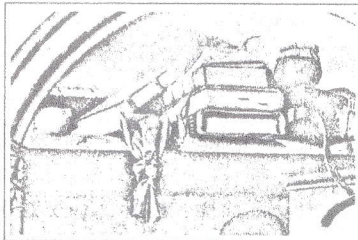
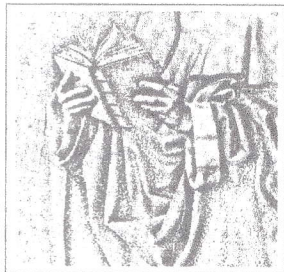


**cascades**



**slow reading club**



**middelburg, 10-10-2024**  
**amsterdam, 12-10-2024**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>The Angel of Darkness</i> .....	3
Ernesto Sabato	
<i>The Melancholy of Anatomy</i> .....	5
Shelley Jackson	
<i>The Switch</i> .....	9
Virgilio Piñera	
<i>Hyperparasites</i> .....	11
Aase Berg	
<i>Die, My Love</i> .....	12
Ariana Harwicz	
<i>Out</i> .....	15
Christine Brooke-Rose	
<i>In the Heart of the Guinea Pig Darkness</i> .....	19
Aase Berg	
<i>Roberte Ce Soir</i> .....	20
Pierre Klossowski	
<i>The Two Peasants</i> .....	23
Guatier le Leu	
<i>The Parasite</i> .....	26
Michel Serres	
<i>The Flea</i> .....	29
John Donne	

## THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS

(1974)

Ernesto Sabato

Translated by Andrew Hurley

### *A Wingèd Rat.*

Unable to make a movement or a sound (why call out? so people would come running in and see him and be so filled with disgust and revulsion that they clubbed him to death?), Sabato watched his feet turn slowly into the shrivelled black claws of a rat. He felt no pain, not even the tingling that one might expect from the shrivelling and drying out of the skin. But he did feel repugnance, and the repugnance grew stronger and stronger as the transformation continued: first his feet, then his legs, then, little by little, his torso. The revulsion grew even more terrible when the wings formed, perhaps because they were of flesh, and had no feathers. At last, his head. Until that moment he had followed the process with his sense of sight.

Although he had not had the courage to touch those bat's legs with his hands, which were still those of a human, he could not bear not to stare in horrified fascination at the gigantic rat's claws, covered with the wrinkled and leathery skin of some ancient mummy, that were now his. Then had come, as we have said, an even more striking and horrifying thing—the sprouting of the enormous cartilaginous wings. But when the process reached his head, and he began to feel his face stretch and lengthen into a muzzle, the hairs on his nose grow long and black, and his nose began to sniff at the air about him, the horror of it was indescribable. He lay for a time paralyzed in his bed, where the transformation had come upon him by surprise.

He tried to stay calm, to invent some plan. The plan would have to include silence, because one cry, one scream would bring people who would kill him without mercy, beat him to death with iron bars. There was, of course, the fragile hope that they would recognize in that nauseating creature the features of himself, especially as it was not logical that such a creature would have taken over his room, his bed, so inexplicably.



In the rat's head he now possessed, ideas were furiously boiling. He sat up, at last, and once upright he tried to calm himself, to take things as they were. With care, as though inside a body that did not belong to him (which in some way it did not), he shifted on the bed until he was in the position a human would take to get out of it: on the edge of the bed, that is, with his feet hanging downward. But he realized that his feet no longer reached the floor. From the contraction of his bones, he thought, he must have shrunk, though not all that much really, and that would explain, too, why his skin was so wrinkled. He figured his new height at about four feet. He got up, and he looked at himself in the mirror.

He stood unmoving for a long time. And then he lost his composure—he wept in silence at the horror. There were people who kept rats in their houses—physiologists like Houssay, for instance, that experimented with the repulsive creatures. But he, Sabato, had always belonged to the class of people who are nauseated at the mere sight of a rat. It is easily imagined, then, what he felt as he stood before a four-foot-tall rat with cartilaginous wings and the wrinkled, black skin of those hideous creatures. And him *inside it!*

His eyes had grown weaker, and then he suddenly realized that the weakening of his vision was not some passing phenomenon, some product of his emotional state, but rather would actually in time grow worse, until he became totally blind. And he was proven correct: within a few seconds, though those seconds seemed centuries filled with nightmare and disaster, his sight faded to utter blackness. He stood paralyzed, though he felt his heart pounding in tumult and his skin shivering with cold. Then, little by little, he groped his way toward the bed and sat down on the edge of it.

He stayed there a while. And then, unable to contain himself, forgetting his plan, all his rational precautions, he heard himself give a terrible, chilling cry of anguish, a cry for help. It was not a human cry, though; it was the shrill, stomach-churning shriek of a gigantic winged rat. People rushed in, naturally. But no one showed the least surprise. They asked him what had happened, if he felt ill, if he wanted a cup of tea.

It was obvious that no one noticed the change in him. He did not answer, did not speak a single word, thinking that they'd think he had gone mad. He simply decided to try to live somehow, keeping his secret, even in this horrendous state. Because that's the way the will to live is: unconditional and insatiable.

## Shelley Jackson

### *Cancer*

The cancer appeared in my living room sometime between eleven and three on a Thursday. I am not sure exactly when, because I suffer from bouts of migraine, and sometimes I miss things, or see things that aren't there, flashing shapes like the blades of warrior goddesses, the vanes of transcendental windmills. A little airborne sprig could go unnoticed some while.

It was barely visible, a pink fizz, like a bloodshot spot of air. It was so small there was no great wonder in its hanging there, the way a feather might rest on an updraft. It is hard for me to admit it now, but when I first saw it, I thought it was pretty. I blew on it. It drifted sideways, but when I looked for it later, it was back where it had been before.

The cancer grew with improbable speed. At first I watched it curiously, almost fondly. Near the center it distended and grew as solid as meat. The branches divided and divided again. It was a starfish with split ends, an animal snowflake.

I did not speak of it to anyone. Once, the neighbor came to ask me to restrain my hedges. She was a nervous woman with a face too old for her hair. Her child was with her, that little blond creature I had once attempted to befriend. The child paid me no attention, but stared past me in the direction of the living room. I intercepted her gaze out of instinct, not any fear I could have named.

I looked at the cancer every day. Perhaps it was as big as a chicken—no, a parakeet—when I set my hand against it. I took one of its twigs and bent it back on itself. I did this out of curiosity, no more. When the tips darkened and began to wilt, I let go and looked up. The little girl was looking at me through the fogged window, her white fingers like claws on the edge of the sill. When she caught my eye she dropped out of sight. By nightfall the limb had straightened itself again, though it was a darker purple where the damage was.

*We pop our kitchen sponges in a bath of bleach and dig the moldy grout from around the sink; it is the season for dentistry, manicures, and laser*



*depilation. We rinse the food off our plates the minute we are finished eating, scrape the soft sludge into the garbage chute with a shudder of distaste. Everything soft seems decayed to us; we wear nylon jogging suits we launder daily, we cut our hair or pull it back into flawless chignons.*

Of course I tried to oust the cancer, though I felt ashamed of myself as I jabbed it with the broom, trying to force it out the window. I had tied a kitchen towel around my head, as if I thought the cancer might tangle itself in my hair in its panic. What a figure of fun I seemed to myself, especially when the cancer proved impossible to budge! I should be more clear: it was possible to shift it, but something invisible bound it to the center of the room, and the farther it was from that point, the more insistently it sought to return. (Not like an animal struggling, mind you. More like a buoyant object one tries to force under water.) Finally, I trapped it in my apron—I also wore an apron—and hobbled to the front door with it straining between my legs. On the front porch I met the postman. We looked down at the large mass struggling inside my apron. When I raised my eyes, I was met by such a grotesquely knowing, indeed sympathetic gaze that I dropped my bundle and stepped back, setting the door between us. After this I stopped trying to evict the cancer. Besides, I had thought of something worse than a cancer in my living room: a cancer tapping on my window, or leaning on my doorbell for all the world to see.

Another time I held a match to the tips. They curled into spirals, tight as watch springs, then turned to ash and fell off.

After the operation the little girl had stopped going to school. She seemed to live in the yard. When she spotted me at the window she stopped whatever she was doing until I went away. She was always carrying something: a large piece of chicken wire, a carburetor, a brick. I never saw her with a toy.

I knew that in some way I had secreted the cancer, sneezed it from a nostril. It was not from outside. Every success it enjoyed was evidence against me. In it, you could watch my fault take concrete form; it was a kind of malignant trophy. I thought I could live with it, at first. It is some comfort to get what we deserve, even when we deserve nothing good. Perhaps I was proud of my error, because it was so brightly colored, and took such definite form. To have it was to have something, that was certain. In private I might fit a ring onto one of its digits, a gaudy ring with a yellow stone. I looked at it, you could almost say lovingly: what lawless circus beauty. The stink of the big cats, the glare of the lights! I forgot myself, brought my hands close, almost petting the hairy fringe. But afterwards ran scalding water on my palms.

I thought I could guess the size it would end up. But it grew and grew. It was the size of a badger, then a goat, then an ox. I compare it to animals because it was hot, as if blood ran through it instead of sap. Its body heat tropicked the room. And though it resembled a bush, I guess, more than anything else its own size, it had an animal presence, uncouth, yet sly, subtly critical, disturbingly womanly. If I looked away, and let my mind wander, I was brought back with a start by the feeling that someone was there.

Still, a great leafless bush, with smooth skin like the manzanita. The muscular trunk (it was hardly a trunk; the ganglion, rather) was scarlet. The limbs were streaked with purple, fading to pink toward the ends: pink fretwork against my ceiling. They grew thinner and more translucent, until it took a keen eye to make out where they no longer were. The air itself seemed stained.

*We roll things, hard things, across surfaces, hard surfaces, because we have an unquenchable thirst for the clean sound of hard things hitting. We beseech the ovarian sky to let fall the rain it is thick with, we light lighters to purge the flatulent winds, we pull our bedsheets tight and our hospital corners have a truculent look that makes babies cry.*

Zeus	Master of the master	Master of the slave	Amphitryon
	Master of the slave	Slave of the master	
Hermes	Slave of the master	Slave of the master	Sosie
	Master of the slave	Slave of the slave	

## THE SWITCH

(1944)

Virgilio Piñera

Translated by Mark Schafer

Their friend made ready for the two couples. The lovers would at last be united in the flesh. He had prepared everything with exquisite taste, insisting only that in exchange for the immense joy he was providing them everything must be consummated in absolute darkness and in the strictest silence. So, when the lovers arrived, he informed them that the lighted room where they stood was the last they would contemplate during their unforgettable, carnal night. Formal courtesies were exchanged, and they made their way through a small gallery to the immense doors that led, said the friend, to the two nuptial bedrooms.

Already the walk through that gallery had been consummated in absolute darkness. The friend (who had no need of light) announced that they had reached the entrance to human paradise, and that at his signal, the doors would open to admit the eternal lovers, separated until now by the inevitable tricks of fate.

Suddenly, a wave of terror animated them: it seems a gust of wind abruptly lifted the woman's gowns. Terrorized, they abandoned their lovers and pressed themselves madly against the breast of the friend, who was standing in the center of that strange assembly. Smiling slightly, and without retracting his order, the friend took them by the wrists and spun them around so that each came to rest in the arms of the wrong lover. The men were waiting like well-trained stallions, silent and tense. Order was soon re-established and at a signal from the friend, the doors opened and the crossed lovers passed through.

There, in the carnal chamber, they lavished the most refined and unprecedented caresses on each other. In grateful and loving respect for the vow they had taken, they did not even begin to utter a single sound, but made love until they had drained (as they say) "the cup of pleasure." All the while, the friend remained in a lighted room, torn with anguish. Soon the lovers would leave their rooms, and,



seeing the horrible switch, their love would be extinguished by the disturbing knowledge that it had been consummated with objects absolutely indifferent to them.

The friend began to think of various means of repairing the breach: he immediately rejected the idea of carrying the women to a common room, then restoring them (now properly switched) to their respective lovers. That was a partial solution; for example, either of the women might suspect that something was amiss in the passage from a dark room to a lighted one. Suddenly, the friend smiled. He clapped his hands and two servants appeared instantly. He whispered a few words into their ears and they disappeared, returning shortly armed with small golden needles and enormous silver scissors. The friend examined the instruments and immediately directed the servants to the nuptial doors. They entered and, groping in the darkness, took hold of the women and quickly cut off their tongues and poked out their eyes, then did the same to the men. Relieved of their tongues and eyes, they were brought before the friend, who was waiting for them in his well-lighted room.

There he let them know that, desiring to prolong that memorable, carnal night, he had ordered two of his servants, armed with needles and scissors, to take out their eyes and cut off their tongues. Hearing this statement, the lovers immediately recovered their expressions of ineffable happiness and through their gestures let the friend know the profound gratitude that possessed them.

For years they lived in uninterrupted joy. Finally, the hour of their death arrived and, perfect lovers that they were, they were stricken by the same fatal ailment and died in the same moment. Learning of this, their friend smiled slightly and decided to bury them, restoring to each lover his beloved and thereby to each beloved her lover. This he did, but in their ignorance, the lovers joyfully continued their unforgettable, carnal night.

Aase Berg

Translated by Johannes Göransson

Nanoblack horses, vantablack net-fishing for the Polaris pearl. A hard, dull synthetic pearl. Or *Pinctada margaritifera-cumingi*, grown in mussels in Tahiti. Local pollution gives the pearl its colour. The core of the true pearl from Bahrain is not a grain of sand. Small holes in the oyster shell indicates a parasite. In the soft parts of the slow-slacking intestinal flora of the hover-horse. Along the silk roads of the ocean, the blank pearl of the motor men's helmets whil in the same moonlight, the same foam.



Ariana Harwicz

Translated by Sarah Moses &amp; Carolina Orloff

Now I'm speaking as him. As him, I think of her and my mouth goes dry. I don't know what she's doing lying on her back in the thick, light grass, tossed aside like a piece of junk. She's wearing the same shirt she had on yesterday. Pink, sleeveless. The same black trousers she had on last week. He sees everything: I recognise every piece of clothing in her wardrobe by now, he says to himself. She has wellies on even though it's not raining. She wears flared skirts to give herself curves, but they disappear as soon as she puts on denim shorts. She ties her hair up in a tight bun like an imitation classical ballerina about to walk on stage. I know her positions off by heart. She sits hunched over, her head hanging between her legs. Or she lies down, like now, as if someone's just dumped her there and forgotten about her. She eats with her hands, straight from the pan, but only when she's alone. She winds handkerchiefs around her neck like a Burmese woman does metal coils. Her bra straps show. I can't smell her and I can't tell if she's breathing heavily. I don't know what it feels like to touch her back. I'm missing the details. The closest I came was the time I drove my motorcycle up to her front gate, but the sound of the engine scared her and I had to drive off. Did she look at me? Does she ever think about me? Her eyes are what intrigue me most, not knowing exactly what colour they are. I'd say they're grey, but sometimes they seem closer to the colour of hay. What would it be like to have her eyes fixed on mine? I know she has broad shoulders and her fingers are slender. I know she almost never laughs, that she walks with such large strides it's as though she's marching in a military parade. She doesn't smoke. Or at least I've never seen her smoke. She doesn't listen to music, at least not in the late evening just before nightfall when I stop by after work, my mouth already dry half an hour before I mount my motorcycle and put on my helmet. Half an hour before knowing that I'll see her sitting on the swing with her baby, blonde like her. Frail and long. Throwing him up into the air and grabbing him clumsily on the way down. Though once she missed. I'll see her cry, see her fury in the way she holds her mouth. I don't know her name or her age. I don't know anything at all. I

heard her singing opera in a deep baroque voice once and it's obvious she wasn't born here, but where was she born, and when? If someone had told me this story at work, I wouldn't have believed it. A man like me. The person in charge of the X-ray department at the city's health clinic. A radiologist who graduated from the public university, class of '83. Married with a daughter who's different, who has special needs. An easy-going guy, a man of the house. Born and raised in the city closest to here. Born and raised in the city closest to here. A man who spent all his childhood and teenage years in the same flat in the same region in the centre of the country. Spellbound by a woman who wears flared skirts and spends her afternoons sprawled out like an amphibian on her lawn. I see her for as long as the slowest speed of my motorcycle allows. Those few fatal seconds. I think about her and heave with desire. A man like me, not particularly good, but not the devil either. A man like me who enjoys running his fingers through his wife's soft hair, who makes love to her slowly, respecting her moods and her menstrual cycle, and only when our little girl's asleep. A sharp, fun guy who doesn't overcomplicate things. And now the hazard lights are on and I've pulled up on the side of the road. I'm hounded by this dryness in my mouth, knowing that on my way home I'll pass her front gate and see her there among the flowers. Those images that will then last the ten miles separating her from my house. Furious images stuck to my palate. Her among the thorns, a dream-like orange vision, and me a crazy fox on the roadside. The farms and animal pens pass by, first I hear clucking and then I see the chicken coop. The same people as always say hello with their hands in the earth or on a cow's udders or holding some shears up in a tree. This familiar setting with its farm equipment, cow dung, poultry houses and hunting dogs is spoilt by the image I drag home with me like a piece of rubbish. The image that grows inside me, causing chaos. The horror of this desire. Wanting to skin, to flay, to escape what pursues me. I wave to my beautiful wife who's pulling up weeds with her garden gloves, but the image continues to follow me when I park and go inside. An aura expanding. My tree, insipid and leafless, becomes voluptuous. And she's with me when I hold my daughter in my arms. Even when I put food in her little mouth and bathe her. And beyond. Far beyond. Today at dawn I cried for her on the kitchen floor, pounding the tiles with my fists and longing to have her finger bones, her hips, the flesh of her buttocks here with me. I fooled myself believing this was the lowest I could go. An image poisons you: the eyes of an owl, and just like that, it's too late. I push her up against the wall, undo her bun with my teeth and strangle her with my kisses.

[...]

I use my sleeping husband's hand to touch myself. He's not looking at me, he's dreaming. He uses my dead hand to touch himself. I'm not looking at him, I'm



asleep. We're in separate bedrooms, on separate mattresses. There's been a mistake. We're not meant to be one. No one wants to be a Siamese twin, to have their organs stuck to someone else's. He smiles while he dreams. I don't make him smile. I swear at him. I punch him, on the shoulder, in the face. He's had it up to here with me and vice versa. We're too much for each other but we carry on. I give him the finger, fuck you, as soon as I get up. Morning, what do you want for breakfast? My outstretched finger in his face. I'd love to break his teeth. The restless child is singing softly between his mum and dad. Who do you love more? asks his Dad, about to explode any second. Is it so difficult for him to say how was your day yesterday? Apparently it is. How was your day yesterday? I ask myself, and answer, fine thanks. I proceed to tell myself about my day, chatting away. I leave the table and he eats my croissant and finishes my coffee. He lets me go, obviously, but then he regrets it and bursts out, You're evil, leading me into the pastures where the vegetation is taller than us. He doesn't give in. He makes me walk blindly, the grasses hitting me in the face like thistles, like the bones of a skeleton. Then he decides to take advantage of the situation and presses himself up against me, but it doesn't go anywhere, and he pushes me further in. I start to speak, I don't know what words come out of my mouth but I keep them coming and he tells me, When you speak it's like the car alarm, it goes on and on, it's unbearable. So I carry on speaking, and now I'm shouting, though I don't know when I raised my voice. Can't you speak without shouting? Can't you give the verbal diarrhoea a rest? He doesn't understand that I can't. Control yourself, he says, I don't understand a thing when you speak non-stop. Why don't you take a pronunciation course? Why don't you do a language exchange with a local? We stop somewhere. Now what? But when I go to say something he snaps at me and walks a few feet away to where I can't see him. I press my fists into my eye sockets. It hurts. What's the point of crying? I'm a startled deer, a sad, sensitive deer. A cool breeze picks up. He doesn't come back to me, but he hasn't left either. I'm just another patch of grass. Nothing happens until suddenly we hear grunts and mooing. I run around in circles and end up on the streaked tarmac. He's there too, watching the show. The cows have been separated from their calves, when just a second ago they were all grazing together quietly, stuffing their faces. These bovine mothers are causing a massive scene, mooing so loudly they grow hoarse, doing everything they can to resist. But their babies get taken away just the same. See you later, calves, I say, waving goodbye. Bon voyage. The cows are still there by the side of the road, stunned. The vultures arrive in time for lunch with their collars of feathers, holding their cutlery and napkins. We go home together, arms around each other. We love each other so much. We sing a catchy little ditty, *why oh why, tell me why could it be, that when a cow's tied up, her calf won't leave. Someone else's misfortune is a swift kick from a horse.*

## Christine Brooke-Rose

A fly straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over the knee. Sooner or later, the knee will have to make a move, but now it is immobilised by the two flies, the lower of which is so still that it seems dead. The fly on top is on the contrary quite agitated, jerking tremulously, then convulsively, putting out its left foreleg to whip, or maybe to stroke some sort of reaction out of the fly beneath, which, however, remains so still that it seems dead. A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy in its innumerable eyes, but only to the human mind behind the microscope, and besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the flies. Sooner or later some such interruption will be inevitable; there will be an itch to scratch or a nervous movement to make or even a bladder to go and empty. But now there is only immobility. The fly on top is now perfectly still also. Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary, a bowl of gruel to be eaten, for instance, or a conversation to undergo. Sooner or later a bowl of gruel will be brought, unless perhaps it has already been brought, and the time has come to go and get rid of it, in which case—

— Would you rather have your gruel now or when I come back from Mrs. Mgulu?

That question is inevitable, but will not necessarily occur in that precise form.

— Two flies are making love on my knee.

— Flies don't make love. They have sexual intercourse.

— On the contrary.

— You mean they make love but don't have sexual intercourse?

— I mean it's human beings who have sexual intercourse but don't make love.

— Very witty. But you are talking to yourself. This dialogue will not necessarily occur.

The straddled fly stretches out its forelegs and rubs them together, but the fly in top is perfectly still. Soon the itch will have to be scratched.

— Hello, is there anyone there? It's Mrs. Tom.

— Who is it? Oh, hello, Mrs. Tom, did you get my message?



— Yes, that's why I came, and how are you?

— I was delayed this morning by Mrs. Ned's tub, it was broken you see, so I was too late to catch Mrs. Jim. But Mr. Marburg the butler kindly offered to get in touch with you.

The itch is scratched very gently, so as not to disturb the flies. The fly on top trembles, quivers and sags, then stretches out its left foreleg to flicker some reaction out of the straddled fly, which, however, is now quite still. Sooner or later the knee's immobility will undergo a mutation, a muscle will twitch and the flies will be disturbed. But for the moment they are dead to the world, even to the commotion made at the door by the coming interruption, the question which sooner or later must occur, in some form or another.

— That was Mrs. Tom.

— I know, I heard her.

— She got my message in spite of everything. You see I was late at Mrs. Mgu-lu's this morning, on account of Mrs. Ned's tub.

— Look, two flies are making love on my knee.

\*\*\*

The squint seems bluer today, and wider. The pale eye that doesn't move is fixed on the two flies, but the mobile eye wriggles away from them, it's blue mobility calling out the blueness of the temple veins and a hint of blue in the white skin around. Then this eye too remains fixed, reproachful perhaps.

— Mrs. Mgu-lu looks quite ill you know, at least, as far as one can tell, with that wonderfully black skin. Yesterday apparently the doctor changed all her medicines, so she said I could have her old ones. This one is for the thyroid. And this one's for the duodenum, look.

— Don't come too near, you'll frighten them.

The pale eye stands guard over the flies. The other moves along the print.

— *Duodenica* is an oral antacid buffer specially prepared for easy absorption by the sick the aged and the very young its gentle action provides continuous antacid action without alkalinisation or fluctuation reducing gastric acidity to an equatable level of pH4 which is sufficient to relieve pain and discomfort with practically no interference with the secretory balance of the stomach or other normal digestive mechanism. *Duodenica* is particularly recommended in cases of over-alcoholisation supersatiation ulceration hyper-acidity dyspepsia *Duodenica* is NOT a drug one capsule twice a day during or after meals NOT to be taken without a doctor's prescription.

In the sudden silence the fly on top is very still, so still that it seems dead under that pale policing eye.

— Would you rather have your gruel now or in a little while? It makes no difference to me, I have things to do.

\*\*\*

— Sooner or later I shall have to disturb them.

The mobile eye shifts towards the knee and back, but the two flies lie quite still, as if dead to that extra light of awareness briefly upon them.

— Where's your fly-swatter? Ah, here.

— Don't! ... frighten them.

— There's hundreds of eggs in that fly. Think of the summer. It's the winter flies you have to kill. Well I'll leave the thyroid thing with you, and the *Duodenica*. There are some suppositories too, let's see, anti-infectious therapeutic and tonifying by means of bacteriostatic properties of four sulphonamides selected among the most active and least toxic, together with—ah no, that's for dogs, how silly of me.

The winter flies lie quite still, dead to the removal of that pale light of awareness briefly upon them. Sooner or later there will be a movement to make, a bladder to go and empty and a bowl of gruel to go and eat. The fly-swatter is made of bright red plastic. Through it, the high small window looks trellised in red, a darker red against the light, almost a wine red. Through the trellis the winter sky is blue and pale, paler than the summer sky. But it is difficult to re-visualise the exact degree of blueness in the summer sky without interposing picture postcards as sold in the city streets. No sky is as blue as that, not even here in the South. It is difficult to re-imagine the exact degree of heat, and picture postcards are cold. The winter flies lie quite still, dead to their present framing in a circle of dark red plastic, dead to the removal of the red plastic frame around the light of awareness on them. Sooner or later they must be interrupted, but now there is only immobility.

The knee lowers itself gently, an earth transferred, a mountain moved by faith. The leg stretches slowly to a horizontal position. The elbows on which the recumbent body rests have to straighten out so that the body can rise from the mattress on the floor, using the hands to lean on. In the process the knees bend up again slightly. The winter flies take off, locked in a lurching flight, at eye-level, then, together still, they sway up towards the high small window a long way from



the floor, and land their conjugal bodies on the transverse bar, where they lie very quiet, so quiet they might be dead.

Even at eye-level the flies lies quiet on the transverse bar, so quiet they might be dead.

The kitchen door is framed by the bedroom door. At the end of the short dark passage, almost cubic in its brevity, the kitchen through the open door seems luminous, apparently framed in red. The doors however are of rough dark wood. The walls of the passage are at right angles when curving is desired.

The circle of steaming gruel in the bowl is greyish white and pimply.

A conversation occurs.

A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy among the innumerable white globules in the circle of gruel, but only to the human mind behind the microscope. And besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the globules. If, indeed, the gruel hadn't been eaten by then, in which case a gastroscope would be more to the point. And a gastroscope at that juncture of the gruel's journey would provoke nausea.

## IN THE HEART OF THE GUINEA PIG DARKNESS

(2015)

Aase Berg

Translated by Johannes Göransson

The gorge is swarming with guinea pigs. They crawl on each other like spiders: here in the gorge, here in the stack, here in the heart of the guinea-pig darkness. The gorge is swarming with guinea pigs, and we run, you and I, with your soft wax skin and our love. We run in the tunnels and the rumbling water chases us in a wave of guinea pigs rolling against each other. Jupiter hangs heavy and cruel up there in the firmament, and nervespies lurk behind every evil corner. Guinea pigs are swarming. They are born, they hatch, out of caves and holes. The guinea pigs are swarming and crawling around on the gigantic guinea-pig queen's sensitive, swollen egg-white body. She gives birth and groans, she moans and bleeds. Everywhere the membranes, everywhere their bloated puffbellies. We run with the heart in the tunnel, you and I, while nervous systems break down behind us, while the amniotic fluid surges in the pumping, pulsing chasm. Rotting acids and guinea-pig lymph are streaming yes streaming down the walls. Guinea pigs are thronging. Here they come and get us! Now they're opening us up, now they're swallowing us with their pink flesh organs. Now I love you and now I fear you, and now I finally roll out your guinea-pig body on the baking sheet. And you lean back and let your skin grow into the stinking cell plasma of the guinea-pig wall, my beautiful traitor, and the guinea pigs swarm all the way into the depth of your treacherous guinea-pig organism.



Pierre Klossowski

Translated by Austryn Wainhouse

*The Rule of Hospitality.*

The master of this house, having no greater nor more pressing concern than to shed the warmth of his joy at evening upon whomever comes to dine at his table and to rest under his roof from a day's wearying travel, waits anxiously at the gate for the stranger he will see appear like a liberator upon the horizon. And catching a first glimpse of him in the distance, though he be still far off, the master will call out to him, "Come in quickly, my happiness is at stake." This is why the master will be grateful in advance to anybody who, rather than considering hospitality as an accident in the souls of him and of her who offer it, shall take it as the very essence of the host and hostess, the stranger in his guest's capacity partaking of this essence. For with the stranger he welcomes, the master of the house seeks a no longer accidental, but an essential relationship.

At the start the two are but isolated substances, between them there is none but accidental communication: you who believe yourself far from home in the home of someone you believe to be at home, you bring merely the accidents of your substance, such accidents as conspire to make a stranger of you, to him who bids you avail yourself of all that makes a merely accidental host of him. But because the master of this house herewith invites the stranger to penetrate to the source of all substances beyond the realm of all accident, this is how he inaugurates a substantial relationship between himself and the stranger, which will be not a relative relationship but an absolute one, as though, the master becoming one with the stranger, his relationship with you who have just set foot here were now but a relationship of one with oneself.

To this end the host translates himself into the actual guest. Or, if you prefer, he actualizes a possibility of the guest quite as you, the guest, actualize a possibility of the host. The host's most eminent gratification has for its object the actualization in the mistress of the house of the inactual essence of the hostess. Now upon whom is this duty incumbent if not upon the guest? Does this mean that the master of the house might expect betrayal at the hands of the mistress of the house? Now it seems that the essence of the hostess, such as the host visualizes

it, would in this sense be undetermined and contradictory. For either the essence of the hostess is constituted by her fidelity to the host, and in this case she eludes him the more he wishes to know her in the opposite state of betrayal, for she would be unable to betray him in order to be faithful to him; or else the essence of the hostess is really constituted by infidelity and then the host would cease to have any part in the essence of the hostess who would be susceptible of belonging, accidentally, as mistress of the house, to some one or other of the guests.

The notion of mistress of the house reposes upon an existential basis; she is a hostess only upon an essential basis: this essence is therefore subjected to restraint by her actual existence as mistress of the house. And here the sole function of betrayal, we see, is to lift this restraint. If the essence of the hostess lies in fidelity to the host, this authorizes the host to cause the hostess, essential in the existent mistress of the house, to manifest herself before the eyes of the guests; for the host in playing host must accept the risks of the game, and these include the consequences of his wife's strict application of the rules of hospitality and of the fact that she dare not be unmindful of her essence, composed of fidelity to the host, for fear that in the arms of the inactual guest come here to actualize her *qua* hostess, the mistress of the household exist only traitorously.

If the essence of the hostess lay in infidelity, the outcome of the game would be a foregone conclusion and the host the loser before it starts. But the host wishes to experience the risk of losing and feels that losing rather than winning in advance, he will, at whatever the cost, grasp the essence of the hostess in the infidelity of the mistress of the house. For to possess the faithless one *qua* hostess faithfully fulfilling her duties, that is what he is after. Hence by means of the guest he wishes to actualize something potential in the mistress of the house: an actual hostess in relation to this guest, an inactual mistress of the house in relation to the host.

If the hostess' essence remains thus indeterminate, because to the host it seems that something of the hostess might escape him in the event this essence were nothing but pure fidelity on the part of the mistress of the house, the essence of the host is proposed as a homage of the host's curiosity to the essence of the hostess. Now this curiosity, as a potentiality of the hospitable soul, can have no proper existence except in that which would look to the hostess, were she naive, like suspicion or jealousy. The host however is neither suspicious nor jealous, because he is essentially curious about that very thing which, in everyday life, would make a master of the house suspicious, jealous, unbearable.

Let the guest not be the least bit uneasy; above all let him not suppose he could ever constitute the cause for any jealousy or suspicion when there is not even anyone to feel these sentiments. In reality the guest is anything but that;



for it is owing to the absence of cause for jealousy and suspicion, which are not otherwise determined than by this absence, that the guest is going to emerge from his stranger's accidental relationship to enjoy an essential relationship with the hostess whose essence he shares with the host.

The host's essence—hospitality—rather than being confined to impulses of jealousy or suspicion, aspires to convert into a presence the absence of cause of these impulses, and to actualize itself in that cause. Let the guest understand his role well: let him then fearlessly excite the host's curiosity by that jealousy and that suspicion, worthy in the master of the house but unworthy of a host; the latter enjoins the guest loyally to do his utmost; in this competition let them surpass each other in subtlety: let the host put the guest's discretion to the test, the guest make proof of the host's curiosity: the term generosity has no place here, it is without meaning in the discussion, since everything is generosity, and everything is also greed, but let the guest take all due care lest this jealousy or this suspicion grow to such proportions in the host that no room is left for his curiosity; for it is upon this curiosity the guest will depend in order to display his abilities.

If the host's curiosity aspires to actualize itself in the absent cause, how does he hope to convert this absence into presence unless it be that he awaits the visitation of an angel? Solicited by the host's piety, the angel is capable of concealing himself in the guise of a guest—is it you?—whom the host believes fortuitous. To what extent will the angel actualize in the mistress of the house the essence of the hostess such as the host is prone to visualize it, when this essence is known to none but him who beyond all being knows? By inclining the host farther and farther, for the guest, be he angel or no, is only inclination in the host: learn, dear guest, that neither the host, nor yourself, nor again the hostess herself knows the essence of the hostess; surprised by you she will attempt to find herself in the host who then will no longer hold her back: but who, knowing her in your arms, will hold himself richer in his treasure than ever.

In order that the host's curiosity not degenerate into jealousy or suspicion, it is for you, the guest, to discern the hostess' essence in the mistress of the house, for you to cast her forth from potentiality into existence: either the hostess remains sheer phantasm and you a stranger in this house if you leave to the host the in actualized essence of the hostess; or else you are indeed that angel, and by your presence you give an actuality to the hostess: you shall have full power over her as well as over the host. And so, cherished guest, you can't help but see that it is in your best interest to fan the host's curiosity to the point where the mistress of the house, driven out of herself, will be completely actualized in an existence which shall be determined by you alone, by you, the guest, and not by the host's curiosity. Where upon the host shall be master in his house no more: he shall have carried out his mission. In his turn he shall have become the guest.

## THE TWO PEASANTS

(13th century)

Guatier le Leu

Trans. Nathaniel Dubin

They both had risen with the sun and traveled far ere day was done, so, when they found a place to stay, so tired and tuckered out were they, the older of them was so bushed, he was at once both pale and flushed and couldn't eat at all that night, nor could they whet his appetite by any means. The tender heart (he scraped away the outer part) of two cabbage stems and one roast turnip was all he ate, at most.

The other man ate his fair share—he, unlike his friend, was not so weary—and then they lay down side by side in bed, sleepy and satisfied, where they slept on soundly and tight till past the middle of the night, when the older peasant awoke, who'd felt so tired, he thought he'd croak.

He nudged his partner there in bed. "Psst, are you listening?" he said. "I am so famished, I don't doubt that I am ready to pass out or maybe go stark raving mad. Is there anything to be had that you know of, vittles or bread?"

The younger peasant racks his head and tells him, "Friend, I don't see how at any price I'd find bread now unless I go and wake my host and strain myself to the utmost, which surely wouldn't be polite, but half a pot remained last night of a thick milk and batter gruel.

Just lie here patiently. If you'll behave yourself and keep your calm, I'll hurry up and get you some, and you can have your fill of what —'s left over if I find the pot."

Then he rose, naked as a jay-bird, and to the stores made his way and searched till he found the pot and reached out, lifting up his right hand, and grabbed the ladle by the stem and picked it up, filled to the brim (they'd left it standing in the gruel), and, with the ladle overfull, he then proceeded to return, but doing so took a wrong turn, for unfamiliar with the lay-out there, in the end he went way off left and came to his host's bed. "Can you hear me?" he softly said. "See here: I've brought it as agreed."

Off the edge of the bed, where she'd moved it, the wife's ass hung undraped. Between her cheeks her asshole gaped, but since her sleep was so profound, the woman didn't hear a sound



the lad made, lost in an entrancing dream in which she had gone out dancing.

What's more, she'd turned away her face.

Hear what's in store now from the Fates!

The boy who for the gruel had gone was Roger de la Porte's own son and thus related to his host.

When he made out the woman's posterior dimly in the gloom, he naturally did assume that this must be his hungry friend.

He placed his hand on her rear end and, feeling the hair there on her, he, since his friend's bearded, too, and furry, has come to the right place, he knows.

Close to her hole he moved his nose, and softly, hearing that it uttered not a sound, to himself he muttered, "I knew it; he is in a faint.

It's clear to me his hunger's gained the upper hand. I'll pull him through't without recourse to herb or root."

He then proceeded to bestow on it three kisses in a row.

He did this to revive the man, as one often sees happen when his or her friends standing about will kiss a person who's passed out.

No sooner did he start to kiss her than wind broke forth out of the fissure, gusty and loud, as if to cool (he thought) the ladleful of gruel.

"No need to blow on it, you old scoundrel," he tells him, "since it's cold. You're not so hungry, then, I see. You think it's Mr. Lanfroy's tree? What oughtn't to be done, you do. Last night I clearly saw you chew those turnips and the cabbage stalks. As for your breath, it really irks me, for it's more malodorous and fetid than a parsnip is. Your wife can't help but love another. If Robert Lopart is her lover, he's quite the handsome man, he is, so why should I be secretive?

Men who stink should be cuckolded. Then blow again, her bowel did, right in the fellow's nose, and he wrenched his head back spasmodically.

"You lousy cuckold," says the lad, "an asshole doesn't smell as bad as you. By Saint Germain, I swear if you don't get your ass in gear, I'll punch you squarely in the nose."

At that instant her ass explodes and thunders forth a hearty one. The lad says, "He's leading me on, making me listen to his bleating!"

He swings the ladle at her, beating and striking her across her bottom, so even her private parts got some, because the gruel spreads out and leaks across and down her nether cheeks.

The woman then woke with a start because her dreams pressed on her hard.

Her fundament, completely soiled, dripping with porridge and befouled, she shoved against her husband's lap, who took offense at all that crap when he awoke and felt it there.

He says, "We are disgraced, I swear! Madam Mainsent, what's on your ass? I wish I were off in Alsace or far off in the Alps. Oh, this is a dirty trick, a loathsome business. If ever your relations knew about this, and the neighbors, too, you'd be degraded shamefully, both you and all your family."

When the young man heard what he said, he made his way back to his bed, feeling and groping with his right arm in the darkness of the night. He told his friend the accident. Their worthy host meanwhile went and drew a bath, and they scrubbed down.

The men, when morning came around, got up and took leave of their host,

who, being courteous and most well brought up, wished them both Godspeed and handed them two loaves that he'd for them as a gift of farewell.

Humbled before her man as well as shamed, the woman's ill at ease, for, thinking she had lain so, she's of the opinion that she had really done something foul and bad, since in her sleep she'd dreamt she did.

After the two peasants had bid their host farewell, they turned and went back where they'd come from: Ostrevant.



Michel Serres

Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr

## Rats' Meals / Cascades

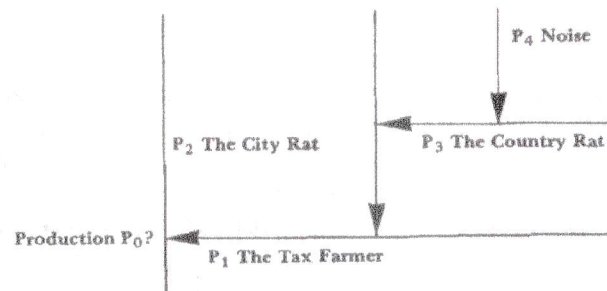
The city rat invites the country rat onto the Persian rug. They gnaw and chew leftover bits of ortolan. Scraps, bits and pieces, leftovers: their royal feast is only a meal after a meal among the dirty dishes of a table that has not been cleared. The city rat has produced nothing and his dinner invitation costs him almost nothing, Boursault says this in his *Fables d'Esoppe*, where the city rat lives in the house of a big tax farmer. Oil, butter, ham, bacon, cheese—everything is available. It is easy to invite the country cousin and regale oneself at the expense of another.

The tax farmer produced neither oil nor ham nor cheese; in fact, he produced nothing. But using the power of the law, he can profit from these products. Likewise for the city rat who takes the farmer's leftovers. And the last to profit is the country rat. But we know that the feast is cut short. The two companions scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? \* A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. Let's go to the country where we eat only soup, but quietly and without interruption.

The tax farmer is a parasite, living off the fat of the land: a royal feast, ortolans, Persian rugs. The first rat is a parasite: for him, leftovers, the same Persian rug. Nothing is missing, says La Fontaine. At the tables of the first, the table of the farmer, the second rat is a parasite. He permits himself to be entertained in such a fashion, never missing a bite. But strictly speaking, they all interrupt: the custom

\* here Serres puns on the multiples meanings of the french word *parasite*. From the translator's preface: "In French, the word has three meanings: a biological parasite; a social parasite, and static. The English *parasite* corresponds only to the first two meanings in French. Thus the reader should always be aware of this additional resource in the French that is not translatable into English."

house officer makes life hard for the working man, the rat taxes the farmer, the guest exploits his host. But I can no longer write; the noise, the ultimate parasite, through it's interruption, wins the game. In the parasitic chain, the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor. The noise chases the country rat; the city rat remains, for he wants to finish the roast. A given parasite seeks to eject the parasite on the level immediately superior to his own. The following shows the cascade which collapses when  $P_1 = P_4$ .



I leave it to you to think about the loud noise: the sounds of the street which would makes the tax farmer give in; the creaking of the floorboards, the cracking of the beams, which would chase the rats from the building.

Let's draw up the balance. In the beginning is production: the oil crusher, the smokehouse, the cheese-maker's hut. Yet I would still like to know what *produce* means. Those who call production reproduction make the job easy. The world is full of copiers and repeaters, all highly rewarded with money and glory. It is better to interpret than to compose; it is better to have an opinion on a decision that has already been made than to make one's own. The modern illness is the engulfing of the new in the *duplicata*, the engulfing of intelligence in the pleasure [*jouissance*] of the homogeneous. Real production is undoubtedly rare, for it attracts parasites that immediately make it something common and banal. Real production is unexpected and improbable; it overflows with information and is always immediately parasited.

It attracts the farmer, whom I catch in the act of stealing (away). If he is a peasant, he raises cows and calves, pigs and poultry, living on butter and ham, eating at a table furnished with other foodstuffs; sometimes he sleeps in the barn, in the manure, among the livestock; he does not destroy non-renewable resources, like a vulgar industrialist, but lives off the newborn. Industry pillages and plunders. Such a farmer is part of a matrix. Is he a parasite? If he is a tax-collector (an interrupter), he takes part of the products of others for his own profit or for the profit



of the state to whom he respectfully defers. He is a veritable impostor.\*\* His table abounds with cheeses, ham, bacon, butter, all produced by the first farmer. The situation repeats itself throughout history, for history has never lacked for political parasites. History is full of them, or maybe is made solely of them. Dinner is served among the parasites.

[...]

To parasite means to eat next to. Let us begin with this literal meaning. The country rat is invited by his colleague from town, who offers him supper. One would think that what is essential is their relation of resemblance or difference. But that is not enough; it never was. The relation of the guest is no longer simple. Giving or receiving, on the rug or on the tablecloth, goes through a black box. I don't know what happens there but it functions like an automatic corrector. There is no exchange, nor will there be one. Abuse appears before use. Gifted in some fashion, the one eating next to, soon eating at the expense of, always eats the same thing, the host, and this eternal host gives over and over, constantly till he breaks, even till death, drugged, enchanted, fascinated. The host is not prey, for he offers and continues to give. Not a prey, but the host. The other one is not a predator but a parasite. Would you say that a mother's breast is the child's prey? It is more or less the child's home. But this relation is of the simplest sort; there is none simpler or easier: it always goes in the same direction. The same one is the host: the same one takes and eats; there is no change of direction. This is true of all beings. Of lice and men.

\*\* The word imposteur means both "tax collector" and "impostor."—Trans.

## THE FLEA

(1633)

John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,  
Yet this enjoys before it woo,  
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,  
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,  
Where we almost, nay more than married are.  
This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;  
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.  
Though use make you apt to kill me,  
Let not to that, self-murder added be,  
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since  
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?  
Wherein could this flea guilty be,  
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?  
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou  
Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;  
'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:  
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,  
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.



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