

the setting chasm



whisner fraga

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in alcohol i found a father ever since that swampy night in

which all excuses converted themselves into oil lamps and darkness. and i was educated to respect all those family things. all around the artificial islet in which the grange's outer walls were set, a dam attempted to hide into it the lives (mayhap the deaths) we were not taking into account, for all that those happening inside the precinct cannot overcome the others either in their importance or in their condolences, and even the water, that throbbingly instills into the air the rebellion of its noisy, inconvenient belly, that someday we shall also bury into its chasm all those beloved ones we are temporarily anchoring into the earth, sumptuous tombstones to seal the annihilated structures, submarine excursions around the flooded necropolis during every all souls' day, or it is only the hubbub from partying in their route toward the end, i don't know, for all that nothing firefled on the almost faded sky and in those forlorn eyes. mine own were two splotches enlarged by tiredness and the conscience of a single sleep, when the morrow embraces the splendor of dawn and finally chooses to go away.

its drunken men's audacity is still precarious and my sight reaches only that which it cannot see and what it cannot spy are the coals melted into magma, only a couple of two flames burning into ecstasies and then the ashes, nor the ballet of a stray cat's hemophilic tail, nor the grass whiffing the thick night grease, nor the half-leavened food you puked out of your stomach before the feet of an indistinct shape either asleep or dead, not even the arteries of this orange-tree which feels too weak to spirit itself away from this place, nor the drowsy green on the wings of that fly which sucks from the carrion of vitals tossed over a corner of our lawn, nor the late bubbling of beer poured into the smeared, solemn mug of someone who doesn't know anymore why he is drinking. real soon all that sloth will be mortified by the rage brought over by the hurry of forgetfulness, just like a platoon all dressed up with clean



uniforms for review which all together present arms to their commanding officer only because it is high time for this. and the long blood syrup navigating the congested fleshly pipes in a heavy acceleration of boosters when the rattle of this fruitless sleep finally gives way to despair, to the trotting, to the laboring over tables in which someone resists to the enigma of a pack of cards, wavering between boredom and the will to live, how many more drafts to go? the fence taken over by ivy and the gadabouts working over today's gossips, the boat threshing against the unfair route set toward the stones.

the run.

the dammed, untamed energy fumbling for the debris of fear, retrieving from the rubble the saturated compulsion of pain. arms and legs floundering toward a beach where waters and sand long gave up meeting. The rounded hands digging into the wavelets and now and again leaving them, allowing the wetness to haunt the already spasm-intersected breath, the closed-together fur of the algae, the vitality of a closure i shall be the only one to witness and the loneliness of this biology-disinherited void and the womb that bears me toward the return, the lacteous skin and the lonely fish swimming across beer cans, condoms, discarded baseball caps and the dust hovering slowly down and through a depth of several meters, now it is being too far away from everything. the rotten breeze, three or four bystanders are waving to me, slowly and scared-like, a drowning would not go well with them, i gather they are marching toward a boat and i let go, for i know there will time aplenty till they find me, paws grooving into the water concession, going away to a parturition, a thrilling across the air giving way to an unisonous lowering enwrapped within a porous, egotistical worry and i prayed to be taken to the dunes of cement and mud, toward the firm loam, to the slaughter before the barbecue, to the disgusting farce of enlightenments.

the pain in the ass that is their company, their faces devouring the appetite for other pulps, the will to destroy everything they ask from me, both with disdain and an apathy to calm me down. the old man feels amused by his own lack of teeth, *hey unk, have you drunk your dentures?* while they yank wide open his arcades full of amalgam and humiliate the paltriest of bipeds, not remembering the demeaning they have to take themselves every hour, even there, where the very string that cleanses their teeth from the beefsteak fibers belongs to someone else.

the fence, the wall, the dirt road, the unkempt veggie garden, the orchard that will not wither for lack of watering, the roof tiles and their clay barks, the *caboclo* half-breed farmhand turning his dismay between his fingers like tobacco rolled into a corn leaf, the tapping of whispers going away from my eardrums, and the croaking of the vines slapped by the wind while hanging from an unassuming, low wall raising before and around the house, and the gate with its metallic veins, later.

on days of yore those were the bread mornings, poking into its eroded skin, dried up from the blows of the old firewood oven, in the lonely breakfast of those who wake far too early, and probing the crack where i shall stick my finger to the depth of vengeances and from there I shall rescue an embryo of flour and eggs, consumed into pulps and bacteria to the rush of hunger. those days in which a scalpel slashed into the clouds with unmethodical wrath, exposing our skull to the vanity of sun, the asphalt overgrown with pimples the nails of automobiles endlessly poked into and picked at, the fat women and their carton fans, the stores weaving the monotony of ancestors' webs, as if even the silence would disinherit that boondocks, leaving emptiness in its place, the sultry nights and the old wives quacking about the fate of the villain in the current soap opera, the lime rotting between the bricks of their nightmares, and the son soaked up by the venom of greed, the subways taken over

by chagrin and crime, the rush of forgetting that death, like he always does, marches miles ahead of our imbecile trotting or else lurks behind our backs so that we can only meet him when he wants us to.

the cotton fabric erasing the tiny peaches of your breasts, helena, your eyelids stumbling in hangover desolation, the howling of loudspeakers dictating the grainy cadence of legs and it is then and there that the valve, unplugging the blood, breaks out the dam of lies, the velvety tubes close to the skin, the enigmatic raveling of guts, life faster than life, outside a maze of brick walls and dementia. nonetheless, helena, it is that coarseness of time that delights me, this echo of moans that sharpens my envy and thus, when your tongue, careless like that of a decadent actress, scratches somebody's gangrened moustache i can no more tell whether you are challenging me or is this just a feature of your own showing up, that personal theatrical performance you have been calling of late, with calculated dexterity, as your 'self-search'.

ever since your last pondering from a week ago and plus, to auction my sight, to throw a tunnel straight to my face, the lighting so poor, helena, that even the megawatts of noon cannot convince me the afternoon is certain to come, the unrepressed longing for running away somewhere, anywhere, where i can no longer meet my cousin getting drunk with her own piss, squatting like a frog in the imbecility of her twelve years of age, where i no longer have to take the tea with cream cookies, where i no longer must watch my aunt moldering snagged within her own rusty nerves. it was the children's coca-cola i wanted, helena, from those bottles my granny saved for her favorite grandchildren into whose number i never belonged, i craved for that poison while my healthy body could take it, that bubbling ardency too expensive for me to afford with my allowance which i never got anyway.

and the backbone creaks from the sedentary life of years, this languidness of a lichen in which, while sneaking through other folks' orchards, a gathering of concrete and grass is only to be found, a processional of ants and their slave-like singsong, the secret roaring of the gnats and a withered tree that is breaking down some walls already gone ruinous by the violence of old age. fumbling at this hieroglyph of nothingness, that's why, under the roof tiles cooked in the fat of black men's legs, a fizz of absences thusly whips my ears and it is not only that, but the chanting of the fearful, and it is toward me that they turn and again it is on account of me that they become silent, the shrill of dumbness within the assuredness of my shadow, but another sprite hovering just there, a makeshift stage and all those rags heralding this coyness of muscles and the unction of brightness, mindless to the absurdity of their presence, from the mouth, nostrils, and ears of an old woman tied to a chair. and thence the whinnying of frights.

and behind all that resin, helena, i witness my aunt's molding, that one who already gave up her bowels, from the stomach to the anus, to the slaughter of cancer, on olden times she didn't show this bashfulness not even when she ordered me to march naked to the bath, when she rubbed my feet to bleeding pain and even then she didn't find me clean enough to her taste and what smut was that only she suspected the existence of on me, helena? the group approved of my perplexity, after all the creature puked out by the unconscious old woman trod toward myself. a spider hoisted its own abandonment, snubbing down the silhouettes that waved their incredulity of the craven and i, persuaded that the nausea of any dialog would be useless, all illegitimate, a devotion of heresies floating on the taint of absurdity, denied her the pomp and circumstance of a ghost, i just wanted to leave that house and nonetheless, helena, this was tantamount to pillaging off symbols the praxis of an unappealable truth.

disemboweling the dark, that pitch foam, the furniture devastated by the savaging of white ants. then, helena, where should i aim my steps to?

toward the ruins of an incomprehensible christmas, to that fanfare blowing out of my grandfather's lungs, to his aqueous cough and the bituminous phlegm of his cardiac condition, the heroic corpse pursuing after a last breath, the swampy bedrooms where the future blinked its despondent nap, the chirr of straw and springs every time i turned on my side, in a futile attempt to settle my torso in a more comfortable position while the twilight chewed me up and the coyness attained by the fear this noise would jeopardize in the next room the sleeping fury of my grandparents.

over her belly the telltaling embroidery of slashes and lines, a fearsome toothless sewers, exhibited like the penultimate harvest before the end and thence the smell of scum, she, harassed by medicines, hospitals, physicians, nurses, janitors, castrated by the heinous chemotherapy, still she joked: *I have now another hole where he can thrust that thing in.*

to the muslin clothing, a fabric that had not this connotation of tender condescendence while i was a child, helena, and i watch the beginning of a body, framed by the anguishing fringe of its twenty years and this is where i sniff the terminus of this abrupt disquiet, like the flatness of beaches pasted to the skin and wrapping their usual depression, which is a whistle announcing the curfew, which is a story of disdain set into the ruts on my forehead, which is that triad of family names that brings you the wealth and the arrogance to tame the world, which simply is.

to the impatient cockroaches that surf over the broad leaves of rubber trees, pinpointing trays with the agony of their excrement, starving rats, cautiously watching their preys, and they can no longer reckon when they will be able to nibble at another

corpse, to the funky slumber over their backs, the skies above there like an orange-like splotch stinking the breezes with heat, the dead cooking within their ashamed wells, where they can smell the sweat of all those close-by bones. that's how forty degrees centigrade, one hundred five degrees fahrenheit, boost the travel to the dust, that's how i question clothing, helena, a naked death would not feel more adequate to these tropics that may serve as an inspiration to hell? that's how i loosen my collar while watching the corpse and its heavy mantle of flowers and cotton fabric during this wake where only the christ is right in his freshness of spread-out arms and the skimpy rags that hide his parcel of manliness, even the electric fan is targeting his cross hanging on the wall as if it, too, understood hierarchies. to the downward slope of undulating dust all over the road, the solemn building and the tired-out music, couples dispiritedly waltzing, too young, too old, mutilated from their pains for a short while, a ball nobody knows the why and wherefore of, the surly dissonance of beaten-down instruments, the musicians and the drudgery of the three-beat notes they finger, like scarecrows shooing away the flats notes that play out of the boots and wooden shoes of those creatures with no reasons to keep alive, small nothings inserted into a bigger nothing. all the same, helena, it is a shiver of hatred that scratches my backbone, calloused by the pitiless beatings, when i lend myself to countless errands, when i go fetch the groceries for the lady across the street, when i go for the parcels sent to the prosthodontist, when i walk the madam's poodle, all the while bargaining into my wish to buy a tape-recorder, my piggy bank getting fatter by the hour, before i lend my outer skin to her relief. until the moment i panhandle her wrath, i listen to her shouting my name in rage and, never letting her into the knowledge, i transfer into magnetic tape the sound of the buckle in her belt turning my back into stigmata and the

desperate yelping of those who will lifelong nourish the regret for their cravenness and i think this might explain to you my bookshelves stuffed with old-fashioned cassettes from which i still believe being able to unveil the meaning of those cryptic indications on their spines, steel<sup>1</sup>, bronze<sup>2</sup>, aluminum<sup>1</sup>, brass<sup>3</sup> when, helena, I started an inventory of metals that my engineering major rendered all the more enhanced.

in this moment when nimbleness renounces to your face's delicateness, when the haughtiness of your ready-made life slips on the heels and thighs of a smart slut with whom your own father fell in love, when the transcendent temperature of your martyrdom imprints a definitive tragedy upon your features, all that is left to you is the commonplace of memory and this sweeping scorn imbibed into the disperse doses of envy tatters your pride when someone asks her just to keep the conversation flowing what were the experiences she was most marked by, whatever she mentions from her tallness simulated by the height of her four-inch wooden shoes, down her upturned nose and by the lost chance anyone had to escort her into a bedroom ever since she achieved passing for a sixteen-year-old independent woman?

all the while the alluring brim of darkness pitch-covers the new litter of kittens, while from the hall i eavesdrop the coagulated panting of a couple ensconced in my house bathroom, the soft falling of pants, the rolling up of a dress, all the while the vultures plot for the putrescence of every animal, all the while doveshit, sparrowshit, turtledoveshit, the crap from all kind of birds couple desperately on the veranda of my grandparents' shack, a stinky, dried-up snow hovering over the wall i am so used to i no longer feel any disgust when sitting upon, all the while the cantankerous noise, the well-known clinking of worn-out gears, heralds my uncle's visit, all the while, deep into the pleasure of my slumbers, i sniffed the oily lighter

smell announcing the smoky victory of my grandfather's next cigarette, and for that long while, helena, you were growing into a woman, all unknowingly watching the sliding of hours. to the clods of dirt the motorcycle's tires rush into my shirt, imprisoned within the powdery rain, the crowing of dried boughs leaving the trees in sudden dives, to my cousine and her makeup-blurred cheeks commenting flatteringly on the antiquated shoes i had just been given, this placid smile anticipating her explosions, helena, nothing capable of facing the persuading potency of the family show i had to daily watch, suffused in horror for that i presumed would turn myself into on my later years: that hovering caterpillar.

to the liquorish agreements inside the bars, where the vapor of conversations jams into the rims of glasses, into the sparkling beer bottles and, above all, helena, into the nightmare exhumed from the vertigo truth had been reduced to, the recurrence of the scarecrow, the crows fencing their beaks against the straw grimace, a butterfly hanging from its nose, eyes tattooed in both wings, so that, helena, every time the wind sped up the ballet of those leaves and its torso glued all the more to the manikin's face, it was like in that succession of waving in and waving out the clown tried to see the unfocused birds, it was like he rattled the leftovers of his sight, it was like the blinking of his painted eyelids could shoo away his executioners, it was like all that he could do with his arms manacled to the branch, his body juicy of delicate hay and the passiveness of one who never could unearth his own roots and go visiting other plantations.

to the bookworms engineering the tunnels they had designed into my father's moldy western story pulps, to the *fila* dog and his beastly docility, to his name, an awkward homage to evil, the vigorous and nasty lucifer. to his asphyxia, the dog and his spittle oscillating into an incurable obeisance, i bounded him to the mango-tree bole, a long barbed-wire chain tied to his neck,



a bowl spilling water into the grass by his side and all that heat jailed between the veranda and the backyard, a mindless caress over the fur on his back, i watched the knowing fleas jumping out of him, it was no joke, helena, i am not allured by the bad taste of urgency and, two days later, when i came back from my trip, a halo of flies gravitated around his skull, a frenzy around his muzzle and yards of rope circling the tree and he could no longer see the water bowl wherein to quench his thirst.

until we reached your kin, helena, a little lebanon transplanted into the neighborhood, i venerated your father, helena, his snoring in the living-room shattered the wizened silence of a friday and he would only wake up from his indifference to rail with my little friend, a kingly latency exhaled from his words dispatched into a strange lexicon, *charra alaik sharmute* and i, too, felt within that harsh, inflexible echo the contours of an advertence, all the while you and your braids trembled behind your mother's dresses, already holding your *masbaha* and whispering *alhamdu lil-lah allah akbar*, the darkish syrian bread, the sharp hissing of the black olives, the *laban mah kbhar* cellophane-like cucumbers covered with curdle, the sweet devilish *tabine*, the fingers stuck into the *fatushe* and the *tabule*, and the practicality of your family: a pretty girl must marry a rich lad, there is no call for her to needlessly suffer, the buzzing in the radio, the warlike invasion of foreign waves and i felt dangerously hypnotized by the aniseed flavor in the *arak*, whose sips defended me from the poison of my own timidity.

to the mud of scribbled cities in the backyard, gigantic turnpikes in a make-believe road, plastic wheels perforating the ways in tireless voyages and our innocence would not allow for drunken drivers and the houses, tile shards, pebbles, cardboard, and bits of rusty wire didn't even boast of doors to isolate their imaginary dwellers, the beetles, the large inch-long *saiwa* ants, the bush growing thick only a few yards away, the infinity of

that backyard, all the while the bleating voice of a speaker repeated the name of the next singer in the rookie show, my mother's hairdo balancing over her engrossed head, the smoke from the frying-pans melting the scarce fat to be found in the third-quality meat, ah, helena, alas, alas, alas, helena, it was only a matter of probing with our mist-greased feet through the citron-grass, the mornings anointed with children's play and that's how the things shone among the pain-exalted opacity, this frozen taste of uncertainty from which fatality, helena, would become the changeless swarm of fears bubbling inside my breast, the make-believe cattle guarded by my watching fingers, the sticks of burn-out matches tearing into the shapeless abdomen of guavas so as to represent the legs of those paralytic oxen and the plastic in the few real miniatures, puppets within my unbelieving hands, a regiment of insignias planted on the uniforms and the severe presence of a warlord, a lonely kid who avenged the disgraces he suffered himself upon the fates of his toy characters.

a constant, fate-like growl surging from the forlorn backroom where they hid, pent-up among the crowding, discarded, old utensils from the household, your brother's mutineer genes, bones, and muscles. they feared an unlikely escape, helena, that the makeshift bars would not resist to his constant onslaughts, that the flavoring of his humors would find an ally in a miraculous power, that the synapses within that unsteady brain would plot toward a successful rebellion. his life, his well-being, his happiness, his health meant nothing to anybody. a pasty, aggressive turf where the seeds of nature took root inside his head, an agonic feebleness gleaned together by centuries of your family history, as far back as could be remembered including an epileptic great-great-grandfather, a doddering great-grandfather to the threshold of the present generation with your schizophrenic uncle and that cousin vegetating within

one of the last fad syndromes, only recently catalogued, centuries after being nourished by the cunning, discombobulated shrewdness her body boasted of.

to the projector ejaculating unto a humongous screen the *trapalhões*<sup>1</sup> clownishness or the violence of american blockbusters, all those features we swallowed in our preteen years acephaly, all the while sucking on mint candy, all the while watching from the corners of our eyes the least movements of the pubescent girl sitting by us, in the hope of, by dint of her carelessness, we could half-see a slice of her breasts we could later compare to those in the forbidden magazines we stole from mr. anastácio's corner newsstand.

to the perch, helena, into which you transformed that gorilla's shoulder, the tattoo stamped on its nape, just like a grimace scorning me, the face smeared with green and yellow paint, the pack of lazybones skipping their classes in an aimless attempt to forget the imminent entrance exams, all the while keeping loose the reins of soberness, all the while proclaiming their profuse knowledge of foreign languages and politics expressed by the newly-learned word, impeachment, as if the disharmonic choir of our tribe took over the authority to diminish the voraciousness of a parasitic phalanx, whose sweat only drips in the act of sucking at the congress coffers' collective teats, between one and the next party in the public stables where both corruption and several call-girls circulate naked and the baritone pitches forth a crystal-goblet-trembling *o sole mio* between one and the next upgrade of jk's motto: five years in

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<sup>1</sup> *os trapalhões* [the blunderheads] were a troupe of four comedians led by renato aragão [didi] who achieved great success while playing on sketches presented on a brazilian tv network from the seventies to the nineties. (translator's note).

fifty<sup>2</sup>, between one and the next bite in the delicious, fat Brasília *piçarras*, between one and the next negotiation for still another bribe, in short, between the completion of one and the next of their civic duties.

back to the last squirt of morrow, to the scaling of hands around the table's edge, to the draining of my smell, to the reaching into the bacillus of things, to the homecoming while listening to the feathery bugle of sleepless roosters and the landing on the floor of those bedrooms carved out of a sticky crudeness given them by the early light closing into the windows where, helena, when i impress a turn on the doorknob's gadgetry, i find a bat jailed among the alveoli of rafters in the roof, eyelids ready to fend off the sun's onslaught, meanwhile a bland wind begins to hover upon the dust of hours and the sleep finally rises as a firewall against my pain.

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<sup>2</sup> “jk” is short for juscélino kubitschek, the brazilian president at the time of reference, also the initial builder of the new federal capital city, brasília; his motto is herein inverted, the original was ‘fifty years of progress in five’, never accomplished; also a reference to the popular saying, ‘Everything ends in *piçarrá*’, meaning that all debates and scandals in brazilian congress ended by the opponents sitting together to share the slices of a *piçarra*, a metaphor for ‘bribe’. (translator’s note).