

The Island of Anamorphoses

Néstor Ponce's version

translation: Max Ubelaker Andrade

I was him. When the boat shipwrecked, pushed under by the storm, the wind and the waves, I found myself projected out into the ocean, flailing desperately in search of something to hold on to. The night was blindness. Absolute black. I tried to float, beat by giant fists of water, opening my arms. And it was like this that I found a piece of wood to cling to.

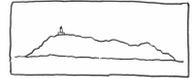
We have all been young once. I was, back then, an apprentice on the ship, seventeen years old and equipped with a musculature toughened by maritime life. In the ports— Santos, Havana, Le Havre, Sanlúcar de Barrameda—, my body, toasted by the sun and marine salts, with its hardened pectorals, sparked desire in young women. The night of the shipwreck, youth allowed me to resist and, emptied out by exhaustion, arrive on land.

I saw myself holding on to the wood like someone joining fate, someone who sees himself at a distance and no longer recognizes his own body.

I awoke when my body hit the rocks and sand of a beach. I advanced, stumbling and delirious from the happiness at knowing that I was alive. I fell into the white of the sand. I returned to sleep.

I was awakened by the salted intensity of the burning sun. The pain in my muscles pulled against my body; licking my lips I felt them split open by salt and thirst. I sat down and looked at my surroundings: strips of deserted beach, the ocean disappearing into the line of the horizon and, behind me, palm trees and a dense tangle of trees, plants, shrubs. In the background one could see the green of the earth stretching upwards, climbing toward a rocky peak.

I spent a few minutes studying the surface of the ocean: there were no signs of the storm, nothing was left of the ship. Only the piece of wood that saved my life rested



against the damp sand, covered in iodine. “Water,” I thought. “I have to find water.” And then I spoke. I repeated the same sentences over again until they began to calm my mind. I did not know that the blind monologue was the first of many long conversations with myself. The I began to transform itself into a he. I spoke to myself as though I were talking to another, to an ungraspable being that had, nevertheless, contorted itself into my shell.

“What does he have to do today?” I would ask myself out loud. He was I, in a slowed, but inexorable sense.

He resolved to walk along the perimeter of the island, in order to get a sense of its terrain, hoping to find a spring of fresh water, or some remains of the shipwreck. Following the path of the sun, he estimated that it took two hours. Nothing was found on the excursion, only the incessant landscape of palm trees and dense vegetation: the wood plank—which he had dragged into the brush—was the only thing that allowed him to differentiate the place of his arrival from any other corner of the island.

He decided to go in a few meters, with a stick in hand in case wild animals or vermin appeared. The words of his father and his grandfather, experienced men of the sea, brought him strategies for survival in case of shipwreck. Find wide-leafed plants in the morning, to drink their dewdrops, or coconut trees, or pools of water, or containers, of plant or stone, that might allow you to collect the rainwater. Ten meters into the jungle he encountered a surprise, a few palm trees shorter than the ones on the beach, but with some fruit that seemed similar to coconuts.

Man lives off of starry-eyed hopes, and is punished by time and destiny. The fruits in the palm trees were real, they called out to him, screaming. He climbed the trunk forgetting his exhaustion and the weakness of his muscles. Only survival mattered. He arrived at the objects of his desire and he hit them, knocking a good many down.

His heart was beating hard. He breathed in deeply and then he, his body, climbed slowly back down. His knotted hands picked up a coconut and broke it open against a rock: it contained a transparent, viscous liquid. A finger touched it, absorbed it. The mouth of the man tasted it: a slightly sweetish flavor, like coconut milk. He drank a short sip, anticipating a lethal bouquet. After waiting a few interminable minutes, desperate, that



man who had once been me drank with abandon, with fury, swallowing down the holy water of all the coconuts.

A spiraled euphoria awaited him, it raced across his body, shaking it. He trembled with happiness. And he cried, as one being born.

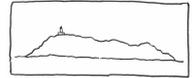
Four months and four days later he was still enclosed within the circular sphere of the island, within its continuous geometry. In that time he had constructed a cabin among the trees, the shrubs and the brush. He had recovered, from the edge of the ocean, three chests that held clothing and unexpected items such as matches, a mirror, a comb, a knife, soaps, a compass, silverware, crystal wineglasses, a few bottles of sherry. He had established, also, with some reticence, that he was the only living being on the island. The only areas left to explore were on the mountain: a rocky green crest holding dominion over a piece of earth flung into the ocean by some indifferent god.

It was then, on an excursion across the mountain, when he discovered the cavern.

The solitude of the castaway is incommensurate; it knows no distances and approximates insanity. Perhaps this is why the copper-colored man, with his sinewy muscles, surprised himself speaking alone, discovering the different inflections of his voice, why his nights were populated by dreams delivering contorted images of loved ones. Night to day, day to night. Him. The only one, without measure.

He would wake up startled, thinking that they were at his side, just as ten years before. But no. Only the perfect silence of the island, broken every once in a while by the wind that pushed against the plants. Or the snapping of a branch that would fall, bringing him to his feet in a feral pounce, lance in hand, ready to face the unknown animal that he longed so much to see. Not to eat it, to stab it, but rather to feel life stirring, there, by his side.

Regardless, nothing. Still the man sought out life, he hunted it among the sounds, the silences, the mist.



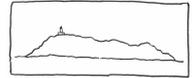
One night he woke up in anguish. He had drunk to excess after his routine diet of fish, crabs, roots, and tubers roasted among embers. A heavy fog warped his mind. The man could see himself from a strange distance that was, nevertheless, an intimate one. He could see himself from the trunk of a palm tree, surprised and mute. He was a castaway on the shore, a lost being living in the immensity of the universe.

The man decided to complete his survey of the island. He made his way around the hill to discover the other side. He climbed, cutting his hands. A voice from elsewhere whispered advice in his ear. He arrived at a ledge as dry as sunbaked leather. It was there where he discovered the caverns. They were holes in the stone, hammer strikes in the rock.

The caverns could be a shelter, the guarantee of a life waiting for the arrival of a rescue ship. They could protect the man of knotted arms so that every morning he could set fires along the coast, scrutinizing the horizon where, at any moment, the castaway said to himself out loud, they might emerge from within the vapors and burnt iodine of the air.

He entered the cavern, with a torch. The fearful steps of the man feared the attack of unrecognizable creatures. No horror is heard in the presence of what he found: lined up against the wall, seated, the skulls of twenty human beings shone in the half-light. The man cried out, fell to his knees, pulled at his hair, his beard. He fell prostrate. The skeletons were dressed in clothing that began in the sixteenth century and extended forward in time and tragedy. It was a grotesque fashion parade prepared by a madman for an absent public. The message was clear, it was inscribed in the undulations of fire projected upon the rocks: no one had been able to escape the island alive and so the man, miserable and abandoned, moaned for his destiny and his misfortune. His own skeleton would be placed there by the next castaway, by the miserable being forced to be the successor of his dynasty.

For several days, several nights, he stayed in his cabin. Weeping for his inevitable death.



Some men know this: we are beings of change. We move through a world in movement. We seek ourselves in irreconcilable losses. Regardless, in the island, there were no opportunities, there were no options: only survival until the moment of closing one's eyes forever. A mockery of life. A ridiculous face made at the expense of an impossible farewell.

He decided to return to the cavern. The skeletons were there waiting for him. He stuck the torch into the sandy earth and took off his clothes. He dressed himself with the vestments of a dead man from the sixteenth century. He continued through the cavern a few meters until the path began to narrow. On his knees he advanced further for a few minutes through a narrow tunnel that brought him to an enormous cave; it was impossible to see its ceiling. The walls were covered in cylindrical crystals that, as though in an amusement park, multiplied his image into infinity. In certain moments, convex mirrors offered him warped and undulating figures; at other times the concave forms foretold unexpected, urgent movements.

A voice was heard: the man did not know if it was his or the echo of that which once had been. He fell to his knees and, without halting his song, cut his veins. His skeleton, he thought before dying, would be placed first in the macabre procession, at the beginning of the infinite multiplication of cadavers. He was already another: the man who had begun this perplexing dynasty.