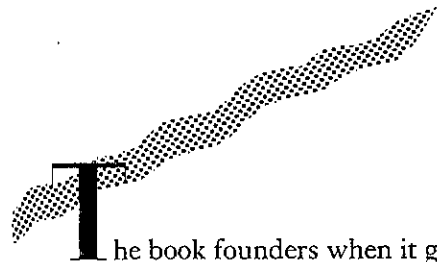


Guatemala

RODRIGO REY ROSA

The Book



The book founders when it goes needlessly into the relation of certain pleasures.

Before the start of the voyage, it tells of a bathroom. It describes the hot water issuing from the tap, and it pauses to recall the sound it made. It speaks of the light coming in through the window and of soapsuds and of the memories that return as he bathes.

Afterward, or even during the bath, someone knocks at the door. He is handed a letter which he reads quickly. He dresses and eats something, packs a valise and takes some money from a box. Then he goes to see the friend who sent him the letter.

They talk a while, he spends the night there, and early the following morning he leaves from a port.

Days later he arrives in a city he calls Ogman. He decides to stop over there, in order to summon up memories of the sound an anchor makes as it drops into the water, and the sound made by the chains that attach a ship to the dock.

The port looks like a market. Without his being aware of it, a boy, or a youth with the face of a boy, dark-skinned, is wait-

ing for him. He calls him by name. Then he leads him far down a narrow alley, until they reach a blue door in a white wall. Surely he is afraid. He mentions many dark eyes and strange smells. They have walked for two hours before arriving at the door, and the author busies himself noting down what he sees: rare plants, dissected snakes, dried roses, and the recently severed heads of goats or sheep, women with everything covered save their eyes, incenses of various hues, and swords and daggers adorned with skins and precious stones. They stop and his guide gives four raps on the door.

There is something different and unexpected in that house. Music sounds continuously. As one listens to it, one becomes confused. The old man who opened the door asks him to sit down at the table, scarcely distinguishable from the floor. Presently he brings a bottle of something dark, along with two identical stone mugs. He fills them and swallows the contents of one, gesturing to the other man to do likewise.

Although at first he was pleased by the interior lighting, it now begins to bother him. When he looks at his host, it seems to him that the man's gaze pierces his skin.

Still neither one of them speaks. Suddenly he feels the need of viewing himself in a mirror; he glances around the room, but sees none.

The old man gets up and goes into the adjoining room. The house has no doors between the rooms—only weighted curtains.

The music is dying away. The light grows feeble: one can sense the arrival of night. From behind the curtain in the next room a voice begins to intone. The rhythm and some of the melody he recognizes, but he is unable to make out the words. He stands up and the voice grows clearer. The curtain moves slightly, as if stirred by the wind. Then it seems to him that he is looking at a girl, and he confuses her silhouette with the shadow of the old man. He takes a step forward, his vision clouds, and the shadow and the silhouette disappear. At that point the book ends.

Translated by Paul Bowles

CRAZY GLUE

Etgar Keret

She said, "Don't touch that."
"What is it?" I asked.
"It's glue," she said. "Special glue. The best kind."
"What did you buy it for?"
"Because I need it," she said. "A lot of things around here need gluing."
"Nothing around here needs gluing," I said. "I wish I understood why you buy all this stuff."
"For the same reason I married you," she murmured. "To help pass the time."
I didn't want to fight, so I kept quiet, and so did she.
"Is it any good, this glue?" I asked. She showed me the picture on the box, with this guy hanging upside down from the ceiling.

"No glue can really make a person stick like that," I said. "They just took the picture upside down. They must have put a light fixture on the floor." I took the box from her and peered at it. "And there, look at the window. They didn't even bother to hang the blinds the other way. They're upside down, if he's really standing on the ceiling. Look," I said again, pointing to the window. She didn't look.

"It's eight already," I said. "I've got to run." I picked up my briefcase and kissed her on the cheek "I'll be back pretty late. I'm working—"

"Overtime," she said. "Yes, I know."

I CALLED ABBY from the office.

"I can't make it today," I said. "I've got to get home early."

"Why?" Abby asked. "Something happen?"

"No . . . I mean, maybe. I think she suspects something."

There was a long silence. I could hear Abby's breathing on the other end.

"I don't see why you stay with her," she whispered. "You never do anything together. You don't even fight. I'll never understand it." There was a pause, and then she repeated, "I wish I understood." She was crying.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Abby. Listen, someone just came in," I lied. "I've got to hang up. I'll come over tomorrow. I promise. We'll talk about everything then."

I GOT HOME EARLY. I said "Hi" as I walked in, but there was no reply. I went through all the rooms in the house. She wasn't in any of them. On the kitchen table I found the tube of glue, completely empty. I tried to move one of the chairs, to sit down. It didn't budge. I tried again. Not an inch. She'd glued it to the floor. The fridge wouldn't open. She'd glued it shut. I didn't understand what

was happening, what would make her do such a thing. I didn't know where she was. I went into the living room to call her mother's. I couldn't lift the receiver; she'd glued that too. I kicked the table and almost broke my toe. It didn't even budge.

And then I heard her laughing. It was coming from somewhere above me. I looked up, and there she was, standing barefoot on the living room ceiling.

I stared openmouthed. When I found my voice I could only ask, "What the hell . . . are you out of your mind?"

She didn't answer, just smiled. Her smile seemed so natural, with her hanging upside down like that, as if her lips were just stretching on their own by the sheer force of gravity.

"Don't worry, I'll get you down," I said, hurrying to the shelf and grabbing the largest books. I made a tower of encyclopedia volumes and clambered on top of the pile.

"This may hurt a little," I said, trying to keep my balance. She went on smiling. I pulled as hard as I could, but nothing happened. Carefully, I climbed down.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll get the neighbors or something. I'll go next door and call for help."

"Fine," she laughed. "I'm not going anywhere."

I laughed too. She was so pretty, and so incongruous, hanging upside down from the ceiling that way. With her long hair dangling downwards, and her breasts molded like two perfect teardrops under her white T-shirt. So pretty. I climbed back up onto the pile of books and kissed her. I felt her tongue on mine. The books tumbled out from under my feet, but I stayed floating in midair, hanging just from her lips.

China

BAI XIAO-YI

The Explosion in the Parlor

The host poured tea into the cup and placed it on the small table in front of his guests, who were a father and daughter, and put the lid on the cup with a clink. Apparently thinking of something, he hurried into the inner room, leaving the thermos on the table. His two guests heard a chest of drawers opening and a rustling.

They remained sitting in the parlor, the ten-year-old daughter looking at the flowers outside the window, the father just about to take his cup, when the crash came, right there in the parlor. Something was hopelessly broken.

It was the thermos, which had fallen to the floor. The girl looked over her shoulder abruptly, startled, staring. It was mysterious. Neither of them had touched it, not even a little bit. True, it hadn't stood steadily when their host placed it on the table, but it hadn't fallen then.

The crash of the thermos caused the host, with a box of sugar cubes in his hand, to rush back from the inner room. He gawked at the steaming floor and blurted out, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!"

The father started to say something. Then he muttered, "Sorry, I touched it and it fell."

"It doesn't matter," the host said.

Later, when they left the house, the daughter said, "Daddy, *did* you touch it?"

"No. But it stood so close to me."

"But you *didn't* touch it. I saw your reflection in the window-pane. You were sitting perfectly still."

The father laughed. "What then would you give as the cause of its fall?"

"The thermos fell by itself. The floor is uneven. It wasn't steady when Mr. Li put it there. Daddy, *why* did you say that you . . ."

"That won't do, girl. It sounds more acceptable when I say I knocked it down. There are things which people accept less the more you defend them. The truer the story you tell, the less true it sounds."

The daughter was lost in silence for a while. Then she said, "Can you explain it only this way?"

"Only this way," her father said.

Translated by Ding Zuxin

A Continuity of Parks

Translated by Paul Blackburn

He had begun to read the novel a few days before. He had put it down because of some urgent business conferences, opened it again on his way back to the estate by train; he permitted himself a slowly growing interest in the plot, in the characterizations. That afternoon, after writing a letter giving his power of attorney and discussing a matter of joint ownership with the manager of his estate, he returned to the book in the tranquillity of his study which looked out upon the park with its oaks. Sprawled in his favorite armchair, its back toward the door — even the possibility of an intrusion would have irritated him, had he thought of it — he let his left hand caress repeatedly the green velvet upholstery and set to reading the final chapters. He remembered effortlessly the names and his mental image of the characters; the novel spread its glamour over him almost at once. He tasted the almost perverse pleasure of disengaging himself line by line from the things around him, and at the same time feeling his head rest comfortably on the green velvet of the chair with its high back, sensing that the cigarettes rested within reach of his hand, that beyond the great windows the air of afternoon danced under the oak trees in the park. Word by word, caught up in the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting himself be absorbed to the point where the images settled down and took on color and movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin. The woman arrived first, apprehensive; now the lover came in, his face cut by the backlash of a branch. Admirably, she stanching the blood with her kisses, but he rebuffed her caresses, he had not come to perform again the ceremonies of a secret passion, protected by a world of dry leaves and furtive paths through the forest. The dagger warmed itself against his chest, and underneath liberty pounded, hidden close. A lustful, panting dialogue raced down the pages like a rivulet of snakes, and one felt it had all been decided from eternity. Even to those caresses which writhed about the lover's body, as though wishing to keep him there, to dissuade him from it; they sketched abominably the frame of that other body it was necessary to destroy. Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazards, possible mistakes. From this hour on, each instant had its use minutely assigned. The cold-blooded, twice-gone-over reexamination of the details was barely broken off so that a hand could caress a cheek. It was beginning to get dark.

Not looking at one another now, rigidly fixed upon the task which awaited them, they separated at the cabin door. She was to follow the trail that led north. On the path leading in the opposite direction, he turned for a moment to watch her running, her hair loosened and flying. He ran in turn, crouching among the trees and hedges until, in the yellowish fog of dusk, he could distinguish the avenue of trees which led up to the house. The doors

were not supposed to bark, they did not bark. The estate manager would not be there at this hour, and he was not there. He went up the three porch steps and entered. The woman's words reached him over the thudding of blood in his ears: first a blue chamber, then a hall, then a carpeted stairway. At the top, two doors. No one in the first room, no one in the second. The door of the salon, and then, the knife in hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel.

Brazil

CLARICE LISPECTOR

The Fifth Story

This story could be called "The Statues." Another possible title would be "The Killing." Or even "How to Kill Cockroaches." So I shall tell at least three stories, all of them true, because none of the three will contradict the others. Although they constitute one story, they could become a thousand and one, were I to be granted a thousand and one nights.

The first story, "How To Kill Cockroaches," begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches. A woman heard me complain. She gave me a recipe for killing them. I was to mix together equal quantities of sugar, flour and gypsum. The flour and sugar would attract the cockroaches, the gypsum would dry up their insides. I followed her advice. The cockroaches died.

The next story is really the first, and it is called "The Killing." It begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches. A woman heard me complain. The recipe follows. And then the killing takes place. The truth is that I had only complained in abstract terms about the cockroaches, for they were not even mine: they belonged to the ground floor and climbed up the pipes in the building into our apartment. It was only

when I prepared the mixture that they also became mine. On our behalf, therefore, I began to measure and weigh ingredients with greater concentration. A vague loathing had taken possession of me, a sense of outrage. By day, the cockroaches were invisible and no one would believe in the evil secret which eroded such a tranquil household. But if the cockroaches, like evil secrets, slept by day, there I was preparing their nightly poison. Meticulous, eager, I prepared the elixir of prolonged death. An angry fear and my own evil secret guided me. Now I coldly wanted one thing only: to kill every cockroach in existence. Cockroaches climb up the pipes while weary people sleep. And now the recipe was ready, looking so white. As if I were dealing with cockroaches as cunning as myself, I carefully spread the powder until it looked like part of the surface dust. From my bed, in the silence of the apartment, I imagined them climbing up one by one into the kitchen where darkness slept, a solitary towel alert on the clothesline. I awoke hours later, startled at having overslept. It was beginning to grow light. I walked across the kitchen. There they lay on the floor of the scullery, huge and brittle. During the night I had killed them. On our behalf, it was beginning to grow light. On a nearby hill, a cockerel crowed.

The third story which now begins is called "The Statues." It begins by saying that I had been complaining about the cockroaches. Then the same woman appears on the scene. And so it goes on to the point where I awake as it is beginning to grow light, and I awake still feeling sleepy and I walk across the kitchen. Even more sleepy is the scullery floor with its tiled perspective. And in the shadows of dawn, there is a purplish hue which distances everything; at my feet, I perceive patches of light and shade, scores of rigid statues scattered everywhere. The cockroaches that have hardened from core to shell. Some are lying upside down. Others arrested in the midst of some movement that will never be completed. In the mouths of some of the cock-

roaches, there are traces of white powder. I am the first to observe the dawn breaking over Pompei. I know what this night has been, I know about the orgy in the dark. In some, the gypsum has hardened as slowly as in some organic process, and the cockroaches, with ever more tortuous movements, have greedily intensified the night's pleasures, trying to escape from their insides. Until they turn to stone, in innocent terror and with such, but *such* an expression of pained reproach. Others—suddenly assailed by their own core, without even having perceived that their inner form was turning to stone!—these are suddenly crystallized, just like a word arrested on someone's lips: I love . . . The cockroaches, invoking the name of love in vain, sang on a summer's night. While the cockroach over there, the one with the brown antennae smeared with white, must have realized too late that it had become mummified precisely because it did not know how to use things with the gratuitous grace of the *in vain*: "It is just that I looked too closely inside myself! It is just that I looked too closely inside . . ." From my frigid height as a human being, I watch the destruction of a world. Dawn breaks. Here and there, the parched antennae of dead cockroaches quiver in the breeze. The cockerel from the previous story crows.

The fourth story opens a new era in the household. The story begins as usual: I was complaining about the cockroaches. It goes on up to the point when I see the statues in plaster of Paris. Inevitably dead. I look toward the pipes where this same night an infestation will reappear, swarming slowly upwards in Indian file. Should I renew the lethal sugar every night? like someone who no longer sleeps without the avidity of some rite. And should I take myself somnambulant out to the terrace early each morning? in my craving to encounter the statues which my perspiring night has erected. I trembled with a depraved pleasure at the vision of my double existence as a witch. I also trembled at

the sight of that hardening gypsum, the depravity of existence which would shatter my internal form.

The grim moment of choosing between two paths, which I thought would separate, convinced that any choice would mean sacrificing either myself or my soul. I chose. And today I secretly carry a plaque of virtue in my heart: "T's house has been disinfected."

The fifth story is called "Leibnitz and the Transcendence of Love in Polynesia." It begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches.

Translated by Giovanni Pontiero

Taiwan

YUAN CHIUNG-CHIUNG

A Lover's Ear

He noticed that she carried an earpick in her purse. She told him that her ears itched from time to time, and she carried it with her so she could clean her ears whenever she felt like it.

He asked her if she would mind cleaning his ears for him. They also itched from time to time.

The two of them had strong feelings for one another by this time, and they had already done a lot of things together.

In fact, she had used her earpick only on herself, never to clean anyone else's ears. She had always felt that cleaning someone else's ears was the height of intimacy—except, of course, when it was done professionally. Her own mother had been the only other person ever to clean her ears. It seemed to her that if a relationship was lacking either in passion or in trust, there was little chance that one person would clean the other's ears.

She giggled nervously. "Now?" she asked.

They had agreed to meet somewhere else this time, at some open, well-lighted place where there were lots of people. A public place. She had insisted on it. She had told him she didn't want to go to his place or to her place. There was so much passion in

YUAN / *A Lover's Ear*

their relationship at that point that whenever they were alone they fell immediately into each other's arms. That left them no time to do anything else.

He smiled in return. Taking her hand in his and holding it tightly, he looked her straight in the eye and said softly and a little conspiratorially: "Yes, now." The very same tone of voice he always used when he wanted to do *it*. He would say: "I want to put it in."

She could tell she was blushing. Two women at the next table were just then talking about a man. No more than three paces separated the two tables, so that every word the two women said came through as clear as a bell.

He was sitting opposite her, but fortunately the table was small. She told him to lay his head down on the table, the right side up. His large head took up nearly half the tabletop. Since it was right there in front of her, she could work on his ear with ease. She was able to look straight down into his ear canal. He had fleshy ears and a wide opening to his ear canal. It was strange how you could know absolutely everything about someone you were in love with, how you could see the most private parts of his body, yet surprisingly would never really notice his ears. Since the lighting was on the dim side, she couldn't see all that clearly as she cleaned his ear. She asked if she was hurting him. "No," he said.

When she had finished with the right ear, he turned his head to the other side. Neither of them spoke while she was cleaning his ear, so they could hear every word spoken at the next table. One of the women was saying to the other: "What in the world could have happened? With all that love, I just don't understand it." They were discussing a relationship that had gone sour for no apparent reason. She was concentrating so hard on cleaning his left ear that her eyes began to blur; just then her hand slipped. "Ouch!" he complained tenderly, as though the pain itself were

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an expression of love. "Oh-oh," she hastened to apologize. "I'm sorry." Drops of blood appeared on the inside wall of his ear. She didn't have the nerve to tell him. "I'm not going to do it anymore," was all she said.

He sat up and felt around in his ear with his pinky. His eyes narrowed as he savored the feeling. He then gave her the oddest look as he said: "That was sort of like putting it in, wasn't it?"

They broke up not long after that.

Their breakup was accompanied by a very unpleasant scene. It took her a long, long time to get over her feelings of loathing for him and pity for herself. Her only reaction to the news that he had gotten married was indifference—not a trace of emotion. He had become totally irrelevant to her life.

From now on, she reflected, his wife can clean his ears for him.

Inexplicably, this thought saddened her—she suddenly felt very, very sad.

Translated by Howard Goldblatt

