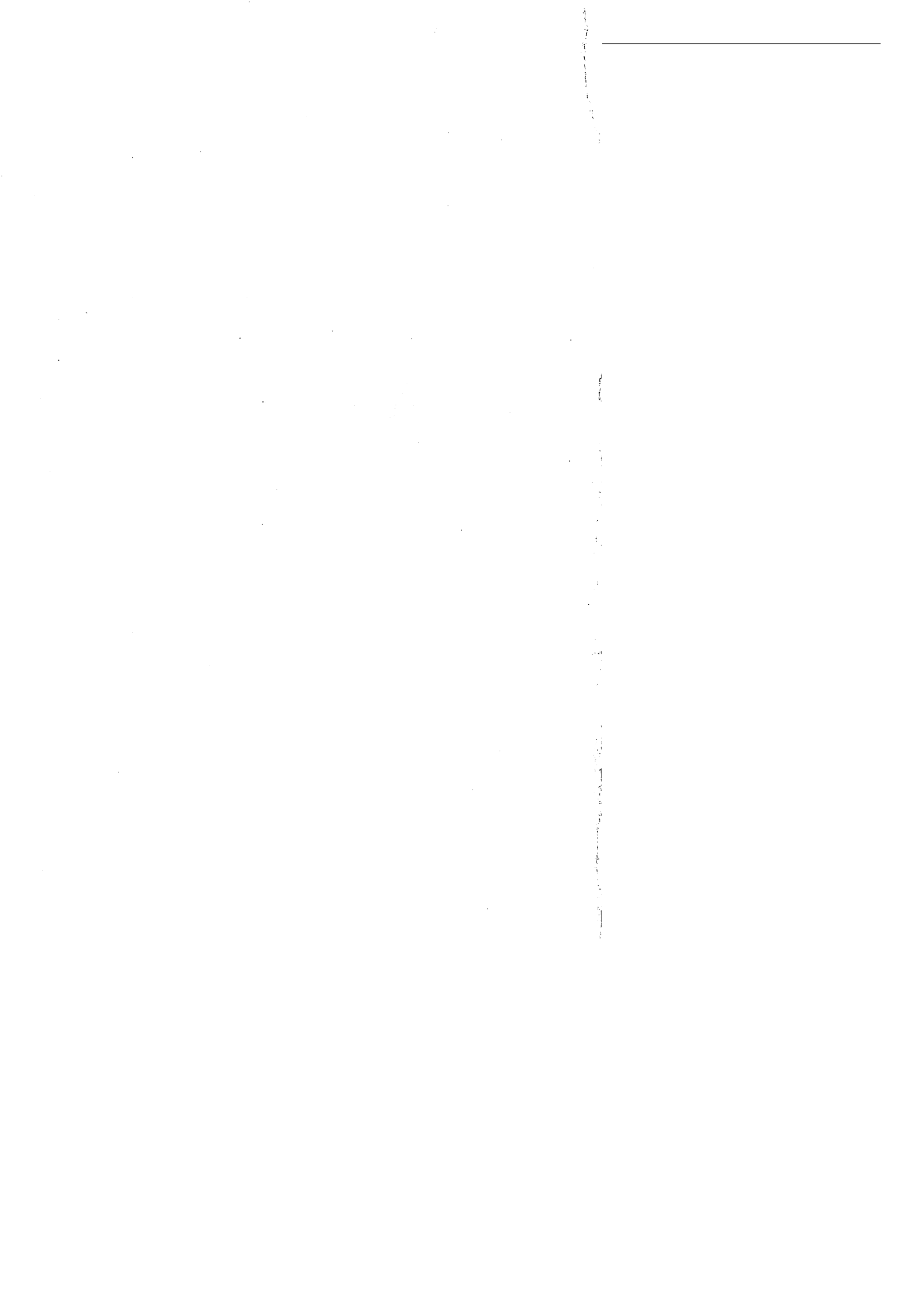

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IN THE FORESTS OF MANHATTAN



EMMANUEL HOCQUARD

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IN THE FORESTS OF MANHATTAN

TRANSLATED BY LYDIA DAVIS

THE MARLBORO PRESS

First English-language edition.

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Originally published in French under the title
AEREA DANS LES FORÊTS DE MANHATTAN

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The publication of the present volume has been made possible
in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.
The costs of translation have been met in part by a subvention
from the French Ministry of Culture.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 92-60853

Clothbound edition: ISBN 0-910395-88-8

Paperbound edition: ISBN 0-910395-89-6

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AEREA
IN THE FORESTS OF MANHATTAN

I. ZACHARIE

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I will have no descendants.



Black, motionless on the ground in the middle of the road, the scorpion aimed its shining stinger at me in the soft light of dusk. However futile its warlike display may have been, however puny its anger at the approach of my white soles, I too became motionless before it and for a long time observed this frightened, melancholy figure that was barring my way. Yes, I stayed there, a few steps from the scorpion, until its fear had insinuated itself into me just as surely as its venom would have, until its tormented form had engraved its coaly sign upon the heart of the child I was.

And I turned back. Yes, I turned back, that day, for the first time.



Sitting today at my long table, before the open window that looks out on the trees, my gaze lost in the dense foliage, I let my thoughts slip noiselessly along with the great white clouds of the end of summer. Mingling with the rustle of the leaves in the wind is the uninterrupted purring of the air conditioner's transformer, an enormous concrete block bristling with open metalwork before which David is parking the little orange bus.

Dear David, who rents out his services as chauffeur to pay for his ornithology studies, always even-tempered, even last night coming back from an outing on the Mississippi, smiling in the midst of the shouts of his drunken passengers and agreeing to make a detour, at one o'clock in the morning, down a bumpy road across the corn fields in search of a case of beer in a drugstore he knew.

Observing his face by the light of the dials on the dashboard, I suddenly thought that his unchanging smile boded no good. But once again I was mistaken. Whistling to himself in the night at the wheel of his little bus, David was thinking of nothing but the singing of the birds he goes to study every Sunday, in the fields and woods, in the company of his friend Jessica, his beautiful friend with the green eyes, an expert in Medieval French.

"Yes, Adam," Aerea said to me, the obstacle is the language!"



I was standing in a large room, over against the wall, looking at the sparkling gown spread out at my feet over the entire surface of the parquet. Aerea came in.

"Here," I said to her, "is your wedding dress."

She gave me a radiant look and, putting her hand in mine, contemplated with delight the long embroidered train on which was repeated as far as the eye could see an iridescent pattern of blue feathers like those in ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. Then she moved away without a word and left the room by a secret door I hadn't noticed.

"Well, that's a very nice dream, Adam," she said to me the next day with the same expression of surprise and joy I had seen on her face in the dream as she looked at the sumptuous dress. "Isn't that royal train a good omen?"

Not long after that, she walked out of my life the same way she had walked out of my dream.



Aerea's name might have appeared next to mine on the last page of the genealogical tree. Yes, I would have been proud to add her name in my small handwriting, like the

tenderest of promises, on that last page where mine was inscribed on the day of my birth forty years ago. But the little flame-shaped inset contains only the letters of the word Adam, my name, the only sign of life henceforth in the whole of that great extinct mass of foliage.

Now that the bonds have been loosened, now that Aerea has left me, with her white retinue of Asias and Oceanias, I remain alone before the dry tree whose leaves will never bear other names. Now I can dream. And my blue-tinged dream is no longer disturbed except by brief, rare turbulences of memory that quickly abate and leave no traces behind them.



In a room on the second floor of the Museum of Natural History, David took me over to a lead cabinet. When he opened its door, a strong smell of naphthalene wafted forth. Smiling, he lifted out of a shallow drawer, from among many rows of hummingbirds, a precious specimen whose minuscule, stiff body he turned delicately between his fingers. He pointed out to me the blue plumage on the top of the head and the breast of the dead bird, of the same mottled blue as the wedding train in my dream.

“This one,” he explained to me proudly, “belongs to a variety formerly very sought after by the Incas for their funeral adornments.”

But, reader, perhaps you don’t like birds? Perhaps you think they bring unhappiness? Don’t worry: no birds live in my memories. Not a single one.



Night has fallen on the trees and on the great plains of the middle of the world. As I listen to the icecubes clink in my glass, I admire the delicate nudity of my smooth-bodied companion, Eve by Cranach the Younger.

"Language is clothing, Aerea," I answered, brushing her lips with my fingertips. "There isn't any obstacle, not the slightest obstacle. Whoever said Adam and Eve talked to each other in paradise?"

Her eyes, gazing down at the blade of the silver knife, shone with contained anger and her gleaming teeth imprinted their precise mark on the buttered rusk that she laid down on the table where we were having breakfast. Behind my dark glasses I watched her fingers with their translucent nails dance among the glimmers of the cups and silverware, I watched her thick hair falling in waves over her shoulders, the white fabric of her nightshirt stretching over her chest.

"You're not funny, Adam. Not in the least funny!"

I watched as her beautiful pale lips moved. My eye was hurting me.



Imagine, reader, Ulysses far away from his own people, on a hot afternoon in early summer, in the American countryside next to the ocean, his right eye closed by an

abcess and wax in his ears. You will be able to form a fair idea of me.

Lying on my bed, I was looking out through the open door of my wood cabin, watching the rain fall. I could see only the gray sky and the warm rain falling on the grass. Burning with fever on top of the sheet, not thinking very well, for moments at a time I would sink into a heavy somnolence in which ancient smells would assault me: baths of dye, lime, mulberries crushed on the ground.

Soon I saw the two forms advancing slowly in the distance: Aerea and Zacharie walking hand in hand, entirely absorbed in an intimate conversation, he watching where he put his little feet, she careful to measure her steps to his. I saw them advance peacefully toward me through the wet grass.

Zacharie considered me without saying anything. Then, looking at Aerea:

"Why doesn't he talk?" he asked in his plaintive voice.

"He comes from very far away, Zac, from the other side of the ocean. He speaks a language you can't understand."

"Is he going to die?"

"He's resting because he's sick. That's why we're leaving again tomorrow. He has to see a doctor."



Everything is quiet. Everything is abnormally quiet in the night. Sitting on my narrow iron bed, my eyes wide open in the darkness, I listen. Outside, the purring of the trans-

former has stopped. I stand up and look out the window. David's little bus isn't there any longer.



Aerea was doing her nails in the next room, standing in front of the window. Motionless, her head bowed, her hair pulled back to one side, she was wearing only her little pale blue stretch panties, which the mirror reflected back to me as a spot of brightness.

"Adam," she said to me as she applied the polish to her nails, "when are you going to decide to grow up?"

It wasn't a question, of course, and the indulgent kindness in her voice wasn't addressed to me.

The day before, I had given her a pair of earrings made of translucent red stone. Each stone was in the form of a teardrop. When Aerea had opened the small tissue paper bag, one of the earrings had fallen to the floor and broken. She had said that she could glue it back together with nailpolish, something she had learned to do in college. Then she had scolded me rather vehemently for my irresponsibility: instead of going to the doctor, hadn't I strolled up and down Lexington Avenue so that I could bring these earrings back to her?

Without answering, I watched her in the mirror. My eye was hurting me, and in the smell of nailpolish that floated between us, I thought of Zacharie again, a little angel naked and wan under the summer rain, warning me twice over in his nasal peacock screech: "Go away! Go away!"



"He went to study a migration," Jessica told me over the phone. "Be a nice guy, Adam, come pick me up tonight and take me to the pool. That will get you out, for once, away from your papers and your books."



After putting a log on the fire, the first fire of the season, David poured more wine into Jessica's glass and mine; then he sat facing us on the white wool carpet, his back to the fireplace.

"Imagine very low walls in curved lines, and grass everywhere as yellow as straw. Squat trees whose gray branches all bear dry leaves bleached by the light, shining and rustling as though they were made of tin. That's the whole landscape. A few flowers the color of coagulated blood and their thin leaves as wrinkled as paper ash. No children, no domestic animals. Not one woman. No voices, no smells. In the center of town, the only sign of life is the sound of cars passing endlessly.

"There exist enormous areas where my fellow countrymen, descendants of the pioneers who came in their old wagons, haven't even set foot yet. They live in their long, silent cars a few inches off the ground. The real encounter

between the country and its inhabitants hasn't taken place yet.

"You're an odd fellow, Adam, and I'm sure you would be sensitive to the gloomy charm of these no-man's-lands where a label from a bottle of Mexican beer shines in the sun like a pool of molten gold among the little mummified flowers, and where the trees, permanently withered, are used once a year as perches for migrating birds. Some day you'll see it, friend. But you won't see the Indians. No, you won't see them."

David's voice, as he spoke, was warm and indolent. In the flickering light of the wood fire, he smiled, his head inclined, his eyelids swollen as though he had missed a few hours of sleep, he wrapped us, Jessica and me, in his invariably kind smile.

"Here, it's different. Here, we're proud of our autumns, the most beautiful in the continent. You'll see. How lucky you are to have come at this time of the year!"



"We have to go out. We have to go out now. Afterwards, it'll be too late."

All night long, the air conditioner had fought relatively successfully against the crushing heat, outdoors, of the New York summer. The album of nudes—*Women Photographed by Women*—wedged in the window to block an air hole had served its temporary purpose after a fashion and when the first glimmers of dawn found their way into the little apartment on 86th Street, I got up and opened the

window of the next room. An unexpected coolness entered the space and filled me with a vast sense of well-being.

Surrounded by smells of perfumes and scattered dresses, the abandoned bed loomed as a milky rectangle in the dim light; on the inner sill of the open window I recognized from their small handwriting my letters to Aerea thrown in a heap out of their envelopes, the ones on top spotted by rain and already covered in dust. Alone among the perfumes and the dresses, I stood still in that inhabited room, delighting for a long time in the coolness on my face and hands.

In the other room, Aerea was asleep, lying on the large purple rug in front of the brick fireplace where the brass tips of the andirons gleamed among the ferns. Recumbent under the mirror, she was shrouded in the folds of the white sheet; her heavy hair fell in a dark wave to the floor; one of her hands lay outside the sheet, a single hand in the half-light.

"Aerea," I called to her softly in her sleep, "we have to go out right away, before the heat becomes overwhelming again."



Now that everything is over, now that the white net of Aerea's silence has fallen on me in answer to my own silence, I spend whole days looking at the leaves that autumn is already clouding with its silky hues behind the pane of my panoramic window. Yes, I look endlessly at the deep tossing and waving of these threatened leaves,

in which I discover more than one restless echo of my life,
presently without employment.



“What thoughts are they, Aerea, that make you more
desirable every day?”

“Do me a favor,” she answered in her melodious voice.
“Tonight, go sleep in the bed or on the couch but not
with me. You look like death again today and I will never
sleep with a dead man.”

Wrapped in the white sheet, a gold bracelet on her
wrist, Aerea was sleeping on the large purple rug while
the little air conditioning factory filled the space of the
night with a din as vast and resonant as the noise of the
ocean.



The day the first leaves loosed their hold on the branches,
fluttering down before my closed window, I was visited
by my friend Sokrat. The capricious flight of the dead
leaves, the light, soundless tumble of their dismal little
wings dancing before my eyes in the transparency of the
air, was echoed at my back—the rather bowed back of the
middle-aged man that I am—by the arpeggio of precise
little raps dealt to the front door by my very thin and very
near-sighted Turkish friend.

“Obviously, Adam,” he said to me gravely, setting his

glass down on my polished table, "obviously you're not in the least Mediterranean."

A disapproving tsk-tsk of his tongue against his teeth issued from his full-lipped mouth; from behind his thick-lensed glasses his byzantine gaze went back and forth several times between Cranach the Younger's Eve, my gentle high-breasted companion, and the vast window behind which the branches were stirring under a rain of golden leaves.

"You're ill, I'm worried about you. Do you know the great abandoned palaces falling into ruin on the banks of the Bosphorus? Majestic and cold, there by the waterside, they look as though the only thing holding them up now were their reflections. You're one of them, Adam. Aesthetics, my friend, will do you in more quickly and more surely than alcohol or the shafts of your disastrous loves! For you, beauty will prove fatal, and I see clearly that what draws you to it is death. So let's drink to our friendship and to your beautiful death, but don't ever try to tell me you're Mediterranean again."

Blowing the white smoke of my cigarette toward the window, I listened to what my sententious friend was saying but never lost sight of the little grove of trees struggling against the autumn in the kaleidoscope of my watchful glances. For my patience, watching and waiting, is fully equal to David's. But then, who knows? Who knows?



I have always been a sort of altruist. Naturally, with the passage of time, and as I have gained confidence, my

altruism has changed. It has been many years, by now, since I stopped approaching other people in search of affection and gratitude, my arms loaded with offerings and my heart overflowing with lofty sentiments. But despite appearances, my disinterestedness has not turned into lack of interest nor my indifference into coldness. My altruism has assumed new forms.

"You're a good person, Adam, but you don't see things face on. I would never be able to marry a man who was satisfied with so few words and so few ideas."

"Aerea," I answered, looking tenderly at her out of my healthy eye, "isn't that the best sort of pledge for a beginning?"

These days, all my altruism goes into the way I look at what is around me.



Under the pale trees in the starry night, all the windows of the house were illuminated. Through the wide open door, the light from the chandeliers made the dead leaves shine as they crackled under my feet.

In the center of the vast ground-floor room, the largest room in the beautiful house which was falling into ruin inside, as was evinced by the cracks in the walls and the ceiling, one long table was cluttered with cosmetics, makeup and multicolored spangles, another with a jumble of clothes, moth-eaten theater costumes, tattered wigs and masks, a third with bottles of beer, jars of sour pickles, plates of sweet bread and roast turkey. Making its way among these tables, a fat siamese cat stopped in

front of the people who had been eating and who were now still busy putting on disguises and making up their faces, preened himself and mewed hoarsely, begging for a piece of the bird. From time to time, the dwarfish forms of children dressed up as husbands and wives would appear framed in the front doorway; their faces blackened, they would arrogantly call out "trick or treat," and as soon as someone threw them a coin or a handful of sweets would immediately disappear into the night like a flight of harpies. I watched as a group of young women bustled about the large table, carefully disfiguring themselves with strokes of their pencils and brushes. They were laughing so wholeheartedly, they seemed so happy with their sad metamorphoses that I too began to laugh. Taking my gaiety for approval, they tried to seize hold of me and paint my face with gaudy colors. I managed to slip away into the next room, where a large fire was burning in the fireplace.

In a dark suit, a white shirt, and a tie, his blond hair dyed black, his face powdered, his eyes ringed with a line of charcoal and his lips painted blood red, David was warmly welcoming his guests.

"David," I said, going up to him, "you look exactly like a sick penguin."

"Tradition, Adam, tradition," he answered. "Now go on and find Jessica. She's waiting for you."

With difficulty I made my way among the guests. Sitting on the couch, her dark hair cut short, wearing an elegant black openwork dress, Jessica was talking to two masked men. She and I were the only members of this comical assemblage not wearing makeup.

When she saw me coming toward her, when our eyes met in the soft light of this part of the room, her very

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