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BIBLIOTHECA PHOENIX

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The Cyclist

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by



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I left the woods and hills of New England to live in a place of such extreme heat that it paralyzed the city at mid-day, and dried up the rivers at the hottest time of the year. The warmth at night was so oppressive that my sister and I took showers in our nightgowns, amidst the squeaking sound of thousands of bats that surrounded our house. The woods and hills of New England became a dream-memory as I lived in a place where in the quiet of the afternoon donkeys fornicated in the street outside my window, packs of wild dogs foraged in shady doorways, and a neighboring parrot learned to mimic our childhood cries to such perfection that he disturbed my mother's sleep with cries of "Mama!" "Mama!" "Mama!"

It was a place where nothing ever seemed to happen (or where, as I afterward learned, the authorities took every precaution to make it seem so). I remember marching in parades with my schoolmates on national holidays in my *uniforme de gala*, and passing in front of the grandstand where we were observed paternalistically by the dictator in his German-style uniform, and the local archbishop with his staff, side by side. I remember the close-knit funeral processions that walked up the center of the main avenue on the way to the cemetery, often carrying a coffin so small that my doll could have fit inside it. I remember spending quiet summer afternoons with the nuns from my school. In a sunny interior courtyard, we practiced elaborate embroidery stitches and drank cool lemonade. Upon seeing them drink, for the first time nuns became human to me, and were no longer disembodied hands and faces. I remember lying in my bed early in the morning listening to the women that worked in my house speak to each other in Guaraní. They told me many legends of the Guaraníes, the native people of that place, and once, they gave me a crudely fashioned statue of St. Joseph. They said that if I buried him head down in the ground, when I grew up I would find my *cheá*, my soul, my shadow, my other self. Most of all, however, I remember Fátima, because she was my guide in the intricate labyrinth of this new culture.

They say that the jaguar met up with the fox. He wanted to eat the fox, but the fox said, "Even if you were to eat me, you would not be full. Let me go and find where the tapirs are plentiful, my grandmother," he said. "Fine," said the jaguar.

Blond and blue-eyed, Fátima was an anomaly in a country whose ethnicity comprised a mixture of the Spanish with Guaraní Indian. She was the daughter of a German officer who had escaped to Paraguay after the Second World War, and a Paraguayan mother. At the time I knew her, however, she was an orphan, along with her brother Antonio, and they lived next door with their grandmother. Fátima's orphanhood deeply intrigued me, and I found out in the course of time that her father had been killed by her mother's lover, and that mother and lover had then disappeared in the wilds of the Chaco. Fátima said that her father had been a great

hunter, and as proof she had a *yaguá* (jaguar) skin rug, with head and all, which dominated the tiny living room of her house. Notwithstanding her German ancestry, Fátima considered herself entirely Paraguayan, as Paraguayan as the couple of Polish concentration camp refugees who ran the carpentry shop on the corner. They used to give us slices of bread with homemade strawberry marmalade. For Fátima, there was no mystery there.

The fox went to look, and he found a place where the tapirs were plentiful. The jaguar went and brought down one of the fattest ones. The fox wanted to share what the jaguar was eating, but the jaguar wouldn't give him any. "At least throw me the bladder," said the fox.

Fátima and I spent many afternoons sitting up in the huge mango tree that occupied her entire front yard. We fantasized about building a fabulous tree house with many levels, connected by intricate, winding staircases. Sometimes we read comics on the lives of saints, and from our lofty position in the branches, were momentarily inspired to lives of devotion and self-abnegation. For a time, we carefully chronicled with scornful curiosity the love affair of the woman who lived next door to Fátima in a house surrounded by a high wall. It was a small yellow house engulfed in hibiscus plants and surrounded by mango trees. From our vantage point in the tree we were able to observe her lover arrive at the hour of the siesta and, standing at the entrance gate, he clapped to gain admittance. The woman, always dressed in black, barely showed herself in the doorway of the house, and without exchanging a word, the man entered and the door was shut. We were entirely ignorant of what would transpire behind that closed door; such things were as yet the dark secrets of adulthood, something that intimidated and excited us at the same time.

The fox blew it up and then dried it in the sun. When it was dry, he hunted for flies and placed them inside it; he stuffed it with innumerable flies. The flies imprisoned in the bladder produced a sound like countless dogs barking in unison. He tied the bladder with the flies inside it to the tail of the jaguar, and then said, "Pay attention to that noise because, without a doubt, there are dogs coming upon us." Because of this, the jaguar did pay attention, but in spite of what he heard, he continued eating.

When Fátima and I descended the mango tree, it was to seek out an adventure. We would go to swim in the faraway lake of Ipacarái that was haunted by the music of the Paraguayan harp, and where the water, at its deepest, only reached our chest. On Sundays we went to the hippodrome where the military raced their horses. One time we made a bet and won the vast sum of one thousand guaraníes each. Our parents didn't allow us to go again after that; they feared that we would become addicted to the vice of gambling. The adventure I remember the most, however, was time we went to see the cyclist.

One day in September the local papers announced an event of national importance: Cirilo Octavio Grijalba y Fuentes, 28 years of age, and a native of the town of Caaguazú, was going to break the world record of consecutive hours and days riding a bicycle. A ceremony was scheduled for the following morning in the central square of the city to commemorate the beginning of this exploit that was destined to win for Paraguay the respect and esteem of the entire world.

So then the fox said, "Pay attention, they're certainly coming now."

And so the jaguar started to run. After running far, he stopped to listen. He could undeniably hear it still, the sound of dogs coming. He started to run again, and having gone very far, he turned to listen and he heard the unmistakable sound of the dogs that were coming. He continued running, and went even further. Once again he stopped, and finding himself weary, prepared to fight. Things were looking bad.

The next morning Fátima and I found ourselves amongst the crowd in the central square of Asunción. Far above our heads, the branches of lapacho and jacaranda trees, with their purple and yellow blossoms, enclosed the scene like a circus tent, protecting the spectators from the brilliant sun. Bunting with the national colors festooned every tree and lamppost, while loudspeakers blared with patriotic music that was simultaneously broadcast on the radio.

Vendors from the provinces displayed large baskets of *chipás*, wrapped in immaculate white cloths. On the north end of the square, on the very walk he was to circle for interminable days and nights, attentive government officials patted Cirilo on the back and had their picture taken for the newspapers.

Cirilo appeared strangely distant from the noise and excitement that surrounded him.

Immersed in his own sober dream, he had no sense of the glory of his enterprise, only the desire to vanquish the effects of countless hours of pedaling, sweat, aches and insomnia that lay in wait for him at each curve in the path, as he cycled around the periphery of the square in the days ahead. He stood there with his new white cyclist's cap, his right hand loosely resting on his bicycle, and he responded to the effusive compliments of the officials with abstracted monosyllables.

He stopped, and looking back, he heard behind him the sound of the barking dogs. He turned around once more, and again he heard the barking dogs. It was then that, without moving from the spot, and stealthily looking back, he discovered that the flies imprisoned in the bladder produced the sound that was similar to the noise of the dogs. Since he was already a long way off from his prey, the tapir, he left the place without any definite course.

Cirilo's bicycle was ancient and seemed as remote from the proceedings as its owner. Of no recognizable brand, it had evidently been repaired, resoldered and repainted so many times that the final product was almost a prototype in its uniqueness. The prolonged contact between rider and bicycle had wrought an intimacy between them, a mutual dependence and support, and they appeared to lean against each other in the trying period before the start of the contest.

After a long time, the jaguar and the fox met up once again. On this occasion, the jaguar said, "Now I'll really eat you." "Even if you were to eat me, grandmother, you would not be full," said the fox. "Let me go and find a good path where you can lie in wait for prey, a man's path," he said. "Fine," said the jaguar.

Cirilo's aloofness from the event of which he was the central focus communicated itself to the crowd, which kept back, allowing him a private circle of space that was only violated by the government officials. As the crucial moment approached, and Cirilo and his bicycle moved toward the center of the square, the circle of space around him moved also, as if by enchantment. When Cirilo reached the center of the square and slowly mounted his bicycle, the loudspeakers and the crowd fell silent, and even the lace-like branches of the trees

overhead seemed to be still. A gunshot rang out, and Cirilo was off. As he pedaled once, and started to coast around the square, the crowd breathed a huge sigh, as if the beginning were actually the end, and the noise and celebrating gradually recommenced.

The fox went in search of a path, and he found a well-traveled place, so he returned to tell his grandmother. Then they went to lie in wait, and the fox stationed himself close to his grandmother. After a long wait, "It seems like they're coming now," said the jaguar.

"Let me look," said the fox. And looking, he saw three boys coming.

"They're coming," he said.

The jaguar asked, "Am I waiting in an advantageous position?"

"Wait a while," said the fox. "The ones coming are not yet men," he said, "they are only future men."

So the jaguar did not stop them; the boys passed by and moved on without delay.

Cirilo did not betray the zeal of one at the outset of a competition; rather, he pedaled slowly, parsimoniously, his head down, a remote and serious expression on his face. By the time he had gone around the square three times, the festivities had returned to their former pitch, and for a solitary moment, there was a collective awareness that the crowd had forgotten precisely why they had all gathered there. Fátima and I sat to one side and watched while Cirilo circled the square a total of seven times. Fátima said that seven was a mystical number, and our observance of this particular number of circuits would ensure the success of the enterprise. At the exact instant he completed the seventh circuit, we walked away without looking back or we would have brought him bad luck.

After a long wait, once again, "It seems like they're coming," said the jaguar.

"Let me look," said the fox.

"They're coming," he said.

"Am I lying in wait to best advantage?" asked the jaguar.

"Not yet," said the fox once more, "the one coming has ceased to be a man."

Since it was an old man that was approaching, the jaguar did not stop him, and let him pass on.

The following Sunday Fátima and I went to the movies. The theater looked onto the square where Cirilo continued to pedal. The square was full of small groups of theatergoers who stood around watching the cyclist. It had rained since we had been there last, and the bunting decorating the trees and lampposts was shredded and discolored. Small bits of debris - candy wrappers, crumpled paper napkins and cups- blew about in a soft breeze and accumulated at the base of trees.

In the silence of the late afternoon, Cirilo had become a fixture in the park. His carefully regulated movements were repeated like clockwork with each circuit of the square. His cyclist's cap was stained with sweat, and the palms of his hands were wrapped in gauze, but the remote expression of his eyes continued to be the same. As he went around the square, his gaze was focused on an imaginary spot always twenty feet in front of him, as if an invisible line, an invisible force, drew him along. It seemed as if that line were to be broken or interfered with in any way, the spell would be broken, and Cirilo would come to a halt. Fátima said that he was turning gray, and that he looked like a soul in torment. She made the sign of

the cross in his direction, and warned that on no account should we look into his eyes lest we be forced to join him in his extraterrestrial wanderings.

After another long wait, "It seems like they're coming," said the jaguar.

"Let me look," said the fox. On this occasion he saw that the one who approached carried a bow. There were, besides, three dogs.

"Now there is truly a man coming," he said, because he now saw approaching the one who was fated to kill the jaguar.

The last time I saw the cyclist, I had gone to the center of town by myself. In a way, I welcomed the opportunity of seeing him on my own. As a modern American child, as I considered myself, I often had misgivings about Fátima's superstitions and prophecies. At the same time I was uneasy: perhaps it was better to believe than not. I reached the square and sought him out around the periphery, his usual path.

It was a brilliantly clear weekday morning, and there was a workaday sense of order and bustle about the square. Since I had been there last, the area had been swept clean of all debris, and working people, both singly and in small groups, crisscrossed the square intent on their own private errands. At first I could not find the cyclist, but then I perceived him approaching my direction from the opposite end of the square. I watched him carefully as he moved slowly down the path toward me: he looked even more gray than the last time, but I realized that the greyness was not limited to his body, rather, it enveloped his bicycle as well. It was not a grayness of illness or decay, but an ethereal grayness, bordering on transparency; he moved as if the tires no longer touched the ground. Since I was watching him with single-minded attention, I did not notice a couple of businessmen rushing in his direction toward the street.

They were deeply engaged in conversation, and walked right through the cyclist into the roadway. A moment later, Cirilo passed in front of me and, upon looking into his eyes, I briefly saw the self-effacing light of satisfied desire. For an instant I experienced a vertiginous feeling of loss, then, a flock of birds took off and flew through Cirilo and through the lapacho trees into the morning sky.

"Get ready and wait," said the fox.

The dogs were already advancing toward the place where the jaguar was, and they were barking in unison. As for the jaguar, he was roaring in a frightful manner. Upon hearing him, the owner of the dogs ran to the spot. When he arrived, the jaguar rose up against him, so the man wounded him with a steel arrow. He wounded him again, and he wounded him again, until he knocked him down dead.

Because the fox had desired that exactly this should occur, only when he saw one who carried a bow did he say, "Get ready and wait!"

That night I slept at Fátima's house. On the nights of greatest heat we always slept in the yard on cots. From over our heads were suspended pure white nets to defend us from prodigious mosquitoes. I lay on my back protected from the night, and from darting, squeaking bats by my cocoon. It was a dense, starless night. I listened to Fátima's grandmother snore slightly, and to Antonio wrestle with a dream. I could smell the chamomile from Fátima's hair, and the starch in the fresh-washed sheets. I thought of Cirilo and his fathomless eyes. I fell into those eyes, and in falling, I returned to a place far away in time and space where I used to play by a small

spring on the edge of a pine wood.

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