

NO
CLASSIC

62:

A MODEL KIT



JULIO CORTEÁZAR

Translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa

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A NEW DIRECTIONS CLASSIC

This novel and this translation are
dedicated to

Cronopio Paul Blackburn.
*y aunque la vida murio,
nos dexo harto consuelo
su memoria.*

J.C., G.R.

62:
A
MODEL
Hit

NOT A FEW READERS will notice various transgressions of literary convention here. To give only a few examples: the Argentine characters switch from one familiar form to another whenever it suits the dialogue; a Londoner who is only starting his study of French begins to speak it with amazing fluency (and even worse, in a Spanish version) as soon as he crosses the Channel; geography, the order of subway stations, freedom, psychology, dolls, and time obviously cease being what they were in the realm of Cynara.

For those who might possibly be startled, I point out that in the territory where this tale takes place the transgressions cease to be such; the prefix is placed alongside the various others that spin about the root *gressio*: aggression, regression, and progression are also connatural to the intentions sketched out one day past in the final paragraphs of Chapter 62 of *Hopscotch*,¹ which explains the title of this book, and perhaps those intentions will be fulfilled in the course of it.

The subtitle, *A Model Kit*, might lead one to believe that the different parts of the tale, separated by blank spaces, are put forth as interchangeable elements. If some of them are, the framework referred to is of a different nature—sensitive sometimes on the writing level, where recurrences and displacements try to be free of all causal fixedness, but especially on the level of meaning, where the opening for combinatory art is more insistent and imperative. The reader's option, his personal montage of the elements in the tale, will in each case be the book he has chosen to read.

¹ *Hopscotch*, by Julio Cortázar, Pantheon Books, New York, 1966.

“I’d like a bloody castle,” the fat diner had said.

Why did I go into the Polidor restaurant? Why, since I’m asking that kind of question, did I buy a book I probably wouldn’t read? (The adverb was already a trick, because more than once it had occurred to me to buy books with the tacit certainty that they would be lost forever in the bookcase, and yet I bought them; the enigma was in buying them, in the motive that possibly demanded that useless possession). And into the chain of questions now: Why, after going into the Polidor, did I go to sit at the rear table, across from the large mirror that precariously duplicated the faded desolation of the room? And another link to put in place: Why did I ask for a bottle of Sylvaner?

(But that last item is left for later; perhaps the bottle of Sylvaner was one of the false resonances in the possible chord, unless the chord was different and contained the bottle of Sylvaner just as it contained the countess, the book, and what the fat diner had just ordered).

“*Je voudrais un château saignant,*” the fat diner had said.

According to the mirror, the diner was sitting at the second table with his back to the one where Juan was sitting, and therefore his image and his voice were forced to have recourse to opposite and convergent itineraries in order to come together in suddenly solicited attention. (The book, too, in the shop window on the Boulevard Saint-Germain: the sudden leap forward of the white NRF cover, coming toward Juan as had the image of Héléne before and now the fat diner’s phrase as he ordered a bloody castle; like going to sit obediently at that absurd table in the Polidor with his back to everyone).

Of course, Juan was probably the only customer for whom the diner’s request had a second meaning; automatically, ironically, as a good interpreter accustomed to the instant liquidation of all problems of translation in that struggle against time and silence which is an interpreter’s booth, he had fallen into a trap, if it’s proper to speak of a trap in that acceptance (ironic, automatic), in which *saignant* and *sanglant* were equivalents and the fat fellow had asked for a bloody castle, and, in any case, he had fallen into a trap without being aware in the least that the displacement of the meaning of the phrase would suddenly cause the coagulation of other things already past or present that night—the book or the countess, the image of Héléne, the acceptance of sitting down with his back turned at a rear table in the Polidor. (And having asked for a bottle of Sylvaner and drinking the first glass of chilled wine at the moment when the fat diner’s image in the mirror and his voice, which reached him from behind, had merged into something Juan couldn’t name, because chain or coagulation were nothing but an attempt to give the level of language to something that presented itself like an

instantaneous contradiction, took shape and fled simultaneously, and no longer entered language spoken by anyone, not even that of an experienced interpreter like Juan.)

In any case, there was no reason to complicate matters. The fat diner had asked for a bloody castle, his voice had stirred up other things, especially the book and the countess, the image of H el ene a little less (perhaps because it was closer, not more familiar, but closer to everyday life, while the book was something new and the countess a memory, a curious memory, furthermore, because it wasn't so much a question of the countess as of Frau Marta and what had happened in Vienna in the King of Hungary Hotel, but in the final analysis everything was the countess, just as clearly as the book or the fat diner's phrase or the aroma of the Sylvaner).

"You have to admit that I've got a kind of genius for celebrating Christmas Eve," Juan thought as he poured himself the second glass, waiting for the hors d'oeuvres. In some way, the advent of what had just happened to him was in part the door of the Polidor, he having suddenly decided, knowing it was stupid, to push open that door and dine in that sad room. Why did I go into the Polidor, why did I buy the book and open it at random and read, also at random, any phrase at all scarcely a second before the fat diner ordered a steak that was almost raw? As soon as I try to analyze I'll put everything into the famous reticular lunch basket and I'll falsify it beyond all cure. The most I can try to do is repeat what took place in a different zone in mental terms, trying to distinguish between what made up a part of that sudden conglomeration in its own right and what other associations might have become incorporated into it parasitically.

But *beneath it all* I know that everything is false, that I'm already far away from what just happened to me and that, as on so many other occasions, it comes down to this useless desire to understand, missing, perhaps, the obscure call or signal of the thing itself, the uneasiness I'm left with, the instantaneous display of another order where memories, potentials, and signals break out to form a flash of unity which breaks up at the very instant it drags and pulls me out of myself. Now all of this has left me with just one kind of curiosity—the old human topic: deciphering. And the rest of it, a tightening at the mouth of the stomach, the dark certainty that around there somewhere, not with this dialectical simplification, a road begins and goes on.

It's not enough, of course. In the end we have to think, and then analysis comes, the distinction between what really forms a part of that instant outside of time and what associations were put into it so as to attract it, make it more yours, put it more onto this side. And the worst will be when you try to tell other people, because a moment always comes when you have to try to tell a friend about it—let's say Polanco or Calac, or everyone at the same time at a table in the *Cluny*, vaguely waiting perhaps for the act of telling to unchain the coagulation again, give it a meaning at last. They'll be there listening to you, and H el ene will be there, too; they'll ask you questions, they'll try to help you remember, as if memory were something purloined from that other force which in the Polidor had been capable of erasing it as past, showing it to be a living and menacing thing, memory escaped from its noose of time to be in the very instant that it disappeared again; a different form of life, a present, but in another dimension, a power acting from a different angle of fire. And there were no words because there was no thought possible for that force capable of converting stretches of memory, isolated and anodyne images, into a sudden dizzying mass, into a living

constellation that is erased with the very act of showing itself, a contradiction that seemed to offer and deny at the same time what Juan, drinking his second glass of Sylvaner, would explain to Calac, Tell, H el ene later on when he met them at the table in the *Cluny*, and which now he had had to possess in some way, as if the attempt at fixing that memory hadn't already shown that it was useless, that he was shoveling shadows into the darkness.

“Yes,” Juan thought, sighing, and sighing was the precise admission that all of it came from the other side, was exercised in the diaphragm, in lungs which needed a deep breath of air. Yes, but it was also necessary to think about it because, after all, he was that *and* his thought, he couldn't stay in a sigh, in a contraction of the solar plexus, in the vague fear of what had been glimpsed. Thinking was useless, like desperately trying to remember a dream where the last threads were reached only when you opened your eyes maybe; thinking was destroying the cloth that still hung in something like the opposite side of the sensation, its latency repeatable perhaps. Closing his eyes, letting himself go, floating in a state of total disposition, in a propitious wait. Useless, it had always been useless; from those Cimmerian regions he came back poorer, farther away from himself. But thinking like a huntsman was valuable at least as a re-entry into this side, and so the fat diner had ordered a bloody castle, and suddenly it had been the countess, the reason he was sitting facing a mirror in the Polidor, the book he had bought on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and opened to a random page, the flashing coagulation (and also H el ene, of course) in a concretion that was instantly concealed by its incomprehensible will to deny itself in its very affirmation, dissolving at the moment of coming together, removing importance from itself after inflicting a mortal wound, after insinuating that it was not important—a mere associative game, a mirror and a memory and another memory, the insignificant luxuries of an idle imagination. “Ah, I won't let you get away like that,” Juan thought. “It can't be that once more I happen to be the center of something that comes from somewhere else and at the same time leaves me expelled from what is most mine. You won't get away so easily, you've got to leave something in my hands, a little basilisk, any one of the images that now I can't tell whether they're part or not of that silent explosion ...” And he couldn't help smiling while he was present, a sardonic witness of his thought, which now brought the perch of the little basilisk within reach—an understandable association, because it came from the Basilisken Haus in Vienna, and there, the countess ... The rest invaded him without resistance. It was even easy to support himself on the central hollow, what had been an instantaneous fullness, a display which at the same time was denied and hidden, making him now incorporate a comfortable system of analogous images that joined themselves to the hollow because of historical or sentimental reasons. Thinking about the basilisk was thinking about H el ene and the countess simultaneously, but the countess also meant thinking about Frau Marta, about a scream, because the servant girls of the countess must have screamed in the garrets of the Blutgasse, and the countess must have liked them to scream. If they hadn't screamed the blood wouldn't have had the smell of heliotrope and marsh.

Pouring himself another glass of Sylvaner, Juan lifted his eyes to the mirror. The fat diner had unfolded *France-Soir*, and the full-page headlines suggested the false Russian alphabet of mirrors. Applying himself, he deciphered a few words, vaguely hoping in that way, with that false concentration which was at the same time the will of distraction, for an attempt to repeat the initial hollow through which the star with evasive points had slipped away, concentrating on any kind of stupidity, such as deciphering the headlines of *France-Soir* in the mirror and distracting himself at the same time from what really mattered, that perhaps the constellation would burst forth intact out of the still present aura, would become a sediment in a zone beyond or this side of language and images, would trace its transparent radii, the thin sketch of a face which at the same time would be a pin with a small basilisk, which at the same time would be a broken doll in a chest, which would be a desperate moan and a square crossed by countless streetcars and Frau Marta on the deck of a barge. Perhaps now, half-closing his eyes, he would be able to replace the image of the mirror, territory that interceded between the semblance of the Polidor and the other semblance still vibrating in the echo of its dissolution; perhaps now he would be able to pass from the Russian alphabet in the mirror to the other language that had appeared at the limits of perception, a fallen bird, desperate to flee, flapping against the net and giving it its shape, a synthesis of net and bird in which there was only flight or the shape of a net or the shadow of a bird, flight itself a prisoner for an instant in the pure paradox of fleeing from the net that entrapped it with the delicate weave of its own dissolution: the countess, a book, someone who had ordered a bloody castle, a barge at dawn, the crash of a doll as it broke on the floor.

The Russian alphabet is still there, wavering in the hands of the fat diner, telling the news of the day just as, later on in the zone (the *Cluny*, some corner, the Saint-Martin canal, which are always the zone), it will be necessary to begin telling, to say something, because they're all waiting for him to begin telling, that ever restless and somewhat hostile circle at the start of a tale. In some way they're all there waiting for you to tell it in the zone, in any part of the zone, you can't tell where anymore because it's in so many places and so many nights and so many friends—Tell and Austin, Hélène and Polanco and Celia and Calac and Nicole, as at other times it's the turn of one of them to come to the zone with news from the City and then it's your turn to be part of the circle that waits avidly for the other one to begin telling, because, in some way, in the zone there's a kind of need, somewhere between friendly and aggressive, to maintain contact, to know what's happening because something almost always happens that might be of use to all of them, as when they dream or bring news from the City, or come back from a trip and enter the zone again (the *Cluny* at night, almost always, the common ground of a café table, but also a bed or a sleeping car or an automobile that speeds from Venice to Mantua, the zone, somewhere between ubiquitous and limited, which resembles all of them—Marrast and Nicole, Celia and Monsieur Ochs and Frau Marta—is at the same time part

of the City and the zone itself; it's a trick with words where things happen with the same force as in the life of each one of them when outside the zone. And that's why there's a kind of anxious present, even though none of them is now near the one who remembers them in the Polidor; there is the saliva of distaste, openings, garden shows, there's H  l  ne, always, Marrast and Polanco; the zone is an anxiety that viscously insinuates itself, projects itself; there are telephone numbers that someone will dial later on before going to sleep, vague rooms where they don't talk about this; there's Nicole struggling to close a valise, there's a match that burns between two fingers, a portrait in an English museum, a cigarette that thumps against a pack, a shipwreck on an island; there's Calac and Austin, owls and blinds and streetcars, everything that emerges in the one who ironically thinks that at some moment he will have to start telling and that perhaps H  l  ne won't be in the zone and won't hear him, even though underneath it all everything he's going to say is H  l  ne. It might well be that he's not only alone in the zone the way he is now in the Polidor, where the others, including the fat diner, don't count for anything, except for saying that all that could mean being even more alone in a room where there's a cat and a typewriter; or perhaps being someone on a station platform looking at the instantaneous combinations of insects fluttering under a light. But it might also be that the others are in the zone as at so many other times, that life wraps them up and you can hear the cough from a museum guard as a hand slowly searches for the shape of a throat and someone dreams of a Yugoslavian beach, while Tell and Nicole fill a suitcase with disordered clothing and H  l  ne looks for a long time at Celia, who's begun to weep with her face to the wall, the way good little girls weep.

Forced to think while waiting for them to bring him the hors d'oeuvres, it wasn't too difficult for Juan to retrace the night's itinerary. First, perhaps, came the book by Michel Butor bought on the Boulevard Saint-Germain; before that there was a listless strolling through the streets and drizzle of the Latin Quarter, feeling the emptiness of Christmas Eve in Paris against the grain, a night when everyone has gone home, and all there is left are people with an indecisive look—almost that of an accomplice—looking out of the corner of their eyes at the bars in caf  s or on corners, almost always men, but also an occasional woman carrying a package, perhaps as an excuse for being out on the street on a twenty-fourth of December at ten-thirty at night, and Juan had the urge to go up to one of the women, none of them young or pretty, but all of them alone and somewhat exceptional, and ask them if they really had something in the package or whether it was just a bundle of rags or old newspapers carefully tied up, a lie that protected her a little more from that lonely walking while everyone was at home.

The second thing to keep in mind was the countess, the feeling of the countess that had become defined on the corner of the Rue Monsieur le Prince and the Rue de Vaugirard, not because there could have been anything to remind him of the countess

on that corner, unless perhaps it was a piece of reddish sky, a smell of dampness that came from an entrance-way, which suddenly were worth a whole territory of contact, in the same way that the house of the basilisk in Vienna in its day had been able to make him take a step toward the territory where the countess was waiting. Or perhaps the blasphematory, continuous transgression in which the countess must have moved (if one accepted the version of the legend, the mediocre chronicle that Juan had read years before, so long before H el ene and Frau Marta and the house of the basilisk in Vienna), and then the corner with the reddish sky and the musty entrance-way became joined to the inevitable realization that it was Christmas Eve in order to facilitate the entry of the countess, her otherwise inexplicable presence in Juan, because he couldn't stop thinking that the countess must have particularly liked blood on a night like that, amidst church bells and Midnight Mass, the taste of the blood of a girl who twists with her feet and hands tied while so close by are the shepherds and the manger and a lamb who washes away the sins of the world. So that the book he had bought a moment before, the passage of the countess and then, without transition, the anodyne and gloomily lighted door of the Polidor, the glimpse of an almost deserted dining room enveloped in a light that only irony and ill-humor could characterize as purple, with some women armed with glasses and napkins, the slight cramp at the mouth of the stomach, his resisting going in because there was no reason to go into such a place, the rapid and wrathful dialogue, as always, in those punishments of his own perversity: Yes / No / Why not / You're right, why not / Go in, then, the gloomier the better you deserve it / For an imbecile, of course / Unto us a boy is born, glory hallelujah / It looks like the morgue / It is, go in / But the food must be horrible / You're not hungry / That's right, but I have to order something / Order anything and have a drink / That's an idea / Chilled wine, very cold / That's it, go in. But if I had to drink, why did I go into the Polidor? I knew so many pleasant little bars on the Right Bank, on the Rue Caumartin, where, besides, I could always have ended up celebrating Christmas Eve on the altarpiece of a blond who would sing me some *no el* from Saintonge or Camargue and we'd have a good time. That's why, thinking about it, the least comprehensible was the reason I finally went into the Polidor restaurant after that dialogue, giving the door an almost Beethovenian shove, bringing myself into the restaurant where eyeglasses and a napkin at armpit level were already approaching me decisively to lead me to the worst table, a joke of a table facing the wall, but the wall disguised as a mirror, like so many other things perhaps that night and every night and especially H el ene, facing the wall, because on the other side, where under normal circumstances any customer would have been able to sit facing the dining room, the respectable management of the Polidor had erected an enormous wreath with colored lights to show the concern that the Christian feelings of the kind customers deserved. Impossible to get out from under all that forcibly: if, in any case, I had consented to sit at a table with my back to the room, with the mirror offering me its swindle above the horrible Christmas wreath ("*les autres tables sont r eserv ees, Monsieur /  a ira comme  a, Madame / Merci, Monsieur*"), something that was getting away from me but which at the same time had to be very much mine had just forced me to go in and order that bottle of Sylvaner, which would have been so easy and so pleasant to ask for somewhere else, among other lights and other faces.

Supposing that the one who tells it told it in his own way, since a lot had already been told tacitly for those of the zone (Tell, who understands everything without words, H  l  ne, to whom nothing is important if it's important to you), or that out of some sheets of paper, a phonograph record, a magnetic tape, a book, a doll's womb, pieces of something that would no longer be what they're expecting you to start telling came out, supposing that what's told didn't have the slightest interest for Calac or Austin and, on the other hand, desperately attracted Marrast or Nicole, especially Nicole, who loves you hopelessly, supposing that you began to murmur a long poem where it talks about the City, which they also know and fear and sometimes go through, if at the same time or as a substitute you took out your tie and leaned over to offer it, rolled up with great care in advance, to Polanco, who looks at it with stupefaction and finally passes it to Calac, who doesn't want to take it and, scandalized, consults Tell, who takes advantage of it to cheat in the poker game and win the pot; supposing absurd things like that, because in the zone and at that moment such things could happen, you'd have to ask yourself whether there's any sense in their being there waiting for you to start telling, in any case, for someone to start telling, and whether the piece of banana pastry that Feuille Morte is thinking about wouldn't be a much better substitute for that vague expectation of those who surround you in the zone, indifferent and obstinate at the same time, demanding and mocking as you are with them when it's your turn to listen to them or to watch them living, knowing that all of it comes from somewhere else or is leaving for who knows where, and, for that very reason, it's what counts for almost all of them.

And you, H  l  ne, will you look at me that way, too? Will I see Marrast, Nicole, Austin leave, saying good-bye with a gesture that will look like a shrug of the shoulders, or talking among themselves because they will have to tell, too, they'll have brought news from the city or will be on the point of taking a plane or a train. I'll see Tell, Juan (because it might happen that I, too, will see Juan at that moment, in the zone), I'll see Feuille Morte, Harold Haroldson, and I'll see the countess or Frau Marta if I'm in the zone or in the City, I'll see them leaving and looking at me. But you, H  l  ne, will you be leaving with them, too, or will you come slowly toward me, your nails stained with disdain? Were you in the zone or did I dream you? My friends go away laughing, we'll meet again and we'll talk about London, Boniface Perteuil, the City. But you, H  l  ne, can you have been once more a name that I carry against nothingness, the simulacrum that I invent with words while Frau Marta and the countess approach and look at me?

"I'd like a bloody castle," the fat diner had said.

Everything was hypothetical, but you had to admit that if Juan hadn't distractedly opened the book by Michel Butor a fraction of time before the customer had given his order, the components of the thing that tightened his stomach would have remained

scattered. And so it wouldn't have happened with the first drink of chilled wine, waiting for them to bring him a *coquille Saint-Jacques* that he didn't feel like eating, for Juan to open the book and discover without great interest that in 1791 the author of *Atala* and *René* had deigned to contemplate Niagara Falls, of which he would leave an illustrious description. At that moment (he was closing the book because he didn't feel like reading and the light was terrible) he distinctly heard the fat diner's order and everything coagulated into the act of raising his eyes and finding the image of the diner whose voice had come to him from behind in the mirror. Impossible to separate the parts, the fragmented sentiment of the book, the countess, the Polidor, the bloody castle, perhaps the bottle of Sylvaner: the coagulation remained outside of time, the privileged horror, exasperating and delightful, of the constellation, an opening for the leap that had to be taken and which he would not take because it wasn't a leap toward anything definite and not even a leap. The contrary, rather, because in that dizzy emptiness metaphors leaped toward him like spiders, like eternal euphemisms or the stuffing of ungraspable display (another metaphor), and, besides, the old woman with glasses was putting a *coquille Saint-Jacques* in front of him, and things like that always had to have a word of thanks in a French restaurant or everything would go from bad to worse all the way to the cheese and coffee.

(And the City, which from here on will have no capital, because there's no reason to make it strange—in the sense of giving it a privileged value in contrast to the cities we were used to ... Now it is proper to talk about it from here on because we all agreed that any place or any thing could be attached to the city, and so it didn't seem impossible to Juan that what had just happened to him had been matter from the city in some way, one of its eruptions or its entrance-ways opening up that night in Paris as it might have opened in any of the cities where his profession of interpreter took him. We'd all walked through the city, always unwillingly, and when we got back we'd talk about it, we compared streets and beaches during the hour at the *Cluny*. The city might appear in Paris; it might appear for Tell or Calac in a beer hall in Oslo; it had happened to one of us to go from the city to a bed in Barcelona, unless it were the opposite. The city was not explained; it was. It had emerged sometimes in conversations in the zone, and although the first one to bring news of the city had been my *paredros*, being or not being in the city became almost a routine for all of us except *Feuille Morte*. And since we're already talking about that, it could for the same reason be said that my *paredros* was a routine in the sense that among us there was always something we called my *paredros*, a term introduced by Calac and which we used without the slightest feeling of a joke because the quality of *paredros* alluded, as can be seen, to an associated entity, a kind of buddy or substitute or baby-sitter for the exceptional, and, by extension, a delegating of what was one's own to that momentary alien dignity without losing anything of ours underneath it all, just as any image of the places we had walked could be a delegation of the city, or the city could delegate something of its own

(the square with the streetcars, the archways with women selling fish, the north canal) to any of the places through which we walked and in which we were living at that time.

It wasn't too hard to explain why he'd ordered a bottle of Sylvaner, although at the moment of deciding he hadn't been thinking about the countess, because in the Polidor, interposed for him had been the discovery, halfway between gloomy and ironic, of the mirror, drawing his attention to other places. The fact didn't escape Juan that in some way the countess had been present in the apparently spontaneous act of preferring chilled Sylvaner to any other wine in which the Polidor took pride, as on other occasions she had probably been present through doubt and terror, exercising among her accomplices and even her victims a force that was born perhaps out of her way of smiling, of tilting her head, or more probably the tone of her voice or the smell of her skin, in any case, an insidious influence that didn't require an active presence, that always worked from beneath; and to order without previous reflection a bottle of Sylvaner, which contained in its first syllables, as in a charade, the middle syllables of the word in which there beat in turn the geographic center of an obscure ancestral terror, couldn't really go beyond a mediocre phonetic association. Now the wine was there, lively and fragrant, that wine which had become objectivized on the edge of the other thing, the coagulation in flight, and Juan couldn't help but feel it was an ironic joke as he drank his glass and savored it on a laughably accessible plane, knowing that it was only a worthless adherence to what he had really wanted to grasp and which was by then so far away. But on the other hand, the fat diner's order had a different meaning. It required asking yourself whether the fact of having looked distractedly at the book by Michel Butor a second before he heard the voice asking for a bloody castle had established an acceptable casual relation, or whether, in case he hadn't opened the book and stumbled across the name of the author of *Atala*, the fat diner's order would have echoed in the silence of the Polidor, agglutinating the isolated or successive elements instead of mingling sluggishly with so many other voices and murmurs in the distracted drowsiness of the man drinking Sylvaner. Because now Juan could reconstruct the instant in which he heard the order, and he was sure that the voice of the fat diner had made itself heard exactly in one of those hollows that are produced in all collective murmuring and which popular imagination attributes, not without an obscure uneasiness, to a desanctified intervention reduced to a joke of proper society: An angel passed. But angels don't always make themselves perceptible to everyone present, and that's what happens when someone says his word, asks for his bloody castle exactly in the center of the hollow that the angel has opened in sound, and that word acquires a halo and an almost unbearable resonance which must be drowned out at once with laughter and worn-out phrases and a new concert of voices, not counting the other possibility that Juan had seen at once—the fact that the hole in sound had only opened up for him, because the diners in the Polidor would have had scant interest in someone's ordering a bloody castle, since for them it was nothing but another dish on the menu. If he hadn't thumbed through Michel Butor's book a second before, would the conversations have congealed, would the fat diner's

voice have reached him with that crisp clearness? It probably would have, even certainly would have, because the choice of the bottle of Sylvaner showed a persistence underneath the distraction, the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard was still present in the dining room of the Polidor, worthless were the mirror with its new images, the exploration of the menu, and the laugh that tried to be lustral of the wreath with the lights. There you were, Hélène, everything was still a small pin with the image of a basilisk, a square with streetcars, the countess, who in some way summed it all up. And I had lived through too many attacks of those explosions of a power that came out of myself against myself not to know whether some were mere flashes of lightning that gave way to nothingness without leaving more than a frustration (monotonous *déjà vu*'s, meaningful associations, but swallowing their own tails), or other times, like the one that had just happened to me, were something astir in territory deep inside, wounding me all over like an iron claw, which, at the same time, was a door slammed in my face. All my actions in that last half-hour were placed in a perspective that could only have meaning after what had happened to me in the Polidor, wiping out in a crazy way any ordinary causal bond. And so the fact of having opened the book and looked distractedly at the name of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, that simple gesture which brings a chronic reader to glance at any printed page that comes within his visual range, had in a way given the potential of what inevitably had to follow, and the voice of the fat diner mutilating, as was the style in Paris, the name of the author of *Atala*, had reached me clearly in a hollow in the noise of the restaurant, which, without the encounter with the complete name on a page in the book, wouldn't have been produced for me. It had been necessary for me to look vaguely at a page in the book (and for me to have bought the book a half-hour before without really knowing why) for that almost horrible neatness of the fat diner's order in the sudden silence of the Polidor to unchain the clawing with a force infinitely more devastating than any of the tangible evidence that surrounded me in the dining room. But at the same time, since my reflection was located on a verbal level, the printed word and the ordering of a meal, Sylvaner and bloody castle, it was no use conjecturing that the reading of the name of the author of *Atala* had been the unleashing factor, since that name had required in turn (and vice-versa) that the fat diner give his order, duplicating without knowing it one of the elements that would instantaneously forge the whole. "Yes," Juan said to himself, finishing the *coquille Saint-James*, "but at the same time I have the right to think that if I hadn't opened the book a moment before, the fat diner's voice would have been mixed in with the murmurs of the dining room." Now that the fat diner was going on speaking animatedly to his wife, commenting on fragments of the Russian alphabet of *France-Soir*, it didn't seem to Juan, no matter how much attention he paid, that his voice dominated that of his wife and the other diners. If he had heard (if he had thought he heard, if he had been given to hear, if he had had to hear) that the fat diner wanted a bloody castle, the hole in the air had to have made him open Michel Butor's book. But he had bought the book before reaching the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard and only when he got to the corner had he felt the presence of the countess, remembered Frau Marta and the house of the basilisk, put all that together in the image of Hélène. If he had bought the book knowing that he didn't need it and didn't really want it, and still had bought it because twenty minutes later the book was going to open a hole in the

air for him through which the claw would be turned loose, all possible ordering of the elements seemed unthinkable, and that, Juan said to himself, drinking his third glass of Sylvaner, was basically all the summing up he could best utilize, putting it that way, of what had happened to him: a lesson of things, a display of how once more the before and the after had fallen apart in his hands, leaving him a light, useless rain of dead moths.

There will be talk of the city in due time (there is even a poem that will be quoted or not quoted), just as any of us could talk about my *paredros* and he in turn could talk about me and the others; it has already been said that the attribution of the exalted position of *paredros* fluctuated and depended on the momentary decision of each one with no one being able to know for certain when he was or was not the *paredros* of others present or absent in the zone, or whether he had been and had just stopped being. The condition of *paredros* seemed to consist above all in the fact that certain things we did or said were always done or said by my *paredros*, not so much to avoid responsibilities but as if underneath it all my *paredros* was a kind of modesty. I know that he was, especially for Nicole or Calac or Marrast, but my *paredros* was useful as a tacit witness of the city, of the strength of the city in us, which we had accepted beginning with the night when for the first time it had been mentioned and its first entrances had been discovered—hotels with tropical verandas, covered streets, the square with trolley cars; it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to have thought that Marrast or Polanco or Tell or Juan had been the first to mention the city because it was something that belonged to my *paredros*, and so to attribute any design or execution to my *paredros* always had a facet turned toward the city. We were profoundly serious when it was a matter of my *paredros* or the city, and no one would have denied noticing the status of *paredros* when some one of us imposed it by the mere fact of giving it that name. Of course (these things still have to be clarified), the women could also be my *paredros*, with the exception of Feuille Morte; anyone could be the *paredros* of another or of all and being it gave him something like the value of a joker in cards, a ubiquitous and somewhat disquieting efficiency that we liked to hold in our hands and throw on the table when the situation arose. There were even times when we felt that my *paredros* was a kind of existence on the margin of us all, that we were us *and* him, the way that the cities where we lived were always cities *and* the city; on the strength of giving him the word, of referring to him in our letters and our gatherings, of mixing him into our lives, we came to act as if he no longer were any one of us successively, as if at certain privileged times he emerged by himself, looking at us from outside. Then we would hasten, in the zone, to install my *paredros* once more in the person of any one of those present, when we knew ourselves to be the *paredros* of another or others, we closed ranks around the table at the *Cluny*, we laughed at the illusions; but little by little the time came when we

would fall back into it without noticing, and from postcards from Tell or news from Calac, from the weave of telephone calls and messages that went from one address to another, there rose up once more an image of my *paredros* which was no longer that of any one of us; many of the things about the city must have come from him, for no one remembered them as said by anyone else. In some way they had become incorporated into what we already knew and what we had already lived of the city; we accepted them without argument even though it was impossible to know who had brought them first; it didn't matter, all of that came from my *paredros*, my *paredros* was responsible for all of that.

The meal was bad but at least it was in front of him, like the fourth glass of chilled wine, like the cigarette between his fingers; everything else—the voices and the images of the *Polidor*—came to him via the mirror, and perhaps for that reason, or because he was already into the second half of the bottle of *Sylvaner*, Juan ended up suspecting that the alteration in time that had become obvious through the purchase of the book, the fat diner's order, and the tenuous shadow of the countess on the corner of the *Rue de Vaugirard*, had found a curious rhyme in the mirror itself. The sudden break that had set the fat diner's order apart and which he had vainly tried to situate in unintelligible terms of before and after, rhymed in some way with that other purely optical unchaining that the mirror presented in terms of front and back. So that the voice that had ordered a bloody castle had come from behind, but the mouth that pronounced the words was there in the mirror, in front of him. Juan remembered distinctly having lifted his eyes from *Michel Butor's* book and looked at the image of the fat man at the precise moment in which he was going to give his order. He knew of course that what he was seeing was the reflection of the fat diner, but in any case the image was located in front of him; and then the hollow in the air took place, the angel's step, and the voice came to him from behind, the image and the voice were produced from opposite directions, centering in his suddenly awakened attention. And precisely because the image was in front it was as if the voice were coming from much farther back, from a farther back that had nothing to do with the *Polidor* or with Paris or with that damned Christmas Eve; and all of that rhymed, in a manner of speaking, with the *before*s and *after*s in which I had vainly tried to insert the elements of what had come together like a star in my stomach. I could be sure of only one thing: of that hollow in the gastronomical noise of the *Polidor* restaurant in which a mirror of space and a mirror of time had coincided at a point of unbearable and most fleeting reality before it left me alone again with so much intelligence, with so much before and after and so much in front and in back.

Later on, with the fuzzy taste of a bad cup of coffee, he walked in the drizzle toward the neighborhood of the *Panthéon*, he smoked, taking refuge in a doorway, drunk from the *Sylvaner* and from fatigue, still persistent in a vague attempt to revive that material which more and more was turning into language, the combinatory art of

memories and circumstances, knowing that that very night or the next day in the zone, everything that he told would be falsified beyond repair, put in order, brought up as a café enigma, a charade among friends, the tortoise that is sometimes taken out of the pocket as sometimes my paredros would take the snail Osvaldo out of his pocket to the delight of Feuille Morte and Tell: idiot games, life.

Out of all that Héléne remained, as always, her cold shadow in the deepest part of the doorway where I had taken refuge from the drizzle to have a smoke. Her cold distant inevitable hostile shadow. Once more, always: cold distant inevitable hostile. What were you doing here? You had no right to be among the cards of that sequence, it wasn't you who was waiting for me on the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard. Why did you insist on adding yourself, why would I hear your voice talking to me once more about a dead boy on an operating table, about a doll kept in a closet? Why were you crying again, hating me?

I kept on walking alone, I know that at some moment I took myself to the neighborhood of the Saint-Martin canal out of mere nostalgia, feeling that there your tiny shadow would become less of an enemy, perhaps because at some time you had consented to walk with me along the canal, while at the moment of each vague reverberation I sensed an instant glow between your breasts, the pin with the image of the basilisk. Conquered by the night, by the Polidor restaurant, by the feeling of a claw in the middle of the belly, I gave in to inertia as always: in the morning we could go back to living, glory hallelujah. It was then, I think, that because of so much fatigue I received the obscure understanding I had searched for with useless weapons in front of the mirror in the Polidor, and I understood why your shadow had been there all the time, round and round, the way larvae go round the magic circle, trying to enter the sequence, to be each talon in the clawing. Perhaps it was at that moment when after endless walking I glimpsed the silhouette of Frau Marta on the barge that was slipping along noiselessly on water that was like mercury; and even though it had occurred in the city, at the end of an interminable pursuit, it no longer seemed impossible to me to see Frau Marta on that Paris Christmas Eve, on that canal which was not the canal of the city. I woke up (it has to be given a name, Héléne) on a bench at dawn; everything facilitated for me once more the explanation that could be followed, the dream where times were mixed, where you, who at that moment were probably sleeping alone in your apartment on the Rue de la Clef, had been with me, where I had gone all the way to the zone to tell these things to my friends, and where, much earlier, I had dined at a kind of funeral banquet, among wreaths and Russian alphabets and vampires.

I enter my city at night, I go down to my city
where they wait for me or elude me, where I have to flee
from some abominable meeting, from what no longer has a name,
a meeting with fingers, with pieces of flesh in a cupboard,
with a showerbath that I can't find, there are showers in my city,
there's a canal that cuts through the center of my city
and enormous ships without masts pass in an unbearable silence
toward a fate that I know but which I forget when I return,

toward a fate that denies my city
where no one embarks, where one is to remain
even though the ships pass and from the smooth deck someone is looking at my city.

I enter my city without knowing how, sometimes on other nights
I go out to streets and houses and I know that it isn't my city,
I know my city by a crouching expectation,
something that isn't yet fear but which has its shape and its dog and when it is my city
I know that first there'll be the market place with doorways and fruit stands,
the shimmering rails of a streetcar that is lost in a direction
where I was young but not in my city, a district like El Once in Buenos Aires, a smell
of school,
peaceful walls and a white cenotaph, the Calle Veinticuatro de Noviembre
perhaps, where there are no cenotaphs but which is in my city when its time is night.
I enter through the market that condenses the dew of a foreboding
that is still indifferent, a benevolent menace, there the fruit women look at me
and locate me, plant desire in me, to go where I must go and putrefaction,
rotting things are the secret key in my city, a fecal industry of wax jasmines,
the street that snakes along, that leads me to the meeting with what I don't know,
the faces of the fish women, their eyes which don't look and its location,
and then to the hotel, the one for tonight because tomorrow or someday it will be a
different one,
my city is infinite hotels and always the same hotel,
tropical verandas with bamboo blinds and vague mosquito nets and a smell of
cinnamon and saffron,
rooms that follow along with their clear wallpaper and their wicker chairs
and the fans on a pink ceiling, with doors that don't open onto anything,
which open onto other rooms where there are fans and more doors,
secret links in the rendezvous, and you have to enter and go through the deserted hotel
and sometimes it's an elevator, in my city there are so many elevators, there's almost
always an elevator
where fear now starts to coagulate, but other times it will be empty,
when it's worst they're empty and I have to travel endlessly
until it stops going up and slides along horizontally, in my city
the elevators like glass boxes that go forward in a zigzag way
cross covered bridges between two buildings and the city opens up below and vertigo
increases
because I will enter the hotel once more or the uninhabited hallways of something
that is no longer the hotel, the infinite mansion reached
by all elevators and doors, all hallways,
and you must get out of the elevator and look for a shower or a toilet
just because, without any reason, because the rendezvous
is a shower or a toilet and isn't a rendezvous,
looking for the shower in shorts, with a cake of soap and a comb