

Farabeuf¹

by Salvador Elizondo



I am trying to remember, but my mind can recall only the moment when for the first time you showed me the photographs of the man. You urge me to sift through my memory. How could I forget! It was dusk. We were walking along the beach, engaged in a banal conversation. We passed a woman dressed in black who was followed by a dog, a *caniche*. A boy was building a sandcastle. The tide rose perceptibly. We went up the cliff and sat on the rocks to watch the play of the waves and the flight of the pelicans as they dove for fish. Yes, I remember it all perfectly. I remember the cry of the waves. And the thrashing of the sea, each time more violent, pressuring the night which, there by the sea, was always slower in arriving. Then we returned, retracing our steps. We passed the ruins of the sand-

castle without noticing them. When we went in, there was a yellow envelope on the chest of drawers, while outside the seagulls continued calling. When you opened the envelope and showed me that unexpected and ecstatic face, night had fallen. It was as if that tumefied look carried night to every corner of the house. I remember everything. Perfectly. And you, do you remember?

“Yes, I remember your body streaked with the reflections of twilight which looked like trickles or stains of blood. Your fragmented words were like wrenched cries in a millennial and ritual torture, and your expression at that time was like that of the man in the photograph. Should I forget everything now...?”

“Are you capable of forgetting it?”

“Oblivion cannot overcome the things that already unite us. The pleasure, the torture, present here, now and forever with us, like the presence of the man who gazes at us from that unforgettable photograph...”

“Yes, ever since that time our expressions are like his.”

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We have played at having our eyes meet on the surface of the mirror—we have communicated, our bodies have touched in that unreal dimension that opens towards the infinite on the wall stained and furrowed by small, anxious insects. Before that inexplicable meeting, you would have told me that all the mirrors in the world could not have contained that sensation of vertigo to which you would have abandoned yourself forever, just as you abandon yourself to death as reflected in the eyes of this nude man whose photograph you love to contemplate every afternoon in a desperate attempt to discover the meaning of your life. That is why you would like all mirrors to reflect your face, in order to feel more real than the gaze of those demented eyes that now and forever keep watch over you.

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Let us help you, dear Master. You must reconstruct a scene from your youth. In this way we will be able to gain access to the most accurate data. Do not forget that in “your day” rain fogged glass just as it does today. Is life, that process which is suspended and at the same time synthesized in the appearance of the carcass that it is your custom, dear Master, to manipulate and cut when stiff, pale, bloodless and still, usually the cadavers of men and women who have come to some violent end, that is, *caro data vermicibus*—is it by chance any different now than it was then? You touch that rather immutable essence known as the body—whether reeking or perfumed, smooth or scrofulous—but always the same in the final analysis. The organs, whatever interest they may have for you, are the same now as they were then and the rain that fogs the glass or soaks the

shoulders of your coat is—is it not?—the same rain that fell in Peking on the day when you, accompanied by your lover (yes, Doctor Farabeuf, *your lover*), with great effort, trying not to get your photographic equipment wet, uttering the same imprecations and interjections that workers and people of the lower class addicted to radical parties utter in our own day even in public places, made your way, pushing and shoving your way through a rather stupefied crowd, until you were able to profane and perpetuate that singular image, unique in the history of sadoerotic iconography. You who delight in diminishing the extension of the human body with your sharpest of knives, you dear Master, who in a night of delirium arranged a covenant with an old whore whom the medical students called *Mademoiselle Bistouri*, or “The Nurse,” due to her marked proclivity, like the Baudelaire character, to sleep indiscriminately with those who prepare amphitheatres and handle cadavers.

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Pay attention. I will try to tell you everything, without neglecting any of the details. The people were not waiting with great anticipation. They arrived gradually after the ceremony had already begun. But he was there. For how long, I don’t know. The fact of the matter is that he was already there, as if he had always been there. It is hard to know exactly what is going on. Suddenly he emerges from the curious onlookers with his hands tied behind his back. Everything about him, everything around him, is tense, as if reality were about to be shattered from one moment to the next. But he does not stumble. He walks with difficulty, but he does not stumble. The stake is fixed in the ground beforehand. Perhaps it was put there the day before. The material mechanism of justice, it might be said, goes unperceived. Who builds the scaffolds? Who sharpens the knives? Who makes certain that the mechanism of the guillotine functions perfectly? Who oils the hinges of the garrote? The identity of the executioners is unknown, as is the merit of their office. It is difficult to describe those things since they happen without our knowing exactly how they happen. Suddenly

the body is covered with blood, and we do not know with any certainty when the executioners made the first cut. Our fascination with that experience is total. That is undeniable. When the torture was finished, we were soaked. We had not realized that it was raining. Suddenly, he was already there, but we did not look at him. We looked at the knives that the executioners brandished proudly, with the wisdom and dexterity that is theirs by habit. In the hands of other men these knives would be awkwardly manipulated, used with excessive caution in their attempt to avoid touching the blades, flinching at the slightest contact with the cutting edge. It is possible that the victim does not know exactly what is happening. The procedure continues in this manner. One watches closely. Nevertheless, when the shower of blood suddenly spurts from the wound, we find that it is impossible to say exactly when the cut was made. That is the way the procedure progressed from the start, when one sees blood slowly trickling down the length of his body, striping his hairless, distended skin, coiling in streams that gravitate toward the saint's genitals, which in these circumstances are the only part of his body that is invulnerable. Then the blood accumulates in the pubic hair until it seeps through, dripping onto the pavement and turning black like coal a few moments later. But that is not what is most disturbing. The Dignitary, the one in the photograph

who appears to be peacefully watching the scene from behind at the right, approaches the man and, introducing his fingertips between the seams of the initial cuts the executioners have made, grasps the lower edge of the wound and yanks downward—first the left side, then the right. It is curious to note how strong the flesh is. One can see it in the effort which the Dignitary must use in order to lay bare the man's ribs. The victim never screams. His senses perhaps are mute to the pain. The Dignitary withdraws and positions himself where he appears in the photograph.... The one at the extreme left of the photograph holds his arm up, exerting with minimal effort a small amount of pressure on one of the bonds or tourniquets located behind the patient. This bond, not seen in the photograph, is most likely sustained by the stake itself as a point of support producing the pressure that holds the arms together and keeps them tight around the stake. One immediately sees that the man carries with him the wisdom of his office. The absolute efficiency of his actions is portrayed in the serene look he directs at the operation of the executioner, who appears at the left side of the photograph, in the foreground, with his back to us. A quick twist of one of the bonds located at the level of the subject's shoulder facilitates the dismemberment of the legs at the knee. To his left—to the right in the photograph—another executioner whose face we cannot see is found.



The polemical photograph of Chinese torture that inspired the novel.

Nevertheless, a distinctive trait of his personality is visible. The man holds a stake which, by its position, by its peculiar angle, most likely exerts the greatest force of all in the procedure. It is, in fact, a large tourniquet. This would not be important were it not for the fact that the executioner's right hand, the one that operates the tourniquet, does not grasp the lever at the point where its probable proportions and weight would have one suppose, above all given the extreme force which it is to exert. On the contrary, it rests, or so it seems, delicately on the beam, in a position similar to the way one would hold a violin bow, bending the little finger delicately in and holding it so that it does not even touch lever. The gesture indicates, without a doubt, that since the executioner's left hand is used to hold the tourniquet at the necessary height, as demonstrated by the firm gesture with which his hand holds the stake from below, his right hand is used to produce slight modifications, barely perceptible increases, infinitesimal decreases, instantaneous and localized relaxations of the general pressure applied to the patient's body—modulations that serve to delay to the most exasperating degree that implacable dismemberment, modulations like those the bow produces on the strings in the *cadenza* preceding the *coda* in a musical score, forcing one to go back. There is yet another executioner behind the victim. His right hand and his face are barely visible. Surely he performs a function similar to that of the executioner on the extreme left of the photograph. Like the other one, his only task is to increase and decrease the pressure of a tourniquet made of hemp. In back, behind the victim, it is possible to see part of the face and the edge of a cap belonging to another executioner who is located at a position that is perfectly symmetrical to the one of the executioner manipulating the hemp tourniquet. And, immediately behind him, we see another executioner with his hair cut in the Manchu style who, like the one at the extreme left of the photograph, exerts pressure behind the victim, at the same time carefully following the operations of the other two in the foreground of the picture, who perform the quartering itself. These two have their backs to the camera. Each works on one of the patient's legs, dis-

membering it at the knee with saws. They will undoubtedly proceed in the same manner with the arms, if they have not done so already. This can only be inferred because, having amputated the hands and then the forearms at the height of the elbow, great pressure on the arm's stumps would be needed from the bonds in order to support the entire weight of the body, thus justifying the function of the executioner who operates the large tourniquet. It is necessary to note the symmetry of this image. The absolutely rational, geometric positioning of all the executioners. Though the identity of the executioner located behind the victim cannot be determined, his existence should not be doubted. Note the expressions on the faces of the spectators. It is curious that of all those included in the scene the victim is the only one who looks up. All the others, the executioners and the curious onlookers, look down. There is one man, next to last at the extreme right of the photograph, who looks straight ahead. His eyes are filled with terror. Notice also the expression of the man located in the center of the photograph between the Manchu executioner and the Dignitary. He is trying to follow the various stages of the procedure, and to do so he must lean on the shoulder of the spectator to his right. The victim is a very beautiful man. A delirious and exquisite mystery is reflected on his face. His look justifies a disturbing hypothesis: that he is really a woman. Had the area around the genitals not been retouched, had the chest wounds been caused by the bloody removal of breasts, there would be no doubt about it. The man seems absorbed in a supreme pleasure, as if contemplating a bacchanalian god. His senses form a halo around him that begins and ends at the same place. That is why there exists a point where pleasure and pain fuse. **MM**



NOTES

¹ Fragments taken from chapters two, three, four and seven of Salvador Elizondo, *Farabeuf*, translated from Spanish by John Incledon (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992). Reproduced with the permission of the translator.