

# The Fear of God

by Andrés Henestrosa



It wasn't ghosts, or dark shapes, or mysterious noises in the night, or phantoms, or dead people or live people or the Devil; it was God who frightened me in my childhood. Yes, the wind, banging against the doors, whining through the cracks, pushing to come in through the crevices, circling the house, did used to frighten me; but it was a passing fear. The howling of the dogs that I learned to identify with the reason that had caused it also disquieted me at one time or another, but precisely because I knew what caused it, I soon forgot it and went back to sleep. I could never see what the dogs could see; that's why even if a man knows the reason for their howling, he can stay calm because the thing that is the most frightening is what comes in through the eyes. The Indians say that for a man to see the same thing the dogs see, he has to put the slimy stuff that comes out of the animal's eye on his own eyes, but I was always afraid of all that and I never dared go beyond my own strength. I knew people who had done it, and some people I used to know told me staggering things.

Soothsaying birds, because they could foretell the death of my elders, were something I avoided, and I would sing or whistle at night so I couldn't hear them or to frighten them away. The bittern, the owl, who foretold the death of the Indian, and who sang all year round but we only heard and believed when somebody in the family was dying. So, a sad outcome, proof that when the owl and the bittern sing, Indians die. But none of this was what I was terrified of. It wasn't the visions either, visions that always tend to come when you're near death, particularly from those diseases that are fatal in and of themselves. One of those diseases that kills you from the moment it becomes clear you have it, even if you keep walking around with it. I know of men who died suddenly and just a little while

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Drawings in this section by Héctor Ponce de León.



beforehand saw extraordinary things: the thing was that they were already inhabited by death; they were already wandering in another world, and they barely had enough time to relate their visions.

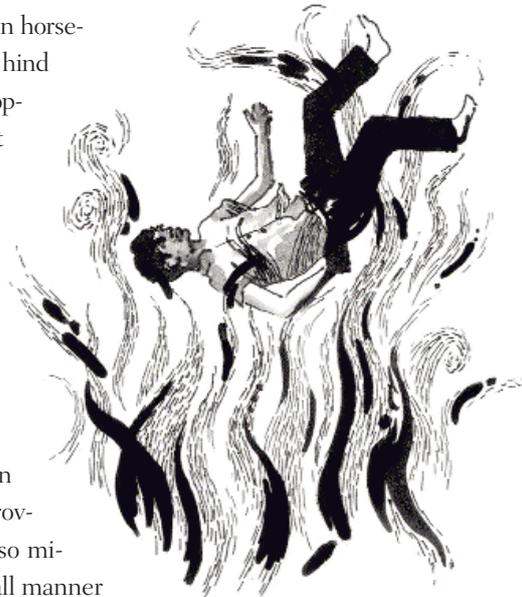
“Why do they let Hono wander around the mountains at that time of night?” asked Checú Cueto one day.

Checú was a man incapable of fear, incapable of lying. And we all ran to make sure that Hono was quietly sleeping in his hammock.

“But I saw him,” said the man.

Four days later Checú Cueto died. The thing was that death ruled over him from the day he got sick.

None of this that I heard day after day gave me anything but a passing chill, a momentary fright. What frightened me when I was a child was God. I even thought I had seen the ballsy Devil, his testicles enormous, sitting at the foot of the hills or running away through the mountains, brushing aside the branches with his hands or herding cattle, imitating cowboy tunes. I have pursued the fairies that I now know were hares, disfigured by the shadows and superstitions, on horseback by the sea, among the tall grass, almost on their hind hooves, white to make them taller, to get closer to the popular idea that they are little men in white pants. But none of that frightened me. Before I was twelve, I could calmly cross atria, cemeteries and graveyards. What frightened me was God. But it wasn't the God that I heard lived in heaven who frightened me, who I imagined to be huge with a long, solemn white beard, all-powerful; not the God who was the creator of Heaven and Earth, or even the implacable God of the flood, but a God who was just mentioned, whose name had barely been read in an image that my mother had on the ranch: a Divine Providence who reigned on an altar. An image that was so miraculous that it had power in everything: it cured all manner



of diseases; it returned lost pigs to the sty, stolen or lost steers to the corrals. It was a stamp that had God in the center and to the sides, different scenes and really chilling legends. The scenes depicted the death of a just man, the death of a sinner, among other cruel things. And to the sides were texts that warned that God sees everything, knows everything, hears everything. Why, I have asked myself now that I am a man, now that I am incredulous, that I haven't the minimal concern about religion, does the Church cultivate the conscience of sin so painstakingly? It does it, I have told myself, to survive, because without that, could it lord it over people's consciences?

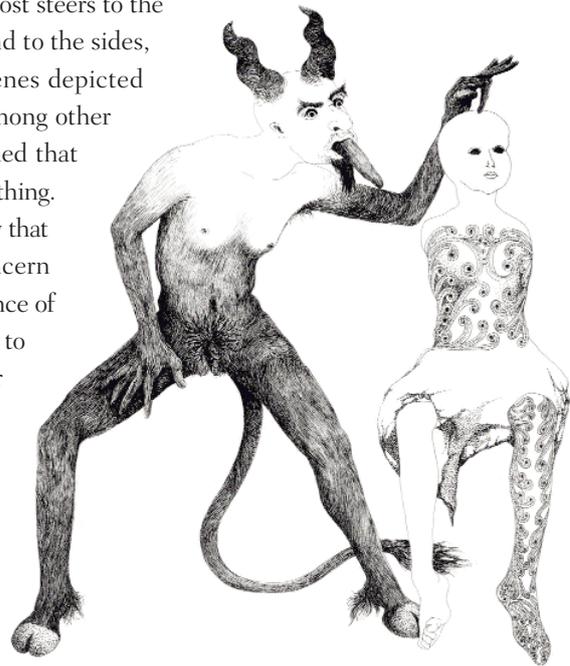
"Devils are to be pitied because they don't see the face of God," old Vale, a servant in my house, used to say. But the thing is that we didn't see him either, though we did see his works: his great sunsets, his full-mooned nights, just like the day except the moon doesn't warm you. If God saw everything, knew everything, heard everything, where could you go that he couldn't chase you? I owe it to this God that I did not engage in solitary pleasures, that I did not lie, that I obeyed and respected my mother, who was his image in her rigor, her sense of justice, her implacability when the time for punishment came along. From a very young age, I had knowledge of women, which I never under any circumstances thought was a sin, having seen so many animals and people engendered, who, nevertheless, continued to be faithful, pious and protected by God. They also had relatives and brethren who blasphemed, who turned against God at the first adversity, in the minimal moments of difficulty. Tomás Dávalos, a federal soldier who stayed in my hometown when the Revolution came, used a string of curses and blasphemies that, after hearing them so often and seeing that he wasn't struck down by lightening, ended by lessening my fears. One day, hearing him rail against his own mother, I said to him, "Tomasito, when you get mad, you even rail against your mother."

And he answered right back, "Yes, if I rail against God, how much more should I rail against that bitch who gave birth to me, shithead that I am."

Teodoro Morales, my uncle, who we affectionately called Dooyo, had a Saint Rafael on his altar. Whenever we would go camping, that is, walk around the clearings, fields and pastures where the cattle grazed, or lasso cantankerous or wild steers, all jobs involving danger, he would go to his altar and say aloud, amidst truth and lies, "Saint Rafael, protect me because you're my bitch!"

And since he never died while he was praying for this, I ended up by overcoming the presence of the Divine Providence in my house, more than my faithful shadow.

But, how and when I managed to escape from that prison, I don't know. The truth is that one day, when I was more grown up, after a rough battle, I knew that I was the central player in my life. Not being a sinner, but, to the contrary, a god-fearing man, everything I achieved cost me sweat and tears. In the middle of the night, lost in immense loneliness, my heart constricted by suffering, I suddenly saw a cloud form and grow and grow in the sky, and a wind come up smelling of wet earth, and an enormous clap of thunder rip the entrails of the night and the merciless rain pour down. And there it was a matter of being cold, and dodging the lightning bolts with prayers and signs of the cross. Or a highwayman or a revolutionary would ask for your horse and saddle



and leave you—a mere child— on foot 20 leagues from home. I was still alive, it's true; but not because anybody had helped me. And the fear of God gradually left me. When in danger, the times I thought I was in the most danger, I would take up his name again, his image. I would put myself into his hands, but I did everything I could to get out of danger. I never thought about death until a short time ago. Dying wasn't really a problem. What was a problem was life; that I know was in order. Dying never frightened me as I gradually stopped believing. It was the punishment that was waiting for me. I saw the sinner's death scene, his arrival in Hell amidst the flames. O God, how you tormented me!

Our faith, our ordered life, was not enough to arrive at the greatest of miseries. We left the ranch. And when we left, we left the image of the Divine Providence behind on the altar.

Once in a while, on the way from a ranch further away where we moved our few belongings, I would stop at the old house, full of bats, of owls, of reptiles, in short, of frights. A stearin candle



that was always in the candlestick holder helped guide me through it to find the odd dish or just to take a look at the humble home of my childhood. A silence that seemed to make waves, that seemed to speak, filled the abandoned house. One night, after a long, hard day, I stopped off at Rancho Nuevo, which was its name. I lit the candle. The terrible silence was illuminated, crouching in the corners. I peeled the husks off some pieces of corn; I cut the kernels off into a bag and went out into the nearby pasture to look for a relay beast. While I was outside, perhaps the beating of a bat's wings or a gust of wind or one of the reptiles I mentioned toppled the candle onto the image of the Divine Providence, so that when I came back inside, I found it half burned. I don't know where the devil I got the desire to laugh, and I laughed with a vengeful laugh: I laughed at seeing the image that had frightened me so much turned into a smoky plank of wood.

Astride my horse, I continued on my way and I never saw God bigger, fuller of stars, sweeter with rumors, closer to me than that night.

The nocturnal birds sang a song that was not at all a plaint, but praise; the stars trembled in the sky and the moon, a minute solitary island, floated among silver clouds. The sea sang a pleasant song. And I rode, with no other goal than the dawn, to be able to watch the sun coming up, which I supposed clearer than ever, fuller of blessings. **MM**