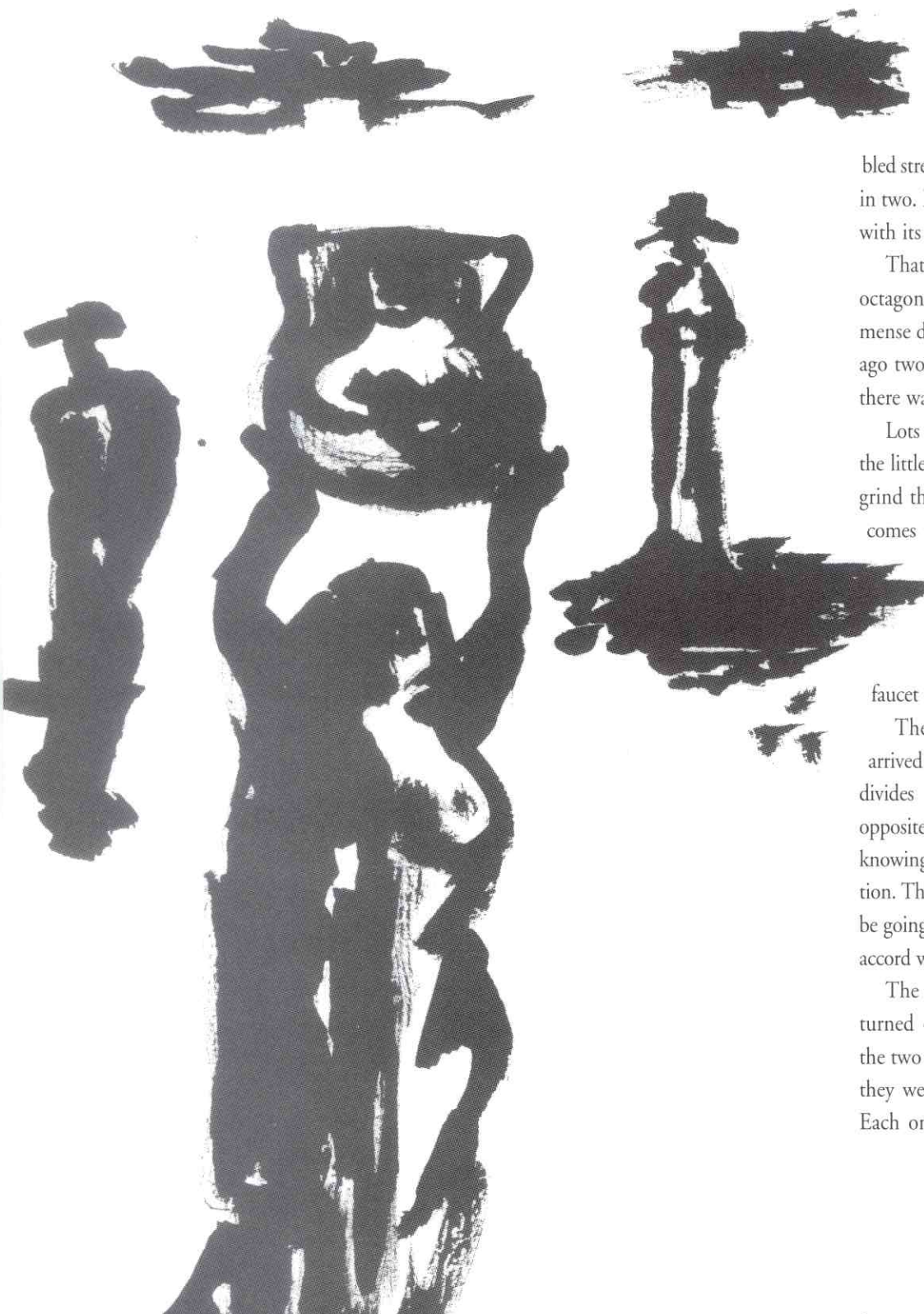


BALLAD¹

Juan José Arreola



In Zapotlán there is a plaza called Ameca, nobody knows why. A wide, cobbled street runs to its end there, then forks in two. From this point the town merges with its cornfields.

That's the little plaza at Ameca with its octagonal shape and its houses with immense doors. One afternoon a long time ago two rivals met there by chance. But there was a girl in between.

Lots of carts and wagons go through the little plaza at Ameca and their wheels grind the earth into the ruts until it becomes very fine. A fine white dust that burns the eyes when the wind blows. And there was a fountain there until recently. A water pipe with its bronze faucet and stone basin.

The girl with her red water jug arrived first along the wide street that divides in two. The rivals were walking opposite her along the side streets, not knowing they would meet at the intersection. The two men and the girl seemed to be going along, each on his own street, in accord with destiny.

The girl was going for water and she turned on the faucet. At that moment the two men saw each other and realized they were interested in the same thing. Each one's street ended there, and nei-

ther wished to go ahead. They stood there glaring fiercely at each other and neither lowered his eyes.

“Look here, friend, you’re staring at me.”

“Well, staring is natural.”

Without speaking, that is what they seemed to say. Their looks said everything. There wasn’t a word of warning. In the plaza which the townspeople were purposely deserting, the thing was about to start.

The stream of water pouring into the water jug—all that broke the dead silence—was filling those two with the desire to fight. The girl turned off the faucet, realizing what was up, when the water already was spilling over. She thrust the jug on her shoulder, almost breaking into a run she was so scared.

The two men who wanted her were at the last stage of suspense, like fighting cocks not yet unleashed, hypnotized by the black points of each other’s eyes. When she stepped up on the opposite sidewalk, the girl stum-

bled, and the jug and water came crashing down to the ground in pieces.

That was all the signal they needed. One with a dagger, a real big one, and the other with a large machete, they went at each other with their blades, parrying the blows a little with their sarapes. All that was left of the girl was the water stain, and there the two men fought for the remains of the water jug.

They were both good and they both struck home. On that afternoon that was almost over and then stopped. They both lay there, face up, one with his throat slit, the other with his head sliced open, like good fighting cocks, just one of them with a bit of breath left.

Afterwards, in the evening, lots of people came. Women who began to pray and men who probably were going to notify the law. One of the dying men was still able to say something:

he asked whether the other had kicked the bucket too.

Later it was learned that there was a girl involved. And the girl with the water jug got a bad reputation over the fight. They say she never even got married. Even if she’d gone as far away as Jilotlán de los Dolores, her bad name would have followed her or probably got there ahead of her. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Taken from Juan José Arreola’s book, *Confabulario and Other Inventions*, trans. George D. Shade (Austin, Texas: U. of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 157-158.

