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Geometric and
Non-Geometric Figures

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By Claude Simon

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In the display window a dozen identical female legs are lined up in a row, feet up, the thighs lopped off at the hip joint resting on the floor, the knees slightly bent, as though the legs had been removed from some chorus of dancers at the precise moment that they are all kicking in unison, and put there in the window, just as they were, or perhaps snipped out, in monotonous multiplicity, from some advertisement showing a pretty girl in her slip pulling on a stocking, sitting on a pouf or on the edge of an unmade bed, her torso leaning backward, with the leg that she is pulling the stocking over raised up high, and a kitten, or a curly-haired puppy gleefully standing on its hind legs, barking, with its pink tongue sticking out. The legs are made of a transparent ochre-tinted plastic material molded in one piece, reminiscent of some sort of lightweight prosthetic device. The male nurse (or the young intern) is holding a severed leg under his arm, like a package. Crowding around an old man with a little white goatee and pince-nez, clad in a hospital smock with a white skullcap atop his head and holding a scalpel in his hand, are a dozen younger people wearing the same sort of white skullcap and white smock with an apron, giving them the appearance of butcher's helpers. The resemblance is even more marked because of their rolled-up sleeves and the bloodstains spattered all over their clothes, and because of the fact that several of them are holding instruments in their hands, saws, pliers, retractors, a number of which are covered with blood. Peeking out of the front pocket of their aprons, which looks like a kangaroo's pouch, are the curved handles of scissors or forceps. It is one of these younger persons who is holding the severed leg under his arm. Another one is carrying a glass jar, inside which there can be seen a curled-up fetus with an enormous head. Following along behind the man with the goatee and the pince-nez, they walk over to an operating table on which a young woman is lying naked. Framed in a halo of blond curls, her face resembles that of the little cherub on the wrappers of Béb  Cadum soap. She is lying there with her arms stretched out alongside her body, not at all frightened, laughing, her head flat on the table, turned to one side toward the spectator, displaying a row of straight, even

teeth. The tips of her very carefully outlined, bright pink nipples are hard and erect. The faces of the young interns are gleeful. The legs are clad in transparent, unusually sheer hose, ranging in color from a light beige to a dark beige. The shiny molded plastic material glistens through the mesh of the hose. The doctor instructs him to take his pants down. At the other end of the street he can see the avenue that crosses it, the scraggly trees, with leaves that have turned yellow, in the little square, the traffic going past, and farther on, overhanging the sidewalk, the glass and metal marquee of the hotel. The intersection of the street and the avenue is about a hundred yards away, and the entrance to the hotel is another forty yards or so past it, on the other side of the intersection. The sparse, sickly looking leaves of the trees, with the texture of cardboard, of a green shading off into a brownish or even a dull rusty color, are rustling slightly in front of the building which stands at the intersection of the street and the avenue, rising up in parallel vertical lines like the pipes of an organ. A bit of pale sky can be glimpsed through the narrow opening framed by the tall façades of the buildings lining both sides of the street. The end of this narrow slit is so blurred by the dense heat waves as to be scarcely visible. The sun's rays at this hour are raking one whole side of the street, tinting it a pale, almost dusty yellow. Standing there motionless next to the window with the row of legs on display, he can feel beneath his palm the bottom ribs on his left side, below which his fingers cautiously probe the soft wall of his belly. The colored plate is an illustration of a male torso. The flesh is tinted a pinkish ocher. The abdominal wall has been cut away from the diaphragm down to the upper edge of the pubis, like a pot lid that has been removed. The opening thus made is more or less the same shape as the soundbox of a guitar, slightly pinched in at the waist. Purple or bluish organs can be seen inside. Where his fingers are pressing is a mass with soft contours, like a sack, colored brick red. Approximately in the center of it there is a pale olive-green pouch, pressing against the wall of the abdomen, rounding off into a little dome at the top, the lower part of it narrowing down to a thin tube that forks off into two branches which disappear from view in the

fold of the reddish lobes. A second tube, larger in diameter and colored mauve, is intertwined with this first tube and its various ramifications. The illustrator has placed a yellow highlight on the little dome formed by the green pouch to indicate that the surface of it is shiny. The doctor asks him if the pain is like a stabbing stitch in his side, a burning sensation, or a dull ache. His pants are now draped about his ankles in accordion pleats. As he lowers his head he sees his shriveled, wrinkled penis and his hairy legs. Hanging on one of the walls of the examining room is a framed drawing under glass showing a procession of gleeful young medical students, armed with a variety of surgical instruments, following a bearded chief physician over to an operating table, on which a young woman is lying naked, with a broad grin on her face that bares all her teeth. The doctor's office is furnished in a style that dates from no one period in particular but is very ornate and pretentious. The wood paneling is a dark, shiny red. The desk top is set in a fillet of gilded bronze, decorated with little garlands at the corners. At the edge of the desk top is a bronze sculpture mounted on a marble pedestal. It represents a woman in a semireclining position, with her body and legs draped in a peplum with multiple folds. On the salient portions of her body -her head, her knees, her instep with the drapery pushed up in folds just above it-the polished bronze has a bright, yellowish sheen. One of the woman's arms encircles a sort of wrought urn with a hinged lid. An opening in the shape of a half-moon has been cut out just inside the edge of the lid so that a pen may be inserted in it, but the hole is empty. His clenched jaws are seized by a muscle spasm which spreads to his temples. His facial muscles twitch slightly. He feels the sweat sliding down his skin, through his hair, onto his neck and back. A grayish, palpable heat seems to have been trapped between the dirty brown walls lining the street. Bending slightly forward, his face tense, he walks over to the fireplug poking up out of the sidewalk at the base of the building, to the right of the display window. The fireplug consists of a heavy cast-iron pipe painted red, which mounts vertically and then curves forward, dividing at the same time into two horizontal branches whose openings are sealed by

a cap fastened to the stem of the fireplug with a little metal chain. The two divergent branches are sufficiently close together to form a kind of seat, onto which he now eases himself down. In this position the pain is no less intense, but he is at least spared the effort of attempting to stay on his feet. Two blacks dressed in white overalls, with long-billed caps on their heads, are busy unloading a truck parked at the edge of the sidewalk. They remove large cardboard boxes from the back of it and carry them inside the shop, holding them against their chests, their torsos leaning forward, their heads turned to one side, their cheeks pressing against the sides of the boxes. As his eyes follow one of them, he notices that the man is looking at him. That is to say, as the black crosses the sidewalk with his load, he stares in his direction for a fraction of a second. Then he disappears inside the shop, which in point of fact looks more like a warehouse of some sort. When the man comes back out a moment later, he looks in his direction again, his eyes remaining fixed on him for a few fractions of a second longer than before and then turning away as he walks back across the sidewalk in the opposite direction. He folds the cardboard box, now empty, into a flat rectangle as he crosses to the curb, and then throws it on the street beneath the back of the truck, pushing it with his foot and thus at the same time pushing the other packing material that has already accumulated farther back under the truck. As he waits for his co-worker inside the truck to hand him another carton, the whites of his eyes become visible, with the pupils in one corner, as he casts another sidelong glance in the direction of the fireplug. His shiny nut-brown face is adorned with a short clipped moustache. His lower jaw is unusually massive and his cheeks puffed out as though his mouth were full. Then the whites of his eyes disappear. When he crosses the sidewalk this time, with another box clutched to his chest, his eyelids are lowered, his attention seemingly concentrated on his feet so as not to stumble over the doorstep of the shop, which he now enters without a moment's pause. At the base of the building, immediately adjoining the fireplug, the wall is constructed of large blocks of gray stone, reaching up as high as a man's head. Above this bottom course of

stone blocks, narrower blocks, separated by concave masonry joints, reaching to the third story, form parallel horizontal bands. By tilting his head back, he can see the entire facade, the upper portion of which is faced with brownish-colored bricks. It rises toward the pale sky, pierced at regular intervals by square windows without balconies or any sort of frame, the apparent size of these rows of windows and the spaces between them progressively decreasing, thus forming lines in narrowing perspective, interrupted at the twentieth-story level, which the viewer's eye projects so that they converge at an imaginary point in the blinding bright, colorless, empty sky above. Overcome by a slight attack of vertigo, he lowers his head, his glance sweeping down the facade from the brown at the top to the gray at the bottom. He then spies tall white letters forming the word DIOS, just above his head on the stone blocks at the base of the building. Leaning to one side, he is able to make out the entire inscription, which reads: DIOS ES AMOR, traced in irregular, crooked capital letters each as wide as two fingers. The second foot of the R at the end is disproportionately long. The liquid paint has run down in dribbles of varying lengths from the bottom curves or feet of the various letters, the paint trails thickening and forming flattened balls that have solidified at their lower extremities. Since the dribbles from the O of the word DIOS have run down exactly to the level of his eye, he can see the slight meanders in the trajectory followed by the paint as it trickled down the somewhat coarse, grainy stone, deflected from its straight downward path by the minute irregularities of the surface. Above the inscription a cross has been traced in the same white paint, the lateral bar of which also has left trickles of white blood running down. A man with a bald head and a long beard, his torso sheathed in a cuirass, with a short peplum beginning at the waist beneath it, is standing on a beach. He has removed his helmet from his head and is holding it in the crook of his arm, with his rigid index finger pointing in the direction of a crucifix, which he is holding up toward the green sky with his other hand. On the right a number of half-naked men and women are joining hands, bowing their heads or touching one knee to the

ground. Several of them are still partially hidden by the luxuriant vegetation, with large, sharply outlined leaves or thin, bristling, spiky ones, topped by lofty palms with slanting trunks. At this moment, the black in the white overalls comes out of the shop once again, folding another brown cardboard box flat. As on his way into the shop, he does not look in the direction of the fireplug on his way out. The foliage, the kneeling natives in the monochrome are all tinted green, as is the warrior brandishing the crucifix. The black appears to be having some difficulty stuffing the cardboard packing material in under the wheels of the truck along with all the other cartons already piled up underneath it. He gives the pile a few vigorous kicks with his foot, but one of the faces of the dihedron formed by the flattened carton refuses to stay folded. Behind the bald-headed warrior is a group of men clad in armor, wearing helmets, and armed with lances and harquebuses, and farther in the distance several sailors are in the midst of beaching a launch, with jade-colored waves still lapping against the stern. The tall black is now bent far over, his torso horizontal, supporting himself by resting one hand on the edge of the truck bed, his right leg lashing out at the pile of packing material which little by little he manages to kick farther underneath the truck. Embroidered on the long bill of his cap and on the pocket of his white overalls is a small beige-colored woman's leg, bent at the knee, with the foot up, surmounted by an emblem consisting of two intertwined letters. The pale green stamp is in the shape of a long rectangle, surrounded by a narrow white margin with serrated edges. The cross that the steel-gauntleted hand of the old warrior is displaying to the savages is surrounded by divergent rays of light, like a sunburst, in an absinthe-colored sky. The cruciform shadow of the airplane glides swiftly across a velvety, or rather, a fuzzy surface, of an almost uniform green, with only a few splashes of a darker green or pale yellowish highlights here and there. The contours of the cross undergo imperceptible distortions as it passes over hillocks choked with dense, luxuriant vegetation, consisting of tall trees and thick underbrush topped by huge, towering palms with slanting trunks, looking like a kind of giant moss, covering

everything, parted only by watercourses or grassy swamps. The swamp waters are a metallic gray. The rivers leave meandering, convulsive traces, twisting back on themselves in tortuous yellow curves. Pressing from beneath against the reddish mass and its little green pouch is a large, livid, swollen tube, traversed by a fine network of little blue capillaries, the entire conformation marking off a more or less square-shaped area inside the opening in the form of a guitar that has been cut away on the front of the body. The upper edge of the square is bending beneath the weight of this tube, as though the latter were a heavy garland. The inside of the square is entirely filled with the sinuous folds of another, narrower tube, similar in appearance to a very large earthworm, convulsively coiling back on itself. The whole mass is moving very slightly, slowly contracting and expanding, imperceptibly changing shape. With his jaws still tightly clenched, beads of sweat running down his temples and breaking out on his upper lip, his eyes expressionless, the sick man slips his left hand into his pants pocket, searching inside it with two fingers for a small packet, from which they remove a cigarette and place it in his mouth. He then remains in the same position, the unlighted cigarette thrust between his lips, his jaws clamped shut, the tip of the cigarette wiggling up and down very slightly, in response to the movement of his trembling lips. A simple system of mechanical relays, in the form of interlocking cogs, drives the limbs of the rabbit advancing along the sidewalk. Fitted with little metal rods, they move up and down causing the tiny rods to strike a brass bell mounted in front of the animal on the little platform it is standing on. The rabbit has long white ears. It is dressed in a yellow sweater and red trousers. Since the child's hand keeps exerting irregular tractive forces on the string by which he is pulling it, the rabbit moves forward by fits and starts. When the child stops, the rabbit's limbs stop moving as well, and the faint tinkle of the bell produced by the little rods also ceases. The intestine is comprised of two principal parts: the small intestine and the large intestine. The average length of the small intestine is 7 meters. The large intestine, or colon, begins at the cecum, descends in a loop formed by the right colon, the trans-

verse colon, and the left colon, with the lower end of this latter leading to the sigmoid colon. The doctor instructs him to lie down on the examining table. This table consists of a flat sheet of lead supported by thin metal legs. The entire surface of the table is covered with a gleaming coat of enamel, the color of an eggshell. Its bare, spare shape, its skeletonlike appearance, its frail legs, and the glistening painted surface form an incongruous contrast with the deep-piled wool rug woven in a red, blue, and green pattern, the mahogany desk, the bronze ornaments, and the leather armchairs. His ankles fettered by his pants, which have fallen down around his feet, he clumsily makes his way over to the shiny enameled examining table. The doctor is a man somewhere in his forties. He looks like a banker or a business executive, for his expression is at once intent, distant, and cold. He is bald and deeply tanned, and is wearing glasses with gold frames and an expensive gray suit tailored in fine, soft wool. His hands with carefully manicured fingernails are circled at the wrist by immaculate shirt cuffs fastened with solid-gold square cufflinks. As he hoists himself up onto the examining table, pivots on his buttocks, and raises his fettered ankles, the doctor whips a watch out of his vest pocket, casts a rapid glance at it, thrusts it back in his pocket, and walks over to the examining table. The reddish or muddy brown courses of the rivers trace meanders whose loops curve back on themselves until they almost meet, twisting convulsively, like earthworms cut in half by a shovel, or snakes. The dense vegetation affords not the slightest glimpse of bare earth. No trace of human life is visible, no roads, no footpaths, no houses, no shacks. Without ceasing their contortions, the watercourses suddenly widen, taking on the appearance of flames, or rather of curved blades of stout daggers, gleaming with the same metallic sheen, and then disappearing from sight amid the brush and the tall grass, though from time to time, like sheets of tin, they catch the reflections of the sun, moving at the same speed as the airplane. Here and there one has a brief glimpse of a tree felled by a hurricane, its roots having doubtless rotted away, lying half-submerged with only the branches that dip down into the swamp holding it above the water. The snake is

coiled on a tree trunk of which nothing is left now save naked sapwood of a yellowish-white color resembling bone, and a few patches of bark. The creature looks like a large tube bending beneath its own weight, dangling in gently rounded curves from the points at which it is attached to its support. Its body is adorned with brown geometrical patterns in the form of perfect lozenges, with light-colored patches in the center of each of them. Outlined by scales, the sides of the lozenges and the contours of the central patches form a sharp saw-toothed pattern, resembling that of the edgings of embroidered lace curtains. The illustration is labeled *snake* in italics, and underneath this caption, in finer print, are the words *boa constrictor*. The phylum of reptiles, or ophidians, comprises 2300 species inhabiting tropical or temperate regions. The body of reptiles is more or less cylindrical and elongated (measuring as much as 36 feet from tip to tip, in the case of the anaconda), and is covered with tiny overlapping scales, except on the belly, which is covered with broad transverse bands of scales. Reptiles have lidless eyes, a tactile, exploratory (but not at all poisonous) tongue, a mouth which. *Coral snake*: see *Elaps*. / *Indian cobra*: see *Naja*. / *Rattlesnake*: see *Crotalus*. / *Serpent-eater*, masculine noun: A diurnal raptorial bird with a curved beak; its eye is surrounded by blood-red cartilage; its head has a crest of dark feathers; its breast is white; the back of its neck and its wing joints are covered with short pale-gold feathers, and its wings are dark brown at the tips; its thighs are also dark brown. Its most characteristic feature is its very long legs, covered with horny, leathery skin, with feet ending in sharp curved talons. It strides like a heron through the tall grass. Moving in rapidly drifting streaks at first, and then piling up in dense gray masses that nonetheless leave glimpses of swampland visible through the holes in them, and finally forming an unbroken layer, the cloud cover now completely blots out the landscape below. The shadow of the airplane flits across its dazzlingly bright surface, surrounded by a halo of pale iridescent colors, rising and falling as it passes over the woolly humps of clouds below. A sudden tug of the child's hand on the string having caused the platform to tilt to one side, the rabbit wobbles and then

topples over on the sidewalk. The child continues to drag it along on its side for a few yards, then turns around and stops in his tracks. His mother halts too. The tall black who is again heading toward the entrance of the shop is obliged to step over the string that is now stretched taut between the child's clenched fist and the rabbit. Beyond the row of legs raised in the air, shelves can be seen inside the shop, with shiny white cardboard boxes piled up on top of them. Sunbeams play across the three walls of the shop, the fourth side of which contains the display window and the door. The boxes ranged along the shelves and piled up on top of them thus form a more or less unbroken outline (certain shelves are not completely stocked and therefore there are empty spaces showing between them, and there is also a door in the wall at the back of the shop) delineating a space that is approximately the shape of a cube, occupied by a long counter made of yellow wood, a table with a typewriter, and several chairs with curved backs, also made of yellow wood. Here and there the tall buildings lining the street are separated by houses that are five, four, or even as few as three stories high. Despite these crenelations and the relatively broad expanse of the street, the impression one receives is that of towering, unbroken walls with only a narrow passageway between them. This impression is enhanced by the fact that the street is unusually long, stretching out in a straight line as far as the lake, more than a mile away, its end disappearing, fading away in the haze, as well as by the disordered profusion of shop signs and panels with advertisements attached to the buildings at the second-floor level and overhanging the sidewalks. In fact, there are not many signs, but when viewed in enfilade they appear to be straddling one another, piled one on top of the other, so that the jumble of letters or designs makes them appear to be more numerous than is actually the case. Most of them are made of neon tubes, and since at this hour they are not turned on, they look dull and gray and dusty in the pale, burning-hot sunlight. Others are made of plastic (in the shape of more or less elongated rectangles, or of superimposed cubes, each bearing one letter), in violently contrasting hues, a riot of garish colors in which reds and greens pre-

dominate. The mother is leaning down toward the child now, pointing several times at the rabbit lying on the sidewalk, and then at his hand clutching the end of the string. The child's eyes follow her repeated gesture, gazing first at the toy and then at his clenched fist, which he raises to his eye level and stares at intently. The child's mother then walks over to the rabbit, bends down, and sets it upright again. A large gap in the sea of clouds affords another glimpse of the ground below, or rather of the same stretch of vegetation: the round tops of the dense trees, the underbrush, dead bone-colored stumps of trees, and tall grass threaded with apparently stagnant swamps, muddy rivers, tin-colored watercourses winding their way along and branching off into smaller forks. Two gigantic black women are walking toward him, carrying heavy packages. Their dark chestnut-brown arms with long smooth muscles, bare to the shoulder, protrude from their shiny sleeveless silk blouses, with no trimming of any sort, like tops of dancers' tights, beneath which their oval breasts move freely. One can see the shining whites of their eyes and the fierce gleam of their teeth. The sun's reflections are still flitting swiftly across the gashes made in the grass by the watercourses, like a bronze glint moving very rapidly, at the same speed as the airplane. Above the tallest facades, the outlines of a number of skyscrapers loom up amid the haze that washes out their color, almost indistinguishable from the pale sky, gray blurs dotted by thousands of windows in vertical rows (or horizontal ones, depending upon their architects' preference for one or the other of these two styles), resembling flat-topped columns, without capitals, of varying heights. The page is divided into three vertical columns. The large number of letters in very fine print gives them an overall grayish appearance. The color photograph of the boa occupies the top of the left-hand column. The entry entitled *Serpent* begins on the preceding page, immediately following the entry *Serpens* (the Latin name for the snake-shaped constellation adjoining *Ophiuchus*), and farther back, the entries *Serpe* and *Serpa Pinto* (Alexandre Alberto da Rocha): Portuguese explorer. The headings of the entries are in capital letters. *Serratula*: a perennial species of wild grass, with purplish

flowers, which sometimes reaches a height of nearly four feet. Serrano y Dominguez (Francisco), Duke de la Torre, marshal and Spanish statesman (Isla de León, today San Fernando). From the highest floors of the skyscrapers one can see others looming up in the distance, one by one or in clusters, poking up out of the stagnant milky haze overlying the city and soaring into the pale sky, where their windowpanes cast sparkling glints. These skyscrapers are brown, pale pink, black, ocher, or gray, their color fading little by little as the eye descends, so that they appear to be floating in midair, vertical, geometrical, weightless shapes resting on an immaterial base, like the mountain peaks in watercolors by Chinese painters, which are clearly outlined in ink, whereas the lower slopes of the range of mountains melt away and disappear in a pearl-gray wash. Rent intermittently, though frequently, by the prolonged shrieking of the sirens of police cars or fire trucks, a continuous rumble rises up through the haze, along with hot, stinking puffs of exhaust fumes mingled with the unpleasant smell of cooked cabbage and rancid oil. It is impossible to catch a clear glimpse of the flow of traffic and the crowds of people making their way along the bottom of the brick and stone canyons. One of the two gigantic black women is wearing a pair of pants made of the same shiny black silk as her blouse, and the other a pair of pink pants. One of the packages they are carrying has an enormous eye on it, approximately a foot and a half long, a photographic enlargement of a copperplate engraving, with a network of fine crosshatches incised by the burin defining the rounded curve of the eyelid. Holding themselves very erect, making their way down the sidewalk in great long strides, they pass the rabbit and then the group formed by the mother and the child. Seated on the fireplug, the sick man sees their smooth-skinned, savage faces pass by far above his head, a shadowy blur towering above the hazy summits of the skyscrapers. The mother clasps the child's free hand tightly in one of hers and stands upright again. She is a young woman with blond hair pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck, dressed in a blouse with the ends tied in a knot beneath her breasts, her hips, buttocks, and thighs imprisoned in

a pair of tightfitting Bermuda shorts in an apple-green and lemon-yellow flower print. A leather bag dangles from a long strap slung over her shoulder. Between the knotted blouse-ends and the waistband of the Bermuda shorts a patch of bare skin is visible, tanned a tawny gold. Situated beneath the diaphragm and weighing between 1500 and 2000 grams, the liver is approximately 28 centimeters wide, 16 centimeters thick, and 8 centimeters high. It occupies all of the right hypochondrium, and extends a short distance over into the left hypochondrium. It is reddish brown in color; its consistency is firm but friable. It is marked with the imprint of contiguous organs. The hepatic artery (carrying oxygenated blood) and the portal vein (carrying blood from the digestive tract and nutritive elements which the liver chemically converts) feed into the pedicle located on its lower surface, from which the hepatic veins arise, carrying off bile to the choledoch and then to the intestine. The tall silhouettes of the skyscrapers are all of a uniform color, a dark, almost solid brown. In the thick whitish haze blanketing their bases, only a few fleeting glints of light can be discerned, shining brightly for a few instants and then winking out almost immediately thereafter, as when, for example, a beam of sunlight is reflected by the window of a car. There is also a long straight line of flickering reflections, lemon yellow in color, very pale at first and then little by little taking on a more pronounced bronze color as they emerge from the haze, toward the bottom of the photograph, at which point the viewer realizes that these reflections are coming from the mirror-smooth surface of a major highway gleaming in the sunlight pouring down on it from the background. The photograph has doubtless been torn out of a magazine carrying it as a double-page spread, for along its median axis one can see the holes left by the staples binding the magazine together. The photograph is taped to the lower right-hand corner of a display window. Immediately to the left of it, at the bottom edge of the window, are three smaller photographs, of the same shape, each showing the same scene with very slight variations from one photograph to the other, as in the successive frames of a filmstrip. In the background is an apple-green stretch of grass, and in

front of it two-thirds of a long convertible is visible, with a woman in a pink dress and a pink hat kneeling on the rear seat, facing backwards. In the second photo the woman is leaning her bosom out over the trunk of the car and one of her legs is thrust over the back of the seat. In the third photo the woman is now on her hands and knees on top of the trunk of the car, face to face with a man who has leaped up onto the bumper, and the edge of a flower-bed with red and yellow blossoms can be seen on the right-hand side of the photograph. In addition to these images, all of the remainder of the lower part of the display window is filled with photos of young or middle-aged men who look like actors, the majority of them with smiles on their faces, in the center of which is the portrait of a man who also looks like a movie actor, with round, full cheeks, hair parted on the side, and a smile on his face too. This latter photograph is decorated with two ribbons, one of them red, white, and blue and the other black, running along together and meeting to form a rosette at the center point of the lower edge of the frame. Inside the display window, next to the glass, are two parted lace curtains, with a pattern in the form of garlands of leaves encircling a bird, draped in two symmetrical curves whose lower edges fall behind the photographs. Either because they are very dirty, or because they have been tinted or perhaps been yellowed by the sun, these curtains are the color of urine. Since the net fabric they are made of is woven in squares, the designs on them have contours staggered like stairs. Though the outline of the bird is broken up and telescoped by the folds in the curtains, it is possible to discern that it is a peacock with long, drooping tail. The traditional sign of a barbershop, consisting of a frosted-glass cylinder with alternating red and white helicoidal lines running up and down it, surmounted by a white sphere, is affixed to the side of the shop. This latter, painted an olive green, occupies the bottom floor of a brick house, with an exterior iron stairway. The entire facade of the house itself is plastered with a pinkish layer of calcimine so thick that it covers over the roughness of the bricks and clogs up the concave masonry joints between them. The dark triangle of glass between the curves of the two curtains reflects the row of

upraised legs, the thighs of which are superimposed upon the photos of actors, that of the skyscrapers poking up out of the haze, and the series of images in which the lady in pink is scrambling out of the back of the car. The reflected image of the sick man sitting on the fireplug, his unlighted cigarette still dangling from his lips, is superimposed upon the flowers and the urine-colored lace peacock. Gleaming in the sunlight, the tall silhouette of the black in white overalls cuts off the row of legs as it goes past the window, though the chorus of dancers in spangled costumes, engulfed in shadows as though swallowed up by a trap somewhere in the dim back room of the barbershop, continue to raise their legs in the air with cheery persistence. Contrasting with the luminous reflections of the pedestrians passing by on the sunlit sidewalk (among whom the group formed by the woman and the child, standing there motionless, can still be seen), the row of severed legs, with their vague resemblance to prosthetic devices, seems to have been put in storage there, like stage props of a grotesque, artificial, nocturnal world whose color has faded in the daylight. Several elderly ladies in outlandish getups are seated in a row on one of the benches in the foyer of the hotel with the thick red carpeting and marble columns. From inside the telephone booth he can see their withered, painted faces and the flowered hats atop their heads, like huge begonias in soft colors, pastel pink or pale blue. In the distant silence at the other end of the line the telephone keeps ringing at regular intervals. In between rings he can hear the silence slowly flowing, with a slight hissing sound, like thick layers of time fleeting, continuously and inexorably. The airplane seems to be suspended motionless in a space without a single point of reference above the vast stretch of gently rounded clouds ahead and behind, to the right and to the left. Beyond the revolving door he can see the darkness swept by beams of light, the moving headlamps of cars. Prolonged blasts of the doorman's whistle summoning taxis follow one upon the other almost without interruption. People dressed for dinner or the theater emerge from the elevators from time to time and walk toward him across the red carpet. The child being pulled along by his mother's hand gives a violent tug on

the string, which immediately stretches taut, but the rabbit starts wobbling almost the moment it begins to move and topples over on its side again. The doorman in a dark maroon uniform with a row of gold buttons down the front comes through the revolving door and walks over to the group of elderly ladies, looking directly at one of them and tipping his cap. The ringing of the telephone suddenly stops, there is a click as someone picks up the receiver at the other end, and a piping, joyous child's voice says Hello? The elderly lady rises to her feet and heads for the door, leaning on her cane. She is wearing an enormous broad-brimmed pink hat trimmed with flower-petals; her thin, painted face beneath it resembles a piece of dried-up wood. A lightweight three-quarter-length coat, tailored in a soft, silky pink fabric, hangs loosely from her bony shoulders and her stooped back. Her thin leg bones with knobby ankles, encased in white clocked stockings, taper down into pointed shoes forming a V, the heels touching, the toes apart, her knees splayed, like those of elderly cavalry officers. The doorman, who has now walked back over to the revolving door, holding one of its panels with one hand and his cap over his chest with the other, stands watching the old lady laboriously making her way across the vast red stretch of carpet. At the other end of the line the piping, joyous child's voice says again Hello? Hello? Above the cloud layer the moon can be seen in the empty sky, like a white pill that is slightly out of round. The string, no longer stretched taut between the rabbit toppled over on its side and the child's hand, lies along the sidewalk in soft curves. Serpens is an equatorial constellation made up of beautiful stars spread over a wide area of the sky. Looming up out of the clouds, a snow-covered mountain ridge suddenly appears beneath the airplane, incredibly thin and razor-sharp, with dizzyingly steep, ice-coated sides that gleam in the sun, a trackless, almost vertical surface, topped by its crest of jagged rocks. It twists and turns like the dorsal fin of a conger eel or a moray emerging for an instant, gleaming and glistening, from a foaming eddy. The windswept clouds part, torn to grayish shreds that cling to the dazzlingly bright slopes of the ridge, with its saw-toothed rocks that resemble the vertebrae of some monster,

some fierce, gigantic reptile with a legendary name, that of a titan, a mining company, or a constellation (Aconcagua, Anaconda, Andromeda), moving convulsively, crushing beneath its heavy earthen belly, its millions of tons, the forests and the bile-colored, foul-smelling muddy swamps below, hidden from view beneath the stifling cloud cover. The old building painted in pink calcimine, the ground floor of which is occupied by the barbershop, is doubtless doomed to be demolished in the near future, for it is separated from the adjoining building by a huge empty lot fenced off from the sidewalk along its entire length. Atop this board fence is a sign listing the many companies participating in the construction of the building whose first steel beams covered with a coat of bright orange antirust primer are already in place. Each of the various specialties involved (metal scaffolding, exterior facing, elevators, air conditioning, plumbing) is indicated in small black letters, under one or more corporate names in large red letters. The names of these companies have a multinational ring to them, Mediterranean, Anglo-Saxon, or Central European: MINELLI & FALK, BRONSTEIN, MAC ALLISTER, SANCHEZ LA TORRE, S. STEPHANOPOULOS, HUTCHINSON, O'HIGGINS, WORTZ, ALVAREZ & SILVA, KOLAKOVSKI, etc. The list of names one atop the other is several yards high. Immediately to the right there is an architectural elevation showing how the skyscraper will look once it is finished, adjoining which there is a longitudinal cross section of the building, showing the interior of the building, as though its facade had been removed, divided into row upon row of cubicles, neatly piled one atop the other. The drawing shows men and women, on the various floors of the building, seated on chairs or behind desks or standing in each of the cubicles, or jammed together in the elevators. Machines (generators, air-conditioning equipment, boilers), the bulkiest of which have been relegated to the basement of the building, are also shown, with the professional exactitude of engineering draftsmanship, indicating precisely how the pipes and the conduits are laid out from the bottom of the building to the top, branching and forking off in all directions. One can also see ventilators, cabinets, and

metal desks, long conference tables, counters, huge reception rooms decorated with columns, inner corridors disappearing in the distance, lavatories with tiled walls. Separated by partitions and floors, oblivious of each other's existence, the little figures shown in each of the tiny cubicles are totally absorbed in their work, dictating letters, typing, receiving visitors, holding meetings, or examining statistical charts. Everything (the paint on the walls and the machines, the furniture, the curtains, the fabric in which the chairs are upholstered, the clothing and the faces of the occupants) looks impeccably neat, functional, and impervious to rot. Doubtless hunting for carrion, for the putrefying cadaver of some animal, its immense wings outspread, immobile and weightless, a bird with blue-black plumage is soaring effortlessly in the updrafts along the faces of the ice-covered mountainside. By making movements so slight as to be imperceptible, it slowly wheels in one direction or another, and then, in an oblique gliding motion, it traces a broad circle that brings it closer to the mountainside, then takes it farther away, and then again brings it closer. As dark as night in the dazzling bright light, rigid and watchful, it looks very much like a kite constructed in the shape of a bird of prey, or a species of raptorial bird that has been stuffed and suspended by a wire from the ceiling of a taxidermist's shop. Its bare neck, bright pink in color and covered with fleshy excrescences, stretches up out of the white down draped around its shoulder girdle like a shawl or a fur collar. Its feathers have the consistency and the bright blue sheen of steel. Its bald, bony, lumpy head, its feet, are a cadaverous gray green. Perched on a rock now, it jerks its head this way and that, its beady, staring yellow eyes continually on the alert. With a sudden swift peck, it tears a rotting chunk of carrion apart with its beak, sinking its talons into it to hold it securely. Rubbery ribbons of intestines or dead flesh stretch taut, twisting out of the bird's grasp or breaking apart. The bird then raises its neck, on the alert once again, its head abruptly pivoting on its neck joint and then ceasing to move just as abruptly, its fierce eye circled in red staring emptily, the shred of stinking flesh dangling from its beak and swaying back and forth with the bird's slightest movement. The board fence is cov-

ered with tattered posters, pasted one on top of the other, their colors faded by the sun and the rain, their superimposed letters all jumbled together, like those of the signs viewed in enfilade. Originally bright red, green, or blue, the letters have now washed away to a faint dusty pink, an olive green, or a pale blue gray blending into the background, which is also gray. No single word is completely legible. All that remains are a few enigmatic fragments, in some instances impossible to fit together, and in other instances suggesting a possible interpretation (or reconstruction), or even several of them, such as, for example, ABOR (LABOR, or ABORto, or ABORrecer?), SOCIA (SOCIALismo, aSOCIAción?), and CAN (CANdidato, CANibal, CANcer?). The texts of the tattered posters would nonetheless appear (although this may well be a mere coincidence, or the effect of a particular bias on the part of the decipherer) to have been of a political nature, such as announcements of meetings (MITIN), demonstrations by members of labor unions, or emphatic pronouncements having to do with a strike or some other event. Though he pays close attention, he manages to make sense of only a few disjointed phrases here and there in the speech, not only because of his rather poor knowledge of the language but also because the speaker's delivery, though grave and solemn, occasionally becomes very rapid. In any case the pace of the speech as a whole is such that the time required for the mental translation of a number of words that he recognizes in passing causes him to miss the next few words, so that when he starts listening again, the speaker is already in the middle of another sentence, the beginning of which he might possibly have understood but has failed to hear. To judge from the few bits and snatches that he catches, it would seem, however, that the speech deals mainly with considerations or declarations having a certain social and political import, in which nouns with a rather timeworn air about them, not unlike the faded colors of the posters, such as Liberty, Revolution, Solidarity, or Unity, reappear frequently. Two animals carved from a single large block of mahogany, a condor with a bare neck and a leopard, frame a shield bearing a horn of plenty suspended above the sea between two palm trees. The sea is

represented by wavy, parallel lines standing out in low relief from the reddish wood. The edges of the shield are carved in curlicues, curving forward and twisting back on themselves like those of certain Teutonic coats of arms. The two heraldic animals are in turn framed on the right and on the left by puffy-cheeked little cherubs blowing trumpets. The long tubes of their instruments, ending in a bell, are pointing in different directions, like a sunburst or the folds of a fan. Up above them, a portion of the torso of the chairman can be seen, hunched over and cut off just below the shoulders by the edge of the podium, the projecting cornice of which is supported on the arched backs of caryatids and atlantes with bulging, muscular breasts and bellies which disappear in the folds of a drapery curved from the same block of wood. The chairman is a young man, with hair combed straight back and a wary, watchful, slightly anxious look in his eye. The delegates of the various countries assembled in the chamber are sitting in mahogany boxes with black leather seats, the backs of which have carved baroque pediments, like massive dining room chairs in the baronial German style of the late nineteenth century. Little green-shaded lamps, not at all necessary at this hour since the daylight streaming in through the skylight overhead floods the entire chamber, have been installed on the left-hand side of the desk with which each of the boxes is equipped. White sheets of paper have been laid out in neat piles on the desk, each of them embossed in the upper left-hand corner with the same shield framed by the two heraldic animals that adorns the speaker's platform, surmounted by a streamer bearing the Latin inscription: *ORDO JUSTICIAQUE LIBERTAS*. Below the shield the words *CAMERA DE DIPUTADOS* are printed in a wavy line, as though they too were embroidered on a streamer (albeit an invisible one) waving in the breeze. A dense crowd dressed in light-colored clothing keeps streaming across the intersection of the street and the avenue, this flow being interrupted and then again set in motion at fixed intervals by the traffic lights at the crossing. The individuals or the groups that constitute this crowd of pedestrians proceeding in opposite directions meet and mingle with each other, so that from a

distance the various movements cancel each other out, and the crowd takes on the appearance of an amalgam of little flecks of color, with pastel shades predominating, the eye being unable to follow any one of them in particular, the mass as a whole thus seeming to stagnate, to constitute a static element within the geometrical composition formed by the buildings, resembling a horizontal band, or rather a pointillist plinth, hiding the base of the tall, pale gray façades from sight. The teeming mass of little multicolored particles, making no progress in either direction, its density remaining constant, by turns appears and disappears from view as the traffic lights change at regular intervals and the stream of cars, in which the dominant color is the bright yellow of taxicabs, starts and stops. Unlike the concerted movements of an organized group (processions, parades, political demonstrations), this stream of pedestrians does not appear to be proceeding in any particular direction, to have any predominant vector. Nor is there any perceptible change in it, even though its component elements are quite different from moment to moment. It is as though the same particles keep continually bumping into each other, threading their way around each other, weaving in and out, disappearing and reappearing, endlessly reconstituting another whole that is at once different from and exactly the same as the preceding one, an overall collection of constituent elements in which, like a handful of gravel, it is impossible to discern any sort of order or structure. Because of the absence of any common scale between the size of the little pills and that of the façades whose tops disappear in the overlying haze, it is almost as though one were witnessing the pointless wanderings of lilliputian multitudes forever doomed to circle about, to retrace their paths, to endlessly resume their aimless rounds within a closed, skyless space. Up on the platform, the chairman is still addressing the delegates. Alongside the sheets of paper embossed with the seal of the Chamber of Deputies neatly piled on each of the desks, there has been placed a mimeographed text printed on yellowish foolscap which reads:

DIALOGO ENTRE PARLAMENTARIOS

Y ESCRITORES

Temario

1/ La acción legislativa y la función social del escritor.

Legislación positiva.

a INCENTIVOS:

Creación: (derecho de autor, concursos y premios, etc.)

Vehículo: (industria de la celulosa y el papel, imprentas, editoriales, monopolios, impaestos, etc.)

Promoción: (biblioteca, aduanas, distribución, importación y exportación, propaganda, etc.)

Acción: (crítica, bibliotecas, instituciones culturales, etc.)

b/ TRABAS: Un excesivo ordenamiento legal puede atentar a la labor creadora por la institucionalización del quehacer del escritor.

2/ La acción literaria y la función social del legislador.

El lenguaje como zona de contacto entre el escritor y el legislador al reflejar ambos una realidad que piensan e imaginan unitariamente.

He suddenly realizes that someone is whispering in his ear and gives a start. He sees the face of the interpreter seated in the adjoining box turned toward him and leaning over in his direction. The interpreter points to the mimeographed sheet of paper that he is holding in his hand and asks Would you like me to translate it for you? No he replies. No, thank you very much, I can manage. When it's a written text, that is. When it's someone talking it's more dif . . . The interpreter points to several sheets of paper with the embossed seal lying on his desk, already covered with line after line of neat handwriting in black ink.

He says I'm making a summary for you, but would you also like me to translate word for word as he goes along? No he replies. I'm doing fine. No. I'll be quite all right, don't put yourself to any trouble on my . . . The interpreter says It's no trouble at all since I have to send a report in to the paper I work for anyway. He repeats I'll be quite all right. The interpreter leans back and hunches over the pile of papers on his desk again. A great many of the delegates are middle-aged men who look like professors or doctors, with little clipped moustaches and glasses. They have Mediterranean faces, resembling not so much the Sicilian or Castilian type, with the dry, swarthy skin and bony features that betray a strong admixture of Arab blood which is so widespread in the southern Mediterranean, but rather, because of their white skin and rather soft features, bearing a greater likeness to that mixture of Catalans, Genoese, Greeks, and Levantines inhabiting the eastern basin. Paying close attention, taking notes or frequently shifting positions in their seats, the delegates fill only half of the vast chamber, the empty boxes of which seem still to be occupied by the stiffly starched, disapproving, Bismarckian ghosts of mustachioed gentlemen like those whose portraits can be seen on the inside cover of cigar boxes, in vignettes surrounded by the leaves of tropical trees and medals of international expositions, with the congested, smug, sternly authoritarian look of puritanical slave traders, bankers, adventurers, and politicians worth billions, sitting there in the chamber passing, for their own personal advantage, laws and codes governing the sales of copper mines, native tribes, oilfields, sugar cane plantations, and plots of virgin timberland as vast as entire kingdoms. The country appears to be one dense forest of towering trees. The four vessels sail along the coast to the mouth of a river emptying into the sea by way of two narrow channels. The lead is heaved, and it is discovered that the water is so shallow that only the two smallest boats will not founder. The general therefore orders all of his soldiers into these two vessels, leaving the other two riding at anchor with a watch party abroad. As the warriors begin fighting their way upstream against the current, they catch sight of a large number of canoes full of armed Indians, as well as sev-

eral other armed groups on the shore, whose demeanor seems to indicate that they would prefer to avoid a pitched battle and are attempting to defend the mouth of the river by uttering the cries and assuming the postures that fear gives rise to in those who are hoping to ward off danger by dint of threatening gestures alone. The dorsal fin of the leviathan slowly pivots and it drifts to one side of the airplane, its bare, glistening slopes looming into sight one after the other, terrifying in its solitude, the awesome silence of thousands upon thousands of years. Leaping out of the long boats, the soldiers run through the water in their heavy armor, raising great splashes. A man steps out of one of the last launches being beached by the crew, an elderly warrior with a majestic countenance whose long beard descends down over his breastplate, which tapers to a point like a ship's prow, its metal surface gleaming brightly in the sunlight. Within arrow range now, the helmeted soldiers, armed with harquebuses and crossbows, halt at his order. Half-hidden in the luxuriant vegetation, the Indians with shaved skulls topped with a single tuft of hair watch them closely, ready to sling their javelins and shoot their arrows. The old man's hand, protected by a steel gauntlet with articulated joints, rises in a conciliatory gesture. In his other hand he is holding the shaft of a lance with an oriflamme whose forked end waves gently in the breeze. As it moves, there appear and disappear the words or portions of words forming the phrase O CRUX AVE SPES UNICA, embroidered in gold thread below a cross surrounded by beams of light. The figure 35, followed by the word CENTAVOS, is engraved in copperplate script in the sky, which is tinted a carmine color, no doubt by a setting-or a rising-sun, whose light floods the entire scene, bathing the crests of the waves, the silk of the oriflamme, and the naked bodies of the Indians in its rosy glow. There are bold, firmly determined expressions on the faces of those around the majestic old man. The island encircled by the two channels into which the river divides at its mouth is $12 \frac{1}{2}$ miles long and $2 \frac{1}{2}$ miles wide. On it there have assembled in the course of the last few centuries some of the most ambitious, the most restless, the most frustrated human beings on the face of the earth, fully resolved

to wrest their fair share of life's blessings from the adverse hand of fate. Listening to the tinkling of ice cubes against the inner surfaces of their glasses, their torsos nonchalantly leaning back on leather-upholstered divans, with one arm draped over the back, sitting with their legs crossed, the gentlemen with long sidewhiskers like fish fins, high stiff collars, narrow trousers with gaiter straps, with the pitiless faces of preachers, businessmen, and slave traders, are chatting politely together, watching the smoke from their cigars drift away in wisps amid the dwarf palm trees of their club, the phoenix plants with sharp-pointed leaves, the rococo flower pots, and the heavy chains from which they are suspended. In the holes in the bluish, stagnant haze, a troop of horsemen with drawn sabres appears, beneath a flag whipping briskly in the wind as they gallop swiftly along. The horsemen are wearing felt hats with the brim turned up on one side, long sideburns, and double-breasted tunics. They are leaning over the withers of their mounts pounding ahead with outstretched necks and bulging eyes; the blades of their sabres are unsheathed, pointing forward or brandished in the air in their raised fists. Charging down at the head of the troop of cavalry is their leader, with an ebony beard etching his cheeks. Assembled on the left behind a cannon imbedded in a makeshift barricade atop which several corpses are lying, a group of men with huge broad-brimmed straw hats and drooping mustaches are meeting the cavalry charge, one knee bent, leaning over their rifles resting on the bodies of their dead comrades. Struck, doubtless, by a hail of bullets, one of the horses rears back, dismounting its rider. Turning his back on the attackers, one of the defenders flings his weapon to the ground and takes to his heels. Amid the clouds of smoke in the background, one can still make out the bell tower of a Jesuit mission, a huge wooden gate, like that of a farmyard, and the overhanging canopy of a tile roof. The painting is surrounded by a frame in dark wood with carved acanthus leaves at each corner. The chairman's upper body stands out in sharp outline against the blue blur in the background, the debris of the barricade, and the bloody corpses lying in the foreground. The immense painting covers the entire length of the wall behind the podi-

um. The chairman is apparently reaching the end of his speech, for he is raising his voice. Emphasizing his words, with an up-and-down motion of his clenched right fist, he is chanting each phrase, with deliberate pauses in between: *La forma novelesca / lleva un concepto del hombre / es decir un concepto del mundo: / ¡es un discurso antropológico!* There is ringing applause from each of the rows of boxes. As he applauds, the interpreter leans over again, and raising his own voice in order to make himself heard, says: *Did you understand? He said: The novel as a genre implies a conception of man, that is to say . . .* As he in turn applauds, he says: *Yes. Thank you. I'm doing fine. I understood. Quite well. Thank you . . .*, and thereupon, without ceasing to applaud, he slips out of his box, walks down the steps, stands for a moment, still applauding, at the foot of the podium, then swiftly makes his way through a group of people (journalists? secretaries?) blocking the exit. An old man in a frock coat with a gold chain across his chest leans over toward him, his wrinkled face contorting in a frown as he tries to understand what he is saying. Finally the old man stands up and points down a long corridor with dark wood paneling, motioning to him to follow it and then turn to the left. The lavatory has white tile walls. At the base of the walls and at the height of a man's head is a narrow border of turquoise tiles, which disappears behind the fancy enameled moldings framing the mirrors above each of the washbasins. A strange, subterranean silence reigns, broken only occasionally by the sound of violently rushing water, like that of geysers that suddenly gush up at fixed intervals and then cease just as abruptly, whereupon the silence washes back in, while at the same time one begins to hear once again, as in the shadowy depths of humid grottoes, the regular fall of one single drop of water after another, the dripping noise reflecting off the rock walls. On the side of the room opposite the washbasins is a row of stalls with mahogany doors. As the doctor palpates, his fingers encounter a precise point where a slight pressure produces an acute pain. Seemingly coming from far in the distance, a vague rumble is heard from time to time, as though the ground were being shaken by seismic tremors of slight amplitude, arising from the

dark depths, from the thundering entrails of stone and melted rock, and then it too gradually fades away and finally ceases altogether. Aside from sudden acute attacks, the most characteristic symptoms are a sensation of vague discomfort and a dull heaviness, as though the malfunctioning organ were increasing in weight and volume. This sensation is occasionally accompanied by a vague nausea. He watches the doctor, who is now sitting behind his desk with the bronze ornaments on top and rapidly jotting down a few words in blue ink on a sheet of paper with an embossed letterhead, while at the same time the impersonal voice goes on with its running commentary: firstly, secondly, thirdly, and finally, in the case of an acute attack . . . When he comes out again, he goes over to one of the washbasins and lathers his hands with the bar of soap, gazing at the drawn face in the mirror in front of him, which gazes back at him. Then he pulls a little tube out of his pocket, uncaps it, and tips it at an angle, whereupon there fall into his palm two pale blue pills which he then swallows, leaning over the basin, washing them down with a sip of water from his hand cupped underneath the faucet. Bathed in the usual sunlight of these climes, with countless oriflammes briskly flapping in the sea breeze, the skyscrapers are more typical of the city than its inhabitants. Like human beings, they change, more or less from one year to the next, in gradual stages, from the rococo to the bare, spare lines of today's architecture. The island is covered with luxuriant vegetation, overhung with towering palm trees. Atop their smooth trunks, the palm leaves spread out in a bouquet, like the spray of a fountain, falling in gentle curves beneath their own weight. The successive construction of old-fashioned dwellings and that of new skyscrapers, like cross sections of the trunks of the famous sequoia trees of California, serve to document the various stages of growth, thus allowing one to reconstruct the history of an unusually dynamic continent. The older buildings of ironwork and stone, and the more recent ones of light metal alloys and glass, constitute a record as easily read as the rings in the trunk of a tree several centuries old. The columns of the vast rococo chamber are topped with Corinthian capitals in gilded bronze amid which the light-

ing equipment is concealed. At the tops of the white marble shafts, with a network of grayish veins running obliquely up and down them, the acanthus leaves spread out in a bouquet and curve forward beneath their own weight, like feathers or the spray of a water fountain. Now far behind the airplane, the mountain has almost disappeared, an expanse of white on white barely visible against the endless layer of fleecy clouds. Once more, as far as the eye can see, fore and aft, to the right, to the left, there is the same flat, cottony, slightly curdled sea, above which the airplane appears to be suspended motionless. Proceeding at her same painfully slow pace, the elderly lady has now reached the approximate center of the lobby. Seeing her there on the vast stretch of red carpeting, her white stockings standing out in sharp relief, one might almost take her for a worn-out garment hanging from a coatrack being jerked along by an invisible string to which it is attached, like those objects (boats on the horizon for instance) that are apparently motionless, yet when the viewer's eye searches them out once again, after having tired of watching them and looked away, he finds to his surprise that they are now far away from the spot where he last saw them—as though they were taking advantage of his moment of distraction to cover enormous distances in one fell swoop, and then suddenly returning to their state of immobility. The sole proof that she is indeed moving is the fact that the folds of light pink fabric are fluttering slightly and the iridescent gleam of a diamond flashing from time to time for an instant at her neck or on one of the fingers of her sallow yellow hand leaning on the handle of her cane. The distant voice of the child can be heard over the black ebonite telephone receiver once again, repeating Hello, Hello, in a tone that is beginning to sound impatient. With a brusque sweep of his hand, the doctor pulls his patient's two wrinkled shirttails up over his chest. Since one of them keeps falling back down, the doctor pushes it back up again in annoyance and wads it up like an old rag just below the man's chin. From the telephone receiver, at this point being held away from the listener's ear, all that comes out now is a thin, piping voice that sounds disappointed and a bit anxious. Once the receiver is

placed back on the hook, the token falls down into the return slot with the sound of a coin dropping into a beggar's alms-box. The doctor places his two hands on the patient's side, just below the ribs, his two parallel index fingers touching each other and his two hands thus forming a slight inclined plane. He palpates gently, gradually increasing the pressure. From where the tips of the doctor's fingers are touching, the pain spreads all through the sick man's entire right side, as though some object with a number of sharp divergent points, fanning out in a star, were being driven into it. After hanging up the receiver, he remains standing there in the telephone booth, leaning his back against the enameled wall, as the pink splotch of color formed by the old lady's coat, which he can see through the glass door of the booth, moves almost imperceptibly across his retina. Long after the doctor has removed his hands, the feeling of pressure persists, or rather the sensation that an enormous foreign body is still stuck in him like a wedge. Chronic inflammation of the liver, or attacks of hepatitis, are due to infection (viruses, spirochetes), or to chemical irritation (phosphorus, alcohol, etc.). Certain localized inflammations (*e.g.*, those caused by amoebas) may lead to abscesses of the liver. The airplane appears to be suspended motionless above the immense, unchanging layer of clouds, since each time that one glances at the fleecy humps stretching as far as the eye can see, the only things visible are minute, nearly imperceptible changes. The only evidence that hour after hour is passing is the fatigue that is thickening little by little on his face, like a crust, accompanied by a slight burning sensation, as though he were suffering from a mild fever. It forms a sort of invisible mask of mud that sticks to his skin, plugging up his pores and cracking apart in crevices with sharp, cutting edges along the lines of the wrinkles in his face. He realizes then that someone is speaking to him, like a distant voice on the telephone reaching him through layer upon layer of space. He gives a start, says I beg your pardon, and turning his head, he spies a face bending over in his direction, lit from below by the blinding light reflected by the clouds, like the faces of actors onstage above the row of footlights. The eyes he finds himself staring into are

a very pale blue. Although turned in his direction, they are as expressionless as two bits of porcelain. Beneath the delicate skin of the person's neck he can see the transparent blue-green tracery of a vein. He can also see the upper curve of a pair of breasts between the lapels of the person's uniform. A bar cart loaded with glasses and little bottles of various colors has been drawn up and is standing there in the central aisle. He says No thank you. The eyes turn away, the face moves upward away from him, and the slender blue silhouette, standing erect now, its buttocks thrust out as it balances on its high heels, pushes the bar cart on to the next row of seats. The doctor again applies varying degrees of pressure, all around the spot where he first pressed. By raising his head slightly, he can see his two shoes, forming an obtuse angle, sticking out below the accordion pleats of his pants down around his feet, and the tuft of hairs on his pubis. The doctor says Are you a heavy drinker? His tone of voice is expressionless, objective, colorless, his eyes invisible beneath his lowered eyelids, fixed on that portion of the sick man's body which his hands are palpating. He replies No. The doctor's sharp eyes stare at him through his gold-framed glasses. He repeats No, not really. An occasional drink. But I scarcely think I could be called a heavy . . . The doctor's eyes have again become invisible. In the same expressionless, distant tone of voice, he says What do you mean exactly by an occasional drink? His hands continue lightly to press here and there. A brochure is sticking out of the pocket on the back seat in front of him. The cover of it shows a smiling young woman whose dark blue uniform is three-quarters hidden by the folds of a large loose-fitting red cape cut like an Indian poncho. One of her hands is holding up, at shoulder height, a scale model of a Boeing in chromed metal. Above her head there is printed, in red letters, INTERNATIONAL ROUTE MAP, and lower down, in black letters: NORTH-CENTRAL-SOUTH AMERICA. THE CARIBBEAN AND EUROPE. Fine scarlet lines trace triangles, parallelograms, converge at certain points, then again diverge, crossing pale blue oceans and green or yellowish expanses traversed by meandering rivers and long wrinkles, like crumpled corrugated cardboard, a network of cracks

that make one think of the crust of an improperly baked loaf of bread or a cake. In the huge lobby a woman's shrieking voice can be heard over the loudspeakers, frequently interrupted by static, echoing off the glass and concrete walls. The lobby is packed with people dressed in every color of the rainbow, and the noise is as deafening as in an aviary. The men are wearing sea-green, pink, white, or sky-blue sport shirts, the women dressed in garish bright colors, red, orange, jade green. Their faces are black, yellow, or brown, though a few of them are as pale and pasty as those of colonial Spaniards keeping themselves cooped up in the shadowy interiors of their houses and going out only at night. Most of the people assembled there, however, are half-breeds, Indians, blacks, Chinese, or Polynesians. The woman, whose strident, insistent, discordant tone is reminiscent of that of the voices of choir-boys before they have changed, reels off a list of cities with odd-sounding names, like those of exotic birds, flowers, animals, monsters, saints, or parrots: Caracas, Cúcuta, Barranquilla, Bogotá, Quito, Guayaquil, San Juan, Iquitos, Manaus, Leticia. On the wall behind the speakers' platform with the carved mahogany caryatids the horsemen and their mounts are still galloping along in a thunderous silence, rending the wisps of smoke, frozen in violent, dashing poses. The immense painting is flanked by four side panels of the same height as the main canvas, but narrower, the work of another artist, painted in a very different style, representing groups of allegorical figures. The words VIR-TUS, LEX, JUS, and LABOR are inscribed in gilt letters in the pale skies of the four panels, and against a background of pale prairies or grayish foliage one can make out women clad in long white robes that occasionally leave a breast bared, and men naked to the waist with resolute or reflective expressions on their faces. Holding crowns, branches of laurel, or balances in their hands, or pointing a rigid index finger in the air, the young women appear to be urging their male companions, armed with swords or hammers, on to arduous but stirring feats. By the time he returns to the chamber after having once again elbowed his way through the group still standing at the door, the chairman has concluded his remarks and another speaker is addressing the

audience. He is a man of about sixty, baldheaded, with a pudgy, ruddy face and a long nose tapering to a sharp point. Sitting in his box in one of the front rows and turned toward the microphone set up on his desk alongside the little lamp, he is speaking in a soft, courteous, affable voice, as though he were conversing with one of his colleagues or a fellow member of his club in its salon with exotic plants and sofas upholstered in soft brown leather. The chairman, standing with his hands folded and both his elbows leaning on the podium, is listening to him, while at the same time casting anxious glances at certain sections of the chamber. The delegates have again assumed attentive poses, taking notes, shifting positions in their seats from time to time. When he sits down in his box once again, the interpreter leans over toward him and pronounces a name with a Slavic ring to it, motioning with his head in the direction of the speaker, and then he adds: senator, Communist. Feeling around in his pocket to make sure that he has not left his little tube of pills behind, he listens to the Spanish words being amplified by the loudspeakers as they come forth from the speaker's smiling mouth, just beneath his white mustache, delivered in an amiable, carefully modulated voice into the microphone on its curved stem that is immediately in front of him. After a moment he asks: senator from where? The interpreter's eyes travel back and forth between the speaker and the chairman, and then he turns his head and looks up at the same spot among the top rows of seats toward which the chairman keeps frequently glancing. Then the interpreter abruptly turns his head back in his direction once again and says From here. Then, in a rapid half-whisper, We're going to see some excitement now. And then: Would you like me to translate for you? Without waiting for him to answer, the interpreter begins mechanically whispering into his ear a translation of what the speaker is saying, phrase by phrase, casting frequent glances all the while at the upper rows of seats . . . *creo que el novelista contemporáneo* (I believe that today's novelist, the interpreter says) *es consciente a la vez* (is simultaneously aware) *de estas dos cosas* (of the two following things) : *en primer lugar* (firstly), *la necesidad de expresar* (the need to express) . . . In

the sacred wood, against a background of Attic cypresses, the gray representations of Virtue, Law, Justice, and Labor cross the neutral-colored prairies, their linen trains trailing behind them. With their hair bound up in fillets, their gold girdles knotted beneath their breasts, their frail arms, their olive branches, they stand, virginal and incorruptible, at the side of chaste adolescent boys frozen in a perpetual boredom within the mahogany paneling . . . de representar en las ficciones (of representing in works of fiction) su propio ser (his own nature), su propia realidad (his own reality), sus propios tormentos (his own anguish), sus propios demonios y (his own demons and) al mismo tiempo (at the same time) . . . A timeless light falls from the glass dome rising above the yellowish façade decorated with pediments and columns over whose surface there play the flickering, spiky shadows of tall palms whose slender trunks tower above Victorian lawns watered, mowed, resodded, and smoothed with rollers from dawn to dark each day by the army of municipal gardeners . . . necesita fundamentalmente (has a fundamental need of) un lenguaje y una técnica (a language and a technique) consciente también (that also reflects an awareness) de la jerarquía que existe (of the hierarchy that exists) entre los elementos fundamentales de la creación (between the basic elements of creation) . . . The dome, the pediments, the capitals, and the carpet of bluegrass look as though they had been ordered out of a catalogue, transported across oceans, mountains, and deserts, the façade then put together stone by stone, the lawn planted and defended blade by blade against the torrid winds and the clouds of dust that swirl about, raising little maelstroms of dirty bits of paper that envelop the equestrian statue of the general, who is also an imported product, with a face framed in imposing side-whiskers tucked into the tight bronze collar of his tunic decorated with bronze braid. As he sits there, bareheaded beneath the terrible tropical sun, solidly welded to his bronze horse, his eyes with their hollowed-out pupils seem to be gazing intently at some dream of glory and power, out beyond the Bernini-style façade and the disorder of the modern buildings, out on the pampas, the desert sands, the endless expanses where he once led

the charge of his troops of cavalymen with the look of bandits through rifts in the clouds of smoke. The face of the chairman, who keeps casting more and more nervous glances in the direction of the top rows of seats in the chamber, is framed by the raised hoofs of one of the galloping mounts. Yo creo (I believe) que sólo la generación contemporánea de los novelistas latinoamericanos (that only the contemporary generation of Latin-American novelists) ha aceptado (has accepted) . . . He realizes that someone is knocking on the glass door of the telephone booth. He gives a start, says I beg your pardon, slides the two folding panels of the door back, steps through the opening, saying I beg your pardon once again, stands for a moment alongside the door, which has now closed again, looking through the glass panels at the present occupant of the booth, who has already put the receiver to his ear and is dialing a number. Beneath the enormous reseda flower, the pink fabric hanging in folds has now covered two-thirds of the distance separating the bench, where the old ladies with painted faces, dressed in evanescent costumes, are still sitting in a row, from the doorman in the maroon uniform. He moves away from the telephone booth, hesitates, takes a few more steps, and finally sits down on another bench in the lobby, between the telephone booth and the revolving door. When he looks through the airplane window again, his eyes blink, nearly blinded by the dazzling light being projected upward from the motionless expanse of clouds below, the mask of warm mud painfully grating against the skin at the corners of his eyelids. The white, speckled moon is still in the same position, a little ahead of the airplane and to the right of the axis of its trajectory. The stars are invisible in the bright sky. The equatorial constellation of the Serpent is divided into two separate areas by a portion of the constellation of Ophiucus: the Head of the Serpent (Serpentis Caput) and the Tail of the Serpent (Serpentis Cauda). The black dots of varying sizes representing the stars are connected by short straight lines, also black, traced on the blue background, outlining irregular-shaped patches recalling those laid out by a surveyor's tape, forming triangles, trapezoids, polygons with antennae or tails. Serval: a large-sized bush

cat with a tawny-colored, striped, or spotted coat, often hunted for its valuable pelt. The outlines of animals, objects, individual human figures, or pairs of res have been traced by an engraving tool around the metric shapes formed by the constellations and the stars named after gods or mythical animals: Pegasus, Hercules, Pisces, Scorpio, Capricorn, Virgo, Hydra, the Dog Star, Orion, Sagittarius, Leo, the Pleiades, Castor and Pollux. The fantastic beasts or the muscular bodies look as though they have been projected, giant-sized and weightless, onto the concave walls of a dome decorated by some painter, himself a titan, chained by a mad potentate to his scaffolding beneath the ceiling of some Sistine Chapel or Pantheon. The years, oxidation, or the smoke from tapers have turned the colors gray, smudged the bodies whose rib cages rise and fall as they inhale and exhale, caught up in a slow rotary motion which leaves them successively standing upright, then lying head downward. In the milky light coming through the window that opens out onto the darkness, the two intertwined bodies have a grayish tint, as if covered by a coat of paint of uniform thickness, though slightly lighter in color on the surface of the woman's body. Black dots indicate the hair, the mouth, the nipples, the hairy portions of the two bodies: the man's chest and belly, the couple's pubes. The relative positions of the bodies are modified by imperceptible writhings, imperceptible undulations. They glide across each other in a slithering motion, interrupted by long pauses during which only a hand, an arm, move slowly back and forth, the man's encircled chest, the light-colored breasts of the woman rising and falling, the two of them breathing heavily, the sound of their gasping and panting filling the silence, interrupted from time to time by a word uttered with a sob, a moan. Their immense coupled forms fill one's entire field of vision. They grow even larger, so that the view is obstructed by a bent limb or the delicate folds of the woman's vulva or the shadowy fuzz of an armpit. The mingled odors of damp earth and shellfish mount from between the parted thighs of the giantness. The bodies lying head to foot alongside each other slowly wheel in the darkness, plunging endlessly through space, clinging desperately to each other.

Orion is one of the most beautiful constellations in the equatorial zone. It consists of a group of seven stars, all visible to the naked eye, four of which, Betelgeuse, of a reddish tint, Rigel, which is white in color, Bellatrix, and Saiph, form a quadrilateral. The other three stars, running diagonally across this constellation, are known as Orion's Belt. Below the Belt there can be seen a luminous streak of light emitted by three stars clustered closely together: this is known as Orion's Sword, extending into the Orion Nebula, which is typical of the nebulae of the Milky Way. The different stars indicate only very roughly the position of the bodies and the limbs. The contours of Berenice's Hair are outlined by approximately twenty stars, of a magnitude ranging from 4 to 6. Lost in the vast shadowy expanse, the end of a tongue searches about in the fleecy tuft for the rounded tip of the clitoris. Below the arms encircling the hips, hairy hands press down on the buttocks to part them. Two dense groups of stars forming two triangles of approximately equal size, which are vaguely reminiscent of the outlines of a face, were taken by certain peoples of antiquity to represent the successive positions assumed by the head of the woman when at the moment of climax she arches her back and moves her head away, abandoning the glans of the penis which she has been pressing between her lips, though continuing to tightly clasp the erect shaft in her hand. As dawn breaks, the head of Orion, the blind giant, is silhouetted in profile against the puffy clouds still tinged with the gray shadows of night. His body with its glistening muscles is almost as tall as the trees with dense eading branches framing the landscape. His shoulders and a large portion of his torso and his arms tower above the hills. The artist has shown him from the back, in three-quarter profile, on the right-hand side of the painting, frozen in a pose that represent him walking, his left leg stretched out backward, his right leg bent at the knee, his left forearm reaching out horizontally in front of him, like a blind man feeling his way along, his enormous outspread hand concealing nearly the entirety of a small hillock in the distance. That portion of his face which is visible in this three-quarter profile view is illuminated by a highlight cast by the sun's first rays, extending from his

temple to his cheekbone, his nose remaining in shadow, along with his eye socket, which is covered over by his barely discernible closed eyelid. Although sightless, he is making his way ahead in great long strides, guided by the little figure standing upright on his shoulders, supporting himself by one hand resting on the giant's hair, his head bent down toward him to speak to him, and his other arm pointing to the east as though to indicate which direction to take. The folds of his short, light-colored tunic flap in the violent gusts of wind doubtless blowing about the head of the giant, atop which he is perched as on a mountain peak. It is dawn: as the airplane rises above the palm trees, the paling streetlights, strung out along the avenues like beads on a rosary, the bungalows and the little shacks with corrugated tin roofs, the horizon line also rises and the ocean, its still-phosphorescent waves breaking just offshore following the meandering coastline, forms farther offshore an unbroken expanse that spreads out in the distance like a canvas as far as the eye can see, still a very dark gray in color, its surface streaked with motionless parallel ripples, the tops of which gradually grow lighter, taking on by degrees a pale rose tinge, just as the uppermost edges of the dense, rolling clouds also turn a faint pink. Some of these clouds billow up in giant plumes, like towers, their tops mounting higher and higher in the sky and rounding off into domes, into clusters of cupolas. Others of them, ponderous and slow-moving, form stairways, plateaus, overhanging ledges, precipices. To the west, one can see through the windows of the plane a night sky that is just beginning to grow lighter, with a few last remaining stars still twinkling. To the east, the first beam of sunlight suddenly appears through a rift in the chaos of clouds, like a gleaming bronze blade, as for a few moments longer the rest of the sky remains a pale gray with a faint rosy tinge, and then, as more and more of the rising sun's divergent rays begin to pour through the gap in the clouds, it turns a dazzling, blindingly bright gold, like an altarpiece. The man and the woman are now lying motionless on the bed. As the light grows brighter and brighter it begins to tint their bodies a warm, glowing color against the background of gray, wrinkled sheets. The door of the

telephone booth slams shut, and its former occupant walks off. The flexible metal cord connecting the receiver and the telephone box continues to swing gently back and forth, but finally it ceases to move. Then someone in one of the topmost rows of seats in the chamber suddenly begins shouting. As in the era of silent films, however, the spectator can understand what is happening even before he hears the voice, merely by noting how the chairman's face changes, his face taking on a pinched look and the skin over his cheekbones suddenly turning bright pink, even before he opens his mouth, shouting back ¡Hágame el favor! as the woman's booming, insistent voice, as low-pitched as a baritone's, cries out ¡Por favor, señor Presidente, por favor! and the chairman ¡Hágame senora, no interrumpa al orador!, the woman meanwhile continuing to shout at the top of her lungs, the two voices mingling unintelligibly as the speaker, who has fallen silent now, turns halfway around in his box, a forced smile on his lips, his gaze, like that of the other delegates, directed toward the top row of seats, where the kinky-haired, pug-nosed woman has risen to her feet and is waving her arms in great agitation, screaming even more loudly now so as to drown out the chairman's voice, gesticulating violently with her upraised forearms, her open palms framing her temples as though calling on heaven as her witness or signaling that her head is about to burst, shouting Yo quisiera solamente preguntar si hemos venido aquí para escuchar discursos académicos o para . . . , the interpreter excitedly drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk and saying She's asking whether we've come here to listen to academic lectures or whether . . . , his voice in turn being drowned out by the hubbub in the topmost rows of seats and the deafening noise being made by the crowd of spectators in the galleries, leaning over the balcony railings and applauding the woman, who continues to bellow at the top of her lungs as she points to a delegate next to her, a very pale-faced young man with a blond beard, who is sitting there motionless, not saying a word, as the speaker who has been interrupted remains seated in his box, as though struck dumb, his face slightly flushed, the same tense smile on his lips, also nervously drumming his fingers on

his desk until the chairman turns to him, apologizes for the disturbance, and amid all the uproar asks him a question which he answers in the affirmative with a nod of his head, whereupon the chairman again addresses the woman, raising his hand with outstretched fingers in her direction and saying ¡Cinco minutos!, at which point the woman replies Sí, cinco minutos. ¡Gracias, señor Presidente!, whereupon the chairman repeats in a resolute tone of voice ¡Cinco minutos solamente!, and the woman raises her hand as though swearing an oath and repeats ¡Sí, nada más !Gracias, señor Presidente, gracias!, turning then toward the young delegate, who rises to his feet in the sudden silence and begins to speak in a faint, almost inaudible voice, whereupon the woman points to the microphone on his desk, forces him to sit down again, and maternally turns the flexible stem of the microphone in his direction, and immediately thereafter his very soft voice can be heard throughout the chamber, pronouncing each word slowly and distinctly, saying with deliberate pauses in between each phrase: En estos momentos (at this moment, the interpreter whispers), en que tantos de nuestros camaradas (when so many of our comrades), tantos de los nuestros (so many of our number) están en las cárceles (are in prison), o son torturados (or being subjected to torture), o condenados al exilio (or forced into exile), me parece (it would appear to me) que es verdaderamente (that it is really) de un interés totalmente secundario (quite beside the point) el saber si la creación literaria (to debate the question as to whether literary creation) debe preocuparse (should be focused) de los tormentos, de los demonios del escritor (on the writer's anguish, on his demons), o de no sé cual de esas realidades que le son personales (or on other vague realities that are of concern only to him), de las cuales habla nuestro muy sabio y muy distinguido senador (which our most learned and most distinguished senator has brought to our attention). Seemingly deaf to the wild applause and the bravos forthcoming from the public eries, he remains seated, waiting with lowered eyes as the senator, with a conciliatory wave of his hand, reassures the chairman, standing open-mouthed at the podium, his face now beet red, his anxious gaze

shifting back and forth between the delegates' seats and the pale, motionless young man. When silence reigns once again in the chamber, even though the young man has not made the slightest gesture, the latter's feeble voice is heard once more: ¡Me parece que (In my opinion) la única jerarquía posible (the only hierarchy that merits discussion) es la jerarquía (is the hierarchy) de los problemas y de las necesidades (of the problems and the needs) de los pueblos de nuestros países (of the peoples of our countries), y ninguna otra; (and no other) ¡Me parece que si estamos reunidos aquí (It is my opinion that if we have gathered together here), es para discutir de esos problemas (it is to discuss these problems) y no de los problemas académicos (and not theoretical problems) de una creación literaria (of literary creation) con los cuales nuestros pueblos oprimidos (which to our oppressed peoples) no tienen nada que hacer! (are of no concern whatsoever!) Those seated in the public galleries again burst into wild applause. He sits there motionless, waiting. Eventually, however, he raises his hand and again the chamber falls silent. En fin (Finally), quisiera pedirles a los delegados (I should like to ask the delegates) de los diferentes países de nuestro continente (from the various countries of our continent) reunidos aquí (who have gathered together here) si esta curiosa y colonialista denominación (whether this curious colonialist title) de escritores latinoamericanos (of Latin-American writers) cuenta con su aprobación (meets with their approval), y, en ese caso (and if so), cuál es el lugar (what place) que le reservan (they assign) a los indios (the Indians) que fueron y son los primeros y los únicos ocupantes legítimos de este continente (who were the first and only legitimate occupants of this continent and remain so today). He terminado. (This is all I wish to say.) Gracias señor Senador, gracias señor Presidente. Shouts of approval and bravos as well as applause are again heard from the galleries. His face still beet red, the chairman first gazes intently at the galleries, then at the rows of seats down on the main floor of the chamber, where many delegates are applauding more discreetly. His face still somewhat flushed, but still smiling, still sitting in his box with his head turned halfway around, the senator is

also applauding and nodding his head to indicate his approval. The chairman leans over toward the man seated next to him on the speakers' platform, exchanges a few brief remarks with him, and then straightens up again and raises his hand to plead for silence. The applause continues. The gilt frames of the paintings are reflected on the highly polished waxed floor of the museum. They surround dark rectangles in which the viewer's eye can vaguely make out the figures of heroes, bishops, women emerging from their baths, mingled with the vertical silhouettes of the visitors standing on top of their reverse-image doubles. The heroes, the saints, the goddesses, the dogs dressed in capes edged in fur, and the female bathers are frozen in violent, ecstatic, haughty, or voluptuous poses. Their galloping charges, their meditation, or their uncompleted gestures forever arrested, the muscular bodies, the gaunt hermits, the placid Dutch women or the splendid nude forms of Montmartre models are incarnated in a realm outside of time, in a confrontation of light and shadow. Condemned to battles where victory is never won, to prayers that remain unanswered, to meditations that lead nowhere, to ablutions eternally repeated, their responses to the visitors' questioning gaze are silent, enigmatic signs. Having arrived within a few feet of the doorman who continues to hold one panel of the revolving door open, the old lady's forward motion ceases. Hooking the curved handle of her cane over the crook of her right elbow, she stands there on her thin leg bones clad in white stockings, clumsily rummaging about in her little reticule embroidered with pearls dangling from a handle in the form of a thin gold chain. Placing his cap over his chest at the level of his heart in a gesture of deference, the doorman gazes intently at the little bag with several crumpled bills peeking out of the top. As the sun rises, the stars of the constellations pale, winking out one after another, and the gigantic body of Orion striding forward to his rendezvous grows dimmer and dimmer, seemingly dissolving in the light, and finally disappears. Their left legs lifted above their heads in unison, their feet with arching insteps shod in black high-heeled pumps, the line of chorus girls is permanently frozen in a state of precarious balance. At the

front of the stage, parallel to the lower edge of the painting, a row of gas lamps, in the form of frosted globes topped by a crown of flaring points, cast their pale glow upward, illuminating the dancers' lace underwear, their faces, their upraised skirts whose ruffled hems swirl about their outstretched legs. Below the gas footlights, in the orchestra pit, that is to say in the area between the two parallel lines formed by the edge of the stage and the bottom edge of the frame, the heads of musicians, blowing into their instruments, can be seen in profile. The beams of light projected upward by the gas lamps break up into countless bits of yellow, Nile-green, mauve, or black confetti, drifting apart at times, and at others clustering together in dark patches like iron filings in a magnetic field. The curved scroll of a bass violin juts out in sharp outline above the orchestra pit, like a silhouette in a Chinese shadow play, against the background of legs and luminous flounces of the dancers' costumes. The old lady leans forward in order to get a better look inside her bag as she continues to rummage through it. As she assumes this position, the silver handle of her cane slides down her forearm and the cane falls to the floor. The bright reflection of the young woman and the child, who have again halted along the sidewalk, is superimposed upon the row of raised legs on display in the window of the shop, advertising a brand of stockings that come in a variety of shades ranging from flesh color to putty to dark brown. The cane lies there on the red carpet, a dark straight line ending in a gleaming curve. Letting go of the panel of the revolving door, the doorman hurries over, his arm, already bent at the elbow, reaching down toward the cane. With an imperious gesture the wrinkled hand which a moment before had been fumbling about in the pearl-embroidered bag clutches the arm in midair and arrests it. Teetering precariously on her high heels and slowly bending her bowed legs, the old lady leans down lower and lower, her hand searching about on the carpet, and finally her fingers touch the lower tip of the cane, which she slowly pulls toward her until finally she is again able to grasp the handle of it. One end of the feather boa draped around her neck is hanging down lower than the other, and at this moment it slips down even

farther and begins dragging along the thick carpet. Hence, as the old lady slowly straightens up again, the boa slides off her shoulders, so that when she once again finds herself in an upright position with her hand leaning on her cane, the pink boa is lying at her feet in an S-curve. The young woman rapidly strides over to the rabbit lying on the sidewalk, picks it up, tucks it under her arm, takes the child's hand again, and continues on down the street at a brisk pace. The string that the child has been pulling the rabbit by is now dangling down her side in a loop that is rubbing against the thigh of her Bermuda shorts, swinging back and forth as she strides along. The horizontal rays of the sun break through the clouds and enter the interior of the airplane through the window, striking his eyes and his burning eyelids with such force as to be actually painful. The two naked bodies lying stretched out on the rumpled bed have now taken on natural flesh tones in the morning light: ocher, rosy, or milky tints, depending on the amount of sun and air the various areas of their bodies have generally been exposed to. Like those painted wooden statues of saints carried in processions, teetering on the shoulders of their bearers, provided with a little opening carved in their chests or one of their limbs and covered with a sheet of glass, thus revealing a fragment of bone placed inside it, the skin on the front of the two torsos has been slit and the edges drawn back away from the breasts-or the pectoral muscles-down to a point just above the pubis. Placed over this opening in the shape of a guitar, slightly pinched in at the waist, is a panel of molded plexiglass showing the musculature of the bodies, the furrow between the folds of the man's abdomen, the rounded swelling of the woman's belly below the navel. Through this transparent wall one can see the internal organs, purple or pale white or faintly tinged with blue, all tidily arranged in the cavity, neatly interlocking and traversed by tiny blood vessels that divide, that branch off in every direction like roots, like rootlets, in delicate, sinuous little red or blue twigs. The outer covering of the lungs is divided into a multitude of irregular polygons clustered together, like a conglomerate of pebbles or gravel, their connective tissue forming a sort of grillwork. Leading

from each of the two lobes are large blood vessels which divide off into branches, curve back upon themselves, overlap each other, and intertwine. The lungs regularly contract and dilate. With each heartbeat the blood pulses through the large arteries. The intestines are covered with a diaphanous, iridescent membrane. Folding back upon themselves in complicated meanders, like gathered silk, they too move continuously, though very slowly, undergoing imperceptible distortions. Beyond the edges of the plexiglass panels, skin that is more or less deeply tanned covers the flesh, the muscles relaxed in sleep. The rounded pubis, slightly shadowed by the silky hairs covering it, can be seen between the parted white thighs, dividing farther down to form a pale pink slit. From time to time one of the intertwined limbs stirs, stretches, settles back in its former positions or seeks another, the bodies draw apart, one of them rolls on its side, and then they move together again and the couple's alternate inhalations and exhalations once again become regular. The light is steady now. The sea beneath the airplane is an even, deep blue. The edges of the little islands slowly drifting past are festooned with coral reefs, where the water is a milky green color. As though possessed of a life of its own, the hairy hand placed just slightly below the breasts moves away from the chest, glides lightly over the plexiglass wall above the organs tinted in garish colors or pale pastels, slides slowly downward, and feeling its way blindly, finally stops at the pubis, encircling it, with the index finger gently inserted partway into the slit. The breathing of the sleeping woman quickens. Through the transparent window, one can see the dark reddish-purple mass of the heart dilating and contracting at more rapid intervals. The sinuous, swollen vein, blue gray in color, snaking along the old lady's temple, pulses rapidly as she stands there looking down at the pink boa that has fallen on the carpet and is lying at her feet. The doorman is still standing motionless a few steps away, in the de-ferent posture in which the old lady's hand had frozen him a moment before. In a series of slow movements, the old lady transfers the silver handle of her cane to her left hand, which is still clutching the retic-ule, and then she bends down for a second time, in a succession of

jerky motions, until her hand touches the carpet and grasps the boa. Having done so, she again straightens up, in the same manner as a few moments before, like an automaton moving in fits and starts, with pauses between each successive position she assumes during which one imagines that one can hear the mechanism humming before the next cog is engaged. Moving cautiously, stubborn and invincible, she eventually finds herself standing upright again, the vein winding down her temple pulsing violently now, her wrinkled yellow face impassive as, with the same slow, deliberate gestures, she drapes the boa around her neck, pulls on her gloves, transfers the handle of her cane to her right hand, and opens her bag once again. Orion is advancing toward the hill that can be seen to the left in the background of the painting, just as the first rays of the rising sun strike it. Around his head clouds resembling curdled milk roil and pile into puffy screens, some of them dark and some of them light, like smoke from factory chimneys being driven before the wind, moving in the same direction as the giant, being sucked, like him, toward the hole through which the light is beginning to stream. These clouds would in fact appear to be morning fog rising from the ground, still clinging to the trunks and branches of the trees on the right in wisps that first stretch out like long streamers, then condense, and finally form rounded clusters and domes high in the sky. In the pale haze blurring the end of the street boxed in on both sides by high walls, two factory chimneys can be seen, pale columns against a pale background, the shafts of which are decorated with alternate red and white courses of bricks. The red bands appear to be suspended in midair, to have been painted on the faded sky. Whitish plumes of smoke emerge from the tops of the shafts, flattened out at first by the sea breeze, and then slowly rising in twisting spirals. The two giant black women pass by once again, this time walking in the opposite direction. Their heads and a portion of their torsos appear to tower above the tops of the skyscrapers. He can still see the crowd fluttering like butterflies at the intersection, or rather the sort of horizontal band that forms a kind of fixed pointillist plinth at the base of the skyscrapers. Still as dense as a few moments

before, as dense as it will remain for many hours to come, till nightfall (at which time the only thing that will be discernible in front of the luminous rectangles of the windows will be a black, swarming mass), in the bright light of day it is like those bits of confetti pushed into the gutters by street sweepers the day after a holiday celebration that pile up along the curb, the wind tirelessly stirring up the mounds of little pale green, pink, sulphur-yellow, or blue flakes. Still sitting on the fire-plug, he finds himself in the midst of-or rather to one side of-a double current, like rubbish washed up on a riverbank, on the edge of a stream of people proceeding either toward or away from the static and impersonal swarm down at the end of the street, as though this latter constituted a sort of reservoir, with the silhouettes of the passers-by either decreasing little by little in size, growing thinner and thinner and finally melting into the magma spattered all along the tall façades, or else detaching themselves from it and increasing in size as they approach, the little anonymous particles gradually taking on more definite contours, each of them becoming individualized as they draw closer and closer, becoming men, women, or children. He sits there watching them come toward him, filing past him one after the other in the blinding light, each of them surrounded by a nauseating air of unreality, as on mornings following a night of carnival merrymaking, an impression further accentuated by the many inexpressive masklike countenances, the many grim faces, the grotesque accouterments and shapeless, worn-out garments that form such a noticeable contrast to the long shiny cars, the glistening glass and metal façades, out of the doors of which there spew groups of people dressed in the most motley outfits, reminding one of those hordes that have escaped some sort of catastrophe (a flood, an earthquake, a bombing), parading, with that mixture of indifference, rebelliousness, and the desire to show off to which absolute despair gives rise, the most incongruous combinations of mismatched bits and pieces of wearing apparel that give the appearance of having been scavenged from the warehouse of a dealer in theatrical costumes which has remained intact amid the ruins. In the warm, sticky air in which they seem to be drifting like half-dead

fish, the pasty white or ebony faces, gleaming with sweat, sprinkled with freckles, topped by kinky tresses or mops of red hair, slowly rise like bubbles, passing above his head and disappearing, doubtless doomed to burst, like children's balloons, somewhere far overhead, above the tallest façades, the loftiest skyscrapers, perhaps at the height at which the stifling mixture of gas saturated with water vapor finally ends, in the clear sky, in the free air. The seemingly endless wave upon wave of deafening applause is dying down a bit now, like the sound of an engine that has reached its cruising speed, no longer quite as loud as in the first moments following the interruption of the senator's speech by the young orator, stabilized now at an intermediate level, a monotonous rhythmic patter like a vague noise in the background, even though all but three or four of the delegates on the floor of the chamber have ceased applauding, turning around from time to time in their seats to look up, like the chairman, at the galleries above them, or leaning over to whisper in each other's ear, the chairman continuing to raise his hand in a mechanical gesture from time to time, and then finally giving up, shrugging his shoulders in pretended helplessness as he looks in the direction of the senator, who is now bent over his desk, writing rapidly, but as the senator raises his head and his eyes meet the chairman's he raises his left hand slightly to signal to the latter to be patient, then begins writing again, the sound of the hands still tirelessly clapping resembling that of a violent flurry of raindrops striking a window that doubtless has a double pane of glass, or is made of thick Thermopane, since the pale tropical sun scarcely penetrates it, for its rays are still faint and feeble and diffuse, and it too appears to be suspended motionless in midair. From the cavity within the opening in the shape of a guitar the doctor removes the colored organs one by one (or if they are too large, only certain portions of them). They are made of some lightweight material such as pasteboard or celluloid. They are fitted together by an ingenious system of interlocking catches which allows them to be removed-or replaced-by simply pulling on them or pressing them back in place. The doctor carefully lays these organs out on a little stand, covered with a white

cloth, drawn up alongside the examining table. A little figure is standing on the edge of the path that Orion is following. His arms are outspread in a gesture of astonishment. Standing there with his face tilted back, he stares at the blind profile far above him. The torsos of the other two figures, whose heads are also tilted upward and whose arms are also outspread, appear above the edge of a fold in the terrain, darkly silhouetted against the sloping hillside farther in the distance. The tall black man with a mustache and bulging cheeks like a squirrel's bangs the rear door of the truck shut. As he walks along the gray side of the truck in the direction of the cab, he casts another blank glance at the sick man. Then he climbs in the cab alongside his pal, slams the door, and the truck takes off, immediately heading off to the left, its right rear wheel crushing the cardboard cartons that have piled up underneath the truck. After it has passed over them, a number of the sides of the boxes slowly begin to unflatten. These cartons are of an earthen color. Where their sides have been torn, the raw edge reveals several thick, soft inside layers, urine-yellow in color. The elderly lady dressed in pink silk crams the crumpled bills back down inside her pearl-embroidered bag, straightens up, and holding a coin between two fingers, continues on toward the revolving door, alongside which the doorman is now standing. The doctor methodically puts the organs that he has examined back inside the cavity, one by one, each of them interlocking perfectly in their proper places. In the same dry, neutral voice, scarcely able to conceal his boredom, he says You may put your clothes back on now. The sick man rises to his feet and leaves the fireplug. Leaning slightly forward, the cigarette that he has forgotten to light still thrust between his lips, pointing downward toward the ground, his jaws still tightly clenched, he slowly walks along the sidewalk, trying to hold himself as erect as possible, in the direction of the intersection, beyond which he can still see the frosted glass and steel marque of the hotel overhanging the sidewalk farther down the street. As he walks past the inscription DIOS ES AMOR, on the left of his field of vision he sees, in confusing succession, like a series of film frames shot in slow motion, the row of amber-colored legs, a wide

entryway, a display of shoes, a typewriter shop, the green plants decorating the lower edge of a cafeteria window. He makes his way along at a pace that is at once sufficiently slow to allow some of this series of images (a grayish color, the shiny highlights on pairs of patent-leather pumps, a cactus) to be clearly registered on his retina, and at the same time sufficiently rapid (though it may merely be a consequence of his acute feeling of malaise) for them to simply appear and disappear (like the faces advancing toward him along the sidewalk) in a vague blur of unidentified shapes-or perhaps shapes recognized but forgotten the moment they are perceived, mental concepts (doorway, shoes, green) interposing themselves between his gaze and these objects, substituting for the latter a series of prefabricated, immaterial images. As he goes on farther, the disposition of the forms around him changes. The images close to him file by and succeed each other (one shop window, one display replacing ,another) relatively rapidly, but on the other hand, when he raises his head it seems as though he has made no progress at all: the endless corridor formed by the street appears to grow longer and longer, its far end continually receding in the whitish haze lying motionless above the ocean. Higher up, the tops of the pale skyscrapers glide past, or rather, these vertical shafts drift by so slowly that he can perceive almost no change in their relative positions. Still towering in the distance far overhead, they mask each other, blot each other out, reappear, replace each other, like evanescent apparitions in the blindingly bright sky, like phantoms, yet at the same time they move no closer, so that it seems to him that even though he is dragging himself slowly along he is getting nowhere, stuck fast in a sort of warm, viscous dough that he finds it impossible to extricate himself from, a vague amalgam of stones, bricks, and water vapor. Although the rules of perspective have apparently been followed so as to give the viewer the illusion of depth, the painter, seemingly working at cross purposes, has also deliberately incorporated a great many tricks of perspective in his canvas, thus destroying this feeling of depth, so that as a result the giant has become an integral part of the pasty magma of earth, leaves, water, and sky surrounding him.

Orion is not advancing in an upright position, with his body forming a vertical axis in relation to the plane of the path he is following, as would be the case, for example, if one were looking at a chess piece standing on a square of a chess board, surrounded by nothing but empty space on all sides. He appears, on the contrary, to resemble a figure in a bas-relief, firmly imbedded in the décor that is intended to frame him or serve as a background for him. The gigantic body either stands out from this natural landscape or sinks back into it, depending on the play of light and shadow, but never becomes entirely detached from it. The sun, the branches of the trees, the clouds are also cleverly highlighted or shaded, so that at times the portions of the body in shadow (the right arm, the back) or in the light (the shoulder and the left arm groping in front of him, the left leg stretched straight back) stand out in clear outline, whereas other portions (the right leg striding forward, the midsection of the body, the hand holding the bow) blend into these areas of light and shadow and merge with them. The landscape thus fails to create the impression of a plane perpendicular to the canvas. On the contrary, it forms bumps and hollows and projects certain of its elements forward, not according to their proximity or distance, such as would be the case in conventional perspective, but rather, only in accordance with the requirements of this rhetorical style of composition and expression. These elements cease to be sky, pebbles, leaves, and instead become an environment, or more properly speaking, a matrix. They are not gaseous, mineral, or vegetable masses located at varying distances from the viewer like the receding planes of a stage or film set, but mere accidental lighting (or color) effects, accenting the reliefs (the salient contours) of a dough of uniform consistency kneaded into a single round mound. Though distant objects, the hill on the horizon, for example, where the path reappears, winding its way up the slope, are drawn in smaller scale, they nonetheless seem to form part of the foreground because of their strong contrasts and accents. The rock ledge jutting out over the hill, with certain patches of it in glaring light and others in deep shadow, the thunderclouds with roiling black folds, are exactly similar in

nature to the muscular, craggy back of the giant stuck fast in this clay out of which the creator has modeled forms of the animate and the inanimate world that are indistinguishable from each other. The curious conformation of the clouds affords the museum visitor further proof that he is not contemplating a three-dimensional scene. They imitate the corrugated intestinal convolutions of those thunderheads on which virgins and saints of baroque altarpieces are enthroned, their marble feet resting on storm clouds engraved in stone or cast in plaster, looking like soft cushions, weaving in and out among wreathed columns, mingling with the folds of shrouds dangling out of sepulchers, with porphyry draperies weighing tons that form aerial baldachins, supported by cherubs, flapping in the violent gusts of imaginary tempests. Their ponderous spirals mount round about Orion's head (rather than behind it), blending with the loose folds of the tunic of the servant perched on his shoulders, pointing out to the blind eyes of the giant an ideal goal, one consisting, like the pointing finger itself, like the closed eyelids, the gnarled shoulders, and the monumental footprints in the dust of the path, of no more than a thin film of paint. In the four panels of the revolving door which continues to turn round and round though there is no one inside it, the reflections of the beams of light glide along horizontally, sweeping from right to left, caught by each succeeding panel of the revolving door and relayed on farther, superimposing themselves on motionless patches of light (windows of buildings, store windows) or moving ones (the headlights of automobiles) suspended in the darkness. Beyond the revolving door, out on the sidewalk, the pink silhouette of the elderly lady can be seen, her shoulders hunched over (as though bending beneath the weight of the enormous reseda flower), being solicitously helped into a car by the doorman with the most precautionous and gingerly gestures. The telephone booth is still unoccupied. The flexible-ringed metal tube connecting the receiver to the telephone box hangs in a motionless loop. The telephone box is made of a black plastic material, surmounted by a dial with round holes, each labeled with a number and letters of the alphabet grouped in threes.

One need only insert a coin in a slot, remove the receiver from the hook, and turn the circular dial several times, whereupon one first hears a crackling noise, immediately followed by a series of rings at regular intervals at the other end of the line. The sleeping woman closes her thighs around the hairy hand encircling her pubis. She moans softly and also turns over on her side, pressing her body against the man's. In this position her white shoulders and lower back are in intimate contact with the transparent wall beneath which the purple and bluish organs of her companion are gently stirring. At night the bases of the buildings are illuminated by the dim light of the street-lamps or the reddish glow of the neon signs. As his gaze travels upward toward the top floors, the outer walls gradually disappear in the shadows in which the lighted rectangles of the windows hang suspended. The glass façades of a number of the skyscrapers have lights on around the clock. Their thousands and thousands of windows, arranged in vertical rows one atop the other, separated by thin steel horizontal strips, rise to dizzying heights, forming towering walls that gleam like diamonds. The tops of certain of these skyscrapers are surrounded by dense heat waves, tinged a dirty pink by the reflections of neon signs. Others, however, are plunged in total darkness. Deserted by their daytime occupants, they have been relegated to the realm of shadows. Behind their dark façades, one can almost see their superimposed office cubicles, their corridors, like row upon row of pigeonholes one atop the other in the darkness, filled, like the gutted rooms of abandoned houses about to be torn down, with a clutter of useless objects. Rickety tables, chairs with broken legs, cabinets with sagging carved doors, rolltop desks, rusty typewriters, sofas with prickly horsehair stuffing and backs upholstered in cracked moleskin, exposed beams, plaster acanthus moldings, balustrades, blades of overhead fans, all the debris, identifiable or not, is covered by the dark of night with a uniform layer of black paint. Also black on black, the palm leaves or the flower patterns of the wallpaper are visible only because their edges are outlined in slightly blacker ink or because their more or less leaden hues in a matte finish make them stand out in slight relief. Little by

little the sound level of the applause decreases, the noise of clapping hands seems to thin out, to break up and concentrate around a few scattered focal points. Groups of varying sizes stubbornly continue to applaud for a few moments, then they too disperse. Finally all that remains are a few enthusiastic, isolated individuals who continue to clap their hands for a time, as the chairman stands on the platform, his arm still upraised, patiently waiting, and then as the last applause dies down, finally lowering it, the palm extended, pointing in the direction of the senator, who nods his head in approval, leans back upright in his seat, adjusts the microphone on his desk, and resumes his speech: No hay para que decirlo (I need not point out, the interpreter says) que la muy justa intervención (that the most judicious remarks) del señor Ramírez (made by Mr. Ramírez) cuenta con toda mi aprobación (meet with my entire approval). A few scattered bursts of applause are heard in the chamber, and the chairman also applauds. The senator raises his hand, pleading for silence, and goes on with his speech: No hay para que decirlo (I need not point out) que si los problemas inherentes a toda creación literaria (that even though those problems involved in any sort of literary creation) que he tratado de analizar (that I have endeavored to analyze) incumben fundamentalmente (are of fundamental concern) a toda escritor (to every writer), esos problemas (these problems) no pueden ser planteados (cannot be considered) fuera del conjunto de los problemas (outside of the total context of problems) inherentes a la sociedad en la cual él vive (that are inherent in the society in which he lives) : los problemas de la miseria (the problems of poverty), de la opresión (of oppression), y de la explotación del hombre por el hombre (and of the exploitation of man by man). No hay para que decirlo . . . From time to time a spire, a dome illuminated by floodlights, seems to be suspended between heaven and earth in these lilac-tinted shadows, surrounded by powdery flakes of falling snow. On the trackless crests bearing the names of legendary monsters, the gusts of wind blowing on the summits raise dazzling-white plumes of snow that continually swirl about like clouds of smoke. All along the entire length of the

arteries stretching across the city in parallel lines running from north to south, and from south to north, continuous streams of lights drift slowly along, like globules, beneath the layer upon layer of bluish fumes accumulating between the black blocks of buildings in the narrow canyons. Here and there little islands of light blaze up. From an intersection, from certain points along the avenues, they stretch their tentacles down the perpendicular streets, forming irregular stars or crosses of Lorraine, like molten streams of metal pouring from the ladles of foundries, blindingly incandescent at first, then gradually turning a vivid red, then their ruddy glow becoming less and less bright as they flow away from the furnace, as they cool and merge with the darkness. Although there is a permanent overall brightness, the individual light sources producing this glow continually change color and intensity. Mechanically regulated, each of them alternately winks on and off with uninterrupted regularity. Dazzling the eye with their myriad twinkling flashes, the implacable workings of their mechanisms keep forming combinations that continually vary but at the same time are limited in number, their regular repetition thus appearing to punctuate the vague passage of time. Following the rows of light bulbs along the edge of a sign, covering the entire surface of a billboard, flashing endlessly on and off, forming moving arrows, reversing the colors of the letters and their backgrounds, ticking off the hours, the minutes, the seconds and tenths of seconds in writhing, twisting numerals, suddenly changing, taking on different conformations, and succeeding each other with terrifying rapidity, the lights imprint upon the retina the names or the emblems or the trademarks of airline companies, movie stars, razors, deodorants, makes of cars, or brands of bourbon. Framed in rectangles, in sunbursts dripping with gold, in red moons or ephemeral cascades of diamonds, they are endlessly repeated like admonitions or lessons being drummed into the heads of idiots or retarded children. From the giant conglomerate of cubes, towers, suspension bridges, shacks, warehouses, docks, factories, highway interchanges, expressways, movie houses, illuminated billboards flashing on and off, the same dull rumble continues to rise, constant-

ly pierced by the shriek of sirens mounted on fire trucks or police cars, close by or farther in the distance, wailing in turn like the prolonged, plaintive cries of madwomen. They penetrate the stifling air, mingled with nauseating whiffs of hot oil, exhaust fumes, and the stale smell of food cooking in the kitchens of cheap restaurants. In an electric, grayish, dead light, the side streets stretch out for mile after mile, paved with bumpy asphalt, strewn with empty packing boxes, tattered newspapers, dirty bits of paper, and lined with dark shop windows, bar signs, board fences, doorways with Florentine columns, bloated caryatids, and bearded pot-bellied giants, supporting on their shoulders the weight of purplish cliffs of stone. Peering down into the darkness from the airplane, the eye can discern puzzling patches of light scattered here and there over the surface of the dark earth below. As these patches come closer, one can make out branching points of stars, tentacles, incandescent crosses, like cracks in the dark crust of earth through which trickles of lava appear to be pouring, expelled by some cataclysm far below the surface. Flaring up like little forest fires, looking ridiculously tiny in the immense dark expanses of the night beneath the cold, slowly wheeling constellations, the artificial flames, in which the names of movie stars, petroleum products, perfumes, whiskeys, and tires blaze up, go out, and flame up once again, drift slowly past, fighting an insane battle against the shadows attempting to engulf them. Rent for the space of an instant, driven back for a moment by the blindingly bright force of millions of volts, these shadows then close in again, inexorably advancing and receding with each of the pulsations produced by huge invisible machines whose motive force has been provided by gold mines, by virgin forests swallowed up in darkness, by blacks lashed with whips, and by millions of tons of water roaring down over the edge of wild cataracts. Engraved in copperplate with a network of fine lilac-colored lines crisscrossing in the shadows, forming a straggling row of irregularly spaced dots amid the lights, a number of persons have gathered together on a hillock beneath an overhanging rock ledge. The clumsy drawing represents a group of soldiers in helmets, armed with pikes and swords, their tor-

so sheathed in cuirasses, their legs encased in flaring breeches and tall boots topped by metal thighpieces. Their leader, in a helmet adorned with a plume, his left hand resting on the hilt of a sword planted vertically in the ground, is pointing downward with the index finger of his right hand, as though to designate this precise spot to one of his comrades, directly behind whom a monk clad in a long white hooded robe is standing. In the background a plain can be seen, with two sparkling branches of a river forking off in a Y, and beyond it a range of mountains. At the bottom of the drawing is written the legend: Foundation of Ciudad Nueva. Perched on a rock in the foreground is an Indian armed with a bow, wearing a necklace with metal teardrop pendants, his head tilted upward toward the leader of the soldiers, pointing downward with his rigid index finger toward the same spot on the ground. Parallel to the line of façades of the buildings, a stretch of iron grillwork bordering the sidewalk fences it off from the depression separating it from a recessed building. The bars of the grillwork end in points in the shape of fer-de-lance. A short stairway leads down to a little open door disclosing a maroon velvet curtain hanging just inside. Once he has crossed the threshold, he is vastly surprised at the coolness, the silence, and the dense shadows he suddenly finds himself engulfed in, as though he had made his way into one of those old photographic proofs printed on dark red paper that show none of the halftones, his eyes still dazzled by the blinding light outside, so that at first all he can make out are the little wall lamps whose dim light is reflected on the sides of the rows of bottles, the chromed metal handles of the draft-beer taps, the waxed surfaces of the wood furniture, and the ornamental gold nailheads studding the edges of the barstools. Behind the counter a light-colored, more or less square-shaped patch seems to float in the air like ectoplasm, its outer edge defining the torso of a grossly fat man with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and a tie in garish, clashing colors draped around his neck and fastened to his shirt front by a tieclip. Using the light-colored patch as a guide, groping his way through the reflections with his hand outstretched, he grabs the edge of a barstool, pulls it toward him, and

hoists himself up on it. He then sits there motionless, his two heels clinging to the lower railing of the bar, his forearms leaning on the counter. A fair amount of time passes without his making the slightest move, his eyes staring in front of him at the dark woodwork with a black-and-white photograph hanging on it, showing a young man naked to the waist, his arms bent halfway back in a defensive position, his shoulders hunched over, his chin buried in his chest, his wary, hard eyes staring back at him from behind the barricade of his bare cocked fists. A faint odor of stale beer hangs in the air of the long narrow wood-paneled room, resembling a corridor, with the counter taking up most of the space. On the cream-colored wall of the doctor's waiting room is a painting representing the corner of a boxing ring where one of the contestants has been knocked to the canvas and is lying with his torso propped up on his two arms, his face bloody, his rumpled hair sticking to his sweating forehead. Behind him, in a maroon-colored half-shadow, the eye of the viewer can discern certain vague shapes, and the boxer's trainers shouting to urge him on, their heads lopped off at the neck, like men who have been decapitated. The walls are hung with other paintings as well: a bouquet of anemones, a sunny beach with female bathers and bright-colored umbrellas, a port where seagoing vessels and cranes are silhouetted in bluish gray against water the color of bile. After a moment he begins to feel the sweat between his shoulder blades and on his chest slowly turning clammy. Noises from outside can be heard inside the room, coming from somewhere far away, faint and muffled. The thick carpet, the tables, the inlaid commode, the period armchairs form an anonymous décor such as in those rooms of a stereotyped luxury to be found in palaces or at antique shows, where all traces of disorder or of human habitation have been carefully removed, vacant, empty rooms, serving only as a place to wait, to pass through, or to conduct business. Standing on the mantel between two bronze candelabra is a clock, also in gilded bronze. Leaning her elbows on the face of the dial, a marquise, clad in a metal robe with a tight corset beneath it, is gracefully bending her head downward, with a vague smile on her lips, toward a young man

in a tricorn sitting at her feet strumming a mandolin. The hands of the clock are not moving, yet it seems as though one can hear a sort of almost imperceptible rumble, like that of an invisible glacier creeping forward: something grayish, shapeless, and awesomely heavy that seems to be inching along inexorably, an avalanche in slow motion, on the move for billions of years, patient and insidious, wearing away the floor, the walls. All of a sudden the white patch interposes itself between him and the photograph, and above the loud-colored tie he recognizes the same face as that of the young boxer, though it is bloated now, both massive and soft, the puffy flesh hanging in drooping folds over the powerful bony structure beneath. The man's body is bent slightly forward, his two bare forearms beneath his rolled-up shirt sleeves spread apart leaning on the counter. Like the eyes of the black man and those of the pedestrians passing by a short time before, the man's stony pupils seem to be staring into his without seeing him, neither patient nor impatient: merely waiting. His eyes run along the rows of bottles lined up behind the bulky silhouette, with their different-colored labels, black, gold, pomegranate, yellow, with their slanting letters in copperscript or in the Cyrillic alphabet, the eternal little white horse, the eternal Pickwickian dandy in a red riding coat, a monocle, boots, and a high silk hat, the eternal strings of medals or crowns set in crimson frills, and then return again to the face with the flattened nose, the motionless pupils that seem to be staring straight through him. Finally he says A beer. May I have a beer please? The massive torso straightens up and moves off, as abruptly as it has previously frozen in place, passing from immobility to motion with no intermediate state of transition, like those animal species, those saurians capable of remaining absolutely motionless for hours on end, looking like a tree trunk or a dead branch, and then abruptly darting off with startling suddenness. The eye perceives brown, elongated, half-submerged forms, washed up by the rivers, lying along their muddy banks. The airplane is flying at too high an altitude for one to be able to determine precisely what these forms are. From time to time miserable huts of the same grayish yellow as the water, the grass, or the mud can

be seen along the riverbank, surrounded by a little plot of fenced-in land on the shore, with a canoe or a boat drawn up on the muddy stretch of beach in front of them. Continuing its slow forward movement, the grayish mass of snow advances irresistibly. It has now completely blocked the doorway, like a soft wall, like a flow of pale excrement expelled by some monster, some invisible pachyderm. Large patches, like flaking plaster, whole sections of it work loose from its face and topple over onto the carpet in delicate pastel shades, then little by little are covered over with others, forming piles of debris at the foot of the cliff of ice implacably creeping forward. Along his back and his rib cage the sweat is now icy cold, and his shoulders suddenly begin to tremble. Apparently insensitive to the chilly draft, the fat man in his shirt sleeves picks up a spatula and removes the head of foam brimming over the top of the glass. The glass is poised beneath the tap on a chromed metal plate with concentric rings of round holes in it. Sparkling columns of tiny bubbles rise inside the glass, below the collar of foam. As the level of the liquid slowly mounts, the fat man stands there motionless, his two arms spread apart, leaning his elbows on the bar again, his glassy, pale gray, snakelike eyes dead and expressionless once more, staring straight in front of him at two customers perched on their stools, talking together in low voices. From time to time one of them moves his glass slightly, whereupon the ice cubes inside it tinkle. A man dressed in blue work overalls with straps across his shoulders is sitting at the other end of the counter, on which he has laid down two green bills. His checked shirt is buttoned to the neck, and his tired, wan face is expressionless. He too is staring fixedly in front of him and sitting there not moving a muscle. The excess foam slowly slides down the sides of the glass, breaking up into little trickles and clusters of bubbles, like saliva. The grayish, lumpy mass has spread farther and farther past the door and has now reached the middle of the room. A number of successive layers have fallen away from its face, so that it no longer resembles a steep cliff and now looks like an inclined plane, a sort of enormous wedge that continues to slide imperceptibly forward, pushing before it the moraine of particles of varying size

which keep constantly breaking off, tumbling down the slope, and rolling across the carpet, impelled by their own inertia, ending up just beyond the cone of debris whose furthest tip has now reached the foot of the round table in the middle of the room. Several dog-eared magazines with badly worn, wrinkled covers are lying on the table. His eyes follow the fat man as the latter again presses down on the tap of the draft-beer keg, once more carefully watches the level of foam rising rapidly in the glass, again removes the excess head with his spatula, and then grasps the glass between his thumb and his index finger, walks over, and sets it down in front of him on the counter. He says Thank you. The bartender makes an indistinct grunting noise as he dries his fingers. He then spies the empty glass of the man dressed in overalls, snatches it up, and brings it back to the man a moment later, full to the top once again, picks up one of the two bills, goes over to the cash register, comes back, and places several coins on top of the other bill still lying on the counter. The bartender and the man in overalls have not exchanged a single word. In the glass of gold-colored beer in front of him, the streams of minuscule bubbles continue to rise, as meanwhile hollows form in the head of foam at the top and it slowly collapses, sinking lower and lower in the glass. As he raises his eyes, his gaze meets that of the man in overalls, who is staring intently at him, whereupon the latter immediately looks away. A middle-aged woman with a bloated face is sitting in one of the armchairs on the opposite side of the round table. Her legs, pressed close together, seem abnormally plump. Above the tops of her shoes, the flesh of her instep forms a thick roll of puffy fat. As his gaze travels upward toward her face, it meets the woman's, and both avert their eyes simultaneously. Embarrassed, he rises part way out of his chair, leans over, and picks up one of the magazines lying on the round table, the feet of which have now half-disappeared in the gray blob that meanwhile has continued its slow advance. The cover illustration of the magazine shows a woman clad in a long silver dress, with a red sash across her bosom and a diadem atop her head, standing in front of a bright blue velvet curtain. The hands of the clock have not moved, still pointing

to the same hour as before. The monotonous sea of clouds again hides the ground from view and the airplane appears to be suspended motionless in a sort of frozen eternity, with no visible points of reference, either fore or aft of the aircraft, or to the left or the right. VEN a JESUS que te dará LA VIDA ETERNA. On the dirty wall of varnished bricks in the subway station, near the turnstiles at the exit, the vertical rectangles of the billboards are edged in a row of narrower olive-green bricks. The next poster shows the face of a man with an abundant head of hair, a drooping mustache, and a sharp-pointed chin, behind the bars of an iron grille. Through the receiver he can again hear, in the intervals between the ringing of the telephone bell at the other end of the line, the same monumental, monotonous sound of whatever it is that is flowing endlessly on and on, the same majestic hissing noise, the silent rumbling din of slow erosion, of slow decomposition. Through the little square panels of glass in the door of the phone booth with the crossbars painted red he reads, for the second time, the words in large capital letters on the white poster: JESUS VIDA ETERNA, above a cross surrounded by divergent rays of light beneath which there is written in smaller block letters TU QUE BUSCAS EN LAS TINIEBLAS. This time a woman answers. The voice on the other end of the line is calm and steady. Hello he says very fast. Then, immediately thereafter, It's me. She says Yes I know. He says again It's me, I . . . I . . . Then he waits, listening to her breathing, listening to his own breathing, the blood pounding in his ears. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. Finally she says Yes once again. Yes I know. Then both of them fall silent once more, merely breathing into the phone. The heat inside the booth is stifling. His chest is barely able to expand to take in air. It seems as though he can feel the weight of tons and tons of stones, steel, and bricks, piled one atop the other, far above him, in that light and air that are themselves as heavy as metal, brick, or stones, LA MISION CATOLICA SAN ISIDRO TE AYUDARA, 123 West 86th Street. She says Where are you? To make himself heard over the noise of the subway train just pulling into the station he shouts very loudly I'm here, just a few steps away from your place. He shouts the name of

the subway station. She says Where? He shouts again Just a few steps away from your place! and repeats the name of the station. Then he says nothing, as dark silhouettes pass rapidly by between the phone booth and the posters. AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-SIX PAUL GAUGUIN WAS STILL WORKING AS A CASHIER IN A BANK. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. He says Hello, are you still there? She says Yes. Between the parallel horizontal lines formed by the upper and lower edges of the windows of the subway cars he sees rows of torsos from the back, heads and shoulders in dark shadow, and behind them, passengers standing up, in bright light, one arm raised, clinging to handholds overhead. As the train starts up again they teeter on their feet, all of them suddenly leaning in the same direction and then catching their balance as the train picks up speed little by little, the rhythmic click of the wheels on the rail accelerating, the din growing louder and louder, the rows of torsos cut off at the shoulders and the passengers with uplifted arms gliding past more and more rapidly, the terrible racket gradually becoming less deafening, and then finally ceasing abruptly, as though cut off by a knife, no longer a roar but a noise rapidly dying away as the rear of the last car disappears around a curve on the right, revealing the forest of Y-shaped girders fastened into place with a rim of rivets and painted an olive green, beyond which one can see the other dimly lit platform on the opposite side of the tracks where the silhouettes of other subway passengers are standing. She says I'm sorry, madam, I . . . He says Madam? She says Yes. He says Yes, I . . . In any event, though, I . . . She says very quickly, in a different, muffled tone of voice, as though she were covering her mouth with her hand, I can't talk to you now. He repeats the name of the subway station. He says I'd like to see you. She says I can't. He says When? The man with the sharp-pointed chin stares at him out of the corner of his eye from behind the bars of his teller's cage. She says It's impossible. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE. The upper portion of the grayish mass moving steadily into the room has now reached as high as the frame around the picture of the bouquet of anemones. Its leading edge is touching the foot of the chair in which he is sitting. Several of the frag-

ments of various sizes that keep falling off and rolling down the slope and across the carpet are now scattered around his own feet and even beyond them. A little avalanche tumbles down, strikes his ankle, and stops there. It feels ice-cold. In this sitting position, he can also feel the hard, heavy mass filling his entire right side and reaching up as far as his diaphragm. IT'S NEVER TOO LATE! EVENING ART SCHOOL. DRAWING. PAINTING. SCULPTURE. DESIGN. He says Hello, are you still there? She says Yes, He says I can't . . . She says Wait just a minute! Then he hears her voice again, a long distance away from the telephone this time, speaking in another direction, in those calm, gently persuasive tones one uses when asking a child to please not make so much noise or to go play somewhere else. Then, very faintly, the child's voice. Then the woman's voice again, answering the child. The glass is still standing on the counter in front of him, in precisely the same place where the fat man has set it down. The head of foam has disappeared now, and the beer in the glass has risen to a level just above that where the foam began when the glass was first placed in front of him. Only a few little bubbles are rising from the bottom now and traveling up to the surface, where they burst or collect in clusters which float across the top in accordance with unpredictable laws, sometimes joining with others, and finally clinging motionless to the inner surface of the glass. The faint but persistent odor of stale beer lingering in the half-shadows of the bar, despite the air conditioning, seems to be exuded by the furniture itself, by the counter, by the wood paneling covering the walls. It is reminiscent of a subtle poisonous gas mingled with the smell of fermentation, as though the long narrow space shaped like an intestine had been hollowed out of the belly of some living beast, some ruminant creature whose digestive processes are slow and foul-smelling. The red light on the back of the last subway car has disappeared in the black tunnel, into which the forest of riveted girders also recedes, and from which there emerge muffled, distant echoes, the sound of rumbling wheels, bumps and thuds and tremors. A scorching-hot stink, a fetid blend of must, sweat, and disinfectant wafts up out of the obscure depths. VIDA ETERNA. He says

Hello? Are you still there She says Yes. He says I can't stand this any longer. I absolutely have to . . . Then his voice becomes inaudible, drowned out in the avalanche of noise, the maddening din of metal grinding against metal, of parts disintegrating, as in a series of fiery explosions, as an express train hurtles through the station on the middle track without stopping, and the same rows of dark seated torsos and standing silhouettes with upraised arms being propelled along horizontally at a dizzying rate of speed rush by, hacked to pieces by the metal girders and then disappearing, the catastrophic din gradually dying away as the trainload of human cargo is swallowed up, swept away, into the bowels of the earth by some sort of terrible earthquake, into some subterranean abyss, with a repulsive sucking noise. She says I can't hear you. He says I have to see you. I want to . . . She says No. He says Yes: downstairs at your place. She says No. It's impossible. You know that. He says Yes you can. Then he falls silent once again, merely breathing into the phone, listening to the woman's breathing at the other end of the line, panting slightly, and perhaps hearing another noise, fainter than the sound of a person breathing, an almost inaudible, moist sound. **SOMEBODY IS ALWAYS WINNING. IT MIGHT AS WELL BE YOU.** The subway runs twenty-four hours out of twenty-four and each train is made up of between 10 and 12 cars. The subway system is almost 250 miles long, carries 1,362,000,000 passengers per year, and employs a staff of 35,000. There are both local and express trains. Completely accustomed to the darkness now, his eyes can make out two sorts of reflections on the sides of the bottles. Some of them are yellow and do not move. They are reflections of the metal brackets set in the oak walls, from which the dim lamps lighting the interior of the bar are suspended. The others are a cold silver gray, the intensity of which constantly varies. Within these long thin streaks, other even thinner vertical ones, gray or black in color, resembling slender rods, or rather, wires, keep drifting from left to right or from right to left, their paths continually crossing, in perpetual motion. The view out of the rectangular front window of the bar, which is below street level, is two-thirds obstructed by the low wall supporting the sidewalk, leaving

only a narrow horizontal band at the top through which one can see, as though through a small basement window, the feet and legs of pedestrians, cut off at the knees, as they pass by in both directions outside. They make their way along in a light which, by contrast with the mahogany-colored half shadow inside the bar, appears to be pale and cold, as though they were moving about in another element or were trapped behind the glass walls of an aquarium. The heavy velvet curtain hanging in the doorway causes the echoes of the incessant stir of activity outside to appear to be coming from very far away. HONEY, WE'RE RICH! THAT'S WHAT MRS. JAMES JACKSON SAID WHEN SHE WON \$250,000 IN THE STATE LOTTERY. He says Hello? Are you still there? Hello . . . She says Yes. He says Listen . . . Then his voice again becomes fainter and fainter, and finally fades away entirely, and once more the two of them remain silent, listening to each other breathing, the only audible sound save for the hissing of whatever it is that continues to flow on and on, inexorably, and monotonously, like thin trickles escaping from the outlet valves of a sluice gate, as meanwhile, lifting his finger to plug up his other ear not glued to the telephone receiver, he sees the dark silhouettes again pass rapidly by in front of Gauguin's face, divided into slices by the metal bars, then the cross that promises Eternal Life, the middle-aged lady in the housewife's apron pressing her face against her husband's chest, with his bony Irish profile, wrinkled and smiling, bending down toward her. SOMEBODY IS ALWAYS WINNING. IT MIGHT AS WELL BE YOU! He is now buried to the waist in the avalanche which is still slowly advancing. Opposite him, the feet and ankles of the sick woman with the swollen legs are disappearing in the grayish piles of debris. Although she has not shifted position and is still holding her handbag on her thighs, when his eyes again meet hers he notes that there is now a vaguely anxious expression in them. Two anemones are still peeking out above the chaotically crumbling summit of the advancing pile of debris, one of them red, the other with blue-violet petals. In order to continue reading the magazine he is obliged to raise his elbows high in the air, holding it at eye level. He leafs through the pages mechan-

ically. Amid the rustle of pages turning, there appear, one after the other, photographs of washing machines, television sets, starving Asians, a royal couple, a polo player, soldiers in a jungle, young women in bathing suits lying stretched out alongside swimming pools of turquoise-colored water. From time to time a few sounds filter through the lumpy mass obstructing the rectangular doorway: a telephone bell ringing, a muffled dialogue, the sound of another door slamming shut. The fancy wrought hands of the rococo clock still have not moved. The sound of hands clapping is faint and muffled now, like a vague noise in the background, the crackling of an improperly tuned radio set, or the distant hiss one hears over a telephone receiver. Finally the applause becomes scattered, grows fainter, and finally dies away altogether. The senator's plump, impassive face is perhaps slightly redder now. His eyes are invisible behind the reflections of his glasses, but one can see little wrinkles fanning out in the direction of his temples, and beneath his white mustache his mouth is set in a faint smile. Now that the chamber is silent again, he raises one arm up in a curve, like a bishop or a preacher, and his voice is heard again: *No hay para que decirlo . . .*, he says. (I need not point out, the interpreter repeats.) The door situated opposite the one which has been staved in by the slow advance of the avalanche suddenly opens, and the doctor appears in the doorway, one hand resting on the door handle. The door pivots on its hinges, pushing away some of the lumps that have rolled over that far, leaving imprints on the carpet in the form of flattened concentric arcs. Without apparently even noticing these marks, the doctor looks at the two patients, both of whom have turned their heads toward him. His eyes stare at the woman and he thrusts his chin out in her direction. Bending her body forward and leaning on the arm of her chair with one hand, the woman then rises to her feet with a rapidity that one would not expect from such a stout person and tries to make her way over to the door where the doctor is standing, his expressionless eyes observing her as she proceeds toward him. After a brisk step or two, the woman's forward motion has been slowed down by the thick accumulation of debris, despite the fact that the height of

it has decreased as she has advanced toward the open door, and she is now laboriously placing one of her swollen feet in front of the other, like someone wading through knee-deep water. Little by little, however, she becomes more sure-footed and finally she passes through the doorway as the doctor steps aside to let her by and closes the door behind him after casting one last vaguely irritated glance in the direction of the patient now sitting alone on the waiting room. A smiling young woman, looking as neat as a pin, her dress protected by a gingham kitchen apron with little sky-blue squares and a bib, is holding her hands out toward the viewer above her clean dishes standing in a drainer on the edge of a sink. One of her palms is open, with the outspread fingers pointing downward, to show how smooth and soft the skin of her hand is. Her other hand, which looks larger than life-size because of the angle of perspective, is thrusting into the foreground a rectangular box, half yellow and half blue, on which the name of a brand of detergent appears in white letters. The woman's hair is curly and blond, and her bright red lips are parted in a dazzling smile. The polo player, wearing white gloves and a white helmet, is galloping across the vivid green turf, his torso leaning slightly forward, his long jersey shirt likewise tilting forward at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees. The horse's pasterns and kneecaps are protected by bandages and tawny-colored leather pads. Men carrying weapons or bearing various burdens (ammunition? food supplies?) are walking along in single file through a tangle of brush represented by black and white dots and crosshatches. The photograph is a poor-quality print, not very sharp, the layer of gelatin having perhaps deteriorated because of the humidity and the heat, so that the precise nature of the setting is not clear, for there are no distinguishing features either at the top or the bottom, the right or the left. One recognizes no identifiable individual leaves, trees, stems, or blades of grass. The entire surface is uniformly covered with the same soot-colored scrawls, hiding the lower part of the men's legs up to the ankle, or in certain places even up as far as the knee, surrounding the heads, dotted here and there with clear patches or crisscrossed with lines running in every direction, like

a child's scribble, the entire page giving the appearance of having been crossed out by an angry, clumsy hand, or reminding one of those old films that have been worn out from being run through a projector too often, the figures in them moving through a chaotic hailstorm of white streaks and peeling flakes that form scratches and holes in the image projected on the screen. Because of the poor quality of the print (or perhaps because of the sweat that is running down their skin and highlighting their most prominent facial features), the modeling of the drawn, tired faces is suggested only very sketchily by violently contrasting deep black or pastry white patches, with no halftones. Members of the white race and so tall that they look like giants alongside the native bearers, the leaders, all of whom resemble each other, belong to that particular breed of tough, determined men who boldly venture forth in the most forbidding climes. Small in stature, the natives with their graceful bodies, their narrow almond eyes, their high cheekbones, are of that Mongolian type, either a seemingly pure strain or of mixed blood, found everywhere on the perimeter of the Pacific, and thus, aside from very slight individual differences, they too all resemble each other. The dark pupils of their eyes, scarcely visible in the shadow cast by their prominent brow ridges, seem to be darting fierce, mistrustful glances at the photographer as they file by. The row of faces of the men in the column stretches out in a long line that disappears in the distance, each face growing smaller and smaller, the silhouettes farthest away barely distinguishable from the sooty charcoal-gray smears surrounding them. Becoming more and more simplified as well, their eyes reduced to two narrow slits, their thick lips represented by two dark lines, their little flat, pale, masklike faces framed by a tangle of fossilized vegetation, they themselves appear to be gelatinous fossils, emaciated and exhausted conquerors indomitably continuing their march down through the centuries. No sound can be heard from beyond the door that the doctor has closed once more after ushering the woman patient in just a few moments before. The bouquet of anemones has completely disappeared and the top of the lumpy cliff face that is still advancing is now touching the edge of the

ring where the boxer with the bloody face, lying on his side, his right leg extended, his left leg half-bent beneath him, his two hands stretched out in front of him, is desperately attempting to raise himself up out of the grayish mass, the level of which keeps rising in imperceptible little jerks, in the same way that a patch of sunlight advances, that is to say with the same sly, treacherous persistence: apparently immobile when one is looking directly at it, and then, taking advantage of the fact that the observer has looked away in boredom, suddenly creeping a little farther ahead, and then again ceasing to move the moment the observer's eye glances that way once more. The indistinct crackle of applause can be heard through the telephone receiver once again, at slack tide, so to speak, like the derisive and paradoxical materialization of silence itself, the ironic, clamorous approbation of thousands of invisible listeners clapping their hands long after the woman's voice has fallen silent. His face a bit too red, apparently indifferent to the applause, his mustache hiding the expression of his mouth, the senator carefully gathers together the sheets of paper spread out in front of him. Still casting anxious glances in the direction of the galleries and the group that has collected around the young man who has interrupted the proceedings, the chairman of this session leans over once more toward each of the two members of the central committee sitting on either side of him, then straightens up again and rises to his feet, his head now concealing the chest of the galloping horse, and utters a few words that are immediately drowned out in bursts of applause, mingled with boos, angry shouts, and protests, the fat woman with the kinky hair and the pug nose having gotten to her feet again and another delegate with a short red beard sitting not far from her also having risen to his feet, the two of them standing there shouting in unison ¡señor Presidente! Presidente! and the chairman repeating, his cheeks beet red ¡La sesión está terminada!, as more boos and catcalls arise from amid the imitation Corinthian columns of the galleries reserved for the general public, and the man with the blond goatee, and the woman shout even louder, the din growing even more deafening as the chairman leaves the

podium, followed by the other members of the central committee, whereupon, imitating their example, the majority of the delegates on the floor of the chamber rise from their seats, gather their papers together, and walk down the stairs, some of them clustering together in little groups and conversing with each other as they cast rapid glances in the direction of the row of seats where a number of people have congregated around the woman with the kinky hair, the young man who has interrupted the proceedings, and the man with the red beard, all talking together in vehement tones. From the public galleries there float down a few boos and catcalls meant for the officials who have left the podium, now standing empty, with its mahogany cherubs still blowing into their trumpets, its caryatids with their naked torsos and its cornice in the style of a Renaissance palace beneath the motionless charge of the cavaliers and the allegorical figures representing Law, Labor, Virtue, and Justice. The feeble, distant crackling noise can still be heard over the telephone receiver. He repeats once again Hello? Hello?, standing there listening to the endless derisive clapping far in the distance, his right hand clutching the receiver, until he notices that two people are standing in line waiting their turn outside the phone booth, glaring at him. He hangs up then and emerges from the booth. On one of the two middle tracks another express train roars through the station without stopping in a metallic din again reminiscent of some catastrophe, the same torsos of passengers with upraised arms clinging to handholds overhead rushing past at top speed, again chopped to pieces by the row of steel girders. The boxer's face is merely a bloody blob, a shapeless dark red blotch which the painter has highlighted in certain spots with touches of bright vermilion. Standing there mute, his head hanging down, enclosed within his bell jar of silence with the applause and the boos and catcalls of the spectators, invisible in the dark shadows surrounding the ring, beating against its walls, he seems to be concentrating all of his physical strength and force of will on the attempt to raise himself up on his two arms to extricate himself from the grayish thing in which he is now stuck fast up to his elbows. The bartender with the flat nose, with

cheekbones and the ridge of his brow covered with scars, quickly scoops up a handful of crushed ice out of the bucket behind the counter, fills a cocktail shaker with it, and with a deft, precise motion grabs a bottle by the neck, pours a colorless liquid out of it into the shaker, sets the bottle back down and with the same sweep of his hand grabs up another one full of a gold-colored liquid, pours a quantity equal to the contents of a small glass into the shaker, puts this second bottle back in its place on the shelf behind him, screws the top on the shaker, and begins to rattle it up and down at the level of his ear, his still absolutely expressionless eyes staring straight ahead, his arms, seemingly possessed of a life of their own, so to speak, accomplishing their task with the infallibility of a robot without his apparently being at all interested in or even aware of what he is doing. His huge, hairy, muscular forearms sticking out of his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbow are grotesquely out of proportion to the objects they are manipulating: the bottles, the shaker whose contents he now delicately pours into the empty glasses of the two customers at the bar. Outside, in the narrow horizontal band that is visible through the window, an endless parade of unreal creatures keeps passing back and forth, the upper part of their bodies amputated, thus reducing them to pairs of compasses opening and closing at a more or less rapid pace, meeting each other, catching up with each other, walking past each other. The sparkling columns of little bubbles have stopped rising in the still untouched glass of beer. From time to time, however, a gleaming dot detaches itself from the bottom of the glass, floats to the top, and bursts on the surface of the liquid. As he puts his shaker away, the bartender casts a rapid glance in the direction of the full glass, and then the saurian eyes mount upward to the face of the man still leaning on the bar in front of him, whereupon the pair of eyes immediately looks away again. Although the column of armed men has certainly made some progress in the last few moments, nothing appears to have changed in the décor surrounding them on all sides, as though there were no solid ground beneath their feet nor any sky above their heads, but only the same uniform vegetable decay in every direction, below

them, above them, to their right, to their left, in which their hunched-over silhouettes (bending down in order to present a less vulnerable target, or in order to slip past the low branches, or else weighted down by the burdens they are carrying) seem to be imbedded. In the distance, the faces of the last men marching along in single file are merely pale splotches lost among the myriads of light-colored patches on the leaves, whose varnished surface reflects the light, spangling the dark background like constellations. The sun's rays light on certain of these leaves, perhaps still wet with dew or trickling with beads of moisture in the humid air, forming blindingly bright stars, with uneven branches, amid which a bright yellow spot drifts aimlessly from place to place, fluttering about, rising, falling, slowly moving sideways, then rising again, like a flimsy bit of paper wafting about in gentle air currents. It finally stops moving and remains fixed in the foreground, slightly to the left of the leader of the column, then drifts away once more and again ceases to move. On either side of the slender body, the outstretched wings form two trapezoids with rounded angles along whose central axis black circles with yellow centers are symmetrically placed, very large in diameter on the anterior section of the wings and progressively diminishing in size to a mere dot on the posterior section, which gradually tapers off into two divergent points. A black festoon in the form of slightly tilted loops, also decreasing in size, borders the two outer edges, the last curve of the last two loops being disproportionately elongated as it follows the sharply tapering outline of the wings, so that the two tips form a solid black double prong, like the forked tongue of a serpent. At the approach of the leader of the column, the butterfly takes wing once again, hesitantly flutters about for a moment, as though tipsy, and then disappears off to the right, beyond the rectangle of the photograph. Occasionally a dead branch snaps with the sound of rotten wood cracking beneath the feet of the marchers sinking with a sloshing noise into the humus covering the ground. At regular intervals, an invisible bird hidden in the thick foliage emits a strange cry, a rather mad call, like peals of hysterical laughter. None of the men says a word. The only sound to be heard is

their panting breath, and from time to time the slap of a hand crushing a mosquito on the nape of a neck, an arm. The blood-gorged insect leaves a red streak on the man's palm, which as he continues to march along he mechanically wipes on the thigh of his pants or the front of his shirt stained with dark rings of sweat not only at his armpits but also across his chest and back. Bent down beneath the weight of the burdens they are carrying, the men keep casting anxious, hurried, sidelong glances all about them without turning their heads. As though the bird were moving along with the column, hopping from one branch to the next, its idiot laughter keeps bursting forth sporadically. Out of fatigue or indifference, not one of the marchers lifts his head as the distant rumble of an airplane is heard passing far overhead in the sky. The only thing that can be seen through the gaps in the foliage is a thin white contrail, the tip of which advances rapidly. Standing out in rigid, sharp outline at first, it gradually grows broader and broader, becomes lumpy and fuzzy, and then slowly thins out into a slender wispy cloud which hangs motionless in the sky for a long time. The airplane itself is invisible. At one point, however, as it shifts course slightly, the sun glistens on the fuselage for the space of an instant, and then the bright flash of light disappears. Sitting one behind the other in the cabin, the passengers drowse in their seats, sip drinks, gaze out the windows, leaf through illustrated magazines that the stewardesses have passed out or the airline's publicity brochure, the cover of which shows a young woman in the company's uniform holding up a scale model of the jet that is transporting them. Inside the brochure is a two-page spread showing the aircraft in longitudinal cross section. In order to clearly indicate the diversity of the airline's clientele, the illustrator has taken great pains to vary the ages and the social status and occupations of the passengers: one sees, for example, a number of children whom a stewardess is keeping amused by playing games with them, three nuns belonging to a missionary order, an elderly couple, several servicemen, a young married couple who are holding hands above the armrest separating their seats, and in the first-class section, several elegantly dressed women and a number of

businessmen going through files of papers lying on the little folding tables in front of them along with glasses of whiskey or champagne. In order, doubtless, to call attention to the excellent quality of the seats and the manner in which their contours have been carefully designed to conform to their occupants' weary bodies, cutaway drawings of several of them have been provided, showing the springs and the many thicknesses of foam rubber, and also showing the various bones of the passengers sitting in the seats—femurs, the pelvic basin, the sacrum, the spinal column—the articulations of which fit snugly into the soft, upholstered contours of the seats. The viscera are not shown, and the mass of flesh covering the bones is only vaguely suggested by a shaded area. In the uniform gray monochrome, it is therefore impossible to determine the precise location of the liver or the intestines, which may however become so compressed after a long period in a sitting position that their proper functioning is interfered with. When it is delivered with a certain amount of force and properly aimed, a hook to the liver is one of the blows capable of knocking a boxer out or forcing him to throw in the towel. A blow such as this may cause serious injury to this organ if it is crushed against the spinal column, and it may occasionally even rupture the spleen. Loss of consciousness, attacks of nausea, and violent vomiting may result. Leaning all his weight on his two arms and pushing with all his strength, the boxer is just barely able to raise his torso up, without managing, however, to lift his haunches off the canvas sprinkled with rosin covering the wooden planks of the ring. His thighs, his legs, and his feet remain imprisoned in the colorless mass whose level continues to rise in the doctor's waiting room. Bent double, propping himself up on his arms, leaning slightly forward, his hands convulsively gripping the edge of the porcelain basin, his body racked with spasms and contractions in the general area of his stomach, he vainly attempts to throw up something that seems to be planted in his esophagus like a stake, choking him, its splinters tearing the lining of his throat. But all that comes up is a little saliva which he then spits out, standing there exhausted, unable to move, incapable of even cutting the gleaming thread hanging from his lips and

connecting them to the bottom of the basin. The mad laugh of the bird rings out again, far in the distance at times, and only a little way away at others, so close sometimes that one or another of the men in the column shivers as he hears it. Invisible creatures scamper off into the tall grass or the stinking swamp water as the troop of soldiers approaches. Enhanced or distorted by the imagination of the illustrators, they have the appearance of mythical animals, of disproportionate size and composite anatomies, part horse and part dragon, bird and reptile, bull and fish, their bodies covered with scales, carapaces, or feathers. Amid the twinkling stars of different orders of magnitude outlining the constellations, the centaurs, the peacocks with plumes covered with eyes, the goats with dragon's tails, the wolves and the eagles, the silhouette of the giant stands out in sharp black outline. The reliefs of the immense body are represented by means of fine lines incised with an etching tool, following the bulge of the muscles and the contours of the limbs and more or less closely spaced, crisscrossing in the darkest parts, like the meshes of a net. As it has etched the copper, the acid has flowed beyond the edges of the finest cross-hatched lines, which have therefore ran together and formed an inky black patch, whose edges (the shoulders, the outer contours of the rib cage, the haunches), where the lines are less close together, have breaks in them that afford glimpses of the dim light coming from the open window framing the night sky, against which the kneeling figure stands out in profile. He remains there for a fairly long time, in the same position, staring at the gleaming white porcelain basin, breathing the odor of disinfectant hanging in the air between the tile walls, listening to his panting gasps filling the narrow space, his body still seized with spasms from time to time. The murmur of muffled voices and the sound of tinkling glasses coming from the bar reaches his ear. Against the shadowy background of the forest, the blinding reflections of the sun striking the shiny leaves continue to gleam brightly for an instant, suddenly wink out, and then flash again a little farther on. Standing just outside the telephone booth, leaning his back against the wall of glazed bricks, and fighting against the nausea that is tying

his stomach in a knot, he watches the elderly black woman who has taken his place in the booth slide her coin in the slot, dial a number, wait a moment, and then suddenly become very animated. A pair of glasses with thick lenses mounted in tortoise-shell frames is perched on her nose. She is wearing a bright blue knitted wool beret with a green pompon on top, a green sweater, a maroon skirt. The short sleeves of the sweater leave her forearms visible, with their long muscles beneath the dusky, withered skin suggestive of maroon-colored crêpe de Chine. He can now hear loud bursts of laughter coming from the bar. Suddenly yet another series of spasms causes him to bend forward. The glints, the dazzlingly bright luminous spots explode violently, disappear, and explode again on the varnished, metallic leaves. Unable to move, deafened by the roaring surge of blood pulsing in his ears, standing there clinging to the edges of the basin, he waits till the pounding of his heart and the rhythm of his breathing gradually slow down. His ribs rise and fall rapidly. Opposite him, the little figurine that the professor is holding represents a thin man with a shaved skull and an emaciated face, whose clothing has been pulled down around his waist, baring his bony chest. The professor is holding the statuette between his thumb and index finger. He is also holding a half-smoked cigar between the index finger and the middle finger of this same hand. The professor says *Ha visto jamás un aparato parecido? ¡Mire!* With a brusque sweep of his hand, he turns the statuette completely around, showing it from the back this time. Below the shaved skull and the skinny neck with a deep furrow between the two tendons, the skin looks as though it had been slit and drawn back, baring the spinal column and the cage formed by the ribs, which are daubed with red paint, like blood. Still gripping the edges of the basin, he can feel the sweat trickling down his forehead, his temples, his skull, and his back. The luminous spots continue to whirl round and round before his eyes, lighting up and winking out. The woman's breathing becomes more rapid. It seems as though a faint light is emanating from her buttocks jutting out from the shadow, from her haunches beyond which her sloping back gradually disappears in the dim light in which the eye

can barely make out the black mass of her outspread hair, the smooth profile of her cheek, her nose, her mouth pressed almost flat against the sheet inside the arching handles formed by her two arms curving up around both sides of her head. Her light-colored, vaguely phosphorescent thighs are parted, thrusting up in an almost vertical plane, her leg bones and insteps are resting flat against the bed, and the bottoms of her feet are crisscrossed by soft creases of skin. The man is on his knees, supporting his weight on his buttocks, so that as he leans back he can see his entire penis, shaped like a spindle, stretched out horizontally in front of him, gleaming in the half-shadow where the dark reflection of the night snakes down along the sinuous path of a vein, and thrusting its bare, swollen, glistening dark purple glans forward into the darkness. The other person's muffled panting becomes more and more closely mingled with his own loud breathing. The flaky gray cylinder formed by the ash is now tilted at a slight angle to the shorter stem of the cigar. The professor says ¡Mire! Thanks to an ingenious system of articulation, the right arm of the statuette pivots from the shoulder and begins lashing its bloody back and sides with a whip, the handle of which is tightly clutched in the hand of the flagellant. Inside the torso, behind the parallel bars of the ribs, one can see a little red heart, like a bird in a cage, mounted on a thin wire stem as though it were a rose. A little man with a wrinkled face and wrinkled clothing is standing outside the door of the telephone booth, waiting his turn, a worn, shapeless leather briefcase dangling from his hand. **SOMEBODY IS ALWAYS WINNING.** Another subway train rumbles in the tunnel, roars into the station, traverses the length of the platform, and slows down to a stop. Passengers scramble out through the open doors and head for the exit. The hurrying silhouettes, gray and anonymous, with no more reality than the bodies of the airplane passengers filled in with crosshatches, again pass in front of the face of the imprisoned cashier, the invitation of the Catholic mission written in Spanish, and the two elderly winners of the lottery clasped in each other's arms. The elderly black woman speaks one last word into the phone and darts out of the booth, heading for the nearest subway car. She hurries

along in great pigeon-toed strides, like a stilt bird. The subway train pulls out of the station. As silence returns once again, broken only by dull rumblings like those of distant, catastrophic subterranean upheavals, the lips of the little man who is now shut up inside the phone booth move soundlessly. The cigar ash has fallen on the rug. The professor says ¿Quiere otro café? The cigar between his middle and index fingers is now no more than a short cylindrical stump. With his left hand he picks up a glass of cognac on the table next to him, takes a swallow, puts the glass back down, and then, his eyes twinkling slyly behind his glasses, he starts the mechanism up again and the arm with the whip moves up and down, lashing the bloody sides. ¡Mire! he says ¡Mire! ¡Ha ha ha! ¡Qué invención! ¡Ha ha ha! ¡Qué locos! The lights are no bigger than pinheads now, still turning round and round, multicolored and blindingly bright, against a maroon background. As he teeters back and forth more and more rapidly, his belly bumps into the white form below him. In the depths of the shadows at the bottom, he can see gleaming teeth biting the thin wrist. The muscles of his belly contract in another spasm which this time is so strong it nearly forces him to his knees on the tile floor. The mouth pressed against the rumpled sheet emits indistinct, sobbing sounds. The ebonite receiver is warm and moist, not only because of his sweaty palm encircling it, but as though the plate pierced with little round holes had also preserved the heat and the breath of the black woman and the little man. He inserts a coin in the slot, dials the same number again, hears the telephone ringing at the other end, then the click as someone picks up the receiver, then the same distant woman's voice that says Yes? He says nothing. The woman repeats Yes? He says very fast It's me. Listen. I . . . Then he stands there waiting again, listening to the more rapid breathing at the other end of the line, the faint, incredible panting sound that reaches his ear through the subterranean labyrinth of cables, relays, tunnels beneath millions of tons of stone, iron, and brick, hundreds of floors piled one atop the other, pierced with thousands of windows, far above his head, their summits invisible in the pale, scorching haze, then the voice that says You must have the

wrong number. She does not hang up however, and for a moment they both stand there at opposite ends of the line, breathing and listening to the other breathing, as an express train rushes through the station, its deafening, insane, catastrophic din invading the telephone booth, then suddenly ceasing, until finally she says: I'm sure you must have the wrong number, and hangs up. The sweat pouring down his body forms an icy film. A faint cool breeze comes in through the open window, perhaps a harbinger of dawn. The grayish, milky light plays over the rumpled sheets, whose folds describe sinuous lines that touch each other, flow together, and again draw apart, like chains of mountains or the multiple branches of a river delta seen from an airplane. At last he somehow manages to straighten up again. Standing there on his wobbly legs in front of the pale face reflected in the mirror, he raises his handkerchief to his lips and wipes away a yellowish-green thread of saliva, then carefully rolls his handkerchief up in a ball and thrusts it in his pocket. He lifts the latch, opens the door, follows the corridor, and goes back into the bar, again entering the dense mahogany-colored shadow which is such a contrast to the glaring light in the lavatory, his eyes, no longer accustomed to the darkness, vaguely distinguishing only the dim silhouettes of the customers at the bar and the bartender's white patch of shirt front. The bartender's dull eyes stare at him intently for a second, but then turn away immediately. He walks over to his stool and with considerable difficulty manages to hoist himself up on it, the glass of beer still standing untouched on the counter in front of him. In the last few moments the sea of clouds has gradually grown puffier, with hollow depressions in it that keep getting larger and larger, their edges spreading farther and farther apart, revealing yawning precipices below, as meanwhile the round humps of the clouds swell and form giant mushrooms composed of layer upon layer of neatly sculptured, superimposed domes, their tops at times so bright that the glare is unbearable, whereas their sides tend to become blurred, shading off into indistinct gray veils, which grow thicker and thicker until they form dense shadows the color of sulphur, pierced here and there by flat, slightly divergent bands of sunlight with a dusty

look about them. Far below one catches an occasional glimpse of the nearly black carpet of forest, rent by ribbonlike slashes that gleam as brightly as bronze. Piled one atop the other, the yellowish, gray, or dark-colored clouds shaped like leather water-skins rise to prodigious heights, proliferating, melting together, sometimes forming vaults beneath which the airplane continues on its absolutely straight course: a mere dot in the mingled chaos of shreds of sky, clouds of vapor, dark stretches of vegetation, and trickles of liquid metal. Despite the fact that the cabin is air-conditioned, the sun's rays that pour through the windows from time to time are like a burning weight penetrating one's clothing or one's skin. Taking out his watch, he contemplates the position of the hands on the dial in a stupor, trying his best to remember how many time zones they have crossed, miscalculating, beginning his calculations all over again, looking out the window at the chaotic jumble of forms above and below, with its awesome abysses, its gorges, its ringed pillars slowly drifting by, fading away, suddenly reappearing again, in a frozen turmoil, then glancing down again at the meaningless watch hands, then other precipices, other walls, other black holes with golden sabres stuck in them. Finally he gives up altogether, puts his watch back in his pocket, hearing at that same moment his own voice issuing from his lips, sounding hoarse at first, breaking off several times as he clears his throat, then growing firmer, saying to the stewardess leaning over him May I please have a glass of water? The bartender in shirt sleeves glances at the glass of beer, still untouched, stares at him, and says What did you say? He then repeats A glass of water. Could I please have . . . The loud-colored tie with its clip decorated with a pair of tiny boxing gloves drifts out of his field of vision, replaced by the light-colored patch of the back of the bartender's shirt, which the next moment suddenly pivots around again, the unattractive combination of loud, clashing colors reappearing as the huge ham hand with the hairy fingers sets a glass filled with water, its sides already coated with a gray mist, down on the counter alongside the untouched glass of beer. He says Thank you. As he sips it slowly and prudently, he feels the ice-cold little swallows slide down his throat one

after the other. The stewardess in the dark blue uniform is leaning over him again, with a bundle of magazines in the crook of her left arm. He mechanically takes the one she holds out to him and begins turning the pages, which show pretty girls in bathing suits baring all their teeth in a beaming smile, housewives holding up gleaming pans, and champion racing drivers. Each time his eyelids, reddened from his lack of sleep, blink across his eyeballs, he feels a burning sensation. THE GUIDE RAISED HIS ARMS AND FELL BACKWARD AN ARROW HAD PIERCED HIS HEART. A towering palm with fronds drooping vertically downward takes up the entire length of the left-hand side of a double-page photospread. Its gleaming leaves, each streaked with a longitudinal rib, symmetrically distributed along both sides of the stem, stand out in sharp outline against the black background. Other large, rounded leaves, similar to those of a hazelnut tree, fill the triangle formed by the palm with its drooping fronds and the trunk of a young tree that juts up obliquely from the bottom of the photograph. Still more leaves, long, rigid, smooth, sharp-pointed ones, like sabres, spread out in a fan in the lower right corner, appearing and disappearing amid the fuzzy-edged gaps in the bushy vegetation whose branches project into the foreground, from which there emerge two arms, one of them thrust forward, grasping a wooden bow in its fist, the other bent at the elbow, holding between the thumb and the index finger the taut bowstring, against which the tip of a long arrow is resting, with the clean straight line of the arrow cutting the photograph in two horizontally. Between the long blades of the cluster of rigid leaves one can make out a profile (a chin, a mouth with a bulging upper lip, as though it were swollen, a nose), the eyes and the forehead of which are hidden by a dangling lock of rumpled black hair. As far as the river, the situation has remained perilous. Invisible among the trees, the natives were lying in wait with their poisoned arrows. They themselves, it is said, are not affected by this poison. The forest covers 300 million hectares, representing a quarter of the world's heavily wooded area. Certain species of trees reach a height of 80 meters, with leaves 2 meters long, and bamboo shoots grow at a rate

of 30 centimeters a day. It is impossible to make one's way through this dense forest without encountering impassable obstacles. The bodies of the men marching through it are soon covered with hundreds of dangerous-looking scratches and pustules. To the insect bites are added burns and blisters resulting from contact with vesicant leaves or plants. Sinking waist-deep at times in the muddy swamp water, the men are obliged to hold their weapons up over their heads to keep them from getting wet. The humidity, moreover, is so great that despite all their precautions their steel cuirasses, their helmets, and the barrels of their harquebuses are pitted with rust. They have long since been forced to abandon the culverins with serpent-shaped handles that they unloaded from the ships, and the weakest of the soldiers and the wounded have been hoisted onto the backs of the mules that were being used to transport these cannon, the men's drooping bodies swaying with every step their mounts take. Their heads bowed, their chins resting on their chests, allowing themselves simply to be jerked along, their two hands, joined as though they were tied together, leaning on the pommel of the saddle, they resemble condemned men being led to their death. Five hundred soldiers armed with muskets and swords, clad in armor and equipped with 15 horses and 6 cannon, braving the arrows and the catapults of the Indians, fought their way step by step through this unknown territory. Doubtless their horses have proved to be insufficiently robust, incapable of adapting to the climate or of resisting the rigors of this expedition and have had to be destroyed, for even the officers are riding pack mules. Despite their vaguely ludicrous posture (their legs, disproportionately long in relation to the height of the beasts, hang down both flanks of their skinny mounts, their feet almost touching the ground), and despite the appearance of their uniforms, as filthy and ragged as those of their men, something about their bearing, the way they carry their heads, the way they seat their mounts, their erect torsos distinguish them from the other riders drooping in their saddles. The man at the head of the band has a short, thick, reddish beard which makes him resemble portraits of Charles the Fifth. It casts a ruddy glow between the

reflections of the cuirass and the helmet that he persists in wearing despite the heat. The visor of the helmet with the tapered crest hides his ears and is pushed up over his forehead, forming a point. Useless spurs, the long sharp-pointed, star-shaped rowels of which are so rusty that they can no longer turn in their sockets, are fastened to their tall thighpieces which joggle up and down with each step the pack mule takes. Disturbed by the animal's hoofs, a swarm of little lavender-blue butterflies takes wing and flits about in the air, rising and descending, swirling about in front of the black background of vegetation. These fluttering, light-colored spots form moving constellations, drift apart, and form different ones. As the eye follows them, all it can perceive is a dizzying, luminous swirl of dots, like dancers constantly changing partners. As it slides down his throat, the cool water seems little by little to form a sort of solid axis around which his torso and his limbs resume their usual place. His eyes having once again adapted to the half-light of the bar, he perceives that three new customers have sat down at the counter during his absence. By leaning slightly forward, he can see their three profiles lined up in a row, each with the same coarse features and an identical placid expression, looking like drivers of heavy-duty trucks or those workers in yellow hard-hats that one sees walking along the steel girders of skyscrapers under construction, their three heads slightly hunched down in their powerful shoulders as they sit there in front of their three identical glasses of beer already three-quarters empty. Two of them are in shirt sleeves. The one closest to him is wearing a blue jersey with two yellow bands across the front. The principal inhabitants of the tropical forest are birds: ranging from the bellbird, whose call, imitating the sound of a church bell, can drive a man who is lost out of his mind, to the uruparu, whose song is the most beautiful in the world. Insects and solitude constitute the worst danger in a tropical forest. By leaning slightly forward, he can see the line of profiles of the delegates sitting along the huge table covered in green baize. Seated at the very end of the table is the successor to the chairman who presided over the debate in the Chamber of Deputies. He is an older man, with a head that somehow looks as though it had

been squeezed flat between his abundant black locks, which also look flattened, and the black mustache that hides his mouth. Microphones on the end of flexible curved stems have been set out along the table, there being approximately one for every three delegates, so that each speaker pulls the one closest to him over in his direction when he has been given the floor. The long table is set up in a hall that, like the table, is much longer than it is wide. Its walls are painted cream-color with rounded bay windows let into them between imitation Ionic columns with square fluted shafts. These bay windows are curtained off by maroon velvet drapes and the electric lights remain on continuously. The hall is stifling hot. Another row of delegates is sitting opposite the first on the other side of the table. The perspective causes the two parallel lines of bodies to gradually converge until they meet almost at the very end of the huge table, where only the head and shoulders of the chairman are visible, like those busts erected in memory of illustrious men, decked out in a stiff collar, a cravat, and a bronze waistcoat cut off at the elbows. From time to time, however, his light-skinned hand emerges from underneath the table to turn a page of the document that he is reading, whereupon it again disappears from sight. The delegates follow the text that he is reading aloud from mimeographed copies of it lying in front of them. Every so often one of them leans over and writes something in the margin alongside the passage that the chairman has just finished reading. The page is divided into rectangles and squares in gaudy colors. Each of the boxes on the page shows a strange-shaped bird with bizarre plumage photographed against a background of foliage. A screaming toucan. The araçari, commonly known as the “gri-gri bird” because of its cry. The toucan is shown from the front, its talons gripping a branch, its head turned to the left, so that one can see its flesh-colored beak in the form of a lobster’s claw, and the large spot, also flesh-colored, surrounding its eye, which is in turn surrounded by a ring of short reddish-brown feathers. Bright red and blue reflections play over the front of its belly and its tail, and its folded wings are olive green. The araçari has a long, white, slightly curved beak, its little black eye is surrounded by a blue

patch, its head and neck are black, its belly bright yellow with horizontal red stripes, its wings and tail greenish gray. Every so often the laughing bird, still invisible in the tall foliage, gives a deafening, mad whoop. The little chairman's doll-sized hand emerges from underneath the table and turns another page of the document that he is reading aloud. The majority of the delegates do likewise and a slight rustle of paper, like the beating of wings, is heard along the entire length of the table. Párrafo cuatro, the chairman reads: El escritor se define políticamente por su participación activa a la lucha revolucionaria también en sus palabras, sus escritos y sus actos. The translator leans over and whispers: The writer defines himself politically by his active participation in the revolutionary struggle, whether by way of his spoken words, his writings, or his acts. With his ankles fettered by his unbuttoned pants, he laboriously makes his way over to the examining table, like the woman with the swollen legs who a few moments before has painfully ploughed her way through the grayish lumps piled up on the rug in the waiting room. During the time that he has been sitting there alone, the level of these lumps has continued to rise, so that when the doctor closed the door of his consultation room, he was obliged to lean all his weight on it in order to push away the leading edge of the avalanche, which had already advanced that far. Nonetheless the doctor was unable to prevent some of the lumps from rolling into his private office. By contrast with his efforts to close the door again, his face, his eyes behind the lenses of his glasses set in round gold frames had remained impassive and inexpressive, as though he had noticed nothing at all out of the ordinary (even though during the preliminary questioning of his patient the grayish thing, as he apparently failed to realize, was insidiously filtering through the crack just below the closed door and beginning to spread out over the room), seemingly merely a bit impatient now as he watches him walk over toward the narrow steel table with the awkward gait of a man obliged to overcome the resistance of water in a swamp, or that of dense, bushy vegetation, with every step he takes. Little by little the spaces between the armed men making their way through the tropical

forest grow larger and the straggling column stretches out so far that the leader with the reddish-blond beard is frequently obliged to halt, turning around on his mule with a thoughtful look on his face, knitting his brow, and dispatching some of the more able-bodied soldiers back to the rear to protect the group of wounded for whom no mounts could be found and who are therefore proceeding on foot, leaning on improvised crutches or helping each other along, and have fallen far behind the others. Nothing much is left of the parti-colored uniforms, the flaring breeches with bright inset slashes, the doublets with yellow and blue stripes. Their sleeves are hanging in tatters from their arms, the skin of which has been badly blistered by the sun and is covered with huge, swollen insect bites, their leathery, gaunt faces distinguishable from those of the native bearers only by the beards etching their cheeks. As the days go by, the ragged vestiges of their dazzling uniforms seem to take on the same tints as the forest, and the little round patches of sunlight falling through the interstices of the overhanging vault of vegetation play over both them and the leaves in such a way that they blend indistinguishably. At more or less regular intervals the wooden counter reverberates with a hollow sound as a fist pounds on it. Each of the three strong-armed men leaning on their elbows in front of their glasses of beer which the bartender refills whenever they are empty fumbles in turn in one of his pockets, pulls some coins out of it in his closed fist, and raps with his knuckles on the oak planks of the bar counter. One after the other, his companions call out a number and the man's fist opens. The one whose figure comes closest to the number of coins in the man's fist wins that round. The loser throws a ten-cent piece in the saucer lying alongside their glasses. The coarse-featured faces are expressionless. He is obliged to lean forward in order to see the speaker to whom the chairman has given the floor now that he has finished reading the draft resolution submitted to the delegates. Leaning over toward the microphone, the speaker's massive profile stands out from the other heads lined up in a row all along that side of the table down to the little chairman. His hair combed back flat, his long straight nose, his slightly heavy chin make him look like

one of those busts of Roman senators whose solemn, ponderous majesty he appears to have inherited, by way of the proconsuls of Iberia and generations of Spanish colonial governors. He speaks slowly, in a deep, grave voice, carefully articulating each word in a harsh Castilian accent. *Antes que nada* (Above all, the interpreter whispers), *creo que es absolutamente indispensable examinar* (I believe that it is absolutely indispensable to examine) *este problema fundamental* (this fundamental problem) *de la función social del escritor* (of the social function of the writer) *que es el objeto del párrafo cuatro* (which is the subject of paragraph four) *del proyecto de Declaración Final que nos fué leído por el Señor Presidente* (of the draft of the Final Declaration which our honored chairman has read to us). *La primera y principal objeción que formularía* (The first and foremost objection that I would like to raise), *personalmente y en nombre de varios de mis compañeros* (both personally and in the name of a number of my comrades) *es que* (is that) . . . The blow of the clenched fist, the sound of the voices calling out numbers, and the silvery tinkle of coins landing in the saucer follow each other in monotonous succession. As he stands with his back leaning against the lower edge of the shelf holding the bottles, the bartender's eyes watch the players without seeing them. From time to time one of them utters a brief cry of triumph or dismay. The two cocktail drinkers have left. The customer in the overalls follows the game with bleary eyes. From time to time, without so much as glancing up, he merely raises one finger. The bartender then fills his glass again, takes some money from the pile of bills and coins that the drinker has left lying on the counter next to him, brings him back his change, and then resumes his previous position, staring again with his saurian eyes at the hands of the three heavyweights appearing and disappearing. As the photograph shows, this little bird with the dull plumage has no fear of alighting on the heads of alligators, which tolerate its presence, and indeed even complacently allow it to enter their gaping mouths, where it cleans their teeth by ridding them of the strings of rotten meat caught in the spaces between them. In another rectangle is a photograph of another bird with pret-

ty orange-colored plumage and a tiny black eye, no bigger than the head of a pin, surrounded by a bright pink ring of feathers. On the top of its head is a tall orange crest, rounded like the peak of a Spanish helmet and curving sharply backward and downward, ending at the upper edge of the short, lemon-yellow beak. The average number of species per hectare is approximately 200: growing side by side are such different varieties of trees as heveas, palms, walnut trees, mango trees, banana trees, calabash trees . . . He does not feel like reading the rest of the list because there seems to be no point in doing so: its meaning is lost in the spectacular giant pantomime of the boughs, the dazzling pyrotechnical display of the foliage, and the calligraphy of the lianas, the sudden proliferation of rounded trunks thrusting upward like columns . . . He interrupts his reading of the magazine and raises his eyes. As he does so, he can feel the skin of his face cracking beneath the mask of fatigue and sleeplessness, and the burning edges of the wrinkles furrowing its surface. He says Yes, takes the empty glass that he had wedged down behind the elastic edge of the pouch attached to the back of the seat in front of him and places it in the outstretched hand of the stewardess, who sets it down among the other empty glasses on the tray that she is holding. Suddenly the proliferation of tree trunks thrusting upward in columns smoother than marble, of immense umbels, forming a perfect circle, of clusters of leaves in the form of daggers around which are twined . . . Although he is again sitting there motionless, he can still feel the burning cracks in his skin. The aged monarch whose face is covered with wrinkles is peeking through the opening of a curtain at the two lovers clasped in each other's arms. His forehead, his eyelids, his cheeks, his lips are seamed with an infinite number of crisscrossing furrows, like scars. Beneath the bushy eyebrow, the round, highly magnified eye contemplates with an expression of calm desolation the tangled jumble of intertwined limbs. Immense umbels, giant motionless fans, sunbursts of thorns, dagger blades longer and more sharply pointed than fencing foils around which are twined . . . Thrusting out of the cloak edged in fur draped over the old man's chilly shoulders, his forearms rest on the

arms of his throne, his wrinkled hands tightly gripping the ends of them. The smooth bodies of the young lovers move in undulating rhythms, now slow, now fast, or bump against each other in violent, convulsive jerks. Daggers around which are twined garlands of delicate flowers, as many-hued as rainbows. Often what strikes the eye as a dangerously prickly or forbidding plant is merely a harmless, delicate succulent; but the most delightful, the most attractive flower may leave a blister on one's finger that burns for hours. There is nothing more false than the image, fostered by so many armchair explorers, of a virgin forest bristling with claws and talons all ready to rend to bits the traveler who has lost his way. The real danger. The burning sensation he feels each time his eyelids blink becomes more and more intense, as though grains of sand so small as to be invisible were scratching his cornea. Every inch of the skin on his face is on fire. It seems to him that he is suffocating beneath one of those carnival masks with grinning, grotesquely swollen features, whose rough, rigid inner cardboard surface is grating against his skin. Engraved in copperplate with a burin, the sharply incised line curves in and out, following the contours of the limbs, the breasts, the torsos lying one atop the other. Without once being lifted from the surface, the steel point, guided by a deft hand, has outlined in a single unbroken stroke the moving forms of a two-headed creature with multiple arms and legs that bears a vague resemblance to some legendary beast. Like those pieces of a jigsaw puzzle with sinuous, looping edges, the two profiles with the highly enlarged eyes to fit together perfectly in a kiss, the convex curves of the one and the concave curves of the other separated only by the supple meanderings of the single stroke that defines their interlocking noses, mouths, and chins. After a moment, however, the forms outlined in the drawing change shape as the couple locked in embrace moves and jerks about, and it becomes possible to distinguish the particular features belonging to each of their two bodies. The page is lying stretched out with his legs apart. Resting on his belly and his chest are the haunches and the back of the young woman whose right arm has slipped beneath the right arm of the page and is encircling it,

her right hand closing around the latter's shoulder, her lips joined to his since she has twisted her torso and her plump neck around to face him, as meanwhile she thrusts her buttocks out in the opposite direction, receiving his erect member which has slightly penetrated her body from an oblique angle. Little by little the columns and the clouds piled one atop the other diminish in height. Although still of monumental proportions, there are gaps between them that allow one to see larger and larger expanses of the uniform, dark green, fleecy forest below. The real danger in this green hell is solitude: that total abandonment of man amid a universe in which the oldest nightmares in the world and the most feverish fits of delirium may suddenly attack him. When his eyes look up from the magazine and out the plane window, the frame of which is being struck by the sun's rays, he is obliged to blink his eyelids in order to protect himself against this painful onslaught of light. For a moment he stands there motionless, a bit dazed, his eyes nearly closed, in the light, the heat, and the noise that violently assailed him the moment he stepped through the velvet curtain over the door of the bar and found himself out on the sidewalk, in the very heart of the drab universe where at the foot of the towering cliffs of stone the same crowd, or rather the same plinth, made up of a confused swarm of little multicolored pills continuing to constantly shift position and yet continuing to look exactly the same, appears to have been stagnating, without its density or its movement having changed in any way that would indicate the passage of a certain period of time. Of a pale gray color that takes on only the slightest brick or brown or cream shading, depending on the materials of which they are constructed, the dizzingly high façades, whose flat geometric planes are unbroken by a single bay window or balcony, soar up into the dazzlingly bright haze, the tops of the tallest of them melting away in a vague blur. By turns concealing and revealing each other, the long silhouettes of cars, with the yellow blotches of taxis the predominant color in the stream of traffic, glide along and pass each other in opposite directions against the motley-colored background formed by the crowd of pedestrians. Remaining there motionless, the aged,

melancholy, impotent, solitary monarch is still gazing with rheumy eyes at the gnarled stake buried between the parted thighs, where it is being swallowed up by the swollen, pale lilac-colored lips of the vertical mouth yawning open amid the moist, crinkly tuft of hair. The cylindrical form of the male member is rendered by means of little curved strokes running around its shaft. Other short curved strokes both suggest the volume and vaguely delineate the folds of the heavy testicles hanging at the base of the man's organ. Following the line of the perineum, two rows of downy hairs that gradually grow thinner and thinner stretch from the vulva to the minuscule dark hole represented by a dot, around which little ruffled folds radiating outward in a star form what look like the petals of a sepia-colored flower. Beneath the offered buttocks of the woman and the legs of the page, the folds of the rumpled sheet are represented by a series of long divergent strokes spreading out in various directions, lying close together in certain places, and with large spaces between them in others. Nothing in the drawing (that is to say no sort of decor: the edge of a bed, the corner of a wall, a ceiling) affords any concrete indication as to whether this is a realistic scene (the illustration, for example, of an episode in the Bible, such as Bathsheba's ablutions or Susanna being spied upon by the elders), or whether it is a pure figment of the artist's imagination. The fact, however, that the aged monarch shown in the foreground, his profile overlapping one of the woman's arms, is drawn in smaller scale than the couple in the background leads one to believe that, rather than a silk or velvet curtain, the supple folds that he is parting in order to spy upon the carnal embrace of the young lovers are meant to represent the screen of time itself. By placing man back within his original state of solitude, the tropical forest reminds us that hell is this slow insanity that takes possession of the spirit and dissolves it in the great madness of nature. Huge, brilliantly colored, velvety butterflies, marked with stripes, pupils of eyes, burning embers, red and yellow flames, dazzlingly bright against the somber background of foliage, are still fluttering about. From time to time one of them alights on the sweat-soaked face of one of the wounded soldiers who are being trans-

ported on the backs of the pack mules, drooping in their saddles, and remains perched on the man's reddish-brown or green corselet amid a swarm of flies until whisked away by the hand of a more able-bodied comrade marching alongside. The iridescent doublets of the harquebusiers, their flaring breeches with bright slashes, or their camouflage uniforms with brown, ocher, and olive patches are now nothing but rags and tatters. Though stripped to the waist, the amorous page has nonetheless not removed his velvet doublet with the mutton-leg sleeves or his cap with a feather thrust in it. Surprised perhaps in its sleep, a huge bird with pink plumage suddenly flies up out of a thicket with a loud flapping of its wings, accompanied by a strident cry of anger or fright. Its feet tucked underneath its belly, its neck outstretched, it rises swiftly upward. The long plumes of its tail trail behind it in ripples. Badly jolted by the jerky pace of the pack mule, the wounded man vaguely perceives through the festering slits of his eyelids on which the flies have again congregated the patch of bright colors rapidly crossing his field of vision in front of the vault of leaves, through the gaps in which the white rectilinear trail left by the plane can still be seen hovering in the pale sky, its woolly tufts slowly inching along like a caterpillar and breaking up into little wisps. Pushing their carts down the center aisle, the stewardesses are distributing trays with light snacks on them to the passengers. He shakes his head to indicate that he doesn't want one and begins reading the magazine again. The trees form a veritable cliff of vegetation, steep and opaque. One of the guides, named Pablo Garcia, tries to draw closer to have a look at it. Suddenly he raises his arms as though he were about to speak. But he falls backward without a word, shot straight through the heart. The attack has begun. Through the slits of Orlando's eyelids, his eyes are no more than a black thread, burning with fever and terror. Suddenly, from the wall of foliage, bright flashes of light begin to appear everywhere: firearms being discharged. The first to fall beneath the volley of gunfire is Torino, our second guide. He had been trying to go to his comrade's rescue. Two more of our men are wounded. They crawl back on their hands and knees toward the rest of the column as we fire

our weapons to give them cover. There is a lull then, the quiet disturbed only by the rattle of the firearms as they are reloaded. In the silence the speaker with the head of a proconsul slowly articulates each word in a deep bass voice, slightly distorted by the metallic crackling of the loudspeaker. Es por eso (That is why, the interpreter whispers) que propongo para el párrafo cuatro (I propose for paragraph four) la siguiente redacción (the following wording): el escritor se define políticamente (the writer defines himself politically) por su participación activa, tanto espiritual como física, a la lucha revolucionaria (by his active participation, both spiritual and physical, in the revolutionary struggle). A slight murmur of protest runs the length of the two rows of bodies on either side of the green table. Two or three delegates raise their hands, trying to get the chairman's attention. In an imperious gesture, the proconsul holds his arm out in front of him, his palm vertical: ¡Una última palabra si me lo permiten, nada más que una palabra! (One last word, if you please, just one word!) The chairman nods his head in approval. The proconsul leans over toward the microphone again: Me parece necesario agregar simplemente esto (I find it necessary merely to add the following) : yo creo que nosotros que estamos aquí reunidos (I think that those of us who are gathered together here) no tenemos de ninguna manera que tomar en cuenta (have no need whatsoever to concern ourselves with) la opinión de los cínicos, de los hastiados o de los "blasés" (the opinion of cynics, or of those who are bored or blasé), ni la de los intelectuales decadentes (or with that of those decadent intellectuals) que la sociedad capitalista utiliza para (that capitalist society uses in order to) . . . Turning to the right after leaving the bar, he sees his double walking at his side, reflected in the various shop windows as he passes by them one by one. No artistic effect or attractive manner of presentation appears to have been attempted in the arrangement or the disposition of the merchandise on display or the advertisements that proliferate anarchically. The sole rule that appears to have been followed is that of accumulation and repetition, either vertically or horizontally. The goods on display, the publicity slogans, the names or initials or trademarks of

various companies are set within a series of squares or rectangles of different sizes which spread out on his right like a sort of wall built of irregular courses of stones, broken only by the empty spaces of doors or entryways. The predominant colors are yellow, red, and brown. Although most of the buildings lining the street are quite old, the bases below the show windows, the doorframes, and the facings of the walls up as far as the second story have almost all been done over in gleaming, hard materials such as ceramic tile, chromed steel, or marble. Narrow little stores, street stalls even, with drooping, lopsided canopies above them, still exist amid the modern shop windows, however, and likewise, amid the towering steel and glass façades, there still exist vestiges of ornamental architectural effects that were the fashion around the end of the last century: Corinthian columns, arches or corbels decorated with sculptured garlands, bands of stone with large concave masonry joints like those of Renaissance palaces. This incongruous, exuberant mixture of rococo vestiges and cold, modern materials further reinforces the impression of wild, insane accumulation and anarchy, also enhanced by the unbelievable quantity of dirty bits of paper, of crushed, crumpled packing material sticking out from underneath the wheels or the bodies of long shiny vehicles parked along the entire length of the sidewalk. He has taken no more than a few steps when, either because of the stifling heat and humidity that violently assailed him at the same time as the light, or because he is again on his feet and obliged to go on walking, the sensation of relative comfort that he experienced in the bar disappears. His legs feel shaky, the pain, or rather the dull pressure, in his side has returned, and the hustle and bustle of the crowds on the street and the deafening noise of the traffic make his head swim as he slowly and painfully makes his way down the street, his eyes mechanically noting, as a short time before, the objects, the lettered signs, the photographic reproductions, or the displays in the windows, over which there glides, immaterial and transparent, the hunched-over silhouette walking at his side. After having covered a distance of only a few yards, he is obliged to stop again. His double also halts dead in his tracks and pivots

around at the very same instant that he himself turns around to look inside the display window alongside which he is standing, as though he were casually window-shopping, so that his double now appears in full face, standing out in dark outline against the luminous reflection of the street behind him, forming a uniform gray patch (as though the interior of the shadowy silhouette, like that of the passengers in the cross-section illustration of the airplane, were represented merely by a crosshatch of intersecting parallel lines) filling in the outline of the head, the shoulders, and the body without the eye being able to make out any of the details of the figure's dress or face, so that it is impossible to tell whether or not a grimace of pain is distorting or deforming its features. The flat reflection of the head is partially superimposed upon a red sign that bears the inscription SUPER QUALITY in white letters above a green rectangle on which the word CIGARS appears. As though he were focusing his eyes on a precise spot in order to try to forget the pain or allow it time to lessen in intensity, meanwhile attempting to act as though nothing were wrong (or perhaps reading mechanically), he shifts his gaze a little to the right where there is a second sign with the names GARCIA Y VEGA written in cursive script, underlined by a flourish running backward from the final stroke of the last letter and then curving back around in a loop, forming a sort of incomplete figure eight lying on its side. These two signs affixed to a vertical panel made of white pasteboard are surrounded by cigar boxes scattered here and there around their edges, inclined at a more or less sharp angle, as though they were flying through the air, amid a jumble of tree leaves in rust-colored or olive plastic, asymmetrically pinned up between the boxes, looking as though they too were being blown away in a violent gust of wind. The lids of the boxes are open so as to show the rows of cigars inside, with a red paper band around each of them. With an exasperated gesture, and amid a loud rustle of pages being brusquely turned, the delegate with the mask of a proconsul unfolds a newspaper lying in front of him and makes a great pretense of being totally absorbed in reading it as another man with a short reddish beard sitting on the opposite side of the table, almost

directly across from him, begins his speech in reply, bending over toward his microphone. Though distorted by the same metallic resonance as it comes over the public-address system, his voice is nonetheless not as sonorous as that of the preceding speaker. El ideal que, en cuanto escritores independientes (The ideal which, as independent writers), proponemos a la humanidad enferma (we propose to suffering mankind) es una comunidad (is a community) que termine de una vez por todas con toda especie de explotación, ya sea física o espiritual (which will put an end, once and for all, to every sort of exploitation, be it physical or spiritual) de la criatura humana y (of each and every human being and) . . . Behind the motionless flat gray silhouette reflected in the window of the cigar shop bright glints of light run along the horizontal lines of the body of a long car parked at the curb. The front fenders and the radiator grille are visible on the left of the silhouette, which conceals a part of the hood, as at the same time the folded convertible top and the long rear trunk reappear on the right, superimposed on the bright colors of the boxes of cigarillos displayed on a vertical plywood panel occupying the entire right-hand side of the shop window. Rectangular in shape, these boxes are piled one atop the other at random, like stones of a rough wall, their different dimensions not permitting any regular sort of arrangement, with the result that various-sized bands of the plywood panel to which they have been fastened or glued have been left showing in the spaces between them. The predominant colors here too are red, yellow, orange, and brown. A small number of boxes with white, blue, or green lids form unattractive patches of contrasting color here and there. At the top of the panel white letters in relief, made of a molded-plastic material, announce: Imported Cigars and Tobacco. Below this row of letters are flat boxes arranged in a sort of checkerboard pattern with irregular squares, inside which (except for four or five squares decorated only with a number) two alternating images are repeated over and over, the same each time: the head of a court jester peeking out from beneath a red cap with tassels hanging down all around his face, each of them with a little bell at the end, and the bust of a man with a goatee dressed

in a Louis XIII period costume with a turned-down lace collar, and a wide-brimmed felt hat decorated with an ostrich feather rakishly perched on one side of his head. Having perhaps found an article that particularly interests him (or is he merely pretending to be interested?), the proconsul carefully folds the newspaper and begins reading again as the speaker in the reddish beard goes on with his rebuttal: Es por eso (That is why) que también me parece (I too am of the opinion), a pesar de mi desacuerdo (despite my disagreement) sobre los términos de la proposición hecha por mi estimado compañero Valdés García (with the terms of the proposal put before us by my esteemed comrade Valdés García) . . . Behind the newspaper that he is holding up in front of him like a wall, the proconsul makes a show of being totally absorbed in the article he has begun reading . . . que debemos examinar (that we ought to examine) la redacción (the text) de este muy importante párrafo cuatro (of this extremely important paragraph four) con la más grande atención (with the greatest attention), pesando cada palabra cuidadosamente (carefully weighing each word). Por consiguiente, propongo (I therefore propose) . . . Leaning his elbows on the table, the proconsul is still holding the newspaper up in front of his face with both hands, so that the delegates sitting on the other side of the table can see only the top of his head peeking above the page entirely divided into rectangles of different sizes, some of them vertical and some horizontal, put together like the stones of a wall. The page as a whole resembles a sort of irregular checkerboard, each square of which is decorated with designs and inscriptions. Certain of them are black on white, and others white on black. One of the rectangles, much taller than it is wide, occupies a good fifth of the left-hand side of the page. Next to a drawing representing a rocky peak with angular sides, at the foot of which a troop of minuscule horsemen are galloping along, are the words, in block letters: ¡2a SEMANA! ¡UNA PELICULA GIGANTE!, then on the black soil, in white letters with wavy curlicues: EL ORO DE MAC KENNA (MACKENNA'S GOLD) and surmounting the whole, alongside the vertical inscription HOY, a list of names, also in white letters, enclosed within little black

rectangles: ASTOR, BANDERA, LAS LILAS, NORMANDIE, GRAN AVENIDA—ROT. DESDE LAS 13 HRS. The tops of his shoulders barely visible above the surface of the table covered in green baize, the little chairman is leaning forward, rapidly covering sheets of paper with line after line of black handwriting without raising his head. Behind the delegates, the observers, among whom there are several women, are seated on a row of chairs along each side of the hall with the round bay windows closed off with dark curtains and flanked by Ionic columns. A number of these observers are taking notes, supporting their notebooks on one of their crossed thighs. The delegate with the Charles the Fifth beard is now holding a sheet of paper in his two hands and reading: El deber del escritor (The duty of the writer) es de hablar (is to speak) en nombre de (in the name of) las masas trabajadoras y oprimidas (the proletariat and the oppressed masses), dando testimonio (bearing witness) . . . Immediately adjoining the vertical rectangle is another rectangle, longer than it is tall and smaller in size, the lower left-hand corner of which is entirely occupied by the photograph of the torso of a woman lying on her side on a cushion or a pillow, her long, smooth, blond hair spread out over her bare shoulders, the lower border of the rectangle cutting off the illustration just at the areola around the nipples of her full breasts, which are also bare. The woman's eyes are closed. The regular features of her face, half of which is veiled in shadows, are set in a grimace of pain. Above her head the word *¡Simultáneo!* is written in a cursive hand, enclosed in two exclamation points, and then, in block letters: HOY—ALAMEDA, MINERVA. DESDE LAS 13 HRS. ¡TRIPLE COLOSAL!, and in a black cartouche on the right: LA VENUS MALDITA East-mancolor . . . MAYORES DE 21 AÑOS. Bathed in diffuse light on every side, the towering rectangular façades of the skyscrapers look almost identical, and one can tell whether they are in the sun or in the shade only by noting whether they are tinted a light yellow or a pale blue, there being no difference in intensity between them. They seem to be floating through the milky haze in a dizzying state of weightlessness, like half-full oil drums, heavier at their base than at the top, drifting imperceptibly in murky water.

Next to the cigar store is a smaller shop which still has its old wooden front, the owner having been content merely to repaint it black. Arranged in the window on a slightly inclined plane, magazines with multicolored covers are lined up one alongside the other in four vertical rows. Their lower edges are resting on horizontal strips nailed to the board (or the plywood panel), thus preventing them from sliding down. Like the storefront, the strips and the board are painted black. The format of all the magazines is more or less identical. The covers show naked or partially clothed women, certain of them, for example, having kept on their mesh stockings or their garter belts of black or pink satin. They have been photographed in a number of different poses: sitting in an armchair, kneeling on all fours on a bed, or lying on their sides, but in each case in such a way that their gaping thighs expose the area of their genitals. A rectangle or a little square of black paper pasted over each of the photographs conceals their nipples or their vulvas, however. They are all staring into the camera lens with a fixed smile on their faces. Those who are on all fours, their buttocks higher than their heads in the background, have all twisted their faces around in a violent contortion so as to show the photographer or the spectator their entrancing smiles. Resting their weight on their shoulders, they have brought their arms back along their sides, parting their buttocks with their two hands so as to afford a good view of their perineum and their anal orifice just above their genitals. Those who are seated or lying on their sides have drawn their thighs up, so that their knees almost touch their shoulders. These clumsy and uncomfortable positions (supported on a mound of pillows, their heads are bent over so far that their chins touch their breastbones, or else their necks are twisted around at an awkward angle so as to allow them to glance backwards) have caused their faces to become somewhat contorted, and given them double chins or spiral folds in the skin on their necks. The few bits of décor visible on these covers almost entirely occupied by bodies (shiny silks or satins in raw primary colors-royal blue, daffodil yellow, red-modern furniture in blond wood, decorative pillows, lamps with fancy wrought-iron feet painted in white enamel) remind one of

the sort of interiors that appeal to concierges or petit bourgeois who like “class.” On other covers one catches a glimpse of the edge of a swimming pool or a stretch of green turf . . . dando testimonio (by bearing witness) de sus condiciones de vida (to the conditions in which they live) y dando una voz a (and giving voice to) sus legítimas aspiraciones (their legitimate aspirations). The space below the advertisement for LA VENUS MALDITA, to the right of the panel showing the group of horsemen galloping along at the foot of the huge cliff, is occupied by another rectangle, taller than it is wide, inside which, beneath the name of the movie theater (EL CASTILLO), one can see a rather indistinct image, in the foreground of which one can vaguely make out the body of a man dressed in some sort of military uniform, with a beret on his head, holding a shiny black automatic weapon against his chest with both hands, in an oblique line. Behind him, amid a swirl of lights and shadows roughly rendered in black and white in the photographic reproduction, there can be seen the smaller and smaller silhouettes of the men following him, all of them also armed, making their way through the jumble of splotches and intertwining lines which are more a suggestion than a representation of the tangled vegetation of a jungle. The lower part of his body disappears in a sea of black ink with vague reflections stirring on its surface. The upper edge of the illustration has been cut into irregular scallops, like those formed by treetops, in order to leave room for the name of the movie theater, in black letters on a white background, whereas the title of the film, ¡EL INDOMABLE!, is written in large irregular white letters, like dribbles from a paint brush, arranged in an ascending curve, above the words, in smaller letters, ¡SENSACION! 3a SEMANA. The little band is laboriously wading through yellowish, muddy water. The bad quality of the photographic plate and that of the printer’s ink, which is greasy and smudgy, accentuate the sticky, muggy, humid atmosphere of the scene. The opaque shadows cast by the leaves all around the marchers and behind them have none of those pale, transparent yellow or blue splashes of color such as one sees in Impressionist paintings, for instance. There are only a few scattered reflections on the sur-

face of broad shiny leaves, gleaming with a hard metallic glint in the half-shadow against which blurred clouds of flitting butterflies can be seen, countless species of them, in colors as bright as glossy enamel, much like those garish decorative pillows offered as prizes at fairgrounds games of chance or those that one glimpses on the daybeds of concierges' apartments: turquoise-blue wings with indigo stripes spreading out in a fan and two narrow orange bands separating the anterior wings from the posterior pair (*Hopferia militaris*): red wings edged in black braid, with the tip of each anterior wing marked with an eye with a black eyelid, a white cornea, a purple iris dotted with little black spots, bordered on one side by a lapis-lazuli lace-work pattern, the same being repeated on a smaller scale on the two posterior wings, this time with a blue pupil spotted with black (peacock butterfly); pairs of triangular anterior wings, resembling lateen sails, yellow marbled with black, bordered with a blue band edged with black loops (swallowtail butterfly). Certain of the women are of the Scandinavian type, with long, smooth blond hair. The cover illustrations of the bottom row of magazines show men, occasionally in pairs, who have also been photographed in poses enabling them to prominently display their sex organs in the immediate foreground, though little rectangles of black paper have been pasted over the area of their genitals too. The doorway of the shop is set back from the show window, and the outside walls along this entryway have also been used to display magazines. Here too the cover illustrations show men and women with parted thighs. In this entryway, however (possibly in accordance with the provision of a law that may consider these display areas perpendicular to the street as forming part of the interior of the shop), there are no black rectangles concealing the vulvas with gaping lips, the moist pink, lilac, or sepia mucous membranes surrounded by more or less dense, fleecy tufts of hair, or in some instances shaved pubes that make the genitals look like prominent rounded buboes that have burst along a vertical axis, forming a narrow slit surrounded by swollen, slightly inflamed fleshy tissue. The glans of the men's penises is exposed, with folds of loose skin bunched up just below the rim. Although none of

these male members is in a state of erection, they are all large-sized and their tips hang down below the lower edge of their testicles, with the weight of their balls stretching the skin into the shape of a half-filled sack. Through the open door there can be seen a number of customers standing with their heads bent over, leafing through the magazines laid out on long counters. At the very back of the shop, one can make out a wall or a partition with an opening draped in a black curtain that leads to narrow passageways illuminated by dim red lights. Above it the word PEP is inscribed in large white letters arranged in an ascending curve, followed by several exclamation points. Each of the anterior wings, shaped like a rounded petal, is divided lengthwise into two approximately equal areas, one of them white, the other an amethyst blue, slightly overlapping the white area toward its tips and broken up by broad black stripes shaped like exclamation points, the last one of which borders the entire outer edge of the wing; the posterior wings, smaller in size and of a less brilliant blue with a grayish tinge, also have a row of divergent black bands, plus two narrow orange stripes at the point where this posterior pair of wings joins the anterior pair (*Mesomenia cresus*). The muggy, suffocating hot air has a sticky consistency. Continuing on up the street, his hand again pressed against his side, he walks on past the display of magazines in the shop window. Beyond the intersection where the motley patches of cars and pedestrians are still crossing back and forth, he can see the marquee of his hotel, still a frighteningly long distance away. At the intersection, the street crosses a wide main avenue. On the map of the city the blocks of buildings and skyscrapers form rectangles tinted a light gray, of varying sizes and shapes, some of them quite elongated and others nearly square, depending on the relative size of the intervals between the parallel streets and avenues, which invariably cut across each other at right angles. The map as a whole has the appearance of a wall with visible joints of white cement, or of a vast checkerboard with irregular squares, with red dots here and there to mark the location of railway stations, museums, and the principal civic monuments. The area not taken up by the huge ads for the three first-run films that occupy

approximately two-thirds of the page is filled with a checkerboard of little rectangles inside which there are listed, below the name of the movie theater where they are playing, the titles of a series of films: IMPERIO: EL AGENTE SECRETISIMO—CALIFORNIA: BUENA SERA MRS. CAMPBELL—YORK: SANDRO—CITY: EL GOLFO—EGANA: LO QUE EL VIENTO SE LLEVO—RIALTO: LOS VIOLENTOS VAN AL CIELO. To the left of each title one can see a little photo showing either the head of the star of the picture, or a scene from the film (a fight between two men, a man and a woman locked in embrace, the Chinese shadow-play silhouette of a woman in a transparent nightgown, a cowboy drawing his Colt from his holster) intended to arouse the moviegoer's interest. In his sleep he experiences the vague feeling that something is missing and several times his hand gropes around next to him for the body that is not there. Blinking his eyes to shield them from the light as he first raises up on one elbow, then sits up on the edge of the rumpled bed, he sees the rectangle of the door floating as though in a pool of murky water, framing the silhouette of the woman standing in her bare feet on the tile floor of the kitchen just beyond the doorjamb. Her legs, her shoulders, and her arms are also bare. A brown bath towel with the ends tied in a knot above her breasts hides her body down to the upper edge of her thighs. She is holding a large cup of steaming coffee in her hand, drinking a sip of it from time to time. A short hallway leads to the door of the kitchen. Another door on the right-hand wall of the hallway is open. Through this rectangular opening (distorted into a trapezoid by the angle of perspective) one can see a washbowl and half of a bathtub. Above the bathtub is a window, through which one can see a factory chimney towering above the tops of a grove of pines, silhouetted against a sky that is still a pale amber color. The last stars have disappeared and the sun has not yet risen. Each of the purplish-brown bricks of the chimney is clearly visible, as is each of the light-colored masonry joints between them. Still sitting on the edge of the bed, located along the same axis as the hallway, he looks at the woman draped in her bath towel standing facing him, looking back at him. At

that moment, although she has not moved, the loosely tied towel slips down, baring her body dappled with shadowy patches. Touching one of the ends of the towel beneath her armpit, the woman grabs the other end with her free hand, unhurriedly draws it back up over her breast, and continues to stand there in that position. Neither of them says a word. He walks on, passing in succession a men's clothing shop, a radio and television store, the enormous show windows, framed in polished steel, of an export-import company, and again halts, holding his side, in front of an optician's display window. Behind the glasses in gold or tortoise-shell frames scattered among the folds of a mustard-colored velvet cloth is an anatomical color plate showing an eye, the size of a small melon, removed from its socket. Its posterior surface is traversed by a network of red veins spreading out like roots. Below it is a schematic cross section of the same eye, on the same scale, showing the rounded cornea, the anterior aqueous chamber, the pupil, the vitreous humor, the retina, and the optic nerve. The cornea and the sclera surrounding the eyeball are colored a pale lavender blue, the anterior aqueous chamber behind the rounded portion of the cornea is flesh-colored, the iris red orange, the choroid coat is striated with fine blue lines, like the flat surface of an onion cut in two, the vitreous humor is a bluish gray, the retina and the optic nerve are Nile green. A wavy mauve-colored line connected with a black stroke to the word macula outside the drawing wanders across the back of the eye and then penetrates to the center of the optic nerve like an axis. The overall effect of the contiguous blue, orange, green, and red lines is reminiscent of the hues of a rainbow. An enormous magnifying glass has been placed in front of the photograph of a film star in such a way that the passer-by can see the latter's greatly enlarged eye, extending over almost the whole width of her face, like that of a cyclops. Next come a typewriter and office-equipment store, then a toy store, and then a lingerie shop. Slowly making his way down the street on his shaky legs, he can still see his double gliding across dictaphones, memo pads, metal filing cabinets, the letters of typewriter keyboards, miniature tanks, miniature rockets, miniature airplanes hanging by wires above

columns of little soldiers in camouflage uniforms making their way through a miniature jungle amid Meccano sets, teddy bears, and packs of solitaire cards, then disappearing as he goes past an empty doorway, then reappearing in front of the torsos of women clad in short transparent lavender, turquoise, black, yellow nightgowns, gold lamé brassieres, or lace panties, and then, immediately afterward, in front of a succession of men and women sitting one behind the other in a series of narrow boxes separated from the street only by the invisible glass wall against which some of them are leaning their shoulders, all in profile, all turned in the same direction and all in the same position, that is to say leaning slightly forward, so that each of them seems to be addressing the back of his or her neighbor, as in that poster that one used to see in the subway, showing house painters in white overalls lined up in single file, each of them tracing with a brush the words of an advertising slogan for a brand of paint on the shoulders of the man in front of him. They glide slowly by, one after the other, on his right, vaguely unreal, incredible, like the repetition, with minor variations, of the face of one and the same person reproduced in several copies, some black and some white, each with a slightly different expression, absent, so to speak, both from his material envelope and from his natural habitat, transported into some other distant world, uttering inaudible words, listening for inaudible responses recorded and transmitted not by a flesh-and-blood conversational partner but by the ear and mouth of ebonite that he is holding against his own ear and his own mouth, each of them carrying on an interminable, passionate, voluble discourse for his own benefit alone, in a silent and incoherent cacophony, the delegates around the long green baize-covered table all speaking and waving their arms at the same time, the little chairman attempting from time to time to raise his hand to plead for silence, leaning over toward the microphone placed in front of him, beginning a sentence, then giving up, turning his head to take as his witnesses several people standing behind him, each of whom leans over in turn to look over his shoulder as he mechanically continues to hold his arm up in the air, several arms around the table likewise being

raised, like those of pupils in a classroom, the hubbub now having reached its climax, having gone flat, so to speak, canceling itself out, destroying itself, a sort of quiet sound now (like the lapping of water stirred by the wind in a boat basin where the little waves strike the stone sides of the wharves and bounce back off, bumping into the ones following immediately behind them as they retreat, so that as they mingle and swirl about it is impossible to make out any predominant orientation or prevailing direction of motion, the water being covered with sharp little pointed crests which appear to rise and fall without ever changing place, the overall surface thus undergoing no visible modification), as though disorder and incoherence constituted the inevitable, natural, stagnant state of affairs, the observers and the journalists sitting in rows like the rings of an onion along the bay windows and the imitation Greek columns also talking, leaning forward so as to hear or see better, certain of them rising to their feet, joining the groups of delegates standing about, the proconsul's newspaper, now abandoned, lying flat on the table, folded in two, so that for the first time the head of the leader of the troop of soldiers is visible, lying upside down however, topped by his beret with a star pinned to it and surrounded by the ever-present cloud of mosquitoes, minuscule yellow dots alternately clustering together and scattering in the sunlight, forming a series of moving constellations against the black background of the forest, the interpreter sharing the general excitement, nervously tapping his notes with the cap of his pen, his neck outstretched, his face turned toward the end of the table where the chairman is sitting, though from time to time he remembers the role that he has undertaken to perform and quickly turns around, beginning a phrase such as They propose that, or The others insist that, then breaking off his translation almost immediately, his attention drawn here or there by other more violent outbursts as the delegates argue with each other, and finally giving up, leaning over one last time to say I'll explain later, then concentrating his entire attention thereafter on the focal points round about the hall where the stormiest arguments are taking place. Above (or now, since the newspaper is upside down,

below) the fronds in front of which the cloud of mosquitoes is swirling about, one can still read the words EL INDOMABLE, resembling those inscriptions traced in haste with clandestine passion on a wall in the dark of night in broad brush strokes, the ends of each letter as ragged as broken planks bristling with saw-toothed slivers. Since the decipherment of the upsidedown letters, from right to left, requires more time than a normal reading of them, it seems to confer on the words spelled syllable by syllable that weighty significance and odd solemnity of messages with a hidden meaning that such words take on when laboriously read out by children or near-illiterates: NOC . . . VRL . . . TO. (CONTRATO) . . . VER. . . OS (PERVERSO) XOH(HOY) OLO . . . RI . . . VD (FLORIDA) SES . . . DE (DESDE) SVT (LAS)OI (10) SRH (HRS)VA . . . OX . . . SER(MAYORES) ED (DE) IZ (21) NV . . . OS (AN-OS) The syllables decoded one after the other, the words, the groups of words, seem to be printed over the confused tumult of voices, a superscription at once monumental and ridiculous: IL . . . OA . . . TI(TIVOLI) OL . . . OD(TODO) NU (UN) VID(DIA) VA . . . VA (PARA) OM . . . RIR(MORIR). It is easy to see what certain of the upside-down photos illustrating the advertisements represent, but either because of the poor quality of reproduction of the newsprint, or because of their very small dimensions, other, more complex images present to the eye nothing but an incomprehensible jumble of black and white dots. After a moment he stops trying to decipher the page of advertisements. With its bold-faced captions, its names of movie theaters suggestive of elegant beaches, of palaces, its enticing photos of figures in passionate poses, the newspaper lying there abandoned on the green baize-covered table seems to have ended up there by sheer chance, as useless and as oddly out of place as those that one can see floating on the surface of the dirty water of seaports, soaking wet and half-fallen into shreds, or those wrapped around bunches of leeks, continuing to hopelessly display fragments of words or images snatched out of a world of violent, high-flown rhetoric and enclosed in rectangles surrounded by a heavy black border, like death announcements. In the rectangle of the window the sun is now tinting the tops

of the pines yellow. On one side of the tall factory chimney the bricks are taking on a pale orange tinge. An orange, slightly lopsided rectangle is lying flat against the wall of the bathroom, at a right angle to the wall with an open window at the same height as the rectangle. The sun has not yet entered the kitchen (or at least not that part of it that he can see from the edge of the bed where he is still sitting), where the woman with her torso wrapped in the dark brown bath towel is standing facing him. The entrance to the subway is a rectangular opening in the sidewalk alongside the cafeteria on the corner of the avenue, its long axis parallel to the street, enclosed on three sides by a plain metal railing with bars painted olive green. On the fourth side is a stairway leading down that is wide enough for only two persons to descend abreast. This dirty gray flight of unswept stairs is lined by two walls of varnished bricks. Fastened to the narrow end of the railing is a metal sign bearing a single word, UPTOWN, in white capital letters on a background of the same olive-green color, framed by the initials BMT repeated twice. The woman's eyes stare at him above the edge of the large cup whose contents she is sipping in little swallows. Each time she swallows he can see her neck bulge slightly and the cartilage of her larynx move up and down beneath the skin as the liquid slides down her throat. Above her right breast the towel hanging from her hand forms three oblique folds spreading outward like a fan. He asks the same question a second time, being obliged to clear his throat to make himself heard. She lowers the cup and he can see her entire face. Her eyes still riveted on him, she says softly No. No, that's not possible. The rectangle of sunlight on the bathroom wall slowly turns from red orange to yellow. Crossing her chest in a horizontal line at the height of her armpits, the towel allows one to see only the upper edge of the opening in the form of a cello case protected by a panel of plexiglass, behind which one can make out large red and blue tubes which fork off in different directions and intertwine. Beneath the smooth skin of the neck a very faint bulge is the only indication of the location of the outer cervical blood vessels, which swell imperceptibly with each invisible pulse of blood. Narrow blue, red, and yellow stripes, only a few

fractions of an inch wide, indicate on the map the various subway lines, dotted with little white circles at more or less regular intervals. The system as a whole is laid out in approximately parallel lines, which occasionally bend slightly inward or outward, though in the southern portion of the city they branch out and intertwine in complicated loops and curves. In the lower left-hand corner of the map is a rectangular inset explaining the principal symbols: Red lines: IND. Blue lines: IRT. Yellow lines: BMT. White circles: LOCAL STOPS. White circles with a black center: EXPRESS STOPS. Two white circles with black centers connected by a line: FREE TRANSFER. In the opposite corner is the inscription HOTEL MAC ALLYN above a heart-shaped photograph showing a building twenty-five stories high with a huge skyscraper towering above it in the background. Underneath it there is written in cursive script: *In the Heart of the City.* The arch of the aorta is colored a darker blue violet than the superior vena cava. A cross section of the heart shows the pinkish myocardium and the complicated interweavings of the fibrous strands which leave between them narrow cavities and passageways like those of a grotto with numerous pillars formed by stalagmites and stalactites that have joined together. He is now dressed again and is sitting in the chair facing the doctor's desk. As the thumb and the index finger of his right hand fumble at the base of his left forearm to rebutton his shirt cuff, he peers anxiously at the face of the doctor as he bends over the prescription he is writing out. He can see hanging on the wall behind the doctor the gleeful band of jocose medical students dressed in blood-stained smocks crowded around the young girl with the head of a cherub stretched out naked on the operating table. Tired of waiting and feeling exhausted after the examination, he allows himself to lean back, rests his head against the back of his seat, and closes his eyes for a moment. After a little while the burning sensation produced by his eyelids as they blink down over his corneas becomes less painful, gradually turning into a mere sensation of warmth that is not at all unpleasant, and is in fact even restful. When he removes his glasses and rubs his eyelids with his thumb and index finger, hairy, fuzzy caterpillars,

green at first, next red and orange, and then as incandescent as electric light bulbs, writhe and twist, break apart, and slowly reform against a dark brown background. The mere contact of certain caterpillars with the skin has a vesicant effect, causing a painful burn and swelling which may last for several days. A brilliant apple-green in color, the soft ringed body is decorated with perfectly regular black geometric patterns, splotched with yellow highlights. Its tail tapers into a sort of brown dart, the point of which is slightly red. Arching its back, alternately contracting and expanding, the caterpillar inches along the surface of a broad, velvety, dark green leaf, with prominent coral-colored ribs that curve like eyelashes. Between the bases of each of the ribs are small pale oval spots forming a sort of branchlike appliqué pattern against the velvet background. The friction of the air passing over the outer skin of the airplane is louder than the sound of the jet engines, resembling the rumble of an express train hurtling along at top speed. He opens his eyes again. Orlando stretches his arm out toward the night table and raises a large glass of water to his parched lips with a trembling hand: Strange to say, señor, we were all very calm. Poisoned arrows were whizzing past us from all directions and hitting the trunks of the trees; the great whining lead balls from the Indians' muskets were ricocheting all around us. Despite the blood pulsing at our temples and the darkness surrounding us, we each picked a single man as our target, aiming carefully before we fired. It was imperative to conserve our ammunition. Death was staring us in the face. Other small photographs inserted in the text show peculiar-shaped flowers, in violent colors or in soft pastels. Certain of them look like purple mouths with a darting tongue that bears a vague resemblance to a phallus. Others have ruffled petals, or petals that look as though they had been crimped with a curling iron, which open out, twist in spirals, unfold, twine back on themselves, dotted with flecks of vermillion, saffron, cinnabar. The most beautiful orchids in the world blossom in profusion in this hell with the thousand treacherous poiso . . . He leans forward to pick up the magazine that has slipped out of his hands. The floor of the plane is covered with ugly royal-blue carpeting with little

wavy black lines that look like caterpillars. He straightens up, settles back in his seat again, and leafs through the pages looking for the article he had been reading. The titles of the various sections of the magazine appear one after the other. MANNERS AND MORALS. BUSINESS. THEATER. POLLUTION. MODERN LIFE. MEDICINE. At the top of one column is a box in the upper part of which one sees a gray spot vaguely shaped like a kidney or a navy bean with shallow crenulations running along the top of it. To the right of it is the caption BRAIN. Beginning at a red dot in the center of the mass is an arrow pointing downward, ending at the edge of a circle showing an enlarged cross section of the hypophysis. From there a second arrow describes a curve that leads the eye to a sort of retort with its beak pointing toward the right, occupying the lower part of the illustration. Following the path of the curving arrow the eye encounters the words: ACTION OF THE GONADOTROPINS. In the bulb of the retort is a small oval, tilted at a slight angle, from which there emerges a thin serpentine, which after having followed a meandering trajectory finally re-descends along the central axis of the beak of the retort. The initial T of the word TESTICLE overlaps the right edge of the oval. The title of the illustration as a whole reads: SCHEMATIC DRAWING OF THE MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM. Out of respect for the principles of decency, doubtless, the beak of the retort has been neatly severed, approximately at its midsection, so that neither the upper end of it nor the glans at the very tip is shown. The various organs illustrated in the drawing have no other connections between them aside from the arrows leading the eye from one to the other, and each of them appears to be floating about separately, as in a glass jar filled with formaldehyde. Their respective dimensions, moreover, have no relation to those of the corresponding real organs, certain of them being greatly enlarged in the schematic drawing simply to show the details of their structure more clearly. There is no reason, therefore, to attribute any particular significance to the fact that the testicles and the base of the severed penis cover an area approximately twice the size of that of the brain. The explanatory text, furthermore, remedies any possible

misinterpretation by emphasizing the primordial importance of this latter organ in the overall functioning of the system. On the wall of the bathroom the rectangle of sunlight is now a pure yellow, a uniform lemon color, no longer bearing any trace of those slight marblings that characterize the first or last rays cast by the sun when it is still hovering just above the horizon or is just about to sink below it. Although the process has taken place in stages in which the changes are so infinitesimal as to be imperceptible even to the eye of an attentive observer, it has nonetheless occurred with surprising rapidity, for the woman is still standing there in the very same place, still holding the cup of steaming coffee at the level of her face and continuing to slowly sip it in little swallows. She is now bathed in the dazzling bright light flooding into the kitchen, the bathroom, the hallway (though the latter area is just a bit more dimly lighted, however), and the bedroom where he is sitting on the edge of the bed with the rumpled sheets. Turning his eyes away from her face, his gaze descends along the brown towel and her legs, sweeps across her bare feet planted on the black and white tile floor of the kitchen and then the parquet floor of the hallway, and halts at the patch of the bedroom rug between his own feet, which are also bare, and slightly parted, their divergent axes forming the sides of an angle with a narrow open end. His left foot partially hides a green hexagon on a red background, inside which is a series of smaller and smaller hexagons, successively brown, ocher, blue gray, brick red, and tobacco-colored. Their contours bristle with barbs in geometric patterns which give them somewhat the appearance of crabs with a carapace surrounded by curving legs and claws. From beneath his right foot there emerges a band within which there is a running pattern of more or less X-shaped motifs on a white background, each with curved tips and a horizontal bar through the middle, alternately blue gray bordered in red, red bordered in black, green bordered in red, brown bordered in red, and then again red bordered in black. To the right of this same foot another part of the carpet begins, repeating the same pattern of large barbed hexagons, against a brown background this time, each of them again enclosing a series of smaller ones, this time

successively brick red, blue gray, yellow, maroon, red, a darker blue gray, and orange. Beginning at the external malleolus, a prominent vein snakes across the instep beneath the skin, bifurcating midway, with the lateral branch almost perfectly perpendicular to the other one, which continues on downward, growing narrower and narrower and becoming less and less prominent, gradually disappearing just above the little toe. The skin along the path of the vein has a slight greenish tinge. When he raises his head after a moment, his eyes immediately meet the pair of brown eyes still staring over the edge of the cup at him. The cup is white, with a narrow green border around the upper edge. It is decorated with broad grooves, the scalloped tops of which surround the rim of the cup like the petals of a flower, that gradually taper as they run down the sides and finally converge near the base. The production of sex hormones is regulated by the hypophysis. The very large family of orchids (numbering approximately 15,000 species) constitutes the entire order of Microspermae. The soggy red soil of the forest disappears beneath the vegetable debris and the humus covering it. Between his feet spread slightly apart he can see the grimy gray cement pavement of the little square. A row of stunted plane trees, alternating with scraggly shrubs with leaves that have already turned brown and look like cardboard, has been planted along the narrow strip of dirt running the length of the iron grille separating the square from the street. The bench on which he is sitting is made of broad slats of wood painted an olive green, resting on cement supports. The square occupies one of the triangular areas formed by the two avenues cutting obliquely across each other at the intersection, outlining two symmetrical plots of ground whose points touch. Still staring at him, she drinks another swallow of her coffee, then removes the cup from her lips. She then slowly pivots her head from left to right and from right to left, her eyes still riveted on him, as though the only form of communication possible, beyond any sort of spoken words, was this shaking of her head in silent dissent. The last clouds have drifted away. Very far off on the horizon above the immense forest, one can still see their whitish clotted lumps strung out

in a motionless line. Below the airplane, the ground is beginning to form little hillocks. Still covered by an impenetrable green carpet of vegetation, it soon is furrowed with valleys, some of them with very steep sides, at the bottom of which rivers the color of yellow or red ocher wind their way along. In little patches at first, and then stretching over larger and larger areas, there appear expanses of ground covered only with grass and shrubs, and then finally naked soil, or even cultivated fields, and a few hamlets with tin roofs gleaming in the sun. Narrow paths wind in ribbons up the sides of higher and higher, more and more arid mountains, until finally all trace of human life disappears once again, the ranges extending as far as the eye can see in series of interlocking pyramids, with their sharp summits, their naked, burned, geometrical faces in pastel shades: mauve, rose, pale reddish brown, slate blue, or ocher. As far as the eye can see, not a single house, not a single path appears on the awesome, monotonous successions of triangular planes joining to form perfect dihedrons, the surface of which is marred only here and there by some geological irregularity, and the colors of which remind one of those of the charred residues that remain in the bottom of retorts or test tubes after a chemical experiment. Now that the hall is silent once again, the little chairman recapitulates the various proposals concerning the wording of the final text of paragraph four in a monotonous voice, like that of a court clerk. After reading each one he raises his head and counts the number of hands raised around the table. When he has finished counting, he leans over toward his assistant, who has also counted them, and checks the figure that the latter has written down on a slip of paper. *Proposición número uno: el escritor se define políticamente, en la medida que tiene existencia social, también lo hace por medio de silencio o su ambigüedad. Proposición inicial elaborada por el grupo de trabajo de la Comisión de Redacción (Proposal number one: the writer may choose to define himself politically, insofar as he has a social existence, by his silence or by his ambiguity. The initial proposal drawn up by the work group of the Drafting Committee).* *Proposición número dos: el escritor afirma su existencia y cumple su*

misión social poniendo su persona, sus escritos y sus palabras al servicio de las masas y de los pueblos oprimidos. Proposición de Antonio Márquez (Proposal number two: the writer affirms his existence and fulfills his social mission by placing himself, his writings, and his spoken word in the service of the masses and oppressed peoples. Proposal by Antonio Márquez). Proposición número tres: el primer deber del escritor es de hablar en nombre de las masas trabajadoras y (Proposal number three: the prime duty of the writer is to speak in the name of the working masses and) . . . Yielding to their fatigue, the majority of the plane passengers have placed the backs of their seats in a reclining position and are drowsing. Some of them have loosened their ties and unbuttoned their shirt collars. Several of them have drawn the curtains at their windows and the cabin is bathed in a shadowy half-light. One woman has leaned her head over onto her companion's shoulder. The stewardesses walk up and down the center aisle from time to time glancing to the right and to the left even though none of the passengers has rung for them. One of them has given a child a box of crayons and a coloring book. After hesitating a long time before choosing one of the crayons, the child traces, without raising the crayon from the paper, long continuous curves that loop back on themselves and cross each other, going outside the outlines of the human figures or the animals that he is coloring. A clumsy movement of his arm causes the box to fall on the floor and the crayons scatter over the carpeting. His mother leans down to pick them up and the stewardess squats down in a position that causes her skirt to creep up over her thighs. A man with skin the color of café au lait and wavy orange hair that no doubt is dyed paces endlessly up and down the little square, more or less following the bisecting angle formed by its two longest sides. He is dressed in a blue suit that is in good condition but slightly wrinkled. His shoes of reddish leather are carefully polished. He is wearing reddish-purple socks and a shirt with mauve stripes, unbuttoned at the neck, without a tie. As he walks back and forth, he keeps talking in a loud voice, waving his arms and hands in front of him like a puppet. At times he stares blankly into space. At other times he stares at the

people sitting on the benches, who avert their eyes. Proposición número cinco: el valor del intelectual no consiste hoy en saber lo que piensa ni para quién piensa, sino en la relación estricta entre lo que piensa y lo que hace. Proposición de Manuel Arenas Vidal (Proposal number five: the value of the intellectual today does not depend on what he thinks or for whom he thinks, but on the intimate relationship between what he thinks and what he does. Proposal by Manuel Arenas Vidal). Proposición número seis: No hay otra acción positiva y justificativa del escritor que aquella que consiste en (There is no other positive and justifiable action on the part of the writer save that of) . . . Occasionally feeble puffs of sticky, scorching air gently stir the yellowed leaves of the trees. Hemmed in within the towering walls of the buildings surrounding it on all sides, as though it were situated at the bottom of a well, the square gets sunlight only when the sun reaches the axis of one or the other of the avenues that cross each other at that point. The cement pavement has a number of rectangular openings in it, covered by grilles, from which there emerge warm, fetid puffs of air, and the intermittent muffled roar of subway trains passing by below. On the shortest side of the square is a tall stone monument with a niche framed by two imitation Corinthian columns in which a Minerva cast in bronze covered with a verdigris patina, wearing a helmet, armed with a lance and a buckler, is stretching her free hand out above a great round bell, also cast in bronze, framed by two men dressed in the work clothes of blacksmiths, each armed with a hammer. The torsos of the two workers are articulated at the waist, the joint being hidden by the folds of their loose-fitting tunics drooping down over their belts. At the very top of the monument is the dial of a clock. Precisely on the hour, the bodies of the two blacksmiths pivot horizontally, and one after the other they strike the bell with their hammers. The metallic bronze notes ring out one by one in the motionless hot air trapped in the square. Nothing about the light (neither its intensity nor its color value, since it is an almost perfectly uniform pale white both in the areas in shadow and those in sunlight) allows the eye to distinguish this particular moment of the day from

those that have preceded it. The heat, the stifling atmosphere have not changed, as though they depended neither on the position of the sun in the sky nor the greater or lesser proximity of dawn or twilight. Nor does anything about the green penumbra lying stagnant beneath the thick foliage, the landscape surrounding them, the forest that is ever and always the same give any indication to the troop of men in arms laboriously making their way through the giant vegetation that any progression, either in space or time, has taken place. They seem to be marking time, the grass, the lianas, the layer of vegetable debris covering the ground forcing them to raise their feet to exaggerated heights, in the manner of supernumeraries pantomiming the movements of a column on the march on the boards of a stage without advancing a single step, as their weapons become more and more badly eaten away by rust and the few remaining garments covering their bodies fall into rags and tatters. Although they can scarcely be heard above the continuous rumble of traffic, the sounds of the bronze being tapped by the hammers cause the black man with the orange hair to halt in his tracks, raise his head, and watch the mechanism function. When the blacksmiths cease moving, he starts pacing back and forth again, waving his arms about and muttering between his teeth once more, his face set in an expression of outraged indignation. The noise of the hammers striking the bell also causes a number of pink and gray pigeons to fly up. They flutter about overhead, turning and wheeling, then alight on the branches of a tree that has already shed most of its leaves, and finally fly back down to the cement pavement and begin pecking about again for a few crumbs of food. A flock of twenty or so huge birds that have been stripping a tree of its fruit fly up, emitting a chorus of guttural cries. Only two or three of the men in the column raise their heads. The aras are by nature a social species: they live in flocks consisting of several dozen individuals. Along with the cockatoo, the military ara or soldier macaw is the largest of the order of Psittaciformes. Its tail, which is longer than its body, is covered with feathers ranged in tiers and tapers to a sharp point. Its cheeks are featherless: the skin covering them is usually

white and extends down below their lower beak, thus giving its face a very distinctive appearance and an apparent expression of scorn or disdain. Its upper beak, like that of almost all parrots, scarcely moves: it serves to give the bird a purchase as it climbs up a branch. Its plumage is a beautiful bright red. Its wings are yellow and blue. 'What a riot of color when a flock of aras spreads its wings and flies upward in the sunlight! The squawking, chattering flock disappears, leaving behind it a long, dazzling, bright-colored trail across the observer's retina. The few soldiers who have allowed their attention to be distracted lower their heads once more and begin plodding onward. The ridge of their brows is not enough to stop the sweat that is rolling down their foreheads from running into their eyes, down along the bridge of their noses, and over their heavily bearded cheeks. From time to time one of them mechanically wipes his face with his bare forearm, which is also dripping with sweat and streaked with grease from his weapon. Some of them are muttering swearwords or mumbling complaints. Though the bronze clock has not struck again, the black man with the faded henna-colored hair halts again, as though completely bewildered, casting a defiant stare all about him, his eyes, at once hostile and surprised, successively contemplating the people sitting on the benches in the square, the pedestrians passing by, and the stream of traffic flowing along the base of the towering stone walls, his puppet's hands also motionless now, at the level of his face, as though he were suddenly totally oblivious of them; then, again without any apparent reason, he begins pacing up and down once more and resumes his soliloquy, closing his right fist, which rises and falls with a brusque, mechanical motion in cadence with each of his first jerky steps. Still following the rhythm of the lights as they change at the intersection, the continuous stream of traffic stops dead, starts up again, stops dead, starts up again. The building at the intersection of the street and the avenue towers far overhead with its rows of windows one atop the other, separated by the horizontal bands of the facing of the building, like a slice of many-layered puff pastry. At the mezzanine story, an advertising slogan, repeated over and over, proclaims that the

store occupying the ground floor and the floors above is the largest in the world. A motley crowd continually pours in and out of the revolving doors. With the regularity of a metronome a luminous reflection glitters for a second and then disappears on each of its glass panels as they turn endlessly round and round. A middle-aged, rather stout lady, clad in a bright dress the color of a pink caramel and wearing a toque with a plume of gray feathers atop her head, enters the square, wearily makes her way over to one of the benches, and sits down. She sets a large, sturdy paper shopping bag down on the ground next to her swollen feet. The bag is labeled with the name of the store and the same slogan as that on the building, repeated both above and below a giant eye, outlined and shaded with little intersecting curved lines placed fairly close together, like the enlargement of a copperplate engraving. Behind the thick round lenses of his glasses mounted in gold frames the eyes of the doctor are greatly enlarged as he sits there reading the prescription he has written out and commenting on it. Above the cup decorated with a green border around the rim the woman's two eyes seem to occupy the entire upper portion of her face. They are still turned toward the man sitting on the edge of the rumpled bed, and he too is still staring at the woman's face, or at any rate at that portion of it which he can see above the rim of the cup, which is now apparently empty, though she mechanically continues to hold it in front of her face, as if she had absent-mindedly forgotten to set it down, or as if she were trying to conceal the lower portion of her face behind it. The color and the intensity of the rectangle of sunlight on the bathroom wall have not changed. The patch has perhaps moved slightly, but the shift in its position is so infinitesimal that the eye cannot perceive it. It seems as though the sun, after having suddenly appeared like an orange above the tops of the pines and started to change color and grow brighter as it began its rapid ascent, is now almost motionless as it commences to trace its broad arc across the sky with the solemn slowness of fixed stars launched into space at fantastic speeds. Between the imitation Ionic columns of the long hall in which the delegates are carrying on their debate, the heavy draperies

curtaining the windows are like a thick bandage that prevents any light from entering the room. The faces and the long table covered in green baize with the white rectangular pads of paper lined up along each side of it are bathed in the same even light cast by the rows of electric bulbs concealed amid the capitals of the columns. There is no change at all in the light which would indicate any passage of time or give one even an approximate idea of what hour of day it is (morning, afternoon, twilight). The monotonous flow of voices speaking in a foreign language, all sounding more or less the same, the return at regular intervals of the same words, groups of words, or their synonyms in the remarks made by the successive speakers further accentuates this sensation of being outside of time. Después de esperar durante varios días (After having waited for several days, the interpreter whispers) que este Encuentro de Escritores (for this Writers' Conference) . . . This time the speaker addressing the delegates has risen from his seat, doubtless in order to emphasize the solemn nature of his pronouncement. He is a man of about thirty, with the somewhat flaccid features of a young male lead, of a handsome lothario of the sort shown on postcards bought by soldiers or housemaids, standing against a pink background whispering into the ear of a young girl with frizzy hair listening to him with a smile on her face as she peeks at him over a bouquet whose flowers in relief peep out of a little paper lace collar glued onto the card. He is peering through the narrow slits of his half-closed eyelids, his high cheekbones standing out, his thick upper lip partially hanging over his lower lip, his heavily pomaded hair an oily black, combed back from his forehead in a pompadour: He is wearing a cashmere tie with a little yellow pattern on a green background and an English-cut single-button sports coat stretched tight across his pot belly . . . se decidiera a tratar, al fin (to finally get around to dealing with . . . Disregarding the microphone on the table in front of him, which, moreover, is not tall enough for a speaker who is standing up, he turns toward the chairman and reads a paper that he is holding in both hands . . . los puntos del temario que se había fijado de antemano (the points on the announced agenda) . . . Barely visible above the

tabletop, the short little chairman looks at the speaker over the tops of his glasses, with a pained expression of stunned surprise and disbelief on his face, his hand still holding the pen above the sheet of paper that he has been writing on or perhaps a text that he has been making notes on. The majority of the delegates are also looking at the young male lead with much the same astonished expressions on their faces, somewhat attenuated, however, by their state of weariness and boredom. The Roman proconsul has again pointedly unfolded his newspaper . . . hemos decidido abandonar el Encuentro (we have decided to withdraw from the Conference) y fijar ante él nuestra posición y desacuerdo en los siguientes puntos (but before so doing we shall explain our position and express our disagreement with regard to the following points). Primeramente: el desarrollo real de las actividades (First: the way in which these sessions have been conducted) que en poco o nada ha tenido que ver con (which has had little or nothing to do with) el espíritu de la convocatoria (the announced aims and purposes of this Conference) y los puntos (and the points) . . . After a moment, the pain, the nausea, and the sort of vertigo he has been feeling become less intense. On each of the sides of the acute angle formed by the square are four benches in a row. Running parallel to them and to the railing surrounding the square are a row of iron hoops, originally intended, doubtless, to fence off a patch of lawn, but there is not a single blade of grass growing in this grayish strip of bare earth, which is covered only with scattered bits of paper or crumpled newspapers. The first bench to the left along the side of the square opposite him is occupied by two young girls in very short skirts who are nibbling on various things they keep removing from a paper sack that they have set down on the ground between them. Seated on the second bench are the plump lady in the candy-pink dress and a young man in blue pants, blue leather moccasins, blue socks, and a pale blue shirt, the tails of which are hanging down over his pants, who is attentively reading a brochure. The sole occupant of the third bench is a man with abundant long brown locks dangling down both sides of his face and touching a thick close-cropped beard, like that worn by

Charles the Fifth in Titian's portrait of that emperor. He is not so much sitting on the bench as reclining on it, with his body turned a bit to one side, its weight resting on his upper left thigh, buttock, and elbow, and with his legs, slightly bent at the knee, stretched out in front of him, his torso inclined at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees, and his head bent over almost horizontally, leaning on his left shoulder. His eyes are closed. Lying next to him, rolled up in a ball, are a beige sweater and an old jacket of the same olive-green color as his pants, which have holes in them in several places, on the right knee in particular, where his light skin shows through, and on his right hip, where the edges of a long tear have been fastened together with safety pins, thus affording, like Renaissance costumes with slashed doublets, a glimpse of the black lining underneath (or perhaps another pair of pants below the outer pair that he is wearing?). One can also see the skin of his ankles and his bare feet in low-cut black shoes without laces. He appears to be motionless, but if one looks at him long enough one perceives that his body is slowly slumping down and collapsing bit by bit, like snowmen in the sun, or as though it were being eaten away from within by an army of termites. The process is not continuous and his successive changes in position are the result of a series of tiny jerking motions. It is almost as though some tendon, some little gnawed bone inside his body suddenly gives way, and immediately thereafter his torso falls a few fractions of an inch farther over on its side. From time to time, without his opening his eyes, an unconscious reflex causes him to shift more of his weight onto his elbow, whereupon his torso assumes a slightly more upright posture, in an effort to regain its position of a moment before. But then, as though exhausted by the effort expended, it slumps over even farther. At the point of intersection of the two avenues at the lower end of the park, the black man with the orange hair continues to pace back and forth, talking to himself, halting in his tracks and then taking off again. In the long hall with the walls covered with plaster moldings painted a uniform ocher color where the light from outside never penetrates, the ashtrays overflowing with cigarette stubs and the increasingly disorderly alignment

of the blotters and the pads of paper placed in front of each of the delegates are the only indications of the time that has passed. Sexto (Sixth): la complicidad de ciertos escritores (the complicity of certain writers), famosos o a punto de dejar de serlo (long famous or on the point of no longer being so) que por razones fáciles de explicar (who for reasons that are easily explainable) han abandonado (have abandoned) el papel que antes representaban (the role they once upheld), el de vanguardia y conciencia moral (that of an avant-garde and a moral consciouness) de las fuerzas auténticas (aware of the real forces) que se proponen a corto o largo plazo (that will sooner or later permit us) edificar desde nuevas bases (to establish new foundations on which to build) las organizaciones políticas de nuestros pueblos (the political structures of our peoples). Siete (Seventh) . . . The airplane is now flying over a dry, barren, ocher-colored desert coast, bordered by the thin line of foam formed by the ocean waves as they break on the shore. From the altitude at which the plane is flying, the white border separating the two elements, earth and water, like an overcast seam, is apparently motionless, as are the parallel ripples that streak the immense expanse of blue that stretches as far as the eye can see, as frozen, as petrified as the burnt cliffs, the deserted beaches, the mouths of rivers of sand without the slightest glinting reflection of water. Low rocky crags, more like crusts than mountain peaks, jut out from the tops of long gray dunes shaped like cuttlebone, all lying along the same axis, having doubtless been piled up around some obstacle in the path of winds that have been blowing for centuries. As far as the eye can see, there is not a single city or field or hamlet or human habitation. Only a thin line, almost as straight as a string, stretches out to infinity, a short distance inland and approximately parallel to the general direction of the shoreline, occasionally curving slightly as it passes around a dune too high for it to cross, then again following the same absolutely straight course, apparently coming from nowhere and leading nowhere, across the sunbaked rocks, the vast stretches of sand, the terrifying naked expanses the color of sulfur, iron, or rust. Their faded uniforms hang in shreds from their fright-

fully emaciated bodies, like useless, filthy rags. From time to time a lieutenant halts alongside the path and counts them as they pass by. They slowly straggle past him one by one, and as he waits for the next one to come by his pensive gaze follows the staggering silhouette now disappearing in the distance. Their tattered rags reveal their burned skin, baked a dark earthen color, beneath which each tendon, each muscle, and each bone stand out as in *écorché* anatomical drawings. From the back one can thus see: A: the Levator Scapulae. B: the Scapula stripped of its muscles, except for the Depressor Scapulae. C: the Depressor Scapulae. D: Portion of the Serratus. E: the Iliocostalis Lumborum, running from the lower Ribs to the Ilium. F: Spinous Process of the Vertebral Column, extending from the posterior part of the Os Sacrum along the entire length of the Spine to the Neck. G: Sacrum, forming the dorsal wall of the Pelvis, running beneath the Spinous Process as far as the Twelfth Dorsal Vertebra. H: Portion of the Transverse Process. I: The Ribs. K: Long Extensor of the Elbow. L: Tendon of the Short Extensor of the Elbow. M: Humerus. N: Elbow Joint. O: Radius, with several ligaments, without their fleshy covering on the outer side. P: Greater Trochanter. Q: Portion of the Vastus Externus. R: Triceps. S: Portion of the Semitendinosus. T: one of the Flexors of the Toes. V: Flexor Digitorum Longus. X: Gemellus, Superior and Inferior, and Soleus. Y: Scapula stripped of all its muscles. Z: Humerus. *a*: Tibia stripped of flesh. *b*: the bone called the Fibula, also stripped of flesh. *c*, *d*: Other Extensors of the Foot. Because they are sick or wounded or improperly fed, or perhaps simply to serve as food themselves, the pack mules have had to be destroyed one after the other, and the leader of the troop of soldiers is himself proceeding on foot, with the aid of a walking slick, his damascened helmet, his Toledo steel sword, and his rust-pitted pistols dangling at his side and rattling like pots banging together. Between the short blond beard that covers his cheeks and his hair that is too long, his eyes have the feverish gleam of an indomitable force of will. The path they have followed is strewn with the cut-up carcasses of abandoned mules, the flesh of which is immediately devoured by ants.

Beneath the reddish swarm, bones the color of ivory, ribcages, skulls with long yellow teeth soon appear. In a very short time, the grass, the lianas, the luxuriant vegetation take possession of them, creeping into the interstices, the cavities, the empty eyesockets, curling around the still-stinking bones. The soldiers no longer even turn around when one of their number halts in his tracks and collapses, they no longer dig a grave for him, no longer mark it with a mound of earth or a cross, no longer utter prayers for him. Those who still have enough strength left pick up the weapon of this or that dying man as they pass by, and he sees them disappear in the distance, losing themselves in the green gaps in the vegetation, the last man in the column bent over double and limping along beneath the weight of his double load of rifles or submachine guns with their greasy, funereal black barrels. Sometimes the invisible enemies following them come upon him. He can then see their cruel, indolent faces bending over him, their thick upper lips that hang down over their lower lips, and their oily hair. Although their uniforms too are sweat-soaked, there is not a single tear in them and they are tightly buttoned up to the neck, as provided by the regulations for military dress. After having tortured him, they finish him off with their long knives. At other times he is attacked by wild beasts whose blurred forms are scarcely identifiable in his delirium, resembling the fantastic creatures born of the imagination of some painter. Occasionally the miniaturists whose works are housed in the museum paint animals whose characteristic features do not correspond to any known species. We believe this to be true of this cockatoo whose pink crest appears to be an anomaly. In order to identify this bird with the gray and saffron-colored plumage with any degree of certainty it would be necessary to examine its physical remains. It has proved impossible to locate them in the museum's collections. Terrified by the discovery of monstrous creatures of shapes and dimensions unknown in our own climes, explorers brought back drawings and descriptions of them that are often sheer products of their imagination. Certain of these creatures, for instance, have the tail of a fish, a body covered with scales, dragon's feet, and a horse's head.

Others have a horse's body and a man's torso. Still others have a bird's talons, a bear's claws, and an eagle's wings. A person who does not believe in the supernatural is incapable of understanding Columbus, according to Count Roselly de Longues, the postulator of the Cause before the Congregation of Sacred Rites. Jumbled together with the gods with bulls' heads, the rams with dragons' tails, the crabs with giant pincers, the scorpions, the bicephalous vultures, the peacocks covered with eyes, they slowly wheel round and round, invisible in the pale sky. Below the plane a reddish haze, wispy and transparent at first and then gradually growing thicker, little by little blends the desert and the ocean into one and the same indistinct gray monochrome, in which from time to time the thin piped edging of foam that separates them appears again, disappears, reappears once more, becomes blotched out altogether, and then abruptly emerges again, very close now and moving, alternately advancing and retreating, like streams of saliva, over the dark brown sand along the shoreline of the bile-colored ocean, bouncing off the stripped hull of a boat that has been beached on the strand at an oblique angle. Indistinguishable at first from the ground that it is built on, its huts of dried mud the same color as the gray-ocher earth, a city slowly looms up before the eyes of the passengers leaning over to look out the windows of the plane. The one-story houses are square, with no roofs except a thatch of reeds or sheets of corrugated tin held in place by stones, all of them of approximately the same size, each of them hugging its neighbor, or sometimes separated from the adjoining dwelling by a tiny courtyard. The city as a whole looks like an immense earthen checkerboard rising out of the soil itself, or rather, as though the ground had been hollowed out into regular-shaped cells by some species of burrowing creature that cohabits with its kind in a permanent colony. As the plane makes its landing approach, one can see the bell towers of a number of whitewashed churches, and farther in the distance, the vertical geometric shapes of several skyscrapers. Beneath a lowering gray sky, a regiment drawn up in a square is trooping the colors in honor of a group of officers heading toward a military plane whose fuselage and wings are painted a

dull green. As the airliner which has just landed brakes slowly to a stop along the cement runway, its passengers can see the brass instruments of the drum and bugle corps and the bright yellow reflections regularly playing over the cymbals being rhythmically struck together. The noise from the jet engines prevents them from hearing the music, but the movements of the bandleader's arm and the little lead soldiers of the honor guard goosestepping past the officers gathered at the foot of the stairway leading to the plane mark the beat of the inaudible music. The drab city, the bell towers, and the skyscrapers are now hidden behind the airport buildings, the tallest of which is a quadrangular tower painted yellow with broad plate-glass windows running all around the top. With its jet engines whining, the airplane turns down a taxiway to reach the ramp. The musicians in the drum and bugle corps have ceased to move. The honor guard is now motionless. At the foot of the stairway leading to the military aircraft, the officers are standing stiffly at attention, returning the salutes of the honor guard. Holding in his hand the rectangle of yellow plastic material that he was given as he left the plane, he walks down a long corridor with a gleaming tile floor that reflects back the sound of the clacking heels of the other passengers. The corridor leads to a large main lobby. Sitting in black leather seats with feet of chromed metal, a small number of waiting passengers are reading newspapers, smoking, or having their shoes shined by youngsters with oily black hair. Behind a counter where two men with green armbands are standing is a map of the country on which the principal tourist attractions are indicated by means of little red disks, alongside each of which is a large photo showing either a baroque church, or snow-covered mountain peaks, or ruins of cyclopean walls half-hidden amid luxuriant vegetation. The band suddenly strikes up once again outside, and the sound of bugles blaring and cymbals being struck together is heard once more. The airplane with the camouflage paint job slowly begins to move toward the takeoff runways. It was not until the nineteenth century that the cyclopean language inherent in the formidable forgotten monuments of the civilizations of America began to attract attention. At the dawn of the cen-

ture, pioneer explorers began to hack and chop away with their axes and picks the dense virgin forests surrounding a few of these sleeping giants, thus affording us a new perspective of these pyramidal temples, enabling us to examine them in detail and plot their contours. The largest of these huge constructions contains 366 large niches and 12 small ones, which apparently served to house idols. These monuments are not tombs. Now that he is sitting down, the tall buildings around him have stopped drifting through space. Presenting unbroken vertical faces, or sometimes constructed of cubes of decreasing size placed one atop the other like the steps of giant pyramids, these geometric masses tower upward into the pale haze. Their walls are pierced with thousands of windows laid out in regular rows, as small as little dots on the highest floors and impossible to count. As the eye descends, the spaces between them grow larger and they become more distinct. Piled row upon row, they add up to a fantastic figure. As one's gaze descends to the lower floors, letters forming the names of companies and advertising slogans appear, one per window at times, running from one end of a façade to the other. At the very bottom are the word: **THE WORLD'S LARGEST STORE**, in letters several stories high. These enormous characters are outlined in red, their vertical lines and rounded loops bordered with strings of electric bulbs that remain turned on even in broad daylight. As though the giant size of the letters, their red borders, and the lights were still not enough to attract attention, a switching mechanism regulates the flow of current into each of the bulbs, causing them to wink on and off successively, so that a procession of twinkling little globules keeps endlessly running along the entire length of the slogan above the bench on which the man with the red beard has now totally collapsed. His torso is stretched out horizontally, resting on its left side, its weight crushing his bent left arm, his half-open left hand dangling down over the edge of the bench, his right arm resting on his right side, with his clenched right fist just a little lower than his hip joint, his two legs (which have shifted position along an axis symmetrical to that of his torso as he has gradually pivoted on his hip-his entire body tending to slide downward

into a reclining position) spread apart, describing two slightly divergent curves descending from his pelvis to his sockless feet in shoes without laces, only the heels of which are resting on the cement pavement. His light green shirt is unbuttoned to the waist, baring his hairy chest. His head, the top of which is now resting on the slats of the bench, is tilted at an oblique angle and the sun is illuminating it in a manner reminiscent of theater footlights which reverse the usual disposition of areas of light and shadow on the faces of the actors onstage, highlighting the upper lip, the base of the nose, the ridge of the brow above the eye. From time to time, without his waking up, his right hand rises in a mechanical motion, lifts up one tail of his shirt and scratches his right side, thus revealing a patch of pasty white skin. The woman with the feather-plumed toque, glasses with round lenses mounted in gold frames, and white gloves is still seated on the second bench, as though in a drawing room, alongside the student who is still absorbed in his reading. The two young girls fold up their paper sack, licking their fingers one after the other and then wiping them on their handkerchiefs. Beneath the bench on which they are sitting, two pigeons are pecking at the crumbs the girls have dropped while consuming their repast, and then, following one after the other, their plump breasts jutting out, they cross the cement paving of the square, making unpredictable detours as they head for the bench on which he himself is seated. Once having reached his feet they fly away, even though he has not made the slightest move. He looks down between his two bare feet at the green, red, brown, ocher, and blue-gray pattern in the shape of hexagonal crabs bristling with legs, claws, or curving antennae. The border of the rug is decorated with a running pattern of broad tridents, like little stylized trees, in colors matching those of the hexagons, standing out against a white background. Beyond the border of the rug he can see the bare waxed parquet floor, with the boards in each square laid out in chevrons, and then the floor of the hallway with parallel boards running lengthwise, the first stretch of which, immediately beyond the door of the bedroom, is in shadow, followed by a much paler chestnut-brown zone fanning out around the

door of the bathroom, which takes on a bright gold color where it reflects the patch of sunlight on the wall, and then is again followed by a section in shadow, which gradually grows lighter and lighter as it approaches the kitchen door, at the threshold of which the black and white square tiles begin, their diagonals running along the same axis as the hallway, so that from this perspective they take on the appearance of lozenges whose points meet. The tip of one of the woman's bare feet is lying just inside a white lozenge, her other foot is entirely within a black lozenge, her legs are joined, the bottom of the bath towel is cutting off her body horizontally at the level of her thighs, her left hand is still holding one end of the towel just below her right armpit, the hand holding the cup has been lowered and the rim of the latter is at present level with her breasts: the woman's entire face is now visible. He says Not ever, you mean then? In order to stretch his legs, he wanders aimlessly about the vast half-empty lobby with the polished marble floor and the black leather armchairs. Outside the platoons drawn up in a square leave their places one after the other and the soldiers march off in cadence with their weapons now slung over their shoulders. The musicians in the drum and bugle corps put their instruments away in khaki bags and also leave the boarding area, which is now empty except for two or three aircraft belonging to domestic lines and his own plane, standing motionless at the end of the ramp with mechanics in overalls, who have driven up in little yellow vehicles clustered around it, hard at work on it. He realizes that he is still holding the plastic rectangle in his hand. He looks down at it and reads the word TRANSITO above a number consisting of three figures. He finally slips it into the pocket of his suit coat. In one of the corners of the lobby are several counters behind which a number of salesgirls are stationed, girls such as one sees in fashionable boutiques in every country around the globe, standard models despite their shiny black hair pulled back severely in a bun and the tinkling earrings dangling from their earlobes. The same tourist souvenirs are on display in each of the stalls, mainly brooches and pendants in white or gilded metal imitating native jewelry, each repeating, with slight varia-

tions in detail or setting, the same face in bas-relief, shown either in profile with its almond eye, its prominent nose, its mouth with the drooping corners, or else in full face, with its lips drawn back in a hideous grin, baring all its teeth, and its tongue hanging out. In either case its head is surmounted by a crown of stylized feathers curving downward like a bishop's crook and spread out like ostrich plumes, its ears being ornamented with pendants made of disks or, rather, flat stones with a hole in the middle, in the center of which is suspended a little moving piece, like the flattened clapper of a bell. Three-stranded necklaces hang down over its chest, their outer edges decorated with regularly spaced protuberances which make them look like gear teeth. The masks are surrounded by heads of animals, birds, serpents, jaguars, all also stylized, with cruel expressions, sharp beaks, pointed teeth, and decorated with abstract geometrical ornaments such as triangles or squares, or sometimes with rows of pearls. Two elderly American ladies are standing next to one of the displays conversing in English with the salesgirl, and one of them is trying on a silver pendant in front of a mirror to see how it looks against the wattled, reddish skin above the low-cut neckline of her dress. Wearing white painted helmets, khaki uniforms and short-laced boots, two soldiers (or two policemen?) are nonchalantly strolling along side by side, with a black rubber truncheon hanging by a strap from their wrists. A pistol holder fastened to their belts by a long thong dangles at their sides. Their indolent, cruel-looking, impassive faces are an earthen color, their eyes look like two slits between their half-closed eyelids, they have high, prominent cheekbones, and their upper lip hangs down over their lower lip. The handles of their pistols, decorated with cross-hatches, and a few inches of the black, oily steel of the barrels can be seen peeking out of the holsters. With his thick blond beard eating into its contours, the face of the leader of the column looks surprisingly white, either because of the fact that the photo has been overdeveloped, or because he belongs to that breed of men of Castilian origin whose skin apparently never becomes sunburned and stubbornly remains a pale, even a pasty, white. To judge from what one can see of

his features, one would be tempted to say that his face has an almost feminine softness, or even a weakness, about it, were it not for the fact that such an interpretation is belied by the rugged surroundings through which he is laboriously making his way, the weariness that is tautening the skin over his bones, the fierce, indomitable strength of will evident in his gaze, the awesome effort this long march represents, and the state of exhaustion of the troops that are following him. He is leaning on a simple cane, like a person strolling in the park of a health resort where he is taking the waters, and although his uniform too is now reduced to rags and tatters, he has lost none of his dignity, and, apparently, none of his strength, as is evidenced by the fact that the burden that he is carrying is extremely heavy, consisting of two automatic machine pistols, the straps of which form an X across his chest, plus several fully loaded cartridge belts slung around his waist. Nonetheless, something about his appearance and his bearing—perhaps precisely his exaggerated air of unshakeable resolve, his calmly defiant expression—suggest that he already knows (and perhaps already knew when he started out?) that he will never reach the end of his expedition, the goal which he has set for himself, and that he will remain there forever, bogged down in the rotting humus of the forest, a man beaten but unbowed, an indomitable man standing there amid the black smudges of printer's ink in this rectangle bordered in black, like a death notice, on the page of movie ads. The young male lead folds the paper he has just finished reading aloud and slips it into his pocket. Then he pushes his chair back and heads for the exit, followed by three or four other delegates who have been sitting alongside him. Some of the public spectators sitting on the chairs set up along the walls in concentric rows like layers of an onion burst into applause. The little chairman watches them file out of the hall, his expression still one of stunned surprise and disbelief. At this moment one of the persons standing behind him leans over and taps him discreetly on the shoulder. The chairman thereupon suddenly appears to come to his senses, turns around, and grabs the sheet of paper being held out to him. Pulling his glasses down over his eyes again, he begins to read it,

paying no attention to the hum of conversation that has arisen as people exchange comments on the departure of the young male lead. When he has finished perusing the sheet of paper, he presses a buzzer. The conversations cease. Tapping the piece of paper he is holding in his hand with the index finger of his other hand, he says: Se me ha sometido una proposición (A proposal has been submitted to me) del compañero . . . (by our comrade . . .) He halts in mid-sentence, and with a quizzical expression on his face, turns around toward the person standing behind him, whereupon the latter leans over and whispers in his ear. The chairman nods his head and goes on: del compañero Miguel Angel Blásquez (by our comrade Miguel Angel Blásquez), que sugiere (who suggests) de pasar inmediatamente (that we proceed immediately) a la discusión de los otros párrafos de la resolución (to a discussion of the other paragraphs of the resolution), dejando provisoriamente de lado (postponing for the time being) la redacción del párrafo cuatro (the drafting of the final text of paragraph four). En lo que a mi se refiere (As far as I personally am concerned) . . . At the same time that it has descended the wall of the bathroom, the rectangular patch of sunlight has become distorted, its two vertical edges having moved closer together while the parallel upper and lower edges have tilted at an angle, the diagonal joining the lower left corner to the upper right corner having grown longer and the other diagonal shorter. The figure is thus tending to become a lozenge. The woman is still standing in the same spot. They are gazing into each other's eyes. He repeats: Not ever, you mean? Not ever? . . . She again shakes her head, pivoting it a short distance from left to right and back two times. Then her lips move. She says: We have always known that. He says No. She says Yes. We knew it from the very beginning. We have known it all this past night. The sun has reappeared and there is not a single cloud in the sky. Following the yellowish coastline, the airplane is again flying above the ocean with its motionless ripples. The desert looks exactly the same as the one stretching out below the gray sky as the plane approached the dry, sere city. Or perhaps it is just a bit more sandy and the long dunes in the form of a cuttlebone that

the wind piles up around a few rocky outcroppings, all of them lying along the same axis, are perhaps just a bit broader. Nonetheless they must not be very high, for the thin rectilinear line formed by the road that again stretches to infinity amid the arid desolation runs straight across them, without curving to go around them, it doubtless having proved easier simply to make it run slightly upward for a short way and then slightly downward. The white overcast seam connecting the mineral desert and the desert of water is also motionless once again. The eye cannot discern the movement of the tossing waves or that of the foam spreading out over the sand on the shore or breaking against the sunbaked rocks. Not a single ship is visible on the ocean, not a single glint of sunlight to be seen reflecting off a windshield or a car body to indicate the presence of a vehicle traveling along the road. Several new passengers have boarded the plane and are sitting in the seats of those who have gotten off at the last stop. Their relaxed faces, their vivacity form a sharp contrast to the drawn faces and the bloodshot eyes and reddened eyelids of the others. The plane crew has also been replaced by another one. A few moments before, a black man dressed in a light gray polo shirt and pants of a darker shade of gray has sat down on the other end of the bench that he is sitting on. The thick black hair covering his round head has been cropped very short. It is only the color of his skin that distinguished him from a European, for he has the latter's straight, slightly flattened nose and almost thin lips. Molded in plaster, his face would resemble those heads of Carthaginian or perhaps Nubian gladiators seen in Roman mosaics. His entire person gives off an aura of contained strength, like the bodies of large felines or of pugilists in repose. His two hands with rosy brick-colored palms are clasped together on the thigh of his right leg, which is crossed over his left leg. The movements of his right foot as he swings it rapidly up and down from time to time, as well as the rapid changes in position of his head, which he abruptly turns to one side or the other, are in sharp contrast to his stolid expression, his massive bulk, and the sound of his powerful bass voice that can easily be heard above the noise of the traffic, even without his shouting, as he sud-

denly addresses abusive remarks to one or another of the persons sitting on the benches or crossing the square. His tone of voice, moreover, is brusque, haughty, and insolent, and would even seem positively hostile were it not for the fact that there is nothing threatening about his bearing and the fact that his body is absolutely motionless except for the foot that keeps jerking up and down. Despite the power of his vocal organs, his rapid, staccato delivery amid the rumble of passing vehicles prevents one from understanding the meaning of the words he is speaking, which may well be sarcastic or derisive, for his gleaming white teeth are visible from time to time as his lips part in a sort of smile. It is therefore conceivable that he bears no personal grudge against those whom he is staring at in this manner, and that he is content simply to address his remarks in the general direction of one or another of them. The contrary is also possible. The people to whom he appears to be speaking, principally those who are sitting on the benches in the row across from him, glance at him for a moment, then avert their eyes. The black man with the orange hair who is still pacing back and forth, waving his arms wildly, halts, and interrupting his soliloquy, stares fixedly at him. For a few seconds, as the other man, still sitting on the other end of the bench in his nonchalant pose, heaps abuse on him in his bass voice, he stands there nonplused, with an expression of vague disbelief on his face. Then without replying, he suddenly seems to lose all interest in him and begins pacing back and forth again, raising and lowering his right arm with the same brusque, mechanical gesture each time he takes off again after halting for a moment. The proconsul pounds his fist to emphasize each phrase . . . porque, como lo he dicho (because, as I have already stated), es manifiestamente inútil (it is obviously useless), de comenzar el examen del programa de este Encuentro (to undertake to examine the other points on the agenda of this conference) si para empezar y antes de tratar cualquier otro punto (if before taking up any of the other subjects) no logramos ponernos de acuerdo (we are unable to reach agreement) en una definición Clara y sin ninguna ambigüedad (on a clear and unambiguous definition) de la actividad y de la función

social del escritor (of the proper activity and the social function of the writer)! In the timeless light of the neon tubes, the facial features of the delegates seated on both sides of the long table are beginning to look haggard and drawn with fatigue. It must doubtless be late in the evening, for the attendants who have entered the hall from time to time to empty the ashtrays and refill the water carafes have long since ceased to appear. A number of them are empty. The delegates are obliged at times to get up from their seats to go and borrow from one of their neighbors along the table one of the carafes half-filled with water that is now lukewarm and of a consistency that seems viscous to their palates parched by cigarette or cigar smoke. In order to stub their cigars or cigarettes out in the bottom of the ashtray, it is necessary to move the butts filling them to one side, and some of them fall on the green carpet now strewn with flakes of ashes. The little chairman has pushed his glasses back up over his forehead and partway past his hairline, thus giving his tired face the look of a drawn mask, like that of aging bicycle racers as they arrive at the finish line. Si comprobamos que somos incapaces (Should we find ourselves incapable) de ir más allá de esta condición previa básica (of resolving our differences with regard to this basic premise), entonces cualquiera discusión sobre tal o cual punto secundario es perfectamente inútil (then any sort of discussion with regard to one or another of the secondary points is absolutely useless), y, en lo que a mi se refiere, creo que en esas condiciones (and it is my own personal opinion that in such a case) la única conclusión lógica sería de redactar un acta (the only logical solution would be to draft a statement) que consign nuestro desacuerdo (formally attesting to our disagreement) y ponga el punto final a esta reunión (and putting an end to this conference)! The blue expanse streaked with parallel ripples stretches out endlessly between the coastline and the airplane, whose course, forming an acute angle with the shore, is gradually taking it farther and farther out to sea. Already the fringe of foam is barely visible. The desert has become a yellowish band, beyond which the tall range of mountains stands out in profile. The two young girls have now finished putting their things

back in the sack. One of them lightly brushes her skirt to remove the crumbs from it. Holding a ball of crumpled paper in her hand, the other one looks around for a refuse container in which to dispose of it. Failing to see one, she bends down and thrusts the crumpled ball of paper underneath the bench, whereupon she goes to the further trouble of stamping on it to flatten it. The moment she ceases stepping on it, it begins to unfold, rapidly at first, and then continuing to open either in a slow continuous motion or in imperceptible abrupt, jerky motions, like buds or flowers bursting into bloom which have been filmed in such a way that the process is speeded up when projected on the screen. The doctor has concluded his remarks concerning the prescription. He then folds it in two and stretches his arm across the desk in order to place it in front of the sick man. As the latter in turn takes several bills out of his pocket and lays them on the desk, the dihedron formed by the prescription begins to unfold slightly. The doctor appears not to notice the bills with complicated designs engraved on them, the overall tone of which is a vague orange color. The bills, which have had the same folds for some time, do not open. Only one of them, which was folded in four, forms a straight-sided dihedron, one of those whose surfaces is lying flat on the desk top covered in olive-green leather with a gold border. The doctor rises to his feet and stretches one of his arms out in the direction of the door. The lady in the candy-pink dress pulls on one of her long white gloves, rises to her feet, and clutching her white leather bag in her hand, heads for the exit of the square. The black man with the head of a gladiator takes a round flat object out of his pocket and cups it in the palm of his hand. He says something slowly in his deep bass voice as he stares at it, holding it at eye level, then raises it to his lips and suddenly kisses it two or three times. As he reaches down to put it back in his pocket, his hand misses the opening of the pocket or the object catches on the edge of it and falls to the ground, whereupon a brief glint of light is reflected upward from it. It is a cheap little pocket mirror, approximately three inches in diameter. The back of the mirror is decorated with a photograph of a naked woman printed on a bright pink piece of paper (or

a sheet of plastic material). He wipes first the back of the mirror and then the front of it with the bottom of his sleeve, and before putting it back into his pocket he speaks to it and touches it to his lips once more. As his broad hand completely conceals the object, it is impossible to determine whether he is kissing his own reflected image or the naked woman, or to make out which of the two faces he is speaking to. Both the traffic along the avenue and the crowd walking back and forth along the sidewalk below the letters reading THE WORLD'S LARGEST STORE are still as dense as before. The bright flashing light bulbs winking on and off in succession continue to chase each other round and round inside the edges of the bulging curves and the straight legs of the giant painted letters. Perhaps their glow is slightly brighter now. The pale light bathing the tall façades of the skyscrapers has not changed perceptibly, however, and it is only the same faint difference in color as before (either pale blue or pale lemon yellow), rather than their intensity, that allows the eye to differentiate between those of their planes in shadow and those in sunlight. On the wall of the bathroom the geometrical patch of sunlight is becoming more and more elongated along one of its diagonals, thus tending more and more to assume the form of a lozenge, but in this case as well it is difficult to determine with any appreciable accuracy the rate at which the process of distortion is taking place, for the changes in angle are so infinitesimal as to be immeasurable. When he rises to his feet and starts walking in the direction of the exit of the square, he can once again hear behind his back the powerful voice of the black man, whose head is doubtless turned in his direction. The man is apparently shouting something to him, but he does not turn around. Once he has gone through the iron gate he again finds himself at the intersection of the two avenues that cut across each other, forming an X, and the street crossing both of them at their point of intersection, at right angles to one of them. He thus sees the deep trench of the street, narrower than those formed by the avenues, again stretching out before him, continuing on in a straight unbroken line for several miles until it finally reaches the river, and at the very end of it, the three tall chimneys with

alternate red and white horizontal stripes running around them near their tops. After the more open space at the intersection, the long corridor seems even more confining than before and the neon signs gleam with a decidedly brighter pink and red glow than the luminous letters of the giant department store. As along the stretch before the intersection, the street is lined on either side by a succession of buildings of every description, façades of buildings of average height, of skyscrapers, or of houses three or four stories high at most, interspersed with demolition and construction sites at random intervals, and here too there are elegant shops with large plate-glass show windows set in steel frames and little old-fashioned rundown shops with merchandise on display, or rather simply unpacked and piled up on the shelves with no effort having been made to arrange it in any sort of orderly or attractive way. Among the chaotic profusion of signs, seen once again in enfilade, straddling each other and piled one atop the other, his eye immediately searches for the marquee of his hotel, the flat parallelepiped of frosted glass and chromed metal overhanging the sidewalk that is now only a short distance away. Very soon, however, he experiences the same dizzy feeling that has previously forced him to stop and sit down on the bench in the square, his physical surroundings again beginning to drift in space and teeter back and forth. The sidewalk he is walking along is covered with a thick layer of that same grayish material (which, even though it is lukewarm, has a consistency similar to that of snow) that has accumulated little by little in the doctor's waiting room. Since it has now risen to the level of his knees, it makes it difficult for him to proceed and each step he takes requires an effort that causes him to more or less lose his balance, like someone who has become stuck fast in a quagmire or whose ankles have been fettered. Although he is still doing his best to keep a calm expression on his face and to walk along in a straight line, he is doubtless staggering a bit despite himself, for as his gaze meets that of pedestrians passing by in the opposite direction he can glimpse in their eyes a sort of brief glimmer of surprise, and occasionally disapproval, before they turn away indifferently. The large number of bars, with an even

greater profusion of signs outside them, along this stretch of the street may perhaps serve in their minds to explain what may very well strike them as an odd gait and a peculiar look on his face. As if it too had been waiting for him to start walking again, the sweat has again begun to trickle out of his pores and run down his back, between his shoulder blades, and along his sides. The few survivors who are making their way through the forest no longer constitute what may properly be called a troop on the march. They straggle along in a ragged line, separated at times by considerable distances, plodding along one by one or in groups of two or three who are helping each other along. Nothing now remains to indicate that they are soldiers or men capable of doing battle, except perhaps to defend their own individual lives, for they have abandoned every one of their weapons that are at all heavy and have kept only their light carbines or sometimes merely a pistol. Even the leader's chest now has only one leather strap slung across it. From time to time he halts, turns around, and waits for the staggering, emaciated, nearly naked silhouettes straggling along behind him to catch up with him, growing larger and more distinct as they come closer. As they advance one can make out, little by little, in front view: A: the anterior surface of the Shoulder. B: the Humerus, stripped of flesh. C: one of the Flexors of the Elbow. D: the Brachialis Antichus, arising at approximately the midpoint of the Humerus, and firmly attached to it, inserted into the Ulna by a large Tendon above the Biceps. E: the Long Supinator of the Radius. F: the Round Pronator of the Radius. GH: the Flexors of the Fingers. I: the Serratus Magnus. K: the Rectus. L: the Transverse Ligament (crossing between the Greater and Lesser Tubercles of the Humerus). M: the Sternum. P: the Elbow joint, stripped of its muscles. Q: the Radius. R: the Vastus Externus. S: the Vastus Internus. T: the Crural Ligament (attached to the Femur as the Brachialis Antichus is attached to the Humerus: arising between the two Trochanters and surrounding the Patella, forming a single Tendon with the Rectus and the two Vasti). U: the Triceps. X: the Greater Trochanter. Y: Portion of the Tendon of the Vastus Externus. Z: Portion of the Tendon of the Rectus. *a, b, c*: Extensors of

the Toes. *d*: the Tibia stripped of its muscles. *e, f*: Flexors of the Toes. The first men to catch up with the leader immediately sink to the ground and sit there not saying a word, or occasionally lie there stretched out full length. When they have regained their strength a bit, they gather their filthy rags about their limbs as best they can and scratch their skins covered with crusts and suppurating red or pink sores. Certain insects, certain almost invisible larvae creep into the orifices of their bodies, their nostrils, their tear ducts, their anuses or urethrae, ascend these hollow channels, and settle in the tissues, causing internal abscesses and intolerable pain and occasionally blindness. Others imbed themselves between the toes, gorging themselves with blood until they have entirely filled the gray sacklike pocket constituting their bodies. Totally absorbed in picking the parasites off their bodies or caring for their wounds, the men no longer pay any attention to their leader's words as he endeavors to restore their confidence. He then unfolds a rough map which he carefully spreads out flat and closely scrutinizes, trying to orient himself. The map has been folded in four, and along the four folds the paper has become soaked with sweat or with moisture from the air and cracked, so that it now consists of a series of rectangles held together only at a few points where the paper is still intact but is threatening to split apart at any moment. On this sort of checkerboard with yellowed squares, wobbly lines that look as though they had been traced by a feeble hand indicate the courses of rivers and the orientation of the ranges of hills, but vast expanses of it bear no markings whatsoever, and all that can be seen on the parchment are spots of moisture with puffy contours, like the coasts of islands or continents. Occasionally the leader calls one of the native porters over to him, and the man leans over, his face contorted in a frown as he struggles in vain to understand the meaning of the patterns formed by the wobbly lines. Then after having folded the map back up and put it away, the leader counts the men sprawled out on the ground in one brief glance. Each time they halt to rest there are fewer of them. He continues to wait patiently, his eyes gazing as far as he can see down the path that they have taken, where nothing is stir-

ring now except a few bright-colored patches of hovering butterflies. After a moment he decides not to wait any longer, gives the signal to begin moving on again, and strides off without turning around. The men rise to their feet one by one and the staggering band of emaciated bodies makes its way onward. Soon the spaces between them again grow larger, but like their leader none of them turns his head around to look behind him. On the green baize tabletop irregular pale gray coronas now surround the ashtrays overflowing with snuffed-out cigars and cigarettes. A horizontal, clean-edged, slightly wavy, wispy cloud of smoke lies motionless in the vast hall above the heads of the delegates, almost all of whom are now in their shirt sleeves, their collars opened wide, the knots of their ties midway down their chests. They are sitting in their chairs in relaxed poses, or not even bothering to keep up appearances, some of them leaning backwards with their parted legs stretched out underneath the table, and others slumped over, resting their foreheads on one hand. Paying no attention to the speaker, some of them have moved their chairs together, forming a circle, sitting there in little groups indifferently shaking the ash of their cigars off onto the floor. Certain others, however, are continuing to scribble furiously, filling page after page with black lines, crossing many of them out, and then handing the sheets of paper back and forth across the table. Almost all of the observers have left, except for a small number of journalists who would appear to have given up taking notes. The delegate who has the floor at this point is a woman. Her dark hair is cut in a Dutch bob, and she is wearing a prim starched white collar resembling that of a schoolgirl's uniform and a red foulard with white polka dots tied in a big bouffant bow. Her red manicured fingernails are filed in almond-shaped ovals. Her discreetly but carefully made-up face, which is almost masculine and has long since lost its youthful bloom, forms an incongruous contrast with her schoolgirlish getup. As she speaks she nervously taps the sheets of paper spread out in front of her with the cap of her pen. Por lo que a mi me concierne (As far as I personally am concerned), estoy dispuesta a votar (I am ready to cast my vote in favor of) el texto del párrafo cuatro propuesto inicial-

mente por el Grupo de Trabajo (the text of paragraph four originally proposed by the Working Committee), es decir (that is to say) . . . She stops in mid-sentence and fumbles through the pile of papers in front of her. A number of delegates follow her example and do likewise. The majority of them, however, do not even bother. She picks up one sheet of paper, discovers that it is not the one she wants, puts it back down, picks up another one, and begins to read it aloud: El escritor se define políticamente (The writer defines himself politically) . . . The Roman proconsul, who has now also rolled up his shirt sleeves and is lolling back in his chair, removes the fat cigar that he has been chewing from between his lips and says in his deep voice: ¡Está bien, está bien! Lo conocemos todos: proposición número uno. (Never mind! Never mind! We're all familiar with it: proposal number one). The overage schoolgirl stops, nonplused, and scowls fiercely at him. ¡Está bien! ¡Continúe! the proconsul says. Es inútil de leer una vez más esta proposición. Es el número uno. ¡Está bien, está bien! ¿Y en seguida? (Never mind! Never mind! There's no point in reading that proposal again. It's number one. All right, all right! So what?) Several delegates around the table second the proconsul, though they do so listlessly, as though merely showing their approval or disapproval now requires an effort that is beyond the limits of their strength. The proconsul smiles at the female delegate, as though to apologize, points with his finger to the dial of the wrist watch circling his huge hairy wrist and says Si continuamos así, estaremos aún aquí a las cinco de la mañana . . . (If we go on like this, we'll still be here at five o'clock in the morning . . .) Rigid with anger, the woman continues to scowl at him for a moment, and then suddenly pivots her entire body around toward the little chairman, and forgetting that she has a microphone in front of her, shouts at the top of her lungs ¡Señor Presidente! Beneath the airplane there is now nothing but the solid-colored, faintly rippling surface of the ocean. Far in the distance, on the side of the plane where the coast has previously been visible, all that can be seen now is a narrow, wavy, purplish-brown mountain ridge, the peaks of which stand out clearly against the pure blue sky. There is no apparent change in

the surface of the ocean or in the flattened silhouette of the mountains which would indicate that the plane is moving, and it appears to be hovering motionless above the immense blue expanse of water bordered by the narrow lilac-colored festoon. The dusty neon signs, whose red, pink, or occasionally green glow stands out against the gray background of the street, or against the black panels on which they have been mounted so that they will show up more plainly, seem to creep behind each other one by one and then reappear again a little farther on, like players of one of those children's games in which the first one in line steps two, three, four, or six paces backward, in accordance with the penalty levied against him or some secret rule, but then soon reappears at the head of the line as others in turn step backward, then again drops back as others take his place up front, and so on. WINES AND SPIRITS—SHOE REPAIRING—ARENA BAR—DANCE—WINES AND SPIRITS—SHINE WHILE "U" WAIT—BARBERSHOP—DRY CLEANING—WINES AND SPIRITS—CROWN BAR—KENTUCKY BAR—DIAMOND. The other end of the street which stops at the edge of the whitish fog over the ocean recedes as he advances. With the roar of a cataract or of some terrible disaster, the blood pulses into the mauve, pink, lilac, and purple vessels crisscrossing between the marbled organs or spreading out in branches beneath the transparent skin. From time to time the cry of the laughing bird, still the same one apparently, is heard again. Marshaling their every force of will to drag one foot after the other, the exhausted marchers no longer even give a start when every so often a snake or some other creature scampers away beneath their feet, paying no attention now to the animals inhabiting the forest unless they are large enough to serve as possible game to kill and eat. Often, amid the blinding spots of light dancing in front of their eyes, which are covered with pus or blurred from lack of sleep, they are no longer able to distinguish giant butterflies from certain birds. Both have incredible colors, incredible dimensions. Motionless and weightless in the dark green shadows, minuscule iridescent specks seem to hang suspended from invisible wires. Their wings flutter so rapidly that they form a fuzzy halo around their gently rounded bod-

ies covered with feathers the color of metals and minerals, bronze, emerald, topaz, ruby. Darting from one flower to the other, they again freeze in one spot, hovering motionless in midair in the same halo of rapidly fluttering wings as they plunge their long beaks in the deep chalices. Others, scarcely larger, have a slate-blue breast, an olive-green belly, chestnut-colored wings, a long forked steel-gray tail. Aerial acrobats, they constantly perform such daring stunts as stalls, chandelles, and nosedives. They suck the nectar of the flowers, but also catch a great many insects. Perched on a branch, they lie in wait and when a fly or a little butterfly passes within reach, they swoop down on their prey and fly off with it in their beaks. Like the crested cockatoo, they seem to be the products of the aberrant imagination of some painter. At the sight of them, as when they spy monstrous plants or giant serpents, some of the marchers, in their state of utter exhaustion, believe they are suffering from hallucinations and begin to rave deliriously. Their incoherent cries, their blasphemous outbursts, their recriminations die away in the heavy air trapped beneath the vault of the trees. Occasionally a fight breaks out or no apparent reason, assuming the form of insults pouring forth from toothless mouths, threatening gestures, feeble voices hoarsely croaking, dying away in a cough, a vomiting of blood, their arms and their cocked fists dropping listlessly back to their sides without a single blow having been struck. Tricked by an optical illusion, he leans to one side, stretches his arm out across the table, saying ¡Con su permiso!, and picks up the carafe in front of the delegate sitting on his right with an empty chair between the two of them. Only a thin trickle of water comes out of the neck of the carafe tilted above his glass, and it runs dry almost immediately. The interpreter offers to get him a beer from the bar. He politely refuses at first, and then says Yes, if you please, thank you very much, fumbling in his pocket for a bill, but the interpreter has already left. Casting furious glances in the direction of the proconsul from time to time, the woman delegate in the schoolgirlish getup, still turned facing the chairman, goes on with her voluble and vehement speech, mentioning among other things trumped-up debates, systematic obstruction of the

proceedings, deliberate dereliction of responsibilities, and ending with the threat to withdraw from the conference. At this point the little chairman, who has been peering at her over the top of his glasses with a distressed expression on his face as he listens to her, gives a vague wave of his hand which might be interpreted as a gesture of either encouragement, assent, or resignation. She then casts a triumphant glance in the direction of the proconsul, pulls the microphone closer, and says: Este es el texto inicial: el escritor se define politicamente en la medida que tiene existencia social, también . . . At this moment the interpreter returns to his seat, leans over and whispers The bar is closed . . . lo hace por medio de su silencio o su ambigüedad. No appreciable change has taken place in the parallelogram of sunlight on the bathroom wall either, for even though it has continued to grow longer and longer it still has not formed a perfect lozenge. Y ésta es la frase que yo propongo de añadir inmediatamente a continuación para completar este párrafo cuatro (And this is the phrase that I propose be added immediately thereafter in order to complete this fourth paragraph). Picking up another sheet of paper covered with line after line of handwriting, a number of which have been crossed out, which is lying in front of her, the woman delegate then slowly reads out: Esta definición (this definition) no supone necesariamente (does not necessarily imply) una literatura de partido (a form of literature that follows a definite party line), la cual no agota por cierto (for obviously this sort of literature does not exhaust) el significado político de la obra literaria (the political significance of a work of literature). She stops speaking and her gaze sweeps over the tired faces of the delegates. Two of them raise their hands to attract the chairman's attention. The proconsul once again pointedly consults the dial of his wrist watch and then, thrusting the chewed end of his cigar back between his lips, he takes a long puff on it and leans farther back in his chair, concentrating all his attention on the clouds of smoke, following them with his eyes as they swirl up toward the ceiling. With a wave of his hand, the chairman gives the floor to one of the two delegates who have requested permission to speak. Me parece (It

seems to me), the latter says, *que esta intersante proposición* (that this interesting proposal) . . . A bird with a black beak, black feet, a black back, a head covered with a round yellow spot, like a skullcap, with an orange ruffled breast and a yellow belly speckled with little random black dots, is perched on a dead branch on which a few remaining patches of rough gray bark are still visible. The barbets, or Capitonidae, are tropical birds belonging to the order of Piciformes; they owe their name to the long tactile hairs, or vibrissae (modified feathers), surrounding their beak, forming a sort of beard. The orange barbet is the size of a thrush. They inhabit forests or wooded savannas, hollowing out nests in the wood of trees attacked by insects or fungus diseases, that is to say, species of trees that are not very hardy. They feed on insects or fruits. They emit powerful cries, repeated over long intervals. (Painting on parchment by Vially, National Museum of Natural History, Vol. 80, no. 54). A typewritten resumé of the French text translated into English lies alongside the illustration. There is a reproduction of another illustration on parchment on the other side of the glass. The text in French accompanying it also has an English translation lying next to it on a separate sheet. It reads: This magnificent bird, of a brilliant reddish orange, lives in the forests of South America. The male, shown here, has a fan-shaped crest of feathers on the front of its head. The plumage of the female is less brightly colored, being of a uniform brown. At the beginning of the mating season, the males congregate and choose an open spot free of dead branches or any other sort of debris, most often beneath the trees where cocks-of-the-rock (*Rupicola rupicola*) come to seek their food. The parade-like display usually takes place in the early morning. An old cock begins it by dropping down from a branch onto the ground. As the sun rises, he makes great leaps in the air, unfolds his wings, spreads his tail out in a fan. First one of the other males and then all the rest (up to seven or eight of them) imitate him, each of them executing his “saltarello” in turn, a performance that lasts for several minutes. The significance of this pantomime is not clear. Is it a nuptial dance to excite the females and invite them to copulate, or a display

that stimulates the hypophysis by means of certain special images and as a consequence stimulates ovulation and egg-laying? We do not know. What is particularly baffling is the fact that the males continue to dance even after the females have laid their eggs, incubated them, and the eggs have hatched (Watercolor from Francis Levaillant's *Histoire naturelle des Oiseaux de Paradis*, Volume I, plate 51). Between the two images, the center of the display window is filled with various objects: pieces of pottery with geometric designs, terra-cotta statuettes, reddish or ocher in color, representing figures with smooth skin stretched taut over a thick subcutaneous layer of fat who are squatting down with their heads tilted slightly back. They have eyes like coffee beans, visible only through a narrow slit between the eyelids, flat faces, lips set in an expression of indolent cruelty. Ornaments of multicolored feathers, and a few swatches of handwoven cloth complete the decoration of the window, on the left side of which the life-size figure of a young woman, cut out of plywood, dressed in a dark blue uniform and a red poncho, is holding a model airplane in chromed metal in her hand. Slightly to the rear of the pieces of native pottery is a very large model of the same type of aircraft, resting on two wooden sawhorses, with a part of the fuselage cut away, so that one can see little male and female dolls sitting in seats upholstered in blue fabric. Above the airplane, occupying the middle of the window, is a vertical panel, slightly taller than the stewardess, cut out of plywood, on which there is displayed a reproduction of a page from a very old portolano showing the American continent. The land masses shown are more compact than on modern maps but are nonetheless readily recognizable. Their notched contours sometimes form wedge-shaped indentations with the point extending inland, or serrated gulfs, with the names of anchorages, rivers, and bays inscribed in red or black Gothic script perpendicular to the shore. Written in parallel or slightly skewed lines, sometimes very close together and sometimes far apart, they form a sort of irregular fringe along the shoreline of the ocean. A short distance inland any sort of names or markings abruptly disappear, as at the same time the green border grows fainter and fainter,

finally blending with the yellowish tint of the parchment, on which there are painted clumps of palms and trees with dense foliage, red parrots, monkeys, winged dragons, blue or brown birds, swamps, meandering rivers, and men with black or brick-colored bodies busy gathering wood, making fires, dancing in circles, or hunting, armed with bows and arrows and bucklers, either stark naked or wearing loin-cloths, cloaks, and headdresses of alternating green and orange feathers. The airplane has now broken through a bank, or rather, a thin layer, of clouds in low relief, stretching as far as the eye can see to the right, but neatly cut off, like the edge of a table, forming a clean, absolutely straight line, lying approximately parallel to the coast, on the left. Beyond it, one can see the ocean, which has now taken on a slightly grayer tinge. On the horizon the thin, wavy, dark lilac-colored band outlining the crest of the tall range of mountains has disappeared. The window of the plane, in the shape of a rectangle with rounded edges set in a molded-plastic frame, is divided into two approximately equal halves by the line of the horizon. The bottom part of the lower half is occupied by the white expanse of the flat layer of clouds, above which there appears a blue-gray band, like a painted plinth. The upper half is almost entirely filled by the very pale, pure blue sky, where there is not a trace of anything that would lead one to suspect the existence of invisible constellations, of composite monsters that are half men and half horses, half goats and half serpents, crabs with pincers as huge as ranges of mountains, goddesses, giants. Somewhere in this immense void, however, Orion, blind and solitary, is still marching onward. In his right hand he is holding a bow at its midpoint, with the curved ends of it forming an S. A cylindrical bronze quiver hangs from his side. In order to render the gleaming surface of the metal, the artist has placed a thick lemon-yellow splotch of paint on the lid, and highlighted one of the generating lines of the cylinder in a duller yellow. The giant advances along the path amid the rocky crags and the jagged stumps of trees felled by some violent storm. His muscular feet, which seem to have been carved out of a reddish block of marble with a network of tiny veins running through it, are as large

as the tree stumps with the contorted roots and the scaly bark. A few steps ahead of him the path dips sharply downward and disappears behind the fold in the terrain where the two little figures are standing, with only their torsos peeking out. Beyond this depression is a grassy hillside with a grove of trees at the top, then a lake (or the bottom of a gulf?) whose gleaming reflection can be seen between the luxuriant masses of foliage, and then, on the other shore of the lake, another clump of trees. Beyond the display window of the airline company a long row of buildings stretch out in a blurry haze: a warehouse with frosted windows, a men's clothing store, an apartment building with no shops on the lower floor, a bar, a shoe store, a laundry, a street stall selling hot dogs and Coca-Colas. The very end of the long trench lined in stone and brick, where the three tall chimneys are slowly sending clouds of smoke into the white sky, keeps endlessly receding. Far in the distance, on the hillside at the left of the painting already touched by the first rays of the rising sun, the path that Orion is following reappears, a thin white line winding its way up the slope. After having formed a perfect lozenge for a fraction of a second, the lemon-yellow parallelogram that the sun is projecting on the bathroom wall as it rises higher and higher above the tops of the pines begins to grow narrower, its upper and lower sides growing shorter as its vertical sides slowly move closer together. After the little jerk when it first started moving, there is nothing that would indicate that the elevator with the closed doors is going up, except the numbers above the two panels of the door, as hermetically sealed as a bank vault, the figures 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 arranged not in a vertical but a horizontal line blinking on and off one after the other. Leaning against the back wall, he can see his blurred silhouette reflected on the polished metal surface. Almost all the chairs set out along the wall of the conference hall for observers are now empty. A few of them have been drawn up closer to the circles formed by certain delegates, with whom the occupants of these chairs are conversing, paying no attention to the speaker who is leaning over toward his microphone, reading a long statement in a monotonous voice. The cloud of

bluish smoke seems to have grown even thicker and to be collapsing beneath its own weight like a ceiling that is slowly falling in, thus reducing even further the volume of air, which is already scarcely breathable. In one corner a journalist is talking in a low voice to one of his female colleagues, with his arm draped across the latter's shoulders. The young woman is still resting her notebook on her crossed thigh, but her hand that is holding her pen is no longer moving. With a vague smile on her lips, she is listening to what her companion is saying to her. Some of the delegates are drowsing, others are listlessly leafing through the evening papers that they have already read, or are sitting hunched over in their seats, their eyes with the reddened lids staring at the green baize covering of the table that is strewn with ashes. It seems as though a faint gray glow is beginning to filter into the room between the edge of one of the windows and the edge of the velvet curtain (which has possibly been pushed to one side when a chair brushed against it) draped across it to shut out the light. With one of his arms stretched out in front of him, fumbling about in the void, Orion is still advancing in the direction of the rising sun, guided by the voice and the information passed on to him by the little figure perched on his muscular shoulders. There is every indication, however, that he will never reach his goal, since as the sun rises higher and higher in the sky, the stars outlining the giant's body are gradually growing paler and dimmer, and the fabulous silhouette motionlessly advancing in great strides will thus slowly fade and eventually disappear altogether in the dawn sky. No harbinger of dawn is visible, however, in any of the other windows that have been let into the wall at regular intervals between the fluted shafts of the imitation antique pillars and draped with heavy brown velvet curtains that allow no light to enter the hall. Identical doors, of varnished brown wood, placed at regular intervals along the wall, line both sides of the long corridor painted cream-color, the floor of which is covered to the height of a man's knee with the omnipresent thick, grayish material, viscous rather than fluffy like snow, that makes walking along it so difficult and muffles the sound of footsteps. If one or the other of the walls were

removed so as to show a longitudinal cross section of the succession of rooms running the entire length of the corridor, both on the right and on the left, it would allow one to see that each of these rooms is exactly the same, with identical furniture, some of them empty, others occupied by men or women, some of whom are washing their hands or brushing their teeth, others of whom are unpacking or closing suitcases, others writing letters, and still others sitting in armchairs or lying stretched out on beds with their shoes off leafing through newspapers or magazines. The rectangles of the doors follow one upon the other at regular intervals to the very end of the corridor, which turns at a right angle, whereupon one's eye discovers another corridor identical to the first one and lined on the left and the right by the same regularly spaced dark brown doors. Caught in the thick viscous material covering the floor, he plods along, laboriously putting one foot in front of the other. At times the two walls of the corridor appear to move closer together, and then draw apart again, or else they tilt with an undulating motion, as the floor also moves up and down with an undulating motion, and it is difficult for him to keep his balance. At times, in fact, in order not to fall, he is obliged to lean one of his hands on one of the walls and halt to catch his breath, waiting for the walls to stop tilting and assume a vertical position once again. The young journalist leans his head over a little closer to his companion, murmurs a few words in her ear, and then kisses her on one corner of her still smiling mouth. Still standing in the same place on the black and white checkerboard tiles of the kitchen floor, the woman has picked the cup up again and raised it to her lips once more. In order to allow the last few drops of coffee to slide down her throat, she tilts the cup back at a sharp angle, so that he can now see the circular base on its underside, which forms an ellipse when viewed from this perspective. The woman continues to hold the cup in this position long after she has ceased drinking from it, thus hiding her entire face except for her forehead. After a moment she lowers it just a little and her eyes with the dark brown pupils appear, staring straight ahead. Between the edge of her lower eyelid and the green border decorating the rim of

the cup, a thin band of her face is now also visible. Two gleaming, silvery lines descend vertically from the little drops clinging to her eyelashes, in which a glint of light trembles slightly. The gleaming lines reappear below the cup, framing her chin, as though they were running down from the corners of her lips. Little by little the parallelogram of sunlight grows narrower and narrower as its vertical sides come together, until soon it is no more than a bar that continues to grow thinner and thinner. The lower edge reaches the tile floor, bends to the right in a sharp fold, and moves farther and farther out across the floor. The patch now forms an obtuse angle, the sides of which, a moment later, are reduced to two streaks, then two thin lines where the light seems to concentrate, to seethe and boil, and then two incandescent threads which gradually grow dimmer and finally cease to glow, though for a brief instant they leave a bright, fuzzy trace whose intensity in turn rapidly decreases. Soon there is nothing left on the wall or on the tile floor to indicate where the luminous patch has been. The young lady journalist turns her face toward the right and offers her lips to the man bending down toward her, the back of his head now completely masking the face of the young woman, so that all that one can see of her is her neck with a prominent, bulging muscle stretched taut by the angle of contortion of her head. As it pivots on its hinges, the varnished wooden door panel reveals a narrow band of copper, beyond which an expanse of flowered carpet begins. The reflection of the flowers seems to glide backward in the panel, caught up in a swift rotary motion. The room and everything in it, his bed, his chair, his table, the telephone, the window in which the pale rectangles of the skyscrapers are outlined against the empty sky, also seem to be caught up in a whirling motion which grows faster and faster until the whole thing finally tips over as the carpet tilts vertically upward. The palms of his hands stretched out in front of him to protect himself hit the carpet, and immediately thereafter he feels its soft, fluffy nap touching his cheek. After a moment, by pushing hard on his forearms, he manages to lift himself up off it, and then he remains there on all fours, barely able to breathe, as little by little the wheeling

motion of the forms slows down and finally stops. Despite the deafening pounding of blood in his ears, he is able to hear, somewhere far in the distance, the faint rumble of an airplane crossing the sky above the city. The longitudinal cross section of the fuselage shows the successive rows of seats in which the motionless passengers are sitting like mannequins, their profiles facing forward, drowsing, holding open magazines or newspapers in their hands, or gazing out the windows at the bristling forest of prisms, of cubes, of towers, that stretches out below them as far as the eye can see, pitted with well shafts, canyons, narrow trenches, at the very bottom of which one can see the rosy glow of neon lights blinking on and off. A longitudinal cross section of the head in profile shows the principal organs, the ivory mass of the brain through whose complicated circumvolutions the blood pulses with every heartbeat, the purple tongue, the teeth, the porous bones, and the pale bulging eyeball, firmly held in place by its red roots, with its iris, its cornea, its vitreous humor, its aqueous chamber, and the thin membrane of the retina on which the images of the world fall, gliding across it and replacing each other one by one. The background of the carpet is a bottle-green color. The flowers are grouped in bouquets of different sizes, repeated at regular intervals, composed of roses in wine-colored shades, of little cream-colored flowers, and leaves. Seen in this fashion, from very close up, the flowers, the leaves, their veins, following the weave of the backing of the carpet, have steplike edges. The pale, faded colors blend in an old-fashioned color scheme such as that of embroidered samplers or tapestry. Microscopic debris, motes of dust, stray hairs, little hairs coiled up in spirals, horsehair, are strewn over the pink, mauve, almond-green, or pale yellow patches, with the parallel gray strands of the warp and woof showing through in those places where it has been worn threadbare.

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