart rested under the boughs of a tall leafless tree. I wasn't interested in the ox-cart, it was just like others I had seen, but I wished that they would explain why the tree was leafless, very different from the Turkish tree in my yard. I remained silent and fearful, I collapsed in a corner of the wall, away from the skirts. My mother seemed important among them. I didn't pay attention to this: my shoes made me forget the ox-cart, the hammocks, the women who flattered my mother but who really dis-

liked her. I believe that she was bored with these gestures of courtesy. She didn't quite understand them and yawned slightly but discreetly, turning aside from those who tried to favour her. There was a lady of some years and several young ladies: one of them was tall, brunette, and quarrelsome; the others hid behind her, playing a secondary role; today I can hardly remember them. They smiled, moved around, amused themselves.

I don't know how I suddenly saw myself in the middle of the noisy crowd: I know that I was pushed away from the wall and my shoes stopped hurting my toes and heels. They spread me out in one of the hammocks, close to the old lady, and I think that they considered me an object of some interest. Then they brought the tray, the little bottle of liqueur, and the glasses. This came as a surprise to my mother, who tinted the disdainful line of her lips with this rare substance, crossed her hands, and curled her mouth in an attempt to be grateful. Strictly speaking, it isn't possible to affirm that such gestures took place. I caught them, however, during my later visits, and I hesitate to refer to them. Her thin, gnarled fingers touched each other harmlessly; her harsh lips contracted silently; her eyes bulged, fixed, cold, indecisive.

What really amazed me in this person was the lack of a smile. That was as far as it went: two wrinkles that were fixed on the face, almost non-existent lips that were drawn back, similar to the edges of a bent tin can that served as as mug. So she remained, holding back her indiscreet yawns. Slight and ugly, she was always harassed, distrusting all gestures of kindness, fearing them as deceptive. When I grew up and tried to please her, she received me with suspicion and hostility; if I happened to agree with her, she would change her mind and smack her lips disdainfully.

The one who gave me my first glass of liqueur was the good-looking brunette, but I don't know who gave me the second. I drank several, I drank the rest of the bottle. I behaved indecently, I lost my shyness, I found myself at ease, talking a lot, going berserk and demanding more liqueur. One of the girls brought me a glass of wine with honey. My mother scowled and stretched out her arm at me, but I had reached the stage where I would defy any form of opposition. Through a fog, I distinguished vague and inconsistent forms. I rejected the hand that was reaching for me and took the glass. From then on, till I fell asleep, time disappeared. Certain minute details emerged, but others vanished decisively. All of a sudden I gained

courage, the dangers faded away. I fortified myself as I perceived allies among the people surrounding me.

One of them stood out, brunette, tall, reddish, smiling, noisy. A real lady. Twenty years later, when I learned that she had gone downhill, I was distressed. She was ruined, probably finished in a short period of time. The backlands pride had shrunk, a tradition was reduced to pieces. Nevertheless, lies were spread in the city. The popular literature and songbooks were largely wasted on endless stories about wild and vindictive country people, and pure and naïve girls. This is deceptive. The lady in question was educated near the corral; she knew the mysteries of procreation and was simple. The daughter of the proprietor, she persisted in being honest and was hoping to be married. But the debts were piling up, people were leaving the farm, the droughts came, the old man, without his chain and umbrella, became one of the dregs of society – and the lady renounced her virtue, dropped her morals, and gave in to the law of instinct.

She was very pretty. I drew close to her with a kind of friendly impudence, I rubbed myself against her. This need to receive caresses from a person of the opposite sex suddenly emerged, stimulated by alcohol.

I suppose that this wasn't the first time that they got me drunk. The women of the North-eastern backlands quiet their children at night with a bottle of strong wine. My brothers swallowed their wine and behaved well: they didn't cry, they didn't shout, they didn't make any demands. They would wake up quiet, listless, foolish, acting like saints. They would wet the blankets, but this didn't bother them: they would go on sleeping anyway. And, as soon as they were asleep, Dona Maria would relax. When I perfected my sense of smell and sight, I perceived that my brothers' blankets were stinking horribly. Mine must have been like that.

Seeing me so completely at ease, my mother attempted to hold me. Not feeling very secure in the hammock, I tried to rise, trembling; I pulled at the old lady, wanting to show her my feelings. We reached a big sun porch, we sat down, and I laid my head familiarly on the woman's lap.

Objects vanished into thin air, among them a remote, almost imperceptible tree which stood in the patio near the ox-cart. My curiosity returned, I pointed with discouragement at the bare tree,

and I stuttered:

'My daughter, what kind of wood is that?'

I obtained the information, and in a few minutes I asked again:

'My daughter, what kind of wood is that?'

Again the answer came, but the need to learn lit up and darkened, glittered in my mind like a firefly. A strange talkativeness ruined the dull silence that they had imposed on me. The shy little animal talked nonsense, and bursts of laughter resounded in the room, stifling my mother's annoyance. My feeling of power was convincing. It didn't occur to me that she would re-establish herself, would return with me to the sad house, would thrash me and pull my ears. It seemed to me that the noisy girls and the white-haired lady would go, in the future, to fetch me the little bottle, the glasses and the tray, and listen to my day-dreams.

When my father returned, I found myself in a moment of evasion, indifferent to censure, on the knees of a woman I hardly knew, chattering with the other charming ladies, who were somewhat invisible in the dense fog that enveloped me.

The Arrival at the Village

It was a cold night. Voices mingled on the sidewalk, people walked around a great bonfire in the patio. The embers cracked, the flames rose, illuminating for a moment the dim bystanders, and from the smoky shade came prolonged laughter. My father, invisible, commented:

'It looks like a cuckoo.'

What would a cuckoo be? If my father didn't invariably cool my curiosity by repeating a dirty phrase about people who asked questions, I would have asked him. The phrase always startled me. I didn't want to convince myself that I was hearing such ugly names, and when their meaning came through to me, I would withdraw sad and humiliated, finding my father gross and swearing never to ask him again.

I thought of turning to one of the people hidden in the darkness. There was an uproar: neighing, footsteps, the noise of trunks being

slammed shut. And the bursts of laughter by the fire. What could a cuckoo be? Without the damned shoes, hard as wood, I would go in, go out, and try to find out. Certainly they wouldn't pay attention to me. And the shoes were hurting my toes and chafing my heels. Where were my sandals? In my tight clothes, I moved with difficulty. I usually wore a shirt, jumped and ran like a little animal, and climbed up the legs of José Baía, who had been born prematurely and brought up without being nursed. José Baía was a wonderful person, perhaps because he hadn't been nursed and was a seven months' child, which made him an exception. If José Baía were there, he would tell me what a cuckoo was. My trousers, my jacket and my shoes foretold large events. And enigmatic words had awakened in me vague suspicions, a dull enthusiasm for unknown adventures, and fear. What was going to happen? It would be good if José Baía were with me, chattering in his easy and halting speech, delivering me from my terrors.

The memory of this old scene brings back to me the house turned in different directions, an oddity that later happened again. Often the streets and buildings were dislocated, leaving me perplexed and lost. The front door and the porch weren't facing the dam as they usually did, but the piles of garbage and the Turkish tree. There was a pause. Voices, the noise of trunks being dragged, the flames from the bonfire, neighing, the bursts of laughter from the cuckoo – they all disappeared.

I found myself, hours later, on a bright day, spread on the pommel of a saddle, horribly jolted by the trotting of a horse, rough hands supporting me. We passed through a little settlement – two rows of deserted shacks and among them huts made of black clay and dry straw. What purpose could it serve? Somebody spoke about bars and parties, but the constructions of earth and burnt straw impressed me. I lost sight of them, I soon forgot them, shaken by the horse's gait that upset my insides; the thorny vegetation increased and diminished, the usual cactus and cereus.

Suddenly I found myself off the horse, completely abandoned, in a strange world filled with white or painted houses, without porches, amazing. Two of them were marvellous: one had sparkling quadrants, the other rose above its neighbour. I approached the little two-storey house, I ran away scared and confused: I could never have imagined one house on top of another. In the one below I saw red

and blue people, all alike; in the one above, two fellows leaning and talking in the window, and, I don't know why, perhaps because they were on the roost, they seemed enormous. One of them wore a red and blue uniform, just like those on the ground floor but with strips of yellow galloon on the cuffs. I ignored the uniforms and the galloon, evidently precious objects. In vain did I look for Amaro and José Baía. Away from the old farm I found myself out of reality and alone. I wasn't really alone: several people paraded around the place, vague noises broke the silence. The suspended house was admirable, just like a boy on stilts. I approached it again, then turned to the one that glowed and sparkled. My jacket hurt my armpits, my shoes bit my feet and stumbled repeatedly on the bricks. I missed my shirt and sandals. On the other side of the street a long passageway exposed a yard full of rose trees. I intended to examine them closer. The feeling of isolation came back, I started to walk restlessly on the sidewalk. I wanted to shout, to ask for information. I had to go back, to amuse myself with the water lilies floating on the dam, the wild ducks, and the low damp land. It seemed ridiculous to me for somebody to live in a place crowded with so many houses. Till then I had known only four or five. The porch of our house was supported by sturdy stakes made from the mastic tree. José Baía held me by the arms and twirled. Once turned loose, I would walk away, dizzy and staggering. The fences and trees swirled, the stakes spun and hit me on the head. My mother would scold José Baía, but he paid no attention: he would twirl, tell stories about jaguars, and brag about being born prematurely and not being nursed and drinking milk from a hundred cows at the gate of the corral. The gate was far away. The dam, the low damp land, the wild ducks, and the water lilies faded away. Flames licked people's shadows, a muleteer burst into laughter. Cuckoos. Then came bars made of clay and straw, the trotting of an animal jolting me over the roads, cactus and cereus moving up and down. The bars and the cuckoos grew old. Violent sensations erased the cactus and the cereus. These plants wouldn't fit near the big bird-trap perched on a wooden stick. I felt like crying. I wouldn't fit either. I saw an open door, went inside, and walked to the dining-room, following the smell of my family. Dona Clara, the woman who would be called Dona Clara, was sitting on a mat, feeding porridge to a boy. I felt confused. And, seeing a cat, I asked whose cat it was. Dona Clara answered that it was hers. I left, wandered along the sidewalk,

looking for José Baía, my mind swarming with many complaints. I couldn't remember my arrival, I didn't know how I had got there. Suppose they forgot me in the midst of so many surprises? I withdrew. I saw another door. I headed for it, stopped at the living-room, noticed the cat, the mat, the boy and Dona Clara. Again I asked whose it was and got the same answer. I waited for a few more words. They didn't come – and I left disappointed. I had intended, in referring to the cat, not that Dona Clara would be pleased with it, but that she would start a conversation, talk about the men in red and blue clothes, about the sparkling house, the rose trees. Dona Clara didn't get my hint. And I found myself on the street, shrunken, crestfallen. The window of the little two-storey house closed. But on the ground floor, the colourful fellows moved about cheerfully, and one of them was singing a slow, easy-going song, very different from José Baía's. Two or three old women emerged from the house of the rose trees. The old women and some passers-by became, all of a sudden, a crowd – and the crowd fascinated and frightened me. I approached the little two-storey house timidly. I wanted to hear stories, laughter, songs. And I wanted to get away from that place, take off my shoes, see my sisters, amuse myself with the rascal José. I roamed along the sidewalk, limping, my eyes misty, my groin humid. I sat down on the ground, tired and unhappy. Then I leaned against a wall and fell asleep.

The Village

Buíque had the appearance of a crippled body: the Largo da Feira formed the trunk; the Rua da Pedra and the Rua da Palha served as legs, one almost stretched out, the other curved, taking a step, climbing a hill; the Rua da Cruz, where the old cemetery was, constituted the only arm in an upright position; and the head was the church, whose slender tower was populated with owls. And the groin, Sr José Galvao's house, glittered, its three façades covered with tiles; it was the source of the immense prestige of his disdainful children: Osório, who was taciturn; Cecília, who was bored; and Dona Maria, who loved the word *bottle.* On the left thigh, that is to say at the beginning

of the Rua da Pedra, the Penha dam, filled with the music of frogs, was dyed with green spots, and on the foot, at the top of the hill, the stagnant pool of water called Intendência was found. Some intersections opened from the trunk: one led to the lake; another made an elbow bent towards the Cavalo-Morto, a sand-pit which had a bad name, and ended at Sr Paulo Honório's place; in the third the windows of the vicarage overlooked the public school, which was white with a terrace wall and which was conducted by a man of few words with a long beard, similar to the country teachers of the past. This similarity gave me the conviction that all male teachers were bearded and silent.

Dona Maria, a private person married to Sr Antônio Justino, worked in the Rua da Palha – and, by being private, she wore out her companion, who was officious and, consequently, neglected in the opinion of the heads of the family. Sr Antônio Justino, a man of no profession, lived on the earnings of others; the husband of a schoolteacher, he was not completely parasitic, in spite of existing without an occupation. If his wife had a licence to teach, Sr Antônio Justino would lose his name and surname. Dona Maria didn't have a licence or receive money from the government – and so Sr Antônio Justino was still not entirely depersonalized.

Near this school the police headquarters and the jail were found. The local detachment of the corps of guards yawned and lounged on their bunks, and the lazy smiling José da Luz, who was Indian-Negro, sang.

Social life was concentrated in the Largo, the place for commerce, gossip, and reading newspapers when the mail arrived. On Saturdays booths were put up and country people swarmed around. On Sundays there were spiritual practices: an extensive mass, confessions, weddings, baptisms, and abundant invectives from Father Joao Inácio. Two missionaries, very different in their methods of indoctrination, had been in the backland: Friar Caetano, a person of infinite sweetness, almost a saint; and Friar Clemente, a coarse man who harassed the women and instilled enormous respect. Father Joao Inácio had a lot of Friar Clemente in him: he didn't go as far as beating his parishioners, but, if he were angered, he would distribute insults to the little ones, calling them dogs and pigs. This disrespect was proffered with energy and shouts from the pulpit; there was no evidence that Father Joao Inácio was actually preaching.

The important men of the municipality, both the government and the opposition, came from a group of families more or less interlinked, powerful in the North-east: Cavalcanti, Albuquerque, Siqueira, Tenório, Aquino. Father Joao Inácio was an Albuquerque. Commander Badega, related to all the big ones, father of various natural sons, was crushed by the sight of César Cantu, dressed in a frayed, discoloured cassinette and wearing his hat with the gnawed brim and black boots with yellow patches. So, with whip and spurs, he entered the municipal courtroom one night with a bunch of young half-breed girls and, to the sound of a harmonica, danced waltzes and quadrilles till sunrise. Despite the title of commander, the farm workers called his captain.

Normally the people of the street, except during the three days of harvesting, rested six days a week. In their rare business negotiations they looked for exorbitant profits.

Through the acute cold of the mountains walked solitary figures, their hands behind their backs, wearing dark overcoats, like buzzards bristling under a light rain.

And at the end of the winter loquacious people gathered round the counters of the shops and discussed politics and criticized other people. In the afternoons they established themselves on the sidewalks, in the shade. The dice rattled, the counters snapped on the backgammon boards. And the discussions were endless. People talked about the courage of the lawyer Bento Américo, who became a professor of law and gained fame by dressing badly and writing without verbs. During one speech to the jury, Bento Américo imitated Colonel António de Aquino, a political leader: he lit a cheap cigarette and put his foot on top of a chair. This speech provoked immense admiration.

Ancient events occurred again, confused with more recent ones, and the news in the papers stirred up their minds. They debated Canudos, the revolt of the fleet, abolition, and the war with Paraguay as simultaneous happenings. The Republic, at the end of the second period of four years, still wasn't definitely proclaimed for them. Nothing really altered the life of the village. The same games of backgammon and cards were transmitted from generation to generation; the same jokes provoked the same laughter. Certain phrases, after being learned by heart, mixed easily with others having the opposite meaning – and these incompatibilities established themselves in the mind like articles of faith.

Without doubt Floriano Peixoto and Deodoro da Fonseca were great, so great that aside from politics, they received popular acclaim and entered the songs of the North-east:

Pedro Paulino, Leodoro, Loriano.
It was the republican law
That invented the local guards.

Those who frequented the sidewalks knew something more about the famous generals than their truncated names. They didn't perceive in them the public virtues (no one was in a position to notice this), but discovered in them qualities precious to an inhabitant of the backlands: vigour and cunning. That answer Floriano gave to the foreigners caused enthusiasm. A strong man, yes, sir: he arrested and deported without fear of their scowls. Deodoro was the one who didn't meet with their favour. In the early years of his life he was a poor boy, and Dom Pedro sheltered and educated him, and gave him a position and epaulets. In return for all these favours, he took advantage of his feeble protector. The ingrate. He should have waited for the old man to give up.

My father, a businessman, agreed with everybody. Nevertheless he sometimes had his own ideas, which didn't collide with the others. On the first of November a hero emerged, the Baron of Ladário, unknown before the revolt, born to resist all the way to prison if necessary, to be shot, anything to keep the monarchy from being overthrown. A small amount of bloodshed was enough. And my father, who didn't read much and who was free from bellicose sentiments, saw in the minister an incomparable glory. Later he forgot him completely, he stopped alluding to him as a special instance of bravery. He had a weak imagination and was very incredulous. He annoyed the other unbelievers; he believed only in his current accounts and invoices. He distrusted books, whose pages bore a great deal of nonsense, and he obstinately denied airplanes. In 1934 he was still finding them dubious. Perhaps he even suspected that the Baron of Ladário was a character of fiction.

National politics was a novel that the bearded boys skimmed, left aside, took up again, and misrepresented. Versatile, they didn't remain at this level; they fell into vulgar successes that were also fairy tales.

The district judge mentioned the jurisdiction where he had served in Amazonas: monstrous alligators, inoffensive jaguars, cobras that swallowed oxen.

Sr André Cursino, a small plump man with a big belly, went out in the street clad in a dressing gown.

Sr Batista, inserted into a stiff shirt, strangled in his black tie, a pointed beard stretching out his skinny face, talked slowly. When he stopped talking, heads around him shook in agreement, and malicious eyes mocked him.

Sr Filipe Benício, a corpulent man, had wrinkles and a greyish moustache. When he was serious, he caused fear. In conversation his gravity faded away.

An unhappy type was old Quinca Epifânio, bony, restless, gaunt, a miser even in his words. He kept his pantry in his store: kegs well-covered, protected from the rats. In the morning a rascal would come to the counter, a basket hanging on his arm. The miser uncovered the things he had hidden, weighed and cautiously measured the miserable ration: two hundred grammes of dried and salted meat, two fingers of pork fat, a saucer of beans. He deprived himself of this and bade farewell to the customer, stuttering.

Beyond the lake, on top of a hill, Sr Félix Cursino received visitors on the porch of a house surrounded by cashew trees.

Below this class of people walked creatures who didn't read newspapers and who were ignorant of Dom Pedro II and the Baron of Ladário.

André Laerte, a very dirty barber, wore a bloody smock and walked softly like a cat.

The laughs of the bricklayer Carcará hurt everybody's ears.

Sr Acrísio, a card player who was almost blind, zigzagged, tapped the walls, and examined the steps and doors with his stick. At the game he arranged the cards close to his spectacles and felt them slowly, as if his fingers could see.

Master Firmo the tailor, with a needle stuck in his collar, asked for a cigarette. If he didn't get it, he would go into a grubby little bar and buy a packet. He would take the necessary cigarette and give away nineteen, because he wasn't possessive; he was moderate in his vice and he owed everybody.

Some people, when they didn't show up on the sidewalks, drew severe criticism. Sr Antônio Justino and Sr Afro were among them,

the former because he was indolent, the latter because he led an irregular life.

It would have been difficult to prove that Sr Antônio Justino was lazier than the other inhabitants of the village, but everybody condemned him: he didn't have a farm or occupation, he didn't play any games, and at the gatherings on the corners he gave the most ordinary opinions.

Sr Afro, victim of an unhappiness that I understood only much later, didn't consider himself unhappy, nor did he give that impression: he was a strong young man, ruddy and smiling. When he wasn't present, the people who argued about Canudos and the Baron of Ladário made repugnant grimaces and let out cutting remarks or obscene gestures. Sr Afro, who had had only a church wedding, lived at the Cavalo-Morto, an improper section, with his wife, a tall freckled blonde, and a friend. This friend had a nominal residence at Sr Afro's farm, but in fact he lived in the street and in sin, devoted body and soul to his adopted family – a dedication that time and sarcasm couldn't cool or corrupt. The three of them found in their little world the essence to maintain their sociability. They did without parties, visits and chatter. And Dona Maroca, an attractive woman with her white skin and clothes, was well-washed and brushed; she walked steadily on her strolls, without looking at the windows she passed, as though she had no need of courtesies. The honest women turned away in anger. And the dishonest ones, rather excessively made up, said to each other:

'Hum ! hum ! Maroca passes and doesn't even look.'

To be exact they were saying *she don't look,* which was strange to me. Dona Maroca didn't look. She went on her way, elegantly stiff – and that's all.

I was startled by the lack of consideration and the coldness which enveloped these creatures. I couldn't understand why that pretty girl, fragrant and starched, should be in any way inferior to Sr Acrísio's Dona Agueda, who was slim and sharp-featured. Also it seemed unjust to me to give to old Quinca Epifânio, wrinkled and hungry-looking, more value than Sr Afro, who was robust and gay. Men's ways of judging were peculiar. Very peculiar.

Nevertheless this absurd judgment followed me. It fixed itself in my mind, it grew roots. It made me angry, I couldn't get rid of it, I wanted to restore the reputation of Sr Afro and Dona Maroca. Two

normal people. I think so. Yet I despise them, I find them rotten. It is impossible for me to think of them otherwise. I repeat in my mind Father Joao Inácio's deranged invectives.

A New Life

Our house was in the Rua da Palha, near that of Dona Clara, a serious person who had several children, a cat, and an invisible husband. A relative of hers, a sister or niece, one of those people who never ask or speak or wish for anything, who appear when they are useful and soon disappear without expecting any thanks, became familiar with us and took care of the arrangements when we moved in. She dusted, scrubbed, and arranged the black chairs, the wardrobes, and the leather-covered trunks ornamented with studs. After finishing the work, she disappeared. Even her name got lost.

My father, who had turned into a businessman, established himself in the Largo da Feira. There, in a sad hideout, which later I remembered when I saw caves in illustrated pamphlets, he spent his days opening boxes and packages, arranging merchandise, examining invoices, calculating with his pencil on pieces of wrapping paper. I waited in vain for him to finish this activity and come back to the porch bench and the lowlands of the farm. Often I came to him with messages. And in the beginning I was often late walking along the wide pathway, contemplating the rose trees in the garden, the glittering tiles of the walls, and the little two-storey house where there were men dressed in uniforms.

This lasted only a short time. My mother discovered some spots on the floor; she scraped the bricks and was horrified to learn that they were the blood of a person who had tuberculosis. She washed her hands thoroughly and cried in despair because she was convinced that the dried hæmoptysis would reach her and kill her. She closed the contaminated bedroom and resolved to move out of the house.

Sometime later we were relocated, both the business and the family, on a street corner near the Cavalo-Morto. Behind our store, which had four doors, two of them in front, there was a storeroom for ironware and corn, where I and my sisters played. At one side were

the living-room, the bedrooms like caverns, occupied by my parents and the girls, the pantry and the kitchen. A corridor, separating the residence from the store, led to the dining-room, large and low. There benches surrounded a rough table, and a canvas bed was hidden in a corner, a bed that was offered to me when I stopped sleeping in the hammock because I was afraid of ghosts.

The ghosts came one night, four or five of them, stretching out and squatting at the entrance to the corridor. I was frightened; I shouted and woke everybody up, describing the luminous figures that moved up and down in the darkness. When they moved upwards their heads touched the ceiling. I went to lie in another place and the next day I had a notoriety that I was ashamed of. My family repeated the story and believed in it, holding me responsible for minute details which I did not remember. Could a being so small invent such a thing? I was bewildered, I wanted to avoid exaggeration and say that my story wasn't so important, but I feared I would lose my prestige. I thought I had seen some lights – and the lights suddenly turned into bodies and participated in a conversation. I was ashamed, I wanted to reduce the number of my ghosts. I was frightened of nothing. Nevertheless I was doubtful. This strange situation took over my mind – and in the end I had to admit my vision. Perhaps I wasn't totally mistaken. I might not have seen the lights that stretched and contracted, but I must have seen something.

Little by little I forgot my adventure and settled into my ways. Nevertheless I was somewhat frightened, and this unusual sensation was mixed up with my day-to-day uncertainties. Sudden shivers, a bristling of the hair, and dizziness when someone spoke to me. In the darkness of the long nights I was able to repel the dangers by rolling myself up in the blankets, leaving only my face uncovered. The edge of the sheet covered my forehead, surrounded my face. Thus I felt myself protected: no ghost would come to threaten my exposed mouth, nose and eyes. If the sheet fell away, I would be terrified. I had to keep my ears and scalp hidden, probably because these were the parts most subject to accident. Maybe spooks would come to hurt them.

We lived in a kind of prison, hardly divining what went on in the street, which was covered with mist for long months. We knew our corner very well: from the window of the storeroom, climbing on the rolls of wire, we could see, on a sunny day, farm workers carrying bags

on their shoulders, horses tied to a strong post, transients who cautiously came up to the wall, looked at the surroundings, and moved away after wetting the red brick.

A few steps away, at the next corner, there was a house similar to ours. Three boys, a thin nervous lady, a man with skinny legs stuck in very tight trousers, legs that gave him his nickname. Awkward atop these limbs, Teotoninho Sabiá (named after the thin-legged thrush) winked his yellow bird-like eyes, shook his big featherless wings, and mumbled in an inexpressive clucking. We observed fragments of life, we were captivated by the side of the other birdcage, which was open, and we envied immensely the little Sabiás; we wanted to run and fly with them.

On winter days our corner was transformed into a stream of dirty water, where the children's elaborate toy buildings melted away and small paper boats floated by under the command of a boy covered with mud. The drizzle increased. The steady rain froze us. A swinging curtain hid the furniture and shelves of the store. Fabrics became mildewed, metals would rust. The doors and windows remained closed. Figures moved in the shadow, indeterminate.

I would retire to my bed in the dining-room and roll myself in the humid blankets. I could hardly see the pools in the backyard, the spots that grew larger on the walls, the dark tiles of the roof, and the edge of the flour press, old and rotten, fallen on the porch. There was an acrid smell of burnt green wood; the smoke from the kitchen mingled with the dusty water, thickening the soot that clung to the cobwebs. An enormous wooden gutter-pipe, a suspended river, overflowed during the thunderstorms with a deafening noise. After it subsided, it continued for days and days to drip on the ground; beyond the porch a light and silent water-spout was overflowing, agitated by the wind.

It was not possible to distinguish other sounds from the song of the frogs in the Penha dam – voices that were acute, grave, slow, fast, and among them intermediate or discordant sounds, the bellow of a bullfrog, a terrible animal that bites like a dog; if he catches a Christian, he will turn him loose only when the bell tolls. It was the laundress Rosenda who explained that to me. Admirable bell! What was a bullfrog like? According to my information, he possessed a nature like a human being's. Peculiar. If I could have run, left the house, got wet, covered myself with mud, launched little boats in the torrent,

and made sand buildings with the young Sabiás, I certainly wouldn't have thought of these things. I would have been a lively and happy creature. Alone, shrunken, the only thing I could do was to occupy myself with the bullfrog, almost a person, sensitive to bells. Bells had never impressed me.

Frog, little frog,
On the bank of the river.
Don't throw me in the water,
Dear little sister:
Little frog is cold.

A song to lull children. The little frogs of the dam cried with cold in many ways, screaming, sobbing, demanding or resigned. I too was cold and liked to hear the frogs.

Father Joao Inácio

The place for meetings and gossip was the dining-room, from which, through two doors, I could see the porch and the kitchen. Because they talked very loudly, people could easily make themselves understood from one room to the next. On the bundles of wood arranged near the fire, on the flour press, on the hard benches that surrounded the table, we sat and listened to the banter of the servant, a stupid fellow and a prattler. Rosenda, the laundress, smoked a pipe and starched the clothes on a board. The rascals, José and Maria, sneaked out of the shadows, forgetting their rank and colour, and we could hardly distinguish them from the children of Teotoninho Sabiá.

We all lived in a great confusion – and the living-room, with the black chairs, a lithograph of St John the Baptist and one of hell, and the little crystal mirror that Amâncio, my father's godson, had brought from Rio when he left the army with the rank of sergeant, was hardly ever used. This mirror often fell from the wall but never broke, rivalling the blue glass, a souvenir of my grandfather's wedding, and the toothpick holder that represented two roosters and a fox. Six years ago the toothpick holder still existed, but one of the roosters was gone.

The black chairs weren't dusted. One day the police lieutenant became suspicious of them, took out his handkerchief, and cleaned one. Horrible. My mother was infuriated; she wanted to grease the furniture with fish oil so it would ruin the untouchable uniform of that smart-aleck. She gave up her vengeance – and the living-room remained deserted. It was occasionally opened to receive Dona Conceiçao, Dona Clara, Dona Agueda, and other ladies who grew tired of the silence, staring at the saint, the horned demons, the mirror, and the dusty sofa with the cane seat.

Eventually this room was turned into a storeroom for corn. After the furniture was removed, we brought in the corn because the storeroom at the back had become a nursery for butterflies. The corn had remained exposed, waiting for the rise in prices that would be caused by the dry season, and the larvae had got at it. Now it had lost its value. It was necessary to treat it with poison to kill the insects. A treat for children. I and my sisters stirred the contents of the golden granary, spreading the arsenic. There was no need for a workman – we gladly took over the task ourselves. We abandoned the flour press, the storeroom jammed with ironware, and the bare yard where we could hear the noisy cotton-gin at the Cavalo-Morto.

In the room that was turned into a granary our environment enlarged unexpectedly and we had much more freedom. Seeds spilled all over the corridor, accumulating to form a kind of slope, on which we could climb till we reached the windows. From there we dominated the street; we could see the passers-by who looked shorter than us. Sr Acrísio, mistaking his way, stumbled, fell against the walls, and growled: 'Devil! devil! devil!' A few steps away to the right, Sr Chico Brabo mistreated Joao. On our shifting slope we managed to stabilize ourselves. Our fun represented something useful – and no kill-joy would come to quieten us down and impose his discipline on us.

Nevertheless a shadow would sometimes darken our joy: the memory of the vicar. In the kitchen and dining-room we would imagine this terrible man, a kind of werewolf created to force us into obedience. His absurd pronouncements in the church were repeated. But this was of no interest to us. We were, all the same, right in fearing this dreadful man in every respect. He never smiled. One glass eye, unmoving in a black circle, gave him a sinister aspect.

In spite of this, Father Joao Inácio made a habit of caring for

people with smallpox, creatures who spread fear throughout the village. If the word got around, doors would shut, business would fall off, at the foot of the street they would burn ox dung, and creolin was smeared on pieces of roof tile. One night these unhappy people were taken, wrapped up, to the straw sheds built in the brushwood, where, abandoned, their sick flesh would rot on the leaves of banana trees. Some male nurses who were immune to the disease perforated their pustules with thorns from the cactus tree, washing them with cheap sugar-cane brandy and camphor. There was a high mortality rate, and the survivors bore horrible scars. The quacks who dealt with the plague caused as much fear as the victims. They were isolated; people felt as much repugnance as admiration for them.

During one the most violent epidemics Father Joao Inácio and Captain Badega, who didn't need to take precautions, established themselves in the sheds. Those who were afraid perished. These two came out of it unhurt, and consequently they received the honorary title of 'commander'. A minor distinction. The vicar never became a canon. And Captain Badega remained a captain, hidden away on his farm, indifferent to honours, reading César Cantu, ruling over various natural sons and a lot of young girls.

After this achievement, Father Joao Inácio prepared jars of lymphatic fluid and started injecting the arms of every human in the village and the vicinity. The people of the backlands didn't want to allow this disgrace in their bodies and still get sick from it. If a doctor tried to inoculate them, there would be disturbances. But this weak authority used despotic methods; he wouldn't give explanations. He insulted the rabble, a race of dogs and pigs. He commanded because he had powers: he was an Albuquerque and a priest. And the parishioners would allow themselves to be contaminated, the cowards, lamenting that his reverence the priest didn't dedicate himself entirely to the rites of worship. He didn't dedicate himself. He directed a political party – and the worship received little of his attention.

He was a schoolmate of Father Cicero. He talked about him as though he were a conjurer who was beginning to be noticed: unknown and suffering for not being an Albuquerque.

Father Joao Inácio was poor and had creditors whom he dominated. He managed, despite necessities, to exhibit his independence, to insult people, to shout.

We were vaccinated in the store, grown-ups and children. To my surprise, I ignored the evil tendency of the man; I didn't feel pain or fear. But the wounds that emerged, the convalescence, the fever, forty days without bacon, seemed to me the work of the reverend. I talked about this disaster with my sisters. The little one, a small animal, didn't attribute the long suffering and the rigorous diet to the punctures. The oldest, however, who already discerned ulterior motives and helped me in the theft of sweets, agreed with me: really this evil creature had almost made us ill by forbidding us the bacon. We suspected that unhappiness would return, and the suspicion would be confirmed on the porch and in the kitchen if we did something wrong.

One afternoon we amused ourselves on the corn. We would make holes, and, when they were deep enough, we would dive in, causing the slopes to collapse and disappear in the yellow ruins. This gave me immense pleasure.

I was very impressed by José Baía's stories, his references to powerful invocations, especially to the she-goat of enormous virtue. Whoever possesses this sorcery escapes from the most serious situations, disregards ambushes, defeats enemies, walks fearlessly along paths, and silences firearms. In dangerous moments one is transformed into a stump. Or disappears, evaporates – and in front of the blunderbuss set in the fork of the trap appears the image of Our Lord, crucified.

I wanted to know this fabulous prayer. It would be wonderful for me to spend an hour in peace, looking at the wall of the backyard, listening to the frogs in the Penha dam and the noise of the cotton-gin at the Cavalo-Morto. They wouldn't scold me. If they called me, I could remain seated quietly on the flour press. They could shout. They could approach me – I would move a few centimetres, calm and secure. And I would give that rascal Maria a scare, gently pulling her kinky hair. Later, protected by this powerful spell, I would go in for unusual things: wandering in the streets, invisible, spinning invisible tops, flying invisible kites. I would linger on the street corners, listening to curious stories, I would lie on the sidewalks, joining the rowdy dirty boys. I would remain isolated, fitting into every group. And if I saw Father Joao Inácio, I would run towards him and examine his leanness disguised by his faded cassock, his hard eye unmoving in the black orbit. We would stroll along like two friends.

There, hidden in the corn, with only my face uncovered, I filled

myself with ideas like these; I would picture myself as an enchanted being. I would start chattering. My sister also day-dreamed that she was bodiless and hidden in mystery. Our talks, sometimes tempestuous, were now a murmur, like those we had at night in the dining-room.

At the moment when the priest arrived, two graves were ready. He appeared near us, so near that he could, by stretching out his arm, reach us with his umbrella.

'Leonor!' I whispered in agony.

Leonor turned around and fainted. We fell into a deep despondency, like two animals, magnetized. I lacked the strength necessary to move, to reach the door and escape through the corridor. The dreadful figure held me – and the eyeball seemed to want to leap out of the elongated spot on the skinny face and jump on top of me. His chin almost rubbed the window sill. His shrunken mouth bit on his lips. That's what I saw. That and the curved handle of his umbrella riding on his shoulder. Right after that I felt anxious and hazy. And through the murmuring I heard two or three words, dry, authoritative, incomprehensible, that hurt my ears. Surely the vicar sent some message to the owners of the house, but this went beyond my understanding. A shiver, a sudden gust of air invaded my lungs and stayed there, a knot in my throat, a faint heart, tired flesh, my will suspended. My instinct dragged me towards the grave, and there, just a foot away, I found myself incapable of burying myself. Under my paralysed limbs the kernels of corn shifted, squeaked, and decided not to slide very fast, dragging us and covering us. The phantom stood for a long while waiting for us to get up and do what he said. Because we didn't move, he turned away, mumbling through his nose – his usual way of showing disapproval. Stupid, he called us. Surviving the smallpox and ungrateful. That was what he must have thought.

'Stupid.'

Father Joao Inácio didn't know how to talk to us, to smile or be playful – and our hearts were closed to him. In Father Joao Inácio, an admirable man of action, we perceived only hardness.

My mother read slowly in an inexpressive manner, making absurd pauses, swallowing commas and full-stops, abolishing the normal intonation, elongating or shortening the words. She didn't understand their meaning very well. And, with such prosody and such punctuation, the simplest texts became obscure.

These distortions drew me away from the painful exercise, a true enigma. This and the unpleasant look of the four-volume novel, stained and cracked, which the neighbourhood ladies would read haltingly, word by word, finding ridiculous intentions in the loose pictures, where the ink grew faint, forming stains. 'A strange, uniform, and . . . group.' It lacked the adjective that ended the legend for one of the illustrations. I believe that it was *handsome.* Various people in a box with wheels, pulled by two horses, different from the ox-carts that squeaked on the backlands roads. On top of the box was a haughty man with a whip and a moustache, a coachman, according to what I was told – an inadequate name in my opinion. A coachman ought to deal with *cochos* [troughs], objects not seen in the book. Everything in the book seemed to contradict our familiar usage. 'A strange, uniform, and handsome group.' It sounded like a song.

My mother repeated this till she learned by heart the story of Adélia and Dom Rufo. She got tired and changed to some pamphlets with yellow covers, published by the fathers of St Francis de Sale. She spent hours on the black sofa in the living-room, her eyes prominent and alert, her mouth wrinkled; from time to time she wet her fingers with saliva and turned the pious pages. She had her fill of ingenious miracles, parables, biographies of saints, legends, exacting advice, indefinite offers and threats. She grew ecstatic over the actions of Dom Bosco, a fine old man, similar to Friar Caetano, the missionary who moved through the North-east, elevating the souls of the local girls.

She abandoned these lofty passages, she became frightened and fled to the bedroom to hide from the eternal punishments. She would grow excited, then despondent, perhaps finding in her conscience some little thing that was censured in the pamphlet with the yellow cover. She fled from the earth and looked at the beyond. Soon after that she would descend from this high level and fall into the vulgar, commenting on the gossip of the village, reprehending the rascals, nagging, smacking her lips. She wouldn't allow us to talk in this way.

She was very stubborn about it. If one of us let out a phrase that she condemned, she grew angry and corrected it: *humph.* We didn't like the onomatopœia: we insisted on the exact word, even though it would hurt us.

Her ordinary existence, based on the earthly affairs of the household, lasted two or three weeks, or till the mail would bring her monthly supply of religious literature. Then there appeared the bigots with their stigmas, Dom Bosco, simple dialogue, edifying events, the vague pleasures of heaven, and the minute tortures of hell.

Purifying herself at this good source, my mother sometimes needed to expand: she transmitted her raptures and fears to me. One afternoon, painfully assembling her syllabus with her habitual lament, she had a sudden surprise and put her face close to the page. She read the passage again – and her thin lips contracted, her eyes narrowed and were fastened on the crystal mirror. She became aware of a bad experience and refused to accept it. Before diving into that nightmare, she clung to some wretched pieces of furniture – the mirror, the clock, the chairs – and tried to lean on somebody.

She drew me near her, she told me secretly her lost and foolish complaints. Perplexed, sometimes she would move towards the windows, sometimes she would examine the little book that was open on the black concave sofa. She wasn't indecisive for long. In her sickly curiosity, she plunged into reading, she wasted an hour punishing herself to excess. She got up, crossed the corridor and the dining-room, and fell back on the flour press on the porch. I followed her and sat near her without saying a word; I hoped that she would call me. Our disagreements faded away. I considered her weak and good; I wished I could comfort her and tell her something encouraging. My heart felt heavy and there was a knot in my throat, and I was somewhat alarmed myself. I hated the pamphlet; I had the idea of stealing it, hiding it, or tearing it up.

The poor woman despaired in silence. She pressed her inoffensive bony hands together; her skinny chest went up and down; near the red spot on her forehead, a vein was swollen. Several people in the family had that curious spot. In moments of excitement it became more noticeable, almost purple, from the eyebrows to the roots of the hair – and when these people grew angry, they were almost crazy.

After all this my mother blew up in loud sobs, one great crying spell. She held me, blindly embraced me, wet me with her tears. I

tried to get away from these rough caresses. Why wouldn't she quieten down and leave me in peace?

Her excitement diminished, her crying gradually ceased, and a little sad voice confessed to me, between long sighs, that the world was going to end. This was written in the designs of Providence, which were brought regularly through the mail. At the turn of the century an angry comet would shoot across the sky and extinguish all creation: men, animals, plants. Creeks and dams would be converted to smoke, stones would melt. In ancient times the wrath of God would exterminate life with water; he determined now to end it with fire.

I ignored the century, the comet, the tradition. And my ignorance spread fraternally towards all living creatures. Not perceiving the mystery of the letters, I found it difficult to believe that they would combine to tell such unhappy news. Probably my mother was wrong in believing that she saw imaginary disasters on the page. I brought up this possibility, but it was rejected. I announced this disgraceful possibility very clearly. I looked at the brick wall, which I considered indestructible.

Sometime later I and my sister were playing near the wall. We would run back and forth from there to the porch and then relax for a while in the shadow, then run again. On one of these turns, when we reached the flour press, we heard a great noise. We turned around. The wall had disappeared. We saw rubbish, clay, a cloud of dust, trees, the backyard suddenly expanded, the bases of houses, the cotton gin of the Cavalo-Morto. Before another wall was built, we would jump over the ruins, admiring the fancy little scraps of iron, the machine devouring the seeds, fluffs of cotton flying about slowly, forming a thick, soft hailstorm. The diligence of the motor, the spinning of the wheels, of the pulley, of the belt and the saws, took the place of the noises that lulled us during harvest time. We gained experience, we argued about it. And my confidence in the construction decreased.

That afternoon, though, I found out about the prophecy; I still didn't believe that anything had collapsed. The wall was still unshaken. I convinced myself that a dubious and remote phenomenon, almost nameless, wouldn't have the strength to tear it down. I also discovered that God wouldn't eliminate everyone at once without motive, Sr Afro, Carcará, José da Luz, André Laerte, Firmo the

teacher, Sr Acrísio, Rosenda, and the children of Teotoninho Sabiá. And Father Joao Inácio. Who had told the fellow in the book that God had decided to kill Father Joao Inácio? Father Joao Inácio was powerful. I firmly repudiated the prediction. Just rumour: the world wasn't going to end. A world so vast, where the village and the farm fitted in easily, wouldn't be destroyed.

My mother found my unruly demonstration rather strange; she tried to prove to me that the sages knew about the complications of heaven and divined their consequences. But she wanted to be sure that she had not made a mistake, at least in the part dealing with the great fire. She refuted my opinion energetically, but her tone was amiable. She became serene, ending the debate as if we were talking about the visions in a dream. She insisted on calling me an animal. She didn't succeed in intimidating me. And it was this absence of fear, this indifference to the remote dangers, to the fire, to the destruction, that made her tranquil.

She had been apprehensive for some days, turning the pages of the pamphlet, her eyes wide-open and very serious. She finally abandoned the cataclysm and took refuge in new fears.

The comet came at the end of two years and behaved very well. My mother went to observe it from the door of the church without a tremor, entirely forgetting the prediction. By this time we had moved; we lived far away from the village. The world was immense, it was many leagues in length – and securely it challenged prophecies and comets.

Hell

Sometimes my mother lost her rough edges and her hardness; she would cheer up and try to look pretty: fourteen or fifteen years younger than she actually was. During these short and precious truces, I got used to thinking of her as a child, a companion of flexible temperament, whom it was necessary to treat cautiously. I succeeded in acting imprudently and annoying her. The fourteen or fifteen years that emerged between us suddenly seemed more – and made me unhappy.

One day, in a burst of conversation on the flour press on the porch, my mother tried to compose phrases with the obscure vocabulary of the pamphlets. And I let myself be lulled by the music. And from time to time I would venture some question which stayed unanswered and disturbed the narrator.

Suddenly I heard a common word and I had the idea of looking up its exact meaning. It dealt with hell. My mother found my curiosity odd: it should have been possible for a boy of six years, the age when he enters school, to ignore that. I already knew some things. *Hell* was a bad word which we shouldn't pronounce. But it wasn't only this. It described an awful place to which badly educated people sent the others when they had an argument. And a place must have houses, trees, dams, churches, lots of things, so many things of which I demanded a description. My mother condemned this demand and wanted to remain at the level of generalities. I didn't agree. I asked for explanations, I appealed to her knowledge. Why shouldn't she explain this business correctly? I insisted so much that she grew condescending. She stated that that place was different from others. There weren't any plants, or corrals, or stores, and those who dwelt there were the worst sort, tortured by demons with tails and horns; after death they lived in the midst of fires larger than those on St Joao's day and in large pans filled with melted pitch. She talked a bit about these creatures.

The bonfire on St Joao's day I knew about. One was built in front of the house. In the afternoon I would walk around the pile of wood that the rascal José had built. While admiring the preparations, I was shocked to notice all of a sudden a young papaya tree covered with green fruit. At night it lay on a pile of kerosene bottles; then became a firebrand. And I stayed on the sidewalk till ten o'clock, watching the flames that my father fed with staves and odd bits of wood. The people of the village moved around, laughed and sang, illuminated by other fires. On the following day the leaves of the papaya tree were toasted, pulverized. And in the street, now cleared of rubbish, appeared large black stains.

I also knew the melted pitch. In the storehouse there were slender kegs containing a dark substance which, when stepped on, would take on the colour of an old coin – after the pitch has been wet and dried and scratched on bricks, it is free from verdigris. I had crumbled this marvellous thing with a half-kilo weight beside the Roman scale in

the store. I put the golden dough in a newspaper cartridge; I put a match to it and waited for the results. A tear ran on the paper, reached my middle finger, and dribbled from the fingernail to the first joint. Abandoning this experience, I became desperate, covering up my shouts, and rushed to put my hand in a pot of water. I suffered in silence, fearing that they would find out about my mischief and my burn.

When my mother spoke about melted pitch, I examined the scar on my finger and shook my head in doubt. If a small lump, crushed by a half-kilo weight, produced that disaster, how could one suppose that people would endure for many years full kegs poured into wide deep pans, over the bonfires of St Joao?

'Were you there?'

She disregarded the inconvenient question and continued energetically.

'I wanted to know if you had been there.'

She hadn't been there, but things were this way and couldn't be otherwise. The priests taught it thus.

'Were the priests there too?'

My question didn't indicate a distrust in authority. I wasn't even thinking of this. I wished that they would explain to me the curious habits of this place. I wasn't satisfied with merely the bonfires, the wide pans of pitch, victims and demons. I needed details.

My mother spoiled the story with an incongruity. She assured me that the devils got along very well on flames and embers. She wasn't aware, though, of the resistance of the tormented souls. She had said that they could bear eternal sufferings. Soon she insinuated that, after a longish stay there, they would become devils. It was indispensable to clarify this point. I didn't look for reasons; a simple affirmation was enough. I was ready to believe it and would accept the extraordinary cases without much effort, as long as they weren't too incompatible. I required a witness, somebody who had seen the devils with horns and the souls swimming in pitch. I still wasn't able to understand perfectly things that were described but never seen.

'Were the priests there?' I asked again.

My mother was irritated; she found me flighty and stupid. They hadn't been there, of course they hadn't been, but they were learned people, they were instructed in books in seminaries. I sensed a grave deception: the eternal flames and the horrible kettles grew cold. I

began to think the story reasonable; I tried to guess for what motive Father Joao Inácio, powerful and half-blind, punctured people's arms with vaccine. Perhaps Father Joao had lost his eye in hell and had brought that bad habit from there. My mother's answer disillusioned me; it shuffled my ideas. And I was rebellious:

'It's nothing like that.'

For some time my mother had been analysing me with her mouth open, terrified. And I, angered by the disappearance of the wide pans of pitch, the demons, and the prestige of Father Joao Inácio, repeated:

'It's nothing like that. It's just talk.'

My mother bent over, took off her bed-slippers, and spanked me several times. I wasn't convinced. I remained docile, trying to accommodate myself to the peculiarities of others. But sometimes I was sincere, like a fool. And the blows of bed-slippers and other timely punishments descended on me.

The Rascal José

The black Quitéria begot several children. The males ran away, were arrested, and escaped again – and before abolition they were half-free. They vanished. The females, Luísa and Maria, joined my grandfather's people. Maria, the younger, although born free, never stopped being a slave. And Joaquina, her offspring, took her place in the kitchen till the old people died; the family didn't have the resources to maintain her. Then Joaquina freed herself. And got married, unlike her forebears. Luísa, a vagabond, was unsociable. In times of drought and hunger she would grow closer to the old people and move to the farm, nagging and ill-bred, arguing in a loud voice and causing trouble. At the end of some weeks she would arrange the household goods and have a good time; then she would conceive her children, who disappeared, eaten by vermin or given away like kittens. The only two who survived were those that my father took care of.

Maria had her mother's nature. And unable to reveal much of herself, she washed the dishes and swept the house in silence, indiff-

erent and serious, lacking fellow-feeling, waiting to gain wings to fly. She realized this project.

The rascal José, devious and gentle, talked too much and laughed constantly in his gentle and persuasive way, trying to be harmonious with everybody. When rejected, he would lower his head. Then he would come back and reveal his small abilities without being offended; he was skilful and humble; he always showed his teeth. He wasn't very happy. He hid his cold white eyes as if he were scared; his lips trembled sometimes, but this would be disguised with a funny sort of face that would soften the anger of the grown-ups. And José would escape by gliding away, meek and slippery, from the hands that wanted to grab him. When he was caught in mischief, he lied, innocent and shameless. He would place one index finger over the other in the form of a cross, kissing them: 'By God in heaven, by the five wounds of Jesus Christ Our Lord, by this light that shines on me.' Frail and skinny, he was subdued. An insignificant blot.

I never saw him cry. He moaned, screamed, begged, sobbed out infinite promises, but his eyes would remain dry and hard. He made me envious: it was difficult for me to hold back my easy tears. I took him as a model. And, since it was hard for me to copy his actions, I imitated his way of pronouncing words, and that disgusted me. All of this cooled off my ambition to improve and educate myself; I was forced to recover my normal speech. People made him call me 'sir'; they didn't admit that I would consider myself worthless and would voluntarily shun that little mark of respect. José, indifferent to my plight, remained obedient and modest, protecting me.

We frequently went to the little farm that my father kept near the street beyond the new cemetery. Under the trees of the clearing, resting on the dry leaves, I remained torpid for hours, looking at the rows of manioc bushes, the fences, and parakeets that coveted the yellow corn-cobs. José idled on the neighbouring farms. Soon after leaving the house, turning the corner of the Cavalo-Morto, a bunch of boys got together. And the band grew larger; in front of Paulo Honório's wall it became a noisy platoon that decorated the sand with flowers of the coral tree. The women doing the planting saw the scarlet petals as indecent objects; they stepped on them furiously, throwing insults at the bushes. The brats in hiding would shout and run into the woods, spreading on the ground other flowers, red and furry; they lay in wait, annoying the women. Mounted on my white

sheep, I was startled by their indignation; I wanted to know why they crushed such beautiful things with their feet. I found this game foolish and grew tired of the noisy kids. One day one approached me and began a conversation using mysterious words. José intervened:

'Shut up. He doesn't understand this.'

I became sad, humiliated at my ignorance being announced. I wanted to protest, pretending to be clever, but I gave up and confessed to myself that they behaved in a singular way. I went away serious and free from curiosity.

My white sheep died and the visits to the little farm ended.

José knew about places, people, animals and plants. But once he made a mistake. He presumed to see at a distance the person of my grandfather in a leather-clad trooper:

'Sr Ferreira in a short leather jacket on Sr Afro's horse.'

I disagreed. My grandfather dressed in leather only when he worked in the field. On the street he presented himself in a shirt and tie, and also at the fair, at mass, at elections, and on the jury. When the man drew near, we noticed the mistake – and this gave me some satisfaction. I felt closer to the boy now that he was fallible. I had thought that his knowledge was instinctive and sure. I modified my judgment and hoped that, with some effort, I could also learn names by heart and find my way through roads and paths.

Despite the error, José's prestige didn't diminish. I was convinced that he had expressed himself well and repeated with enthusiasm:

'Sr Ferreira in a short leather jacket on Sr Afro's horse.'

I ended up by dividing this phrase into two lines, which at first I declaimed and later on sang:

Sr Ferreira in a short leather jacket
On Sr Afro's horse.

My mother became angry and scolded me with very ordinary terms. Stupid, idiot. I bit my lips and went to hide in the storehouse, from where I could see the street corner. But, after climbing to the window sill, my legs hanging out, I couldn't forget this nonsense and recited my monologue, hitting my heels on the bricks:

Sr Ferreira in a short leather jacket
On Sr Afro's horse.

José taught me several lessons. And the most valuable marked my flesh and spirit. I remember the scene perfectly. It was at night, it was raining, the gutters were dripping. In the dining-room my father was talking about the little black boy, who didn't behave very well. No indication of tempest and violence, because his fault was slight and my father wasn't angry: he would be satisfied with a few invectives. Finding himself willing to forgive, he easily accepted explanations. When only the simple foolishness of the accused was involved, his harsh voice would soften, a thick laughter would crack – and calm was re-established. We went through difficult moments, though: we couldn't know whether he was going to be placid or infuriated. And our behaviour would carry him from one extreme to the other. We succeeded or failed as though we were playing heads or tails. If the customers acted properly in the store, we would receive unexpected generosities; if they didn't, we would suffer the consequences. Probably it's like this everywhere, but here these vicissitudes were only too clear.

On this night José, as usual, denied some little naughtiness he had committed. Forced to answer for himself, he continued his denial. They had proof and the evidence was there. The black boy was obtuse; he didn't perceive that he should at least confess something and try to defend himself later, to swear by this light, by the wounds of Christ, not to do it again. He lost his chance – and the authority abhorred him, not because of his venial fault, but because of his stubbornness, aggravated perhaps by the memory of strange facts. Now the poor fellow had to be resigned to his punishment. And he endured, he tried to check the terrible anger. The infraction grew larger and became mixed up with some old ones, already forgiven, and these in turn became horrible crimes.

When my father himself was sufficiently angered, he held the rascal and pulled him to the kitchen. I followed them, curious, excited by a live thirst for justice. Not a bit of sympathy for my disgraced companion, who suffered at the whipping post, awaiting his punishment. Nor did I think it a good idea to intervene; that would make me superior. I remained on the side of the law, wanting the sentence to be inflexible. I wasn't afflicted by fears, because nobody was accusing me, nobody was stirring my conscience. Not recognizing any dangers, I thought they had gone.

The embers of the stove were covered with ashes and died under

the raindrops; the water from the gutter-pipe splashed on the slippery brick floor; the smoky flame of the hanging lamp flickered. With a murmur, the child kissed his thin fingers. Suddenly the whip licked his back and he sprang into action. He started to turn round to ward off the blows. And his words flowed in a torrent:

'By this light, my godfather. By the five wounds of Our Lord Jesus Christ.'

His whimpering supplication was useless, the painful yelp of a new-born dog. Many strokes of the whip were lost and hit the shins of the judge turned executioner. This person put aside the instrument of torture and grabbed his victim by the ears; he lifted him and started to shake him. His moaning ceased. His wretched body fell away, its shadow coming and going on the dusky wall, reaching the roof-tiles, and his feet were moving in the air.

Here I was tempted to help my father. I wouldn't be able to be of any particular use, but I was certain that José had committed a serious offence and I decided to collaborate in his suffering. I removed a short log from the wet pile and gently touched the bottom of one of his feet which were moving over my head. In truth I merely touched the little black boy's skin. I wouldn't dare to hurt him; I only wanted to convince myself that I was able to make somebody suffer. My action was a simple demonstration of a perverse sentiment, which was limited by my weakness. If the experience hadn't gone wrong, it is possible that my bad instinct would have made me a strong man. It failed – and I took a different direction.

Certainly José didn't feel anything. I took heart and touched his foot again with the inoffensive piece of wood. But this time he screamed in despair, saying that I had hurt him. My father turned him loose. And, seeing me armed, he ignored José's injuries: he lifted me by the ears and finished the punishment, transferring to me all the rascal's faults. I was obliged to participate in somebody else's suffering.

A Fire

On one of our trips to the little farm, José invited me to visit the remains of the fire that had devoured one of the shacks that lay beyond the clearing. I was suspicious. I never went near those huts,

where there swarmed the malicious little devils who annoyed the women who worked in the fields.

I was overcome by curiosity: a fire that could destroy houses was really admirable. I didn't know that a fire had such power. I had only seen fires in the kitchen, licking the tripod on the stove, or rising from the little public square on the eve of St Joao's day, or sometimes causing a little damage, as on the day when a spark from Maria Melo's pipe fell on my sister's shoulders. Now it was the cause of a really large destruction – and this surprised me. It had got angry and behaved like a tame horse that took the bit in his teeth.

I left my white sheep tied in the shade and went with the boy in the direction of the shacks. One of them had already gone. The ruins were spreading and still burning: ashes, a hot, black rubbish that we couldn't approach. From a distance I felt cheated: I had hoped to discover flames rising towards the sky, crackling wood, red clouds – and here was only crumpled débris. I was disgusted and couldn't give it a thought.

In the yard, in front of the smouldering remains, men and women were weeping, lamenting, gesticulating. And some, seated on trunks, looked like idiots, silent and inert. I moved away from a dark object, something like a charred stump. All eyes were fixed on that, and little by little I distinguished words in the sound of their weeping, the outline of a dreadful situation.

While the men worked in the field and the boys idled in the vicinity, two young black girls did the cooking, blowing on the kindling and fanning the fire. A spark reached the wall and in minutes the straw was burning. The two girls tried to stop the disaster. Not being able to do anything, the younger ran away. The other decided to empty the house: she saved the pans, the grater, the straw mats, the cane bed, a bundle of clothes, and the trunks. Deaf to the calls of her sister, she collected all the household objects except the lithograph of Our Lady, which was probably singed in the place where they hid it. The walls disappeared, the roof collapsed, the only door was like the red throat of a furnace from which fearful tongues emerged. Despite this, she dived into the furnace in seach of the blessed image. On her way back, she found the entrance blocked and died. There she was. A girl moaned and sobbed that she tried to stop the unfortunate one: Our Lady didn't need anybody, She would escape if She wanted to. The stubborn girl ignored the pleas – and there she was. The eyes were

fastened on that thing stretched out near the hot ashes.

This story upset my stomach; the smoke drew tears from me, giving me headaches. I had never seen a corpse. I was afraid, but I wanted to examine this one; surely it had disintegrated in the catastrophe. I was sorry I had accepted José's invitation. It would be good to come back to our little farm and lie on a mattress of leaves, admiring the parakeets, the flowers of the coral tree, and the yellow corn-cobs. However, I couldn't find peace. I was excited, fascinated by the smoking ashes, by the weeping, the laments; my morbid taste was torturing me.

Following the gaze of this inconsolable group, I drew near the dark stump, exposed on the ground, a precious object. Why? I couldn't understand its worth; I found it strange that they referred to it with respect, giving it a Christian name. Bits of reality entered my understanding, were repelled and came back more confused than ever. Affirmations and negations fell upon me almost simultaneously. A human being was lying here. But I soon rejected this obtuse assertion. Nothing human: it had the vague appearance of a roll of tobacco. That's it, a roll of tobacco, similiar to those my father kept in the storeroom, moistened with a viscous liquid and wrapped around the trunk of a banana tree. Only this one wasn't moistened or covered: it was bare and burnt. A roll of ordinary tobacco, like those sold in the stands of the fair, peeling and crumbling in the sun. It was difficult to give it a woman's name, a woman's existence. Nevertheless the repeated exclamations and fragmentary comments destroyed the evidence and in the end assured me that a dead Negress was in the yard. It forced me to perceive the connection between this burnt stump and the brave girl who took the trouble to protect the domestic objects – the arms and legs were missing. I was torn between my energy and my visible inertia. Indecision changed to a great fear, not of this motionless thing, but of the being that moved and continued to move in the grievings of these people. My energy was perhaps going to prevail over my inertia and punish me. Not having obtained permission to see the accident, I felt guilty, but it was impossible to determine the extent of my guilt. I considered myself profane. I wasn't permitted to see corpses, especially this one, deprived of its usual bodily parts as a consequence of the tragedy. I bent over in a burst of courage. It lacked hair, it lacked skin – and not having breasts nor sex, it lost the rest of its animal characteristics. The surface was

covered with a crust, like that of old metal abandoned to decay. In some places it was similar to roasted beef; and there was really a strong smell of roast beef; otherwise it was terribly dry. In this gritty lump of earth the head stood out, what once was a head, with its empty eye-sockets, two rows of teeth shining in the devastation, and the hole of the nose, expelling a green, yellow substance. I recognized a face, the remains of a face, a horrible mess, uglier than the masked fools at Carnival. I didn't see the details: I only saw with a quick glance the teeth, the empty eye-sockets, and the flow of pus.

I averted my eyes, moving away nauseated, cursing José who had exposed me to this enormous disgrace, and I analysed everything with interest. I dragged him away and we returned to our farm, but the shadows of the trees, the flowers of the coral tree, and the birds didn't bring me peace. I condemned myself and condemned the boy. If I hadn't given in to temptation, that filthiness wouldn't have existed, at least wouldn't have existed in my mind.

I arrived home needing to confess, to free myself from the terrible memory. I told what I had seen and heard: sparks reaching the straw, eating at the straw, spreading their damage; the girl moving furniture, protecting the Virgin Mary, perishing wrapped in flames, then stretched out on the ground, without arms and legs, her teeth wide in an ugly grimace. Two dark holes, a greenish gelatin running through the nostrils.

I shivered and repeated the description; I was so excited that my parents tried to calm me and to play down this sinister thing. There was no reason why we should be tormented, they said. Without doubt this was an unhappy occasion. But it was the will of God, it was written. And it could have been worse, much worse. If the church had been burned or Sr Quinca Epifânio's store, the most important one in the village, the loss would have been tremendous. God was merciful: He contented Himself with a miserable hut, situated well away from the street, and with the sacrifice of an anonymous black girl. I wasn't convinced. Sr Quinca Epifânio's store and the church had nothing to do with that business. I hadn't seen any fire in the church or at Sr Quinca Epifânio's store: I did see a shack destroyed, and in my mind the shack expanded, matching houses constructed of brick. Sr Quinca Epifânio and Father Joao Inácio were still alive. If they had died in a big fire, they would be as repulsive as the black girl.

They should have scolded me, told me that I had behaved badly in

leaving the clearing, the trees, the parakeets, and the flowers. The unhappy memory tormented me: it was necessary for others to know about it and censure me. They had always been too rigorous with me, and now they left me with this burden in my mind. The questioning and the punishment would have calmed me a little more: I would have forgotten, in my sorrow and anger, what I had seen. They didn't punish me, they wanted to turn that horror into an ordinary fact.

At night sleep eluded me; there was no way of holding on to it. The black girl was there near my bed or on the table in the dining-room, without arms and legs, and she was only two or three feet long. Suddenly she grew monstrously large. Below her immense forehead were cut huge precipices. Below her nose was a great pool of pus. And her teeth grew larger in a fantastic laugh. On ordinary nights, in order to escape the inhabitants of the darkness, I would cover my head. This sheltered me: no ghost would come to pursue me under the sheet. Now I couldn't save myself. The charred ember approached me, pulled back the cover, touched my body, dirtied me with the brine that ran from the deep fissures. The empty orbits watched me, the mud from the nose bubbled in a death rattle, the teeth came together and wanted to bite me. I crawled and hid my face in the pillow, and the vision continued to haunt me. The shivers that agitated me turned into a violent tremor. I couldn't endure the suffering and shouted like mad, scaring the family. They came to get me and tried to sweep the spectre out of my imagination; they put me at the foot of their bed. There I grew prostrate in the circle of light from the oil lamp, hearing the crowing of the roosters, until dawn brought me a slight drowsiness filled with bad dreams. I fell asleep with that loathsome figure and I woke up with it.

During the day I talked about it again and described it until I was nauseated. I searched for the one responsible for that sordid agony, and I blamed Our Lady for it. If the creature hadn't had the idea of saving Her image, she would be cutting palm leaves to make a new shack. She was devout, and that doomed her. Evidently the Mother of God was ungrateful and furious. In payment for such pure devotion – wrath and destruction.

The grown-ups, though, refuted my judgment emphatically. The Virgin Mary had been generous. She had chosen a black girl because She considered her worthy of salvation. She imposed some pains on her and in return She offered her paradise, without the stage in pur-

gatory. The horrible fire of purgatory couldn't be compared to earthly flames, and each of us, sooner or later, would be cooked in it. The black girl was lucky. She was probably in heaven already, in front of Jesus, mingling with the seraphim.

This particular benevolence left me perplexed. I didn't say anything more, prudently, but I found this interpretation doubtful and confusing. It didn't seem to me that purgatory was indispensable. And the black girl, incomplete and dirty, wasn't in heaven. What would she do there? She would spoil the eternal pleasures, she would stain the wings of the angels.

José da Luz

In order to reduce my mischief and put me in order, they used several methods: first, the werewolves that, by being invisible, were ineffective; after that, religion and the police, revealed in the persons of Father Joao Inácio and José da Luz. They quickly made clear to me the value of these authorities, whom I admired and feared from a distance, but when they approached me only the vicar maintained his reputation. José da Luz soon lost his prestige. There was no way of making him seem serious and firm and able to inspire fear. An inefficient bugbear. With his olive-coloured face, his unruly hair tamed with pork fat, his alert eyes swarming with joy, flat nose, and wide mouth provided with strong, noisy weapons. No wrinkles on his dark-brown skin, no wrinkles in his shirt or trousers ironed carefully by Rosenda the laundress. Clean, with his shining collar, his boots squeaking and polished, José da Luz differed a lot from the common policemen, who were slovenly and rumpled and stirred up noise in the fair and at the end of the street, along with the local fellows and the whores.

Probably these men behaved like that out of vengeance. During their hard days as civilians, they had suffered blows and insults, slept in jail without reason, borne on their callouses the heels of rubber shoes; these fellows had a knife in the back. Dressed in uniform, they were insolent and aggressive; they erased their old humiliations by afflicting some other poor souls. They drank cheap liquor made from

sugar-cane and wandered around, stern, self-important and sluggish, and their insolence – the loosened belt, the cap askew, the menacing forelock – gave them status. Withdrawn and malicious, they danced the samba and created disorder in straw houses, where the violence passed unperceived and nobody would complain.

José da Luz had something in common with the men who played backgammon and argued about politics. A nosy young fellow who talked too much, he eased his way into the company of the landowners. Pleasant and adroit, he certainly escaped from the rigorous marches of the militia and the harsh duties. He didn't hold grudges, he didn't need to get even. He accepted the military life with a light heart. And he sang, in a slow nasal voice:

I became a policeman. I live in the quarters
Because I love the fine uniform.
Now it's too late. I remember and think.
Too much work, we don't gain a thing.

One of the stanzas ended with these lines:

I quit the uniform, I grab my coat,
I'm gonna row the boat: nothing but service.

José da Luz would make the first *e* in *service* more open, a prosody that later on I heard confirmed in various places. In general the lower ranks dragged their voices over the first syllable of *service* when they referred to the work of the barracks, because in this way they distinguished themselves from ordinary civilians, who didn't modify the vowel.

It was through this anonymous song that José da Luz expressed himself, finding the demands of his office excessive. He seemed such a miserable fellow, crying all the time. They assured me later that he was very bad, and this disturbed me. A third individual emerged for me, neither sad nor wicked. Really jovial and good, a bit foolish and ingenuous. The yellow buttons, the red and blue uniform, the fine uniform mentioned in the lament, were like so many trifles.

At this time, because of my indecisive nature, they would keep me in the store for several hours on end. They sentenced me without formalities, but the punishment indicated my fault. And there, silent and

isolated, guessing the mystery of the code, I made a long examination of my conscience; I tried to catalogue my hurtful and my inoffensive actions, I exercised in vain my small sense of morals. I confused myself by perceiving that an action sometimes brought punishment, other times it didn't. It was not possible to be clear about this, to establish a reasonable norm for behaviour. Later on I familiarized myself with these incongruities, but at the beginning of life they appeared to me not in disguise but as they really were, and they bothered me. I moved as though I were walking on fragments of glass. Believing caution useless, I gave in to fatality. Certain phrases I heard in the dining-room and kitchen confirmed this disposition: 'What can be done? It was God's will. So it was written.' Even today I think that my little hits and numerous misses are works of an ironic and capricious destiny, fertile in disconcerting cunning. I was resigned, hunched up near the balcony, temporarily safe. So it was written, it was God's will. And I sneaked away like a rat, unsettling piles of paper, straw and ribbons for packing, and exploring the shelves and the bins.

This moderate punishment, besides teaching me the rules of proper conduct, had the purpose of making me take care of the store. While I was there, my father amused himself in the neighbourhood, chattering in a loud voice. It frequently alarmed me; I was convinced that he was arguing. The thick laughter of Filipe Benício and the crowing of Teotoninho Sabiá soothed me. Reassured, I went back to my ordinary pastimes and drew considerable satisfaction from them. In fact the hours leaked away monotonously in the space that was given to me, but no matter where it was, I always felt that what I was doing was insipid. I was forbidden to go out, and the other boys, at some distance, made me envious and fearful. Perhaps they were dangerous. Left out, not possessing rubber balls, kites or little tin carts, I amused myself with my sisters, building houses of canvas and saddles for the horses on the porch, and stirring the corn in the storeroom. During my confinement, I remembered these games with sorrow. I entertained myself by mixing up the ribbons, exploring the dark corners, and observing the work of the spiders and the flight of the cockroaches. In my imagination I wandered in a world filled with men and women as tall as a child's thumb. Not yet having heard of the voyages of Gulliver, I think that my Lilliputian people had their origin in the cockroaches and the spiders. These little people talked very softly,

buzzing like bees. No harsh words or scratches, no raps on the head or pulling of the ears. I tried hard to nullify discords. When my insects misbehaved they revealed rude instincts; they were separated so that it was impossible for them to molest each other. And they received advice different from common advice. They would jump, run, get wet, turn over chairs, scrape their hands, and launch little boats in the water running through the gutters. No getting angry. No gestures leading to tears.

Leaving aside this day-dreaming, I fell back on inspecting the merchandise. I climbed on the ladder, opened boxes, undid packages of hinges, and admired the mechanism of the locks. I tried out the keys, listened to their dry jingling, and saw the bolts going in and out. I was afraid that they would catch me and reprove my curiosity. Perhaps a part inside had been broken. Forces contained there would be turned loose, explode, and throw me from the ladder. I remembered the case of the pistol. It had been some years ago on the farm. My uncle, a guest, kept the weapon in a drawer, warning me not to touch it. I promised not to do so. When I was alone, I wanted to get closer to this horrible mechanism that would fire and kill animals. I wandered round the table, fighting the temptation, knowing that I wouldn't resist very long. I opened the drawer, swearing not to touch the pistol. That was what I had promised. I only wanted to see it. Well, there it was. A common old firearm, black and loaded with lead and powder. After propping my finger on it and not causing a disaster, I removed it, abandoning all precautions. I lifted the hammer and couldn't get it back to rest. Right after that I had the idea of examing the contents of a little case built into the stock. I lifted the top – and a rain of red caps sprayed out on the floor. Putting the pistol aside, I escaped, leaving the drawer open. I spent hours of anguish, without getting up enough nerve to enter the room; I waited for them to call me and scold me for the mess I had caused. They never called. Now, on one of the highest rungs of the ladder, turning the key, I feared the caps of the lock would spill over. They weren't exactly caps. But the small jingling bits of iron decided to fall apart with a lot of noise.

I had put everything back in its place; I stepped down, abandoning these trifles and ironwares; I went to fuddle myself with the patterns that ornamented the wrappings on rolls of cotton material. The prettiest of these pieces of paper showed a tree covered with fruit

in the shape of heads. An axe was leaning against the trunk. And, threatening absent enemies, a tiger standing on his back feet bared his large teeth. It advertised the goods of Machado, Pereira & Co., the great suppliers of Recife. The company was the tiger, Delfino Tigre. I thus educated myself in respect to similar entities.

One afternoon when I was seeing in the picture the handle of Machado [which means axe], the branches of Pereira [which means pear tree] and the claws of Tigre, I saw José da Luz enter the store and I froze. I wanted to run away and hide myself under the counter: my joints got stiff, my muscles relaxed. I tried to overcome my fear and stand up straight, to articulate a phrase or a smile. All in vain. José da Luz was terrible. He would throw people in jail, he would hit and shove the people at the fair. He was superior to Machado, Pereira & Co., my father's creditors. The red and blue of the distinguished firm, exposed on the cotton material, were displayed on José da Luz's clothes – and this isolated me. Even though I tried to ignore the great importance of this offspring of an Indian and a Negro, it was impossible for me to familiarize myself with the colours in the pictures.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. The policeman leaned his elbows on the counter and started talking to me naturally, just like those shabby beings Amaro and José Baía, the inhabitants of the farm. My fright vanished, my frozen spine got warm, and I started to move. In my father's presence this character's talk was indirectly kind. I thought myself unworthy of attention. Nevertheless, if they saw me accompanied, well-mannered people would talk to me, making faces and flattering me. The faces and the flatteries made me distrust them. When I was alone, all this disappeared. José da Luz didn't expect any favour from me: his talk was free.

We had other conversations – and we became friends. Now I no longer limited my imagination to jails, to inventing fantasies and concerning myself with locks and colourful papers. I had an excellent companion, who bent over the counter and was almost my size. I don't remember any of the stories he told me, short and varied, undoubtedly of little importance. When I heard them, I thought of different things and interrupted several times:

'Sing something, Zé da Luz.'

José da Luz cleared his throat and told about the sad life of the barracks:

Now it's too late. I remember and think.
Too much work . . .

Versatile, I observed the yellow buttons of the prestigious shirt and the small cap. Why did he wear a hat without a brim? The question came out spontaneously, and José da Luz explained to me that a policeman's lot was like that. I was contented with this, my curiosity wasn't very demanding. José da Luz's red and blue uniform was fading; it didn't differ much from my own clothes. And José's boots, shining and squeaky, looked like my hard high-laced boots, which seemed smaller every day. We were two insignificant beings, one talkative and restless, the other filled with dreams and obstinate. My little toys faded away.

This swanky half-breed had a great and beneficent influence on my life. He cleared my way, he gave me confidence, he drew me closer to the human species. A wonderful teacher. I think, though, he was a bad worker. The State didn't pay him his day's ration and his wages for him to abandon his dirty and ferocious colleagues and fill the heads of children with useless stories. An anarchist.

Reading

I found myself perched on the counter, opening boxes and packages, examining the trifles on the shelves. My father, in a good mood, pointed out the common objects and explained their use.

I fixed my attention on some pamphlets whose covers were ornamented by three vertical stripes, blots and stains covered by lines similar to those in newspapers and books. I had the unhappy idea of opening one of these pamphlets and went through its yellow pages of ordinary paper. My father tried to arouse my curiosity by asserting the value of these badly-printed and obnoxious lines, some of which were missing. He assured me that people who were familiar with them possessed terrible weapons. This seemed absurd to me: these insignificant lines didn't look like weapons. I heard his praises with scepticism.

Then my father asked me if I didn't wish to learn about these

wonders and become a smart fellow like Father Joao Inácio and the lawyer Bento Américo. I answered no. Father Joao Inácio frightened me, and the lawyer Bento Américo, remarkable in the opinion of the jury, lived far from the village and didn't interest me. My father insisted that he considered these two men as models and related them to the primers on the shelf. For the second time he threw the treacherous question at me. Didn't I feel the urge to figure out the black signs on the yellow paper?

Thus the Tempter expressed himself, in human form, on that fatal morning. This consultation surprised me. In general they didn't ask me whether anything was to my liking: there were obligations, and I had to submit myself. The freedom that was suddenly offered to me, the right to choose, insinuated a vague distrust. What was going to happen? But this smiling question made me adopt an attitude different from my usual one. I didn't want to look impolite and obtuse and relapse into my usual state of subjection. I let myself be persuaded, with no enthusiasm, hoping that the scrawls on the paper would give me the necessary qualities to free myself from petty duties and punishments. I made my decision.

And the learning started right there, with the presentation of the five letters I already knew by name, the ones that, years before in the country school, the girl had babbled along with the bearded teacher. I was astonished. It was odd that they appeared right at the beginning of the book, these syllables pronounced in a distant place by a strange person. Couldn't it have been a mistake? My father asserted that the letters were really baptised in that way.

The next day some more appeared, then others – and thus began my cunningly imposed slavery. They condemned me to that hateful task, and as it wasn't possible for me to carry it out efficiently, the hours stretched out, all my time was consumed by it. Now I could no longer touch the packages of ironware and trifles; I didn't entertain myself with the prints on the rolls of cotton: I stayed seated on a trunk, not thinking, with the pamphlet on my knees.

My father had no vocation for teaching, but he wanted to put the alphabet into my head. I resisted, but he was stubborn – and the result was a disaster. Soon he showed impatience and scared me. He quickly threw half a dozen letters at me and went to play cards. In the afternoon he grabbed a stick, took me to the living-room – and the lesson was tempestuous. If I hadn't seen the stick, I could still have

said something. Seeing it, I shut up. A piece of wood, black and heavy, the width of four fingers.

My mother and my natural sister protected me: they took me out of the store and, on the flour press on the porch, they furnished me with indispensable advice. I moved away, discouraged. The pamphlet was worn and crumbling and moist with sweat, and I used to scrub it to hasten its destruction.

This served no purpose. Another pamphlet would arrive – and the fat and roguish lines and the three vertical blots nauseated me. What to do? The thought of the stick opened my eyes wide. But little by little I grew torpid, my head inclined, my eyes became bleary – and, between yawning and dozing, I would hear the fastidious song that Mocinha murmured beside me. I wanted to rouse myself and wake up. My sleep was heavy, an enormous disgust covered my ears and stopped my talk. The things around me slipped into darkness and thoughts came to a standstill. In fact I understood, sluggishly, the stories of Trancoso. They were easy. What they made me learn by heart seemed foolish.

At last I became familiar with almost all the letters. Then I was shown twenty-five others, different from the first ones but with the same names. Stupefaction, laziness, despair, the desire to give up everything. The third alphabet appeared, then the fourth, and confusion was established, a horror of misinterpretation. Four signs with only one denomination. If I got used to the capitals, leaving the small ones for later, perhaps I wouldn't become so stupid. They simultaneously threw me large and small evils, printed and hand-written. It was hell. I resigned myself – and conquered the damned things. Two, though, offered resistance: the miserable dentals which even today cause me trouble when I write them down.

Alone it was no trouble, but in the presence of my father I would become mute. He made it hard for a few weeks, before concluding that it wasn't worth clarifying for me. Once a day his severe shout called me to the lesson. I would get up with misgivings and head for the living-room, frozen. And I sulked: my tongue missed my teeth, I sputtered confusing sounds. I overcame my trouble by giving names to the difficult consonants: the T was a bull, the D a small turkey-hen. My father laughed at the innovation, but soon he reverted to his serious demands. It was impossible to please him. And his stick hit my hands. When I approached the dangerous passages, my heart would

grow faint, my throat dry, my vision dark, and in the confusion which filled my ears, his harsh complaint increased. If the two letters came together, my suffering diminished, because, after getting through the first one, the second was easy. But if they were at some distance from one another, then I saw in their arrangement a perverse intention – and my torments were doubled.

My poor hands were swollen, my palms were red and purplish, my fingers were thick and could hardly move. They pulsated with the rhythms of a watch. I had to lift them. At the end of the punishment, I went to sit on a bench in the dining-room; I stretched out my arms over the table, trying to ignore the painful throbbing. The frogs were singing in the Penha dam; the cotton gin squeaked in the Cavalo-Morto; Dona Conceiçao, across the corner, yelled out, calling her daughters. They were close by, on the porch and in the corridor, playing with my sisters, and I couldn't see them. My wet eyes could hardly see the gate to the yard. My hands rested stiffly on the wooden table. I thought I was going crazy. And I depended anxiously on the little dream-images that soothed my loneliness. The world made of toy-boxes, people reduced to the size of a child's thumb.

I was pursued by much unhappiness. But it came abruptly and vanished. Sometimes it multiplied. Afterwards, long periods of repose. In moments of optimism I supposed that it was finally over.

I wasn't mistaken for very long. The three vertical stripes, wet by tears, stretched out beside my sore hand; the obstinate letters would afflict me night and day, always. The beams of sunlight that moved across the bricks and climbed the walls set the time when I was punished. In a few hours and some minutes the terrible scene would take place again: shouts and anger involved me, annihilated me, destroying the last vestiges of conscience, and the piece of wood hammered my wounded flesh.

My father finally despaired of teaching me; he was disappointed at having produced such a stupid being and abandoned me. I took a deep breath and started my spelling, guided by Mocinha. And the two letters were tamed. I stuttered syllables for a month. At the end of the pamphlet they were reunited and formed solemn and intricate sentences which annoyed me. My father had certainly played a horrible trick that damned morning, inculcating in me the excellence of the printed page. I couldn't read well, but, heaving painfully, I was able to swallow these wise thoughts: 'Laziness is the key to

poverty – Those who won't take advice seldom do right – Speak little and well: they will take thee for somebody.'

To me this Takethee was a man, and I couldn't understand what he was doing at the end of the pamphlet. The other pages were falling apart; I was left only with boldface type, the summary of the knowledge announced by my father.

'Mocinha, who is this Takethee?'

Mocinha found my question strange. She didn't think that Takethee was a man. Perhaps he was 'Speak little and well: they will take thee for somebody.'

'Mocinha, what is the meaning of this?'

Mocinha honestly confessed that she didn't know this Takethee. And I was sad, ruminating on my father's promise, waiting for new deceptions.

School

Laziness, the key to poverty, and other ponderous concepts thrown into the last page of the pamphlet, soaked in sweat and decomposed, stained my fingers with ink – and for a few days I could move around in the yard, see the street, tramp along the sidewalk, and associate with the children of Teotoninho Sabiá. I was truly restless. I didn't get another pamphlet, one of those which cost only a few cents and had three stripes and barely perceptible letters on the cover. I felt almost free. But, chatting with Joaquim on the sandy street corner or admiring Teresa's angelic little face, I was sometimes struck by a strange uneasiness, almost terrified by my painful exercise. Impatient voices would rise, becoming shouts that hurt my ears; my sweaty hands would shrink, already feeling the rigour of the blows on my palms; a rope tightened my throat and suppressed my voice; and the two enemy consonants danced: d. t. I tried hard to forget them revolving round the earth, building hills, opening rivers and dams.

The annoyances of the pamphlet never left my thoughts. 'Speak little and well: they will take thee for somebody.' This was never explained to me – and I grew to dislike guessing at the meaning of these aphorisms.

I was distressed to remember the promise made on the counter months before. The advice in boldface type on the last page of the pamphlet served no purpose for me. I gained nothing, perhaps because I still had much to learn. I could stutter syllables, join them into words and, moaning, swallow words and articulate an empty sentence. Certainly my family wouldn't be happy with such mediocre results: the lessons continued in the living-room and near the press on the porch, supervised by Mocinha. It was just as hard now as it was at the beginning.

I tried to imagine books. I wanted to see them and end this dull vacation that had been granted me. Undoubtedly they were nearby: fearful conversations did away with my illusions and spoiled my playthings. The sooner the better. They couldn't be worse than the pamphlets – and this consideration gave me more confidence in the future. But the infamous dentals annoyed me; they represented indecisive fears.

It was around that time that the old Negro man appeared; he was clean in his collar and tie, his boots, his fine cotton clothes and his spectacles. I found it odd, because I didn't accept such refinement in Negroes, and I showed my surprise by using the language of the kitchen. My father found my observation original; he saw in it intentions that I didn't have; he passed it on to the customers in the store and to his partners at backgammon and cards. I heard it recounted by Sr Afro, completely distorted, containing words that I never dared to pronounce. I now felt myself responsible for these interpolations and acquired a momentary embarrassed notoriety. I hated having to get out of my corner and show off; it seemed to me that they were teasing me. It was all my father's fault. Often he had insulted me; he punished me excessively because of the two letters that I tried to eliminate abruptly. But this didn't make any difference. Probably he wanted to fool himself as well as the others. 'Can't you see this wonder? I produced it.' I disdained the wonder, of course; it seemed a spurious object, but merchants don't have the ordinary scruples of ordinary people. He praised the insignificant merchandise exposed on the shelf so much that he forgot my obvious faults without difficulty and transformed me into a kind of safe-lock with good springs. He was the manufacturer. By the force of repetition I came to think that locks with good springs would open my understanding. And I derived some vanity from this. I became, at any rate, author of

an ostentatious phrase and I cursed the old Negro, the origin of it. Incapable of fabricating such a thing, I recognized myself as the instrument of a trick and it displeased me to hear my father stitch together contradictory opinions. This incoherence reduced his judgment. Now I wouldn't really know if I was an idiot, as he had stated; I was inclined to see in my punishment his impatience and exaggeration; sometimes I could think that he created a reasonable idea that Sr Afro amplified. Impossible to say where it was and how it started, but they insisted on accepting it and declaring it mine, and this left me perplexed.

My father's sudden change disturbed me. His favourable and unforeseen judgment might make him throw me a second bait praising the written paper, fooling me, forcing me to begin reading the dreadful volume which moved through my imagination and spoiled my fun on the sandy street corner. Disgrace was certain to follow. Thick laughter would soften it, his voice would roar hoarsely, a piece of wood would strike my wet palms.

Although this terror slowly faded, others appeared. It was disappointing the way it happened: I didn't realize that inside me something was different. Little by little I changed. I was thrown into an adventure, the beginning of a series of sinister adventures. When the wounds caused by the alphabet were healed, a perverse scheme was announced – and my pains returned. In fact they were merely dormant, the healing was only on the surface, and sometimes the flesh would tear itself by contracting; my interior revolved; I was shaken by indeterminate torments, similar to those which were caused by the stories about souls in the next world. Discouragement, cowardice.

The news came too quickly: they were going to put me in school. They had already spoken to me about it in their moments of anger, but I was not convinced; this would never happen unless I threatened their peace. School, according to information worthy of belief, was a place where rebellious children were sent. But I always behaved correctly; shrunken and tepid, I glided like a shadow. My games were silent. And I didn't even dare to bother the grown-ups with questions. Consequently I had crazy ideas caused by the sayings I heard in the kitchen, in the store, or near the backgammon table. School was horrible – and I couldn't deny it as I denied hell. I considered my parents' resolution an injustice. I searched desperately in my con-

science for the act that had brought on this imprisonment, this exile between dark walls. There would certainly be a board to dislocate my fingers, a furious man to shout scornful notions at me. I remembered the public teacher, austere and long-haired; I shivered when I thought of the strength of his arms. I didn't defend myself, I didn't reveal the ideas that were racing in my head, the grief that swelled in my heart. Any resistance was useless.

They brought me some new clothes made of white cotton. They tried to put me in the yellow high-laced boots: my feet had grown and there was no way to reduce them. The boots hurt me, pressing on my bones. My socks were being torn, the high-laced boots were dry and shrunken. I didn't feel the blisters or the warnings. The teacher's beard was imposing, his muscles must have been tremendous. My white cotton clothes, which Rosenda had starched, went together with a straw hat. The fragments of the ABC pamphlet, pulverized and thrown out in the yard, danced in front of my eyes. 'Laziness is the key to poverty. Speak little and well: they will take thee for somebody. D, t, d, t.' Who was Takethee? An unknown man. Was the teacher going to ask me to explain Takethee and the key? A great sadness because I didn't perceive any sympathy around me. They mercilessly arranged the sacrifice – and I let myself be dragged, weak and resigned, an unhappy lamb anticipating the slaughterhouse.

They suspended the punishment, they tried on me some purple Moroccan leather shoes which were loose. I gave a long sigh of temporary consolation. At least I was free from the calluses. Why bother to think about the rest? Misfortunes were inevitably going to pour on me. Joaquim Sabiá was happy. Dona Conceiçao, busy in the oratory, talking to the saints, left him on the sandy corner.

They washed me, scrubbed me, combed me, clipped my fingernails dirty with mud. And, with my new clothes of white cotton, the purple Moroccan leather shoes, the straw hat, sheets of writing paper in my box, pens, pencils, and a pamphlet with a yellow cover, I left the house, so perturbed that I didn't see where they were taking me. I didn't even have the curiosity to inform myself: I was sure that I would be delivered to the severe bearded fellow who resided in the little square near the church.

They conducted me to the Rua da Palha, but only later did I realize I was there in a small room. They brought me to a short plump lady with white hair. Rows of pupils were lost in a confused mass. My

cold hands couldn't handle the objects kept in the box; my eyes moved in a disturbed way, looking for something that stood out in the indistinct mass; the voice of the fat woman murmured sweetly.

Days later, I saw a little boy arrive, held by two men. He resisted, debated, bit, grabbed the door and screamed ferociously.. He entered jerking, and, if he could get loose, he would gain the sidewalk. It was difficult to subjugate the angry animal, to seat him and control him. The boy fell into a long fit of sobs. I examined him with astonishment, contempt and envy. I couldn't jump, scream in that way, show my strength, kick, use my teeth, or spit on people, foaming and savage. They had tamed me. Being civilized and weak, I went where they pushed me, very docile and light, like pieces of the ABC pamphlet, pulverized, loose in the air.

Dona Maria

The fat woman called me, gave me a chair, examined my clothes, my scalp, my fingernails and teeth. Then she opened the white box and took out the first reader:

'Read.'

'No, ma'am,' I replied confusedly.

I hadn't yet studied the fine letters, smaller than those of the ABC pamphlet. The difficulties had to be clarified.

Dona Maria decided to explain them, but soon she stopped and left me to wander the unknown way by myself. I stopped too: she incited me to go on. I perceived that the small letters were similar to the stains in the pamphlet; I tried to make them out, to group them, in a slow song that the teacher corrected. The exercise was prolonged and I dared to ask her how far the lesson went.

'Are you tired?' murmured the woman.

'No, ma'am.'

'So let's go on.'

This seemed to me unreasonable: they demanded useless work from me. But I obeyed. I really obeyed with satisfaction. That tenderness, her soft voice mending my barbarism, her small hand turning the page, her clean white-coloured dress, everything seduced me. In

spite of everything this extraordinary creature had an agreeable smell. Ordinary people exhaled strong and exciting odours of tobacco, sweat, pork fat, mildew, blood. And nauseating breath. Rosenda's teeth were black with tobacco tar; André Laerte wore a filthy apron: behind the leather trunks, shining with their yellow studs, bloody shirts were hidden.

Now, free from harsh exhalations, I was at ease. But not altogether: I was calm enough to arrange, without much absurdity, the syllables that would combine themselves into concise sentences. I overcame my fear and trembling, I wanted to end the task before the teacher's anger broke. Surely this would happen: it was impossible for a human being to keep up that serenity, whispering as she did.

Her anger didn't show – and I explored several pages. Then Dona Maria interrupted me and paid me a few modest compliments. I asked her to set the lesson. She vaguely indicated the middle of the book.

'And the beginning?'

She declared that it wasn't worth repeating the pages already read, and she kept me near her. Probably my father had recommended this. When I was introduced, he exaggerated my rudeness and stubbornness. A pretext: he wanted me isolated; fearing that I would be corrupted, he allowed me only a few innocent friends. Sometimes she forgot her vigilance; she permitted me to walk in the playground, where the rascal José and the boys loafed about.

Ending my embarrassment, I shut the book and observed my schoolmates. My pine box, my white cotton clothes and my purple shoes gave me some security. But inside I felt weak. They had given me this conviction and it was difficult to overcome my bashfulness.

A new life started. For weeks and weeks I tried to adjust myself. I didn't act in a natural, insignificant way; I was careful to compensate for my deficiencies. I expressed myself deplorably. And we had little time left for communicating. In the teacher's absence we abandoned our places and whispered together. Many of the students showed me indifference or antipathy, and Cecília, peevish and proud, shuddered, reared back, her mouth twisted, so great a disdain in her bright little eyes that I turned away vexed, fearful of molesting her.

This deprived me of excellent teachers. To be honest, the best teachers that I had were ignorant. Thanks to them, erudite complications were easy when translated into slang.

Fortunately Dona Maria possessed a childlike soul. Her world was our world; there she lived, sniffing little mysteries from the spelling books. She had numerous doubts, admitted the co-operation of the pupils, and let the women who baked our biscuits cheer up the classroom. One day an object that looked like a pencil appeared in a drawer of the table. A huge pencil, whitish at one end and dark at the other. What could it be? The entire class was interrogated; she examined the piece of wood, touched it lightly, bit it, shook her head and stuck out her lip indecisively. Dona Maria retreated and pondered; finally she suggested that perhaps it was the measuring tool that Sr Antônio Justino used when he cut his roll of tobacco. But Sr Antônio Justino cut without measuring his roll. And the rubber scraper, useless without its point, remained on top of the table, defying our shrewdness and making us humble, beside the ferule that was used for striking the palms of our hands. The school demanded a ferule, but it isn't known whether the modest emblem of authority and knowledge ever caused anyone's tears. Dona Maria never used it. Not even to evoke threats. When she was annoyed, she lifted her little finger, a discordant note in her gentle voice – and we were alarmed. These signs of displeasure were rare and short. The excellent creature soon grew tired of being severe, resumed her friendliness, and scribbled words and numerals which we reproduced.

I didn't adapt easily to this work: my hand held the pen awkwardly, shaking back and forth; the capricious pen kept missing the line and avoiding the curves, tearing the paper, wobbling like a crazy cockroach and spreading blots. It was useless to hold my fingers and keep them under control: they resisted, went their own way, heavy and wet; the ink mixed with sweat and left great stains on the paper. Dona Maria stared at the damage with discouragement; she tried vainly to repair it. Her consolation bothered me, and I was sure that I couldn't be corrected.

Once when I wore myself out with this damned task, I heard a whisper:

'Did you wash your ears today?'

'I washed my face,' I stuttered in confusion.

'I asked if you had washed your ears.'

'Sure. If I washed my face, I must have washed my ears.'

Dona Maria, while talking, pushed my ears out from my face and advised me to treat them carefully. This disturbed and shamed me.

If the woman had given me a blow on the head with her knuckles or lightly slapped my hands, I wouldn't have been angry, but that gentle warning left me confused, with my eyes cast down, wishing to jump in the water and free my body from the impurities that offended fussy people. My family never concerned themselves with such trifles, and hygiene was considered a luxury. I remembered having heard somebody criticize a certain lady guest who, before going to bed, wanted to take a bath:

'Dirty lady.'

The teacher's observation seemed improper to me, but it worried me; I evaded this unpleasant scrutiny, and I slept very lightly that night. The next morning I got up early, opened the window of the dining-room, went to the iron washstand, and filled the basin slowly, careful not to wake the others and the parrot. It was still dark in the yard and silent in the bedrooms. I stayed perhaps an hour soaping and scrubbing myself, till the sun rose and the hinges of the doors squeaked. I went to look at myself in the living-room mirror: my ears had become almost purple, as if they had been pulled. Were they clean enough? My hands were wrinkled and insensitive, but it didn't matter. What worried me was the ears. I continued to clean them rigorously, and at the end of a week they were so blistered and cracked that they were difficult to scrub.

The teacher noticed my excess of zeal and secretly told me to leave them in peace. I disobeyed: I had contracted the habit and I was afraid of another reprimand, worse than insults and shouts.

Within the space of a few months my mother had become fat. Her cheeks were shrunken and her arms thin, but her stomach was growing – and her feet were swelling. She was so nervous she could hardly move and collapsed on the sofa with the cane seat, spitting on the pictures in her novel and abandoning herself in the heat. We didn't see each other in the morning. I got along by myself. And after swallowing my coffee, I walked to the empty school.

Sinha and Sr Antônio Justino used to come to teach me the catechism. Then the room became crowded and Dona Maria imposed on us our drowsy homework. I distracted myself by staring at the ceiling, the flight of the flies, part of the corridor, the windows, the tiled house, and the heads of the passers-by. Nearby, in the police barracks, José da Luz was singing. A beam of light went down the wall, stretched along the bricks, climbed another wall, and reached

the point which indicated two o'clock. The boys threw down their books, noisily closed their little boxes, reached the street shouting, and ran to play with their tops on the sidewalk. I admired their noisy freedom, I censured them and envied them. I would remain in class by choice. There my fears were dispersed; I got along well with those people; the man lazy in his slippers, smoking and yawning; the spinster who taught me patiently and guided my stubborn fingers; the affectionate and truly kind old lady, similar to the heavenly figures in the *Lives of the Saints.*

Dona Maria was neither sad nor happy, she neither flattered nor hurt her neighbour. She never laughed, but from her half-open mouth and kind eyes a permanent smile overflowed, rejuvenating her round face. Events appeared to her in a subtle clarity, which altered and purified all that was disgraceful. And if violent news or passion covered this light, she would be frightened and clasp her hands, and a cloud would shadow her smile. She didn't understand violence and passion. If her husband and daughter died, she would suffer – and she would be resigned, trusting in the promises of Christ. In fact these promises had already been realized. 'Blessed be those who thirst for justice,' hummed the boys dozing through the catechism. Dona Maria didn't have any thirst for justice, or any kind of thirst for that matter, but she was blessed: her simple soul wished for little and drew near the Kingdom of God. She didn't radiate excessive warmth. Neither was she cool. She justified the comparison made by a certain awkward preacher: 'Our Lady is like a turkey-hen that opens her wings to shelter her chicks when it rains.' About Our Lady we knew, from the lithographs, Her blue dress, Her ecstasy, Her halo. Dona Maria represented for us this great maternal bird – a heterogeneous nestful, we lost, in her warmth and coziness, the different instincts of birds born from different eggs.

In this merciful peace my ordinary dissatisfactions grew dull; a strange trust impelled me towards this white-haired saint, easing my heart. I told her some foolish things. Dona Maria listened to me. Thus protected, I thought better of myself. The scribbles of ink continued to be horrible, despite Sinha's efforts, but the pamphlet with the yellow cover was rapidly overcome. Everything there was easy and insipid: combinations already seen in the ABC pamphlet, phrases that could be articulated in a breath. And the absence of absurd advice, the monstrosities that were arranged on the hateful page, pulverized

and torn with satisfaction.

Reading the message which called for a second textbook, my father showed great surprise. There was a breath of optimism; fragments of happiness reached me. They gave me a spool of thread and sent me to buy a sheet of red paper in Filipe Benício's store; I got a pair of scissors, paste, and some sticks, and on the porch I made a kite that didn't fly. For dinner they gave me bacon. And they showed me the appreciation my progress had caused: an ugly book with a portrait of a bearded and obnoxious man. My hair stood on end; I foresaw that nothing good would come of it.

I was really confused, to say the least; I fell into a long sleep from which not even the perseverance of my teacher could pull me. I never displayed any kind of aptitude. Cursed, sometimes tolerated, in rare moments praised without motive, I wasn't really stupid, but I became so; I think I became almost an idiot. My senses grew numb, my dull spirit took on the hardness of stone. Completely inert.

Later, much later, I advanced a few steps out of the shadow. I retreated, I went off course. Walking always in zigzags. The second book was certainly not the only cause of my misery. There were doubtless others. I think, though, it was the chief.

The Baron of Macaúbas

A large dark book with a severe binding. In its thin uncountable pages, the minute letters simmered, and the illustrations grew larger on paper shiny like the track of a snail or a dry mucus.

I started reading unwillingly. And soon I was caught in the story of a lazy boy, who, going to school, was late because he turned to the little birds and received sensible opinions and good advice from them.

'Little bird, would you like to play with me?'

A peculiar way of asking, I thought. And the little bird, busy constructing a nest, expressed himself in a manner even more confused. Wise and arrogant bird, that admitted to being an excessive worker and directed the little vagabond on the way to duty.

Right after that came other irrational beings, equally well-intentioned and good talkers. There was a little fly who lived in the

wall of a chimney and flew without purpose, disobeying her mother's orders. She flew so much that in the end she fell in the fire.

These two stories got me interested in the Baron of Macaúbas. I examined his photograph and was assaulted by sinister presentiments. A type with a thick beard, like that of the rural teacher I had seen earlier. Ugly face, long hair. And perverse. Perverse with the innocent fly and perverse with the readers. How did the bearded personage ever get involved in the business of birds, insects and children? He had nothing in common with these living creatures. What he tried to do was to raise the children, the insects, and the birds to the level of the teachers.

It didn't seem nonsense to me for the animals to understand each other, fight and make peace, and tell their undoubtedly curious adventures. I had thought of this; I admitted that the frogs of the Penha dam could express themselves and sing intelligible things for us. The weak complained, the strong shouted demands. They constituted a society. Businessman frogs, cowboy frogs, the reverend Joao Inácio frog, the José da Luz frog who liked grand uniforms, naughty frogs, sons of the little frog Teotoninho Sabiá, the frog Master Firmo the tailor, the frog Rosenda the laundress chattering her gossip at the edge of the water. Our small world could expand a little, adorned with dreams and forelocks.

Unfortunately a learned man, using small animals, imposed on us the language of learned men.

'Would you like to play with me?'

The little bird on the branch answered with precept and moral. And the fly used adjectives drawn from the dictionary. The figure of the baron stained the frontispiece of the book – and we could understand that it was his pedantry that was attributed to the fly and the little bird. It was ridiculous that a hirsute and serious individual, a learned man and baron, should chirp advice and buzz admonitions.

And this was still condescending. We deciphered the two apologues with difficulty; I shrank and grew discouraged, unable to find any meaning in the pages that followed. I read them, spelling them out and stuttering, nauseated. I remember one of these horrors, at which I yawned for a long time. A fellow, being pursued, hid in a cave. The providential spider came to spin his web at the entrance to the refuge. And the pursuers didn't bother the fugitive; if he had got in, he would have broken the web.

Dona Maria condensed this literature and explained it. And my discouragement increased. I thought that she was creating a fantasy; it was impossible to see this simple narrative in those long and disarranged words.

I feared the Baron of Macaúbas; I considered him a great sage; I confused his knowledge with the enigma presented in catechism:

'Can we understand this well?'

'No; it's a mystery.'

My unhappy brain was boiling, then it evaporated and changed to fog, and in this mist floated flies, spiders and little birds, difficult names, vast pedagogic beards. I became foolish. My head fell into long dozes, my fingers grew numb and let the heavy book drop. Nevertheless I managed to finish it. I woke up weary, certain that I could never get rid of those complications of the printed word.

Whose fault could it be, the Baron of Macaúbas' or mine? It must have been mine. A man filled with responsibilities would certainly write correctly. There was no disorder in the composition. I was the only one who was confused by it; ordinary boys could easily see the fugitive hiding in the cave and the spider spinning her web. I was humiliated – and within this horrible book-binding I could see only a confusion of thorny paths. It wasn't worth the effort to walk through them. In truth I didn't make any effort: the exercise nauseated me.

I was left, though, with a weak hope, because at that age no one is totally a pessimist: I clung to the illusion that the third book wouldn't be as bad as the second. I tried to fool myself by taking refuge in an incongruity. In fact, knowing myself inept, it was absurd to expect any improvement. I couldn't accept this. And if the catechism had meant anything to me, I would have held on to God, asking Him to free me from the Baron of Macaúbas. And yet I wouldn't gain anything by being freed from him: the other inventors of children's stories were probably like him. In any case I tried hard to put away the fly, the spider's web and the virtuous bird.

A lost hope. I received a thick book, the cause of shivering spells. Ordinary paper, worn-out print. And, right at the beginning, the sign of evil: the considerable beard, the hairy wisdom. From this sinister object I keep the mortifying memory of many pages that dealt with correct punctuation. I was approaching my seventh year; I wasn't able to read my own scribbles; they were dreadful. Despite this I mixed myself up with complicated rules, I mumbled technical ex-

pressions, and I enclosed myself in an admirable stupidity.

The multiplication table and the catechism were painful, but here I was obliged to memorize only a certain number of lines.

'Seven times nine?'

'Sixty, a little more perhaps.' Dona Maria's demand wouldn't disturb the unities.

'How many enemies does the soul have?'

In three words I was exempt from the imposition. I found it strange that one would associate the devil with the flesh: naturally there was some mistake in this answer. I wanted to resist this nonsense, but the sorcery of the typography began to dominate me. Lacking an explanation, I imagined a carnivorous devil. The composition diverted this idea. Patience. All the artificial phrases left me perplexed. After all, my duty was to parrot syllables. Dona Maria didn't go into details; perhaps she accepted the carnivorous devil. A short mystery, fortunately.

The other mystery, the one which involved full-stops, commas, parentheses and quotation marks extended rather far and provoked a terrible sleepiness.

It was at this time that they imposed Camoes on me in manuscript. Yes, sir: Camoes in horrible stained characters – and manuscripts. At the age of seven, in the interior of the North-east, ignorant of my own idiom, I was compelled to divine, in a strange language, the daughters of Mondego, the pretty Inês, the arms and the distinguished barons. One of these barons was probably the Baron of Macaúbas, the one of the birds, the fly, the spider web; and the punctuation. God forgive me. I abominated Camoes. And as for the Baron of Macaúbas, I associated him with Vasco da Gama, Afonso de Albuquerque, the giant Adamastor, also perhaps a baron.

My Grandfather

My mother became ill. She put on a lot of weight on her stomach and feet, but the other parts of her body remained thin. On the front of her neck the flesh enlarged, the bulges on her forehead increased, her dress was short in the front, becoming shorter every day, showing her

legs as thin as sticks.

She spent a few months on her father's farm. Before she was cured, she had to stay a few days in bed, feeding herself with a porridge made of boiled manioc flour and capons that came from the henhouse built at the corner of the garden. And she drank *cachimbo,* a mixture of sugar-cane brandy and honey from the beehives hanging from the eaves of the porch. In obedience to the brutal medicine of the backlands, they would add onions to this beverage, making it quite repulsive. At last my mother left her brooding. She was pale; without a big stomach her skirt touched the ground; she was weak and slack. And she was nursing a crying child.

I was taken to the country on the back of my Uncle Serapiao's horse. The teeth of an iron rake had stuck in my foot the day before. The jogging of the animal shook me, the crupper and the pommel of the saddle annoyed me, and the wound was getting infected and ached. And Serapiao scared me telling stories about souls and haunted places.

'Serapo, don't talk about this. Shut your mouth.'

Serapiao had insisted; I had jumped on the small pebbles of the road and had hurt my wound caused by the iron rake. At the farm I could hardly walk; I limped from the corrals to the pen where the goats were kept, to the jujube bushes at the end of the patio, sustaining myself on my heel.

My little uncles stayed at a distance; they ran through the brushwood and abandoned me to the whims of my grandfather, who forced on me the prose of the Baron of Macaúbas and the catechism, brought in Serapo's saddle blanket. But the old man gave unknown names to the letters; he read in a peculiar way – and I lamented the absence of Dona Maria, the excellent teacher who allowed me to make mistakes and murmured advice in a sweet way, as if she were apologizing. My grandfather was demanding. He stopped on a damned syllable, forced me to repeat it, and this disturbed me. His long white beard swept my frightened face; his blue eyes filled with threats, hurt me; his voice grew lower and rolled and penetrated my ears like thunder, hoarse and sniffling. My knowledge dispersed; the lines were mixed up and escaped; on the paper and inside me large spots grew larger. In this deplorable situation I stupidly confused the reading and mumbled foolish answers. The shouting echoed and filled me with fear and little by little became a great laughter that attracted atten-

tion and shamed me. This rude happiness seemed out of place to me: my foolishness wasn't funny.

Suddenly my fear ended; a singular kindness involved me, harsh and astringent, displayed in his hollow authoritative voice and his thick uncomfortable laughter. A solid kindness, with the smell of tanning and the angico tree.

Leggings, leather jackets, breastbands and enormous hats with cheekstraps hung from wooden pegs driven into the black adobe wall. Piles of leather soles were arranged in the corners, and ropes treated with grease. Lined up on a trestle were country saddles with their dark sweaty blankets. Big hairy shoes were everywhere, fur mantles, straps, halters, whips, rawhide lashes. All this brought people closer to the animals.

On the days of the slaughter I would climb the gate of the corral and see my grandfather with an axe knock down, bleed, and skin a young cow, getting up from the red ground with his hands red. I compared him later to the ancient Jews – Abraham, Isaac, Esau, religious and carnivorous people.

My grandfather's religion was secure and familiar. It revealed itself in front of the oratorio in the living-room placed on top of the table covered with a striking cloth. In the drawer of this altar were kept little wooden mallets, deer horns, awls, wax, nails, pincers, and pieces of leather which were used to grind toasted tobacco. On top, in the light, among ribbons and dried flowers, were pious lithographs and small figures of saints carved by rude sculptors. The old man would kneel on the mat, cross himself three times, gently strike his chest, and hear the litany which Maria Melo, priestess and wife of a cowboy, chanted in a kind of Latin. There, squatting and contrite, near the black Vitória and Maria Moleca, voluntary slaves because they had no other way to use their freedom, he was greatly diminished, hardly different from Ciriáco the goatherd. At the end of the ceremony he would recover his grandeur and authority:

'Oh, black woman!'

Maria Moleca would bring water in a wooden trough, come and wash his feet, squatting, and dry them on a soiled towel. This position was natural for her. Squatting, she prepared the food, seasoned the pans, and poked the fire under the tripod of stones. Squatting, she swept the house with a bundle of whisk brooms cut in the backyard, where the mucambe tree and the velame flowers were fading. She

slept squatting, leaning against the wall, under the curtains of palm leaves that hung from the ceiling.

If the wooden trough didn't arrive quickly, my grandmother would intervene in a bad temper:

'Go and wash your master's feet, black woman.'

She wouldn't address herself to any particular black woman, because she was afraid of Vitória, who was slow in her work of restoring the disorderly bedroom; she walked staggering, doing a man's work, and was easily angered; arranging the small breasts of a shrunken virgin, her ferocious courage shaking her, she would throw off her hereditary subservience and roar:

'Slavery is already over, ma'am. If I die in Sr Pedro Ferro's kitchen, I won't be saved.'

But she would grow old and wrinkled in the kitchen. Sometimes her thigh would become dislocated – and the poor woman would twist and moan, her eyeballs painfully fixed on the children who laughed at the faces she made. Her masters sympathized with her and would carry her to her cane bed, like a little run-down machine which they tried to polish and oil. Her bones back in place, she would get up and limp off to repair the garden fences, water the carnations and the wormwood plant, and fill the water jug from the river; on the return trip it tilted on a piece of cloth she carried, threatening to fall, a plume of green leaves in its neck.

This hesitant and obstinate ruin of a woman was a refuge: she defended us from household dangers, she wrapped us in her cotton skirt, she protected our ears and hair with grumbling tenderness and a peculiar expression of ineffectual maternity. We were safe around her.

'If I die in Sr Pedro Ferro's kitchen, I won't be saved.'

She died unexpectedly, vomiting blood, under the shelf where skillets, bags of salt, and ropes of garlic had accumulated. Surely she was saved, because she endured her virginity and preserved her clean spirit. We missed her, even though she couldn't have been sold, and with her dislocated side, she represented only a sentimental value.

Before abolition some blacks had abandoned the house; they were caught by the man who pursued runaway slaves but they escaped again. My grandfather left them in peace, thinking them crazy and ungrateful. How could they survive? Here they were quiet. The service demanded little effort, the cattle round-ups were tourna-

ments; the owner would spend days on the porch bench or stretched out in a hammock, sniffing tobacco, a scarf on his shoulders, with slippers and clothes of raw cotton from which seeds had been removed in the nearby gin and which were woven on the loom in the house.

The immense area covered with brushwood didn't belong to anybody; the cattle pastured freely on it, from one brook to another; their number increased or declined, animals from various farms, recognizable by their brands. In the morning the milk cows went their way; they returned in the afternoon. The rest of the animals stayed at a distance, hidden among the shallow vegetation, the thistles, and the little primitive houses that decorated the prairie. Wealth appeared in the winter without reasonable profit; it disappeared in the summer without inconvenience. In prosperity the family's habits didn't change because the absence of knowledge limited their desires; if poverty came, they all remained calm, retiring early in the evening and telling their beads.

My grandfather possessed bulls in excess, dispersed over the brushwood and difficult to round up. He didn't take them to the market. He waited for the cattle dealer to come and fetch them. Then he ordered some to be caught; he looked them over carefully and determined their weight: so many kilos and so many pounds. He was never mistaken. He conducted the negotiations in an easy-going way. Once rid of the buyers, he vanished in the darkness of the bedroom, whispered numbers to his wife, and hid the package of notes inside a trunk with good hinges and a good lock. At the time of the monarchy his treasure was certainly invisible; it consisted of yellow coins. Later on, when money was paper and became unstable, he sometimes had to extract it and show it in the street to elderly people before it was converted into a pile of devalued symbols.

During the dry season the few inhabitants of that remote place moved around digging watering-places in the sand and cutting baskets of mandacaru [a species of cactus] for the cattle, who ended up covered with ticks. The hammocks were folded. People's hands bled from hard work; the blisters on their feet were cured with a kind of fat melted over the embers. Not a single cloud shadowed the long days; sinister flights of passing birds streaked the blue sky; the branches of the trees became dark kindling; the leaves were scorched; on the white sleek ground of the lowlands along the river large cracks were opened.

All this trouble over the dying animals was useless, because God had condemned them and nobody could do a thing about God's resolutions. In the meantime my grandfather walked up and down getting pricked by thorns, giving orders in his slow nasal voice, demanding really useless precautions. He would be more relaxed when complete ruin appeased the divine wrath. He would sit down on the hammock again without creditors, free from guilt. Uneasiness and fatigue were the penance he imposed on himself. His court of justice, ancient and private, was far from Father Joao Inácio's. Through a long summer he paid for his light sins, and the winter would find him strong and haughty. The certainty of proceeding well would give him that perfect serenity. He fulfilled his simple duties; he couldn't live in any other way. To feed the cattle and see them multiply or diminish; to procreate sons and bring them up, to provide them with baptism and wedding, not to neglect them, to protect them in poverty and sickness, to put a candle in their hands at the deathbed, to shroud their bodies and to carry them to the cemetery and eternity. Not a single strange thought perturbed him, not a single written word would modify the old, wild, pastoral God.

The only books found on the farm were my stupid pamphlets in the hard covers, which the patriarch, during this vacation, tried to explain to me in a high, frightening voice ending in thick laughter. I couldn't improve my intellect. His feigned rebuke and his hoarse happiness puzzled me. I moved away from rough caresses and the beard that scratched my face.

The wound in my foot healed. I went to hide among the brushwood that shadowed the margin of the empty pond. Boys walked along here, playing with bones and pebbles. Serapiao explained to me the complications of Brazilian history, making a lot of mistakes. And when there weren't any witnesses, a small silent girl patiently examined my body. She lifted my cotton shirt, the kind of clothes I wore in the country; she used her eyes and fingers in a profound study.

The disease of the eyes that pursued me in my childhood kept me out of school and delayed me, while Sr Joao Galvao's children plunged into big colourful books. It tortured me for weeks and weeks; I lived in darkness; my face hidden in a dark cloth, I stumbled over furniture; I guided myself by tapping along the walls. My infected eyelids were stuck together. In order to open them, I remained for an endless time with my head immersed in a basin of water, washing slowly, because the contact of my fingers was excessively painful. When I ended this operation, the mirror in the living-room showed me two bloody eyeballs which quickly grew wet and wanted to hide themselves. Objects appeared plastered and foggy. I withdrew to take refuge under the dark cloth, but this didn't lessen my suffering. Any kind of light dazzled me; it hurt me like needle points. And my tears ran down, thickened, and solidified on my red singed skin. I had to move around to search for the basin of water.

Undoubtedly my appearance was disagreeable and inspired repugnance. And the household were impatient. My mother was weak enough to show me her active antipathy. She gave me two nicknames: calf-hide and blind-goat.

The calf-hide is an intruder. When a baby calf dies, its skin is removed and placed over an orphan calf, which in this disguise can be nursed by the cow. The cow senses the smell of her calf in the skin and, thus fooled, she accepts the other animal. I owed this ridiculous comparison to my distorted appearance, my ugliness and floppiness. There were no clothes that fitted my body: my shirt was swollen on my belly, the sleeves were either too short or too long, the coat was too large in the back and inflated like a balloon. In truth this outfit was sewn by an insignificant seamstress who was very busy and paid little attention to the measurements. All the boys of the village, though, wore similar clothes, and they were able to modify them to fit properly. I looked as though somebody else's coat was hanging on my shoulders. Calf-hide. But I didn't tolerate this. This insult showed me very early my position in the family. I was compared to an unhappy animal; I thought of myself as a boring pupil, hardly accepted. I was angry, remaining calm in appearance; later I settled down. My awkwardness was nobody's fault, nor my horrible clumsy manners. Criticizing my inferiority, perhaps they wanted to improve me.

The other nickname was more insulting than the first. I remembered the childhood game and I was angry:

'Blind-goat!'
'Yes, sir.'
'Where do you come from?'
'From the old shed.'
'Are you bringing gold or silver?'
'Gold.'

Right after that, they threw in some rubbish that had *roach* instead of *gold* as a rhyme; if the answer was silver, the indecency ended with *beetle.* I abominated the dirty names; the filthy joke nauseated me. I didn't know why I was so christened. Had it referred to a blind horse, I wouldn't have been so offended. Surely the dialogue was intended to hurt me by calling me vulgar names connected with the beetle and the roach. I would grow annoyed, I couldn't forget the mortifying joke:

'Blind-goat!'
'Yes, sir.'
'Where do you come from?'
'From the old shed.'

So it continued all the way to the end. I repeated mentally the shameless verse that I wouldn't dare to say aloud. It couldn't refer to me; I was convinced that my mother couldn't have any idea of connecting me with the beetle and roach. If the inflammation of my eyeballs disappeared, the irritating expression would also disappear, and I would return to the catechism and the stories of the Baron of Macaúbas.

The illness was prolonged – and I suffered its effects doubly. It seems that they were annoyed because my organism insisted on being sickly and wretched. In fact there was no medication, but sometimes they put in my eyes a sticky layer of beaten egg white, and I was immobilized on my canvas bed. They isolated the deteriorating organ: the egg white became a sort of gum, glueing my eyelids. I didn't complain or moan. Beneath this mask, my wounds were protected from the flies, but the pain was atrocious and the heat immense.

The stinging increased, invisible hands stuck thin nails into my head. I tried to distract myself by listening to the frogs in the Penha dam. The frogs explained themselves only at night: by day their voices were mixed with other noises. When would they allow me to get up and go to the iron wash-stand to dilute the dried paste glued to my face? I would go there limping and tapping the walls. Free from this terrible medication, I would return to bed and my tears would gently flow out.

In the darkness I perceived the enormous value of words. On clear days when things were moving, I entertained myself by observing the store and the storeroom, I explored some metres of the square and the Rua da Halha, from the house to the school, and from the school back to the house. I didn't know the village well, but certain points and figures were called to my attention and took on meaning: the church tower where owls dwelt, the police quarters, the garden and the women who clipped the rose bushes, the marvellous façade of tiles, Filipe Benício, Teotoninho Sabiá, José da Luz, Dona Maria, Father Joao Inácio. Sandpipers would land and paper kites would entangle their tails on the loose telegraph wires. The gate, always closed, separated us from the street corner. Small lizards crawled over the red bricks of the wall.

Now the thick shadow covered everything. The wall fell down, like the other one that had collapsed years ago. Again there appeared the half-dispersed plants, the cotton-gin in the Cavalo-Morto, clouds of floating cotton. The church, the lamp-posts and the telegraph wires, birds and flowers, the bright façade, the transients, were scattered, vague and distant: at the height of summer they were enveloped in a dense winter drizzle.

But the noises increased, all the sounds acquired meaning. People mingled in their footsteps: to be precise, they had form and features, and from a distance it was possible to tell whether they were angry or pleased. Dona Conceiçao recited her prayer in the next house: certainly her spirit and knees were calloused adoring the lithographs in the oratory. The counters of the backgammon game snapped at a distance, dice rattled, and the partners shouted numbers, excited or dejected. I associated the monotonous exterior noise with that inside the house: bits of conversation, children wailing, the shrieking noise of water boiling in the tea-kettle, the crackling of the flames, the vibration of the bellows, the whispering of the rascals. My ears

sharpened; they reconstructed indistinct phrases and filled in the gaps – and this shortened the time. The two injurious epithets that tormented me mingled with the harsh voices, aggravating the sting of the flies. The whisper of my good ugly sister had a soothing effect, floating softly over my wounds like a small feather. The pain receded, the hours passed quickly.

Lacking this delight, I tried to anæsthetize myself by listening to my mother's songs, two out-of-tune songs that amused me on the farm. Probably they had existed before, but it was there that I became aware of them. They continued in the village for some years. Later, when we moved to the city and our economic condition improved, they vanished: either my mother's artistic sentiment grew dull or it grew more demanding. One of the lyrics started in this way:

The letter A stands for – adorable;
The letter B stands for – beautiful;
The letter C stands for – chaste;
The letter D stands for - darling;
The letter E stands for – eternal;
The letter F stands for – felicity.

Instead of *ef,* my mother pronounced it *fe,* which was certainly convenient for the last line, and she ended with *felicity* because *eternal* could be associated only with God, not a goddess. The Virgin Mary was the only female divinity she would recognize. I insinuated to her later on that *ef* could also be used. And the darling could be a goddess in the opinion of the poet. She was disgusted, she considered the innovations impertinent. The recital dragged through the entire alphabet: but it was impossible to place the adorable beautiful with such letters as the K and the Y.

The second composition referred to episodes in folk-plays with an historical background, fights between the Moors and the true believers, but the song had the name of a seamen's shanty and included various interpolations. The epoch was accommodated to the song.

Master pilot,
Where are your wits?
If you drink your cheap liquor
We're all of us lost.

The singer interrupted herself and described the scene: indignant officers and a master pilot on deck, raising to his mouth the neck of a bottle. The uproar diminished. Now the sailors shouted:

The captain smells like clove,
The commodore like cinnamon –
Masters both of sea and war!
The poor cook from the galley
Stinks like a burnt pan.

Here they corrupted it: sea-*of*-war. My idea of the sea was an infinite dam, and I imagined war as noise multiplied, but I couldn't understand war as master of the sea. It was peculiar. In the long night I tried to decipher this nonsense. My thoughts wandered, slipping from one subject to another, and tried to cling to the black walls.

In the Rua da Palha boys sang the multiplication table; they acquired the theological virtues, they fled from the enemies of the soul, and stopped at the beautiful coloured prints; they recited the story of a horseshoe which was found, sold, and substituted for a bunch of cherries. When the beam of light reached the stroke of the pencil that marked two o'clock, they would all get up and go out in the streets in a tumult. I never got that excited.

One day my darkness thinned out, confused pieces of the world emerged in the nebulous dawn. I wanted to concentrate on them, I was blinking furiously, filled with a crazy joy. I went back to my little occupations, to my quiet, tepid children's games. I was no longer a blind-goat. But I remained a calf-hide. Silently I slid into sadness and discouragement. Osório and Cecília talked securely and clearly; they read fast and out-distanced me. My disgraceful eyes roved over the yellowish page and wet the abominable stories of the Baron of Macaúbas. My stiff fingers, stained with ink, dirtied the page and traced illegible scribbles among the lines. There was no way to get ahead.

And months later, a new pause, a dive into the shadows. I moved painfully around corners, an unhappy blind-goat, contenting myself with bits of sound and tatters of images, wretched.

What really displeased me in those days of temporary blindness was the voice of Sr Chico Brabo, my neighbour on the right. My canvas bed, placed against the wall which separated us from the street corner, was near the Sabiá family. Sr Chico Brabo's house was a little farther away: in between were the dining-room and the pantry. But when he talked, Dona Conceiçao's prayer faded away, conversation would end, and also the whispering of the boys in the kitchen, the noise of the bellows, and the crackling of the flames licking the angico wood in the stove. It was as if the man had crossed the walls and doors and was here beside me. His tremendously big voice surprised me; detached from the tender manners that softened him on the sidewalk and in the street, he was almost unrecognizable.

Sr Chico Brabo was a middle-aged bachelor, stocky and short; on his flabby and yellowish face a red beard and eyes small as a pig's. I don't remember having seen him chatting with the landlords and merchants, who, after the vicar and the judge, formed the local aristocracy and whose mark of distinction was wearing an overcoat and *cachenez* of wool during the winter. He lived modestly; he appeared wearing only a shirt; his uncovered chest was a tangle of reddish hair. I ignored his way of making a living. Solitary, he exempted himself from social duties with timid smiles, compliments, and some obsequious phrases.

He dealt in drugs; he owned a home pharmacy; he would go to the sick and give them free medicine. He treated the children well; he caressed them, passing thick short fingers over their heads.

He was extremely interested in Leonor's asthma. Bending through the window, he talked to my mother, asking for news and giving advice. The next day he offered her some small packages of white powder. Following his prescription, my sister was cured.

At Sr Chico Brabo's house there were no skirts: all the work was in Joao's charge; he was a boy of ten, clumsy and happy, his soul reflected in two rows of wide teeth, always exposed. Joao prepared the food, brought supplies from the fair, and went for water at the Intendência well. From my invalid's bed I noticed part of his work: the moving of furniture and the squeaking of his broom on the bricks. Suddenly everything vanished, dominated by the hoarse and powerful shout of Sr Chico Brabo:

'Joao! Oh, Joao!'

The boy retreated, but the shouting persisted, energetically:

'Joao! Oh, Joao!'

I wished that the boy would run to help and end that prolonged shouting, scolding, and punishment. If he was late, his master would be angry and aggravate the punishment. A mistake. Sr Chico Brabo wouldn't become angry: he went along in the same way, until the boy got out of his corner and went to receive his blows. This lassitude on the part of both of them alarmed me and gave me a cold sweat. How could someone remain calm in such a situation? When a disgrace like that happened to me, I moved quickly, shaking with fear, to erect an improbable defence, condemning myself.

I really didn't know if Sr Chico Brabo was calm. Perhaps he maintained a massive and unchanging anger. It remained hidden for many hours without increasing or diminishing. Its absence of gradation filled me with astonishment and a new malaise. Five syllables fell heavily, the first three together, the remaining ones after a pause. I shivered with fear, covered my ears with my wet palms, writhed in despair, and mentally I withdrew to a hiding place:

'Get out, Joao. Go soon.'

Certainly this was worse than all the strokes of a whip. A moment of silence, heavy breathing, a cough, the gurgling of a cold animal. In my imagination a slow body would disentangle itself, the fat of its double chin attained stability, and the white slackness got its colour back. Short fingers became long and were transformed into claws.

And the appeal became hoarse, a formidable patient grunting of an animal that never leaves its state of calm.

Well. Now Joao had decided to leave his hiding place, to trust himself to destiny, but this didn't shorten the performance. Before the hairy fist grabbed him by the neck with the force of a sledgehammer, there was an extensive argument, a detailed catalogue of guilt, divided into separate chapters, that ended with a steady voice:

'Joao! Oh, Joao!'

How could one shout in that way at a person who was so near, God in heaven? A long shout, interrupted and then started again. In his bilious face there were no doubt some drops of blood. This didn't precipitate the outcome: the punishment went deeper and was more methodical. Two swollen hands held the thin arms, shaking them to emphasize the scolding. I suppose that Sr Chico Brabo didn't feel any

pleasure in mistreating the child physically: he liked to torment him slowly, to hurt him with words. It's possible that the words didn't hurt and would merely glide over the soul used to threats. Then, after all, two or three light blows. Shrieks from the one; blows and heavy breathing from the other. Later everything would calm down and the usual noises would return to lull me.

The next day Joao would be whistling, singing, dragging the chairs and sweeping the bricks. The livid man would spread pork fat on the window sill, snarl solemnly and timidly to the greetings of the passers-by and talk to the women of the neighbourhood, teaching them household remedies, being useful and solicitous.

Two figures pursued me during my long illness: the amiable fellow seen in the street, and the ferocious creature of the dining-room. The discrepancies increased and accumulated – and it was difficult to admit that someone could be so generous and so cruel. The memory of that soft kindness, of the little papers of white powder, of the smiles, brought nothing but goodness to my spirit; the furious shouts and the blows discharged at Joao showed me his evil side. Where was Chico Brabo? Which of the two was the real Chico Brabo? This development terrified me. Perhaps the sons of God had much nonsense and ill-temper. A few, like Dona Maria, could always be serene, bearing their bellyaches and migraines. But Dona Maria, the old teacher, almost illiterate, came close to being a saint. Other living creatures possessed virtues and faults in varying degrees. Chico Brabo seemed to me two incompatible beings. In vain I tried to bring them into harmony. The memories multiplied and became exaggerated. Prostrate on my canvas bed, with my eyelids stuck together, I could see one of them distinctly. My ears, excited in the blindness, fixed my imagination on the second.

When my vision returned, the two figures made peace and exchanged concessions. My eyes were filled with images. Teotoninho Sabiá's children fluttered about. José da Luz would come to tell me stories. A door would open onto the Rua da Palha, showing the village the permanent festival of the garden filled with flowers. On Saturdays the little square would be crowded with tents; country people in their jackets and leather aprons stumbled round the fair, the rowels of their spurs jingling. On Sunday, at ten o'clock mass, clouds of incense would darken the altars, the branches of cotton flowers, and the veils of brides; the pealing of bells smothered the murmuring of

the crowd and the cries of new souls screaming at the font while being baptized. The village was agitated. And in this agitation Chico Brabo dissolved; parts of Chico Brabo mingled with parts of other living beings. My half-opened eyes wandered, looking for the swallows flying near the ceiling, or stumbling over the reading.

But they went back to their useless state, to hide once more, tearful and festering, beneath the dark cloth. And the image of Chico Brabo crumbled again. The good part stayed outside, obsequiously dispensing kindness to the housewives and the boys with asthma. The bad part was confined to the dining-room and demolished Joao.

If Chico Brabo had servants, cowboys, a wife, and children making noise in the kitchen, he would divide and sub-divide his anger and distribute it equally, and parts of it wouldn't even be noticed. But Chico Brabo could only dispose of that small subservience. He put all his venom in it, purifying himself, and returned to the living-room to caress the children and offer remedies to the neighbouring ladies.

José Leonardo

He appeared on Saturdays at the fair, under a vast hat, erect on a bulging saddle blanket, in a complication of bags, whips and luggage. He was the most dignified man I have ever seen. Serious, with the rigid gravity of a statue, his great light eyes filled with candour.

I retain the impression that José Leonardo, without hurrying, did everything right: he functioned like a watch, the wheels moving regularly and the hands indicating a certain number of duties.

The merchants praised him and disputed over him. His brother, Antônio Freire, didn't pay much attention to obligations: he lived in the street, asking here and there for what he needed. Everybody responded. José Leonardo would pay without haggling over the price and pretend not to notice his negligence, and the tavern-keepers invented bills and bled him.

I don't know how this man got close to me. His seriousness and silence should have kept us apart. He brought me gifts, we remained friends; he took me to Pico, a farm which he owned about two leagues from the village. From winter to summer the plain stretched along

a zone of green in the brushwood. In the distance a hand-saw stood up perpendicular; a peculiar stone wall that ended in a point had the appearance of a dead tree. From this came the name of the property. A thread of water ran from there; it neither increased nor diminished. It was channeled through the ditch, domesticated in the wooden pipe, and then it spilled into the trough which rotted beneath a jito tree, an excellent bathtub. I remember my first bath. In the heat, the cold jet would caress us. Sr Filipe Benício scrubbed himself with soap and became the colour of a sugar-plum. He would shake part of his body as though he wished to untie it. Diving in the shallow tank, he panted like an animal. He would get up, rid of the suds, fresh and clean. His long moustaches spread out, white; the tangled hair on his belly, also white, surprised me. I didn't think that such hairy people existed.

From the trough the water overflowed and ran freely over the cultivated land, moistening the field of enormous sugar-cane, the only one on these little farms. Once the humidity ended, the backlands emerged, to start with uncertain and monotonous, filled with insignificant palm and cashew trees, then dry and yellow, covered with cactus, bones and pebbles. There crept the famished and dirty creatures who sold baskets of wild plums and small game at the fair. In times of scarcity they lived off this, and since scarcity was frequent, they migrated and ended in misery. One shack here and there, sheds of mangy goats, their bells ringing sadly.

On my trips to Pico, riding on the back of José Leonardo's horse, I yawned in the heat, looking over the brownish plain and seeking the green of the jujube bush. Suddenly I saw the unchanging abundance and shade that provided the little landlord with his serenity. José Leonardo was really independent. The farmers of the region had to put up with alternatives: years of abundance and years of penury. Sometimes the land produced an excess, sometimes it produced nothing. Waste and wretchedness. And against this any effort was useless.

José Leonardo didn't know immoderate profits or losses. He dedicated himself to a safe industry, different from that of his neighbours. He didn't breed cattle – Pico was free from mud and the flies of the corrals. He dressed in cotton in the house and at work, an amazing thing. In general only the inhabitants of the street wore cotton clothes. The countrymen were always clad in leather; they moved about like armadillos. To tell the truth, in the surrounding country

there was no agriculture except that of the niggardly fields planted along the lowlands beside the dams and the cracked banks of the temporary rivers. The bags of corn and beans in my grandfather's house came from a distant area that was more fertile. The men shod the horses, castrated the animals, milked, cut up large pieces of meat, tanned hides, and made whips and ropes; the women filled jugs with milk and sent it off curdled and made into cheese.

At Pico one didn't sense the smell of blood or the decay of the wounds on animals affected by lice. And unknown occupations soon impressed me. I stayed a long time in the small sugar-mill, admiring the yoked oxen moving round the axle-tree, the sugar-cane pressed by the wooden mills, and the juice flowing through a pipe that poured into the first large pan at the base. From there it was transferred to others in gourds attached to sticks. And from the third one a thick reddish syrup went to the moulds and left heaps of raw brown sugar on the ground already covered with the crushed cane.

It never occurred to me that the raw brown sugar was the result of human work. In boxes in humble taverns, it didn't seem to demand much preparation. That was a curious pastime. Beautiful and golden, it was piled up still warm. And I wished to remain there, by the heat of the furnace, watching the cane being crushed and the juice bubbling in the large pans, thickening and solidifying.

At night, in the big house, they danced and sang. The moonlight struck the little white stones on the paths. I discovered that one of them was shining more than the others – and José Leonardo forced me to accept it. For several years I kept this precious object which glittered in the darkness. In a corner of the wall, like a lost ember on the hot ashes, it encouraged, in times of annoyance and pain, these memories – the border of the sugar-cane field, the water soaking into the lowlands, the tame oxen moving round the wooden mill, the honey boiling in the large pans, dancing and singing, the lively plumage of the macaws. And it illuminated the figure who was gradually moving into the past, cold, dignified and tranquil. A kindness different from other ordinary kindnesses. He didn't attract us, but he inspired confidence; he would overcome the damned shyness that inhibited my tongue, darkened my sight and froze my hands.

I asked several questions of José Leonardo, and he was never astonished. Sometimes I hesitated and he sought in my face the meaning of the obscure phrase. And the answer would come naturally and

patiently. Without having impressed me too much, this man lingered in my memory and disposed me towards benevolent sentiments.

I moved; I went to live in the city. The glittering stone disappeared – and my bedroom, after prayers were said and the kerosene lamp was put out, darkened. But his serene image accompanied me. At night it was fixed on the wall near the lithographs of the saints, understanding and generous, without trying to correct me and without giving me the advice that always harassed me and served no purpose.

My Natural Sister

We made several trips to my grandfather's farm. On that one, the most important, we remained three months – and the family gained one member and lost another.

The gain was represented by a crying baby boy who died young. My mother lay on her lumpy bed of raw leather; I was put out for some hours in the brushwood beside the lake. When I returned, the little boy was wrapped in his diapers, with an amulet attached to his arm; he was perfumed with lavender and was being submitted to the prophecies of Maria Melo. Everything was normal: my mother had recovered, the capons that had been getting fat in the little enclosure by the side wall near the garden had been killed.

The member of the family who disappeared was Mocinha. I don't really know if she disappeared from the family, but it is true that she left us. Perhaps they didn't consider her kin: her relationship to us was imprecise. Before my father's marriage, Mocinha had been sent to him secretly; she passed through the hands of Aunt Dona, a poor widow who lived with him and had two young daughters. Came the wedding, came the change; the aunt and cousins were left behind and Mocinha accompanied us to the backlands.

She was white and strong, with big eyes, black hair, so beautiful that I doubted whether she was of my blood. It seems that they didn't want to acknowledge her. They kept her locked in a dark bedroom. It was natural: we always had humid bedrooms, sad and securely closed, for the women. She sat by the corner of the table; she prayed and ate with her head down. The constraint must have tortured her,

because in the yard, in the kitchen, on the porch, she laughed, sang, and got along with Rosenda the laundress. She would shrink from the corridor to the living-room, repressing her actions and denying herself.

My mother treated her almost ceremoniously. Sometimes she felt an antipathy for her, she nagged, she made faces – and we, weak human beings, boys and rascals, apprehensively observed this expression of a bad omen. These annoyances didn't reach Mocinha. She was like a stranger, a permanent guest, even though she occupied herself with light tasks: she embroidered palms and dull little flowers on pieces of cloth stretched on frames, she mended shirts, she starched white skirts in a bluish solution, she ironed on a board wrapped in linen placed over the backs of two chairs.

This was enough to satisfy her need for movement. And the demands of her spirit were satisfied with masses, novenas, a rosary during the month of May, talks on the porch beside the flour press, and reading a long novel, the story of Adélia and Dom Rufo. To tell the truth, Mocinha was half-illiterate, but the narrative, already repeated over and over, didn't present any obstacle; Adélia and Dom Rufo revealed themselves. The excellence of Dom Bosco, brought out in the yellow pamphlets of the Salesians, was what she translated with effort and uncertainty.

After getting up and before hiding herself in the shady bedroom, which had only one opening, Mochina would draw near my father and whisper rapidly. He growled a blessing and would go away with a frowning face.

That was a duty, a traditional duty, which both flattered and diminished him. Probably the state of things (cattle dying and cheap cloth on the shelf) wouldn't allow him to produce children in many bellies and gain something from their labours. A mean procreator, he obeyed common morality – and in that badly pronounced blessing in the morning and at nightfall there was a confession that he lacked the right to sleep with many women to procreate numerous descendants. He slept and begot, but occasionally and with prudence. He was a thoughtful and discreet patriarch; he zealously kept an account of his sentimental slips. Mocinha didn't represent anything useful. A sentimental token of sinful origin. And my father tried to convince others that she didn't exist.

Difficult. The intruder grew larger and more beautiful, her clothes

were altered, she loved to see herself in the living-room mirror. And from the mirror she skipped to the window, where Miguel would whisper tender sentiments to her at nightfall.

Miguel, an important individual, one of the most important people of the place, couldn't decently be connected with a 'daughter of the grass'. His people, owners of the house with the tiles (which so astonished me when I first stepped down from the horse at the village), protested. My father protested too, haughtily and at considerable length, being proud of Miguel's preference, but he was rigorous and unyielding. The venetian blinds were closed and carefully watched; relations with the outside were thwarted; the girl, elevated to the category of a person, heard shouts and harsh censures, and the two daily blessings were never bestowed again.

I thought later about the reasons that impelled my father to reject a fellow of good birth, influential in local politics. Perhaps he wished to avoid the talk which caused him fear. Perhaps he was afraid of assuming responsibility and going all the way. He never behaved like that. Ordinarily he would be occupied with minute things, and he spent much time on the card game, his winter diversion; he would fill the saucers with little counters, and he would only take a risk when the trump cards dominated his hand. He shunned advantages, he distrusted easy and rapid profits which demanded courage and capital – and after the disaster of the farm, famished animals, murrain and destruction, he became excessively cautious. Really he was ambitious, but his ambition didn't last long. A brief love for adventures and risks, moderate adventures and risks, induced him to sell on credit. He took every precaution; he studied his customers from the inside out and doubled the price of the merchandise, and if he put the bill up a bit, he would sweat in true anguish. At the end of the ninety days' term he would skin the debtor with two per cent interest a month. It is possible that in this case involving the affections he acted according to his commercial habits and proceeded like a businessman. If he had accepted Miguel's good intentions, he would have had to come up with the girl's trousseau, a church ceremony, music, and a dinner for dozens of guests. Father Joao Inácio, Commander Badega, Sr Félix Cursino, Teotoninho Sabiá, and Filipe Benício would have had to come. We would have had speeches and a dance. These annoyances, besides being expensive, were not according to my father's nature. They would disorganize his life. Our table was small, surrounded by

hard benches. With the years it grew larger and received numerous guests, but at that time it generally accommodated six or eight persons. And in the living-room, once the sofa with the cane seat and the chairs were removed, only a few couples could move around. My father hated dances, a necessary formality at weddings. He would undoubtedly remember his indiscretions committed during the waltz and the quadrille – and from this came his hatred. There was in his time, in his dark past, a certain Deolinda, whom my mother referred to with envy. Deolinda had appeared scandalously in the quadrille and the waltz and betrayed her husband – and, in consequence, my father energetically reproved the abominable exercise. My mother forgot the reproval and made a mistake: she danced with a bearded cousin at the house of my grandfather. She repented, she drew my thin chest near her and asked me not to reveal to anyone this disgraceful event. I compromised myself. When we argued, I threatened her. She paid no attention to the threats: she pulled my ears. I felt the treachery but I was generous; I kept the secret. And the couple's tranquillity wasn't affected.

Deolinda had faded away. And Mocinha, in her apathy, embroidered palms and flowers, starched skirts, and heard masses. In the long and crumpled novel she made the acquaintance of Dom Rufo and Adélia. And she transformed Miguel into a virtuous hero. Our totalitarian régime accepted Adélia and Dom Rufo but not Miguel. It did not try to suppress the fiction contained in the dirty volumes. It permitted reading, recognizing its uselessness aside from political articles and the promotion of bad writers. But although giving the girl the right to think about different sorts of stories, it decided to preserve her virginity. It was obliged to feed her for long years, dress her, and shoe her. This meant a small expense, almost unnoticeable. Extraordinary expenses – sheets, pillow slips, gowns, the white dress, veil, garland, ribbon, lace, a lot of food and drink, music, etc. – would disturb his finances. Aunt Dona had an unhappy marriage; as a widow with two daughters, she developed tuberculosis. Aunt Josefa, a spinster, had been old for some time. And Jovina was also old and is still getting older, lame and sad, in the company of the last of my natural sisters. My father distributed little scraps to these poor ladies. He would continue to maintain Mocinha as long as she continued to behave and live calmly in the birdcage according to moral standards.

Her maternal blood boiled in her then, and her solitude afflicted her. And Miguel didn't want to be merely a character in a novel. They understood each other, in spite of the prohibition; they inflamed each other, they exchanged nods and messages. And everything was resolved.

My grandfather's people were gathered in the living-room, beside the table which contained in its drawers balls of wax and wooden mallets used for castrating oxen, and on top, in glory, lithographs and sculptures, Jesus and the Virgin, masculine and feminine saints. My mother rocked her new son in the hammock, beside her lumpy bed of raw leather, by the light of a kerosene lamp which was fading in its glass. Maria Melo recited the litany. The master, the old cunning fellow Ciríaco, and several of his favourites were down on their knees praying over their leather hats. The master's wife, the girls of the neighbourhood, and the black girls from the kitchen, sunk on the mat, beat their chests and sang. My aching and infected eyes were hiding under a black cloth; they were filled with tears and could hardly see these indecisive faces and the tremulous flames of the candles. Fragments of the confusing exterior penetrated my ears. The hooks of the hammock were quiet, the voices grew weaker. The litany ended; the women got up in a rustling of skirts: sandals and slippers were dragging; the brightness of the oratorio died out; the unplastered walls became even darker.

Suddenly, an uproar: Mocinha had disappeared. They searched for her in every corner; the rays of the kerosene lamps illuminated the bedrooms, the cotton storeroom, the yard, the field of brushwood, the patio; my grandfather's shouts echoed along the banks of the Ipanema River. Mocinha couldn't be found. Kidnapped by several gentlemen in a display of force and conquest, she was, in conformity with the custom of the times, taken in and guarded by several elderly ladies. In this asylum nothing bad would befall her, but it was made clear that a runaway girl was a fallen girl.

To make amends for this absurd fall, the verbose mediators arranged a meeting between the families. There were the usual conversations and the agreements didn't materialize. My father remained intransigent and dignified. When I returned to the village, I found him with a beard, affirming that the ungrateful girl meant a cut-off hand for him. A peculiar phrase. The girl had never effectively served him as a hand. My father was like that: he liked emphatic

expressions and didn't pay attention to the meaning of the words. A cut-off hand. This amputation exempted him from baths, veil, garland, lace, ribbon, sheets, pillow slips, dinner. Mocinha was married silently, without music and without a dance, at the seven o'clock mass. And she had some years of stability and happiness.

She tried to reconcile herself with us. While my father was playing cards at the store, she came in through the gate of the yard; she stayed for an hour talking in a low voice with my mother on the flour press on the porch.

Then we moved and we became separated. Miguel abandoned her and joined another in a civil marriage. If I am not mistaken, he also joined an Indian girl, according to the law of the Indians, near the region of the Amazon. Mocinha disappeared without a trace.

Antônio Vale

We had stayed in the village for a while – to tell the truth, we were guests – with great economy and no comfort. We lived like migrants from the backlands who stayed there a while in order to gain the strength to continue on their way. My father, educated behind the counter, had accepted his mother-in-law's advice and had started as a cattleman on the remote lowlands of Pernambuco. Ruined by the dry season, he used the rest of his capital and credit and negotiated with the purpose of obtaining the means to return to Alagoas and the woods.

The temporariness of his situation provided him with an excuse to refuse inconvenient transactions. He was a passer-by; he didn't want real estate nor did he want to sell on credit. But he acquired and cultivated the little enclosed property near the cemetery. And out of fear he wouldn't allow it to be sold. He was scared at the sight of a braggart; he showed him his merchandise abruptly. He made an effort to hide it; he pointed out its defects; he disliked showing the bill and wrapping it – and the mark of his loss remained in his account book to annoy him. More and more things were sold at low prices and scared him.

From time to time these undesirable customs gave him pleasant

surprises, like Sr Antônio Vale, a farmer from a considerable and ill-tempered family. Sr Antônio Vale would buy regularly with cash and without haggling over the price. One day, upon seeing the bill, he emptied his pockets and concluded that his paper money, coins and silver were short. The only thing to do was to leave some articles behind. The unhappy moment, anxiously awaited, had arrived. But my father was prepared and used his candour and ingenuity precisely: he knew the man's bad reputation; the other merchants said he was a snake in the grass and wouldn't give him two cents credit. Slander and lies. He could take the cloth. One could see that he was a decent person. The store was going to close down, but, while its doors were still open, my father was the boss. Without doubt. Sr Antônio Vale became tense and red, hit his foot on the sidewalk, and shouted to the small square that all the merchants were devils, a bunch of scoundrels. He would show that they were nothing but liars.

So he did. In numerous transactions he was too punctual: he was certainly devising a way of cheating. My father expressed himself about this last action in the dining-room, at supper, with that vague way of talking as if he weren't addressing himself to anybody. In fact he wasn't. My mother directed her short thoughts towards easier matters, and the monologue served the purpose of arranging his ideas.

'After all, it could be worse. He is mistaken, of course, this time he is mistaken. He knows that I'm about to move and he runs away. Naturally. I don't complain: he acted decently for three years and gave me a profit. Fortunately he doesn't owe me much.'

Sometime later Sr Antônio Vale was informed of our trip and promised to come back. The day before we were to leave, he hadn't appeared.

'I knew it,' moaned the creditor. 'I wasn't expecting anything else.'

But at daybreak, while the mule drivers tightened the straps on the last loads and my mother inspected the deserted house, tripping over her enormous riding skirt, Sr Antônio Vale appeared on an ambling horse, with his thick saddle blanket and his bags filled, and decided to accompany us. He brought a roll of notes and paid his debts.

An extensive ride, dozens of leaves. I went on horseback, with my legs spread on a pillow, grabbing José Leonardo's jacket to balance myself in a very uncomfortable position. At first the novelty made me talkative and curious; I asked the names of birds and plants, but the sun and heat came, and I fell into a stupid sleeping spell. My sweaty groin was burning, the animal's jogging shook me, turning my guts and dislocating my bones. Limp and inert, I was amazed to see the prattling horsemen around me satisfied with the hard exercise. At the stops, I dragged myself, I staggered like a parrot, unsteady, with my joints aching.

We relaxed one afternoon in the house of the popular poet Cordeiro Manso. Afterwards we spent the night near a muddy dam where ducks swam. A tent was constructed out of bundles, boxes and tarpaulins, and there I stretched out on rolls of cast-off cotton; I was cold, illuminated by candles of carnauba wax. My ribs rubbed against the stakes of a fence; I was interrupted in my sleep by the cry of the wind, the talk of the mule drivers quartered in the vicinity, and the almost human moans of a sick sheep.

Other stopping places escaped my memory. José Leonardo and Antônio Vale said goodbye – and with them the backlands disappeared. Cactus and cereus trees were replaced by a dense and very green vegetation; on the dark paths the cattle bells became silent; brooks appeared, grew larger; transformed into rivers, they delayed our journey.

Unknown figures came to meet us, amiable and laughing, cousins of various degrees, who were so familiar that it seemed as if we had always lived together. Evidently my father's economic situation was not serious. He had migrated and run into debt, but he had pulled himself together, and, thanks to the production of the farm, he reassured his relatives. The older ones perceived him from a distance; the younger ones would come up to him, tender and full of praise. And so, tolerated by some, flattered by others, he would plant his severed roots again in the old land.

José da Luz, Father Joao Inácio, the old teacher with the white hair, Filipe Benício, Chico Brabo, and Teotoninho's children dissolved in the distance. And the strange faces inspired fear in me.

I made the rest of the trip with a happy young man, who tried to

explain to me the chimneys of the sugar mills, the fields under cultivation, and the robust trees clustered together which obstructed the landscape. The great deserted whitish spaces of sand and gravel, the scattered woods, benches made from the macambira tree, stone fences, pens and corrals, luminous days streaked by the flight of migratory birds – all disappeared. By-paths would ascend, descend, and twist, and beside them houses and flower and vegetable gardens were arranged. Those who passed by didn't wear leather. At almost any point I found myself in a hole between the hills. Abundant and noisy water, immense pastures, foggy mornings.

We reached the district of Viçosa in Alagoas. Before establishing himself in the city, my father was a guest in a mill whose fire was dead. And for some months, during long absences, he worked with Sr Manuel Costa, setting the basis for a commercial partnership, which failed within a short time.

I was constrained by the new environment; I lost some habits and acquired others. Numerous accidents perturbed me: marshy places, gates, barbed wire, sharp leaves of sugar-cane plants, and ditches. It was impossible to run because of the slopes. Objects and words not existing in the backlands brought me uncertainty, and the manner of speaking shocked my ears. People and their relationships upset me: I didn't know if I behaved correctly with my confusing and respectable kinfolk.

My mother's brothers were small, some of them smaller than me, and we played together in the brushwood round the lake. Jacinta had said once, angry and red, when she was lengthening her cotton dress:

'You have to respect me. I am your aunt.'

And I had answered casually:

'You are stupid.'

Now I was introduced to harsh women smoking pipes and to important wrinkled men: Aunt Jovina and Aunt Josefa, Uncle Pedro and Uncle Inácio. Advice, hardness, scowls. I got a natural sister, brunette, bad-mannered and ugly. And two pretty cousins, who ended with tuberculosis.

At the end of the patio the sugar-cane brandy fermented. Rose bushes flourished in the garden, vines were entangled on the trellis. A brook hidden in the verdure ate the black earth and muddy stones. We lived there in promiscuity, animals and little Christians.

The commercial partnership Ramos & Costa, dealing with the business of farming, small goods, hardware and perfumes, was established on one corner of the main square of the city: a handsome building with several doors and a red and black sign made by Joaquim Correntao, who painted Indians adorned with feathers and talked a lot about chimpanzees and orangutans. In the store there were two cashiers and a bookkeeper.

My family was installed on Rua do Juàzeiro, in a house near the jail, and there our troubles began. Certainly my father tried too hard to keep himself going. He started to have vertigo and fainting spells; he passed out for long minutes, and we were alarmed; orphans, we cried, staring at the dead body. He would get up, revive himself, and continue his routine of climbing towards the level of his relatives rooted in agriculture. Some of them, hard and strong, came to visit us. Once these ceremonies were over, my father would fall into a profound state of abasement. Sometimes he would lie down and wrap himself in the blankets; discouraged and trembling, he would announce in shouts that he was going to die. Dr Mota Lima would come and give him a substantial scolding; he encouraged him, fixing the thick spectacles that he wore for his myopia. The patient would become ashamed of all the noise – and hours later he would flatter the landlords and collaborate in their politics.

The land was a muddy place filled with slopes. In winter-time we walked with difficulty on the pavement of loose stones which were intermingled with the water from the floods.

I was matriculated in the public school of the teacher Maria do O, a dark mulatto, extremely robust, one of the most vigorous creatures I have ever seen. This vigour showed itself in violent thrusts and shouts at the seventy or eighty pupils placed in every corner.

I was put in the corridor – and, seldom inspected and almost unperceived, I reopened with disgust the third book of the Baron of Macaúbas; I was stuck again with the rules of punctuation. My deficiencies were hidden for some days: Dondom, a pale merciful girl, helped me with my lessons; she protected me and corrected my pronunciation, uselessly, and she made the enigmatic calculations for me on the slate.

In the morning I was sent to scribble some lines. Right at the

beginning of this terrible duty, the worst of all, appeared a novelty which made me distrust instruction in Alagoas: in the interior of Pernambuco we would put 1899 after the names of the place and the month; now we were writing 1900, and this made me terribly confused. I lacked the necessary explanation. As the memory of the sweet white teacher in the backlands, with her beautiful curled hair, overcame the rough dark one with her rigid muscles and the yellow streaks in her angry eyes, I considered the new date an error. Certainly it wasn't this reflection that stiffened my wrist and crowded the paper with blots and corrections, but it could have had this effect: actually I didn't do my best to inscribe these doubtful signs.

Once, noticing my discouragement in front of the tattered sheet of paper, Dondom grabbed my pen, traced various characters in direct calligraphy, making them thinner and thicker as required, and induced me to go on in that way. Lost advice: the scribbles of 1900 were like those of 1899. And when the teacher graded the writing and saw the cheating, she called me and demanded explanations. I wanted to lie, making myself responsible for it. Impossible. I looked desperately at my accomplice. Dona Maria do O thrust her hand in the girl's hair, leaving her thumb and index finger free, with which she grabbed one of my ears. And, holding on to us, she shook her arm violently: we twirled like two marionettes and sank back in our seats.

I returned to anonymity and shadows, crushed. But the girl's benevolent imprudence and the wrath of the enormous brute failed: I remained obtuse, hating the commas and the catechism, opening the dirty books only at the time of the lesson. Happily I escaped among dozens of rude boys. If it weren't for the memory of the fingers which squeezed my ears, I would have been able to find peace and security. In the classroom, watching the mulatto or half-breed shaking the ferule, I had to behave myself, simulate attention, and wet the hated pages with saliva. And there, shrinking and insignificant, with my books closed, I fell stupidly into light sleeping spells, almost alone. Awake, I yawned and examined the narrow yard that climbed the hill towards the cemetery, muddy and slippery.

Nearby in the kitchen, three old ladies, aunts of the teacher, small and dark as pitch, would roast corn in a piece of earthenware; they would crush the corn in a large wooden mortar and fill colourful little boxes with corn flour. The smart pupils would buy this sticky dough, bitter and nauseating – and the profits from this home industry would

perhaps exceed the wages paid by the treasury.

Held in by her corset, whitened with rice powder, Dona Maria do O pretended to be human outside the school: her voice would soften, her flesh would be restrained, she looked domestic; her yellowish eyeballs would hide under her purple lids – and the beast would put her claws in her hair, fawning.

Among the victims of this devil, the most unhappy was my cousin Adelaide. Her parents didn't want to be separated from her. And, rich and being able to entrust her to an establishment that would teach different languages, they had decided to instruct her without letting her out of their sight. The more or less European schools were far away. Would they turn her loose in a world subject to inconveniences? No. Near the house the girl would preserve all her virtues: she would embroider pillowcases; without being courted, she would be united at the altar with a rich, responsible, good-looking boy. And she would be different from the women who smoked clay pipes. A learned Adelaide, not too learned, who had the latest notions and sufficient instruction. An Adelaide who would bathe in a brook and speak French.

Well, Joao Leite, owner of the Cavalo-Escuro, didn't know the stages of knowledge. He believed in a diploma from the Normal School. He put his daughter in the hands of Dona Maria do O. And, in consequence, once a week ox-carts and mule drivers would pour moulds of sugar, sugar syrup, and sacks of grain and flour into the school. At first this extravagance was received with enthusiasm, but they got used to it and forgot to express their thanks; finally they abandoned the ridiculous gestures dispensed to the smiling carrier, a Negro named José Luis. Adelaide was let down. There she was, almost an orphan – and the horrible mulatto woman would swell with vanity, advertising through indirect ways that she was charitable towards an intruder. Indifferent to the large payment, she tortured her.

She hadn't actually begun by subjecting her to bad treatment; accustomed to freedom, to giving orders, to running around, to insulting the farmhands making sugar brandy, Adelaide would rebel against the new authority, who apparently resembled the creatures who served her at the big house. Months and years were necessary to dominate the little creature, to lower her standing, while the executioner would accommodate herself to the situation, try her strength,

and perfect her wickedness. At first the servile approach, the conventional smile; then a cold look, a gesture of displeasure, a hard word; then recomposed flattery; again, acrimony and harshness. Comings and goings, cessations. A punishment – and soon the anxiety to obliterate it, to explain it as the work of education. Her shrewd cowardice would sweeten her short truces. If only it wasn't for the girl's blabbing, asking her parents to take her out of this hell. She didn't ask. Perhaps she even ignored that fact that she was in it. They had conquered her, they had worn out her sharp edge on a whetstone. Finally this preoccupation ended. And the girl would look sadly at the street and the green hills. Silently she went down, she went down more each time; she would avoid things, trying to hide her slenderness in the overcrowded class. It was useless to try. Dona Maria do O would penetrate people with her eyes; she would find the small fugitive body in a corner of the room; she would impute any fault to it. Sometimes the building wasn't well swept. Specks of dust, visible among the benches, were exaggerated when pointed out by her severe thick finger and commented on by her strident voice. And the unhappy girl, bending under her unreasonable anger, went to fetch the broom to clean the bricks. She reduced herself to the condition of a servant. In domestic work she would suffer the obstinacy of the three little old ladies the colour of pitch. These stupid crones came from a very low class; surely the venom they distilled had been acquired in the slave quarters. From the old servitude they turned to giving harsh orders; they avenged themselves on a possible descendant of remote gentlemen. Adelaide would bend her back, hardened in her obedience; she would lose her heart in the most humble tasks.

The strange reversal of roles surprised and revolted me, but I never showed it. Away from school, in spurts of courage, I confronted the shrews.

'Ah ! niggers ! '

There in the corridor, the book forgotten on my knees, watching the yard and the hill, listening to the chanted lessons and the vexation of the teacher, I effaced myself and fastened myself to the wall, faint-hearted and disdainful. I wouldn't dare to reveal my affection for my cousin, I wouldn't even risk observing her suffering. As her hours of affliction increased, I lowered my head, pretending not to see her thin arms, her pale withered face, her twisted mouth, and her big frightened eyes without tears. I was afraid that if I showed any sign

of interest I would hurt the poor girl and humiliate her even more. Perhaps this was hypocrisy: what I feared was to compromise myself by associating with that weakness and receive the blows on the neck destined for her. It didn't seem to me that Adelaide could re-establish her former rights, regain the soul of a proprietress, and dominate the poor farmhands exhausted from their work in the field. The mill had lost its grandeur; it was the shadow of a mill, and the young mistress would carry years of shame till the end of her life.

I had received vague news of slavery, without the whip and the whipping-post; it was acceptable, almost desirable. Maria Moleca and Vitória, free, lived peacefully in my grandfather's house. It didn't occur to me that they remained there out of habit or because they had nowhere else to go. They were satisfied, they had always been satisfied. The teacher's aunts had been fancy household slaves, undoubtedly, before they were freed through the foolishness of an odious princess. Ingrates. I never knew that somebody had actually handled the spade and sweated in the cultivation of cotton and sugarcane: the plants grew spontaneously. And I didn't think of the sacrifice necessary for the three women to bring up their melancholy niece, to straighten her out, dress her, brush her, and impose her on society. This metamorphosis was casual. And it frightened me.

My poor cousin, so good and so fragile, putting up with their miserable headaches. The place for the Negro was in the kitchen. Why did they leave there to come into the room and pull Adelaide's ear? I couldn't resign myself to it. What harm did Adelaide do them? Why did they behave in that way? Why?

A Burial

On that day we had a holiday. I found the boys in a tumult at the door of the school, and somebody guided us to a distant house, where crying women were putting little stars on the robe that adorned a small corpse, transformed into an angel. When the last touches were finished, the crying increased and four pupils held the handles of a blue coffin. We went out, we walked along muddy paths filled with holes; we climbed a steep slope and, sliding in the red mud, we

reached the white walls, the little spots seen from below, now high and wide, striped with green. I went through the gate.

I had never entered a cemetery and I used to fear them because of the spectres that were described to me in the kitchen. At night these stories would make me tremble and my hair stand up. The darkness was filled with mysteries; the smoky embers of the stove glowed; they accompanied the dance of the witches. Here, though, in the brightness of the strong sun, the terrors disappeared. The band of children was smiling; they spread out through the narrow paths and climbed over the smooth mounds arranged in a line.

The blue coffin was left beside a grave; old Simeao hid it; he took a shovel and covered it with earth; he made a kind of flower bed. I heard some hollow blows, indifferent to the ceremony.

I remembered what was said about the gravedigger, who was slow and whose hands shook. He had lost his family, he was deprived of all the interests which would attach him to life; almost decrepit, he enjoyed only the company of the dead. He had become hardened in his task. Because his unsteady legs needed rest, he rarely came down to the city. He consumed the rest of his strength in the shadow of the tombs, pulling up noxious weeds and clipping rose bushes. And when he finished his work, he relaxed on the top of a catacomb and slept. When he was found, stiff, it wouldn't be necessary to carry him very far: they would leave him among his plants. This withered figure put me at peace. Simeao lived among the dead – and never did any one of them bother him. A powerful man. Or else the dead were very weak.

I wandered some distance away to examine the purple china flowers and the heads of the lizards in the cracks of the sepulchres. The nocturnal stories – evils with eyes of embers and dogs chewing pieces of rotten meat – disappeared. And my fright also ceased in my work of guessing the names and dates that were fading on the tombstones. What I felt was nausea. Nausea at the stones, the bricks, the gnarled branches surely impregnated with oil. I was afraid to touch the objects dirty with mournful, indelible fat. Colourless junk, dry leaves, withered petals and vague fragments, piled up like garbage, disgusted me: in spite of being washed by winter and burned by summer, they must have contained pus or marrow.

I moved to a corner where there was a gap in the wall. It was a charnel house. I saw skeletons in disorder, arches of ribs tangled with each other, rosaries of vertebrae. On the lugubrious pile a skull stared

at me and seemed to make fun of me. Such an idea of horror had never occurred to me. A heap of junk. It was difficult to imagine them as parts of people, mixed and decomposed in a great disgusting pile. The skull seemed to grow larger; to tell the truth, it acquired features and wanted to speak. My hands were getting wet and my sight darkened. I was angry because I wasn't able to move out of there, to run through the grass with the boys, and to see old Simeao's birds and rose bushes. Shut in this sinister vault, I felt a knot in my throat and I wanted to cry. A different feeling from the one that touched me when I heard stories of haunted houses. Desperation paralysed me. Loathing, the sensation of finding myself fallen in a manure pile unable to clean myself, and irreparable ruin almost everywhere. This was ugly and sad. And the ugliness and sadness were active, they showed their strong teeth and wanted to bite me. A mistake: indifference, immobility. The immobility and indifference attracted me. I tried to invoke the troubled souls, the devils who move furiously in the eternal flames. These creatures inspired in me pity or terror. In front of the naked carcasses, it was impossible for me to be touched with pity. It was crazy to suppose that they were mocking me.

I stayed a long time contemplating the ruins; I don't know how and when I left. Perhaps my companions came to get me. I don't remember.

I entered my house, diving into a thick shadow. At the table I refused the food. My relatives didn't understand my fasting; they left me alone with my elbows over the board, staring at the orange trees in the neighbourhood. The night fell, darkness tinged the foliage; they didn't bring a light and the young ones retired.

I lay on a bench, my joints cracking. The darkness increased. I shut my eyes. I moved my fingers, I searched for my knuckles; I touched my arms, my trunk, and my neck. I fumbled at my hairy scalp, struggling to discover there the sutures and protuberances. I touched my jaw and cheekbones. I twisted my eye sockets and rubbed my lids: my eyeballs were slowly dislocated. Filthiness. My lids and eyeballs were going rotten; they *were* rotten. Only my skeleton would resist. Bones. This misery was attached to me and there was no way of eliminating it. A skull was going to follow me everywhere; it would be with me in bed and during the hours of play and discouragement; it would bend over the boring pages and bear knocks on the head. It was going to be filled with notions and with dreams and be empty, to

rest in a charnel house in the sun and rain, showing its teeth to the children. I would end up like that. I didn't interrupt my examination of the eye sockets, and the horrible cavities grew larger and deeper, similar to the two holes which had stared at me in the cemetery. The children chattered in the kitchen, probably seated on the large wooden mortar, warmed by the fire and absorbed by the supernatural wonders. In normal circumstances I would be there with them, facing dwarfs and ferocious giants. There, lying on the bench, I wouldn't have any need to communicate, to be fortified by the company of the little Negro boys. Dwarfs and giants were only words; the indeterminate enemies that lived in darkness dispersed. I tried to remember them to scare myself. In vain. Outside the crickets sang, the wind hummed in the branches of the orange trees and the fence of lath-and-plaster; fireflies and roaches started to appear; the children whispered. Scarcely. And inside – a bundle of bones. Scarcely. My flesh bristled, the blood ran through my arteries. All this would be consumed by the worms. The horrible image persisted. The images would also be consumed by the worms. So why should I exhaust myself, pray, go to the store and to school, receive the teacher's punishment, and burn out my brains in adding and subtracting? What for, if my brains were going to melt and abandon my useless box? What impressed me the most was the eye sockets: the detailed search went on and I found them empty. Hollow and dark, like the others. And the rest? There was no rest. There was nothing. There wouldn't be anything there. Old Simeao had got used to sleeping by the light of the swamp fires, which were no longer lovers consumed in incest, pursuing and repelling each other among the graves. He had been freed of beliefs; he had escaped from the supernatural. And he was resigned. I couldn't be resigned. The souls from the other world and the werewolves acquired much value; they were important for me.

The letters in the book I was reading seemed to me at that time confused and pedantic. But the skill of the composition doesn't exclude the substance of the fact. I tried hard to entangle the unnamed things that existed in such confusion in my childish mind. It is because they were unnamed that they now appear doubtful. After all, I didn't have any difficulties. I was exposed to various legends. Having overcome my initial resistance, I tried to confirm them. Suddenly I would deny them as a whole without analysing them. I wasn't entangled in doubt. I had said *yes*; I would come to

say *no*: a skull caused the collapse of my ideas.

I don't intend to insinuate, though, that I had confined myself in atheism, that I was different from other boys. I didn't even think about God. What disturbed me was the souls. And mine wasn't completely dead. That enormous disillusion passed. The phantoms had returned; they had softened my solitude. They had disappeared little by little and their place was taken by other phantoms.

A New Teacher

They took me out of the school run by the half-breed woman; they put me into one run by a half-breed man, not because this was better than the other, but because my family had moved to the Rua da Matriz, and Dona Mario do O, at the Juàzeiro, was too far away, thank God. The new teacher functioned at the Largo do Comércio, in a house with a garden containing two or three palm trees.

One day a brother of his, light and sympathetic, turned up angry at Sr Costa's store; he sat on a bale of cotton, he opened a newspaper, closed it, stared at me, and shouted:

'I have my place defined in society.'

I didn't refute him. I admired his calligraphy, his speeches in the Masonic lodge, and the style of his conversation. I wished I could talk so easily and laugh like him. But at that moment the man didn't want to talk or laugh. Drunk, he slobbered, remembering some offence:

'I have my place defined.'

Probably someone had molested him, someone who hadn't received an adequate answer, and here, in the disturbance of his drunkenness, he confused me with another.

'Without a doubt.'

The fellow disdained my confirmation: he hit his thigh and hammered, ill-tempered, ready to fight, slobbering:

'I have my place defined.'

But this happened after I entered his brother's school. The teacher didn't have a place defined in society. To tell the truth, he didn't have a definite place in mankind: he was a wretched type with a high voice and ambiguous manners, and he spent his days straightening his

kinky hair with a brush of hard bristles. Oil and fat didn't tame his curly hair – and the owner was stubborn; he rubbed it carefully, staring in a mirror, courting himself, and biting the end of his tongue. He was ugly, almost Negro – and his ugliness and blackness bothered him. Because he had an image of beauty, but he sought it in his crazy way in his miserable body. He rubbed himself, he powdered himself, he overdressed, he examined himself in the glass, twisting his eyeballs streaked with red.

I remained in the enigmatic stories of the Baron of Macaúbas. I spelled mentally, knowing that I would never be able to say the phrases aloud. And I nodded at the slate, over the slow adding and subtracting of numbers. But my attention was diverted from there, seeking the window, which revealed the heads of the passers-by, walls, roofs, and the pregnant palm trees fanning themselves. I was bothered by the mirror, in which the foolishness of the mulatto was reflected. It was good that the rice powder would stick to his tarnished skin and the oil would set the rebel hairs on his small head.

When this happened, the teacher would leave the room and present himself to his sisters, wriggling and giving little screeches like someone who was being tickled. He would return illuminated, with a childish smile floating on his thick lips. He would sit down at the table, admiring his fingers and his nails ornamented with white spots, and he would put himself in a dainty dream. He would tremble, wake up, look at the four walls, and release a long sigh. After that, sluggishly, as if he were lifting a big weight, he would take up our writings; he would run his dim and distant glance through them; he would mark them, putting conventional numbers on them. With a languid gesture, he would call us to the lesson, which would go on, sleepily and tepidly.

I profited from these moments by jumping over lines, swallowing phrases, and subtracting entire pages. At the beginning I ventured fearfully into such transgressions, throwing timid and guilty looks at the mulatto. Seeing him tranquil, I would slip again into silly talk; I was encouraged to make another jump; peacefully I imagined another book, without confusing explanations, without tedious narratives filled with morals. One exclamation would bring me back to reality, cooling my blood; the fault would reveal itself to me, and I would lift my alarmed face. No punishment. The teacher walked in the world of the moon with his half-closed eyelids; he moved slowly

in the chair like a sleepwalker. He wasn't startled, he wasn't indignant: his exclamation brought about some nebulous feeling that had nothing to do with what I was reading. The scare ended; I found myself isolated; I continued in my infraction without feeling any shame.

Sometimes, though, the mirror would announce to us a tempest. The wretched fellow didn't find himself straight and pale enough; he was sour; a sudden harshness would replace his ordinary sweetness. He would collapse in the chair, moving restlessly; he looked as though he had been bitten by fleas. Everything smelled bad as far as he was concerned. He would hold the ferule as though he wanted to destroy the world with it. And we, half a dozen pupils, would tremble at his massive anger; we would try to hide ourselves one behind the other. We would give our hair, we would exchange our persons for his misery, so dispirited beside the table. Why was he so annoyed? Foolish things. I would say to myself that the teacher, like his brother, could recite brilliant speeches and grow up. To become a man.

The poor fellow didn't intend to be a man. And there he was, defeated, annoyed, and distilling malice. His eyes were bloodshot; he would gnash his teeth. And he would correct our pronunciation furiously, obedient to the commas and full-stops; he would force us to repeat a phrase ten times; he would give low marks to our writings, tearing the paper; he would track down our sums till he found a mistake and he would publicize it with terrifying stridency. Confronted with this sudden policing, we would recoil – and the virgin pages became harder.

In my seat I was discouraged; my brains were burning; I was dizzy. When would that horrible conflict end? Evidently it never would: I had to get used to it, to like the insipidity. I went back to my obligations, reduced by yawning and dozing.

Fortunately the demand didn't last long. The touchy fellow would see an attractive face in the glass; he would get excited and leave me in peace. The complications of the book would diminish and get lost, while my slow spirit was walking far away, stepping over the marshy places that spread through the city. I would go to the railway station, admire the locomotives, the smoke, whistles, carriages, passengers and porters, tracks, sleeping-cars and lumps of coal; I stopped at the market, which was crowded with noisy country people on Saturdays; I visited stores, storehouses, and the post office; I went up and down

steep streets, I strolled on the green hills and at the edge of the wide stony river. So I wandered; I finished imperfectly the rest of the long stories, deaf to the advice that was in them. I wasn't even aware of the existence of the advice.

At last I said goodbye to the Baron of Macaúbas, I put aside the paperback and breathed. But my satisfaction was short: they put me in another bad school and I acquired a classical anthology.

An Interval

Sr Nuno wanted to transform me into an assistant at mass, and this attracted me; I let myself be open to suggestion, ignoring the efforts this novelty would demand of me. In fact the catechism didn't inspire my sympathy, but arithmetic and the classical anthology were worse – and I imagined that with this new option I would get rid of them. It is possible that many vocations started in this way.

My father trusted me to Sr Nuno, proprietor and owner of a dry-goods store and a bakery, a gentleman with a long and respectable beard; he was devout with a happy and noisy devotion, which was revealed when he played the violin at feasts. He also possessed the gift of cutting glass with diamonds and pliers, saving the left-over bits to cover the little saints placed in the frames of mirrors. He offered me many precious things; I sent them to be blessed and I ornamented one wall of my bedroom with them.

In that way I was edified, moderately at first, then excessively and enthusiastically. I took a fancy to the tolling of the bell and the smell of the incense; I learned by heart the phrases of the ritual, and, going from the house to the store and the store to the house, I would remove my hat when I passed in front of the church; I would pray an 'Our Father' and a 'Hail Mary'.

At this time my great ambition was to dedicate myself entirely to the service of God and to enter the seminary. I didn't enter, but I almost did. Exotic words stayed in my mind; I received the favour that I asked of heaven in prayers at night, kneeling on the brick: a cassock of broadcloth and a linen surplice with wide lace. I wore these garments proudly, and white from the waist up, the rest black, I went

one Sunday to the sacristy, ready to help in the holy sacrifice. I imitated the gestures of my companion, a very competent oversized ant, but I acted in a sad way. It was of course the emotion of my debut, said Sr Nuno. And filling me with suggestions, he taught me in his easy-going way the necessary movements.

It wasn't emotion, it was incapacity. The second experience was like the first: I lost courage on the step of the altar; I muttered my part heedlessly, mixing up the answers and shutting up. And so I continued. I would go too fast, too slow, slide on the rug, confuse the epistle with the gospel; I didn't hold the missal right and in the most serious moments I would distract myself by looking at the stained-glass windows. In handling the vials I was so awkward that I fell back. They relieved me of my duties; they didn't even leave me the censer, because I couldn't shorten or lengthen the chains, and in my hands the object, instead of casting smoke, would cast ashes. In the end everything went to the other acolyte, and I resigned myself to hardening my knees, balancing myself on the right kneecap, then on the left, indifferent to the ceremony, mumbling foolish syllables and forgetting to hit my chest and concentrate on the elevation of the host.

At the beginning Father Loureiro tried to correct me. He grew discouraged and impatient: I wanted to help him when he took off his vestments – and he would wrinkle his nose, snuffle, look at me over his spectacles, shake his head, dismiss me, and call for the ability of Moreira the sacristan. And little by little my faith grew cold: the complicated liturgy put off a minister from the Church.

The period of the free ecclesiastics had ended; they had been numerous in the last century. They became more severe. Father Joao Inácio and Father Loureiro lived with their ugly and honest old relatives. In consequence, despondency and desertions. Farmers, mill-owners, and businessmen would put their children in lay schools; we would graduate from liberal academies. Or they would leave us amidst heaps of sugar-cane if they were crude enough; or they would fasten us to the counter.

Under the circumstances, my wishes were disregarded. I spaced and abbreviated my penitence; the flowers that ornamented my small religious images faded, withered and fell. One day in the yard I discovered one of my sisters dressed in the cassock, masked as though she were in the Carnival. I was indignant; then I shrugged my

shoulders, indifferent to this profanation. The cassock was getting old, unravelling at the pockets and extremities; it was covered with stains. It was torn to shreds among my toys – and I forgot it.

Aside from the masses, confessions, baptisms and weddings, I was impressed by my visits to Sr Nuno during this period of learning. I became bolder: my bashfulness ended, I would enter without asking permission, as if the house were mine. Pleasant people: the little old lady, the smiling peaceful girls who moved like parts of a slow machine, and the young man recently ordained.

Father Pimentel was a holy creature and he taught me some knowledge, the first that I accepted with pleasure. He told me about Abraham's journey, the life in the tents, and the arrival in Palestine. He used simple language and brought the subject up-to-date. I didn't hesitate, hearing about the movement of men and cattle, perhaps touched by the drought, to locate Chaldea in the interior of Pernambuco. And Canaan, land of milk and honey, resembled the mills and sugar-cane. I maintained this arbitrary sense of locale, which made the plot so probable; I would spread pebbles, cactus, and cereus in the Syrian desert, and even when the maps came my confusion didn't disappear entirely.

Father Pimentel admitted doubts and clarified the obscure points. He really didn't explain very well the useless sacrifice of Isaac, and in order to avoid my disappointment, he disguised the behaviour of the daughters of Lot, but the other cases were easily and naturally unfolded. Jacob fought Esau over the inheritance, a common thing among rich people; he fled; protected and cheated by an uncle, he took away one of his flock of sheep and married two women. One of them had eyes whose lids looked inflamed. The polygamy, the theft, and the trickery didn't surprise me. Eleven wicked people got rid of one brother.

So far, everything was reasonable. After that I saw in the story a certain exaggeration. Moses was a great leader, but had he really conquered the Egyptians, crossed the sea with dry feet, received food from heaven, obtained water from the rocks, and seen God? I asked for confirmation. Was there any proof the Jew had performed so many miracles? Father Pimentel never tired. Of course he had performed them.

Dizzy, I went to take refuge in the company of the girls. They talked too much. They argued seriously over a piece of cloth for a

dress, pausing at every pleat, analysing the ribbons and buttons; they disagreed and criticized each other, and in the end they reached a conclusion. What surprised me about them was their lack of haste. One was engaged, almost engaged. The decision was postponed – and in the dining-room there were lively chats on the subject, in which all of them seemed to have an equal interest. They debated the conveniences and the inconveniences, and sometimes thy would favour the husband-to-be, other times would not. While seeking the decision, they prepared the trousseau. It was given a tacit assent, but the debates went on over the arrangement of the pillow slips and sheets. They measured and weighed everything so that no deceptions would occur.

These girls had the habit of affirming the contrary of what they wanted. I noticed the singularity with which they praised my monkey-coloured jacket. They examined it seriously; they found the material and the accessories of superior quality and the sewing admirable. I was flattered: I had never paid attention to such advantages. But the praise was prolonged; it made me suspicious. Finally I understood that they were mocking, and I was not offended. Far from it: I found this way of talking to the contrary curious; it was different from the rudeness I was used to. Generally they would say frankly that my clothes didn't fit my body; they were too loose under the arms. The defects were evident, and I considered it stupid of them to point them out. Now they were shamming, playing a game of words which contained both malice and kindness. This mixture of incompatible sentiments astonished me – and for the first time I laughed at myself. The piquant delight didn't reform me, of course, but it showed me what I could have been if nature and the tailor had given me the necessary resources. I was pleased with the idea that my person didn't inevitably provoke irritation or delight, and that my new friends had come to me understanding and charitable.

I remembered this lesson; I kept this jacket many long years. Resigned, I appraised the lining, the pleats, and the backstitches of my monkey-coloured possession. Patience; they had to be like that. Even today, if people pretend to put up with me in a romantic situation, I carefully observe its sleeves and sewing, and I see it as it really is: trivial and monkey-coloured.

At the age of nine I was still almost illiterate. And I felt myself inferior to the Mota Limas, our neighbours, very inferior, as though I were formed in a different manner. To me these happy boys were perfect: they were clean, they laughed loudly, they attended a decent school and owned machines that rolled on the sidewalk like trains. I wore common clothes and shoes with wooden soles; I muddied myself in the yard, making clay dolls; I wouldn't talk.

In my school at the end of the street, some wretched little fellows would doze off on the narrow backless benches that were sometimes scrubbed and washed. On these days we would sit on wet wood. The teacher had a mother and a daughter. The senile mother made lace, beating the bobbins on a cushion between her legs. The daughter, a kinky mulatto, intolerable and nosy, gave us our lessons, but she would teach in such a way that we perceived as much ignorance in her as in ourselves. Near the table there was a mat, where the women would squat, cut material, and sew.

Dona Agnelina was resigned to her daughter in matters of courtship and, sometimes when it was necessary, she would correct her. Once they argued about the word *auréola* that appeared in my anthology. The girl was right, but Dona Agnelina, hemming a dress, thought it was equivalent to a hem; she stuck out her lip and, after hesitating, confused in her mumbling way *auréola* with *ourela* or the edge of the cloth; she recommended to me that, to avoid doubts, I should say *aureóla.*

This was the place for studying. The pupils would stay immobile on the benches: five hours of suffering, a crucifixion. One day I saw flies on a boy's face, nibbling the corner of his eye and getting inside. And the eye didn't move, as if the boy were dead. There was no prison worse than an elementary school in the interior. The immobility and insensitivity terrified me. I abandoned my notebooks and aureoles and I didn't let the flies eat me. So, at nine years of age I still didn't know how to read.

Well, one night after coffee, my father sent me to fetch a book that

he had left at the head of his bed. It was a novelty: my old man never talked to me. And I, after swallowing my coffee, would kiss his hand, because this was the custom, plunge into the hammock, and fall asleep. Startled, I went into his bedroom, held the hateful object with repugnance, and returned to the dining-room. Then I received orders to sit down and open the volume. I obeyed squeamishly, with the vague hope that a visitor would interrupt me. Nobody visited us on that extraordinary night.

My father commanded me to start reading. I did. Chewing the words, stuttering, moaning a dreadful song, indifferent to punctuation, jumping and repeating lines, I reached the bottom of the page without hearing shouts. I stopped, surprised, I turned the page, and I dragged on moaning, like a car on a road filled with holes.

Perhaps the businessman had collected some lost debt: in the middle of the chapter he started talking to me; he asked me if I understood what I had read. He explained that this was a story, a novel; he demanded attention and summarized the part already read. A couple with children walked through a forest on a winter's night, pursued by wolves and wild dogs. After much running, these creatures arrived at the shack of a woodsman. Was it or wasn't it? He translated for me in kitchen talk several literary expressions. I was encouraged to chat. Yes, there really was something in the book, but it was difficult to know everything.

I patched together the rest of the chapter, trying my best to penetrate the meaning of the confused prose, venturing sometimes to enquire. And an almost imperceptible little light appeared in the distance; it went out and reappeared, vacillating in the darkness of my spirit.

I went to bed worried: the fugitives, the wolves and the woodsman agitated my sleep. I slept with them and woke up with them. The hours flew by. Indifferent to school, to my sister's toys, and to the prattling of the children, I lived with these creatures of dream, incomplete and mysterious.

The next night my father asked me again for the book, and the scene of the preceding evening was repeated: difficult reading, misunderstandings, explanations.

On the third night I went to fetch the book spontaneously, but the old man was gloomy and silent. And the next day, when I prepared to chew over the narrative, he dismissed me with a sullen gesture.

I have never experienced such a great deception. It was as if I had discovered a very precious thing and suddenly the wonder was broken. And the man who dashed it to pieces, after having helped me to find it, didn't imagine my sorrow. At first I felt desperation, a sense of loss and ruin, then a long cowardice, the certainty that the hours of enchantment were too good for me and couldn't last.

The secret signs of my sorrow were ended, so I thought; I found that the bad could be repaired, and I explained the business to Emília, my excellent cousin. Her serene face, wide black eyes, an air of seriousness – a beautiful girl. Her sister, playful and wayward, sometimes through her feet, sometimes through her head, laughed like a crazy woman and suddenly exploded in bursts of anger. But Emília wasn't of this world. She was angry with me only once, on the day that, tubercular, she saw me drinking water from her glass. An angel.

I confessed my disgust, then, to Emília, and I proposed that she should direct my reading. I made an effort to interest her, telling her about the darkness in the forest, the frightened children, the conversation at the woodsman's house, and the appearance of a girl named Agueda.

Some time later, this Agueda was very useful to me. Eusébio, the crazy one, held the book in the store and started to declaim it, and coming across the name of the character, he pronounced it *Aguéda.* This gave me satisfaction: despite being older, Eusébio the crazy one was more backward than I.

When I spoke to Emília, though, I ignored the fact that there were people as uneducated as Eusébio, and I easily admitted the *auréolas* of the teacher. Agreeing with my mother's opinion, I considered myself an animal. Therefore it was necessary that my little cousin read the novel with me and help me decipher it.

Emília answered with a question that astonished me. Why didn't I try reading alone?

For a long time I showed her my mental weakness, the impossibility of understanding the difficult words, especially in the terrible order in which they were joined. If I were like the others, fine; but I was too stupid, everybody thought I was too stupid.

Emília opposed my conviction and spoke to me about astronomers, individuals who read the heavens and perceived everything there is there. Not the heaven where Our Lord God and the Virgin Mary

dwell. This one nobody had seen. But the other that lies below, the one of the sun and the moon and the stars, the astronomers knew it perfectly. Well, if they could see things so distant, why couldn't I divine the pages open in front of my eyes? Didn't I distinguish the letters? Didn't I know how to assemble them and form words?

I pondered on Emília's theory. I, the astronomers, what foolishness! To read things in the heavens, who could imagine it?

And I took courage and I went to hide in the yard with the wolves, the man, the woman, the children, the tempest in the forest, and the woodsman's shack. I reread the pages I had already gone through. And the parts that were clear shed a little light on the obscure points. The small characters grew and slowly penetrated my thick intelligence. Slowly.

The astronomers were formidable. I, poor me, couldn't unveil the secrets of the heavens. Tied to earth, I would be moved by sad stories in which there were men and women pursued, children abandoned, darkness, and ferocious animals.

Samuel Smiles

I had seen this name several times in the anthology, but, as I didn't know how to pronounce it, I used to cough at the end of the lessons in which it appeared, causing a terrible confusion. These lessons must have contained important rules, I imagine, rules that would have been useful if they had got into my head, but at that time I didn't guess what Samuel Smiles wanted of me. By not understanding what he said and even ignoring his name, I respected him too much, annoying him.

This affair was deceptive and somewhat profitable. Yawning, I would hum his nebulous advice. The teacher corrected me. When, though, I sputtered, coughing, the name of the author, the correction was lacking – and consequently I presumed that, at least on this point, the woman's ignorance coincided with mine. I made sure of this by stopping my cough and pronouncing Smiles in various ways so that Dona Agnelina wouldn't criticize me.

At last I noticed a peculiar sort of behaviour on her part: before

I barbarously abandoned the extraordinary word, I closed the book and broke off the conversation. Out of that grew a kind of complicity that made her reasonable for months. In arithmetic I was a savage, little more or less than a savage, but I was tolerated, and I believe that I owe this to Samuel Smiles.

This backward teacher possessed a rare talent for telling the stories of Trancoso. She would visit us and hold us till midnight with tales and romances, which she stretched out and coloured admirably. They taught me nothing, but they transmitted to me a liking for printed falsehoods.

Perhaps Dona Agnelina's remarkable gift had induced my father to remove me from the wrong path and to entrust me to the retired teacher Rijo, a remarkable prattler. We were only two pupils, I and my cousin José, a little rougher than I. In the teacher's absence, we would yawn and watch the swallows in the sky, the white lizards on the wall, and the fearful spines of the books on the shelves. The man would suddenly appear, quickly take our lessons, pile up some questions, and soon give the answers without waiting for us to answer them rightly or wrongly.

Then I got one of the fraudulent passages of Samuel Smiles to read. I coughed and mumbled the second word, filling my mouth with my tongue. The teacher interrupted me, separating the syllables with great clarity: Samuel Smailes. I opened my eyes wide and the fellow repeated: Smailes. I stammered the difficult name without any assurance. I imagined a mistake: what was different from my usual manner of talking I took for an error. Really I pronounced Smiles in various ways, but I supposed that some of them would be correct. I thought the teacher was a jackass – and my cousin José agreed.

When this display of rebelliousness ended, though, I started to have doubts and was considerably astonished; finally a vague mixture of resistance and admiration for that man who altered the letters. His serious firmness made me suspect that I was in the presence of an authority. And as it wouldn't have been possible for me to discern its cause, I was pleased with its looks – and the suspicion was transformed into conviction.

I agreed easily. I had read a novel and I was able to understand it. I understood only parts of it because my vocabulary was insignificant. I considered it reliable, the greatest novel in the world. Later my certainty was shaken and painful doubts affected me.

The teacher couldn't be compared to ordinary living beings. Serious, with his finger on the page, he articulated: Smailes. During the lessons that followed I noticed that he didn't contradict himself. I started then to admire him. I looked for other words in which the *i* was pronounced in that way. Uselessly. In spite of everything Smiles was Smailes, and nobody could tell me otherwise.

Well, one day in the store I found myself ruminating over a newspaper in a loud voice, just to familiarize myself with literature, without noticing that somebody was listening. Suddenly my literary sense was increased by the paper. I cleared my throat and exclaimed: Samuel Smailes. One of the cashiers censured my ignorance and corrected me: Samuel *Símiles.* The other cashier hesitated between *Símiles* and *Simíles.* I repeated that it was Smailes, and this produced hilarity.

The young man who said Simíles used to make fun of me in a noisy way. Anything I said excited him: he would bite his lips, become as red as a turkey, shed tears; in the end he couldn't stop, he would fall into convulsive laughter and roll over the counter, half suffocated. Perhaps I was ridiculous: some foolishness must have provoked the rude outburst. What foolishness? He wouldn't understand. Limited intelligence.

The employee who said Símiles, a vain humourless mulatto, never looked me in the face. When I talked to him, he turned aside and muttered offensive things in his chosen language.

Among the individuals who frequented the store, there was one who was particularly disagreeable: Fernando. This monster took pleasure in tormenting me. Very rude, he insulted me for no reason.

I had a weak memory and tried in vain to correct myself: I provoked laughter, smacking of the lips and dirty words. I would shrink and grow cold and my sight would darken. I would shut up in the presence of these dreadful beings; I ran away like a rat, but I was unable to free myself. I would sit silently in a corner, leafing through the dictionary in order to interpret the novel of the cape and the sword, and people would come and gradually take charge of me, almost always referring to my vague foolishness.

Sometimes I tried to ease myself by reproducing softly, with my ears on fire, Fernando's insults. I always went wrong: the laughter would increase, the lip-smacking would thicken, and Fernando would become more ferocious. It was useless to react.

On that day, though, when the mulatto answered me harshly, I swore he was wrong. The white fellow started to turn red and ended up exploding into vulgar laughter. I asserted again that Samuel was Smailes, really Smailes, but I spoke unsteadily, very unhappy and wanting to cry. The young man continued to laugh, the mulatto muttered and wrinkled his nostrils, and Fernando insulted me.

Confronted with this, I invoked the authority of the teacher, who must have known Samuel Smiles well. The teacher pronounced it Smailes. It's a lie, shouted Fernando – an injustice, because I didn't know how to lie.

They covered me with scorn and decided to take the mulatto's opinion: Samuel Símiles. I gave up, beaten.

But I relaxed. Their contempt didn't reach me: it would hurt a learned person. I found support, I enquired whether the foolishness that the malicious trio attributed to me was really foolishness. I grew up a little, leaning on the man who taught me only the name of Samuel Smiles, and he taught a lot. Seated on a large box, the dictionary on my lap, I laughed at the three. Fools.

I was a bit stupid; everybody was impatient with my lack of wit. Uncultivated, without doubt. Poor vocabulary, little understanding.

But Samuel Smiles easily imposed himself. He was Smailes because the teacher's voice was clear to me and his yellow fingernail scratched the page energetically. Samuel Smailes, of course.

And the fellows' jokes slid by me without making a dent. My heart was relieved. I was isolated with my face stuck in the dictionary. Imbeciles. They had decided by a majority vote that Samuel was Símiles.

I started to read in a low voice, entirely clear in my mind. Imbeciles. Samuel Smailes for sure. And I was entangled and lost in the dictionary; I avoided the influence of the three wicked fellows.

Samuel Smiles, a tiresome writer, rendered me an immense service.

I discovered a booklet with a yellow cover and cheap paper, filled with small letters and lines jammed together, so jammed that for an inexperienced eye the jumps and repetitions were inevitable. I believe that it came to me after a burst of religion. It must have been around then. The saints who were hanging on the walls of my bedroom had grown in importance. Now they were diminished and were replaced by the beings who peopled the voluminous stories.

Today everything is mixed up; it's a confusion. Perhaps the necessity for mystery and grandeur had led me to believe in the saints and the heroes, who developed simultaneously. There was, though, a lack of balance: the first ascended a lot, while the others descended; after that those on the bottom began to rise, caught up with the others and gained the lead. These slow things, almost imperceptible, passed into a nebulous spirit. To tell the truth, there was no time to differentiate between them. In the darkness luminous figures grew larger. But among them were empty spaces which were filled by the new images.

I don't know why these dream-creatures fought inside me. I believe it was because of a prohibition, a terrible prohibition, related to the booklet with the yellow cover. Somebody had left it in the store. I leafed through it slowly, spelling out the words and consulting the dictionary, seated on a box of candles. The books in the establishment consisted of the ledger book, the bookkeeeper's journal, the cash-book, and others that José Bastista dealt with. Among the merchandise, though, were half a dozen dictionaries. I examined with some profit these objects that didn't find a buyer. They contained the flags of every country (here is where I started my geography) and portraits of important persons (the origin of the little history I know). My father allowed me to make my investigations, because the red bindings, the flags, and the portraits had no value: it was even good that they would be damaged; it would save the salesman the memory of a bad transaction. Merchandise. Parts of the yellow booklet were shown to me – it was called *The Boy of the Woods and His Dog Pilôto.*

I got along slowly, looking up the definitions of almost all the words, like someone deciphering an unknown language. The work was painful, but the story held me, perhaps because it dealt with an abandoned child. I always had an inclination towards abandoned children. At the beginning of the long novel I found the boy lost in a

forest, hearing the howling of the wolves. Dona Agnelina's stories referred to little maltreated boys who would free themselves from trouble and sometimes overcome giants and witches.

At the house I showed what I had found to Emília; I described the boy, the woods, and the dog. Not one sign of approval. Emília opened her eyes wide; horrified, she looked at the booklet, held it with the tips of her fingers, dropped it as if it were dirty, and advised me not to read it. This was a sin. I ventured to argue. My cousin was mistaken: in the story there were an excellent boy and dog. She drew back, very pale, fearing to be contaminated, and turned aside her face. Sin.

'Why a sin, Emília?'

Because the book was excommunicated, written by a bad fellow, a Protestant, to fool the gullible. I objected; I said that the boy and the dog acted like Christians. She answered that therein lay the danger: when the devil wanted to tempt people, he affected a good appearance; he would hide his duck-feet and give reasonable advice. Later he would show his fingernails and his tail, he would smell like sulphur and take people to hell. Ignorant and young, I didn't know what was right or wrong, but if the book had a bad origin, it couldn't be a good thing. I assured her that it didn't have a bad origin; Emília looked from a distance at the letters on the cover, disagreed, and went out filled with repugnance.

I remembered the pitomba fruit that I had seen on Good Friday on top of the larder. Somebody had convinced me that I had to fast. A small sacrifice, because at noon and at night we would eat to excess. During the intervals, though, a rigorous abstinence – and then the pitomba fruit and the temptation had appeared to me. I walked around the food cabinet, went away, returned, hesitated; my moderate faith succumbed.

Now I was stronger, but the need to know about the boy of the woods and his dog Pilôto didn't compare to the modest appetite that the pitomba fruit had caused on Good Friday. I contemplated rebelling against Emília. The booklet was neither the work of Protestants nor the suggestion of the devil.

I grew sad, crushed by that obligation. And I regretted having talked to my cousin. If I hadn't talked so much, I would have read *The Boy of the Woods and His Dog Pilôto* without guilt.

Later I encountered much intolerance, but this little incident was extremely painful for me.

I returned to the store without having decided to throw away the condemned booklet. When I passed in front of the church, I removed my hat, and I recited an 'Our Father' and a 'Hail Mary'. I had become used to this exercise, but now with desperation and remorse I begged forgiveness for carrying under my jacket, close to my body, an impure object. I wasn't resigned to losing it; I argued with myself, trying to convince myself that Emília rambled uselessly.

In the store I went to sit on the big box of candles. My plans for revolt had completely disappeared. If my enemy Fernando had arrived at this moment, I wouldn't have even been aware of his presence, I was so perplexed.

It was as if people had shut a door in my face, the only door, and had left me in the street, in the rain, wretched and lacking direction. They prohibited me from laughing, talking loudly, and having opinions. I lived in a great jail. No, I lived in a small jail, like a parrot tied in its cage.

Through the difficult prose of the novel, I had seen my freedom. My mind was fastened on the unsteady plot: the characters moved slowly and vaguely; little by little they would emerge; they could hardly be distinguished from real beings. And they would make me forget the terrible code which afflicted me. Suddenly the prohibitions reached the mysterious world where I hid myself. It was impossible to move around, a sad mute parrot in the cage. When I started to imagine wide spaces, the law stopped my dream.

I cried; the booklet fell to the ground, useless. The boy of the woods and the dog Pilôto were dying. And nothing could take their place. An immense disgust and loneliness. Unhappy the boy of the woods, unhappy me, unhappy all persecuted boys subject to knocks on the head and to animals that howl in the night.

The cashiers, listening to me, would mutter or burst into laughter; Fernando would insult me; my mother would treat me indifferently or harshly. And I would remain alone in the world. It was sinful to tighten me like a press. I was a load of cotton squeezed in the press.

Before this I was almost at peace, free from the cashiers and from Fernando, free from my mother in thinking about the children who overcame giants and witches and the fear of the forest. But the clearing had closed, darkness enveloped me, a lid descended from the sky – and I found myself defenceless again. The volume with the yellow cover had fallen to the floor. I wanted to pick it up. There were the

Protestants, there was the devil – and these remote and confused beings filled me with fear. Tremendous dangers, horrible imprecise dangers rolled over my head.

Poor me, poor abandoned children in the darkness. I cried a lot. And I didn't dare to read *The Boy of the Woods and His Dog Pilôto.*

Fernando

He is one of the most unpleasant memories I have kept: a thin fellow with a hard eye and swarthy looks. I don't remember ever having seen him smile. With his harsh voice and rough manners, ill-humoured and impertinent, Fernando was like that. And added to this was something cold, humid, and sticky, which gave me the absurd impression of a vertebrate and very fast snail.

If he talked to me, he would throw me a wounding phrase. Sometimes, thinking about its meaning, I wouldn't find any reason to be offended, but the way in which he expressed himself, his heavy eyebrow, his air of sufficiency and imposture, his brusque laugh, a shrugging of the shoulders, a shaking of the head – everything made me ill at ease. It was as if he wanted to cut me with blades of gelatine.

I grew up hearing the worst things about Fernando. If he was as bad as they said, there couldn't be another scoundrel like him. He was a relative of the political leader, and in the country in those days a political leader gave more orders than a West African chief; he would dispose of people and handle the authorities, miserable toys. We lived in a big enclosure near a mill and the only people who had peace were those who flattered the master. The newspapers of the capital would publish news of horrors, but nobody would dare to sign accusations. Any indiscretion could lead to fires, beatings, jail, or death.

I suppose that, while I lived there, the jury didn't function. Meanwhile dead bodies would arrive in the city almost daily. Usually they would come in hammocks covered by a red cloth. But when there were lots of them, they were placed on the backs of animals, fastened to the pommels of the wooden frames of the pack-saddles. And the horses, covered with blood, would pursue their own way, stumble on

the stones of the street, and stop at the door of the jail, where the detachment of police was quartered.

Old Frade, influential in a neighbouring district, said he had never killed a man. He killed bad guys, many bad guys. In my district men were also assassinated, even though bad guys were preferred. When a landlord who supported the government wanted to molest an opponent, he would order some of his tenants to be wiped out – and the threatened person would sell his land to him for less than its value. If he didn't sell soon, other tenants would disappear, until the transaction took effect. Only rarely, in cases of personal offences, questions of family, would members of the upper class be eliminated. The only thing that happened to them was that their possessions would be taken, through more or less legal means. But the rabble were decimated, old Frade's bad guys died in abundance, and we got used to the corpses that stained the city.

A strong régime. The leader talked right; he talked about Korea, he backed Japan against Russia in 1905; he sometimes argued about grammar. When he was in a good mood, nobody thought him capable of bleeding a chick, but he was quick to anger and then on the street corners he would bellow insults at friends and enemies. He would lose his head, he roared, complained and said he was surrounded by scoundrels who stained his reputation. The scoundrels, thus attacked, would shrink together near the counters of the stores where they idled; they would hide behind the scandal sheets of the capital city, filled with ferocious and anonymous letters, which seemed exaggerated to me. The thrashing of undesirable people and the sight of dead fellows were vulgar facts; they hardly justified the indignation of the press. The boss defended himself with shouts and foamed at the mouth; the followers, fearful, mumbled and tried to discover the authors of the fearful accusations. Suspicions swarmed. And days later it was certain that somebody would be attacked in public with a whip or stick. I have never seen such a powerful régime.

Little friend Fernando received the wrath destined for others and didn't react. In a political upset he clearly exposed his nature like a billiard table: he bore the brunt from both sides. But at that time only the boss, owner of bodies and souls, had the power to humiliate him. Hearing the insults, Fernando would recompose himself and become insolent, terrifying the unhappy people at the end of the street. He specialized in disgracing poor girls who surrendered through fear or

were violated. Sometimes their own mothers would take them to the sacrifice.

I remember Rathina, a beautiful creature. On party nights she would dress in red clothes, show two red roses on her cheeks, and smile with a red smile; she was all a triumphant redness – and this doomed her. The old lady Rata had the eyes of a rat, thin rat fingers, a rat mouth, and rat manners. Rato the brother was a small young man with a big nose, very restless. The girl Rathina was different from the rest of the family; she didn't distinguish herself from well-mannered girls. She wrinkled and grew old in a dark corner.

In the city there were numerous whores, whores all over the place, even children twelve years old – the tax extracted from those who didn't own a farm.

Men of modest means, whom the boss annoyed in hours of peevishness, didn't pay a tax, or they paid very little. And Fernando, a close relative of the government and revenue officer of Intendência, molested the opposition, skinned the country people at the fairs, and gathered virginity.

These notions reached me slowly and incompletely. Still young, I didn't understand certain things. Nevertheless this individual gave me the shivers. He was always too rude with me, and this made me accept without question the gossip that circulated about him. I got used to thinking of him as a dangerous animal. And reading in the red dictionary, where there were flags of all the countries and portraits of important people, that Nero had been the greatest of all monsters, I doubted it. Was he worse than Fernando? The book's assertion perplexed me. How was it possible to measure people's insides? And I felt sorry for Nero, who had never done anything to me. Fernando tormented me and was awful. Perhaps he wasn't the worst monster in the world, but he was the most shameless. His face like a battered mug, his hard impertinent voice, his nagging, his oblique eyes filled with bitterness, an impudent disgusting manner, an asthmatic snore ending in a blast – everything assured me that Fernando was full of venom. If that blast, the noise of a boiler, were transformed into words, brutalities would emerge. The fellow became a symbol for me – and I hung all my miseries on him.

Then one day my conviction was deeply shaken. The two employees were opening large boxes in the store. Fernando was dozing on the bench beside the closet where perfumes were kept. The hammers

pounded, the chisels cut through the iron hoops; the boards screeched as they were dismantled. After finishing their work, they picked up the paper and straw used in packing; they distributed the merchandise in lots; José Batista from his desk read out invoices to be checked.

It was then that the great event happened. One of the boards had remained on the floor, bristling with nails. Fernando got up, lifted it, grabbed a hammer and started to bend back the sharp ends of the nails, snarling. Negligence. What if a barefoot child stepped on it?

I couldn't believe what I saw and heard. Then was Fernando all that bad? I thought it was a miracle. I believed I had been unjust. Fernando, the monster, similar to Nero, was afraid that children would hurt their feet. I forgot the ugly things mumbled about him; I condemned the red dictionary with the flags and portraits. Perhaps Nero, the worst of beings, could also bend the nails which would prick children's feet.

Jerônimo Barreto

I had a problem that couldn't be solved for months. How could books be acquired? At the end of the story of the woodsman, the fugitives and the wolves there was a little catalogue. Five or six nickels a volume. I intended to buy some, but José Batista told me that that was the price in Lisbon, in strong currency. And Lisbon was far away.

In desperation I called on Emília's help. I needed to read, not the dull textbooks, but about adventures, justice, love, vengeance, things till then unknown. Lacking this, I would attach myself to newspapers and almanacs; I would decipher the events and anecdotes on the calendars. These scraps increased my desire for reading, which was becoming an obsession. I wanted to isolate myself, as I did when we moved because the house was being repaired. To tell the truth, the others were the ones who did the moving. Under the pretext of watching the repairs, I would run away with a novel beneath my jacket, return, avoiding the bricklayers, helpers and painters, and hide in the living-room. I would plunge in a couch and, dusty and filthy with whitewash, breathe the smell of the paint; I spent hours deciphering the narrative by the light that seeped through the dim

glass. I was deprived of this refuge. And where could I get books?

Emília tried to help me; she counted on her fingers the probable owners of libraries, serious and inaccessible: Dr Mota Lima, Professor Rijo, Father Loureriro. I wouldn't dare to bother them. The nearest one was the notary Jerônimo Barreto. Daily, when I walked through the steep street of Matriz, I would linger in front of the public notary office, thrust my famished eyes through the window, and see in a bookcase thick rows of beautiful bindings in lively colours. At a wide table, in shirtsleeves, the official handled judicial documents. And a respect filled with envy detained me on the sidewalk. I attributed a powerful knowledge to that brown-haired young man; I found it strange to see him, simple and calm, joining those who frequented the store, where he would introduce Robespierre and Marat into the conversation – two figures whom I venerated before I ever heard anything about the Revolution or for that matter France.

I hoped that Emília would talk to Jerônimo. She refused. I revealed the situation to José Batista, the only employee whom I didn't resent. José Batista closed the bookkeeper's record and listened to me; he considered a go-between unnecessary, because my intention was modest. I considered it unreasonable.

I left the office discouraged. It was impossible to get along with a learned man who knew about Marat, Robespierre, and others who escaped my memory and language. These personages made me a coward. And their owner would perhaps jealously keep them for himself and wouldn't let clumsy hands stain them with sweat. I affirmed, I repeated to myself that I wouldn't approach Jerônimo Barreto.

I went to his house, climbed the sidewalk, and delayed my steps as usual in front of the letters of attorney and public forms. And I knocked at the door. A minute later I was in the room, explaining my misfortune and asking whether I could borrow one of those marvels. Later this sudden spurt of energy startled me – in times of torment it was repeated. How did this purpose get translated into action? In fact there wasn't a purpose. My timidity disappeared without reason; it was almost the disappearance of myself. I expressed myself clearly, I showed my clean fingers, and I promised not to bend the pages and spoil them with saliva. Jerônimo opened the bookcase and, smiling, gave me the novel *The Guarani*; he invited me to come back and gave me the run of the whole collection.

I left enraptured, covered the red cotton binding with wrapping

paper, and distracted myself with Dom Antonio de Mariz, Cecília, Peri, nobles, adventurers, and the Paquequer. Certain expressions made me remember the anthology and my father's language in his moments of enthusiasm. I saw the portrait of José de Alencar, bearded, similar to the Baron of Macaúbas, and I found it remarkable that the two used the same loose prose. Once I had got through the fire and the flood, two enduring elements in our national literature, I examined the volumes, removed the covers, and returned them to the owner.

Jerônimo Barreto directed my attention towards works of fantasy. I travelled a lot, I was drawn into the presence of countesses. But I remained in a state of disorder, sneaking out through the corners, and my family's severe judgment increased. Only my cousin José, listening to me describe a burned house, muttered:

'He talks too much.'

Perhaps I had retained some of the adjectives from *The Guarani.* This wasn't necessarily an advantage, at least not at the beginning.

A kind of school opened in the city, and I was put in it. When I arrived, the director, insinuating and soft, dictated half a dozen lines to the newcomers. He corrected and classified the dictation; he picked mine up and was horrified; he wrote *incorrigible* in the wide margin of the paper. This hard judgment didn't surprise me. I even grew a little vain at seeing that my writings were different from the others'.

Days later the fellow asked me for a copy of the constitution of Brazil and a grammar book. I took the grammar, but I held back the constitution; in its place I used a history of Brazil with questions and answers. And so I didn't analyse the law of my country, and I gave Jovino Xavier a miserable impression. When he received the paperbacks, Jovino carried on a conversation with me: he was startled, he contracted his lips and crushed his moustache, he scratched his head, embarrassed. And he left me in peace; for weeks he didn't address a word to me, perhaps thinking of me as an imbecile, and this helped be a lot.

At this time I was involved in Rocambole's brawls. Jerônimo Barreto sent me off in several directions: he introduced me to Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, Jules Verne, and finally Ponson du Terrail, in pamphlets which I devoured at school, beneath the orange trees in the yard, at the rocky side of the Paraíba River, and on the large boxes of candles near the dictionary which contained the flags

and illustrations.

My schoolmates withdrew from me. While they recited the capitals and rivers of Europe, I ruminated on the introductory parts of the dictionary: twenty-four hours, three hundred and sixty-five days, white race and black race. While I put my foot in Europe, they explored other parts of the world. Deaf to the explanations of the teacher and indifferent to the gibes of the boys, I was engrossed in reading the precious section of the book, hidden between the pages of an atlas. Sometimes I searched on the map for the places where the terrible thief Rocambole travelled. And the map would grow larger and more populated, streaked with roads over which barouches and stage coaches travelled.

In this way I got to know various cities and lived in them, while the boys around me were screaming with the noise of a street-fair. The din didn't reach me. They talked to me in vain. When I was shaken, I became frightened; my ideas were absent, as if I were being pulled out of sleep. They looked at me, amazed, and slowly I became aware of reality.

Governor-generals, the Dutch and the French, started to importune me. The periods of history were divided into quarters and subdivided, and the pieces were labelled in a terrible confusion. My new friends mechanically memorized Portuguese, French and Dutch exploits, and rules of syntax – and they were brilliant in their Saturday examinations. On Monday they had forgotten them, and by the end of the week it was necessary to repeat the exercise and temporarily memorize the subject again. As they advanced, the work became more painful: only a little time remained for the last lessons.

I found it stupid that they wanted to force me to parrot what I happened to hear. It was dishonest to talk in such a way, pretending wisdom. Even though I had learned by heart an incomprehensible text, I would be silent in the teacher's presence – and my reputation was pitiful.

One day, though, there was an unforeseen examination and the students were confused about the rivers and capitals. I had retained parts of the information. Old geography, prior to the locomotive, was filled with clues and continuity, it was laid out in an orderly fashion and produced a regular effect. I mentioned the forest of Bologna, Versailles, the Seine, the Tower of London, the bridges of Venice, the Rhine and the Tiber, and the port of Marseilles. It wasn't exactly

what was wanted. In any case I was hurt. Certain interruptions revived my eloquence. The Mediterranean? Surely, Corsica, land of Napoleon. From the dust of Ajaccio to the throne of St Louis. Jerônimo Barreto had talked to me about the dust and the throne – and this didn't cause any difficulty: Ajaccio was there on the map, and St Louis had been the king of France. Napoleon came off badly in the Russian campaign, right in the first pages of Rocambole. Foolishly, I referred familiarly to the Cathedral of Nôtre-Dame and Vesuvius, as if I had seen them. On top of this, I listed exotic plants and animals: oaks and pines, vineyards and wheat fields, wolves and wild boars, blackbirds and nightingales.

The novelty ended, my knowledge caused distrust and some disdain: Versailles, Nôtre-Dame and the nightingales looked like contraband. And they were useless, of course. But they were useful for composing narratives – and apart from this they didn't arouse my interest.

Common existence grew distant and deformed; acquaintances and passers-by took on the qualities of the personages in the book I was reading. I neglected my obligations and those imposed on me at the store. Some rules, however, helped me in understanding the novel and I put up with them – I yawned and dozed trying to go through them.

In a few months I read through Jerônimo Barreto's library. I changed my habits and my language. My mother noted the modifications with impatience. And Jovina Xavier also became impatient, because sometimes I revealed considerable progress and at other times I showed the ignorance of a savage. The cashiers of the establishment stopped annoying me, and because of my behaviour, they started to consider me a peculiar individual.

My mother, Jovino Xavier, and the cashiers disappeared. The only real and intimate person was Jerônimo Barreto, who provided me with the material of dreams and talked to me about the dust of Ajaccio, the throne of Napoleon, Robespierre, and Marat.

They offered my father the job of substitute judge and he accepted it without scruples. He knew nothing about law; he possessed only a precarious general knowledge. But he was allied with the mill-owners, voted the government slate, and merited the trust of the political leader – and found himself able to judge.

At that time, and later, the posts were given to docile followers who were blind to what was going on. This was convenient for the system of justice. It was necessary to absolve friends and condemn enemies; otherwise the electoral machine would jam.

The magistrates, with their rings and diplomas, diligently tried to accommodate themselves, to humble themselves, and to overlook some shabby tricks. Suddenly they would recoil; they had the kind of politeness which the local top dog wouldn't understand and he would face it unwillingly. And then came quarrels, quick trips, and affronts; a bill of indictment drew the reply of a dagger or stick. Finally the bachelors of law could hardly put up with it. Favours and exaggerated salutations were dispensed to them – and they turned aside from us. My father deputized for the judge, who was usually absent from the judicial district.

The minor country officials didn't hesitate: ignoring the nature of the intransigence, they would weaken imperturbably; they would sign dispatches written by the court clerk.

It was in that way that my father received the title and bore the noisy joy of the black José Luís, who, on Saturdays, from the living-room to the kitchen, laughed, shouted and danced enthusiastically:

'Where is our substitute judge?'

There was no particular reason for jubilation. I keep a pitiful memory of this authority.

Venta-Romba asked for charity, moaning a sad ditty, indifferent to refusals:

'How are you, Major? And the major's wife? And the major's small children?'

His voice would come out smooth; the wrinkles of his dark face would deepen in a constant smile; the mist of his eyes was illuminated by a strange sweetness. I have never seen a beggar so gentle. Hunger, drought, cold nights spent in the open air, vagrancy, solitude – all the miseries accumulated in a horrible end of existence had produced

that peace. It was not resignation. He didn't even seem aware of his sufferings: pain slipped through him without leaving a mark.

'How are you, Major? The major's little children?'

With serene humility and insignificance, his trembling and withered hands, his deformed feet dragging his sandals, he tried to find his way through the corners and stopped beside the counters of the stores. Remnants of happiness vanished from his tranquil features. His dirty game-bag, made from the fibre of thistles, weighed on his shoulders; his straw hat filled with holes didn't protect his curved head; his drawers made of raw material and open shirt with its tail exposed were rags and patches.

He appeared once a week, on Fridays, when charity was dispensed: a saucer of flour at private houses, a coin at the stores and cheap taverns. But the families of the shopkeepers and tavern owners didn't practise charity because this would be a redundancy.

'Ask at the store.'

We had orders to turn away these beggars.

One Friday Venta-Romba knocked on our door. He must have knocked, but we didn't hear the blows. He found the bolt of the door and entered; suddenly he appeared in the dining-room, his fingers faltering on his cane. The girls were frightened and the boys put up a great clamour.

'Go away, sir,' said the mistress of the house.

From a distance, this application of *sir* to a ragged creature didn't sound right. My mother expressed herself like that to a person she didn't know. She had brought this habit from the farm, and it sometimes didn't necessarily entail politeness. In various tones, *sir* could mean respect, disdain or displeasure. Now, with stridency and harshness, it indicated anger, and the phrase meant more or less:

'Go away, you vagabond.'

Venta-Romba was confused; he choked and erased his smile; shame and perplexity came over his face; he contracted his lips, showing his bare gums.

'My lady . . .' he mumbled.

Perhaps he was trying to explain himself. Hoarse and smothered interjections escaped him; his dim eyes saw the children's fright and were wide-open in distress.

My mother was resolute. Living as she had in the country, she would shoot, ride, and grow hard. One day an important man of the

neighbourhood had suddenly entered her kitchen, livid, begging her to hide him from the police: she locked him in a bedroom and kept the key, and she took the first measures necessary for his escape. It was not necessary for her husband, a faint-hearted person, to come to chase away Venta-Romba. But she sent out the rascal José with a message and she planted herself near the table, harsh and silent, with the corners of her mouth contracted and a very large red spot on her forehead.

In front of her the poor man tried to alleviate this hard impression, and he was more confused than ever; his moment of escape passed. He scratched hard, muttered excuses in his asthmatical way, and nobody listened to him. In a fit of impatience, he hit his cane on the brick, aggravating the confusion. Severity wrinkled the woman's face; the girls whispered, praying, and kept their attention on the entrance to the corridor.

At this point my father arrived. He arrived restless and pale, and soon he was fortified and started to question Venta-Romba, who poured out his heart and found the disorder strange: the malevolence of the boys, shouting and crying, the serious lady, and the frightened little ladies. A crazy useless noise and a lack of common sense. Thank God, everything was now cleared up. He took off his hat, said goodbye, and backed out:

'Goodbye, Major.'

My father stopped him. Before anything could be resolved. He was mistaken about the extent of the rascal's improprieties; he had sent a message to the commander of the detachment. His weakness impelled him to extreme decisions. He had imagined himself in danger. He recognized his mistake but he was obstinate. He muddled the alarm caused by the message with the disgust inspired by this wretched figure – and he lost his bearings. He was inclined to exaggerate the intruder, to impute the guilt to him and punish him. Any other way, the case would end ridiculously.

'You are under arrest,' he stuttered nervously, because he had been excited by that kind of violence.

Somebody coughed in the living-room; a red cap appeared at the end of the corridor. Indifferent, Venta-Romba stumbled like a parrot and leaned painfully against the door-post. He lingered and gave an exclamation of surprise and doubt. And when the phrase was repeated, he babbled in a colourless way:

'Major is joking.'

He let his gaze wander: the noise of the children was replaced by a perverse curiosity; the girls trembled over their sewing; my mother's face showed steady indifference; a fellow was strolling in the living-room, showing bits of his showy uniform. Of course it wasn't a joke, but the old man, puzzled, didn't catch up with the disaster. He moved away from the door, leaned against the wall, and planned a movement of defence. If he hadn't been toothless, he would have gritted his teeth; if his muscles weren't slack, he would have raised his cane. It was impossible for him to bite or rear up; the mechanical gesture of a trapped animal faded away; slowly, the meaning of the harsh words penetrated like the point of a drill; his spirit was dulled. And from this bundle of rags a feeble question emerged:

'Why, Major?'

It was also what I wanted to know. At the window, amusing myself with the flight and the buzzing of the bees from the hive hanging from the eaves, I saw the confusion start and thicken within minutes. They had nothing to do with it – and the lamentable interrogation shook me. Why? How could a living being incapable of action be arrested? Venta-Romba moved slightly. Not being able to do any harm, he had to be good. It was difficult to carry that hobbling kindness to jail, where criminals served their sentences.

'Why, Major?'

The repeated query remained unanswered. The major didn't know how to act. He had been scared, he had called on the public force, and he was afraid to contradict himself. Perhaps he felt compassion of a sort and recognized his injustice. He would get worked up, accuse himself, and pour his anger over the poor creature, the cause of the disturbance. In desperation, he snarled insults. The policeman, who was clearing his throat, drew near, his shirt unbuttoned, with his pointed knife in his belt, and his rubber-soled shoes of thin leather squeaking.

Twenty-four hours in jail, a night on a sedge mat, and the gibes of his prison-mates, who were alienated people. The Friday was lost, the stingy charity disappeared. What was it like? What was the payment of imprisonment like?

Venta-Romba collapsed and wet his sordid beard with tears; he put an end to the pitiful question with a murmur. The soldier lifted his shirt, grabbed the waistband of his drawers, and held up that

stumbling ruin who wanted to collapse; he crossed the corridor and reached the street.

I was prostrate and gloomy on the sidewalk, a weight on my heart. Venta-Romba went jerkily down the steep street, shifting his legs, acting foolishly like a Judas on Holy Saturday. If they didn't hold him, he would fall. His game-bag was shaking; on his unruly head the vestiges of his hat went forwards and backwards; his sandals slipped on the grass.

I felt disgust, repugnance, a vague remorse. I wouldn't risk a word of mercy. I wouldn't gain anything by intervening – it would certainly be prejudicial – but I would face the consequences. I had witnessed an iniquity and found myself an accomplice. Cowardice.

Later, when the punishment was over, I returned home insolent and ill-mannered – and I believe that the jailing of Venta-Romba caused this. It also must have contributed to the distrust that authority inspires in me.

Mário Venâcio

A theatrical group was organized and they wanted to place it under the patronage of Joao Caetano; but Major Pedro Silva, a mill-owner, offered the amateurs a house that was rotting away at Juàzeiro, in front of the jail, and the institution subsequently received the name of Pedro Silva School of Drama. They paved the floor, plastered and whitewashed the building; they built a stage with backdrops of a forest, a palace, and a grass hut; Joaquim Correntao did his best with the stage curtain, which was very showy with three well-breasted goddesses. And after numerous rehearsals, they staged *The Plebeian,* which drew tears from the audience.

Among the amateurs, an unknown young man, a new agent at the post office, was soon noticeable through his ugliness and peculiar manners. Mário Venâcio was very poor: he wore sailcloth made in the State of Rio, the rude clothes of a country man; he prepared his own food and lived in a kind of cage hanging onto the hill of Pao-sem-Miolo. The front part served as office, study and living-room.

Soon the news got around that a learned man had arrived. I saw

him from a distance, quick and small, his thin face like the mouth of a rat, with the manners of a rat – a fast porcupine with his head inclined, stumbling on the pavement. And somebody in the store said that there was a profound fellow, a contributor to the newspapers and the author of books, the devil. His devious and twisted manners expressed his inner life, the contempt for common sense and the inspiration of a poet. Generally poets had a weird appearance and thus wore their hair long, hiding their ears.

I drew near this curious individual at the school, where he appeared before us teaching geography. It wasn't his speciality: but he adjusted to this subject as he would to any other, just to alleviate the work of Jovina Xavier. Little by little he abandoned the maps and the lists of oceans and rivers. He suggested to us the founding of a periodical.

The idea, accepted with enthusiasm, cooled off at the end of a week; it would have died if I and my cousin Cicero hadn't saved it. We persisted and, overcoming obstacles and fatigue, became the editors of *Dawn,* a paper printed in Maceió, with two hundred copies published twice a month, delivered by the courier Buriti, who sold magazines and declaimed parts of *The Blond Boy.* The wretched title was the choice of our mentor, who was rich in rare words.

The editorial office was established in the post office and soon became a haven for the eccentric. In the afternoon members of the Pedro Silva School of Drama and Viçosa School of Instructors gathered there, groups who slept during the whole year; they would wake up when new directors took their chairs, and, after the speeches, they would return to their sleep. These people made a noise that frightened the passers-by, annoyed the neighbours, and attracted timid cashiers, who were entangled in the complications of grammatical agreement and versification. Without catching correctly the meaning of the conversation, one would pick up a few words, study them in the dictionary, and use them with energy.

The Plebeian having been performed, Mário Venâcio took from the theatre wardrobe some clothes that he wore on winter nights, and finally he mixed them with his ordinary things. With clogs, cotton pants frayed at the cuffs, an undershirt, morning coat and hard hat, he crossed the street and went to the tavern; with his hands filled with packages and kindling under his arm, he returned, hunchbacked and stumbling, went to the kitchen, started the fire, and seasoned the pot.

After that he would enter the living-room, drying his long fingers; he would sit at the table near the bookcase covered with newspapers, letters, cushions and rubber stamps:

'Naturalism . . .'

Perplexed, I examined the people around me and tried to distinguish the effect of the long, difficult, tedious speech on them. Were they understanding it? Sometimes the confusing discussions startled me: silent young men became lively; they argued almost religiously with exaggeration and hatred. This made me dizzy and nauseated. A bright idea came to me: the agreeable novels were trifles, Indeed, they seemed to me insipid and obscure. That is where beauty was, especially in the prose of Coelho Neto.

I didn't care for beauty: I wanted to amuse myself with adventures, duels and travels, situations in which the good triumphed and the evil ones ended up imprisoned or killed. Incapable of revealing my preference, I resigned myself and put up with the *Baladilhas,* the *Romanceiro,* and other praiseworthy stuff which upset my stomach. I dozed off on top of them, and I returned them, fearing that I would be forced to talk about them. For me they were trifles, but this opinion was contrary to the experience of the others. I considered myself insufficient, I shut up and swallowed my yawns. While the owner of the house was explaining the difficult literature, I made an effort to understand it. I would be intimidated in the presence of an authority.

'The Little Beggar' and various things of mine launched in *Dawn* came out with such embellishments of style and so many interpolations that very little was retained from the original. I was ashamed when I read these exaggerations written by our teacher: everybody would see the fraud.

Mário Venâcio fabricated articles and news and reduced the editors to figureheads. He ornamented the shabby pages with serious short stories. One of them began like this and was admired by the Viçosa School of Instructors and the Pedro Silva School: 'Jerusalem, the deicide, slept peacefully under the dim light of the stars. Over the hills hovered a tenuous mist, the breath of the great sleeping city. In the houses of the goatherd, watchdogs howled lugubriously.' Our ears were indifferent to the conflicts. And the breeze from the Mount of Olives and the torrent of the Cedron, biblical places, increased the value of the work.

But we wouldn't stay with the torrent and the breeze. We would

descend the Mount of Olives, end up on the national plain, and visit the *Casa de Pensao* and *O Coruja.* From the imitation we would jump to the model, we would invade the depravity of the *Rougon-Macquart,* published in Lisbon.

Sometimes, though, I had a lively longing for the characters in the booklets: I abandoned the post office and went to the library of Jerônimo Barreto; I would return to my easy reading; I would see again counts and countesses, bandits and fighting musketeers; I would travel with them in their stagecoaches over the roads of France. I forgot Zola and Victor Hugo and cheered up. I had been ungrateful to my poor heroes with capes and swords. I wouldn't dare to display them now. I would disguise them carefully and, thus fortified, I would submit again to the sorrow and search for the artifice and the substance, in general much artifice and little substance.

The postman made my correspondence with bookstores easy: I wrote letters, and I received bills and packages. Not having resources, I got used to taking coins from the store and keeping them in a bulky flask under pillowcases and towels in the top drawer of the commode. Among the nickels and silver there was some paper money – and I filled up the shelves of the wide bookcase, a birthday present. These offences caused me no remorse. I reached the point where I convinced myself that my father, shrunken and miserly by nature, tacitly approved of them. He excused me, censuring his own greediness, trying to hold on to absurd hopes.

Mário Venâcio predicted a great future for me; he saw in me signs of Coelho Neto, of Aluísio de Azevedo – and this excited and alarmed me. Bashful, with my ears burning, I rejected the prophecy: my school exercises were foolish compositions; they weren't any good. On the contrary, the prophet affirmed. They still weren't any good. But I would write novels. I spent months proving to myself that his guess wasn't a mockery. Then my vanity faded away and was replaced by a vague affliction. What did the man see in my writings? If I decided to trust him, I would regret the probable mistake for the rest of my life. I examined myself inside and found myself empty. I couldn't find myself capable of conceiving one of those bloody plots, filled with brave nobles and chaste ladies. And, inattentive, I walked in the street jostling, half blind and half deaf. I would never describe a hanging lamp like the one made of yellow metal that illuminated, with oil and elaborate wicks, two pages of *Scenes of Amazon Life.* I

wouldn't pay any attention to the hanging lamps. Would they be necessary? The arguments at the post office had no end. I remember the people who supported the government and their opponents spread out, rancorous, on the corners of the small city and in the newspapers of the capital. The fanatical partisanship surprised me; my collaboration on *Dawn* was terribly eclectic. Mário Venâcio continued to encourage me; I shunned the risky pretensions.

This kind prophet drank carbolic acid. I got up from the couch, where I was held by the novelty and my sufferings from arthritis and a Russian novel; I went to find my friend stretched out on a sofa, near the table covered with papers, brochures, bits of sealing wax, cushions and rubber stamps. A messenger from the administration, after the inquiry was made, wrote a pompous obituary in which he buried the corpse under the foliage of a willow tree, among cypress roots, vegetation unknown in our region.

Soon *Dawn* also died. I put myself at a distance from the critics. I didn't get along with the very uncertain public. At school, at Pedro Silva School, at the Viçosa School of Instructors, they tolerated me. In the house, without questioning me, they hated my new occupation.

Sr Ramiro

At that time our house was swarming with guests. The city still didn't have a hotel, and in the afternoon, when the train arrived, porters carrying luggage nearly always showed up. Unknown fellows would come in without ceremony, as if we had an obligation to receive them; they remained two or three days; they would leave at dawn, without thanks, furtively.

My mother would get angry and promise to insult this gang of parasites. But she would ease her temper and swallow her indignation and go to cry in the smoke of the kitchen, beside the fire, snarling her disgust to the servant and the rascals.

My father affected a magnanimous patience, not without interest. A calculator, he possibly saw in this country hospitality a use for capital. He would increase his transactions, he owed a lot, and in the winter money was short. Since the intruders were usually travelling

salesmen and supervisors of wholesale establishments, it was convenient to put up with them. In return, they gave good information about the small retailers in the interior. And they pointed out to him profitable transactions involving the buying of bankrupt goods cheap. In these sales there were lots of nails of considerable size, rusted nails, and cotton goods with horrible patterns. At the end of the year customers would be suspicious that all the merchandise had defects, and the inventory showed piles of useless articles.

The travelling salesmen attracted individuals strange to commerce and transformed our house into a boarding house. Among them Sr Ramiro stood out. He had the responsibility of starting a Masonic lodge, an odious business filled with risks.

My family weren't rigorously Catholic: they avoided the confessional, prayed little, and seldom went to church, only on feast days. But they admired the processions, fasted during Holy Week, and knew very well that the Freemasons give their blood to the devil, get rich, and condemn themselves. Old Pedro Rico, a distant relative of ours, had behaved in this way and was in hell. No doubt about it. He walked around a neighbourhood of haunted places; he wandered over the roads, galloping on a black horse, pleading for masses and moaning:

'I am the soul of the late Pedro Rico.'

Sr Ramiro understood the difficulties and was cautious; he didn't reveal his sinister designs all at once. He made several trips and, with persistence and cunning, declaring himself excessively religious, he initiated some discreet publicity; he fortified himself, got some converts, and inaugurated the lodge called the Messengers of Faith, which had as its master the political leader. At the pompous inauguration, serious persons from Maceió declaimed long speeches.

For several months my father was nodding his head over books and pamphlets, marking them with triangles and compasses. At the beginning he kept these instruments locked in a drawer, later he abandoned them at random; he let us see the enigmatic abbreviations which ended in three little dots. He grew tired of these secret sessions; and I believe he remained at a very low degree; he didn't get beyond apprentice.

While adepts were being seduced and the large sad house in the Gurganema was being repaired, Sr Ramiro would visit us frequently. He was a solid, dark fellow with grey hair and wrinkles, and he was

ponderous, so ponderous that we could hardly picture him without shirt and tie. His slow voice oozed in order not to miss a syllable. Thick eyebrows, a serene, olympian manner of looking. This person had some of the ways of a statue, and perhaps the conviction that he was a statue, and we should admire it. Before breaking the silence, he would sniff, contract the corners of his mouth, flatten his nose even more, and puff up his great moustache. He would teach us that the Filipino is very strong and can carry two Filipinos without tiring himself. Like ants. And he would describe the organization of an anthill. Nobody had mentioned the Filipinos or the ants, but the man found a way of evoking these beings and gave his discourse.

Usually this happened after dinner. After the abundant and bad meal had been masticated and the plates removed, Sr Ramiro would thrust his elbows on the tablecloth, examine the faces around him, and wait for a convenient cue for his voluminous exposition. He would deepen his wrinkles, ruffle his hair, thicken his neck, puff up all over, talk for an hour, and there was no break for an aside from anyone else. The two cashiers fixed on him their attentive eyeballs; the boss shook his head in respectful approval; my mother, at a corner of the table, repressed her yawns and bit her lips.

It was during these discussions, between advances and retreats, that the Supreme Architect of the Universe appeared and produced a considerable effect. Sr Ramiro talked about the Supreme Architect of the Universe with devotion, lifting himself a little.

I was bored with this wisdom and magnificent language: I used to run away after coffee, scaring the listeners and menaced by the spectacles of the orator, who, calling me to order, tried to punish my disrespect. He read my story 'The Little Beggar' in the first number of *Dawn* and corrected my various errors. This literary work, recomposed by Mário Venâcio, seemed perfect to me, but Sr Ramiro disagreed and corrected it all over again. He altered the position of the words, found showy synonyms, and shivered when he saw my character stretching out her hand for public charity: he made her stretch out her hands, because there was no indication that she was a one-handed person. Finally a terrible criticism, the worst that I had yet received. Great anger filled my heart; mentally I elaborated long insults; I hated the Filipinos and the ants.

And I was relieved only when the monster went out, leaving a deplorable memory. When the Messengers of Faith were starting up,

Sr Ramiro, thirty-degree or more, taught them the necessary principles, the blows of the hammer, and the duties that everyone would have. The lessons ended, the visits grew infrequent and finally ceased. My father let him borrow one hundred cruzeiros and lost sight of him. He was disillusioned and retained considerable rancour. Perhaps brothers should help each other, but that way of extracting help was knavish. He shut himself up, gnawing with indignation. It was for this, I believe, that he repudiated the three little dots, the mysterious brochures, the triangles, the compasses, and the Supreme Architect of the Universe.

The Unhappy Child

There was a particularly wretched pupil at school. They said that he was worthless, even though usually they refused to specify his faults, which were whispered about with gestures of repugnance. In the afternoon, during the recess which filled the sidewalk and the street with noise, the other pupils apparently withdrew from him, and if somebody transgressed this hard unspoken rule, he risked being reproved. We welcomed a possible majority opinion, in spite of our never having discussed the subject: everyone assumed the condemnation was agreed upon and feared to compromise himself.

The boy would draw near the groups, sketch a cynical smile, and insert himself into the conversations in vain. The strongest ones would confront him, look at him with disdain, spit, and turn their backs on him. This behaviour gave us a principle of conviction; and since the victim was resigned and lowered his head, we admitted his guilt without any effort.

It wasn't only this: they would throw harsh words at him and snarl insults. He pretended not to understand them; he would make efforts to appease our souls, offering us helpful signs, which were usually accepted with indifference or repelled.

At the beginning only the advanced classes behaved like that; the slow ones followed their example; after all, the boy found himself among enemies.

The worst was the principal: he isolated the boy on a corner of the

bench, transformed him into a circus animal, a kind of Joaquina or Jacob, the gorillas that had captivated us. Excessively unjust, he always thought the boy's work badly done; he made him responsible for somebody else's mistake; in moments of anger he didn't disguise his hatred.

'Look at that shameless person.'

With the scolding, he would intensify the separation and stimulate our bad instincts. He considered the boy a lost cause, without doubt, and alienated him from his companions. He reminded us every minute that to be around him was bad. For a long time he stood observing him, as if he were looking for spots on his clothes and the absence of his moustaches; he had a horrible feline softness, his moustache bristled, his short paw lifted slowly, and his voice was a suave purr. At a distance, we could suppose it a friendly speech. Suddenly the slow gentleness mewed:

'Insolent.'

The poor rat would pretend to be impassive and hide behind a book; within minutes he would become upset and discouraged and start to tremble. If we were analysing Camoes or cataloguing the seas of Europe, any omission would justify the offence. But to provoke a person in that way, without explanation, alarmed us. The affront couldn't be related to school work; it had to be connected with something else. This imprecision became very important: it was a serious and ugly thing.

The principal would get up, one shoulder higher than the other:

'Shameless.'

His menacing fur bristled, his gentle manners were replaced by shaking gestures; all that velvet wore out, and his claws began to show and remove the sheet that hid a face filled with terror. After that, blows, soft thuds on the bricks, the dragging of bruised limbs, whispered complaints, sobbing.

Sometimes the man exceeded himself: he would tie the boy's arms with a rope, beat him hard, open the door, and his desperate humiliation would be exhibited to the passers-by; the boy would sniff, try to deny his tears, and wipe his nose. His tears would mingle with his mucus, which would drip on his jacket and shirt – and the wet cloth had a disgusting smell, a mixture of ants and mould.

The ferule figured in our code. At the small Saturday examinations, difficult questions went through the rows of pupils – and the

pupil who guessed the answers punished the ignorant. The friends of justice would hit with vigour, willing to break wrists; others, like me, deaf to the advice of the teacher, would touch the instrument lightly to the palms. This wouldn't bring us shame: it was the custom until cards were used to indicate good marks. After that we paid for our mistakes with this currency; we even got to lend it to schoolmates in need.

It was impossible to give it in exchange for that suffering different from ordinary sufferings. Nobody would dare to offer the ransom. We would attend a strange punishment, inflicted without due process. The accusation evolved in secret. During the course of the torture, the principal snarled, and from the movement of his lips we would understand the insult whispered during the recess. There was no defence. No interference at all.

Free from his torments, the boy would return to the corner of the bench and efface himself while he was sought for messages and trips to the post office and tavern. Finally the principal abandoned his scruples and sent him to help his family in their domestic service. Indifferent, the boy didn't even understand his degradation: it was good that he should be deprived of his studies and made use of in the kitchen. Solicitous, he perhaps hoped to escape harsh treatment. No one ever showed him gratitude: he was pushed around as if it was his duty to split wood and collect the mail.

In the house his father annoyed him ceaselessly; he invented punishments: he would gag him, put the backs of his hands on the dining-room table, and beat his palms, almost cracking his fingers; he would bind his shins and hang him upside down from the beam, like a sheep in a slaughterhouse. Growing tired of these innovations, he would resort to habitual cruelties: beating and whipping. His brother would attend the scenes, terribly frightened, and he would expand himself in grim descriptions. And for weeks the poor boy would pull back his sleeves violently, button himself up, and straighten his collar to cover the discoloration of his skin and the red, grey and black spots.

In spite of everything, the school was a refuge. Fatigue and flattering the principal's wife and children at least brought about some indifference. And this was convenient. If the boy, after ending his obligations, would calm down, he would escape easily, anonymous and colourless. But he couldn't hide himself. He needed intimacy; he was always rehearsing friendly actions that were frustrated.

Fellows with long trousers and a first growth of beard behaved in a singular manner towards him: they would send him short messages, wave at him, and confide in him in a mysterious slang. These slips didn't mean they were dedicated to him. They would avoid him in public; they would suddenly become angry at him, and they persecuted him with cutting words.

He would put up with their ingratitude and gibes, quickly disperse them, and laugh, showing his yellow teeth which reminded me of the giant Adamastor. When I entered the school the little fellow appeared with his elbows fixed on his legs, stuttering hoarsely and harshly:

His hollow eyes and awful
Bearing and earthly pale colour.

My memory had provided the association. He really was pale and awful. His eyes had a dry glitter and they stared at us impudently. The faces he made dislocated his enormous square chin. His moist oily skin rubbed us – and this was disagreeable: we took care to escape his moisture and oiliness and the smell of ants and mould. He didn't appear to wash himself; he caused disgust.

Poor fellow. What good did it do to rap on his head and pull his ears, if it were soon forgotten? The comparison showed me that I was treated with benevolence. Unhappy boy.

I left him in the school; I lost sight of him. And I met him again, quite changed. When he started his life as a criminal, he was perhaps in his fifteenth year. He shot a man treacherously; he was sheltered in the house of the political leader and absolved by the jury. Later he committed numerous evil deeds; his violence and cruelty were respected. He idled away his preparatory work in a bad high school. In the academy he obtained his passing grade by threatening the examiners. He graduated and started a newspaper. As his old principal, his tormentor, had closed his establishment and suffered hardships, he gave him a wretched job and took his revenge. He took pride in his dress: the stains disappeared, to say nothing of the ants and the mould. And he had many women. It was in the house of one of them that he was murdered. He lay on the couch and fell asleep. In the darkness of the night an enemy covered him with the stabs of a dagger.

When I was eleven I experienced a serious disorder. Going through a door, I hit the doorpost and I felt acute pain. I examined myself and thought I had two tumours. My body hair emerged and I grew thin – and while bathing with other people in the Paraíba River I was ashamed of my nudity. It was as if my body had suddenly become ugly and impure. In it I perceived vague demands; I was alarmed; for the first time I compared myself with the men who were washing themselves in the river.

I wanted to warn the family, to consult with Dr Mota, and to stay in bed. I found myself, though, greatly perplexed. I had never been frank with my relatives; they never allowed me to be expansive. Now my timidity was exaggerated; it seemed impossible to confess the situation. And if I dared to talk to Dr Mota, he would say the disease was incurable.

I reflected and said that I was neither sick nor did I need to lie down. It was bad to lie down. I amused myself in the store, at school, and at the post office; at night I would spend hours thinking crazy things; I would roll on the mat and count the strokes of the clock in the living-room and search in vain for sleep. I would get up, light a kerosene lamp, reach for a novel, stretch myself out in the hammock, and read till I was tired. My mind would run away from the book: it was necessary to reread whole pages. Inexplicable restlessness, later somewhat explicable. Little by little the condition was explained, based on bits of conversation, memories from reading, and ambiguous phrases which suddenly made sense and made me tremble.

This would pass: the other boys certainly didn't live in such restlessness. But my anxiety increased, my hours of insomnia doubled, and in the morning the mirror displayed the deep shadows under my eyes and my pale wilted face.

I gradually recomposed my clothes. I could do without luxuries, but I wouldn't go out wearing clogs and stuck in cotton clothes without a collar. I got a broadcloth suit, a felt hat, American shoes, and a red tie. I didn't dare to demand more than one tie: my father in his rigorous way allowed me only what was necessary. This was enough

for my appearance – at school, at the office of the periodical, during the sessions of the School of Instructors of Viçosa and at the Love and Charity, which elected me as second secretary.

It was then that I saw Laura, during an examination. Jovino Xavier asked her some simple questions; noticing her strength in this subject, he pushed for her and declared her analysis flawless. He listened to the speeches, received the thanks of the lady teacher, and praised Laura's intelligence and progress to excess. I agreed. A sudden admiration swept over me; it soon became a kind of cult.

I hardly noticed her little tan face, her black tresses, and her round shining eyes. My ideal of beauty was refined young ladies, pallid and blonde, who glided beside lakes (mentioned in the instalments of novels) struck by moonbeams and crossed by slow swans. Laura didn't have the conventional blue eyes and golden hair, but she knew how to divide sentences and classify clauses with assurance, work at which ordinary girls usually failed. I imagined her composing small stories, thumbing through the dictionary, busy with occupations similar to mine – and I drew her near me; later I exaggerated her merits – and I put her out of the way. If she were near, I couldn't maintain the veneration, which was contrived. I had put her beyond the blue lakes; I considered her even more perfect than the girls in the novels.

Twice a day, on the road to school, I delayed my steps in front of a low house and peered through the windows; it was usually deserted; I went on, relieved and discouraged. If I saw the girl, I would grow cowardly and stammer a greeting – and I drew away, scraping the walls, banging against the doorposts, and swinging a pile of books held together by two ribbons. I walked plunged into reverie. I wanted to free myself, examine the street, and move aside from the passers-by; the rejected image would return and become a fixed idea, pleasant and painful.

The uneasiness that filled my nights was almost palpable and had features of its own – black hair would caress my face, and her breathing would benumb me. Different sensations assaulted me: my head burned, my fingers trembled, cold as ice. It was impossible to bear contact with the sheets. I would arise suffocated and go to swing slowly in the hammock. I would no longer light the lamp. I was afraid to deprive myself of the phantom and recover my calm. And reading bored me: I spent one month dragging myself through Zola's *The Dream* without any desire to reach the end, interpreting the narrative

in my own way. The woman who embroidered liturgical vestments and who was confused with the saints of Jacques de Voragine would become Laura, and I contemplated her, a character in a novel, also in the scaffolding near the wall of a cathedral. She would come down from there and resume her individuality, and I would entertain myself in long conversations with the girl.

I wouldn't be able to say aloud the tenth part of that: I would express myself with difficulty; I would trouble myself searching for the words; I would shuffle the subjects and I had a slight defect in pronunciation: I would swallow *dd* and *tt*. My voice was hushed, stammering and inaudible. The speech that I made at the Love and Charity was a disaster: my murmurs didn't carry further than the vicinity of the platform. When Mário Venâcio tried hard to consider me a novelist in embryo, I drew back, filled with doubt: I wouldn't be capable of composing a dialogue.

But there, in the darkness, my dogged tongue would cut loose; questions and answers flowed clearly. These interviews were curious. Laura had a red mouth and a candid smile. Long eyelids shadowed her eyes; the fringe of the hammock became long black hair. That's all. Laura didn't have a body – and so my torment began. I had suppressed the indecencies. With some hatred I had wrapped *The Tenement* in many layers of thick paper and I had tied it in many loops of strong cord; I had hidden it behind the other volumes in the lower shelf of the bookcase. Some crude passages emerged from the book – and the contamination horrified me. From naturalism I kept only *The Dream,* and I didn't want to think, with Mário Venâcio, that the woman who embroidered liturgical vestments was degenerate.

Certainly there was no soul in this Laura that I had created; I was angry at myself, though, for reducing her to an organism subject to common needs. I freed myself from my trouble by diluting her. A perispirit, the perispirit to which Dr Mota referred with such security. Nobody can embrace a perispirit. After all, it shunned thoughts: it would ask for a way of justifying its strange glorification.

When I was in this state, sleep terrified me. It had been a refuge. It contaminated itself. When my yawns started and my eyelids drooped, I jumped from the hammock, strolled in the dark, and leaned against the chest of drawers. My legs dragged and bent down towards the bed. Torpor seized and extended me – and came to be

abomination. Laura appeared again, not a little transparent figure: a solid long-limbed being, all flesh and bones. Her rigid arms held me; her wide chest fell on top of mine, it pressed against me, and any effort to release myself was useless. I wanted to wake up, run away from the nightmare, and restore to the child her former qualities; in some way I felt responsible for this terrible substitution. Anguish, shivering. And I would wake up gasping for breath, biting my lips in despair. Animal, a monstrous animal – and I would sink into sadness and call for death. My illusions were broken into pieces. I was sick at myself. Filthy, needing water and soap. But this wouldn't clean me; the stains were indelible. To sleep and forget the polluted vision. The night wouldn't end, and sometimes my misery was repeated. Terror, then lassitude, repugnance.

I got up early, drank my coffee, and went to the Paraíba River. An extensive cleaning-up, diving and swimming. Surely my family would perceive this pitiful business. It must have been the effect of the coffee, a stimulant. I abstained from it and drank tea made from orange leaves, without benefit.

During the day I occupied myself in painfully reassembling the broken idol. Returning to school, I went to the rehearsals of the Pedro Silva School of Drama. I didn't really pay much attention. Indifferent to the declamation, I sneaked out through the back of the stage, lay in wait at a window, and looked at the kitchen of a low building and the backyard where rose trees flourished. Train whistles, the noise of machines, carts rumbling on the pavement, numerous muleteers, the cracking of buranhém trees. This mingled with the sanguine drama in five acts and a prologue which was going on nearby, beyond the forest painted on the cloth, the work of Joaquim Correntao. What interested me was the garden. A little palm tree waved at me from a distance, shook itself, and made me promises that normally would fail. However, the noise in the street, the babbling matched with the voice of the prompter, the goings and comings on the stage, everything around remained deserted. I persisted in a useless vigil. It was getting dark; the amateurs would put away their parts and leave the stage; Pereira the lamplighter would climb the steep street with a ladder on his shoulder, going to light the street lamps; the flowers would fade; the fans of the little palm tree, almost black, would wave goodbye. A useless vigil. Well. I had to return. The next day Laura's face appeared among the plants like a brighten-

ing of the sky.

Finally there were grumblings: at the Pedro Silva School they found my persistence strange, my love of the theatre, which I showed by turning my back on the set and sticking my elbows on a window sill, peculiar. I was scared. Would they guess my secret? If I could open myself to somebody and reveal my joys and deceptions, perhaps I could gain peace. Confidences were impossible.

Constantino, the new cashier at the store, author of vulgar letters to *Dawn,* noticed my weakness and advised me; he wanted to introduce me to Otilia da Conceiçao. I refused his proposal, somewhat vexed. I didn't really refuse it: I avoided this ignoble subject. At the same time I found myself ridiculous; I stuttered bashfully. But the nocturnal horrors increased, the circles under my eyes deepened and enlarged in my pale thinness. And the young man renewed his advice; he mentioned Dr Garnier; he threatened me with madness. Actually this obsession had already made me a little crazy. I prevaricated, I resisted, I succumbed.

One day at twilight we went for a walk; we directed our steps through the Rua da Palha and entered a dark room. Constantino spoke in a low voice to somebody and went out. After a few minutes I saw myself in a bedroom, serious and bashful, examining photographs and saints which ornamented the wall, boxes of rice powder, and flasks exposed on a table covered with paper. Beside the bed Otilia da Conceiçao waited in silence. I dropped on the little trunk and, also in silence, began to take off my shoes. My sight grew dim, my moist fingers shook, my shoelace had an impossible knot in it. I made an effort to undo it: it became damp with sweat and even more complicated. And my disgust was immense.

I entered my house nauseated, swallowing my sobs.

Weeks passed. I became sick. The arthritis tied me to the couch, and my wretched body was covered with spots. Limping, I opened the bookcase, dug out *The Tenement,* unwrapped it, and put it back among the other novels. And it was no longer an object of aversion. A reasonable story, with some shamelessness to attract readers.

Now I was entangled in the Russian novels. Crippled, I sank into the canvas seat of the chair and tried to lift one aching arm, move my fingers, and turn the pages.

The figure that pursued me at night grew serene and fled. And the other, a colourful cloud, disappeared.

Date Due