Bottles

ALCINA LUBITCH DOMECQ (b. 1953)
Translated from the Spanish by Ilan Stavans

Alberto Manguel, the celebrated Argentinian-born Canadian translator and editor, once divided writers into two categories: those who perceive a single corner of the world as their entire universe, and those who wander everywhere in the universe looking for a place called home—the particularists and the universalists. This novelist and storyteller unquestionably belongs to the first group. Her novel The Mirror's Mirror: or, The Noble Smile of the Dog *(1983) established her as a postmodernist in the tradition of Italo Calvina and Jorge Luis Borges, and* Intoxicated *(1988), her memorable collection of tales from which "Bottles" is taken, immediately elevated her to the level of master of the short story genre. A surrealist examination of motherhood, this tale has as protagonist a woman alienated from herself, a robot-like creature trapped in her own corner of the universe.*

MOM WAS TAKEN away, I don't know exactly where. Dad says she is in a nice place where they take good care of her. I miss her . . . although I understand. Dad says she suffered from a sickening love for bottles. First she started to buy them in the supermarket. All sorts of bottles—plastic and crystal, small and big. Everything had to be packed in a bottle—noodle soup, lemon juice, bathroom soap, pencils. She just wouldn't buy something that wasn't in one. Dad complained. Sometimes that was the reason we wouldn't have toilet paper or there wouldn't be any salt. And Mom used to kiss the bottles all day long. She polished them with great affection, talked to them, and at times I remember her saying that she was going to eat one. You could open a kitchen cabinet and find a million bottles. A million. I hated them, and so did my sister. I mean, why store the dirty linen in a huge bottle the size of a garbage can?

Dad says Mom didn't know anything about logic. I remember one night, after dinner, when Mom apologized and left in a hurry. An hour later she returned with a box full of wine bottles. Dad asked her what had gotten into her. She said she had been at the liquor store, and she immediately started to empty every single bottle into the toilet. All the wine was dumped. She just needed the bottles. Dad and I and my sister just sat there, on the living room couch, watching Mom wash and kiss those ugly wine bottles. I think my sister began to cry. But Mom didn't care. Then Dad called the police, but they didn't do a thing. Weeks later, we pretended to have forgotten everything. It was then that Mom began screaming that she was pregnant, like when my sister was born. She was shouting that a tiny plastic bottle was living inside her stomach. She said she was having pain. She was vomiting and pale. She cried a lot. Dad called an ambulance, and Mom was taken to the hospital. There the doctors made x-rays and checked her all over. Nothing was wrong. They just couldn't find the tiny plastic bottle. But for days she kept insisting that it was living inside her, growing; that's what she used to say to me and my sister. Not to Dad anymore, because he wouldn't listen to her, he just wouldn't listen. I miss Mom . . . She was taken away a month later, after the event with the statue in the living room. You see, one afternoon she decided that the tiny bottle wasn't in her stomach anymore. Now she felt bad because something was going to happen to her. Like a prophecy. She was feeling that something was coming upon her. And next morning, before my sister and I left for school, we found Mom near the couch, standing in the living room. She was vertical, standing straight. She couldn't walk around. Like in a cell. I asked her why she wouldn't move, why she wouldn't go to the kitchen or to my room. Mom answered that she couldn't because she was trapped in a bottle, a gigantic one. We could see her and she could see us too, but according to Mom, nobody could touch her body because there was glass surrounding it. Actually, I touched her and I never felt any glass. Neither did Dad or my sister. But Mom insisted that she couldn't feel us. For days she stayed in that position, and after some time I was able to picture the big bottle. Mom was like a spider you catch in the backyard and suffocate in Tupperware. That's when the ambulance came for the second time. I wasn't home but Dad was. He was there when they took her away. I was at school, although I knew what was happening. That same day we threw away all the bottles in a nearby dump. The neighbors were staring at us, but we didn't care. It felt good, very good.

Love

CLARICE LISPECTOR (1925–1977)
Translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero

Perhaps the most complex story in this volume, "Love," collected in Family Ties *(1960), is to Brazilian letters what Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" is to English literature: a meditation on feminine angst. During a tram ride, Anna, a happy housewife and mother, is thrown into existential despair when she confronts the face of a blind man chewing gum. Like the narrator of Sartre's* Nausea, *Lispector's protagonist is horrified by the dense fluidity of existence, which challenges the neat arrangements of domestic life as well as her reflective consciousness. Lispector's* The Complete Stories *appeared in English in 2015. Benjamin Moser's biography,* Why This Word *(2012), follows her existential and aesthetic journey in minute detail.*

FEELING A LITTLE tired, with her purchases bulging her new string bag, Anna boarded the tram. She placed the bag on her lap and the tram started off. Settling back in her seat, she tried to find a comfortable position, with a sigh of mild satisfaction.

Anna had nice children, she reflected with certainty and pleasure. They were growing up, bathing themselves and misbehaving; they were demanding more and more of her time. The kitchen, after all, was spacious with its old stove that made explosive noises. The heat was oppressive in the apartment, which they were paying off in installments, and the wind, playing against the curtains she had made herself, reminded her that if she wanted to she could pause to wipe her forehead and to contemplate the calm horizon. Like a farmer. She had planted the seeds she held in her hand, no others, but only those. And they were growing into trees. Her brisk conversations with the electricity man were growing, the water filling the bank

was growing, her children were growing, the table was growing with food, her husband arriving with the newspapers and smiling with hunger, the irritating singing of the maids resounding through the block. Anna tranquilly put her small, strong hand, her life current, to everything. Certain times of the afternoon struck her as being critical. At a certain hour of the afternoon, the trees she had planted laughed at her. And when nothing more required her strength, she became anxious. Meanwhile she felt herself more solid than ever, her body become a little thicker, and it was worth seeing the manner in which she cut out blouses for the children, the large scissors snapping into the material. All her vaguely artistic aspirations had for some time been channeled into making her days fulfilled and beautiful; with time, her taste for the decorative had developed and supplanted intimate disorder. She seemed to have discovered that everything was capable of being perfected, that each thing could be given a harmonious appearance; life itself could be created by man.

Deep down, Anna had always found it necessary to feel the firm roots of things. And this is what a home had surprisingly provided. Through tortuous paths, she had achieved a woman's destiny, with the surprise of conforming to it almost as if she had invented that destiny herself. The man whom she had married was a real man; the children she mothered were real children. Her previous youth now seemed alien to her, like one of life's illnesses. She had gradually emerged to discover that life could be lived without happiness: by abolishing it she had found a legion of persons, previously invisible, who lived as one works—with perseverance, persistence, and contentment. What had happened to Anna before possessing a home of her own stood forever beyond her reach: that disturbing exaltation she had often confused with unbearable happiness. In exchange she had created something ultimately comprehensible, the life of an adult. This was what she had wanted and chosen.

Her precautions were now reduced to alertness during the dangerous part of the afternoon, when the house was empty and she was no longer needed; when the sun reached its zenith and each member of the family went about his separate duties. Looking at the polished furniture, she felt her heart contract a little with fear. But in her life there was no opportunity to cherish her fears—she suppressed them with that same ingenuity she had acquired from domestic struggles. Then she would go out shopping or take things to be mended, unobtrusively looking after her home and her family.

When she returned, it would already be late afternoon and the children back from school would absorb her attention. Until the evening descended with its quiet excitement. In the morning she would awaken surrounded by her calm domestic duties. She would find the furniture dusty and dirty once more, as if it had returned repentant. As for herself, she mysteriously formed part of the soft, dark roots of the earth. And anonymously she nourished life. It was pleasant like this. And this was what she had wanted and chosen.

The tram swayed on its rails and turned into the main road. Suddenly the wind became more humid, announcing not only the passing of the afternoon but the end of that uncertain hour. Anna sighed with relief, and a deep sense of acceptance gave her face an air of womanhood.

The tram would drag along and then suddenly jolt to a halt. As far as Humaitá she could relax. Suddenly she saw the man stationary at the tram stop. The difference between him and others was that he was really stationary. He stood with his hands out in front of him—blind.

But what else was there about him that made Anna sit up in distrust?

Something disquieting was happening. Then she discovered what it was: the blind man was chewing gum . . . a blind man chewing gum. Anna still had time to reflect for a second that her brothers were coming to dinner—her heart pounding at regular intervals. Leaning forward, she studied the blind man intently, as one observes something incapable of returning our gaze. Relaxed, and with open eyes, he was chewing gum in the failing light. The facial movements of his chewing made him appear to smile and then suddenly stop smiling, to smile and stop smiling. Anna stared at him as if he had insulted her. And anyone watching would have received the impression of a woman filled with hatred. She continued to stare at him, leaning more and more forward—until the tram gave a sudden jerk, throwing her unexpectedly backward. The heavy string bag toppled from her lap and landed on the floor. Anna cried out, the conductor gave the signal to stop before realizing what was happening, and the tram came to an abrupt halt. The other passengers looked on in amazement. Too paralyzed to gather up her shopping, Anna sat upright, her face suddenly pale. An expression, long since forgotten, awkwardly reappeared, unexpected and inexplicable. The Negro newsboy smiled as he handed over her bundle. The eggs had broken in their newspaper wrapping. Yellow sticky yolks dripped between the strands of the bag. The blind man had interrupted his chewing and held out his unsteady

hands, trying in vain to grasp what had happened. She removed the parcel of eggs from the string, accompanied by the smiles of the passengers. A second signal from the conductor, and the tram moved off with another jerk.

A few moments later, people were no longer staring at her. The tram was rattling on the rails, and the blind man chewing gum had remained behind forever. But the damage had been done.

The string bag felt rough between her fingers, not soft and familiar as when she had knitted it. The bag had lost its meaning; to find herself on that tram was a broken thread; she did not know what to do with the purchases on her lap. Like some strange music, the world started up again around her. The damage had been done. But why? Had she forgotten that there were blind people? Compassion choked her. Anna's breathing became heavy. Even those things that had existed before the episode were now on the alert, more hostile, and even perishable. The world had once more become a nightmare. Several years fell away, the yellow yolks trickled. Exiled from her own days, it seemed to her that the people in the streets were vulnerable, that they barely maintained their equilibrium on the surface of the darkness—and for a moment they appeared to lack any sense of direction. The perception of an absence of law came so unexpectedly that Anna clutched the seat in front of her, as if she might fall off the tram, as if things might be overturned with the same calm they had possessed when order reigned.

What she called a crisis had come at last. And its sign was the intense pleasure with which she now looked at things, suffering and alarmed. The heat had become more oppressive; everything had gained new power and a stronger voice. In the Rua Voluntarios da Patria, revolution seemed imminent, the grids of the gutters were dry, the air dusty. A blind man chewing gum had plunged the world into a mysterious excitement. In every strong person there was a lack of compassion for the blind man, and their strength terrified her. Beside her sat a woman in blue with an expression that made Anna avert her gaze rapidly. On the pavement a mother shook her little boy. Two lovers held hands smiling . . . And the blind man? Anna had lapsed into a mood of compassion, which greatly distressed her.

She had skillfully pacified life; she had taken so much care to avoid upheavals.

She had cultivated an atmosphere of serene understanding, separating each person from the others. Her clothes were clearly designed to be

practical, and she could choose the evening's film from the newspaper—and everything was done in such a manner that each day should smoothly succeed the previous one. And a blind man chewing gum was destroying all this. Through her compassion, Anna felt that life was filled to the brim with a sickening nausea.

Only then did she realize that she had passed her stop ages ago. In her weak state everything touched her with alarm. She got off the tram, her legs shaking, and looked around her, clutching the string bag stained with egg. For a moment she was unable to get her bearings. She seemed to have plunged into the middle of the night.

It was a long road, with high yellow walls. Her heart beat with fear as she tried in vain to recognize her surroundings; while the life she had discovered continued to pulsate, a gentler, more mysterious wind caressed her face. She stood quietly, observing the wall. At last she recognized it. Advancing a little farther alongside a hedge, she passed through the gates of the botanical garden.

She strolled wearily up the central avenue, between the palm trees. There was no one in the garden. She put her parcels down on the ground and sat down on the bench of a side path, where she remained for some time.

The wilderness seemed to calm her, the silence regulating her breathing and soothing her senses.

From afar she saw the avenue, where the evening was round and clear. But the shadows of the branches covered the side path.

Around her there were tranquil noises, the scent of trees, chance encounters among the creeping plants. The entire garden fragmented by the ever more fleeting moments of the evening. From whence came the drowsiness with which she was surrounded? As if induced by the drone of birds and bees. Everything seemed strange, much too gentle, much too great.

A gentle, familiar movement startled her, and she turned round rapidly. Nothing appeared to have stirred. But in the central lane there stood, immobile, an enormous cat. Its fur was soft. With another silent movement, it disappeared. Agitated, she looked about her. The branches swayed, their shadows wavering on the ground. A sparrow foraged in the soil. And suddenly, in terror, she imagined that she had fallen into an ambush. In the garden there was a secret activity in progress, which she was beginning to penetrate.

On the trees, the fruits were black and sweet as honey. On the ground lay dry fruit stones full of circumvolutions, like small rotted cerebrums. The bench was stained with purple sap. With gentle persistence, the waters murmured. On the tree trunk, the luxurious feelers of parasites fastened themselves. The rawness of the world was peaceful. The murder was deep. And death was not what one had imagined.

As well as being imaginary, this was a world to be devoured with one's teeth, a world of voluminous dahlias and tulips. The trunks were pervaded by leafy parasites, their embrace soft and clinging. Like the resistance that precedes surrender, it was fascinating; the woman felt disgusted, and it was fascinating.

The trees were laden, and the world was so rich that it was rotting. When Anna reflected that there were children and grown men suffering hunger, the nausea reached her throat as if she were pregnant and abandoned. The moral of the garden was something different. Now that the blind man had guided her to it, she trembled on the threshold of a dark, fascinating world, where monstrous water lilies floated. The small flowers scattered on the grass did not appear to be yellow or pink but the color of inferior gold and scarlet. Their decay was profound, perfumed. But all these oppressive things she watched, her head surrounded by a swarm of insects, sent by some more refined life in the world. The breeze penetrated between the flowers. Anna imagined rather than felt its sweetened scent. The garden was so beautiful that she feared hell.

It was almost night now, and everything seemed replete and heavy; a squirrel leapt in the darkness. Under her feet the earth was soft. Anna inhaled its odor with delight. It was both fascinating and repulsive.

But when she remembered the children, before whom she now felt guilty, she straightened up with a cry of pain. She clutched the package, advanced through the dark side path, and reached the avenue. She was almost running, and she saw the garden all around her, aloof and impersonal. She shook the locked gates and went on shaking them, gripping the rough timber. The watchman appeared, alarmed at not having seen her.

Until she reached the entrance of the building, she seemed to be on the brink of disaster. She ran with the string bag to the elevator, her heart beating in her breast—what was happening? Her compassion for the blind man was as fierce as anguish, but the world seemed hers, dirty, perishable, hers. She

opened the door of her flat. The room was large, square. The polished knobs were shining, the windowpanes were shining, the lamp shone brightly—what new land was this? And for a moment that wholesome life she had led until today seemed morally crazy. The little boy who came running up to embrace her was a creature with long legs and a face resembling her own. She pressed him firmly to her in anxiety and fear. Trembling, she protected herself. Life was vulnerable. She loved the world, she loved all things created, she loved with loathing. In the same way she had always been fascinated by oysters, with that vague sentiment of revulsion that the approach of truth provoked, admonishing her. She embraced her son, almost hurting him. Almost as if she knew of some evil—the blind man or the beautiful botanical garden—she was clinging to him, to him whom she loved above all things. She had been touched by the demon of faith.

"Life is horrible," she said to him in a low voice, as if famished. What would she do if she answered the blind man's call? She would go alone . . . There were poor and rich places that needed her. She needed them. "I am afraid," she said. She felt the delicate ribs of the child between her arms. She heard his frightened weeping.

"Mummy," the child called. She held him away from her. She studied his face and her heart shrank.

"Don't let Mummy forget you," she said. No sooner had the child felt her embrace weaken than he escaped and ran to the door of the room, from where he watched her more safely. It was the worst look that she had ever received. The blood rose hot to her cheeks.

She sank into a chair, with her fingers still clasping the string bag. What was she ashamed of? There was no way of escaping. The very crust of the days she had forged had broken and the water was escaping. She stood before the oysters. And there was no way of averting her gaze. What was she ashamed of? Certainly it was no longer pity; it was more than pity: her heart had filled with the worst will to live.

She no longer knew if she was on the side of the blind man or of the thick plants. The man, little by little, had moved away, and in her torment she appeared to have passed over to the side of those who had injured his eyes. The botanical garden, tranquil and high, had been a revelation. With horror, she discovered that she belonged to the strong part of the world, and what name should she give to her fierce compassion? Would she be

obliged to kiss the leper, since she would never be just a sister? "A blind man has drawn me to the worst of myself," she thought, amazed. She felt banished because no pauper would drink water from her burning hands. Ah! It was easier to be a saint than a person! Good heavens, then was it not real, that pity that had fathomed the deepest waters in her heart? But it was the compassion of a lion.

Humiliated, she knew that the blind man would prefer a poorer love. And, trembling, she also knew why. The life of the botanical garden summoned her as a werewolf is summoned by the moonlight. "Oh! But she loved the blind man," she thought with tears in her eyes. Meanwhile, it was not with this sentiment that one would go to church. "I am frightened," she whispered alone in the room. She got up and went to the kitchen to help the maid prepare dinner.

But life made her shiver like the cold of winter. She heard the school bell pealing, distant and constant. The small horror of the dust gathering in threads around the bottom of the stove, where she had discovered a small spider. Lifting a vase to change the water—there was the horror of the flower submitting itself, languid and loathsome, to her hands. The same secret activity was going on here in the kitchen. Near the waste bin, she crushed an ant with her foot. The small murder of the ant. Its minute body trembled. Drops of water fell on the stagnant water in the pool.

The summer beetles. The horror of those expressionless beetles. All around there was a silent, slow, insistent life. Horror upon horror. She went from one side of the kitchen to the other, cutting the steaks, mixing the cream. Circling around her head, around the light, the flies of a warm summer's evening. A night in which compassion was as crude as false love. Sweat trickled between her breasts. Faith broke her; the heat of the oven burned in her eyes. Then her husband arrived, followed by her brothers and their wives, and her brothers' children.

They dined with all the windows open, on the ninth floor. An airplane shuddered menacingly in the heat of the sky. Although she had used few eggs, the dinner was good. The children stayed up, playing on the carpet with their cousins. It was summer and it would be useless to force them to go to sleep. Anna was a little pale and laughed gently with the others.

After dinner, the first cool breeze finally entered the room. The family was seated around the table, tired after their day, happy in the absence of any discord, eager not to find fault. They laughed at everything, with warmth and humanity. The children grew up admirably around them. Anna took the moment like a butterfly between her fingers, before it might escape forever.

Later, when they had all left and the children were in bed, she was just a woman looking out of the window. The city was asleep and warm. Would the experience unleashed by the blind man fill her days? How many years would it take before she once more grew old? The slightest movement on her part and she would trample one of her children. But with the ill will of a lover, she seemed to accept that the fly would emerge from the flower, and the giant water lilies would float in the darkness of the lake. The blind man was hanging among the fruits of the botanical garden.

What if that were the stove exploding, with the fire spreading through the house, she thought to herself as she ran to the kitchen, where she found her husband in front of the spilled coffee.

"What happened?" she cried, shaking from head to foot. He was taken aback by his wife's alarm. And suddenly understanding, he laughed.

"It was nothing," he said. "I am just a clumsy fellow." He looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes.

But, confronted by the strange expression on Anna's face, he studied her more closely. Then he drew her to him in a sudden caress.

"I don't want anything ever to happen to you!" she said.

"You can't prevent the stove from having its little explosions," he replied, smiling. She remained limp in his arms. This afternoon, something tranquil had exploded, and in the house everything struck a tragicomedic note.

"It's time to go to bed," he said. "It's late." In a gesture that was not his but that seemed natural, he held his wife's hand, taking her with him, without looking back, removing her from the danger of living.

The giddiness of compassion had spent itself. And if she had crossed love and its hell, she was now combing her hair before the mirror, without any world for the moment in her heart. Before getting into bed, as if she were snuffing a candle, she blew out that day's tiny flame.

his face and not his soul. He opened his mouth and for an instant his face involuntarily took on that expression of comic indifference he'd used to hide his mortification when asking his boss for a raise. The next second, he averted his eyes in shame at the indecency of his wife who, blossoming and serene, was sitting there.

But suddenly the tension fell away. His shoulders sagged, his features gave way and a great heaviness relaxed him. He looked at her older now, curious.

She was sitting there in her little housedress. He knew she'd done what she could to avoid becoming luminous and unattainable. Timidly and with respect, he was looking at her. He'd grown older, weary, curious. But he didn't have a single word to say. From the open doorway he saw his wife on the sofa without leaning back, once again alert and tranquil, as if on a train. That had already departed.

Happy Birthday
("Feliz aniversário")

THE FAMILY BEGAN ARRIVING IN WAVES. THE ONES from Olaria were all dressed up because the visit also meant an outing in Copacabana. The daughter-in-law from Olaria showed up in navy blue, glittering with "pailletés" and draping that camouflaged her ungirdled belly. Her husband didn't come for obvious reasons: he didn't want to see his siblings. But he'd sent his wife so as not to sever all ties—and she came in her best dress to show that she didn't need any of them, along with her three children: two girls with already budding breasts, infantilized in pink ruffles and starched petticoats, and the boy sheepish in his new suit and tie.

Since Zilda—the daughter with whom the birthday girl lived—had placed chairs side-by-side along the walls, as at a party where there's going to be dancing, the daughter-in-law from Olaria, after greeting the members of the household with a stony expression, plunked herself down in one of the chairs and fell silent, lips pursed, maintaining her offended stance. "I came to avoid not coming," she'd said to Zilda, and then had sat feeling offended. The two little misses in pink and the boy, sallow and with their hair neatly combed, didn't really know

how to behave and stood beside their mother, impressed by her navy blue dress and the "pailletés."

Then the daughter-in-law from Ipanema came with two grandsons and the nanny. Her husband would come later. And since Zilda—the only girl among six brothers and the only one who, it had been decided years ago, had the space and time to take in the birthday girl—and since Zilda was in the kitchen with the maid putting the finishing touches on the croquettes and sandwiches, that left: the stuck-up daughter-in-law from Olaria with her anxious-hearted children by her side; the daughter-in-law from Ipanema in the opposite row of chairs pretending to deal with the baby to avoid facing her sister-in-law from Olaria; the idle, uniformed nanny, her mouth hanging open.

And at the head of the large table the birthday girl who was turning eighty-nine today.

Zilda, the lady of the house, had set the table early, covered it with colorful paper napkins and birthday-themed paper cups, scattered balloons drifting along the ceiling on some of which was written "Happy Birthday!", on others "Feliz Aniversário!". At the center she'd placed the enormous frosted cake. To move things along, she'd decorated the table right after lunch, pushed the chairs against the wall, sent the boys out to play at the neighbor's so they wouldn't mess up the table.

And, to move things along, she'd dressed the birthday girl right after lunch. Since then she'd fastened that pendant around her neck and pinned on her brooch, sprayed her with a little perfume to cover that musty smell of hers—seated her at the table. And since two o'clock the birthday girl had been sitting at the head of the long empty table, rigid in the silent room.

Occasionally aware of the colorful napkins. Looking curi-

ously when a passing car made the odd balloon tremble. And occasionally that mute anguish: whenever she watched, fascinated and powerless, the buzzing of a fly around the cake.

Until four o'clock when the daughter-in-law from Olaria arrived followed by the one from Ipanema.

Just when the daughter-in-law from Ipanema thought she couldn't bear another second of being seated directly across from her sister-in-law from Olaria—who brimming with past offenses saw no reason to stop glaring defiantly at the daughter-in-law from Ipanema—at last José and his family arrived. And as soon as they all kissed the room started filling with people greeting each other loudly as if they'd all been waiting down below for the right moment to, in the rush of being late, stride up the three flights of stairs, talking, dragging along startled children, crowding into the room—and kicking off the party.

The birthday girl's facial muscles no longer expressed her, so no one could tell whether she was in a good mood. Placed at the head was what she was. She amounted to a large, thin, powerless and dark-haired old woman. She looked hollow.

"Eighty-nine years old, yes sir!" said José, the eldest now that Jonga had died. "Eighty-nine years old, yes ma'am!" he said rubbing his hands in public admiration and as an imperceptible signal to everyone.

Everyone broke off attentively and looked over at the birthday girl in a more official manner. Some shook their heads in awe as if she'd set a record. Each year conquered by the birthday girl was a vague step forward for the whole family. "Yes sir!" a few said smiling shyly.

"Eighty-nine years old!" echoed Manoel, who was José's business partner. "Just a little bean sprout!" he said joking and nervous, and everyone laughed except his wife.

The old woman showed no expression.

Some hadn't brought her a present. Others brought a soap dish, a cotton slip, a costume jewelry brooch, a little potted cactus—nothing, nothing that the lady of the house could use for herself or her children, nothing that the birthday girl herself could really use and thereby save money for the lady of the house: she put away the presents, bitter, sarcastic.

"Eighty-nine years old!" repeated Manoel nervously, looking at his wife.

The old woman showed no expression.

And so, as if everyone had received the final proof that there was no point making any effort, with a shrug as if they were with a deaf woman, they kept the party going by themselves, eating the first ham sandwiches more as a show of enthusiasm than out of hunger, making as if they were all starving to death. The punch was served, Zilda was sweating, not a single sister-in-law was really helping, the hot grease from the croquettes gave off the smell of a picnic; and with their backs turned to the birthday girl, who couldn't eat fried food, they laughed nervously. And Cordélia? Cordélia, the youngest daughter-in-law, seated, smiling.

"No sir!" José replied with mock severity, "no shop talk today!"

"Right, right!" Manoel quickly backed down, darting a look at his wife whose ears pricked up from a distance.

"No shop talk," José boomed, "today is for Mother!"

At the head of the already messy table, the cups dirtied, only the cake intact—she was the mother. The birthday girl blinked.

And by the time the table was filthy, the mothers irritated at the racket their children were making, while the grandmothers were leaning back complacently in their chairs, that was when

they turned off the useless hallway light so as to light the candle on the cake, a big candle with a small piece of paper stuck to it on which was written "89." But no one praised Zilda's idea, and she wondered anxiously if they thought she was trying to save candles—nobody recalling that nobody had contributed so much as a box of matches for the party food that she, Zilda, was serving like a slave, her feet exhausted and her heart in revolt. Then they lit the candle. And then José, the leader, sang with great gusto, galvanizing the most hesitant or surprised ones with an authoritarian stare, "come on! all together now!"—and they all suddenly joined in singing loud as soldiers. Roused by the voices, Cordélia looked on breathlessly. Since they hadn't coordinated ahead of time, some sang in Portuguese and others in English. Then they tried to correct it: and the ones who'd been singing in English switched to Portuguese, and the ones who'd been singing in Portuguese switched to singing very softly in English.

While they were singing, the birthday girl, in the glow of the lit candle, meditated as though by the fireside.

They picked the youngest great-grandchild who, propped in his encouraging mother's lap, blew out the candle in a single breath full of saliva! For an instant they applauded the unexpected power of the boy who, astonished and exultant, looked around at everyone in rapture. The lady of the house was waiting with her finger poised on the hallway switch—and turned on the light.

"Long live Mama!"

"Long live Grandma!"

"Long live Dona Anita," said the neighbor who had shown up.

"Happy Birthday!" shouted the grandchildren who studied English at the Bennett School.

A few hands were still clapping.

The birthday girl was staring at the large, dry, extinguished cake.

"Cut the cake, Grandma!" said the mother of four, "she should be the one to cut it!" she asserted uncertainly to everyone, in an intimate and scheming manner. And, since they all approved happily and curiously, she suddenly became impetuous: "cut the cake, Grandma!"

And suddenly the old woman grabbed the knife. And without hesitation, as if in hesitating for a moment she might fall over, she cut the first slice with a murderer's thrust.

"So strong," the daughter-in-law from Ipanema murmured, and it wasn't clear whether she was shocked or pleasantly surprised. She was a little horrified.

"A year ago she could still climb these stairs better than me," said Zilda bitterly.

With the first slice cut, as though the first shovelful of dirt had been dug, they all closed in with their plates in hand, elbowing each other in feigned excitement, each going after his own little shovelful.

Soon enough the slices were divided among the little plates, in a silence full of commotion. The younger children, their mouths hidden by the table and their eyes at its level, watched the distribution with mute intensity. Raisins rolled out of the cake amid dry crumbs. The anguished children saw the raisins being wasted, intently watching them drop.

And when they went over to see, wouldn't you know the birthday girl was already devouring her last bite?

And so to speak the party was over.

Cordélia looked at everyone absently, smiling.

"I already told you: no shop talk today!" José replied beaming.

"Right, right!" Manoel backed down placatingly without glancing at his wife who didn't take her eyes off him. "You're right," Manoel tried to smile and a convulsion passed rapidly over the muscles of his face.

"Today is for Mother!" José said.

At the head of the table, the tablecloth stained with Coca-Cola, the cake in ruins, she was the mother. The birthday girl blinked.

There they were milling about boisterously, laughing, her family. And she was the mother of them all. And what if she suddenly got up, as a corpse rises slowly and imposes muteness and terror upon the living, the birthday girl stiffened in her chair, sitting up taller. She was the mother of them all. And since her pendant was suffocating her, she was the mother of them all and, powerless in her chair, she despised them all. And looked at them blinking. All those children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of hers who were no more than the flesh of her knee, she thought suddenly as if spitting. Rodrigo, her seven-year-old grandson, was the only one who was the flesh of her heart, Rodrigo, with that tough little face, virile and tousled. Where's Rodrigo? Rodrigo with the drowsy, conceited gaze in that ardent and confused little head. That one would turn out to be a man. But, blinking, she looked at the others, the birthday girl. Oh how despicable those failed lives. How?! how could someone as strong as she have given birth to those dimwitted beings, with their slack arms and anxious faces? She, the strong one, who had married at the proper hour and time a good man whom, obediently and independently, she respected; whom she respected and who gave her children and repaid her for giving birth and honored her recovery time. The trunk was sound. But it had borne these sour and unfortunate fruits,

lacking even the capacity for real joy. How could she have given birth to those frivolous, weak, self-indulgent beings? The resentment rumbled in her empty chest. A bunch of communists, that's what they were; communists. She glared at them with her old woman's ire. They looked like rats jostling each other, her family. Irrepressible, she turned her head and with unsuspected force spit on the ground.

"Mama!" cried the lady of the house, mortified. "What's going on, Mama!" she cried utterly mortified, and didn't even want to look at the others, she knew those good-for-nothings were exchanging triumphant glances as if it was up to her to make the old woman behave, and it wouldn't be long before they were claiming she didn't bathe their mother anymore, they'd never understand the sacrifice she was making. "Mama, what's going on!" she said softly, in anguish. "You've never done this before!" she added loudly so everyone would hear, she wanted to join the others' shock, when the cock crows for the third time you shall renounce your mother. But her enormous humiliation was soothed when she realized they were shaking their heads as if they agreed that the old woman was now no more than a child.

"Lately she's been spitting," she ended up confessing apologetically to everyone.

Everyone looked at the birthday girl, commiserating, respectful, in silence.

They looked like rats jostling each other, her family. The boys, though grown—probably already in their fifties, for all I know!—the boys still retained some of their handsome features. But those wives they had chosen! And the wives her grandchildren—weaker and more sour still—had chosen. All vain with slender legs, and those fake necklaces for women

who when it comes down to it can't take the heat, those wimpy women who married off their sons poorly, who didn't know how to put a maid in her place, and all their ears dripping with jewelry—none, none of it real gold! Rage was suffocating her.

"Give me a glass of wine!" she said.

Silence fell suddenly, everyone with a glass frozen in their hand.

"Granny darling, won't it make you sick?" the short, plump little granddaughter ventured cautiously.

"To hell with Granny darling!" the birthday girl exploded bitterly. "The devil take you, you pack of sissies, cuckolds and whores! give me a glass of wine, Dorothy!" she ordered.

Dorothy didn't know what to do, she looked around at everyone in a comical plea for help. But, like detached and unassailable masks, suddenly not a single face showed any expression. The party interrupted, half-eaten sandwiches in their hands, some dry piece stuck in their mouths, bulging their cheeks with the worst timing. They'd all gone blind, deaf and dumb, croquettes in their hands. And they stared impassively.

Forsaken, amused, Dorothy gave her the wine: slyly just two fingertips' worth in the glass. Expressionless, at the ready, they all awaited the storm.

But not only did the birthday girl not explode at the miserable splash of wine Dorothy had given her but she didn't even touch the glass.

Her gaze was fixed, silent. As if nothing had happened.

Everyone exchanged polite glances, smiling blindly, abstractedly as if a dog had peed in the room. Stoically, the voices and laughter started back up. The daughter-in-law from Olaria, who had experienced her first moment in unison with the others just when the tragedy triumphantly seemed about to be

unleashed, had to retreat alone to her severity, without even the solidarity of her three children who were now mingling traitorously with the others. From her reclusive chair, she critically appraised those shapeless dresses, without any draping, their obsession with pairing a black dress with pearls, which was anything but stylish, cheap was all it was. Eyeing from afar those meagerly buttered sandwiches. She hadn't helped herself to a thing, not a thing! She'd only had one of each, just to taste.

And so to speak, once again the party was over.

People graciously remained seated. Some with their attention turned inward, waiting for something to say. Others vacant and expectant, with amiable smiles, stomachs full of that junk that didn't nourish but got rid of hunger. The children, already out of control, shrieked rambunctiously. Some already had filthy faces; the other, younger ones, were already wet; the afternoon was fading rapidly. And Cordélia, Cordélia looked on absently, with a dazed smile, bearing her secret in solitude. What's the matter with her? someone asked with a negligent curiosity, head gesturing at her from afar, but no one answered. They turned on the remaining lights to hasten the tranquility of the night, the children were starting to bicker. But the lights were fainter than the faint tension of the afternoon. And the twilight of Copacabana, unyielding, meanwhile kept expanding and penetrating the windows like a weight.

"I have to go," one of the daughters-in-law said, disturbed, standing and brushing the crumbs off her skirt. Several others rose smiling.

The birthday girl received a cautious kiss from each of them as if her so unfamiliar skin were a trap. And, impassive, blinking, she took in those deliberately incoherent words they said to her attempting to give a final thrust of enthusiasm to something

that was no more than the past: night had now fallen almost completely. The light in the room then seemed yellower and richer, the people older. The children were already hysterical.

"Does she think the cake takes the place of dinner," the old woman wondered in the depths of herself.

But no one could have guessed what she was thinking. And for those who looked at her once more from the doorway, the birthday girl was only what she appeared to be: seated at the head of the filthy table, her hand clenched on the tablecloth as though grasping a scepter, and with that muteness that was her last word. Fist clenched on the table, never again would she be only what she was thinking. Her appearance had finally surpassed her and, going beyond her, was serenely becoming gigantic. Cordélia stared at her in alarm. The mute and severe fist on the table was telling the unhappy daughter-in-law she irremediably loved perhaps for the last time: You must know. You must know. That life is short. That life is short.

Yet she didn't repeat it anymore. Because truth was a glimpse. Cordélia stared at her in terror. And, for the very last time, she never repeated it—while Rodrigo, the birthday girl's grandson, tugged at Cordélia's hand, tugged at the hand of that guilty, bewildered and desperate mother who once more looked back imploring old age to give one more sign that a woman should, in a heartrending impulse, finally cling to her last chance and live. Once more Cordélia wanted to look.

But when she looked again—the birthday girl was an old woman at the head of the table.

The glimpse had passed. And dragged onward by Rodrigo's patient and insistent hand the daughter-in-law followed him in alarm.

"Not everyone has the privilege and the honor to gather

around their mother," José cleared his throat recalling that Jonga had been the one who gave speeches.

"Their mother, comma!" his niece laughed softly, and the slowest cousin laughed without getting it.

"We have," Manoel said dispiritedly, no longer looking at his wife. "We have this great privilege," he said distractedly wiping his moist palms.

But that wasn't it at all, merely the distress of farewells, never knowing just what to say, José expecting from himself with perseverance and confidence the next line of the speech. Which didn't come. Which didn't come. Which didn't come. The others were waiting. How he missed Jonga at times like this—José wiped his brow with his handkerchief—how he missed Jonga at times like this! He'd also been the only one whom the old woman had always approved of and respected, and this gave Jonga so much self-assurance. And when he died, the old woman never spoke of him again, placing a wall between his death and the others. She'd forgotten him perhaps. But she hadn't forgotten that same firm and piercing gaze she'd always directed at the other children, always causing them to avert their eyes. A mother's love was hard to bear: José wiped his brow, heroic, smiling.

And suddenly the line came:

"See you next year!" José suddenly exclaimed mischievously, finding, thus, just like that, the right turn of phrase: a lucky hint! "See you next year, eh?" he repeated afraid he hadn't been understood.

He looked at her, proud of the cunning old woman who always slyly managed to live another year.

"Next year we'll meet again around the birthday cake!" her son Manoel further clarified, improving on his business partner's wit. "See you next year, Mama! and around the birthday cake!" he said in thorough explanation, right in her ear, while looking obligingly at José. And the old woman suddenly let out a weak cackle, understanding the allusion.

Then she opened her mouth and said:

"Sure."

Excited that it had gone so unexpectedly well, José shouted at her with emotion, grateful, his eyes moist:

"We'll see each other next year, Mama!"

"I'm not deaf!" said the birthday girl gruffly, affectionately.

Her children looked at each other laughing, embarrassed, happy. It had worked out.

The kids went off in good spirits, their appetites ruined. The daughter-in-law from Olaria vengefully cuffed her son, too cheerful and no longer wearing his tie. The stairs were difficult, dark, it was unbelievable to insist on living in such a cramped building that would have to be demolished any day now, and while being evicted Zilda would still cause trouble and want to push the old woman onto the daughters-in-law—reaching the last step, the guests relievedly found themselves in the cool calm of the street. It was nighttime, yes. With its first shiver.

Goodbye, see you soon, we have to get together. Stop by sometime, they said quickly. Some managed to look the others in the eye with unflinching cordiality. Some buttoned up their children's coats, looking at the sky for some hint of the weather. Everyone obscurely feeling that when saying goodbye you could maybe, now without the threat of commitment, be nice and say that extra word—which word? they didn't know exactly, and looked at each other smiling, mute. It was an instant that was begging to come alive. But that was dead. They

started going their separate ways, walking with their backs slightly turned, unsure how to break away from their relatives without being abrupt.

"See you next year!" José repeated the lucky hint, waving with effusive vigor, his thinning, white hair fluttering. He really was fat, they thought, he'd better watch his heart. "See you next year!" José boomed, eloquent and grand, and his height seemed it might crumble. But those already a ways off didn't know whether to laugh loudly for him to hear or if it was enough to smile even in the darkness. More than a few thought that luckily the hint contained more than just a joke and that not until next year would they have to gather around the birthday cake; while others, already farther off in the darkness of the street, wondered whether the old woman would hang on for another year of Zilda's nerves and impatience, but honestly there was nothing they could do about it. "Ninety years old at the very least," thought the daughter-in-law from Ipanema melancholically. "To make it to a nice, round age," she thought dreamily.

Meanwhile, up above, atop the stairs and contingencies, the birthday girl was seated at the head of the table, erect, definitive, greater than herself. What if there's no dinner tonight, she mused. Death was her mystery.

The Smallest Woman in the World

("A menor mulher do mundo")

IN THE DEPTHS OF EQUATORIAL AFRICA THE FRENCH explorer Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came upon a pygmy tribe of surprising smallness. He was all the more surprised, then, when informed that an even smaller people existed beyond forests and distances. So deeper still he plunged.

In the Central Congo he indeed discovered the smallest pygmies in the world. And—like a box within a box, within a box—among the smallest pygmies in the world was the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world, obeying perhaps the need Nature sometimes has to outdo herself.

Amid mosquitoes and trees warm with moisture, amid the rich leaves of the laziest green, Marcel Prètre came face-to-face with a woman who stood eighteen inches tall, full-grown, black, silent. "Dark as a monkey," he would inform the press, and that she lived in the top of a tree with her little consort. In the tepid, wild mists, which swell the fruits early and make them taste almost intolerably sweet, she was pregnant.

There she stood, then, the smallest woman in the world. For an instant, in the drone of the heat, it was as if the Frenchman

Inside My Dirty Head—The Holocaust

MOACYR SCLIAR (1937–2011)
Translated from the Portuguese by Eloah F. Giacomelli

Prolific and prodigious, Scliar had a lighthearted style and an enchanting voice that recalls the art of Sholem Aleichem. But the tone in this extraordinary tale from the collection The Enigmatic Eye *(1989) is dark, ironic. As in Victor Perera's "Kindergarten," events are told from a child's point of view. At its center is an obsession with tattooed concentration camp numbers as a sign of personal identity and also a sense that, after the Holocaust, the world has been invaded by impostors. Compared with Szichman's "Remembrances of Things Future," the focus here is, in Joseph Brodsky's words, "the dance of the ghosts of memory." Scliar is also the author of* Max and the Cats *(1989) and* Kafka's Leopards *(2011). His* Collected Stories *appeared in 1999.*

INSIDE MY DIRTY head, the Holocaust is like this:

I'm an eleven-year-old boy. Small, skinny. And dirty. Oh boy, am I ever dirty! A stained T-shirt, filthy pants, grimy feet, hands, and face: dirty, dirty. But this external dirt is nothing compared to the filth I have inside my head. I harbor nothing but evil thoughts. I'm mischievous. I use foul language. A dirty tongue, a dirty head. A filthy mind. A sewer inhabited by toads and poisonous scorpions.

My father is appalled. A good man, my father is. He harbors nothing but pure thoughts. He speaks nothing but kind words. Deeply religious; the most religious man in our neighborhood. The neighbors wonder how such a kind, pious man could have such a wicked son with such a bad character. I'm a disgrace to the family, a disgrace to the neighborhood, a disgrace to the world. Me and my dirty head.

My father lost some of his brothers and sisters in the Holocaust. When

he talks about this, his eyes well up with tears. It's now 1949; the memories of World War II are still much too fresh. Refugees from Europe arrive in the city; they come in search of relatives and friends that might help them. My father does what he can to help these unfortunate people. He exhorts me to follow his example, although he knows that little can be expected from someone with such a dirty head. He doesn't know yet what is in store for him. Mischa hasn't materialized yet.

One day Mischa materializes. A diminutive, slightly built man with a stoop; on his arm, quite visible, a tattooed number—the number assigned to him in a concentration camp. He arouses pity, poor fellow. His clothes are in tatters. He sleeps in doorways.

Learning about this distressing situation, my father is filled with indignation: Something must be done about it. One can't leave a Jew in this situation, especially when he is a survivor of the Nazi massacre. He calls the neighbors to a meeting. I want you to attend it, he says to me (undoubtedly hoping that I'll be imbued with the spirit of compassion. I? The kid with the dirty head? Poor Dad).

The neighbors offer to help. Each one will contribute a monthly sum; with this money Mischa will be able to get accommodation in a rooming house, buy clothes, and even go to a movie once in a while.

They announce their decision to the diminutive man, who, with tears in his eyes, gushes his thanks. Months go by. Mischa is now one of us. People take turns inviting him to their homes. And they invite him because of the stories he tells them in his broken Portuguese. Nobody can tell stories like Mischa. Nobody can describe like him the horrors of the concentration camp, the filth, the promiscuity, the diseases, the agony of the dying, the brutality of the guards. Listening to him brings tears to everybody's eyes . . .

Well, not to everybody's. Not to mine. I don't cry. Because of my dirty head, of course. Instead of crying, instead of flinging myself upon the floor, instead of clamoring to heaven as I listen to the horrors he narrates, I keep asking myself questions. Questions like: Why doesn't Mischa speak Yiddish like my parents and everybody else? Why does he stand motionless and silent in the synagogue while everybody else is praying?

Such questions, however, I keep to myself. I wouldn't dare ask anybody such questions; neither do I voice any of the things that my dirty head keeps imagining. My dirty head never rests; day and night, always buzzing, always scheming . . .

I start imagining this: One day another refugee, Avigdor, materializes in the neighborhood. He too comes from a concentration camp; unlike Mischa, however, he doesn't tell stories. And I keep imagining that this Avigdor is introduced to Mischa; and I keep imagining that they detest each other at first sight, even though at one time they were fellow sufferers. I imagine them one night seated at the table in our house. We're having a party; there are lots of people. Then suddenly—a scene that my dirty head has no difficulty devising—someone suggests that the two men have an arm-wrestling match.

(Why arm wrestling? Why should two puny little men, who in the past almost starved to death, put their strength against each other? Why? Why, indeed? Ask my dirty head why.)

So, there they are, the two, arm against arm; tattooed arm against tattooed arm; nobody has noticed anything. But I have—thanks, of course, to my dirty head.

The numbers are the same.

"Look," I shout, "the numbers are the same!"

At first, everybody stares at me, bewildered; then they realize what I'm talking about and see for themselves: Both men have the same number. Mischa has turned livid. Avigdor rises to his feet. He too is pale, but his rage soon makes his face and neck break out in red blotches. With unsuspected strength, he grabs Mischa by the arm; he drags him to a bedroom, forces him to go in, then closes the door behind them. Only my dirty head knows what is going on there, for it is my head that has created Avigdor, it is my head that has given Avigdor this extraordinary strength, it is my head that has caused him to open and shut the door, and it is in my head that this door exists. Avigdor is interrogating Mischa and finding out that Mischa has never been a prisoner anywhere, that he is not even a Jew; he is merely a crafty Ukrainian who had himself tattooed and who made up the whole story in order to exploit Jews.

So, once the ruse is exposed, even my dirty head has no difficulty in making Avigdor—and my parents and the neighbors—expel Mischa in a fit of fury. And so Mischa is left destitute, and he has to sleep on a park bench.

My dirty head, however, won't leave him alone, so I continue to imagine things. With the money Mischa gets from panhandling, he buys a lottery ticket. The number—trust this dirty head of mine to come up with something like this—is, of course, the one tattooed on his arm. And he wins in the lottery! Then he moves to Rio de Janeiro and buys a beautiful condo, and he is happy! Happy. He doesn't know what my dirty head has in store for him.

There's one thing that bothers him though: the number tattooed on his arm. He decides to have it removed. He goes to a famous plastic surgeon (these are refinements devised by my dirty head) and undergoes surgery. But then he goes into shock and dies a slow, agonizing death . . .

✡

One day Mischa tells my father about the soap bars. He says he saw piles and piles of soap bars in the death camp. Do you know what the soap was made of? he asks. Human fat. Fat taken from Jews.

At night I dream about him. I'm lying naked in something resembling a bathtub, which is filled with putrid water; Mischa rubs that soap on me; he keeps rubbing it ruthlessly while shouting that he must wash the filth off my tongue and off my head, that he must wash the filth off the world.

I wake up sobbing. I wake up in the midst of great suffering. And it is this suffering that I, for lack of a better word, call the Holocaust.

The Prophets of Benjamin Bok

THE PROPHETS DIDN'T INCARNATE THEMSELVES in Benjamin Bok all at once. At first, it wasn't even a whole prophet that took control of him. Parts of a prophet, more likely. An eye, a finger. Paulina, Benjamin's wife, was later to recall the strange dilation of a pupil, the convulsive tremor of the thumb of his left hand. But Benjamin Bok, a small, thin man with a bald head and a hooked nose, a very ugly man—and to make matters worse, going through a mid-life crisis—and afflicted with a gastric ulcer—Benjamin Bok, poor Benjamin Bok, was regarded—in fact, had always been regarded, even during his childhood—as having a nervous disposition. His parents, in a constant state of alarm, had been overprotective toward him, partly because he was an only child, but mostly because he was so nervous, The boy didn't eat well, he slept restlessly, he had nightmares. His parents kept taking him from doctor to doctor. Leave the boy alone, the doctors would tell them, and he'll get better. But Benjamin's parents didn't leave him alone until he married. And even so, they never ceased to remind Paulina that Benjamin needed to be looked after.

Thus, knowing about her husband's nervous disposition, Paulina didn't attach much importance to what—as she later came to realize—could be interpreted as premonitory signs, and she remained unconcerned even when Benjamin Bok began to intersperse Hebrew words in conversation (which he would do in an odd, raucous voice, a voice that wasn't his). Paulina didn't question her husband about this matter, but had she done so, she would have found out that he *had never learned Hebrew*. Benjamin's parents, assimilated Jews, had

never made an issue of it despite the fact that the boy had always enjoyed reading the Bible.

One day Benjamin flew into a tantrum. He kicked a small coffee table to pieces—right in front of his children, two girls aged eight and ten. Paulina became furious. But she still didn't realize what was happening to her husband.

Finally, it was Benjamin himself who became aware of his situation during a social gathering of co-workers in a *churrascaria*.

Benjamin was an accountant (in reality, something like a manager) in an investment company owned by Gregório, a childhood friend. Gregório, a burly, expansive man, liked to give parties; he wouldn't let the end of the year pass without taking all his employees to a *churrascaria* for a Brazilian-style barbecue.

While Gregório was gabbing away, Benjamin, seated beside him, had his eyes fixed on the remainders of the barbecued meat strewn across the table.

"Dry bones," he cried out suddenly.

Gregório stopped talking, and everybody turned to Benjamin. Dry bones, he repeated, like an automaton. What the hell, Benjamin? said Gregório. Why have you interrupted me like this? And what's the big idea, this dry bones crap?

Benjamin mumbled an apology, and the incident was soon forgotten. But it wasn't him who had said that, of this he was sure; the voice wasn't his. At home, already in bed, it occurred to him *that Dry bones, I heard the word of the Lord . . .* was one of Ezekiel's prophecies. The prophet had spoken through Benjamin's mouth, right there in the *churrascaria*.

Benjamin was a malcontent. He couldn't resign himself to being a mere employee, but he had no desire to become a boss. He was always disparaging the government, but he didn't think much of private enterprise either. He had the reputation of being an oddball, so nobody in the office was surprised at the oddity of his behavior in the

churrascaria. But everybody commented on that dry bones incident. It didn't occur to anybody to connect those words with Ezekiel's prophecy.

Days later, Benjamin Bok went into Gregório's office. Without a word, he took a Magic Marker out of his pocket and proceeded to trace Hebrew letters on the newly painted wall. Flabbergasted, Gregório looked on.

"But what the hell are you doing?" he bellowed at last.

Benjamin then turned to Gregório and stared at him.

"You've been weighed in the balances and found wanting," he then said.

"Weighed in the balances? Found wanting?" Gregório was puzzled. He didn't know that he had just heard the prophet Daniel speaking, and that Benjamin, as he sat on the floor amidst the large vases that decorated the office, was in fact in the lions' den.

Gregório asked Paulina to come to his office for a private talk. Benjamin is bonkers, he said without beating around the bush, we'll have to commit him to a hospital, there's no other way. Breaking into tears, Paulina said that she recognized that her husband wasn't well, but a hospital would be the end of him. Besides, perhaps the whole thing was due to exhaustion. Benjamin works too hard, she said in a tone of voice in which Gregório detected a clear accusation. Subdued, and somewhat remorseful, he conceded that perhaps it wasn't a case for a mental institution.

"But," he was quick to add, "something has to be done. I can no longer put up with this situation, Paulina. The firm is buzzing with gossip. I become discredited, you must understand."

Paulina was again in tears: Ah, Gregório, if you knew what I've been going through, she sobbed. I can well imagine, he said, but so what, Paulina? Let's get down to the nitty-gritty: what's the problem? what's the solution? I haven't gotten all day. We already know what the problem is, so let's tackle the solution.

After considering various solutions, they opted for the one that seemed the most practical, at least for the time being. Gregório would give Benjamin time off for a vacation. Paulina was to take her husband to a seaside resort in the state of Santa Catarina.

At first Benjamin didn't want to hear about a vacation, much less about going to the beach. I get nervous having nothing to do, he said. Besides, I dislike beaches, I'm allergic to sand.

Gregório then intervened and threatened to make an issue of it—he would even fire Benjamin if it came to that. Reluctantly, Benjamin acquiesced. They left the children with Paulina's mother and went to the seashore.

The hotel where they stayed was nearly empty, for it was the off-season.

During the first few days Benjamin seemed to be getting better. He would rise early in the morning, do calisthenics, have breakfast, then read for a while—mostly the Bible, in which he was again very interested. At ten o'clock in the morning they would go down to the beach and stroll among the rare vacationists. In a rather talkative mood, Benjamin would reminisce about his childhood and recall funny incidents that had occurred during their engagement. The sea air can do wonders! Paulina whispered into the mouthpiece when she phoned Gregório to keep him posted.

On the days that followed, however, Benjamin was again in a state of perturbation. He had become very quiet; he slept restlessly. In his sleep he mumbled incomprehensible things. One night he leaped out of bed screaming: Be gone, you wretch! Leave me alone! Paulina had to shake him awake. He was beside himself.

Paulina didn't know what to do. She was afraid of an unpleasant scene at the hotel; she considered returning to Porto Alegre, but she didn't dare to take any steps without first consulting Gregório. She phoned him.

"I don't want Benjamin here, not in the condition he is in!"

shouted Gregório. "He is to stay there until he gets better. Don't bring this nut here, I already have plenty of other worries."

Paulina returned to the bedroom. In the semidarkness, with the shutters closed to keep the heat out, Benjamin was lying motionless in bed. Paulina went up to him.

"He wants me to return to Porto Alegre," groaned Benjamin. "He wants me to announce that the days of the firm are numbered. Because of Gregório's, and other people's, inequities."

"He, who?" asked Paulina.

"You know who." He pointed to the ceiling. "Him. He won't leave me alone."

"Perhaps we'd better go home," said Paulina, trying hard not to cry. Benjamin leaped to his feet:

"No!" he shouted. "I don't want to. I don't want to go back! I don't want to prophetize! I want to stay here, sunbathing!"

He gripped his wife's hand: "Why can't I be like everybody else, Paulina? Why can't I lead a normal life?"

Weeping, they hugged each other. Paulina then helped him back to bed, and then she, too, lay down. She fell asleep. When she woke up, it was already night. Benjamin was not in bed.

"Benjamin!"

She made a dash for the bathroom: He wasn't there either. Seized by a sudden foreboding, she opened the door to the terrace.

A figure was running down the moonlit beach. It was Benjamin. At times he would stop to gaze at the sea; a moment later, he was running again, at times in one direction, at times in another, as if not knowing where to go.

Paulina knew what he was searching for. The fish. The prophet Jonah was searching for the gigantic fish that would swallow him and take him to his destination.

Benjamin began to take off his clothes. Naked, he then proceeded to advance toward the sea.

Tearing down the stairs, Paulina ran to the beach, which was only a short distance away from the hotel.

"Benjamin! Don't, for God's sake, don't!"

He was standing still, with the water waist high. She entered the sea and tried to lead him away, but he kept resisting, and finally he gave her a shove; she fell, and a wave dragged her away from him. At that moment the hotel staff arrived on the scene. With great effort they managed to take Benjamin back to his room.

A doctor came and gave him an injection. Shortly afterward, he was asleep.

Next morning Benjamin couldn't remember a thing. But he seemed fine, although tired and depressed.

They spent a few more days at the seashore, with Benjamin getting increasingly better. Paulina was convinced that he was cured. Maybe it was the dip in the sea, she thought. Or maybe it was the injection.

They returned to Porto Alegre. I feel great now, Benjamin would say again and again. He could hardly know that the prophets were readying themselves for a new attack.

Gregório had a partner—Alberto, the son of old Samuel, the firm's founder, now deceased. Alberto, a shy, absent-minded man, had a degree in economics, but gardening was his passion. His dream was to develop a new variety of begonia, which he would name after himself. Before dying, old Samuel had asked Gregório, whom he had promoted from manager to partner, to look after his son. Which Gregório did for several years, but with growing impatience. Prodded by his wife, ambitious like him, Gregório started to devise a plan to rid himself of his partner.

Benjamin, who suspected that something was afoot, had his suspicions confirmed when he overheard, by chance, a conversation that Gregório had over the telephone. It was a long-distance call from São Paulo, where Gregório had a mysterious informant who would tip him off about such things as investment opportunities, new regulations still in draft form, imminent bankruptcies. Then a few days later, Benjamin saw Gregório in conversation with Alberto. He was trying to persuade his partner to trade his interest in the company for shares in business enterprises in São Paulo:

"Your profits will be much higher, Alberto. You won't have to work anymore, you'll be able to live on the returns of your investments. You'll be able to spend the rest of your life puttering around in your vegetable garden."

"Flower garden," corrected Alberto.

"You bet, in your flower garden. So? What do you think? Wouldn't it be great?"

Benjamin was outraged. Gregório knew very well that the sharp rise in value of those shares was only temporary: the market was jittery, unstable. Poor Alberto was being lured into a trap.

But it was really none of his business, Benjamin thought to himself. Besides, it was all one to him whether he had one boss, or two bosses; it really made no difference to him whether he had to work for Gregório or for Alberto.

He went back to his office and closed the door. Before reaching his desk, he stopped: He was feeling dizzy. It was starting all over again—that thing with the prophets. With his eyes closed, his teeth clenched, his face congested, he stood there motionless for a few minutes. He then opened his eyes and made for the door, but before he had time to open it, he had to stand still again. The same weird sensation was now returning, but with greater intensity.

Two prophets. Two prophets were trying to gain control over him at the same time. Two fierce prophets Elijah and Amos—were fighting and jostling each other in a scramble for what little space there was inside poor Benjamin Bok. They were scrimmaging inside his chest, inside his belly, trampling his entrails with their sandaled feet, their shouts resonating in his skull. At last, having apparently

reached a settlement, they literally pushed Benjamin out. He went staggering down the carpeted corridor, and he opened the door of Gregório's office:

"You accursed man!" he shouted. "You want to seize your partner's share of the business just like King Ahab seized the vineyard of his subject Naboth!"

(It was Elijah speaking.)

"Woe to those who tread on the heads of the poor," he went on. "Woe to those who are unfair to the meek! Woe to those who falsify the balances by deceit! Woe to those who sleep in beds of ivory!"

(It was Amos speaking.)

Flabbergasted, Gregório watched him. Benjamin then started to sputter some garbled words. Inside him, they were fighting again, the two prophets. Finally, Elijah shouted:

"I'll say no more. I'm leaving now. I want my chariot of fire so that I can climb up to heaven!"

Gregório made a dash for the phone and dialed the number of a psychiatric clinic. An ambulance came. Benjamin didn't want to go, and he started fighting with the orderlies. Then all of a sudden he calmed down, and with docility, he let himself be led away. Had he convinced himself that the ambulance was the chariot of fire?

At the psychiatric clinic, Benjamin got to know the man who received the Holy Spirit.

"No, it's not a dove at all. It's more like a butterfly. It enters me through my right nostril and then it keeps flitting about inside my head. It's terrible."

He also got to know the woman in whom Buddha had once incarnated himself: "Just imagine my suffering—me, skinny like this, with that enormous roly-poly inside me."

And there was the mulatto upon whom saints were in the habit of descending; and there was the student who received Zeus. Everybody suffered. Everybody—except for a bearded, long-haired man,

who seemed tranquil. He was not possessed—he *was* Jesus Christ. I do envy him, the man who received the Holy Spirit would say with a sigh. I'm afraid I've been allotted the very worst of the Holy Trinity. I don't know what God the Father is like, but he can't possibly be as jittery as this butterfly.

Benjamin, too, envied Jesus Christ—the limpidity of that gaze, the splendor of that face. If only I could be like him, he would say. He would do anything to be able to rid himself of the prophets. As a matter of fact, the worst part of the whole experience was the expectancy, for once the prophets took possession of him and started speaking through his mouth, he no longer suffered; he became nothing but an empty carcass—a kind of armor that the spirits utilized.

One day he told Jesus Christ that he envied him.

"If your intention is to take my place," said the mental patient, smiling all the time, "desist from entertaining any such notion. There is one and only Son of God—me."

"No, that's not what I meant, you misunderstood me," explained Benjamin. "All I want is to rid myself of these prophets."

"The first step," the other man went on, "is for you to become a Christian. I could even make an apostle out of you, there are openings for apostles. Sell everything you own, distribute the money among the poor, and follow me. Together, we'll then traverse the roads of the Earth, leading men to their salvation."

He took a scrap of paper and a pencil stub out of his pocket.

"Let's make an inventory. What do you own? A car? A house? Clothes?"

No, none of that had anything to do with what Benjamin had wanted to say. Nobody understood him, not even his psychiatrist, a young man named Isaiah. The coincidence of this name didn't escape the notice of Benjamin. Nor of the doctor, for that matter. Deep down, the doctor would say to Benjamin, what you fear is the

prophet that I represent. What you're afraid of, Benjamin, is that I, the prophet Isaiah, will start fighting with your prophets.

Benjamin didn't believe in any of it, but he wasn't one to question the opinion of a doctor with postgraduate work in the United States. So, he would listen to the psychiatrist in silence; when it was time for occupational therapy, he would carve little wooden horses; and when it was time for recreation, he would compete in a ping-pong tournament. And he would take his medicine conscientiously. The worst of it was that the drugs gave him an allergy—a skin disease that quickly ulcerated. Here I am in the same condition as Job's, he thought, alarmed, but upon remembering that Job was not a prophet, he sighed, relieved.

Upon being discharged from the hospital, Benjamin found another job. For many years he led a tranquil life. That prophet thing seemed definitively over.

Then one day he disappeared.

Full of despair, Paulina notified the police. She then went to every single hospital in town—including the mental hospitals—and she ran ads in the newspapers, and put notices on the radio. She even went to the morgue. With revulsion and horror, she looked at the corpses that a sinister-looking attendant had taken out of the freezer. Luckily, Benjamin was not among them. But he was nowhere to be found.

Years later, the mailman delivered a yellow envelope to Paulina—mailed in Rio, but obviously originating from a foreign country. It contained nothing but a picture—a snapshot, badly out of focus, showing a smiling and somewhat fatter Benjamin Bok, in a safari outfit complete with a cork hat similar to the one the explorer Livingstone used to wear. He was sitting on a folding chair, in a barren plain. Beside him, lying on the ground, a huge lion. Standing somewhat farther away, a little black boy looked on curiously. And

there was nothing else. No letter, not even a dedication on the back of the picture.

However, it didn't take long for Paulina to deduce the meaning of the message. At first she thought of Daniel in the lions' den, but Daniel had already had his turn. No, what was represented there was a version of Isaiah's prophecy: *the lion will lie with the sheep, and a child will lead them*.

Benjamin Bok had finally found his peace.

Ah, Mommy Dear

FOR THE FIRST TIME NOW I'm writing *and* telling you the truth. All my other letters, Mother, were written at the whim of illusions by this poor fool who happens to be your daughter. How sad it is! How could this have happened to me, that's what I have been asking myself, and that's what I'm now asking you and Dad. Lately I've been thinking a lot about both of you. I miss you so badly. How painful it is.

I see myself as a little girl, with a ribbon tied to my hair, and you and Dad are taking me to a matinee. Remember? It was a western movie. Everybody in the movie theater was rooting for the good guy, but I kept cheering the Indians on. (By the way, wasn't this already an early sign of something wrong? Shouldn't you and Dad have taken some precautions? I don't know. Besides, knowing won't do any good.)

I see myself in high school, and then in college. Now I wish I had never studied Social Sciences. I wish I had never studied anything. Knowledge brought me nothing but misfortune. If I hadn't gone to college, if I hadn't majored in Anthropology, I would never have met this husband of mine, this Peter. This bastard.

I can imagine the look on your faces as you read this. I can imagine you and Dad wondering, how can she say such a thing about her