

THE FOUR-CHAMBERED HEART

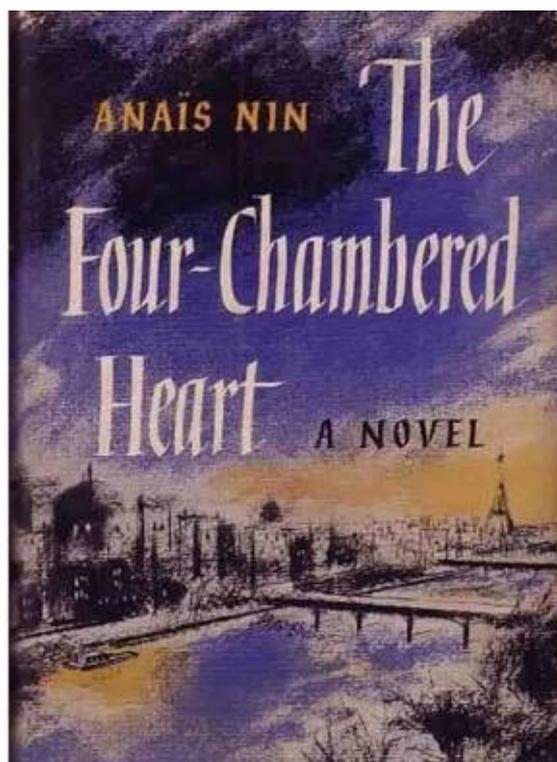
ANNAÏS NIN

THE FOUR-CHAMBERED HEART



ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY AND
UNCONVENTIONAL WRITERS OF THE CENTURY!

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Book III of CITIES OF THE INTERIOR

THE GUITAR DISTILLED ITS MUSIC.

Rango played it with the warm copper color of his skin, with the charcoal pupil of his eyes, with the underbrush thickness of his eyebrows, pouring into the honey-colored box the flavors of the open road on which he lived his gypsy life: thyme, rosemary, oregano, marjoram, and sage. Pouring into the resonant box the sensual swing of his hammock hung across the gypsy cart and the dreams born on his mattress of black horsehair.

Idol of the night clubs, where men and women barred doors and windows, lit candles, drank alcohol, and drank from his voice and his guitar the potions and herbs of the open road, the charivaris of freedom, the drugs of leisure and laziness.

At dawn, not content with the life transfusion through catguts, filled with the sap of his voice which had passed into their veins, at dawn the women wanted to lay hands upon his body. But at dawn Rango swung his guitar over his shoulder and walked away.

Will you be here tomorrow, Rango?

Tomorrow he might be playing and singing to his black horse's philosophically swaying tail, on the road to the south of France.

Toward this ambulant Rango, Djuna leaned to catch all that his music contained, and her ear detected the presence of this unattainable island of joy which she pursued, which she had glimpsed at the party she had never attended but watched from her window as a girl. And like some lost voyager in a desert, she leaned more and more eagerly toward this musical mirage of a pleasure never known to her, the pleasure of freedom.

"Rango, would you play once for my dancing?" she asked softly and fervently, and Rango stopped on his way out to bow to her, a bow of consent which took centuries of stylization and nobility of bearing to create, a bow indicating the largesse of gesture of a man who had never been bound.

"Whenever you wish."

As they planned for the day and hour, and while she gave him her address, they walked instinctively toward the river.

Their shadows walking before them revealed the contrast between them. His body occupied twice the space of hers. She walked unswerving like an arrow, while he ambled. His hands trembled while lighting her cigarette, and hers were steady.

"I'm not drunk," he said, laughing, "but I've been drunk so often that my hands have remained unsteady for life, I guess."

"Where is your cart and horse, Rango?"

"I have no cart and horse. Not for a long time. Not since Zora fell ill, years ago."

"Zora?"

"My wife."

"Is your wife a gypsy, too?"

"Neither my wife nor I. I was born in Guatemala, at the top of the highest mountain. Are you disappointed? That legend was necessary to keep up, for the night club, to earn a living. It protects me, too. I have a family in Guatemala who would be ashamed of my present life. I ran away from home when I was seventeen. I was brought up on a ranch. Even today my friends say: 'Rango, where is your horse? You always look as if you had left your horse tied to the gate.' I lived with the gypsies in the south of France. They taught me to play. They taught me to live as they do. The men don't work; they play the guitar and sing. The women take care of them by stealing food and concealing it under their wide skirts. Zora never learned that! She got very ill. I had to give up roaming. We're home now. Do you

want to come in?"

Djuna looked at the gray stone house.

She had not yet effaced from her eyes the image of Rango on the open road. The contrast was painful and she took a step backward, suddenly intimidated by a Rango without his horse, without his freedom.

The windows of the house were long and narrow. They seemed barred. She could not bear yet to see how he had been captured, tamed, caged, by what circumstances, by whom.

She shook his big hand, the big warm hand of a captive, and left him so swiftly he was dazed. He stood bewildered and swaying, awkwardly lighting another cigarette, wondering what had made her take flight.

He did not know that she had just lost sight of an island of joy. The image of an island of joy evoked by his guitar had vanished. In walking toward a mirage of freedom, she had entered a black forest, the black forest of his eyes darkening when he said: "Zora is very ill." The black forest of his wild hair as he bowed his head in contrition: "My family would be ashamed of the life I lead today." The black forest of his bewilderment as he stood about to enter a house too gray, too shabby, too cramped for his big, powerful body.

Their first kiss was witnessed by the Seine River carrying gondolas of street lamps' reflections in its spangled folds, carrying haloed street lamps flowering on bushes of black lacquered cobblestones, carrying silver filigree trees opened like fans beyond whose rim the river's eyes provoked them to hidden coquetries, carrying the humid scarves of fog and the sharp incense of roasted chestnuts.

Everything fallen into the river and carried away except the balcony on which they stood.

Their kiss was accompanied by the street organ and it lasted the whole length of the musical score of Carmen, and when it ended it was too late; they had drunk the potion to its last drop.

The potion drunk by lovers is prepared by no one but themselves.

The potion is the sum of one's whole existence.

Every word spoken in the past accumulated forms and colors in the self. What flows through the veins besides blood is the distillation of every act committed, the sediment of all the visions, wishes, dreams, and experiences. All the past emotions converge to tint the skin and flavor the lips, to regulate the pulse and produce crystals

in the eyes.

The fascination exerted by one human being over another is not what he emits of his personality at the present instant of encounter but a summation of his entire being which gives off this powerful drug capturing the fancy and attachment.

No moment of charm without long roots in the past, no moment of charm is born on bare soil, a careless accident of beauty, but is the sum of great sorrows, growths, and efforts.

But love, the great narcotic, was the hothouse in which all the selves burst into their fullest bloom...

love the great narcotic was the revealer in the alchemist's bottle rendering visible the most untraceable substances

love the great narcotic was the agent provocateur exposing all the secret selves to daylight

love the great narcotic-lined fingertips with clairvoyance

pumped iridescence into the lungs for transcendental x-rays

printed new geographies in the lining of the eyes

adorned words with sails, ears with velvet mutes

and soon the balcony tipped their shadows into the river, too, so that the kiss might be baptized in the holy waters of continuity.

Djuna walked along the Seine the next morning asking the fishermen and the barge sailors for a boat to rent in which she and Rango might live.

As she stood by the parapet wall, and then leaned over to watch the barges, a policeman watched her.

(Does he think I am going to commit suicide? Do I look like someone who would commit suicide? How blind he is! I never wanted less to die, on the very day I am beginning to live!)

He watched her as she ran down the stairs to talk to the owner of Nanette, a bright red barge. Nanette had little windows trimmed with beaded curtains just like the superintendent's windows in apartment houses.

(Why bring to a barge the same trimmings as those of a house? They are not made for the river, these people, not for voyages. They like familiarity, they like to continue their life on earth, while Rango and I want to run away from houses, cafes, streets, people. We want to find an island, a solitary cell, where we can dream in peace together. Why should the policeman think I may jump into the river

at this moment when I never felt less like dying? Or does he stand there to reproach me for slipping out of my father's house last night after ten o'clock, with such infinite precautions, leaving the front door ajar so he would not hear me leave, deserting his house with a beating heart because now his hair is white and he no longer understands anyone's need to love, for he has lost everything, not to love, but to his games of love; and when you love as a game, you lose everything, as he lost his home and wife, and now he clings to me, afraid of loss, afraid of solitude.)

That morning at five-thirty she had awakened, gently untangled her body from Rango's arms and reached her room at six, and at six-thirty her father had knocked on the door because he was ill and wanted care.

(Ali Baba protects the lovers! Gives them the luck of bandits, and no guilt; for love fills certain people and expands them beyond all laws; there is no time, no place for regrets, hesitations, cowardices. Love runs free and reckless; and all the gentle trickeries perpetrated to protect others from its burns—those who are not the lovers but who might be the victims of this love's expansion—let them be gentle and gay about these trickeries, gentle and gay like Robin Hood, or other games of children; for Anahita, the moon goddess, will then judge and mete out punishment, Mr. Policeman. So wait for her orders, for I am sure you would not understand if I told you my father is delightfully clear and selfish, tender and lying, formal and incurable. He exhausts all the loves given to him. If I did not leave his house at night to warm myself in Rango's burning hands I would die at my task, arid and barren, sapless, while my father monologues about his past, and I yawn yawn yawn... It's like looking at family albums, at stamp collections! Understand me, Mr. Policeman, if you can: if that were all I had, I would indeed be in danger of jumping into the Seine, and you would have to take a chill rescuing me. See, I have money for a taxi, I sing a song of thanksgiving to the taxi which nourishes the dream and carries it unbreakable, fragile but unbreakable everywhere. The taxi is the nearest object to a seven-leagued boot, it perpetuates the reverie, my vice, my luxury. Oh, you can, if you wish, arrest me for reverie, vagabondage of the wildest sort, for it is the cell, the mysterious, the padded, the fecund cell in which everything is born; everything that man ever accomplished is born in this little cell...)

The policeman passed by and did not arrest her, so she confided in him and found him rich with knowledge. He knew of many barges here and there. He knew one where they served fried potatoes and red wine to fishermen, another where hobos could spend the night for five cents, one where a woman in trousers carved big statues, another one turned into a swimming pool for boys, another one

called the barge of the red lights, for men, and beyond this one there was a barge that had been used by a troupe of actors to travel all through France, and there she might inquire as it was empty and had been deemed unsafe for long voyages...

It was anchored near the bridge, long and wide, with a strong prow from which hung the heavy anchor chain. It had no windows on the side, but a glass trap door on deck which an old watchman threw open for her. She descended a narrow and steep stairway to find herself in a broad room, with light falling from skylight windows, and then there were a smaller room, a hallway, and more small cabins on each side.

The large center room which had been used for the stage was still full of discarded sets and curtains and costumes. The small cabins which branched off on both sides had once been dressing rooms for the ambulant actors. They were now filled with pots of paint, firewood, tools, old sacks, and newspapers. At the prow of the barge was a vast room papered with glossy tarpaper. The skylight windows showed only the sky, but two openings in the wall, working like drawbridges on a chain, were cut only a few inches above water level and focused on the shore.

The watchman occupied one of the small cabins. He wore a beret and dark blue denim blouse like the French peasants.

He explained: "I was the captain of a pleasure yacht once. The yacht blew up and I lost my leg. But I can fetch water for you, and coal and wood. I can pump the water every day. This barge has to be watched for leaks. It's pretty old, but the wood is strong."

The walls of the barge curved like the inside of a whale belly. The old beams were stained with marks of former cargoes: wood, sand, stone, and coal.

As Djuna left, the old watchman picked up a piece of wood which held a pail at each end, hanging on a cord. He balanced it on his shoulders like a Japanese water carrier, and began to jump on his one leg after her, keeping a miraculous balance on the large cobblestones.

The winter night came covering the city, dusting the street lamps with fog and smoke so that their light dissolved into an aureole of sainthood.

When Djuna and Rango met, he was sad that he had found nothing

to shelter them. Djuna said: "I have something for you to see; if you like it, it might do for us."

As they walked along the quays, as they passed the station through a street being repaired, she picked up one of the red lanterns left by the repair men, and carried it, all lit, across the bridge. Halay they met the same policeman who had helped her find the barge. Djuna thought: "He will arrest me for stealing a street lantern."

But the policeman did not stop her. He smiled, knowing where she was going, and merely appraised Rango's build as they passed.

The old watchman appeared suddenly at the trap door and shouted: "Hey, there! Who goes there? Oh, it's you, petite madame. Wait. I'll open for you." And he threw the trap door fully open.

They descended the turning stairway and Rango smelled the tar with delight. When he saw the room, the shadows, the beams, he exclaimed: "It's like The Tales of Hoffmann. It's a dream. It's a fairy tale."

Old grandfather of the river, ex-captain of a pleasure yacht, snorted insolently at this remark and went back to his cabin.

"This is what I wanted," said Rango.

He bent down to enter the very small room at the tip of the barge which was like a small pointed prison with barred windows. The enormous anchor chain hung before the iron bars. The floor had been worn away, rotted with dampness, and they could see through the holes the layer of water which lies at the bottom of every ship, like the possessive fingers of the sea and the river asserting its ownership of the boat.

Rango said: "If ever you're unfaithful to me, I will lock you up in this room."

With the tall shadows all around them, the medieval beams cracking above their heads, the lapping water, the mildew at the bottom, the anchor chain's rusty plaintiveness, Djuna believed his words.

"Djuna, you're taking me to the bottom of the sea to live, like a real mermaid."

"I must be a mermaid, Rango. I have no fear of depths and a great fear of shallow living. But you, poor Rango, you're from the mountain, water is not your element. You won't be happy."

"Men from the mountains always dream of the sea, and above all things I love to travel. Where are we sailing now?"

As he said this, another barge passed up the river close to theirs. The whole barge heaved; the large wooden frame cracked like a giant's bones.

Rango lay down and said: "We're navigating."

"We're out of the world. All the dangers are outside, out in the world." All the dangers...dangers to the love, they believed as all lovers believe, came from the outside, from the world, never suspecting the seed of death of love might lie within themselves.

"I want to keep you here, Djuna. I would like it if you never left the barge."

"I wouldn't mind staying here."

(If it were not for Zora, Zora awaiting food, awaiting medicines, awaiting Rango to light the fire.)

"Rango, when you kiss me the barge rocks."

The red lantern threw fitful shadows, feverish red lights, over their faces. He named it the aphrodisiac lamp.

He lighted a fire in the stove. He threw his cigarette into the water. He kissed her feet, untied her shoes, he unrolled her stockings.

They heard something fall into the water.

"It's a flying fish," said Djuna.

He laughed: "There are no flying fish in the river, except you. When you're in my arms, I know you're mine. But your feet are so swift, so swift, they carry you as lightly as wings, I never know where, too fast, too fast away from me."

He rubbed his face, not as everyone does, with the palm of the hand. He rubbed it with his fists closed as children do, as bears and cats do.

He caressed her with such fervor that the little red lantern fell on the floor, the red glass broke, the oil burst into many small wild flames. She watched it without fear. Fire delighted her, and she had always wanted to live near danger.

After the oil was absorbed by the thick dry wooden floor, the fire died out.

They fell asleep.

The drunken grandfather of the river, ex-captain of a pleasure yacht, had lived alone on the barge for a long time. He had been the sole guardian and owner of it. Rango's big body, his dark Indian skin, his wild black hair, his low and vehement voice frightened the old man.

When Rango lit the stove at night in their bedroom, the old man in

his cabin would begin to curse him for the noise he made.

Also he resented that Rango did not let him wait on Djuna, and he would mutter against him when he was drunk, mutter threats in apache language.

One night Djuna arrived a little before midnight. A windy night with dead leaves blowing in circles. She was always afraid to walk alone down the stairs from the quays. There were no lights. She stumbled on hobos asleep, on whores plying their trade behind the trees. She tried to overcome her fear and would run down the steps along the edge of the river.

But finally they had agreed that she would throw a stone from the street to the roof of the barge to warn Rango of her arrival and that he would meet her at the top of the stairs.

This night she tried to laugh at her fears and to walk down alone. But when she reached the barge there was no light in the bedroom, and no Rango to meet her, but the old watchman popped out of the trap door, vacillating with drink, red-eyed and stuttering.

Djuna said: "Has Monsieur arrived?"

"Of course, he's in there. Why don't you come down? Come down, come down."

But Djuna did not see any light in the room, and she knew that if Rango were there, he would hear her voice and come out to meet her.

The old watchman kept the trap door open, saying as he stamped his feet: "Why don't you come down? What's the matter with you?" with more and more irritability.

Djuna knew he was drunk. She feared him, and she started to leave. As his rage grew, she felt more and more certain she should leave.

The old watchman's imprecations followed her.

Alone at the top of the stairs, in the silence, in the dark, she was filled with fears. What was the old man doing there at the trap door? Had he hurt Rango? Was Rango in the room? The old watchman had been told he could no longer stay on the barge. Perhaps he had avenged himself. If Rango were hurt, she would die of sorrow.

Perhaps Rango had come by way of the other bridge.

It was one o'clock. She would throw another stone on the roof and see if he responded.

As she picked up the stone, Rango arrived.

Returning to the barge together, they found the old watchman still

there, muttering to himself.

Rango was quick to anger and violence. He said: "You've been told to move out. You can leave immediately."

The old watchman locked himself in his cabin and continued to hurl insults.

"I won't leave for eight days," he shouted. "I was captain once, and I can be a captain any time I choose again. No black man is going to get me out of here. I have a right to be here."

Rango wanted to throw him out, but Djuna held him back.

"He's drunk. He'll be quiet tomorrow."

All night the watchman danced, spat, snored, cursed, and threatened. He drummed on his tin plate.

Rango's anger grew, and Djuna remembered other people saying: "The old man is stronger than he looks. I've seen him knock down a man like nothing." She knew Rango was stronger, but she feared the old man's treachery. A stab in the back, an investigation, a scandal. Above all, Rango might be hurt.

"Leave the barge and let me attend to him," said Rango. Djuna dissuaded him, calmed his anger, and they fell asleep at dawn.

When they came out at noon, the old watchman was already on the quays, drinking red wine with the hobos, spitting into the river as they passed, with ostentatious disdain.

The bed was low on the floor; the tarred beams creaked over their heads. The stove was snoring heat, the river water patted the barge's sides, and the street lamps from the bridge threw a faint yellow light into the room.

When Rango began to take Djuna's shoes off, to warm her feet in his hands, the old man of the river began to shout and sing, throwing his cooking pans against the wall:

Nanette gives freely
what others charge for.
Nanette is generous,
Nanette gives love
Under a red lantern

Rango leaped up, furious, eyes and hair wild, big body tense, and rushed to the old man's cabin. He knocked on the door. The song stopped for an instant, and was resumed:

Nanette wore a ribbon
In her black hair.
Nanette never counted
All she gave...

Then he drummed on his tin plate and was silent.

"Open the door!" shouted Rango.

Silence.

Then Rango hurled himself against the door, which gave way and tore into splinters.

The old watchman lay half naked on a pile of rags, with his beret on his head, soup stains on his beard, holding a stick which shook from terror.

Rango looked like Peter the Great, six feet tall, black hair flying, all set for battle.

"Get out of here!"

The old man was dazed with drunkenness, and he refused to move. His cabin smelled so badly that Djuna stepped back. There were pots and pans all over the floor, unwashed, and hundreds of old wine bottles exuding a rancid odor.

Rango forced Djuna back into the bedroom and went to fetch the police.

Djuna heard Rango return with the policeman, and heard his explanations. She heard the policeman say to the watchman: "Get dressed. The owner told you to leave. I have an injunction here. Get dressed."

The watchman lay there, fumbling for his clothes. He could not find the top of his pants. He kept looking down into one of the pant's legs as if surprised at its smallness. He mumbled. The policeman waited. They could not dress him because he would turn limp. He kept muttering: "Well, what do I care? I used to be captain of a yacht. Something white and smart, not one of these broken-down barges. I used to have a white suit, too. Suppose you do throw me into the river, it's all the same to me. I don't care if I die. I'm not a bad old man. I run errands for you, don't I? I fetch water, don't I? I

bring coal. What if I do sing a bit at night?"

"You don't just sing a bit," said Rango. "You make a hell of a noise every time you come home. You bang your pails together, you raise hell, you bang on the walls, you're always drunk, you fall down the stairs."

"I was sound asleep, wasn't I? Sound asleep, I tell you. Who knocked the door down, tell me? Who broke into my cabin? I'll not get out. I can't find my pants. These aren't mine, they're too small."

Then he began to sing:

Laissez moi tranquille,

Je ferais le mort.

Ma chandelle est morte

Et ma femme aussi.

Then Rango, the policeman, and Djuna all began to laugh. No one could stop laughing. The old man looked so dazed and innocent.

"You can stay if you're quiet," said Rango.

"If you're not quiet," said the policeman, "I'll come back and fetch you and throw you in jail."

"Je ferais le mort," said the old man. "You'll never know I'm here."

He was now thoroughly bewildered and docile. "But no one has a right to knock a door down. What manners, I tell you! I've knocked men down often enough, but never knocked a door down. No privacy left. No manners."

When Rango returned to the bedroom, he found Djuna still laughing. He opened his arms. She hid her face against his coat and said: "You know, I love the way you broke that door." She felt relieved of some secret accumulation of violence, as one does watching a storm of nature, thunder and lightning discharging anger for us.

"I loved your breaking down that door," repeated Djuna.

Through Rango she had breathed some other realm she had never attained before. She had touched through his act some climate of violence she had never known before.

The Seine River began to swell from the rains and to rise high above the watermark painted on the stones in the Middle Ages. It covered the quays at first with a thin layer of water, and the hobos

quartered under the bridge had to move to their country homes under the trees. Then it lapped the foot of the stairway, ascended one step, and then another, and at last settled at the eighth, deep enough to drown a man.

The barges stationed there rose with it; the barge dwellers had to lower their rowboats and row to shore, climb up a rope ladder to the wall, climb over the wall to the firm ground. Strollers loved to watch this ritual, like a gentle invasion of the city by the barges' population.

At night the ceremony was perilous, and rowing back and forth from the barges was not without difficulties. As the river swelled, the currents became violent. The smiling Seine showed a more ominous aspect of its character.

The rope ladder was ancient, and some of its solidity undermined by time.

Rango's chivalrous behavior was suited to the circumstances; he helped Djuna climb over the wall without showing too much of the scalloped sea-shell edge of her petticoat to the curious bystanders; he then carried her into the rowboat, and rowed with vigor. He stood up at first and with a pole pushed the boat away from the shore, as it had a tendency to be pushed by the current against the stairway, then another current would absorb it in the opposite direction, and he had to fight to avoid sailing down the Seine.

His pants rolled up, his strong dark legs bare, his hair wild in the wind, his muscular arms taut, he smiled with enjoyment of his power, and Djuna lay back and allowed herself to be rescued each time anew, or to be rowed like a great lady of Venice.

Rango would not let the watchman row them across. He wanted to be the one to row his lady to the barge. He wanted to master the tumultuous current for her, to land her safely in their home, to feel that he abducted her from the land, from the city of Paris, to shelter and conceal her in his own tower of love.

At the hour of midnight, when others are dreaming of firesides and bedroom slippers, of finding a taxi to reach home from the theatre, or pursuing false gaieties in the bars, Rango and Djuna lived an epic rescue, a battle with an angry river, a journey into difficulties, wet feet, wet clothes, an adventure in which the love, the test of the love, and the reward telescoped into one moment of wholeness. For Djuna felt that if Rango fell and were drowned she would die also, and Rango felt that if Djuna fell into the icy river he would die to save her. In this instant of danger they realized they were each other's reason for living, and into this instant they threw their whole beings.

Rango rowed as if they were lost at sea, not in the heart of a city; and Djuna sat and watched him with admiration, as if this were a medieval tournament and his mastering of the Seine a supreme votive offering to her feminine power.

Out of worship and out of love he would let no one light the stove for her either, as if he would be the warmth and the fire to dry and warm her feet. He carried her down the trap door into the freezing room damp with winter fog. She stood shivering while he made the fire with an intensity into which he poured his desire to warm her, so that it no longer seemed like an ordinary stove smoking and balking, or Rango an ordinary man lighting wood with damp newspapers, but like some Valkyrian hero lighting a fire in a Black Forest.

Thus love and desire restored to small actions their large dimensions, and renewed in one winter night in Paris the full stature of the myth.

She laughed as he won his first leaping flame and said: "You are the God of Fire."

He took her so deeply into his warmth, shutting the door of their love so intimately that no corroding external air might enter.

And now they were content, having attained all lovers' dream of a desert island, a cell, a cocoon, in which to create a world together from the beginning.

In the dark they gave each other their many selves, avoiding only the more recent ones, the story of the years before they met as a dangerous realm from which might spring dissensions, doubts, and jealousies. In the dark they sought rather to give each other their earlier, their innocent, unpossessed selves.

This was the paradise to which every lover liked to return with his beloved, recapturing a virgin self to give one another.

Washed of the past by their caresses, they returned to their adolescence together.

Djuna felt herself at this moment a very young girl, she felt again the physical imprint of the crucifix she had worn at her throat, the incense of mass in her nostrils. She remembered the little altar at her bedside, the smell of candles, the faded artificial flowers, the face of the virgin, and the sense of death and sin so inextricably entangled in her child's head. She felt her breasts small again in her modest dress, and her legs tightly pressed together. She was now the first girl he had loved, the one he had gone to visit on his

horse, having traveled all night across the mountains to catch a glimpse of her. Her face was the face of this girl with whom he had talked only through an iron gate. Her face was the face of his dreams, a face with the wide space between the eyes of the madonnas of the sixteenth century. He would marry this girl and keep her jealously to himself like an Arab husband, and she would never be seen or known to the world.

In the depth of this love, under the vast tent of this love, as he talked of his childhood, he recovered his innocence too, an innocence much greater than the first, because it did not stem from ignorance, from fear, or from neutrality in experience. It was born like an ultimate pure gold out of many tests, selections, from voluntary rejection of dross. It was born of courage, after desecrations, from much deeper layers of the being inaccessible to youth.

Rango talked in the night. "The mountain I was born on was an extinct volcano. It was nearer to the moon. The moon there was so immense it frightened man. It appeared at times with a red halo, occupying half of the sky, and everything was stained red... There was a bird we hunted, whose life was so tough that after we shot him the Indians had to tear out two of his feathers and plunge them into the back of the bird's neck, otherwise it would not die... We killed ducks in the marshes, and once I was caught in quicksands and saved myself by getting quickly out of my boots and leaping to safe ground... There was a tame eagle who nestled on our roof... At dawn my mother would gather the entire household together and recite the rosary... On Sundays we gave formal dinners which lasted all afternoon. I still remember the taste of the chocolate, which was thick and sweet, Spanish fashion... Prelates and cardinals came in their purple and gold finery. We led the life of sixteenth-century Spain. The immensity of nature around us caused a kind of trance. So immense it gave sadness and loneliness. Europe seemed so small, so shabby at first, after Guatemala. A toy moon, I said, a toy sea, such small houses and gardens. At home it took six hours by train and three weeks on horseback to reach the top of the mountain where we went hunting. We would stay there for months, sleeping on the ground. It had to be done slowly because of the strain on the heart. Beyond a certain height the horses and mules could not stand it; they would bleed through mouth and ears. When we reached the snow caps, the air was almost black with intensity. We would look down sharp cliffs, thousands of miles down, and we would see below, the small, intensely green, luxuriant tropical jungle. Sometimes for hours and hours my horse would travel alongside a waterfall, until the sound of the falling water would hypnotize me. And all this time, in snow and wildness, I dreamed of

a pale slender woman... When I was seventeen, I was in love with a small statue of a Spanish virgin, who had the wide space between the eyes which you have. I dreamed of this woman, who was you, and I dreamed of cities, of living in cities... Up in the mountain where I was born one never walked on level ground, one walked always on stairways, an eternal stairway toward the sky, made of gigantic square stones. No one knows how the Indians were able to pile these stones one upon another; it seems humanly impossible. It seemed more like a stairway made by gods, because the steps were higher than a man's step could encompass. They were built for giant gods, for the Mayan giants carved in granite, those who drank the blood of sacrifices, those who laughed at the puny efforts of men who tired of taking such big steps up the flanks of mountains. Volcanoes often erupted and covered the Indians with fire and lava and ashes. Some were caught descending the rocks, shoulders bowed, and frozen in the lava, as if cursed by the earth, by maledictions from the bowels of the earth. We sometimes found traces of footsteps bigger than our own. Could they have been the white boots of the Mayans? Where I was born the world began. Where I was born lay cities buried under lava, children not yet born destroyed by volcanoes. There was no sea up there, but a lake capable of equally violent storms. The wind was so sharp at times it seemed as if it would behead one. The clouds were pierced by sandstorms, the lava froze in the shape of stars, the trees died of fevers and shed ashen leaves, the dew steamed where it fell, and clouds rose from the earth's parched cracked lips... And there I was born. And the first memory I have is not like other children's; my first memory is of a python devouring a cow... The poor Indians did not have the money to buy coffins for their dead. When bodies are not placed in coffins a combustion takes place, little explosions and due flames, as the sulphur burns. These little blue flames seen at night are weird and frightening... To reach our house we had to cross a river. Then came the front patio which was as large as the Place Vendome... Then came the chapel which belonged to our ranch. A priest was sent for from town every Sunday to say mass... The house was large and rambling, with many inner patios. It was built of pale coral stucco. There was one room entirely filled with firearms, all hanging on the walls. Another room filled with books. I still remember the cedar-wood smell of my father's room. I loved his elegance, manliness, courage... One of my aunts was a musician; she married a very brutal man who made her unhappy. She let herself die of hunger, playing the piano all through the night. It was hearing her play night after night, until she died, and finding her music afterward, which drew me to the piano. Bach, Beethoven, the best, which at that time were very little known in such far-off ranches. The schools of music were only frequented by girls. It was

thought to be an effeminate art. I had to give up going there and study alone, because the girls laughed at me. Although I was so big, and so rough in many ways, loved hunting, fighting, horseback riding, I loved the piano above everything else... The mountain man's obsession is to get a glimpse of the sea. I never forgot my first sight of the ocean. The train arrived at four in the morning. I was dazzled, deeply moved. Even today when I read the Odyssey it is with the fascination of the mountain man for the sea, of the snow man for warm climates, of the dark, intense Indian for the Greek light and mellowness. And it is that which draws me to you, too, for you are the tropics, you have the sun in you, and the softness, and the clarity..."

What had happened to this body made for the mountain, for violence and war? A little blue flame of music, of art, from the body of the aunt who had died playing Bach, a little blue flame of restless sulphur had passed into this body made for hunting, for war and the tournaments of love. It had lured him away from his birthplace, to the cities, to the cafes, to the artists.

But it had not made of him an artist.

It had been like a mirage, stealing him from other lives, depriving him of ranch, of luxury, of parents, of marriage and children, to make of him a nomad, a wanderer, a restless, homeless one who could never go home again: "Because I am ashamed, I have nothing to show, I would be coming back as a beggar."

The little blue flame of music and poetry shone only at night, during the long nights of love, that was all. In the daytime it was invisible. As soon as day came, his body rose with such strength that she thought: he will conquer the world.

His body—which had not been chiseled like a city man's, not with the precision and finesse of some highly finished statue, but modeled in a clay more massive, more formless too, cruder in outline, closer to primitive sculpture, as if it had kept a little of the heavier contours of the Indian, of animals, of rocks, earth, and plants.

His mother used to say: "You don't kiss me like a boy, but like a little animal."

He began his day slowly, like a cub, rubbing his eyes with closed fists, yawning with eyes closed, a humorous, a sly, upward wrinkle from mouth to high cheekbone, all his strength, as in the lion, hidden in a smooth form, no visible sign of effort.

He began his day slowly, as if man's consciousness were something he had thrown off during the night, and had to be recovered like some artificial covering for his body.

In the city, this body made for violent movements, to leap, to face a danger of some kind, to match the stride of a horse, was useless. It had to be laid aside like a superfluous mantle. Firm muscles, nerves, instincts, animal quickness were useless. It was the head which must awaken, not the muscles and sinews. What must awaken was awareness of a different kind of danger, a different kind of effort, all of it to be considered, matched, mastered in the head, by some abstract wit and wisdom.

The physical euphoria was destroyed by the city. The supply of air and space was small. The lungs shrank. The blood thinned. The appetite was jaded and corrupt.

The vision, the splendor, the rhythm of the body were instantly broken. Clock time, machines, auto horns, whistles, congestion, caught man in their cogs, deafened, stupefied him. The city's rhythm dictated to man; the imperious order to remain alive actually meant to become an abstraction.

Rango's protest was to set out to deny and destroy the enemy. He set out to deny clock time and he would miss, first of all, all that he reached for. He would make such detours to obey his own rhythm and not the city's that the simplest act of shaving and buying a steak would take hours, and the vitally important letter would never be written. If he passed a cigar store, his habit of counter-discipline would be stronger than his own needs and he would forget to buy the cigarettes he craved, but later when about to reach the house of a friend for lunch he would make a long detour for cigarettes and arrive too late for lunch, to find his angry friend gone, and thus once more the rhythm and pattern of the city were destroyed, the order broken, and Rango with it, Rango left without lunch.

He might try to reach the friend by going to the cafe, would find someone else and fall into talk about bookbinding and meanwhile another friend was waiting for Rango at the Guatemalan Embassy, waiting for his help, his introduction, and Rango never appeared, while Zora waited for him at the hospital, and Djuna waited for him in the barge, while the dinner she had made spoiled on the fire.

At this moment Rango was standing looking at a print on the bookstalls, or throwing dice over a cafe counter to gamble for a drink, and now that the city's pattern had been destroyed, lay in shambles, he returned and said to Djuna: "I am tired." And laid a despondent, a heavy head on her breasts, his heavy body on her bed, and all his unfulfilled desires, his aborted moments, lay down with him like stones in his pockets, weighing him down, so that the bed creaked with the inertia of his words: "I wanted to do this, I wanted to do that, I want to change the world, I want to go and fight, I want..."

But it is night already, the day has fallen apart, disintegrated in his hands. Rango is tired, he will take another drink from the little barrel, eat a banana, and start to talk about his childhood, about the bread tree, the tree of the meadows that kill, the death of the little Negro boy his father had given him for his birthday, a little Negro boy who had been born the same day as Rango, but in the jungle, and who would be his companion on hunting trips, but who died almost immediately from the cold up in the mountains.

Thus at twilight when Rango had destroyed all order of the city because the city destroyed his body, and the day lay like a cemetery of negations, of rebellions and abortions, lay like a giant network in which he had tangled himself as a child tangles himself in an order he cannot understand, and is in danger of strangling himself...then Djuna, fearing he might suffocate, or be crushed, would tenderly seek to unwind him, just as she picked up the pieces of his broken glasses to have them made again...

They had reached a perfect moment of human love. They had created a moment of perfect understanding and accord. This highest moment would now remain as a point of comparison to torment them later on when all natural imperfections would disintegrate it.

The dislocations were at first subtle and held no warning of future destruction. At first the vision was clear, like a perfect crystal. Each act, each word would be imprinted on it to shed light and warmth on the growing roots of love, or to distort it slowly and corrode its expansion.

Rango lighting the lantern for her arrival, for her to see the red light from afar, to be reassured, incited to walk faster, elated by this symbol of his presence and his fervor. His preparing the fire to warm her... These rituals Rango could not sustain, for he could not maintain the effort to arrive on time since his lifelong habit had created the opposite habit: to elude, to avoid, to disappoint every expectation of others, every commitment, every promise, every crystallization.

The magic beauty of simultaneity, to see the loved one rushing toward you at the same moment you are rushing toward him, the magic power of meeting exactly at midnight to achieve union, the illusion of one common rhythm achieved by overcoming obstacles, deserting friends, breaking other bonds—all this was soon dissolved by his laziness, by his habit of missing every moment, of never keeping his word, of living perversely in a state of chaos, of