

Ernesto Giménez Caballero
Yo, inspector de Alcantarillas
(*I, Inspector of Sewers*, 1928)
translated by Leslie Harkema

I

J'aimerais n'avoir jamais commencé...

This beginning of a poem by André Breton was my beginning.

A spirit—whom I respected so much—pushed me to such a beginning with this stimulus:

“You are an introvert,” he told me seriously. “We have to leave you alone, let’s see...”

Let’s see what? This?

To you, amicable spirit, I send my first harvest of introversions. Which you foreknew, the man-made oracle of my poetic destiny.

What good your words did me! The good of immutable definitions.

Until that moment I hadn’t realized that I was poured out within myself [*in-vertido*]. Inside of the container that is me.

Until that moment I hadn’t known how to account for my life faithfully, according to an internal, unalienable law.

Until that moment I hadn’t known how to gleefully cauterize the constant pain of “not being able to look out, outward, outside,” of not being one who deals with the outer world.

Until that moment I hadn’t known how to leave through the doors of my spirit, stroll around myself, contemplate my apparentness, and return—all exuberance and confidence—(the mollusk to its shell) to my everyday, hermetic self.

! I in me! In me!

How magical these two words, *I* and *me*!

Pronouns substituting for names; words substituting substances, in allusion to essences, of immanences...

! But what *I* was mine that I could be immersed in him without being able to come out of myself?

Was my *I*, perhaps, a star in a well? A ditch in a chasm? A mineral in the undersoil?
How to reach him?

I didn't know.

I only knew that when I got to him I didn't want to let go of myself or abandon him—as Saint Teresa said of her own *I*, the one that searched for its other *I*, which was God. ("It doesn't dare make a sound or move, for it seems that this good will slip out of its hands.")

I remember when one day, crazed from not being able to surface to earth, I went to see the famous neuropath in the faraway city, and he hung from my neck the *Medal of Suffering for the Self*, the cross of holy Hysteria.

"I dub you," he said to me, "invalid of the exterior world, young well-digger of the insides."

Words that my amicable spirit would later confirm; in that moment of its immutable definition of me; in that my christening (and by Royal order) as *inspector*.

Inspector

I put the finishing touches on my now-dead face. I put pieces of glass over the eyes, like funereal urns. So that I could disappear well, into the depths below.

Those cinerary lenses on my face—display cabinets of my pupils, shop window of my soul—were, however, Snow White's coffin in the forest: inside, an infantile life, sleeping.

I put glass on my face, just as the diver his diving bell.

I got a supply of air. And I fell. Vertically.

At the ocean's floor I ran into friends who were searching for their sunken ships just as I was, with the phantasmal gait of lead Medusas (Joyce, Eluard, Ernst, Unamuno, Ray, Gracián, Kafka, Joan Miró).

We brushed each other with rubbery contact, without looking at one another; only what was necessary for a polished hurrah and to confirm that we were wearing our trademark inspector's plates on our foreheads.

Quickly we erased the star of our encounter.

Each one straight ahead on his radius, toward the limit.

After a tiring swim, I reached a black cylinder that look above the sea, onto a mud-colored light, a sky without birds or clouds, where all the shapes were banished and you could only make out irrealities in the flow of the channel.

It was the kingdom of epiplasms.

Sewers

The kingdom of epiplasms: the hallucinatory realm of the sewage pipes: where the cities (animal, vegetable, mineral, man) dumped their last substances decomposed in mire. I kneeled at the edge of the kingdom, as before a Creation of the World, in reverse.

Before me flowed organic life in its last visible metamorphosis, in the last reduction of its individuality.

Life at the end of its life: in its epiplasm.

Joys	Paper	Weddings	Wires
matter	matter	matter	matter
rose	fringe	amor	sorrow
	matter	matter	matter
metal	blood	peels	oxides
matter	matter	matter	matter
tears	wine	nostalgia	wood
	matter	matter	matter
mud	laughter	cork	cloths
matter	matter	matter	matter
pus	hope	water	pain
matter	matter	matter	light
matter	matter	matter	matter
			matter

Matter flowed before me almost as if before God on the first day.

I took a few drops of inframirey silt. (Sublime silt!)
Enough to impregnate this book with vague transcendence.
Let no one read without sterilizing—beforehand—his olfactory papillae.

The Badly Birthed Redeemer

(Poem of the Mule)

She could already smell the capital. It was a smell of excrement and cigarette butts, slightly acrid, smoky, close, very sharp. Soon on the right and the left would appear the rusty tin shanties that had always moved her, however much they represented for her a dual appetite, a vacillating lust. On the one hand, the softish and soggy atmosphere of the stable, of the rich, well-manured, dark, fetid, spicy stall in the stable where they always kept her. The tepid, thick atmosphere of the stable, full of dense gases, flies, fleas, and lice, upon which she would throw herself with voluptuous abandon, freed of collar, harness, blinders, bit, with no more bridle than a simple halter tied to a ring on the manger, which gave her space to roll over two or three times in a row and shake her hooves, numb with cold, in the air, like a hurrah. On the other hand, that preliminary and exciting odor of the shanties also had the power to transport her to the longing of hunger, of sheer fodder, of the other central desire of her simple being. The membranes of her stomach would start to strain against each other in spasms that were almost sexual, like two frenetic thighs, the nearby dry feed vibrating, crackling maddeningly. After the day's infinite tiring, after the hours of trudging down the road with her head cast down, her vision impeded by the fine gray shimmer of the dust, without once putting her snout in the bag, in the drool-covered straw, without even for a moment bathing her frothy chops in a puddle or a single roadside fountain.

She could already smell the capital, and nevertheless... And, nevertheless, she had the sensation that she wouldn't reach it, that it wasn't possible.

Either they had loaded her with more sacks, or she was feeling older than ever, or that last rapping that she'd taken to the head, between the ears, while fording the river, had dazed her to the point of exhaustion.

They thought she was the strongest of the team, and it wasn't true. Her age made her seem sturdier, of greater stature, she gave the impression of being a feistier nag, more of a powerhouse than the others. And so her place was invariably between the shafts, and if they worked her unhitched, with a rider, her saddle was the heaviest.

She could never escape. She tried all the time, timidly, with the crazed, innocent obstinacy of horsiness, to get out of it, to gain the upper hand.

But that driver, that damned *Petaco*, would dominate her with a single word (*Lucera!*) and she would feel weak and give in instantly, nervously tramping over the thorns as if she were going to surrender herself to him then and there, like a meek novice, her stubbornness spent, her will extinguished.

Why, then, those blows from *Petaco*?

She was docile, docile as he would never guess, and good. During his long, unending afternoon naps on the road, when she pulled him dozing on top of the mound of sacks, rocking against the canvas—how carefully she avoided the axle, the ruts in the road, the occasional rocks, and evaded the *autos*, and worked to soften the jostling of the cart!

One day, as she traversed a wide street in the capital, she recalled a quarrel that a foreign woman had picked with him, admonishing him not to use the whip when pulling the cart out of a pothole. She got an urge as if to nuzzle or lick—full of, bursting with

sudden gratitude—the hand of that fleeting attention that had fallen upon her, upon her very loins. But *Petaco's goddamn!* was more powerful, so much so that she felt again, unable to reject it, the immediate desire to be beaten, as if with this sacrifice the jerk would shut up, and in shutting up give her the illusion of understanding her, of justifying her mildness, her abnegation, her dismal tenderness... Was she in love with him? The time when she most feared him was when they would start up again after stopping at a tavern. Every step was too small, too slow for him. And then, his bulging eyes bloodshot and bruised, he would grab her, always her (and she—why?—how she thanked him for it, she thanked him, yes, yes, eagerly, desperately!), he would grab her by the harness, yanking her toward him, tearing her muzzle and her gums with the bit, forcing her to lift her chops to the clouds, blind with pain, while with his rod he thrashed her forehead, between the eyes, Haw! Goddammit! Christ! Whoaaaa! Mutheragawd!

He always cursed her with the name of the virgin. With him she came to be called, instead of *Lucera*, “You, the virgin!”

Which was unspeakable, heartbreaking, completely absurd and completely true. She felt all of her hybridity, all her sterility in that adornment, all her dismal destiny, all the frigidity and consumptiveness of her life. Still, once they had put a donkey in with her. And once a Manchegan stud. She didn't do anything. She stood in the middle of the corral, grazing from a big stone manger. The stud, urged by the farmhands with special coaxings and stimulating slaps, finally came up to her, trying to put his head in the trough. But she, with a shove, intercepted his attempt. Then the ass began to circle her, round and round, only to finally, amidst everyone's astonishment, bend his front knees and genuflect before her with his eyelids lowered.

Something similar happened with another equine. But she never analyzed these scenes or assigned them any transcendent significance.

She felt alone, alone, islanded in the confusion of the species. Brutalized by beatings, incessantly pulling the cart, hopeless, pointed at with rage and hatred by people who believed the old wives' tale that accused her of choosing not to warm the baby Jesus with her breath.

If it hadn't been for a strange something, an odd, comforting vapor that lifted her once in a while, as if from within, from her gut, swaddling her eyes with tears, she would have believed herself to be a mere, inorganic thing, stirred only by the two functions of eating and sleeping.

Her absolute sexual indifference! Her visible and sinister shame! How she would slink away with pretended shock and infinite sadness at night in the stall, at noon in the fields on her plowing days, upon surprising a couple cavorting in her path, their jaws wide in spasms, showing a yellowish battlement of equine teeth gridding the procreative effort!

At this point she was bottled up, stifled by bitterness. Covered with lacerations, frightfully skinny and rough-hided, angular, with a camelish, hard stance, risible, with none of the velvety, brown, lustrous plumpnesses that were still the pride of other mules her age, she went through life inert, the roadway before her, lost in her thoughts in the dust, the blinders focusing her vision on the dust. Her only relief—relief?—was that promising, turbulent, unsettled, gentle, indescribable vapor, a vague premonition of a visceral, intimate postulate, that vapor that she had been able to sense ever since old *Petaco*, having been put in charge of the team, began to shake her.

Among the other muleteers, *Petaco* was taken for the roughest and rowdiest of them all, because his was an indefinite, unspecified breed somewhere between man and beast. Seldom did they speak of him without using words of an elemental, ungulate nature to describe him.

He's an ass, the guy is a mule!

No, he wasn't a mule. No. For her he was something superior, higher than a mule. Maybe not a man, since the rest of humanity never affected her in the slightest. He was, undoubtedly, the transition. Her transition, her promise? Could *she* rise up? Through him?

Would he, in the end, understand her?

One fine day, she was granted a moment of madness, of clouds rolling back, of immense imminence. It was an autumn evening. *Petaco* was heading to the hayloft to get some sleep. They were supposed to set off at dawn with a load of oil and flour.

Petaco entered the stable intoxicated, drunk, very drunk; more than usual. And he came up to her. He didn't have a stick in his hand. She stood very still, tremulous, scared, pricking her ears up with difficulty. He, *Petaco*, did what he had never before attempted, he caressed her haunches and, with his two trembling hands, while saying to her in a hoarse whisper you, the virgin! good... *Lucera!*... Mmm..., he lifted up her tail. But he swayed, staggered, and stumbled to the floor, ending up stretched out asleep at her feet.

She fell sick soon after. With an attack of haematuria that had her standing in a corner pissing blood, sweating, her pulse racing, for more than a week. But she got over it. Still, what strength it took! When they harnessed her up again it was a battle not to fall down defenseless. Thanks to *Petaco's* beatings she straightened up. From then on *Petaco* took his frustrations out on her like never before. He would deposit a daily offering of frenetic lashes between her ears as if he wanted her blood to boil and to make her fly, fly with the cart, as if it were the chariot of Triptolemus, maddened with fright and with pain. He had put her in that state a little while ago, when they forged the river.

She already smelled the capital. There were the shanties. The barren plain was ending and the outskirts of the city were beginning.

Suddenly, flump! Cart and all. Collapsed, lying flat next to the ditch. The cargo needed to arrive. *Petaco* made do with the two other mules and the guide donkey, leaving her lying there, her dusty, grimy stomach bared to the cold air of the clear morning, all straps removed, completely naked.

Some children came up and sat on her belly. "It's still warm!" one said. She shivered as if to shake off a louse and the children ran off startled. Later some gypsies passed by who, without looking at her closely, took her for dead. Later a dog came up to sniff her.

Finally, very slowly, she managed to collect herself, get up, begin to walk, dazed, through the fallow fields, backtracking across the country, aimlessly. She crossed a small farm plot, then a terraced vineyard, then, panting asthmatically, she conquered a chain of small hills. Having put them behind her, she found herself in a clearing where, completely isolated, there stood a chapel. Wham! Another swoon. Right at the door.

The door was open. The little church, empty and clearly penumbral. At the back, an altar adorned with something like brass lianas and tin-leaf loops, presented worshippers with a crucifix wearing a purple kilt, made of percale and edged with gold sergeant stripes.

The Christ's face was dirty, pockmarked by flies and visibly covered with pigeon droppings.

The top of the chapel was a columbary, a pigeon-house. In the limitless and blue morning, the ring-doves came and went with their showy, pedantic flight, so graceless, so pigeon-toed, through the slats in the tower wall.

At one point, *Lucera's* eyes, dulled, grounded by the stonework of the atrium, met those of the holy one. And they kept looking at them two, three long, long hours.

It must have been one in the afternoon by now. From the pigeon-house a tiny little chaffinch let himself leaden a bit and drop to the window of the chapel. He entered and went to perch on the shoulder of the figure with the kilt, as if to receive a command from it. Soon he continued his flight, a flutter, a timid, annunciatory flurry, advancing toward the mule's head until he shadowed it for an instant with his wings extended, as if with this triangular and fleeting shadow he were dropping an ineffable, imperceptible, sanctioning projection, swollen with grace and election, between the animal's ears.

Lucera rose up definitively, her eyes wide, sclera emerging with a golden, radiferous color. Her hooves began to move with something like a circus step, rhythmic, slow, masterful, blessed. And she walked, she walked. She held her nose high, her chops slightly open, sipping the fresh and cold air of the evening.

Her cuts, her mange, her insect bites, had cleared up and disappeared. Her stomach had become lustrous, alabastrine, and it began to swell, to swell soft and tenderly. She walked, she walked, she walked. In the road she found a recently hitched yoke of horses, with the plow at their backs, waiting for the farmhand to return from his work.

The yoked pair followed her. She found a little ragpicker's donkey chewing an oil can full of peels and rinds. And this donkey followed her, too.

They walked like this a long way, making their way through weeds, brambles, hills, fields.

A guard's horse came untied from the post at an inn for traveling laborers. And he joined them, too.

They went along just so, step by step, in a primitive herd, an absurd new flock, without a pastor, like Grimm's musical animals, behind that mule with the swollen belly, who endlessly breathed the violet and sharp air of the brisk evening.

The stars had already appeared in the transparent winter sky when, jumping over the ditch, they reached the highway in great silence.

Who knows how, out of nowhere, suddenly in the unforeseen curve the military truck loaded with bricks was upon her, and it hit her, it gutted her.

The truck continued on, out of sight. The equine chorus closed in around her.

From the deflated, ruptured womb came a white, pure, immaculate liquid that didn't stain the dust, that evaporated instantly in a string of smoke, in a translucent, swift, elevated smoke that finally, high up, rounded out into a benign, spiritualized cloud, with something like dove's wings.

A long whinny was heard throughout the surrounding area. A sharp, heartrending, piercing, unredeemable whinny, a frightful lament of loss, of pain without measure, of absolute miscarriage.

The carts continue passing and passing by that place. The mules continue walking, dragging their intrinsic cargo through there, languidly rocking the bolster, clattering the merchandise along the wheel ruts.

At times, when the driver is exasperated, he lashes them on the head, furious.

In response, they lift their yellow, clamorous jaws to the sky, to the blue hole that the cloud left. Snouts congested, sobbing, uselessly looking for what couldn't come true. That redeemer of theirs, so badly borne away.