

From
The Business of Ramón
García's Disappearance

Thinking of him, writing this, I wonder—has our disagreement with his politics delayed him? Does our opposition put us beside the two policemen who stop him on the road, in the black Volkswagen Beetle he has borrowed (without knowledge or permission) from his sister, Mara? His mother, Esperanza—who would like to see a stop put to his politics—is her hand raised too, bringing him to a halt on that road to Contepec. She has said it often—*Con Ramón es la política primero, es la política segundo, es la política tercero*—politics comes first, second and third with her son. It is her other deadly daughter-in-law, Ramón's lover. Ana, his wife, has the house and plot of land Esperanza has mortgaged for them in Agua Hedionda, and she has his children—Iker and Indarki, but the other one has him.

What wears him out finally is working for PRT in the campaign for the Presidency of Mexico which returns Salinas de Gortari. He struggles on with the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores* (Revolutionary Worker's Party) into the strenuous protest of the electoral fraud. The opposition parties led by Cardenas and Clautier claim more ballots have been counted for Salinas de Gortari than were cast, many marked for them—lost. Ramón's own run to become Mayor of Cuautla, the town where he lives and we have travelled to for fifteen years, has soured him. The aftermath of local politics, the shit he has left in his own soup at home causes heartburn. On the eve of being disappeared, he talks to us over the red smear of chili sauce left on a plate of *chilaquiles*. He speaks about something as mixed up as what he eats with us in the Hotel Cuautla when he visits with his Party comrade and business

partner, Raúl. The tongue-biting swirl of red chili disguises the scrambled egg, stale tortilla and disgusting left-overs fried into it. Late the next night, December 16, 1988, Raúl will call my wife and I on the telephone to find out if Ramón has come to the same place to have supper with us. Ramón has not and he has not arrived at Contepec, where he was to negotiate an order of detergent with a client and talk to a member of the Party. Raúl does not say if comrade and client in Contepec are one and the same. Ramón has not returned for a meeting of the *Trabajadores* local in Cuautla. He never fails to appear, something has gone wrong. Raúl hangs up and proceeds to another call.

We have told Raúl what we think. Ramón has gone up to Mexico City. Ana and Esperanza are there, at the fever clinic with Ramón's youngest, Indarki, who has contracted typhoid from drinking dirty water. Iker is staying with Fernando, Ramón's brother, manager of the Cuautla CONASUPO (a state supermarket) and scout-master, among other things. Iker, Ramón's eldest, adores playing with his cousins' Belén, the toy crib and manger with cast of biblical characters he is forbidden to have at home.

A call comes from Esperanza to Fernando and his wife, Blanca, who have invited us for supper. Esperanza asks if Ramón is in Cuautla, he has not come up to get them in their friend, Fidel's truck. Fernando tells his mother Ramón is not in Cuautla. *Problema*, he says to us and immediately he gets ready to walk us home through the streets of Cuautla and to begin looking. In the yard Fernando looks at where the black Volkswagon Beetle sat. He remembers he has let his brother take it without his sister's permission. Fernando has been garaging it for Mara because she knows he can be trusted not to let Ramón—the great serpent of a persuader and settler of accounts among all seven siblings—get it. Since childhood, Ramón looms over them, responsible for all of them, even Manuel—the eldest. Because Manuel has an impairment, Ramón proxies as eldest and arbiter, but Ramón's and Mara's relations have been bitter ever since Pepe, the youngest brother, has held onto Mara's government-regulated apartment in Mexico City, which was on loan to him for a year while Mara worked as a manager for *El Presidente* hotel in Cancún. Over a year has passed since Mara's return, Ramón believes he cannot get her back what she let go.

Walking us up the street, Fernando decides he must first call on Raúl and that party of his brother's to see if they have learned of his whereabouts or the black Volkswagen Beetle. They have not. Now, Ramón is disappeared in his sister's car and cannot be got back.

At one point in the initial investigation of Ramón's disappearance, Raúl will be identified as Ramón's homosexual lover, but that is false. Raúl's physical relationship with Ramón is as pure as the pine-scented cleaners they develop jointly in their factory. It is set up in a ramschackle disorder of comings and goings, more like a soup kitchen than a cottage industry, in the old refractory of the Hotel Santa Cecilia. Ramón's father and mother decorated the dining hall and managed the Hotel a quarter of a century ago. The charcoal murals of Quixote and Sancho Panza on its walls paid for the the board and lodging of a poor Mexican artist who drew them. The perverse, smoky shapes of the two figures of fiction make odd witnesses for the fumblings of Ramón and Raúl in manufacturing, but ask Esperanza, Ana—any of the women in the family—they will tell you, Ramón and Raúl share the one androgynous lover. After Ramón is disappeared, it will embrace Ana, his wife, and whirl her round the world, looking for him, crying out after for him. The beast, which has one head on the right, one in the centre and one on the left, will bray from right and left into the motionless mask of scar and bone in the centre, will say that this skull eating and drinking for them, governing their lives unlawfully in the middle has swallowed him up.

Ramón's loves have interested me greatly. I have a sixteen-year-old memory of him saying he is in love with my wife, of attending his wedding two years later in Cuautla, to Ana Santander, a Basque—who will give him two boys. Ramón's and Ana's is a romantic story. They meet in París, Ramón has come there to study Marxism. She has come there from Victoria in the North of Spain and works as a chambermaid to cover her studies. He is handsome, a *Marxista de París*, she is a beautiful Basque. They meet in classes of instruction at the Sorbonne and enter into the holy wedlock of the dialectic. The civil marriage is performed while the two have a break in their schedule as guides in a tour Ramón has organized from Paris to the Yucatan. The marriage will appease Ramón's family and it will not tie Ana to the town. They are wed in passing through, on a free-wheeling enterprise in a tour of their own making. The Ramón who sits down to his wedding dinner lectures us in dialectics; the Ramón who counts heads on the tour bus, never fails in his gestimates of the rich—how far they will go and how much they will pay. He shares their taste, he wants them to share it with everyone. Which of his means will he use—charm, argument or a gun?

By the time he is disappeared charm and argument are exhausted and Ana is bound to the town, a prisoner of politics she now half-hates which—

outside of family—is the only social life she has. In a fit of weariness at that, after a party row and suffering from a strep throat I hear him croak—*¡Ojalá que me maten!*—I wish they would kill me. Who they are isn't identified, but I see what the real infection is. The reaction to the government, his own party—Ana's bondage to this dirty backwater, us and our disbelief of him—all jam his eyes with rheum.

Here the circle of exhaustions come complete. Sixteen years before, in our living room in Vancouver, I hear me saying — *¡Estoy agotado!*— The two young Latin Americans in the room topple over, laughing at my choice of words. They are Ramón and the poet, Krufu (who in prose is known as José Manuel Gutierrez, the Peruvian novelist, who will win the Blasco Ibañez prize for *Así me dijo Arturo*). I say I am squeezed out to the last drop with this writing that has driven my wife, Angela, mad at me, but not insane enough to stay if I don't shape up.

Gota, the core of *a-gota-do* means drop. I am melodramatic, dirty-thirtied. The last word has dripped from my vein of inspiration, I believe. The word *agotado* also means something sexual. That amuses them the most, the two younger Latin Americans consider me comic, a poet, only playing with puns. They know Angela looks after me, they know I will fill up again, they wish Angela was looking after them, Ramón most of all. He knows Angela is *muy madre*, very much a mother, like his own—Esperanza. When Ramón has his *Ojalá* on his sick bed, it is just within Esperanza's hearing, but neither Esperanza nor his wife can nurse him, nor Angela and I tease him back to optimism. I gauge Ramón's *Ojalá* too deadly, too readily fulfilled. He has started carrying a revolver.

We are leaning over the gingham tablecloths in the Roosevelt Café, arguing, bantering, poo-pooing the platform his party is working on. We are at the Hotel Roosevelt, on Isurgentes, in Mexico City where he meets Angela and I. We have come, visiting the Pachecos to celebrate the publication of José Emilio's *SELECTED POEMS* which I have done for *New Directions* in New York. The Pacheco's live a walk away, beyond the old motorcar race-course round the Hipodromo, in Colonia Condesa. Ramón is up from Cuautla to attend the Party Conference. From his briefcase, Ramón takes out a small revolver, wags it like a tail at us—pretending to be as playful as a puppy still, at the power in the barrel of a gun. He points it, knowing he not only looks for a target, but makes himself one. The gun is the one thing the

government will not tolerate, but he has to have something when they come hunting. Can't we agree with the need, the ambiguity? Dead if you do, dead if you don't.

We are shocked, we want the gun gone, in the briefcase, out. That crack for crack kind of government and opposition debate—we hear enough of its logic replacing a parliament in Northern Ireland, where we come from. Ramón's eyes mist over as he refreshes his memory over the food on the table. He tells us again of his moment of illumination in Victoria, Spain—the part in a demonstration where he comes to grips with a riot policeman and presses his fingers into the policeman's eyes in the brawl. It is the revelation of what he was capable of doing for the cause, but isn't the problem of Spain—the home of his wife—part solved by socialism and the great Gonzalez who Ramón's father-in-law, the working-class Basque, adores?

Ramón talks little now, but in grudging sympathy with the violence of ETA on behalf of the Basque independence which is still not won. In Mexico, on the other hand, things are awakening, for the year leading up to the electoral campaign that will elect Salinas de Gortari, all the old options are opened like the vaults of the undead, for the devotees of the revolution to follow its corpse, find fresh blood to coax it to life. In adding his, Ramón will become what one Cardenista calls the first martyr of the new regime.

The missing person and martyr—José Ramón García y Gomez. Who is this serious personage whose name grows longer after his death? The deal-maker, the trader, the trickster, the schemer, the humorist—who has disappeared him?

When I see him, it's always me who stands too serious, matchstick stiff in his *abrazo*. He lets me free of the embrace, always given with a sparkling eye, and I see the killed enthusiasm, the murdered enthusiast. My wooden inhuman hug, a rejection. I would like him to set fire to this wooden effigy of me that always greets him, would lend him the matches.

It is always like this, he is always doing something I resist, but follow with fascination, something human, something to do with gain, a bit of business, a shrewd move. This man isn't mentioned in the descriptions of Amnesty International. Living off his wits in small businesses, he is what I would have been if I had grown up in the family businesses after the Second World War. A young fruiterer with other intellectual aspirations, going to the market in a horse and cart or van, a fish-fryer trying to turn our one chip shop into a shoal of fish and chippies. Who disappeared the Ramón who spent

days trying to prolong the life of the flawed cleaning pad on a commercial floor-polisher with a length of hemp? Was it a rival firm, like Ramón's, that wanted to line up the floors of all the banks in town?

Dead of an endless line-up at the bank and the ballot box for his pay-off, Ramón should have grown old, waiting like the rest of us.

The Bank

On the morning of the day he is disappeared, there we are, Angela and I, in the bank. It is on the corner where the old Hotel Cuautla stood, where they filmed scenes for *BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID*. We line up, choosing from a battery of queues at the wickets. The army arrives to collect its payroll. Two riflemen step inside the door, back to back with two other porch guards covering the outside. They track us from the portals, eyes as piercing and non-committal as Siamese cats. The teller tabulates the payroll twice on a manual adding machine, hitting the keys, the fastest teller in the bank. Our line swells, not lengthening, but thickening as those behind inch up on us. The teller counts the payroll twice, the payroll officer repeats the count. Ramón tugs at my arm. "Let him in." He pushes the young Indian, very white young Indian, but Indian who is the gofer for Ramón's detergent business that he partners with Raúl. The young man washes the bottles, stirs the pine-scented mixes, fills the containers, puts in, takes out, will stand in line for eons to make a withdrawal or deposit for the firm, but Ramón wants to make it easy for him, shorter, with the help of a friend, of two friends. I remember my apprenticeship in lining-up during the rationing after the Second World War. I am loyal to the queueing and my place in it, waiting for hours at the age of six to collect one rabbit at the fishmongers in Belfast to bring it home to my mother. Angela and I are incensed at the threatened overtakings, the queue jumpers. Richeousness rising, patience in the name of patience goes. —No— we insist—the people will go mad. Let him wait with the rest.—

Ramón's hands go up, his shoulders shrug. See—he says— without having to open his mouth. Five hundred years of waiting and still you want to keep a poor Indian back.— We debate our stand for ages. We accept our own indignation, we have earned it.

Fresh today as yesterday, from Ulster and Canada, I toe the Imperialist line. Ramón wants a miracle, to move things forward while appearing to keep in line. How could PRI disappear such a prime candidate for an

approach on their behalf. They are the Institutional Revolutionary Party—the Party that leaps forward on behalf of the people while keeping them line. Both Ramón and it would move the Indian along to their own advantage. Faces on a coin, a mere flip the appearances, the difference between them.

How could he become the first martyr of this regime?

The Cardenista, who makes this pronouncement a year after Ramón's disappearance, says it in the doorway to a set of lawyer's offices in Mexico City. He has taken us downstairs in the elevator, shown us to the great glass doors. We have been brought there by a poet and ex-ambassador, Homero Aridjis, along with his wife, Betty, to the Christmas cocktail party of an organization for the creation of effective opposition in Mexico.

Before the great glass door I try to say what I think.

I cannot put it into Spanish, I don't even try—exhaustion takes its easiest refuge in martyrdom; it is Ramón's last resort, a hellish destination for a holiday.

Here is what I can't understand about what happened to Ramón? How can an imp, whose temperament assign him to tweak the Government's nose, turn into a mono-minded ogre with an inflexible mission.

I have to look at myself again to see him. Again, I stand, matchstick stiff in his *abrazo*, am let go. The imp circles the Ulster Canadian seriousness which is locked inside me like a constipated Luther in his clapboard privy. Again, I wish he would set fire to this wooden effigy of me that always greets him, I lend him the matches and he does set fire to seriousness.

It is his own, that blazing image of Marxism he carries graven in his mind. He has learned its catechism and climbs that bloody, boring cross of dialectical materialism, and is extinguished with it before the U.S.S.R.

The other human half is taken too, his Mexican contradiction which ought to have been assumed by the gods into the governing heaven of PRI I always had a secret bet. PRI would take him live because he was a living embodiment of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Officially, his talk is all socialist, about state-control; unofficially, instinctively—he is individualist, free enterprising—the opposite of the three-c (small, middle, and large) conservative Canadian, who preaches privatization publicly, and in private calls for all kinds of state guarantees and subsidies.

I can still hear the Consul General of Mexico in Vancouver, Sr. Herrera, attempting to recruit José Emilio Pacheco into Mexico's ambassadorial ranks. An inarticulate poet, on a bi-lingual reading engagement with me for

his book at U.B.C., José Emilio protests his unsuitability to Sr. Herrera, José Emilio says he leans in the wrong direction. —You would want a former youth leader of PAN—says José Emilio. PAN is the party of the right that Clautier leads into the Salinas de Gortari election. —¡O nó!—says Sr. Herrera, —¡o nó, *el colibrí siempre entra desde la izquierda!*—the hummingbird always enters from the left. Quetzlcoatl, the god, the hummingbird, the morningstar, always comes into his flower from the left to extract the honey. Ramón is to their taste, as the god prefers, a ferment of policies flowering on its left. Perverted of Ramón, to wag a gun in the face of the Quetzlcoatl, bringer of light, inventor of the opiates—pulque and mescal—guardian, guarantor of what appears dead but is alive, P.R.I., the institutionalized revolution...

Blame it on the loss of tolerance, his gun. No two ways about it, bullets are non-convertible currency, but why was Ramón tortured, as reported, not lectured and let out to live his life. Ramón's life is a parable of lost opportunities—how he strives to gain for himself by winning for the Indian at the bank, or for himself and both parties in a dispute between an Indian brother and a sister over the sale of the land, doled out to their father for service to Zapata in the Revolution. Cuautla, Zapata's garrison town, has many such well-endowed Indians.

We enter into the dilemma in a time of flood. It is when I am working on drafts of Pacheco's *SELECTED POEMS* and my novel, *CAGE*, which is set in Tetelcingo, a village north of Cuautla, where the Irish American priest, Patrick Dillon, taught the Tetelcingan Indians to make Taj Mahals for the birds, out of wire. Ramón picks us up at Mexico City in a Peugeot he has got in a good deal for his mother. It is raining amazingly strong, even for the rainy season in July. The River Cuautla has broken many of its bridges, climbed its banks and taken to the road. The sky hangs low and the light peeps through its edges when we drive down the *Cerro* from Mexico D.F. Ramón talks of the airport whence we came and the one where we might arrive on the plain below at Tetelcingo. In the future we might land a minute or two away from thrice-heroic Cuautla, which has been not only the garrison town of Zapata, but H.Q. for Morelos and Hidalgo, strategic for their attacks on the Spanish in nearby Cuernavaca, capital of Morelos, and the other infamous capital, the only capital in the world with the same name as the country. It has sucked up one third of the people in the country, it blows out one half of the effluent in the country. Pollution has made flying into it a hazard. We know, we have just come down out of a brown

cloud, and when we landed there was applause louder than for the finale of an opera at Bellas Artes.

Land here at Tetelcingo will be worth a fortune. Ramón drives us through the toll, off the highway past Oaxtepec, the old Olympic village of 1969 and swimming centre. Ramón drives us over hills of subdivisions, which are called *Lomas de*—the *Heights*, or *Slopes* of this and that. Curling onto undeveloped land, he stops at the fence of a sloping field. The tussocky grass in the field is bent and green from the rains, the sugar cane stands like blades of spear grass in the distance. This slope has a view of all the dark and light in the valley. —*Un dólar— ¿Cómo es la medida de ustedes? Un dólar el pie cuadrado*—a dollar a square foot in your measurements, Ramón says. —*Y tendrá el valor de millones*—It will be worth millions, he adds.

—Why this land?—

—Because of the airport and development.—

—Who owns it?—

—A brother and a sister. The brother wants to sell it for 50 cents a foot, but I can get the sister a dollar. I have found her a lawyer. The family is like Licha.—

(Licha is a friend of the Garcías, who lives adjacent to the Hotel Santa Cecilia, who—as a young girl—married an aged judge, an Indian, a literate revolutionary who was given land and a seat on the bench. The brother and sister are like Licha in that they rent out the land and do not work it.)

—They want to sell it. I know that's bad, but I can make it better. Both will do well if they sell it at a dollar and settle at fifty cents between them.—

—And how will you do?—

—Fine, if I can manage to buy it.—

Has Ramón brought us here, looking for us to invest through him? Are we thinking we might? Has Ramón hit upon the perfect formula for justice in the pursuit of profit. Will we line up at the bank again in front of the Indians Ramón is helping to get ahead?

Everyone is helping everyone else. It is a time of flood and plenty. Even the President is helping Cuautla. In Amilcingo, a village one short step across the river from Cuautla, Miguel de la Madrid, the President, has his country home. It is down a walled and leafy street from *Los Flamingos*—a condo colony of pink stucco nested in lime trees and bamboo. De la Madrid has brought changes to the town of Cuautla, which Ramón shows us. The *zócalo* has been ornamentally paved over in red tile; the taxis and other traf-

fic shut off. Since they haven't put in drains, Ramón informs us of his civic disaffection, the *zócalo* fills up with water from the partly-repaved *Los Bravos*, which is the main street running south into the town square. On our first evening, we drink *café americano* with Esperanza in a restaurant under the columnaded arcade at the River Cuautla end of the square. We watch the rains start in the evening. The water gathers and begins to race across the square, round the bandstand with the booths and counters built into its base. In the street where the water drains out of the square, the people leap up out of eight inches of water onto a bus.

Sudden survivors from a shipwreck picked up by a coastguard who is screaming for payment, the excited busriders neglect to offer the few pesos of thanks for this government-supported service in the spate of glee and repartee let loose. They glance repeatedly at their their wet legs and the water blots that turn their thin cotton shirts and dresses into sausage skins. Crowded on board, their nipples and breasts rub so close together that their teeth can only chatter or bite.

The water swirling through the square will leave a line of slime and silt at the door of the Morelos' house in the corner of the square. The government have recognized it as a museum and given a grant for its maintenance. Between the silt and subsidies, the liberator who gave his name to the state will not sleep easy.

The same rain and rise of the river has taken out the platform bridge at the end of the walled and leafy lane where the President has his country place. The pink stucco colony of *Los Flamingos* stands in puddles. The President will make more changes, wall the banks of the river, make a concrete esplanade where people can walk from Amilcingo down past Cuautla's social security hospital on the main road to Oaxaca. These changes will come after he looks down into the faces of the folk by the broken bridge, the folk spanning the flood, hand to hand, being swept round against the bank by the force of the flow, the brown swirl laden with dead dogs and cattle. De la Madrid comes down with his team from the capital for refreshment at Amilcingo—as Moztecsuma did with his retinue eons ago, to take the stinking sulphur waters at Agua Hedionda nearby. Scanning from the sky in a helicopter the President might ask of his friend, his aides, his pilot, the presidential guard in the seat beside him—What do they think they are doing?—Faces, thrilled with desperation and disaster below, might ask the same of him.

Whatever it is they are doing, Ramón wants us to go and see the next

morning, for de la Madrid has washed away a lot in Cuautla in a blind flood of reform. He has also given them a regional writer-in-residence, Jose Augustín, and a writer's workshop where they can put pen to their problems and produce parables about the forked provider. In a one-man presidential system, the President is the source of all—deluge and drought.

Ramón's eldest brother, Manuel, has things to show too. He wants us to see where the *Zona Roja*—the red light district—is now, the bushes where they murder and kill in the dark, across the Oaxaca road from the empty sites and streets of an industrial city that is stalled *in utero*. The lovely old *Zona Roja* of the homosexual and heterosexual brothels—night-club small to as big as dance halls, the one hundred and one bordellos behind the convent school of La Paz—is gone, swept under a shrub by de la Madrid. After Ramón takes us to Amilcingo in the morning, Manuel will take my son and I to view the new *Zona Roja* in the Peugeot.

Down the walled and leafy lane we go, past President de la Madrid's weekend retreat. Opposite it, we see three municipal workmen in overalls polishing the bronze bust of Morelos, which is set into a white memorial recess with an inscription. The bust has not been placed there since de la Madrid became President, it has always been there, waiting as if for a conference with the new custodian of the country.

The slowness of the work and the attention make the bust appear enormous. It is either the workmen's laziness or they are slowly working it up, rubbing it like Aladdin's lamp to conjure Morelos into a confrontation with the distinguished neighbour who will at some time wheel through the dark wooden gates with the iron studs. The work is also so haphazard that, like weak arguments, it has no effect on Morelos. The liberator remains impassive, only the resistance on his bronze face becomes clearer and clearer. Or are the workmen simply distracted by us passers-by walking in droves under the overhang of trees between the walls—as distracted by us as we are by the Volkswagen beetles lining the curbs and the butts of machine guns sticking out the windows? The faces of the bodyguards in the flotilla of Volkswagens, which are parked up and down the road from the presidential gates, have absorbed all the gloss and shadow from the leaves, the metal on the guns. The bodyguard's faces gleam in the morning as if they had been individually polished by the workmen. The presidential guards climb in and out of the cars to chat and light each others cigarettes, or to follow anyone whose face and figure arouses their suspicion, or catches their fancy. Along

the lane, the pavement thins and crumbles as it nears the river. Around the wheels of the last Beetles, there is a layer of silt. Boys and girls are on their hands and knees pressing at every lump in it.

Are they squashing the Volkswagen Bugs in effigy?

It turns out that they are looking for tortoises washed out of the river banks in last night's deluge. The tortoise are pretending to be stones. Out, on the remaining platform of what was the concrete bridge, a team of young men has gathered. The same on the other side. They are debating who will go next to extend the human chain that will clasp the hand of a young man from the Cuautla side. This has been going on all morning. They say two participants have been lost off the end already in such attempts. But who can believe them? They start again, and the third or fourth human link to venture out is swirled round and hurled against the bank. As they swing round they are watched by us and the people passing farther downriver across the roadbridge from Cuautla to Amilcingo. The Cuautla side of this would-be human span reaches farther into the river because the brown body of the flood is rolling and twisting against the curve on the Amilcingo side, aiming to worm its way into the grounds of the presidential retreat. Slime at the door of Morelos, at the door of de la Madrid.

The Cuautla side shouts their superior achievement, holding their chain just short of the fiercest rip in the river, inviting the Amilcingo team to do their bit. There are taunts and yapping, dogs standing on their skinny legs beside their masters, watching the woman with a bucket of *camotes* (yams soaked in corn syrup) collecting coins.

Take them to the most dangerous place and they will try to cross, take them to the safest and they fall asleep, or shuffle and somnambulate across. Risk is their reason for action. What risky inundation will wake these Amilcingan and Cuautlense tribes on some future morning, bring them together to play a dangerous game? Commerce, the NAFTA, when they might drown in a river of our loonies, US dollars or pesos?

I ask Ramón about these horsemen from the towns and villages who play at spanning the impossible with their bodies to reach friends, who are as good as foes, on the other side. I ask Ramón about this orgy of trying to straddle a river, what does it mean?

These horsemen who ride mules and asses and scrawny ponies, if he could only arouse them and saddle their courage! He would dearly love to ride this source of power bareback, brandishing a pistol, whooping, tramp-

ing on the rooves of the bodyguard's Bugs, galloping over their machine guns in a collective glee, up to the presidential gate..

Either that or he would like to sell the government half the land for their new airport which, like many of their plans, will lie next year *in utero*, as fallow as the fields.

In the afternoon, we drive with Manuel in the direction of Izúcar de Matamoros. The sky is glazed with grey. We pass *el panteón*, the cemetery where his father, Manuel Senior—the Seminarian who trained as a chef for the refectory, but fell in love with Esperanza and went into hotels and catering—lies cooking in the sod near the onion field that Ramón planted for a time during one of his agrarian projects, when the price of onions for export was high. 'The land belongs to those who work it!'

Concrete platforms of phantom factories, streets *sans* trucks... The red oxide-coated girders rise like another cemetery on the same side as *el panteón*, the pantheon of the dead, on the right. Manuel points down into the ground on our left. Here lies the grave of Manuel Junior's sexual satisfactions, on a trail twisted through thorn bushes and maguey. A trail like the one John Houston chose for his production of *UNDER THE VOLCANO*, much of which has been filmed in Yautepec, almost the same distance away as here, on the other side of Cuautla. It is like the trail where the white horse rears up to kick at the Consul's chest—a ghost out of that namesake bottle of scotch, or runaway from the lightning which always arrives in the afternoon, at four in the afternoon. After the wind comes the thunder, and after the wind the lightning bolt. The trail leads back fifty years to the thirties, to a bordello in a Bedlam of darkness, not the bright Bethlehem of whores where Manuel stabled his horse, safely. Even if the women in their belts, buckles and tunics were like Roman legionaries, they took care of themselves and Manuel. Manuel loathes the pimp-protectors who have revived in flocks, like the birds around the *jagueys*—the natural sinks, the water holes on the desert flats between the arroyos here. He dreads the pimp-pickpockets who cull lives in exchange for a sac of sperm. He brays his disaffection with the regime—the President is as God: the origin, the light glistening at the core of the Mexican, political onion. As brood-master, the President ought to shepherd the successful completions of Manuel's urges. The President should chaperone Manuel's visits to *las amazonas en la Zona*, Manuel can love the President no more.

Danger or no danger, Manuel stops the car to get out and make it down

to the trail. My son squeaks. He is old enough to understand, but too young for any practical demonstrations. —Later, Lian—, Manuel says, pronouncing Liam as Lian, like he always does. Then, he repeats his lament—*Muchos robos, muchas dagas, muchas matanzas*.— Every robbery, gleam of a dagger, every murder—every driver's licence in an emptied wallet reflects Manuel's fearful, angry face. He sees the same face on Liam. —*Mejor no irnos ahora. Mas tarde, Lian*—

Yes, better for us not to go now. We are being shown what de La Madrid has sewn with his out-of-touch purity. The stitches in the skin of the stripped and stabbed appear in the Cuautla paper, for which Ramón is trying to connive an interview with me—*el cronista de Cuautla*—the chronicler of Cuautla, which is what he calls me. —He lets people know about the town,—he says to the reporter.—He knows our ways, he understands us.—

Do I?

In the dark, after we come back with Manuel to Esperanza's house on the corner of Privada de las Palmas, after we have eaten and argued, when we are outside and Ramón is about to drive us home in the Peugeot, a horn sounds. —Wait—he says—I'll introduce you.— Bucket slung to her arm, horn to her mouth, she rounds the Garcia house which, in fact, forms the corner of Privada de las Palmas with its walls. In the private place of palms, Esperanza's street, the Indian woman sets down her bucket with the *camotes* she is announcing on the plaintive horn. She is selling the sweet potato soaked in corn syrup at her brother's price for one square inch of land. Does the money belong to the thing out of the ground that grew it, or the ground itself, or the owner of that ground. The ground, like God, owns all three steps in the cycle. Everything comes back to it in its own mystery of exchanges and commerce. The ground can grow the golden money of onions or yam forever, but she has rented out two steps of it for years and now, in her anger at her brother, will sell the cycle of the seasons.

She nods shyly and suspiciously, also resentfully. She knows she is introduced by Ramón as a cause, a legal notoriety. She and Ramón discuss the impasse between the two lawyers—her brother's and the one Ramón has found for her. They decry the stupid hatred that costs so much. When she offers me the *camote*, the sickening sweetness is refused. I couldn't eat one square inch of their land, I can't eat the *camote*. The awkwardness of my dislike is crippling my encounter with her, embarrassing Ramón. He never says that he wishes I could swallow it with relish because it is my wooden human

thing—this problem of my taste. I could accept it, but I would never swallow it the way it is done. This is my contradiction. I may dip my pen in syrup, but my reality...?

Like Juan Rolfo, the Mexican who wrote *THE PLAIN IN FLAMES—Llano en llamas*, I am a puritan. Yes, my yam has to be cut and dried. I prefer it hot, but as plain as the desert.



George McWhirter and José Ramón García y Gomez