

BIENVENIDO, BOB

Es seguro que cada día estará más viejo, más lejos del tiempo en que se llamaba Bob, del pelo rubio colgando en la sien, la sonrisa y los lustrosos ojos, de cuando entraba silencioso en la sala, murmurando un saludo o moviendo un poco la mano cerca de la oreja, e iba a sentarse bajo la lámpara, cerca del piano, con un libro, o simplemente quieto y aparte, abstraído, mirándonos durante una hora sin un gesto en la cara,¹ moviendo de vez en cuando los dedos para manejar el cigarrillo y limpiar de cenizas la solapa de sus trajes claros.

Igualmente lejos – ahora que se llama Roberto y se emborracha con cualquier cosa, protegiéndose la boca con la mano sucia cuando tose – del Bob que tomaba cerveza, dos vasos solamente en la más larga de las noches, con una pila de monedas de diez sobre su mesa de la cantina del club para gastar en la máquina de discos. Casi siempre solo, escuchando *jazz*, la cara soñolienta, dichosa y pálida, moviendo apenas la cabeza para saludarme cuando yo pasaba, siguiéndome con los ojos tanto tiempo como yo me quedara, tanto tiempo como me fuera posible soportar su mirada azul² detenida incansablemente en mí, manteniendo sin esfuerzo el intenso desprecio y la burla más suave.³ También con algún otro muchacho, los sábados, alguno tan rabiosamente joven como él, con quien conversaba de solos, trompas y coros⁴ y de la infinita ciudad que Bob construiría sobre la costa cuando fuera arquitecto. Se interrumpía al verme pasar para hacerme el breve saludo y no sacar ya los ojos de mi cara, resbalando palabras apagadas y sonrisas por una punta de la boca hacia el compañero, que

WELCOME, BOB

One thing is certain: that every day he will be older, further away from the time when he used to be called Bob, with his fair hair hanging over one of his temples, his smile and his sparkling eyes, further away from the time when he used to come silently into the room, murmuring a greeting or waving his hand slightly at the level of his ear; then he would go and sit down under the lamp near the piano with a book, or merely stay silent and apart, lost in his own thoughts, watching us for an hour at a time without moving a muscle of his face, only altering the position of his fingers from time to time in order to cope with his cigarette and brush the ash off the lapels of his light suit.

He is just as far away – now that he is called Robert and gets drunk on any old thing, covering his mouth with his dirty hand when he coughs – from the Bob who only used to drink beer, and then no more than two glasses during the longest of evenings, and who would have a pile of ten-cent pieces on his table in the bar of the club to put in the juke-box. Almost always alone, listening to jazz, his face sleepy, happy and pale, hardly moving his head to greet me as I passed, following me with his eyes all the time I stayed, as long as I could stand the gaze of his blue eyes fixed tirelessly on me, keeping up effortlessly a look of intense contempt and gentlest mockery.³ He used also to be with some other young fellow, on Saturdays, someone as rabidly young as he was, with whom he talked, just the two of them, very animatedly about the vast city which Bob would build on the coast when he became an architect. He used to interrupt the conversation on seeing me pass by to give me a brief greeting. Thereafter he would never take his eyes off my face as he shot smiles and muttered comments out of the corner of his mouth to his companion, who always finished up

terminaba siempre por mirarme y duplicar en silencio el desprecio y la burla.

A veces me sentía fuerte y trataba de mirarlo: apoyaba la cara en una mano y fumaba encima de mi copa mirándolo sin pestañear, sin apartar la atención de mi rostro, que debía sostenerse frío, un poco melancólico. En aquel tiempo Bob era muy parecido a Inés; podía ver algo de ella en su cara a través del salón del club, y acaso alguna noche lo haya mirado como la miraba a ella. Pero casi siempre prefería olvidar los ojos de Bob y me sentaba de espaldas a él y miraba las bocas de los que hablaban en mi mesa, a veces callado y triste para que él supiera que había en mí algo más que aquello por lo que me había juzgado, algo próximo a él; a veces me ayudaba con unas copas y pensaba: «Querido Bob, andá a contárselo a tu hermanita», mientras acariciaba las manos de las muchachas sentadas a mi mesa o estiraba una teoría cínica sobre cualquier cosa, para que ellas rieran y Bob lo oyera.

Pero ni la actitud ni la mirada de Bob mostraban ninguna alteración en aquel tiempo, hiciera yo lo que hiciera. Sólo recuerdo esto como una prueba de que él anotaba mis comedias en la cantina. Una noche, en su casa, estaba esperando a Inés en la sala, junto al piano, cuando entró él. Tenía un impermeable cerrado hasta el cuello, las manos en los bolsillos. Me saludó moviendo la cabeza, miró alrededor en seguida y avanzó en la habitación como si me hubiera suprimido con la rápida cabezada; lo vi moverse dando vueltas junto a la mesa, sobre la alfombra, andando sobre ella con sus amarillos zapatos de goma. Tocó una flor con un dedo, se sentó en el borde de la mesa y se puso a fumar mirando el florero, el sereno perfil puesto hacia mí, un poco inclinado, flojo y pensativo. Imprudentemente — yo estaba de pie recostado en el piano — empujé con mi mano izquierda una tecla grave y quedé ya obligado a repetir el sonido cada tres segundos, mirándolo.

staring at me too and silently echoing the contempt and mockery.

At times I felt strong and tried to look back at him: I used to rest my cheek on my hand and sit smoking over my drink, looking at him unwinkingly, without ever relaxing attention from my face, which was intended to maintain a cold, slightly melancholy look. At that time, Bob was very like Inés in looks; I could see something of her in his face across the club-room, and maybe some evening or other I might even have looked at him as I used to look at her. But almost always I preferred to forget Bob's eyes and I would sit with my back to him watching the mouths of those who were talking at my table, sometimes looking quiet and sad so that he should know that there was something more in me than he judged, something close to his own nature. Sometimes I boosted myself with a few drinks and thought: 'Go and tell your little sister about this, Bob, dear boy', while I stroked the hands of the girls sitting at my table. Or else I developed to excess a cynical theory about something or other, so that they would laugh and Bob would hear it.

But neither Bob's attitude nor his expression showed any alteration at that time, whatever I did. I only remember this incident as a proof of the fact that he took notice of my play-acting in the bar. One evening, at their house, I was waiting for Inés in the lounge, near the piano, when he came in. He was wearing a raincoat buttoned up to the neck and had his hands in his pockets. He greeted me with a nod of his head, then looked around and came on into the room as if he had annihilated me completely with that rapid nod; I could see him walking up and down near the table, on the carpet, tramping over it with his yellow rubber shoes. He touched a flower with his finger, sat down on the edge of the table and started smoking, looking at the flower-vase. His serene profile was turned towards me, his head slightly bowed, his face slack and pensive. Unwisely — I was standing leaning on the piano — I pushed down with my left hand one of the low keys and was then obliged to repeat the sound every three seconds, watching him.

Yo no tenía por él más que odio y un vergonzante respeto, y seguí hundiendo la tecla, clavándola con una cobarde ferocidad en el silencio de la casa, hasta que repentinamente quedé situado afuera, observando la escena como si estuviera en lo alto de la escalera o en la puerta, viéndolo y sintiéndolo a él, Bob, silencioso y ausente junto al hilo de humo de su cigarrillo que subía temblando; sintiéndome a mí, alto y rígido, un poco patético, un poco ridículo en la penumbra, golpeando cada tres exactos segundos la tecla grave con mi índice. Pensé entonces que no estaba haciendo sonar el piano por una incomprensible bravata, sino que lo estaba llamando; que la profunda nota que tenazmente hacía renacer mi dedo en el borde de cada última vibración era, al fin encontrada, la única palabra pordiosera con que se podía pedir tolerancia y comprensión a su juventud implacable. Él continuó inmóvil hasta que Inés golpeó arriba la puerta del dormitorio antes de bajar a juntarse conmigo. Entonces Bob se enderezó y vino caminando con pereza hasta el otro extremo del piano, apoyó un codo, me miró un momento y después dijo con una hermosa sonrisa: «¿Esta noche es una noche de leche o de *whisky*? ¿Ímpetu de salvación o salto en el abismo?»⁶

No podía contestarle nada, no podía deshacerle la cara de un golpe; dejé de tocar la tecla y fui retirando lentamente la mano del piano. Inés estaba en mitad de la escalera cuando él me dijo, mientras se apartaba: «Bueno, puede ser que usted improvise.»

El duelo duró tres o cuatro meses, y yo no podía dejar de ir por las noches al club — recuerdo, de paso, que había campeonato de tenis por aquel tiempo —, porque cuando me estaba algún tiempo sin aparecer por allí, Bob saludaba mi regreso aumentando el desdén y la ironía en sus ojos y se acomodaba en el asiento con una mueca feliz.

Cuando llegó el momento de que yo no pudiera desear otra solución que casarme con Inés cuanto antes, Bob y

I felt for him no more than hatred and shamefaced respect, and I went on banging down the key, hammering it with a cowardly ferocity in the silence of the house, until suddenly I found myself outside it all, observing the scene, as if I were standing at the top of the staircase or in the doorway, seeing him and sensing him, Bob, silent and absent beside the thin wisp of smoke of his cigarette which rose trembling upwards. I felt tall and stiff, rather pathetic, rather ridiculous in the half-light, every three seconds exactly striking the low key with my forefinger. Then the thought struck me that I was not making this noise on the piano out of incomprehensible bravado, but that I was calling him; that the deep note which my finger kept on obstinately sounding at the very end of each final vibration was, now that I had finally found it, the only word of supplication with which one could ask for tolerance and comprehension from his implacable youthfulness. He remained motionless until Inés slammed the bedroom-door upstairs before coming down to join me. Then he straightened up and came walking lazily across to the other end of the piano, leaned an elbow on it, looked at me for a moment and afterwards said with an attractive smile: 'What's on tonight? Milk or whisky? Do you feel the urge for salvation or do you want a leap into the unknown?'

I couldn't answer anything, nor could I smash his face in. I stopped striking the key and drew my hand slowly away from the piano. Inés was halfway downstairs when he said, moving away: 'All right, maybe you'll just decide on the spur of the moment.'

The duel lasted three or four months. I just couldn't stop going to the club in the evenings — I remember in passing that there was a tennis tournament going on at that time — because whenever I remained some time without putting in an appearance, Bob greeted my return by increasing the contempt and irony in his eyes and then would settle back into his chair comfortably with a happy grimace.

When the moment arrived at which I could not want any other solution than that of marrying Inés as soon as possible,

su táctica cambiaron. No sé cómo supo de mi necesidad de casarme con su hermana y de cómo yo había abrazado aquella necesidad con todas las fuerzas que me quedaban. Mi amor de aquella necesidad había suprimido el pasado y toda atadura con el presente. No reparaba entonces en Bob; pero poco tiempo después hube de recordar cómo había cambiado en aquella época y alguna vez quedé inmóvil, de pie en una esquina, insultándolo entre dientes, comprendiendo que entonces su cara había dejado de ser burlona, y me enfrentaba con seriedad y un intenso cálculo, como se mira un peligro o una tarea compleja, como se trata de valorar el obstáculo y medirlo con las fuerzas de uno. Pero yo no le daba ya importancia, y hasta llegué a pensar que en su cara inmóvil y fija estaba naciendo la comprensión por lo fundamental mío, por un viejo pasado de limpieza⁷ que la adorada necesidad de casarme con Inés extraía de abajo de años y sucesos para acercarme a él.

Después vi que estaba esperando la noche; pero lo vi recién cuando aquella noche llegó Bob y vino a sentarse a la mesa donde yo estaba solo y despedió al mozo con una seña. Esperé un rato, mirándolo: era tan parecido a ella cuando movía las cejas, y la punta de la nariz, como a Inés, se le aplastaba un poco cuando conversaba. «Usted no se va a casar con Inés», dijo después. Lo miré, sonreí, dejé de mirarlo. «No, no se va a casar con ella porque una cosa así se puede evitar si hay alguien de veras resuelto a que no se haga.» Volví a reírme. «Hace unos años – le dije – eso me hubiera dado muchas ganas de casarme con Inés. Ahora no agrega ni saca.⁸ Pero puedo oírlo; si quiere explicarme ...» Enderezó la cabeza y continuó mirándome en silencio; acaso tuviera prontas las frases y esperaba a que yo completara la mía para decirlas. «Si quiere explicarme por qué no quiere que yo me case con ella», pregunté lentamente y me recosté en la pared. Vi en seguida que yo no había sospechado nunca cuánto y con cuánta resolución me

Bob and his tactics changed. I don't know how he got to know of my need to marry his sister and of how I had embraced that need with all the strength I had left. My passionate need had suppressed both the past and any link with the present. I didn't notice Bob then. But shortly afterwards I had cause to remember how he had changed at that period, and once or twice I stood there motionless in a corner muttering insulting things about him between my teeth, realizing that by this time his face had stopped being mocking and that he was facing me with seriousness and intense calculation, just as one faces danger or a complex job of work, just as one tries to evaluate the obstacle and measure it against one's strength. But I didn't attach importance to it any longer, and even came to think that in his motionless and fixed features there was a growing understanding of something fundamental in me, of an old past life of decent behaviour which my heartfelt need to marry Inés was bringing out from beneath the years and events to draw me close to him.

Afterwards I saw that he was waiting for the evening. But I had only just realized this when that evening Bob arrived and came to sit at the table where I was alone, dismissing the waiter with a gesture. I waited a moment, looking at him. He was so like her when he moved his eyebrows; and the end of his nose, just like Inés's, became slightly flattened when he started talking; 'You are not going to marry Inés,' he said presently. I looked at him, smiled and looked away. 'No, you're not going to marry her because a thing like that can be avoided if someone is really determined that it shouldn't happen.' I laughed again. 'A few years ago,' I told him, 'that would have made me very keen indeed to marry Inés. Now it makes no difference, one way or the other. But I can hear you out. If you want to explain to me ...' He raised his head and went on looking at me in silence; perhaps he had the phrases ready and was waiting for me to finish my sentence in order to say them. 'If you want to explain to me why you don't want me to marry her,' I went on slowly and leaned back against the wall. I saw at

odiaba; tenía la cara pálida, con una sonrisa sujeta y apretada con labios y dientes.

«Habría que dividirlo por capítulos – dijo –, no terminaría en la noche. Pero se puede decir en dos o tres palabras. Usted no se va a casar con ella porque usted es viejo y ella es joven. No sé si usted tiene treinta o cuarenta años, no importa. Pero usted es un hombre hecho, es decir deshecho,⁹ como todos los hombres a su edad cuando no son extraordinarios.» Chupó el cigarrillo apagado, miró hacia la calle y volvió a mirarme; mi cabeza estaba apoyada contra la pared y seguía esperando. «Claro que usted tiene motivos para creer en lo extraordinario suyo.¹⁰ Creer que ha salvado muchas cosas del naufragio. Pero no es cierto.» Me puse a fumar de perfil a él; me molestaba, pero no le creía; me provocaba un tibio odio, pero yo no estaba seguro de que nada me haría dudar de mí mismo después de haber conocido la necesidad de casarme con Inés. No: estábamos en la misma mesa y yo era tan limpio y tan joven como él. «Usted puede equivocarse – le dije –. Si usted quiere nombrar algo de lo que hay deshecho en mí . . .» «No, no – dijo rápidamente –, no soy tan niño. No entro en ese juego. Usted es egoísta; es sensual de una sucia manera. Está atado a cosas miserables y son las cosas las que lo arrastran. No va a ninguna parte, no lo desea realmente. Es eso, nada más; usted es viejo y ella es joven. Ni siquiera debo pensar en ella frente a usted. Y usted pretende . . .» Tampoco entonces podía yo romperle la cara, así que resolví prescindir de él, fui al aparato de música, marqué cualquier cosa y puse una moneda. Volví despacio al asiento y escuché. La música era poco fuerte; alguien cantaba dulcemente en el interior de grandes pausas. A mi lado Bob estaba diciendo que ni siquiera él, alguien como él, era digno de mirar a Inés en los ojos. Pobre chico, pensé con admiración. Estuvo diciendo que en aquello que él llamaba vejez, lo más repugnante, lo que determinaba la descomposición, o

once that I hadn't suspected to what extent and with what determination he hated me. His face was pale, with a forced tense smile of lips and teeth.

'One really ought to divide it into chapters,' he said, 'there's too much to get through in one night. But it can all be said in a few words. You aren't going to marry her because you are old and she is young. I don't know whether you are thirty or forty – it doesn't matter. But you're a man who is already mature, in other words destroyed, like all men of your age unless they are quite exceptional.' He drew on his cigarette which had gone out, looked towards the street and then at me again. My head was resting against the wall and I went on waiting. 'Obviously you have your reasons for believing that you are exceptional, for believing that you have saved plenty from the wreck. But it isn't true.' I started smoking with my face turned away from him. He worried me, but I didn't believe him. He aroused in me a tepid sort of hatred, but I wasn't sure that anything would make me doubt myself after having realized the necessity of marrying Inés. No, we were at the same table and I was as clean and young as he was. 'You could be making a mistake,' I said to him. 'If you'd like to name something that is destroyed in me.' 'No, no,' he said quickly, 'I'm not such a kid as all that. I'm not playing that game. You're selfish; you're sensual in a dirty way. You're attached to sordid things and it is the things that drag you along. You're not going anywhere, you don't really want to. That's all it is; you're old and she's young. I oughtn't even to think of her in front of you. And you presume . . .' I couldn't smash his face in then either, so I made up my mind to ignore him. I went to the juke-box, pressed one of the buttons and put in a coin. I came slowly back to my seat and listened. The music was not very loud: someone was singing softly in the midst of long pauses. At my side Bob was saying that not even he, not even someone like him, was fit to look into Inés's eyes. Poor kid, I thought with wonder. He was saying that, in what he called old age, the most repugnant thing, the determining factor in decomposition, or perhaps the symbol of

acaso lo que era símbolo de descomposición, era pensar por conceptos, englobar a las mujeres en la palabra mujer, empujarlas sin cuidado para que pudieran amoldarse al concepto hecho por una pobre experiencia. Pero – decía también – tampoco la palabra experiencia era exacta. No había ya experiencias, nada más que costumbres y repeticiones, nombres marchitos para ir poniendo a las cosas y un poco crearlas. Más o menos eso estuvo diciendo. Y yo pensaba suavemente si él caería muerto o encontraría la manera de matarme allí mismo y en seguida, si yo le contara las imágenes que removía en mí al decir que ni siquiera él merecía tocar a Inés con la punta de un dedo, el pobre chico, o besar el extremo de sus vestidos, la huella de sus pasos o cosas así. Después de una pausa – la música había terminado y el aparato apagó las luces, aumentando el silencio –, Bob dijo: «Nada más», y se fue con el andar de siempre, seguro, ni rápido ni lento.

Si aquella noche el rostro de Inés se me mostró en las facciones de Bob, si en algún momento el fraternal parecido pudo aprovechar la trampa de un gesto¹¹ para darme a Inés por Bob, fue aquella entonces la última vez que vi a la muchacha. Es cierto que volví a estar con ella dos noches después en la entrevista habitual, y un mediodía, en un encuentro impuesto por mi desesperación, inútil, sabiendo de antemano que todo recurso de palabra y presencia sería inútil, que todos mis machacantes ruegos morirían de manera asombrosa, como si no hubieran sido nunca disueltos en el enorme aire azul de la plaza, bajo el follaje verde apacible en mitad de la buena estación.

Las pequeñas y rápidas partes del rostro de Inés que me había mostrado aquella noche Bob, aunque dirigidas contra mí, unidas en la agresión, participaban del entusiasmo y el candor de la muchacha. Pero cómo hablar a Inés, cómo tocarla, convencerla a través de la repentina mujer apática de las dos últimas entrevistas. Cómo reconocerla o siquiera evocarla mirando a la mujer de largo

decomposition, was to think in preconceived ideas, combining all women in the word woman, cramming them all in carelessly to make them conform to a preconceived idea based on very scanty experience. But, he went on, not even the word experience was the right one. By then, there were no experiences left, nothing except habits and repetitions, worn-out names to apply to things and so in a sense create them. This was more or less what he was saying. And I was gently wondering whether he would drop dead or whether he would find some way of killing me there and then, if I told him of the images that he conjured up in my mind when he said that even he didn't deserve to touch Inés even with his fingertip, poor kid, or kiss the hem of her dress, her footprints and so on. After a pause – the music had stopped and the lights of the machine went off, increasing the silence – Bob said, 'That's all,' and he went away. He walked out at his usual pace which was assured, and neither fast nor slow.

If that evening I saw Inés's face in Bob's features, if at some moment his brotherly likeness could adopt some trick of a facial expression to fool me and present me with Inés instead of Bob, then that moment was the last time I ever saw her. It's true that I was with her again two evenings later for our usual date, and one midday for a meeting I forced on her in despair – a useless meeting, knowing as I did beforehand that every resource of words and presence would be useless, that all my most pressing entreaties would die astonishingly, as if they had never been – dissolved in the great expanse of blue air in the square, beneath the peaceful green foliage at the height of the good season.

The small fleeting aspects of Inés's face which Bob had revealed to me that night, although directed against me and united in their aggression, had something in common with the girl's own enthusiasm and innocence. But how was I to speak to Inés, how was I to touch her, to convince her, through the suddenly apathetic woman of the last two meetings? How was I to recognize her or even evoke her,

cuerpo rígido en el sillón de su casa y el banco de la plaza, de una igual rigidez resuelta y mantenida en las dos distintas horas y los dos parajes; la mujer de cuello tenso, los ojos hacia adelante, la boca muerta, las manos plantadas en el regazo. Yo la miraba y era «no», sabía que era «no» todo el aire que la estuvo rodeando.

Nunca supe cuál fue la anécdota elegida por Bob para aquello; en todo caso, estoy seguro de que no mintió, de que entonces nada – ni Inés – podían hacerlo mentir. No vi más a Inés ni tampoco a su forma vacía y endurecida; supe que se casó y que no vive ya en Buenos Aires. Por entonces, en medio del odio y el sufrimiento me gustaba imaginar a Bob imaginando mis hechos y eligiendo la cosa justa o el conjunto de cosas que fue capaz de matarme en Inés y matarla a ella para mí.

Ahora hace cerca de un año que veo a Bob casi diariamente, en el mismo café, rodeado de la misma gente. Cuando nos presentaron – hoy se llama Roberto – comprendí que el pasado no tiene tiempo y el ayer se junta allí con la fecha de diez años atrás. Algún gastado rastro de Inés había aún en su cara, y un movimiento de la boca de Bob alcanzó para que yo volviera a ver el alargado cuerpo de la muchacha, sus calmosos y desenvueltos pasos, y para que los mismos inalterados ojos azules volvieran a mirarme bajo un flojo peinado que cruzaba y sujetaba una cinta roja. Ausente y perdida para siempre, podía conservarse viviente e intacta definitivamente inconfundible, idéntica a lo esencial suyo. Pero era trabajoso escarbar en la cara, las palabras y los gestos de Roberto para encontrar a Bob y poder odiarlo. La tarde del primer encuentro esperé durante horas a que se quedara solo o saliera para hablarle y golpearlo. Quieto y silencioso, espiando a veces su cara o evocando a Inés en las ventanas brillantes del café, compuse mañosamente las frases de insulto y encontré el paciente tono

looking at this woman with her long body rigid in the arm-chair in her house and on the bench in the square and who kept the same resolute and determined rigidity on the two different occasions and in the two different places; this woman with her neck held stiffly erect, her eyes looking straight in front of her, her mouth dead, her hands stuck there in her lap. I looked at her and the answer was 'no', all the air around her knew it was 'no'.

I never got to know which particular anecdote Bob had chosen to get this result. At all events I am sure that he did not lie, and that in those days nothing – not even Inés – could make him lie. I never saw Inés again, nor her hardened, empty form. I learned later that she got married and now does not live in Buenos Aires any more. At that time, in the midst of the hatred and suffering that I felt, I enjoyed imagining Bob as he had imagined my actions, picking out the very thing or the very complex of things which had the power to kill me in Inés and to kill her for me.

Now I've been seeing Bob for about a year almost every day, in the same café, surrounded by the same people. When they introduced us – nowadays he's called Robert – I realized that the past had no time-sequence and that in it yesterday joins up with the date of ten years ago. Some threadbare trace of Inés was still there in his face, and a movement of Bob's mouth was sufficient to make me see again the girl's long body, her placid, unselfconscious way of walking, and for the same unchanged blue eyes to look out at me from beneath her loose hair-style, held in place by a red ribbon across it. Far away and lost forever she could go on being alive and untouched, utterly unmistakable, identical with her own essential self. But it was hard work trying to pierce beneath Robert's expression, his words and gestures, in order to find the old Bob and to be able to hate him. On the afternoon of our first meeting I waited for hours for him to be left alone or for him to step outside, so as to speak to him and knock him down. Motionless and silent, occasionally stealing a glance at his face or evoking Inés in the shining windows of the café, I cunningly composed the

con que iba a decírselas, elegí el sitio de su cuerpo donde dar el primer golpe. Pero se fue al anochecer acompañado por los tres amigos, y resolví esperar, como había esperado él, años atrás, la noche propicia en que estuviera solo.

Cuando volví a verlo, cuando iniciamos esta segunda amistad que espero no terminará ya nunca, dejé de pensar en toda forma de ataque. Quedó resuelto que yo no le hablaría jamás de Inés ni del pasado y que, en silencio, yo mantendría todo aquello viviente dentro de mí. Nada más que esto hago, casi todas las tardes, frente a Roberto y las caras familiares del café. Mi odio se conservará cálido y nuevo mientras pueda seguir viendo y escuchando a Roberto; nadie sabe de mi venganza, pero la vivo, gozosa y enfurecida,¹² un día y otro. Hablo con él, sonrío, fumo, tomo café. Todo el tiempo pensando en Bob, en su pureza, su fe, en la audacia de sus pasados sueños. Pensando en el Bob que amaba la música, en el Bob que planeaba ennoblecer la vida de los hombres construyendo una ciudad de enceguecedora belleza, para cinco millones de habitantes, a lo largo de la costa del río; el Bob que no podía mentir nunca, el Bob que proclamaba la lucha de jóvenes contra viejos, el Bob dueño del futuro y del mundo. Pensando minucioso y plácido en todo eso frente al hombre de dedos sucios de tabaco llamado Roberto, que lleva una vida grotesca, trabajando en cualquier hedionda oficina, casado con una gorda mujer a quien nombra «miseñora»;¹³ el hombre que se pasa estos largos domingos hundido en el asiento del café, examinando diarios y jugando a las carreras por teléfono.¹⁴

Nadie amó a mujer alguna con la fuerza con que yo amo su ruindad, su definitiva manera de estar hundido en la sucia vida de los hombres. Nadie se arrojó de amor como yo lo hago ante sus fugaces sobresaltos, los proyectos sin convicción que un destruido y lejano Bob le dicta algunas veces y que sólo sirven para que mida

insulting phrases and chose the patient tone in which I was going to say them to him. I picked out the place on his body to hit with my first blow. But at dusk he went away with his three friends and I decided to wait, just as he had waited years before, for a more suitable evening, one when he would be by himself.

When I saw him again, when we began this second friendship which I now hope will never come to an end, I gave up thinking about any sort of attack. I made up my mind never to talk to him about Inés or about the past but instead that I should quietly keep it all alive inside myself. Nothing more than this I do almost every afternoon, in front of Robert and the familiar faces in the café. My hatred will go on keeping itself warm and new as long as I can go on seeing and listening to Robert. No one knows anything about my vengeance, but I live it, joyful and furious as it is, day after day. I talk to him, smile, smoke, drink coffee. All the time thinking of Bob, of his purity, of his faith, the audacity of his past dreams. Thinking of the Bob who loved music, of the Bob who planned to ennoble the lives of men by building a city of blinding beauty, for five million inhabitants, along the bank of the river; of the Bob who could never lie, the Bob who proclaimed the struggle of the young against the old, the Bob who was lord of all the future and of all the world. Placidly thinking in detail about all this in front of the man with nicotine-stained fingers called Robert, who lives a grotesque life, working in some stinking office or other, married to a fat woman he calls 'm'dear wife'; the man who spends these long Sundays slumped in his chair in the café, going through the racing-papers, and phoning bets.

No one ever loved any woman as strongly as I love his vileness, the utterly final way in which he has sunk into the dirtiness of men's lives. No one was ever so enraptured with love as I am at the spectacle of his short-lived attempts to rouse himself, the plans with no conviction behind them which a destroyed and far-distant Bob dictates to him from

BIENVENIDO, BOB

con exactitud hasta dónde está emporcado para siempre.

No sé si nunca en el pasado he dado la bienvenida a Inés con tanta alegría y amor como diariamente doy la bienvenida a Bob, al tenebroso y maloliente mundo de los adultos. Es todavía un recién llegado y de vez en cuando sufre sus crisis de nostalgia. Lo he visto lloroso y borracho, insultándose y jurando el inminente regreso a los días de Bob. Puedo asegurar que entonces mi corazón desborda de amor y se hace sensible y cariñoso como el de una madre. En el fondo sé que no se irá nunca, porque no tiene sitio adonde ir; pero me hago delicado y paciente y trato de conformarlo. Como ese puñado de tierra natal, o esas fotografías de calles y monumentos, o las canciones que gustan traer consigo los inmigrantes, voy construyendo para él planes, creencias y mañanas distintos que tienen la luz y el sabor del país de juventud de donde él llegó hace un tiempo. Y él acepta; protesta siempre para que yo redoble mis promesas, pero termina por decir que sí, acaba por muequear una sonrisa, creyendo que algún día habrá de regresar al mundo y las horas de Bob, y queda en paz en medio de sus treinta años, moviéndose sin disgusto ni tropiezo entre los cadáveres poderosos de las antiguas ambiciones, las formas repulsivas de los sueños que se fueron gastando bajo la presión distraída y constante de tantos miles de pies inevitables.

WELCOME, BOB

time to time and which only serve to make him measure exactly the extent to which he has forever defiled himself.

I don't know if ever in the past I have welcomed Inés with as much happiness and love as I now welcome Bob daily to the dark and smelly world of adults. He is still a newcomer and periodically suffers from fits of nostalgia. I have seen him tearful and drunk, insulting himself and promising his imminent return to the days of Bob. I can assure you that at such times my heart overflows with love and becomes as sensitive and as tender as a mother's. At bottom I know that he will never go back, because he has no place to go to; but I make myself be considerate and patient and try to make him submit. Like those bits of native soil, or those photographs of streets and monuments or the songs which immigrants like to bring with them, so I keep on making different plans, beliefs and futures all of which have the light and savour of the country of youth from which he came not very long ago. And he accepts. He always protests a bit so that I have to redouble my promises, but in the end he always says yes, he finally manages a smile, believing that some day he is destined to go back to the world and the hours of Bob. And so he remains at peace in his mid-thirties, moving without disgust or clumsiness among the powerful corpses of his old ambitions, and the repulsive shapes of the dreams which gradually were worn down by the constant unconscious pressure of so many thousands of inevitable feet.