

The Autumn Of The Patriarch

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Over the weekend the vultures got into the Presidential Palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows, and the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside, and at dawn on Monday the city awoke out of its lethargy of centuries with the warm, soft breeze of a great man dead and rotting grandeur. Only then did we dare go in without attacking the crumbling walls of reinforced stone, as the more resolute had wished, and without using oxbows to knock the main door off its hinges, as others had proposed, because all that was needed was for someone to give a push and the great armored doors that had resisted the lombards of William Dampier during the building's heroic days gave way. It was like entering the atmosphere of another age, because the air was thinner in the rubble pits of the vast lair of power, and the silence was more ancient, and things were hard to see in the decrepit light. All across the first courtyard, where the paving stones had given way to the underground thrust of weeds, we saw the disorder of the quarters of the guard who had fled, the weapons abandoned in their racks, the big, long rough-planked tables with plates containing the leftovers of the Sunday lunch that had been interrupted by panic, in the shadows we saw the annex where Government House had been, colored fungi and pale irises among the unpled briefs whose normal course had been slower than the pace of the driest of lives, in the center of the courtyard we saw the baptismal font where more than five generations had been christened with martial sacraments, in the rear we saw the ancient viceregal stable, which had been transformed into a coach house, and among the camellias and butterflies we saw the berlin from stirring days, the wagon from the time of the plague, the coach from the year of the comet, the hearse from Progress in Order, the sleepwalking limousine of the first century of peace, all in good shape under the dusty cobwebs and all painted with the colors of the flag. In the next courtyard, behind an iron grille, were the lunar-dust-covered rosebushes under which the lepers had slept during the great days of the house, and they had proliferated to such a degree in their abandonment that there was scarcely an odorless chink in that atmosphere of roses which mingled with the stench that came to us

from the rear of the garden and the stink of the henhouse and the smell of dung and fermented urine from the cows and soldiers of the colonial basilica that had been converted into a milking barn. Opening a way through the asphyxiating growth we saw the arches of the gallery with potted carnations and sprigs of astromeda and pansies where the concubines' quarters had been, and judging from the variety of domestic leftovers and the quantity of sewing machines we thought it possible that more than a thousand women had lived there with their crew of seven-month runts, we saw the battlefield disorder of the kitchens, clothes rotting in the sun by the washbasins, the open slit trench shared by concubines and soldiers, and in back we saw the Babylonian willows that had been carried alive from Asia Minor in great seagoing hothouses, with their own soil, their sap, and their drizzle, and behind the willows we saw Government House, immense and sad, where the vultures were still entering through the chipped blinds. We did not have to knock down the door, as we had thought, for the main door seemed to open by itself with just the push of a voice, so we went up to the main floor along a bare stone stairway where the opera-house carpeting had been torn by the hooves of the cows, and from the first vestibule on down to the private bedrooms we saw the ruined offices and reception rooms through which the brazen cows wandered, eating the velvet curtains and nibbling at the trim on the chairs, we saw heroic portraits of saints and soldiers thrown to the floor among broken furniture and fresh cow flops, we saw a dining room that had been eaten up by the cows, the music room profaned by the cows' breakage, the domino tables destroyed, and the felt on the billiard tables cropped by the cows. Abandoned in a corner we saw the wind machine, the one which counterfeited any phenomenon from the four points of the compass, so that the people in the house could bear up under their nostalgia for the sea that had gone away, we saw birdcages hanging everywhere, still covered with the sleeping cloths put on some night the week before, and through the numerous windows we saw the broad and sleeping animal that was the city, still innocent of the historic Monday that was beginning to come to life, and beyond the city, up to the horizon, we saw the dead craters of harsh moon ash on the endless plain where the sea had been. In that forbidden corner which only a few people of privilege had ever come to know, we smelled the vultures' carnage for the first time, we caught their age-old asthma, their premonitory instinct, and guiding ourselves by the foul smell from their flapping wings in the reception room we found the wormy shells of the cows, their female hindquarters repeated many times in the full-length mirrors, and then we pushed open a side door that connected with an office hidden in the wall, and there we saw him,

in his denim uniform without insignia, in his boots, the gold spur on his left heel, older than all old men and all old animals on land or sea, and he was stretched out on the floor, face down, his right arm bent under his head as a pillow, as he had slept night after night every night of his ever so long life as a solitary despot.

Only when we turned him over to look at his face did we realize that it was impossible to recognize him, even though his face had not been pecked away by vultures, because none of us had ever seen him, and even though his profile was on both sides of all coins, on postage stamps, on condom labels, on trusses and scapulars, and even though his engraved portrait with the flag across his chest and the dragon of the fatherland was displayed at all times in all places, we knew that they were copies of copies of portraits that had already been considered unfaithful during the time of the comet, when our own parents knew who he was because they had heard tell from theirs, as they had from theirs before them, and from childhood on we grew accustomed to believe that he was alive in the house of power because someone had seen him light the Chinese lanterns at some festival, someone had told about seeing his sad eyes, his pale lips, his pensive hand waving through the liturgical decorations of the presidential coach, because one Sunday many years ago they had brought him the blind man on the street who for five centavos would recite the verses of the forgotten poet Rubén Darío and the blind man had come away happy with the nice wad they had paid for a recital that had only been for him, even though the blind man had not seen him, of course, not because he was blind but because no mortal had ever seen him since the days of the black vomit, and yet we knew that he was there, we knew it because the world went on, life went on, the mail was delivered, the municipal band played its retreat and silly waltzes on Saturday under the dusty palm trees and the dim street lights of the main square, and other old musicians took the places of the dead musicians in the band. In recent years when human sounds or the singing of birds were no longer heard inside and the armored doors were closed forever, we knew that there was someone in Government House because at night lights that looked like a ship's beacons could be seen through the windows of the side that faced the sea, and those who dared go closer could hear a disaster of hooves and animal sighs from behind the fortified walls, and one January afternoon we had seen a cow contemplating the sunset from the presidential balcony, just imagine, a cow on the balcony of the nation, what an awful thing, what a stinking country, and all sorts of conjectures were made about how it was possible for a cow to get onto a balcony, since everybody knew that cows can't climb

stairs, much less carpeted ones, so in the end we never knew if we had really seen it or whether we had been spending an afternoon on the main square and as we strolled along had dreamed that we had seen a cow on the presidential balcony, where nothing had been seen or would ever be seen again for many years, until dawn last Friday, when the first vultures began to arrive. Rising up from where they had always dozed on the cornices of the charity hospital they came, they came from farther inland, they came in successive waves, out of the horizon of the sea of dust where the sea had been, for a whole day they flew in slow circles over the house of power until a king with bridal-fan feathers and a crimson ruff gave a silent order and that breaking of glass began, that breeze of a great man dead, that in and out of vultures through the windows imaginable only in a house which lacked authority, so we dared go in too and in the deserted sanctuary we found the rubble of grandeur, the body that had been pecked at, the smooth maiden hands with the ring of power on the bone of the third finger, and his whole body was sprouting tiny lichens and parasitic animals from the depths of the sea, especially in the armpits and the groin, and he had the canvas truss on his herniated testicle, which was the only thing that had escaped the vultures in spite of its being the size of an ox kidney, but even then we did not dare believe in his death, because it was the second time he had been found in that office, alone and dressed and dead seemingly of natural causes during his sleep, as had been announced a long time ago in the prophetic waters of soothsayers' basins.

The first time they found him had been at the beginning of his autumn, the nation was still lively enough for him to feel menaced by death even in the solitude of his bedroom, and still he governed as if he knew he was predestined never to die, for at that time it did not look like a presidential palace but, rather, like a marketplace where a person had to make his way through barefoot orderlies unloading vegetables and chicken cages from donkeys in the corridors, stepping over beggar women with his famished godchildren who were sleeping in a huddle on the stairs awaiting the miracle of official charity, it was necessary to elude the flow of dirty water from the foulmouthed concubines who were putting fresh flowers in the vases in place of nocturnal flowers and swabbing the floor and singing songs of impossible love to the rhythm of the dry branches that beat rugs on the balconies, and all of it in the midst of the uproar of tenured civil servants who found hens laying eggs in desk drawers, and the traffic of whores and soldiers in the toilets, and a tumult of birds, and the fighting of street dogs in the midst of audiences, because no one knew who was who, or by whom, in that palace with open doors in the grand disorder of

which it was impossible to locate the government. The man of the house not only participated in that marketplace disaster but had set it up himself and ruled over it, for as soon as the lights in his bedroom went on, before the cocks began to crow, the reveille of the guard gave notice of the new day to the nearby Conde barracks, and from there it was repeated for the San Jerónimo base, and from there to the harbor fort, and there it would be repeated in the six successive reveilles that would first awaken the city and then the whole country, while he meditated in the portable latrine trying to stifle with his hands the buzzing in his ears, which was beginning to show itself at that time, and watched the passage of the lights of ships along the fickle topaz sea, which in those days of glory was still beneath his window. Every day, ever since he had taken possession of the house, he had supervised the milking in the cow barns, to measure with his own hand the quantity of milk that the three presidential wagons would carry to the barracks in the city, in the kitchen he would have a mug of black coffee and some cassava without knowing any too well the direction in which the whimsical winds of the new day would blow him, always attentive to the gabbling of the servants, who were the people in the house who spoke the same language as he, whose serious blandishments he respected most, and whose hearts he best deciphered, and a short time before nine o'clock he would take a slow bath in water with boiled leaves in the granite cistern built in the shadow of the almond trees of his private courtyard, and only after eleven o'clock would he manage to overcome the drowsiness of dawn and confront the hazards of reality. Previously, during the occupation by the Marines, he would shut himself up in his office with the commandant of the landing force to decide the destiny of the nation and sign all manner of laws and decrees with his thumbprint, for in those days he did not know how to read or write, but when they left him alone with his nation and his power again he did not poison his blood with the sluggishness of written law but governed orally and physically, present at every moment and everywhere with a flinty parsimony but also with a diligence inconceivable at his age, besieged by mobs of lepers, blind people, and cripples who begged for the salt of health from his hands, and lettered politicians and dauntless adulators who proclaimed him the corrector of earthquakes, eclipses, leap years, and other errors of God, dragging his great feet of an elephant walking in the snow all through the house as he resolved problems of state and household matters with the same simplicity with which he gave the order take that door away from here and put it over there for me—they took it away—put it back again for me—they put it back—the clock in the tower should not strike twelve at twelve o'clock but twice during the daytime so that life would seem longer—the order was

carried out, without an instant of hesitation, without a pause—except for the mortal hour of siesta time, when he would take refuge in the shade of the concubines. He would choose one by assault, without undressing her or getting undressed himself, without closing the door, and all through the house one could hear his heartless panting of an urgent spouse, the craving tinkle of his gold spur, his dog whimper, the surprise of the woman who wasted her time at love in trying to get rid of the squalid stares of the seven-month runts, her shouts of get out of here, go play in the courtyard, this isn't for children to see, and it was as if an angel had flown across the skies of the nation, voices were muffled, life came to a halt, everybody remained stone-still with a finger to his lips, not breathing, silence, the General is screwing, but those who knew him best had no faith even in the respite of that sacred moment, for it always seemed that he was in two places at once. They would see him playing dominoes at seven o'clock at night and at the same time he had been seen lighting cow chips to drive the mosquitoes out of the reception room, nor did anyone harbor any illusions until the lights in the last of the windows went out and they heard the noise of the three crossbars, the three locks, the three bolts on the door of the presidential bedroom, and they heard the thump of the body as it collapsed from fatigue onto the stone floor, and the breathing of a decrepit child that grew deeper as the tide rose, until the nocturnal harp of the wind silenced the cicadas and their fiddling and a broad big sea wave swept through the streets of the ancient city of viceroys and buccaneers and poured into Government House through all the windows like a tremendous August Saturday that caused barnacles to grow on the mirrors and left the reception room at the mercy of the sharks, and it rose higher than the highest levels of prehistoric oceans and overflowed the face of the land and space and time, and only he remained floating face down on the lunar water of his dreams of a solitary drowned man, in his denim private soldier's uniform, his boots, his gold spur, and with his right arm folded under his head to serve as a pillow.

That simultaneous presence everywhere during the flinty years that preceded his first death, that going up as he went down, that going into ecstasy in the sea while in agony in unsuccessful loves, was not a privilege of his nature, as his adulators proclaimed, or a mass hallucination, as his critics said, but his luck in counting on the complete service and doglike loyalty of Patricio Aragonés, his perfect double, who had been found without anyone's searching for him when they came with the news, General sir, a false presidential coach is driving around to Indian villages doing a prosperous business of

imposturing, they had seen the taciturn eyes in the morguelike shadows, they had seen the pale lips, the hand of a sensitive bride with a velvet glove that went along throwing handfuls of salt to sick people kneeling in the street, and behind the coach followed two bogus cavalry officers collecting hard cash for the favor of health, just imagine, General sir, what a sacrilege, and he gave no order against the impostor but asked instead that they bring him secretly to the Presidential Palace with his head covered by a burlap bag so that people would not get them mixed up, and then he suffered the humiliation of seeing himself in such a state of equality, God damn it, this man is me, he said, because it really was as if he were, except for the authority of the voice, which the other one never managed to imitate, and for the clearness of the lines on the hand, where his life line went along without obstacles all around the base of the thumb, and if he did not have Patricio Aragonés shot immediately it was not because he was interested in keeping him as his official impostor, that occurred to him later, but because the possibility that the cipher of his own fate was written on the hand of an impostor bothered him. When he became convinced of the vanity of that hope Patricio Aragonés had already impassively survived six assassination attempts, had acquired the habit of dragging his feet, which had been flattened out with a mallet, his ears buzzed, and his hernia ached at dawn in the winter, and he had learned to take off and put on the golden spur as if the straps were tangled up simply to gain time at audiences, muttering God damn it these buckles Flemish blacksmiths make aren't even good for this_ and from the jokester and gabbler that he had been when he was a glassblower at his father's carquaise he became thoughtful and sombre and paid no attention to what people were saying to him but scrutinized the shadows of their eyes to guess what they were not saying to him, and he never answered a question without first asking in turn what do you think, and from the slothful wastrel he had been in his business as a vender of miracles he became diligent to the point of torture and an implacable walker, he became tightfisted and rapacious, he resigned himself to sleeping on the floor, his clothes on, face down and with no pillow, and he renounced his premature presumption of an identity of his own and all hereditary vocation for the golden flightiness of simply blowing and making bottles, and he confronted the most terrible risks of power, laying cornerstones where the second stone was never to be laid, cutting ribbons in enemy territory, and bearing up under so many soft-boiled dreams and so many repressed sighs of impossible illusions as he crowned but did not so much as touch all those ephemeral and unattainable beauty queens, for he had become resigned forever to live a destiny that was not his, even though he did not do it out of greed or

conviction but because he had exchanged his life for the lifetime job of official impostor with a nominal salary of fifty pesos a month and the advantage of living like a king without the calamity of being one, what more could you ask?

That mixup of identities reached its high point one night when the wind was long and he found Patricio Aragonés sighing out toward the sea amidst the fragrant vapor of the jasmines and asked him with legitimate alarm if they had put wolfsbane in the food, because he was drifting off as if pierced by evil air, and Patricio Aragonés answered no, General, it's worse than that, on Saturday he had crowned a carnival queen and had danced the first waltz with her and now he couldn't find any exit out of that memory, because she was the most beautiful woman on earth, the kind you never get for yourself, General, it you could only see her, but he answered with a sigh of relief and said what the hell, Patricio Aragonés, this is the kind of trouble a man gets into when he gets all tied up with women, he proposed abducting her as he had done with so many good-looking women who had become his concubines, I'll have her held down by force on the bed with four troopers at her arms and legs while you take care of her with your soup ladle, God damn it, you can take her while she's bulldogged, he told him, even the tightest of them roll around with rage at first, and then they beg you don't leave me like this, General, like a sad rose apple whose seed has fallen off, but Patricio Aragonés didn't want that much, he wanted more, he wanted her to love him, because this girl is one of those who know where the tune comes from, General, you'll see when you get a look at her. So as a formula for relief he pointed out the nocturnal pathways to the rooms of his concubines to Patricio Aragonés and authorized him to make use of them as if it were he himself, by assault and quickly and with his clothes on, and Patricio Aragonés in good faith sank into that morass of loves even believing that he could put a gag on his urges through them, but such was his anxiety that sometimes he forgot the conditions of the loan, he would unbutton his fly absentmindedly, linger over details, carelessly stumble across the hidden jewels of the basest of women, draw out their deepest sighs, and even make them laugh with surprise in the shadows, you old devil, General, they would tell him, you're growing greedy on us in your old age, and from then on neither of them, nor any of the women either, ever knew whose child was whose or by whom, because Patricio Aragonés's children were seven-monthers just like his.

So it came to pass that Patricio Aragonés became the man most essential to the seat of power, the most beloved and also perhaps the most feared, and the General had more time available to take care of the armed forces, not because the armed forces were what sustained his power, as we all thought, but quite the contrary, because they were his most feared natural enemy, so he made some officers believe that they were being watched by others, he shuffled their assignments to prevent plotting, every army post received a ration of eight blank cartridges for every ten live rounds, and he sent them gunpowder mixed with beach sand, while he kept the good ammunition within reach in an arsenal in the Presidential Palace, the keys to which hung on a ring with other keys that had no duplicates and opened doors that no one else could open, protected by the tranquil shadow of his lifelong comrade General Rodrigo de Aguilar, an artilleryman and Academy graduate who was also his Minister of Defense and at the same time commander of the presidential guard, director of the state security services, and one of the very few mortals authorized to beat him in a game of dominoes, because he had lost his right arm trying to defuse a dynamite charge minutes before the presidential berlin was to pass by the site of an assassination attempt. He felt so safe under the protection of General Rodrigo de Aguilar and with the presence of Patricio Aragonés that he began to relax his concern with self-preservation and was becoming more and more visible, he dared take a ride through the city with only one aide in a covered wagon bearing insignia, looking through the peepholes at the arrogant gilt stone cathedral which he had declared by decree the most beautiful in the world, he peeped at the ancient stone mansions with entranceways from times when all was drowsy and the sunflowers turned seaward, the cobbled streets with the smell of snuff in the viceregal quarter, the pale young ladies making bobbin lace with ineluctable decency among the pots of carnations and the bunches of pansies in the light of balconies, the checkerboard convent of the Biscayan Sisters with the same harpsichord exercise at three in the afternoon with which they had celebrated the first passage of the comet, he went through the Babelic labyrinth of the commercial district, with its lethal music, the labarums of lottery tickets, the pushcarts with cane juice, the strings of iguana eggs, the Turks and their sunlight-faded bargains, the fearsome tapestry of the woman who had been changed into a scorpion for having disobeyed her parents, the alley of misery of women without men who would emerge naked at dusk to buy blue corbinas and red snappers and exchange mother-directed curses with the women selling vegetables while their clothes were drying on the carved wooden balconies, he smelled the rotten-shellfish wind, saw the everyday light of the pelicans around the corner, the

disorder of colors of the Negro shacks on the promontories of the bay, and suddenly there it was, the waterfront, alas, the waterfront, the dock and its spongy planks, the old battleship of the Marines, longer and gloomier than truth, the black dockworker woman who was too late in getting out of the way of the fearsome little wagon and felt touched by death at the sight of the sunset old man who was contemplating the waterfront with the saddest look in the world. It's him, she exclaimed with surprise, hurray for the stud, she shouted, hurray, shouted the men, the women, the children who came running out of the Chinese bars and lunchrooms, hurray, shouted the ones who held the horses' legs and blocked the coach's way so they could shake the hand of the power that was, a maneuver so swift and unforeseen that he barely had time to push aside the armed hand of his aide, scolding him in a tense voice, don't be a damned fool, Lieutenant, let them love me, so overwhelmed by that outpouring of love and by similar ones during the days that followed that it was hard for General Rodrigo de Aguilar to make him get out of his head the idea of riding about in an open carriage so that the patriots of the nation could see him full length, what the hell, because he didn't even suspect that the assault at the waterfront might have been spontaneous but that the ones that followed had been organized by his own security services in order to please him but without any risks.

So honeyed was he by the breezes of love on the eve of his autumn that he dared go out of the city after many years, he started up the old train painted with the colors of the flag again and went creeping and crawling about the ledges of his vast mournful realm, opening a path through orchid sprigs and Amazonian balsam apples, rousing monkeys, birds of paradise, jaguars sleeping on the tracks, even the glacial and deserted villages of his native barren uplands, where they waited for him at the station with hands playing mournful music, tolling death knells, displaying signs of welcome for the nameless patriot who sits at the right hand of the Holy Trinity, they recruited rustics from the back reaches who came down to meet the hidden power in the funereal shadows of the presidential coach, and those who managed to get close enough saw only the quivering lips, the palm of a hand with no origins which waved from the limbo of glory, while a member of the escort tried to get him away from the window, be careful, General, the nation needs you, but he would reply sleepily don't worry... Colonel, these people love me, and it was the same on the wooden paddle-wheeler that went along leaving a wake of player-piano waltzes in the midst of the sweet fragrance of gardenias and rotting salamanders of the equatorial tributaries, eluding prehistoric dragons in their skins like leather gun cases,

providential isles where sirens lay down to give birth, sunsets which were the disasters of immense vanished cities, even the burning and desolate shantytowns where the inhabitants appeared on the riverbank to see the wooden boat painted with the national colors and they could just make out an anonymous hand with a velvet glove which waved from a window of the presidential stateroom, but he saw the groups on shore who were waving malanga leaves for lack of flags, he saw those who jumped into the water with a live tapir, a gigantic yam that was as big as an elephant's foot, a cage of partridges for the presidential stewpot, and he sighed with emotion in the ecclesiastical penumbra of the stateroom, see how they come, Captain, see how they love me.

In December, when the Caribbean world turned to glass, he would take the closed carriage on a climb along the cornices of crags until he came to the house perched on top of the reefs, and he would spend the afternoon playing dominoes with the former dictators of other nations of the continent, the dethroned fathers of other countries to whom he had granted asylum over the course of many years and who were now growing old in the shadow of his mercy, dreaming in chairs on the terrace about the chimerical vessel of their second chance, talking to themselves, dying dead in the rest home he had built for them on the balcony of the sea after having received all of them as if each were the only one, for they all appeared at dawn in the dress uniform they had put on inside out over their pajamas, with chests of money they had pilfered from the public treasury and suitcases with boxes of decorations, newspaper clippings pasted into old ledgers, and photograph albums they would show him at the first audience, as if they were credentials, saying look, General, that's me when I was a lieutenant, this was the day I was inaugurated, this was the sixteenth anniversary of my taking power, here, look, General, but he would give them asylum without paying any more attention to them or inspecting credentials, because the only document of identity for an overthrown president should be his death certificate, he would say, and with the same disdain he would listen to the self-deluding little speech of I accept for this short time your noble hospitality while the justice of the people brings the usurper to account, the eternal formula of puerile solemnity which a while later he would hear from the usurper, and then from the usurper's usurper, as if the God-damned fools didn't know that in this business of men if you fall, you fall, and he put all of them up for a few months in the Presidential Palace, made them play dominoes until he had fleeced them down to their last cent, and then he took them by the arm over to the window looking out onto the sea, he helped them grieve

over this stinking life that only goes in one direction, he consoled them with the illusion that they would go over there, look, he said, over there to that big house that looks like an ocean liner aground on the top of the reefs, where they would have some lodgings with good light and good food, and plenty of time to forget along with other companions of misfortune, and with a terrace overlooking the sea, where he liked to sit on December afternoons not so much for the pleasure of playing dominoes with that bunch of boobs but to enjoy the base good fortune of not being one of them, to look at himself in the instructive mirror of their misery while he wallowed in the great slough of felicity, dreaming alone. Tiptoeing like an evil thought in pursuit of the tame mulatto girls who swept Government House in the dimness of dawn, he sniffed out their public dormitory and drugstore-hair-grease trail, he would lie in wait for the chance to catch one alone and make rooster love to her behind office doors while they burst with laughter in the shadows, what a devil you are, General, such a great man and still so horny, but he would be sad after making love and would start singing to console himself where no one could hear him, bright January moon, he would sing, see how sad I am standing on the gallows by your window, he would sing, so sure of his people's love on those Octobers with no evil omens that he would put up a hammock in the courtyard of the suburban mansion where his mother, Bendición Alvarado, lived and sleep his siesta in the shade of the tamarind trees, without an escort, dreaming about the errant fish who swam in the colored waters of the bedrooms, a nation is the best thing that was ever invented. Mother, he would sigh, yet he never waited for the answer from the only person in the world who dared scold him for the rancid onion smell of his armpits but returned to the Presidential Palace through the main door in exaltation with that miraculous season of the Caribbean in January, that reconciliation with the world at the end of old age, those mellow soft afternoons after he had made peace with the papal nuncio and the latter would visit him without an appointment to attempt to convert him to the faith of Christ while they had chocolate and cookies, and bursting with laughter he would charge, if God is the man you say he is tell him to rid me of this beetle that's buzzing in my ear, he would unbutton the nine buttons of his fly and show the nuncio his huge tool, tell him to deflate this creature, he would say, but the nuncio went along with his shepherd's work with patient stoicism, tried to convince him that everything that is truth, no matter who says it, comes from the Holy Spirit, and he would see the nuncio to the door when the first lights went on, dying with such laughter as had rarely been heard, don't waste your gunpowder on buzzards,

Father, he told him, why should you want to convert me since everything I'm doing is just what you people want, what the hell.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

The Epic Promise of Wedding Vows

That floating calmness shattered its hull suddenly at a cockpit on a faraway plain when a bloodthirsty cock tore the head off his adversary and ate it, pecking at it before an audience that was maddened by blood and a drunken brass band that celebrated the horror with festive music, and though he was the only one who spotted the evil omen he sensed that it was so dear and so imminent that he secretly ordered his escort to arrest one of the musicians, that one, the one playing the tuba, and, indeed they found a sawed-off shotgun on him and under torture he confessed that he had planned to shoot him during the confusion as the people left, it was quite obvious, of course, the General explained, because I was looking at everybody and everybody was looking back at me, but the only one who didn't dare look at me one single time was that son of a bitch with the tuba, poor devil, and still he knew that that wasn't the ultimate reason for his anxiety, because he kept on feeling it at night in Government House even after his security service had shown that there was no reason for worry, General sir, everything was in order, but he clung to Patricio Aragonés as if he were himself after he received the omen at the cockpit, he gave him his own food to eat, he gave him his own honey to drink with the same spoon in case it had been poisoned, so that he would at least die with the consolation that they had both died together, and they went like fugitives through forgotten rooms, walking on the rugs so that no one would hear their great furtive Siamese-elephant steps, navigating together in the intermittent light from the beacon as it came in through the windows and flooded the rooms of the house every thirty seconds with green, amidst the vapor from cow flocs and the mournful greetings of nocturnal ships on the sleeping seas. They would spend whole afternoons watching it rain, counting swallows on languid September afternoons like two aged lovers, so far removed from the world that he himself did not realize that his fierce struggle to exist twice was feeding the

contrary suspicion that he was existing less and less, that he was lying in a lethargy, that the guard had been doubled and no one was allowed in or out of the presidential quarters, that someone had still managed to get through that strict filter and had seen the birds silent in their cages, the cows drinking at the baptismal font, the lepers and cripples sleeping in the rose beds, and everybody at midday seemed to be waiting for dawn to come, since he had died of natural causes during his sleep as had been announced in the prophetic basins but the high command was delaying the notice while they tried to settle in bloody secret meetings their postponed quarrels.

Although he did not know of those rumors he was aware that something was about to occur in his life, he would interrupt the slow domino games to ask General Rodrigo de Aguilar how the mess was going, friend, everything under control, sir, the nation was calm, he watched for signs of premonition in the funeral pyres of cow chips that burned in the courtyard corridors, and in the wells with their ancient waters, but he could find no answer for his anxiety, he visited his mother, Bendición Alvarado, in the suburban mansion when the heat died down, they would sit and take in the cool afternoon breezes under the tamarinds, she in her maternal rocking chair, decrepit but with her soul intact, tossing handfuls of grain to the hens and the peacocks who pecked about the courtyard, and he in the large wicker chair, fanning himself with his hat, following with his look of old hunger the big mulatto women who brought him colored fruit juices to quench his hot thirst, General, thinking oh Bendición Alvarado, my mother, if you only knew that I can't stand the world anymore, that I'd like to go away, I don't know where, Mother, far away from so much injustice, but not even his mother was shown the inside of his sighs and he would return to the Presidential Palace with the first lights of evening, go in through the service entrance, hearing the clicking of sentries' heels as he went along the corridors, and they saluted him all's well, General sir, everything in order, but he knew that it wasn't true, that they were dissembling from habit, that they lied to him out of fear, that nothing was true in that crisis of uncertainty which was rendering his glory bitter and had been taking away his old desire to command ever since that fateful night at the cockpit. Until very late he would stay stretched out face down on the floor without sleeping, through the open window facing the sea he could hear the distant drums and sad bagpipes that were celebrating some wedding among the poor with the same uproar with which they would have celebrated his death, he could hear the farewell of a vagabond steamer that was weighing anchor at two o'clock in the morning without permission from the port captain,

he could hear the paper sound of the roses as they opened at dawn, without one moment of rest, sensing with a woodsman's instinct the imminence of the afternoon when he was on his way back from the suburban mansion and was surprised by a mob in the street, an opening and closing of windows and a panic of swallows in the diaphanous December sky, and he peeped through the curtain of the carriage to see what was going on and he said to himself this is it, Mother, this is it, he said to himself, with a terrible feeling of relief, seeing the colored balloons in the sky, the red and green balloons, the yellow balloons like great blue oranges, the innumerable wandering balloons that took flight in the midst of swallows' fright and floated for an instant in the crystal light of four o'clock and suddenly broke with a silent and unanimous explosion, releasing thousands and thousands of bits of paper over the city, a blizzard of broadsides which the coachman took advantage of in order to slip through the tumult of the public market without anyone's recognizing the coach of power, because everybody was busy in the scramble for the papers from the balloons, General sir, they were shouting out the words on them from the balconies, from memory they repeated down with oppression, they shouted death to the tyrant, and even the sentries along the corridors of the Presidential Palace were reading aloud about the union of all without distinction of class against the despotism of centuries, patriotic reconciliation against the corruption and the arrogance of the military, no more blood, they shouted, no more pillaging, the whole country was awakening from its age-old sleep at the moment he was going through the coach-house door and he ran into the terrible news, General sir, that Patricio Aragonés had been fatally wounded by a poisoned dart.

Years before, during one night of bad moods, he had proposed to Patricio Aragonés that they gamble their lives on heads or tails, heads you die, tails I die, but Patricio Aragonés made him see that they would both meet death in a tie because all coins had both their faces on both sides, he then proposed that they gamble their lives at the domino table, the best out of twenty games, and Patricio Aragonés accepted with great honor, General sir, with the proviso that you grant me the privilege of being allowed to beat you, and he accepted, agreed, so they played one game, they played two, they played twenty, Patricio Aragonés always won, a long and bloody battle was joined, and they reached the last game without his having won a single match, and Patricio Aragonés dried the sweat of his brow with his shirtsleeve, sighing I'm deeply sorry, General, but I don't want to die, and then he went about picking up the pieces, placed them in order in the little wooden box while he said to Patricio Aragonés, like a schoolmaster chanting a rote lesson, that he had no need

to die at the domino table either but in his own time and his own place from natural causes in his sleep, as had been predicted ever since the beginning of his days by the sibylline basins, and not even that way, when you come to think of it, because Bendición Alvarado didn't bring me into the world to pay any heed to basins but to command, and after all I am what I am, and not you, so give thanks to God that this was only a game, he told Patricio Aragonés, laughing, not having imagined then or ever that the terrible joke was to come true the night he went to Patricio Aragonés's room and found him facing the demands of death, hopeless, with no chance of surviving the poison, and Patricio Aragonés greeted him from the door with his hand outstretched, God save you, stud, it's a great honor to die for your country.

He stayed with him during his slow agony, the two of them alone in the room, giving him the spoonfuls of anodyne with his own hand, and Patricio Aragonés took them without gratitude, telling him between spoonfuls, I will leave you here for a while, my General, with your world of stink, because my heart tells me that quite soon we shall meet again in the depths of Hell, I all twisted up worse than a mullet because of this poison and you with your head in your hand looking for a place to put it, let it be said without the least bit of respect, General sir, that I can tell you now that I never loved you as you think but that ever since the days of the Filibusters, when I had the evil misfortune to chance into your domains, I've been praying that you would be killed, in a good way even, so that you would pay me back for this life of an orphan you gave me, first by tamping my feet flat so that they would be those of a sleepwalker like yours, then by piercing my nuts with a shoemaker's awl so I would develop a rupture, then by making me drink turpentine so I would forget how to read and write after all the work it took my mother to teach me, and always obliging me to go through the public ceremonies you didn't dare face, and not because the nation needs you alive as you say but because even the toughest man can get all tight when he crowns a beauty whore and doesn't know from what direction death will explode in on him, let it be said without the least respect. General, but he wasn't bothered by the insolence but, rather, by the ingratitude of Patricio Aragonés, who I set up in life like a king in a palace and I gave you what no one has ever given anybody in this world, even lending you my own women, we'd best not talk about that, General, Patricio Aragonés said, because it's better to be gelded by a mace than to go about laying mothers on the ground as if it were a matter of branding calves, just because those poor heartless bitch waifs don't even the feel the brand or kick or twist or complain like calves, and they

don't smoke from the haunches or smell of singed flesh, which is the least one asks of good women, but they lay down their dead-cow bodies so a person can do his duty while they go on peeling potatoes and shouting to the other women, please keep an eye on the kitchen for me while I take a breather here, so my rice doesn't burn, only you would think that stuff like that is love, General, because it's the only kind you know, without the least respect of course. And then he began to roar shut up, God damn it, shut up or you'll pay for it, but Patricio Aragonés kept on saying without the slightest intention of a joke why should I shut up when all you can do is kill me and you're already killing me, it would be better now to take advantage and look truth in the face, General, so you can know that no one has ever told you what he really thinks but that everyone tells you what he knows you want to hear while he bows to your face and thumbs his nose at you from behind, you might even thank fate that I'm the man who most pities you in this world because I'm the only one who looks like you, the only one honorable enough to sing out to you what everyone says, that you're president of nobody and that you're not on the throne because of your big guns but because the English sat you there and the Gringos kept you there with the pair of guns on their battleship, because I saw you scurrying like a cockroach this way and that, back and forth, when the Gringos shouted to you we're leaving you here with your nigger whorehouse, so let's see if you can put it all together without us, and if you never got up from your chair since that time or have never gone out it's probably not because you don't want to but because you can't, recognize it, because you know that the moment they see you on the street dressed as a mortal they're going to fall on you like a pack of dogs to collect from you, in one case for the killings at Santa Maria del Altar, in another for the prisoners thrown into the moat of the harbor fort to be eaten by crocodiles, in another for the people you skin alive and whose hides you send to their families as a lesson, he said, dipping into the bottomless well of his long-postponed rancor and drawing out the string of atrocities of his regime of infamy, until he could no longer tell him any more because a fiery rake tore his guts apart, his heart softened again, and he ended with no instance of offense but almost one of supplication, I'm serious, General, take advantage of the fact that I'm dying now and die with me, no one has more right than I to tell you this, because I never had any intention of looking like anyone, much less a national hero, but only a sad little glassblower making bottles like my father, take a chance, General, it doesn't hurt as much as it seems, and he said it with an air of such serene truth that the rage to answer did not overcome him but, rather, he tried to hold Patricio Aragonés up in his chair when he saw that he was starting to twist about and hold

his belly in his hands and was sobbing with tears of pain and shame, I'm so sorry, General, but I'm shitting in my pants and he thought he meant it in a figurative sense, that he was dying of fear, but Patricio Aragonés answered him no, I mean real shit shitting, General, and he managed to beseech him, hold on, Patricio Aragonés, hold on, we generals of the fatherland have to die like men even if we pay for it with our lives, but he said it too late, because Patricio Aragonés fell face down and on top of him, kicking with fear and soaked in filth and tears. In the office next to the hearing room he had to scrub the body with dishrag and soap to get rid of the bad smell, he dressed it in the clothes he was wearing, he put the canvas truss on, the boots, the gold spur on the left heel, feeling as he did it that he was changing into the most solitary man on earth, and last of all he erased all traces of the farce and prefigured the perfection, down to the tiniest details, that he had seen with his own eyes in the premonitory waters of the basins, so that at dawn on the next day the cleaning women would find the body, as they did find it, stretched out face down on the floor of the office, dead for the first time of natural causes in his sleep, in his denim uniform with no insignia, his boots, the gold spur, and with his right arm folded under his head as a pillow.

They did not spread the news immediately that time either, contrary to what he expected, but many prudent hours passed with clandestine investigations, secret agreements among the heirs of the regime, who were trying to gain time by denying the rumor of death with all manner of contradictory versions, they brought his mother, Bendición Alvarado, out into the commercial district to show that she was not wearing a mourning face. They dressed me in a flowered dress like a chippy, sir, they made me buy a macaw-feather hat so that everybody would see me happy, they made me buy every piece of junk to be found in the stores in spite of my telling them no, sir, it wasn't a time for buying but for crying, because even I believed that it was really my son who had died, and they forced me to smile when people took full-length pictures of me, because the military men said it had to be done for the good of the country. Meanwhile he wondered, confused in his hiding place, what's happening out in the world, since nothing had changed with the trick of his death, how was it that the sun had risen and had risen again without stumbling, why that Sunday look, Mother, why the same heat without me, he was wondering in surprise when a sudden cannon shot sounded from the fortress on the harbor and the main bells of the cathedral began to toll and all the way up to Government House came the surge of the crowds that were rising up out of the age-old morass with

the greatest piece of news in the world, and then he half opened the bedroom door and peeped into the audience room and saw himself laid out more dead and more decorated than all the dead popes of Christendom, wounded by the horror and the shame of his own body of a military stud lying among the flowers, his face pale with powder, his lips painted, the hard hands of a dauntless young lady crossed over the chest armored with military decorations, the showy dress uniform with the ten pips of General of the Universe, a rank someone had invented for him after death, the king-of-spades sabre he had never used, the patent-leather boots with two gold spurs, the vast paraphernalia of power and the lugubrious martial glories reduced to the human size of a faggot lying in state. God damn it, that can't be me, he said to himself, contemplating the procession that was parading around his corpse, and for an instant he forgot the murky reasons for the farce and felt raped and diminished by the inclemency of death toward the majesty of power, he saw life without him, he saw with a certain compassion how men were bereft of his authority, he saw with a hidden uneasiness those who had only come to decipher the enigma of whether it really was or was not he, he saw a very old man who gave the Masonic salute from the days of the Federalist War, he saw a man in mourning who kissed his ring, he saw a schoolgirl who laid a flower on him, he saw a fishwife who could not resist the truth of his death and strewed her basket of fresh fish all over the floor and embraced the perfumed corpse, sobbing aloud that it was him, my God, what's going to become of us without him, she wept. So it was him, they shouted, it was him, shouted the throng suffocated by the sun in the main square and then the bells of the cathedral stopped tolling their knell and those of all the churches announced a Wednesday of jubilation, Easter rockets exploded, Roman candles, drums of liberation, and he watched the assault groups that came in through the windows in the face of the silent complacency of the guard, he watched the ferocious leaders who dispersed the procession with clubs and knocked down the inconsolable fishwife, he watched the ones who attacked the corpse, the eight men who took it out of its immemorial state and its chimerical time of agapanthus lilies and sunflowers and dragged it down the stairs, those who gutted the insides of that paradise of opulence and misfortune, thinking they were destroying the lair of power forever, knocking over the papier-mâché Doric capitals, velvet curtains, and Babylonian columns crowned with alabaster palm trees, throwing birdcages out the window, the throne of the viceroys, the grand piano, breaking the funeral urns with the ashes of unknown patriots and Gobelin tapestries of maidens asleep in gondolas of disillusion and enormous old paintings of bishops and archaic military men and

inconceivable naval battles, annihilating that world so that in the memory of future generations not the slightest memory of the cursed line of men of arms would remain. And then he peeped into the street through the slats in the blinds to see what degree the ravages of defenestration had reached and with just one glance he saw more infamy and more ingratitude than had ever been seen and wept over by his eyes since the day he was born, Mother, he saw his merry widows leaving the building through the service entrance, leading the cows from the stables by the halter, carrying off government furniture, the jars of honey from your hives, Mother, he saw his seven-month runts making jubilation with kitchen pots and treasures from the crystal and table service for pontifical banquets, singing with street-urchin shouts my papa is dead, hurray for freedom, he saw the bonfire that had been lighted in the main square to burn the official portraits and the almanac lithographs that had been in all places and at all times ever since the beginning of his regime, and he saw his own body dragged by as it left behind along the street a trail of medals and epaulets, hussar's buttons, strands of brocade and frog braiding and tassels from the playing-card sabre and the ten sad pips of General of the Universe, Mother, look what they've done to me, he said, feeling in his own flesh the ignominy of the spitting and the sickbed pans that were thrown on him from the balconies as he went by, horrified by the idea of being quartered and devoured by dogs and vultures amidst the delirious howls and the roar of fireworks celebrating the carnival of his death.

When the cataclysm had passed he still heard the distant music of the windless afternoon, he went on killing mosquitoes and with the same slaps trying to kill the katydids in his ears which hindered him in his thinking, he still saw the light of the fires on the horizon, the lighthouse that tinted him with green every thirty seconds through the slits in the blinds, the natural breathing of daily life which was getting to be the same again while his death was changing into a different death, more like so many others in the past, the incessant torrent of reality which was carrying him off toward the no man's land of compassion and oblivion. God damn it, screw death, he exclaimed, and then he left his hiding place exalted by the certainty that his grandest hour had struck, he went through the sacked salons dragging his thick phantom feet in the midst of the ruins of his former life, in the shadows that smelled of dying flowers and burial candlewicks, he pushed open the door of the Cabinet room, heard through the smoky air the thin voices around the long walnut table, and saw through the smoke that all the ones he wanted to be there were there, the liberals who had sold the Federalist War, the conservatives who had bought it,

the generals of the high command, three of his Cabinet ministers, the archbishop and Ambassador Schontner, all together in one single plot calling for the unity of all against the despotism of centuries so that they could divide up among themselves the booty of his death, so absorbed in the depths of greed that no one noticed the appearance of the unburied president, who gave a single blow with the palm of his hand on the table and shouted aha! and that was all he had to do, for when he lifted his hand from the table the stampede of panic was over and all that was left in the room were the overflowing ashtrays, the coffee mugs, the chairs flung on the floor, and his comrade of a lifetime, General Rodrigo de Aguilar, in battle dress, minute, impassive, wafting away the smoke with his one hand and indicating to him to drop to the floor, General sir, because now the fun is going to begin, and they both dropped to the floor at the instant the machine guns' death jubilation started up by the front of the building, the butcher feast of the presidential guard, who with great pleasure and great honor, General sir, carried out his fierce orders that no one should escape alive from the meeting where treason was being hatched, any who tried to escape through the main door were mowed down with machine-gun bursts, the ones who were hanging out the windows were shot down like birds from a blind, the ones who were able to escape the encirclement and took refuge in nearby houses were gutted out with phosphorus grenades, and they finished off the wounded in accordance with the presidential criterion that any survivor is a dangerous enemy as long as he lives, while he remained lying face down on the floor two feet away from General Rodrigo de Aguilar, tolerating the hail of glass and plaster that came through the windows with every explosion, murmuring without pause as if he were praying, that's it, old friend, that's it, the trouble's over, from now on I'm going to rule alone with no dogs to bark at me, tomorrow we'll have to see what good has come out of this God-damned mess and what hasn't, and if we don't have anything to sit on in the meantime we'll get six leather stools of the cheapest sort, some straw mats, and put them here and there to cover up the holes, we'll buy a few more odds and ends, and that's it, no plates, no spoons, no nothing, I'll bring it all from the barracks, because I'm not going to have any military men or officers around, God damn it, all they're good for is to waste more milk and when there's trouble, as we've seen, they spit on the hand that feeds them, I'll only keep the presidential guard, who are straight shooters and brave fellows, and I'm not going to name any Cabinet, God damn it, just a good Minister of Health, for health is the only thing anyone really needs in life, and maybe another one with a good hand for what has to be put in writing, and that way we can rent out the ministries and barracks and save money

on help, because what's needed here isn't people but money, we'll get two good maids, one for cleaning and cooking and the other to wash and iron, and I'll take care of the cows and the birds myself when we get some, and no more of jumping whores in the toilets or lepers in the rosebushes or doctors of philosophy who know everything or wise politicians who see everything, because after all this is a presidential palace and not a nigger whorehouse as Patricio Aragonés said the Gringos said, and I'm more than enough to keep on ruling all alone until the comet comes by again, and not just once but ten times, because the way I am I don't intend to die again, God damn it, let other people die, he said, talking without any pauses to think, as if he were reciting by heart, because he had known ever since the war that thinking aloud was driving off the fear of the dynamite charges that were shaking the building, making plans for tomorrow in the morning and for the coming century at dusk, until the last coup de grâce rang out in the street and General Rodrigo de Aguilar crawled over to the window and gave the order to get the garbage wagons and take away the dead bodies and he left the room saying, have a good night, General, the same to you, old friend, he answered, thank you very much, lying face down on the funereal marble of the Cabinet room, and then he folded his right arm to serve as a pillow and fell asleep at once, more alone than ever, lulled by the sound of the trail of yellow leaves of his autumn of pain, which had begun forever that night with the smoking bodies and the puddles of red moons of the massacre.

He did not have to take any of the predicted measures, because the army broke up on its own, the troops scattered, the few officers who resisted until the last moment in the garrisons in the city and in another six in the countryside were wiped out by the presidential guard with the help of civilian volunteers, the surviving ministers fled into exile at dawn and only the two most faithful remained, one who was also his private physician and the other had the best handwriting in the country, and he did not have to kowtow to any foreign power, because the government coffers were overflowing with wedding rings given as surety by instant partisans, nor did he have to buy any mats or leather stools of the cheapest sort to repair the ravages of defenestration, because even before the pacification of the country was over the audience room was restored and more sumptuous than ever, and there were birdcages everywhere, chattering macaws, royal lory parrots who sang in the cornices for Spain and not for Portugal, discreet and serviceable women who kept the building as neat and clean as a battleship, and in through the windows came the music of glory, the same Roman candles of excitement, the same

bells of jubilation that had begun celebrating his death and went on celebrating his immortality, and there was a great permanent rally in the main square with shouts of eternal support and large signs saying God Save the Magnificent Who Arose from the Dead on the Third Day, an endless celebration that he did not have to prolong with any secret maneuvers as he had done at other times, because affairs of state took care of themselves without any help, the nation went along, he alone was the government, and no one circumvented his will whether by word or deed, because he was so alone in his glory that he no longer had any enemies left, and he was so thankful for his comrade of a lifetime Rodrigo de Aguilar that he did not get nervous again over the expense of the milk but ordered the private soldiers who had distinguished themselves by their ferocity and sense of duty to form in the courtyard, and pointing to them according to the impulses of his inspiration he promoted them to the highest ranks, knowing that he was restoring the armed forces who were going to spit on the hand that fed them, you to captain, you to major, you to colonel, what am I saying, to general, and all the rest to lieutenant, what the hell, old friend, here's your army, and he was so moved by those who had been grieved by his death that he had them fetch the old man with the Masonic salute and the gentleman in mourning who had kissed his ring and he decorated them with the medal of peace, he had them bring in the fishwife and he gave her what she said she needed most, which was a house with a lot of rooms where she could live with her fourteen children, he had them bring in the schoolgirl who had laid a flower on the corpse and granted her what she most wanted this world, which was to get married to a man of the sea, but in spite of those acts of relief his confused heart did not have a moment of rest until in the courtyard of the San Jerónimo barracks he saw bound and spat upon the assault groups who had sacked the Presidential Palace, he recognized them one by one with the remorseless memory of rancor and he went about separating them into different groups according to the intensity of the offense, you here, the one who led the assault, you over there, the ones who had thrown the inconsolable fishwife to the floor, you here, the ones who had taken the corpse out of the coffin and dragged it down the stairs and through the mire, and all the rest on this side, you bastards, although he was really not interested in the punishment but in proving to himself that the profanation of the body and the attack on the building had not been a spontaneous and popular act but an infamous mercenary deal, so he took charge of the interrogation of the prisoners, physically present and doing the talking himself, to get them to tell him willingly the illusory truth that his heart needed, but he could not manage it, he had them hung from a horizontal beam like parrots, tied hand and foot with their

heads down, for hours on end, but he could not manage it, he had one thrown into the moat of the courtyard and the others saw him quartered and devoured by the crocodiles, but he could not manage it, he chose one out of the main group and had him skinned alive in the presence of all, and they saw his flesh tender and yellow like a newborn placenta and they felt the soaking of the warm blood broth of the body that had been laid bare as it went through its throes thrashing about on the courtyard stones, and then they confessed what he wanted, that they had been paid four hundred gold pesos to drag the corpse to the dung heap in the marketplace, that they didn't want to do it for love or money because they had nothing against him, all the less so since he was dead, but that at a secret meeting where they even saw two generals from the high command they had all been frightened with every manner of threat and that was why we did it, General sir, word of honor, and then he exhaled a great mouthful of relief, ordered that they be fed and allowed to rest that night and in the morning thrown to the crocodiles, poor deceived boys, he sighed and went back to the Presidential Palace with his heart free of the hair shirt of doubt, murmuring you all saw it, God damn it, you all saw it, these people love me. Resolved to dissipate even the dregs of the uneasiness that Patricio Aragonés had sown in his heart, he decided that those acts of torture would be the last of his regime, the crocodiles were killed, the torture chambers where it was possible to crumble every bone in the body one by one without killing were dismantled, he proclaimed a general amnesty, he looked to the future with the magical idea that came to him, the trouble with this country is that the people have too much time on their hands to think, and looking for a way to keep them busy he restored the March poetry festival and the annual contest for the election of a beauty queen, he built the largest baseball stadium in the Caribbean and imparted to our team the motto of Victory or Death, and he ordered a free school established in each province to teach sweeping and the pupils fanaticized by the presidential stimulus went on to sweep the streets after having swept their houses and then the nearby highways and roads, so that in official processions with the national flag and large banners saying God Save the All Pure Who Watches Over the Cleanliness of the Nation piles of trash were carried back and forth from one province to another without anyone's knowing what to do with them, while he dragged his slow feet of a meditative beast about in search of new formulas to keep the civilian population busy, opening a way among the lepers and blind men and cripples who begged the salt of health from his hands, baptizing with his name at the font in the courtyard the children of his godchildren among persistent adulators who proclaimed him the one and only, because now he could

not count on the resources of any lookalike and he had to make himself double in a marketplace of a palace where every day cages and more cages of rare birds arrived ever since the secret was let out that his mother, Bendición Alvarado, followed the trade of birdwoman, and even though some sent them out of adulation and others sent them as a joke after a short time there was no room to hang any more cages, and he tried to attend to so many public matters at the same time that among the crowds in the courtyards and the offices it was impossible to tell who were the servants and who were the ones served, and they knocked down so many walls to make more room and opened so many windows for a view of the sea that the simple act of going from one room to another was like crossing the deck of a sailboat adrift in a crosswind autumn.

The March trade winds had always come in through the windows of the building, but now they said they were the winds of peace, General sir, and it was the same buzzing in the eardrums that he had heard for many years, but even his physician told him that it was the buzz of peace, General sir, because ever since they had found him dead the first time all things in Heaven and on earth had changed into things of peace, General sir, and he believed it, and he believed it so much that in December he went back to going up to the house on the reef to seek solace in the misfortune of the brotherhood of nostalgic former dictators, and the second time he was found chewed away by vultures in the same office, wearing the same clothes and in the same position, none of us were old enough to remember what had happened the first time, but not even the least prudent among us would accept appearances, because so many times it had been a given fact that he was prostrate with epilepsy and would fall off his throne during the course of audiences, twisting with convulsions as gall froth foamed out of his mouth, that he had lost his speech from so much talking and had ventriloquists stationed behind the curtains to make it appear that he was speaking, that shad scales were breaking out all over his body as punishment for his perversions, that in the coolness of December the rupture sang sea chanteys to him and he could only walk with the aid of a small orthopedic cart which bore his herniated testicle, that a military van had brought in a coffin with gold trim and purple ribbons and that someone had seen Bendición Alvarado bleeding to death from weeping in the rain garden, but the more certain the rumors of his death seemed, the more he would appear alive and authoritarian at the least expected moment to impose other

unforeseen directions to our destiny, and we knew that no evidence of his death was final, because there was always another truth behind the truth. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Gregory Rabassa.)

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