

PRAXIS

A CORNELL JOURNAL OF OPINION & REVIEW



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a cornell journal
of opinion & review

volume 4 number 1

winter 1978

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"Praxis" means theory expressed as action. **Praxis** puts undergraduates' ideas into print.

The funding for this issue of **Praxis** came from many sources: the Undergraduate Student Finance Commission; the proceeds from subscriptions, sales and advertising; and the generosity of members of the Cornell community. A grant from the Cornell Council for the Creative and Performing Arts helped to print the photographs included here; we are grateful to the Council for their interest in the magazine. **Praxis** thanks Dale R. Corson, former Provost David C. Knapp, Dean Seznec of the Arts College, Ray Handlin, David Elam, Ron Loomis, Anna Geske, Professors Stan Bowman, James McConkey and Richard Polenberg for their advice and support.

Praxis is published twice yearly by undergraduates at Cornell University. Submissions of essays, reviews, short stories, photographs and artwork should be addressed to **Praxis**, Box 20, North Campus Union, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853. Manuscripts must be typewritten and double spaced. We regret that any submissions lacking a stamped, self-addressed envelope cannot be returned.

Supportive subscriptions: \$10.00 for one year, \$17.00 for two years. Library subscriptions: \$25.00 for one year. Send check or money order to **Praxis**, Box 20, North Campus Union, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853. Make checks payable to **Praxis**.

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ISSN 0161-0414

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cover

Cover photograph by **Daniel Polikoff**.
Cover design by **Howard S. L. Coale**.

interview

The Necessary Lie; 4 Joshua Davis
An Interview with Harold Brodkey

essays

A Tale of Two Minds: 15 John Missing
Law School vs. Graduate School

Learning and What Lies Ahead 23 Michael Sieverts

Visions and Images: 31 Diane Pietrucha
Two Photographers

The Politics of Rape 55 Cynthia A. McKeown

Carter and the Bureaucrats: 67 Steve Cohen
Notes on Urban Policy

volume 4 number 1
winter 1978

archives

Intellectual Preparedness 19 Dr. Hu Shih

fiction

The Last of the Small Time Finaglers 26 Michael Markson

Bashacoff 59 Neil Golightly

Night Sounds 65 Linda Lee

Sweeping the Path 75 Katie Riley

reviews

Nixon, Kissinger and the Politics of Illusion 61 Ken Pomeranz

photography

**Photographs by Two Cornell Students 35 Audrey S. Bernstein
Shirley Shung**

Sweeping The Path

Katie Riley

You can imagine how awful it was, but it was sort of weird too. Towards twilight with shadows beginning to pour out from under the trees. The shadows already stretched across both lanes of the highway, and where there weren't trees there was mist rising up from between the cacti. But the sun was still red in front of me. I'd been driving all day trying to reach San Cristóbal by night and I hadn't turned on my lights yet. I was trying to enjoy that time of day, you know, when the bright star rises in back of you making that part of the sky look dark and deep while the east is still orange. So I wasn't watching the sides of the road; I mean you don't expect people to come jumping out of the brush, come running down a hill onto the road that way, the way she did. You wouldn't be expecting Indians to be wandering around that time of day anyway. You'd think they'd be home, finishing their tortillas, or laying out their blankets or something. So I had one eye on the yellow lines and the other one on the orange sky, when she came down in front of me. I'd hit her before I knew it. God, I felt like it was me'd been hit.

I guess she practically flew, hit her forehead hard on the gravel anyway. At least that's what the doctor said. I was upset enough not to really know; all I saw was blood, rivers of it. It could of been her whole face for all I knew. And I couldn't tell much except she was Indian by her clothes. And her real long black hair was wild-like and already matted in the blood between her face and the gravel when I picked her up. I thought she might be real young, she was so light in my arms, like a feather, but stiff and jerking cause of the pain and she was moaning. And her eyes were open, but I swear they were like a wild animal's, like a deer's after you shoot it, but you come up to it and it's not dead yet, just felled. They were real brown and vacant like, like she couldn't see me, as if there was just so much hurt in between.

Well, to cut it short, I wrapped her poncho round her and laid her out in the back seat there. I brought her into the doctor in San Cristóbal, interrupted his dinner, but he seemed like a pretty nice guy, and got her stitched up and bandaged in no time. He x-rayed her; he gave her pain-killers, he did just about everything and I paid him for it straight out. But now here comes the really weird part. Because she was on those pain-killers (they really knock you out) and since he didn't know how long it'd be before she recovered from the shock, he didn't know how to find out who she was or how to get hold of her people. It's not as if Indian girls carried wallets with their name or address in it or anything. I didn't get to the hotel until pretty late and I admit by then I was about smashed. Not that I usually drink by myself, you know, but like I say, I was pretty upset. But by the time I got up next morning I heard that some people (at least five, they said) had broken into the clinic that night and stolen her out. I can't

imagine how they found her, but the windows were broken and she was gone. I would of liked to've stopped off right then and just sort of investigated the situation, but I had an appointment to keep with some friends. I couldn't afford not getting in touch with them at that point in time. Business matters. I felt bad but I had to leave.

His costume is black like the air.

The light is bright white. It is square like the doorway. It does not overflow the doorway.

The light can not touch her.

She realizes it is day.

She is inside, in the night.

Perhaps her head is off. Perhaps she is asleep but her head has come off in the night.

Her head hurts.

She realizes she is in bed.

She is asleep in her bed and it is day.

Perhaps she is dreaming it is night and now she will have to wake up, now the black man will wake her. Because it is day.

He is holding her wrist.

She realizes she is talking to him.

The sound comes from inside her.

"What are you doing?"

"Listening to your blood."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Lotriko."

"Have I asked you that before?"

"Yes. A few times."

"What you're doing is nonsense."

"Is it?"

He switches from her wrist to her elbow. From that elbow to the other wrist and then catches at the other elbow. His face is all listening. His eyes are wrinkled shut. His fingers are damp on her skin.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asks.

"What happened when?"

"Last night."

Last night. The night before this day? Night before day and then day before that night.

"No."

"It seems you were attacked. You don't remember?"

"Who attacked me?"

"A h'ik'al, a Blackman. Do you remember you were running away?"

"Running away from what?"

"Your father has put himself out for you, this night finding you to bring you back. But still your soul is broken away. Seven parts have escaped. I am here to help you to recapture them.

In the divine name of Jesus Christ my lord

How much my Father,

How much my Lord.

Holy KALVARYO, holy Father.

Holy KALVARYO, holy Mother.

Take me unto your presence,

Cure the sickness,

With one great pulsing

With one small pulsing."

His voice sounds soft and hollow. It comes up out of his black costume, it comes out

from his black hood.

Her soul? It is her soul has escaped? There was a whole soul before, yesterday, the day before the night before today, that a part of it has gotten loose? Parts of her soul have flown away from the rest of her? Broken from her body. Out through her head. Her soul. Where? Away from her.

Who is she? Was she?

She remembers, she was Maruch. Her name is Maruch.

She remembers, she was moaning, sometime. She hears herself, moaning. She sees herself, there, then, it's past. She, it was she, she was moaning.

Her hand touches the bed. Her feet rub themselves together between blanket and bed. She cannot feel the bed with her head. With her hand she touches her head, her forehead. She feels cloth, a bandage.

The man has gotten up; he moves away. He whispers with others so she cannot hear it. The others, they have been here all along, 10 or 12 of them. Then he moves out through the doorway. He turns bright and invisible in the light. As a shadow he grows small. Her head is pounding. She realizes, she has lifted it, straining to see.

A man sits down beside her. She looks at him.

"What are you doing here?"

It is her father. His face seems very wrinkled.

"What do you mean what am I doing here? I am your father. This is my house. Don't you see it?"

"Yes. I see. I see." She turns her face away. His voice is like bull frogs at night.

"Oh. So don't you act like that. We are worried enough. We were out all night searching for you. Shun wanted to come. I could not allow that. But we looked all over. Finally we heard you'd been taken to San Cristóbal. We heard a young girl was in the clinic there. We broke into the Ladino clinic and we brought you back on the mule. And now you are ungrateful. As always. As always, you are ungrateful. Why did you run away?"

Did she run away? She closes her eyes. Her father does not ask twice. Perhaps he thinks she sleeps.

Her soul is a deer. That is how she dreamed it, twice. Twice the deer came to her, to be inside of her. She kept the deer in her soul. When she woke it was still inside of her.

She told Tonik her dreams, and Tonik said, yes, that's how it is. She was a deer. So she asked Tonik what animal she dreamed of, what animal did she hold inside of her? But Tonik would not tell. Instead she told a story.

A boy was hunting rabbits when he saw a beautiful flower that he wanted to pick. Thunderbolt said the boy could not pick it unless he would be good to it. If he was afraid, he should not pick it, he said, because it would turn into a snake. But if he was not afraid, it would turn into a beautiful girl, Thunderbolt's daughter, and she would be his as long as he was good to her. Otherwise she would turn into a snake. The boy went away and came back again. He had to try it. He couldn't not try it and besides it was a very beautiful flower. There was a snake there when he came back, when he had crossed the fence where the flower was, a long, fat snake was waiting next to the flower. It told him not to be afraid though. It told him to go ahead. So he picked it and the beautiful girl went home with him and they were married and he kept the flower in a jar with water. Everything went well for a while. They were happy. She did some pretty miraculous things for him, like bringing him much more corn out of his field than was there. It appeared out of nowhere, more than was there. But then he turned mean. Out of the blue he started yelling at her. Maybe he was piling up debts or maybe he just got too drunk with his friends. But he slapped her and she yelled at him. In bed he turned his back on her, he stuck his butt out at her. And in the morning she had turned into a snake. By morning he woke up and she was not there. There was only a snake beside him, a long, fat snake. He got out fast. He went and made it up with

Thunderbolt so the girl came back. This time he was even nice to his mother-in-law, but then she died and his wife, she didn't want anymore children. That's understandable. The mother-in-law wasn't there to help her any more. The man got mad but he didn't show it. He took his gun. He said he would hunt deer. He said he wanted a deer. But before he could get one he fell in the ravine and died. Deer aren't easy to catch and then also he was mad. That is not a good way to go hunting, when you are mad. That is not a good way to catch anything. Though it was better he did that than that he slap his wife.

Tonik would not say much after that. She just sat there on her stool and held her chin in her hand like it was a chicken's neck. Her eyes looked sad not fierce, not at all like usual. Then she said that some stories end happier than others. But that Maruch should not be sad. No, she should not be since she was a deer and a deer is not easily caught. Perhaps Tonik was a snake.

That was before Shun started coming. First his father and mother and their petitioners and then him.

She feels so very weak. She feels as though she is pinned to the bed.

And her head hurts. It throbs and feels like it will fly off.

Perhaps she will eat charcoal.

Perhaps she is not a deer.

The deer escaped.

Her feet are cold. Even under the blanket, her feet feel cold. She should go to the fire.

The fire might be out. By now it might be night and the fire would be out. She might eat the charcoal there.

She opens her eyes. Men are coming through the light in the door, carrying jugs. It is day. The day before last night? Or the day before tonight? The fire is lit. Her father sits beside her.

Beside the fire at night her father told her about the charcoal cruncher. He said a man once was in bed with his wife. He turned over and his wife's head had popped off. It was down by the fire eating charcoal. She was eating charcoal. He put salt on her neck, but it would not stick, her head would not stick on to her neck. Instead it came towards him, the evil head. It bounced around like a dead chicken. It tried to stick between his shoulders, beside his own head. But he wouldn't let it. He climbed a pine tree. He threw pine cones at it. The youngest pine cones like green ears of maize. And then a deer came by and the head stuck to the deer and the deer ran away to the woods. That way the man was rid of the charcoal cruncher, and "to this day deer are very wild."

Perhaps she was no longer a deer. Perhaps she is a charcoal cruncher.

That was before her mother died. He quit telling stories so much after that. Especially that story. A pine tree fell on her mother's head. They called on the curer. Maruch and her sister helped her father's sister and her mother's sister grind the maize and make the tortillas. Her brothers were too little to even carry the candles. Maruch stayed with her mother all night in the hut since she had to stay in bed. She could not go to the shrines. She was too weak. Maruch prayed and to keep herself awake she played with the clay. Her mother's clay for bowls. She sat by the fire and she made a rabbit and then a crow and then a deer except it looked like a dog. Its antlers looked like ears. So she squashed it and she made some people. When they returned her father saw the clay people; they had dried by the fire; by the fire she had kept going so her mother would not be cold. He stepped on them; he crushed them with his heel. Then he slapped her. What did they hurt? He yelled at her. But what did she do? He asked her why she couldn't do what she was told instead of doing everything but.

She twists her head on her pillow. She feels a hand on her cheek. She opens her eyes: it is her father's hand. It was only because of a story you told. He used to tell about the

beginning of the world. Then the gods made clay people. First they made wood people. But the wood people could not move. So they crushed those. Then they made clay people and the clay people could move, but they had no souls. They had no souls to pray to the gods with. So the gods destroyed them too and made people out of maize and that is what people are today. At least until they get into too much trouble; then the gods will destroy them too. Maybe he thought she was wanting to be made out of clay. Or it could be he thought she was trying to do witchcraft for her mother.

Her father looks at her. She looks back but inside she feels like trembling. She used to feel like that when Shun came. When Shun used to come, every other week, she had to sit in the corner, out of the light. She had nothing to say. She did not know what to say to him. Besides her father took care of that. He made Shun's mother laugh and Shun. Even so her father would look at her, looking when no one else noticed, just like that he looked into her corner as though he could see her trembling.

She closes her eyes.

When her mother didn't get any better he took her to the Ladino doctor in town. Because the shaman took his time and did not cure her he took her to the doctor. He put her on the mule his brother leant him. Maruch stood in the doorway and watched her mother go. She was slumped over the mule's neck; her head wrapped in yellow cloth looked like an overgrown squash. It was after she came back from the Ladino doctor that she died. He said then he would never take any of them to a doctor again. He said it was the gods punishing him. He hadn't trusted them. He should have known when the chicken just flopped down dead when the shaman popped its head off. He should have known not to fight it. The Lord had decided for her to die when the dead chicken fell with its neck towards her feet.

She smells laurel. She can smell geraniums. They have brought the plants. The sweepers have been out to the mountains and they have brought back the sacred water in the jugs. She remembers she saw them come in. They have set up the table at the foot of her bed and they have put the plants there and the maize and the pine branches. They have brought two black chickens. She knows the ceremony. Sweepers are called sweepers because they sweep out the old pine needles and spread out green ones. They make way for the new ceremony the same way Venus sweeps the way for the new sun each morning. She knows the ceremonies.

She was at the clinic last night though. That's what he said. Before this she was there, where he said he'd never let them go. How did she get there? How did it happen?

She cannot remember yesterday. She remembers thinking. She remembers deciding. Something. But was that yesterday? It seems a long time ago, like in a story.

Her sister and her father's sister, and his sister-in-law are by the fire, grinding the maize, patting the tortillas, baking them. That smell is different from the cooked chicken smell and the live chicken smell and the flowers. Mostly there is the laurel smell. Besides the flowers through the house smells like always.

She knows the sweepers. She looks at their faces as they bring the boards to build the small corral around her bed, the corral that is to catch and hold the deer, the deer that is her soul. They are her father's father, his two brothers, his brother-in-law. She looks at them one by one, but they avoid her eyes. They wind the wood around her until finally she can only see out through strips in between the planks, like looking through the bars at the jail. Only that at her feet there is a wide space, the exit, the entrance. It is made of two pine branches bent towards each other and tied. They make a smooth arch like a rainbow. She lets her eyes travel up one bough, across and down the other bough. The arch frames the light that has moved closer now towards the hut door. The sunlight has begun to reach inwards, into the night of the hut. She is able to watch it through the bowed branches. Her night is their day. While she lies here, they work out there. As they see the sunlight now, she waits in darkness.

Tonik told her the story of the Sweeper of the Path. She said that the rising star,

Venus, which is also called the Sweeper of the Path, is a Chamulan girl who rises early to sweep the path that the sun travels after. Tonik said the people did not believe this. The Chamulan girl said that she is the star Venus, that she sweeps the house at dawn and that she continues through the day until she is the evening star at night sweeping the way for the sun into the ocean at the end of the sky, the ocean which dries up when he comes and the salt fishes that are at the market in San Cristóbal are left dry on the sand to be gathered by the men from the market at night, that's why they are salty because the ocean is salty. The Chamulan girl said the sun turns the sky red where she sweeps the way. The dust rises up when she sweeps the dry ocean and through the dust the sun shines red. That is the monkey's sun. But the people all laughed. They wanted to know how an awful ugly black Chamulan girl could look like the bright lovely red star. So they jeered at her and she heard. But all she said was that it was her job: "I sweep because that is my job. That's what I do. I haven't any other work. That is what my work is. That's why I am a star. I sweep Our Lord's path. It isn't just anyone's path. It is the Holy Sun's." Since she heard them, since she replied to their mocking, they had to believe she was the star. That is how Tonik told it. And besides, anyone who has a job, if the job is given to you, people do not laugh. If you think it up yourself you will be scolded. The Lord did not scold her. He must have given her the job. And so they should not have laughed.

Besides she saw a Chamulan girl in San Cristóbal at the festival. Her father took them every year. But last year she saw a Chamulan girl up close attacked by a Blackman. He was from Zinacantan but he was dressed up as a h'ik'al with his face charcoaled black. The Chamulan girl was not black or ugly. But he lifted her skirt and tried to get under it. Then he made gobbledy noises as though he would eat her. The eyes of the girl were opened so wide. She could not move and she stood without saying anything, like Maruch when Shun used to visit, and then the girl turned all of a sudden and ran so quickly.

When her father saw Maruch watching the Chamulan girl he turned to her. He told her that he had warned her. If she went out alone, if she went far from the hut during the day and particularly at night or when it was unsafe, that is at the times each month that she bled. If she was not careful when she was softening the maize for atole or working her clay. That is what would happen. He had told her before. He had described the h'ik'al to her before. So then she saw for herself at the festival last year.

But that didn't stop her. In fact she went more. Because what she did when she went out, she did not flirt with boys like her father accused her. She visited Tonik. Tonik had three daughters but she welcomed Maruch because her daughters were all grown, they were all married with daughters of their own. The way they first met, Maruch was with her sister at the well with the six tall pine trees when Tonik approached them. It was just at the start of the dry season, so that Tonik's wet season well had just dried up. She came with others from her other well and since she had heard that their mother had just died she tried to talk to them. Maruch's sister who was older ignored Tonik but Maruch could not resist. It is hard to say quite how it happened, but soon Maruch was at Tonik's hut as often as she could. And whatever she was doing, grinding maize or carrying firewood or working her little plot of land since her husband had left her, Maruch would help without asking. And instead of scolding her, Tonik would tell her a story. After they finished work they would come back to the hut. Tonik sat on her stool; Maruch sat on the step in front of the door. It would be cool in the shade. The sun in the afternoon was caught by the thatched roof and it would shine down in front of their feet making a sharp point of shadow. Tonik would stretch her legs out under her long black skirt and maybe slap her thighs and laugh because of the work they had done and because they were through. Then she would begin. She had been everywhere. She had been a servant in San Cristóbal and she had even been to the United States because she worked sometimes for the white people who came here on

some business or other to ask nosey questions and questions that made no sense. It was because Tonik spoke more Spanish than most men since she had lived in San Cristóbal she said that the Americans came to her and they paid her well.

Maruch liked these stories but she also liked to hear the ones from long ago because Tonik told them differently than her father. Tonik told the story of the charcoal cruncher, but she said it was the husband not the wife whose head came off and ate charcoal. It was the wife who had to go to tell her brother and her commadre who didn't believe her and she had to bring them back with her to her hut so then they would see for themselves. At night her husband's head crunching charcoals at the cold hearth.

Maruch wonders where is Tonik. At her hut of course. Maruch's father would never allow her to come here. Maruch had asked if she got married if Tonik could be her embracer, but her father said he already had them picked out. He was very mad. He told her it was not her business.

The light from the sun has moved across the threshold. It has even climbed the table at the foot of her bed. Soon it will be under her chin and her eyes will be dazzled, overwhelmed. She closes her eyes inside the still darkness. The noises from the house, she can pick them out. Her father's voice. Her sister still slapping tortillas. The clucking of the tied black chickens and the untied red ones. Bare feet flapping over the hard earth floor. There must be still many people crowded into the small hut, doing things, doing whatever her father tells them, but it is all muffled. Outside from the compound yard she can hear the midafternoon noises, men laughing, childrens' voices playing. Men's voices even, right outside the door. Not inside but right outside, laughing and talking so she can hear. She realizes they are talking about her.

Why did she run away?

She was afraid to get married.

She did not want him.

Her soul is just too hot.

Was she really raped?

That's what they say.

They say she's been asking for it.

The Black-man got her. You know his is two meters long. Ha-ha.

You'd think it would be better to be married. Ha-ha.

Shhhh!

Shhhh!

She hears then only the muttering. Out of hearing they still talk. She opens her eyes but she cannot hear what they say anymore. Even so she heard that much. The sun has reached her face. At the edge of the top of the door she can see growing the bright rim of his face. Brighter, dazzling. Oh! She grips her eyes shut. On the inside of her eyes she sees red, brilliant, a disc of red.

Inside the hut seems muted. The fire crackles. She listens and it talks to her. Spps. Spps. She smells flowers. She smells the cooking. The hot beans. No hurry. No rush. Spps. Spps.

As she wakes again and this time she realizes she is waking, she says, "Now I am waking." She sees the thatch ceiling. She sees the door beyond her feet and the hut around her. She recognizes she is waking up inside the hut inside the corral. The door is darker so it is night. She slept through the sunset and now it is night, the night after the day that was so horrible that came after the night that something happened. It seems a long time since she woke up knowing that she had been asleep and now she is awake. For all she knew it could have been the beginning of the world and they might have been clay people. But now she remembers.

Her sister is sitting beside her. She is offering her water. She is offering her a tortilla

and beans through the crack between the planks. But Maruch does not take them. She does not feel hungry.

She remembers how her head was hurting. How it was so light and yet heavy, how she thought it might have come off.

"The curer is coming. He will be here soon. You ought to eat. You will be too weak."

Maruch turns her face away. "Why won't father talk to me?"

"He's been trying to. But you've been somewhere else. You've been hard to talk to. He's been frightened."

He would be right to be mad. After all Shun gave. Father demanded so much and Shun kept coming and giving in. So much. The first time when they forced their way into the house, long before the sun rises, Father was so mad. Maybe because he was drunk as well, he had been out drinking the night before so he was still drunk. But it seemed like he was mad also just because they were there. He said, "She's no good, but she's all I have. Since her mother died. Since the older sister is married. I need her here." He stayed mad a long time and she stayed in the corner. He had not been that way for her sister when her sister's husband came to court her. Maruch kept in the dark corner. Finally he accepted the rum though. Finally he drank the rum they brought, but not until they promised that Shun would move in with him so Maruch could stay with her Father. That way she could care for both of them.

That did not seem so bad for her. It was not that that made her decide to go. She knew that's why her father was mad though, he had been so mad before and then had given in. She had heard that other fathers did this and they were just joking. But he seemed really mad. So now he would be mad again. That and because Shun had been coming two years now bringing rum (good rum) and fruit and it had all been eaten and he could not have payed Shun back if Maruch ran away, if she refused to be married. And after that first morning they kept complimenting her. Her father and Shun's parents. After that first morning when he said she was worthless, since then when they came over all they talked about was how wonderful she was, how beautiful and clean and what a good cook. Talking as though she wasn't there, as if she was supposed to believe them now when he had been telling her all the time how lazy she was and careless and never had dinner when it was supposed to be. What was she supposed to think? She could not forget what he used to say. But here these people were saying how wonderful.

So it is hard to say why she tried to refuse. She was not sure why. But she had decided. Hard now to remember. It was yesterday. She decided she had to leave. Right then, she couldn't wait. She would go to San Cristóbal. Like Tonik she wanted to try her luck. She remembers that she thought she would like just for once to stand in the market place alone, to know she knew no one, to know her father would not be calling her. There would be no place to call her to.

"He's coming." A man ducks in through the door. "The shaman's come." The incense is lit.

The curer appears in the doorway, a shade in the half-light. The staff under his arm points back towards a brightening star. The people in the house one by one kneel before him to be released. Even Maruch is helped out of bed onto her knees. The back of his hand is cold on her forehead. He kneels on the reed mat before the table. His voice is low but the room is silent. Outside are the noises.

"In the divine name of Jesus Christ my Lord

So much my father,

So much my Lord,

I beseech your divine pardon,

I beg your divine forgiveness,

Will you stand up,

Will you stand firm,

Behind,
Beside,
Your sons,
Your children,
Your flowers,
Your sprouts,
Who have sickness,
Who have pain,
Who are suffering,
Who are miserable,
At dusk,
At dawn,
They are no longer well,
They are no longer healthy,
For how long will they not receive,
For how long will they not possess,
Your beautiful sunbeams,
Your beautiful shade."

The incense and the flowers on the table, other smells are drowned. The hut smells are gone. She watches his hands travel over the red flowers and the green leaves, the white candles with their wicks pointing to where sun rises. His hands travel over them, fluttering, stopping. He places the green leaves over the red flowers, hides the hot inside the cool. The white candles flicker. The hot soul must be hidden. The prematurely hot soul of a child must be hidden. It must be cooled. She is too hot too soon. That is the way to burn out too soon. She does not want to die so soon. Why does she look for death so young? Why was she looking to die? The people ask themselves. The people are asking.

One by one they approach. They kneel at the table to pray before the candles and the plants. Out loud they pray. Words from the gods through their souls out to the gods again. The words. She kneels. Her words are not inspired. She has heard others say them. Her mother. She has learned them; but she has never said them. The shaman holds the clay cup of incense burning, close beside her. The large fire on which the bath water boils and the two candles by the altar light the hut. Very light. It is night but everyone has joined in the day-like night. The people wait. Then the words begin to fall out of her throat. Her voice? It sounds like through a hollow log.

"In the divine name of God my Lord,
Who is thought,
Who is measurement,
Will you stand up in holiness,
Will you stand firmly in holiness,
Behind me,
Beside me;
If there is a passing by,
If there is a respite from
Sickness,
From death,
From illness,
From pain,
See how I suffer
See how I am weak,
In one afternoon,
In one morning,
No longer is guarded my lowly back,

No longer is protected my lowly side.

The women bathe her; they bring her clean clothes. Soaproot smells. They pass the POX. The liquor burns her throat. Again and then again. The bottle is passed.

The Shaman slits the chicken's throat. He lets the blood flow into a bowl. He pours the POX in that cools it. But in the stomach keeps the blood warm. He paints a cross on Maruch's forehead and a double cross on each forearm. Then he sips the blood and POX. Maruch sips it. Everyone drinks from the bowl once. He lights the candles. One by one they take a candle. Even her little brothers, old enough to carry candles now. They leave.

First there are the churches. San Lorenzo ... Esquipulas ... San Sebastián. The cool dark insides. The hollow-sounding prayers before the man limp on the cross. On their knees:

"In the divine name of Jesus Christ my Lord

So much my father,

So much my Lord,

I beseech your divine pardon,

I beg your divine forgiveness,

Divine KALVARYO, divine Father,

KALVARYO, divine Mother,

Holy KALVARYO holy ancient ones,

Holy KALVARYO holy yellow ones,

Holy seas,

Holy ancient ones,

Holy gathering-place,

Holy meeting-place,

Holy place of recovery,

Holy place of rest.

I shall visit your shrines a little,

I shall entrust my soul to you a little,

To your feet,

To your hands,

For your sons,

For your children,

For your flowers,

For your sprouts,

For these I beseech divine pardon,

For these I beg divine forgiveness."

Then.

Up into the mountains they march. In her fresh washed clothes they lead her. On either side, two men, her father and his brother. One takes each arm. They practically carry her. She feels so weak. On the narrow places in the path her father picks her up, he carries her. She tries to watch, she tries to follow the track, to know where her father will put his next foot, to see where he will take her. But her stiffness makes him stumble. And besides she is too weak. She relaxes in his arms. She lets herself be carried.

The shrines. San Kixtoval ... Muxul Viz ... Sisil Viz ... Kalvyro. They circle the town from on high, from mountain top to mountain top. She watches the village below. A full moon is lighting it. She sees the small huddled forms cut out from the trees. She feels their march drawing closed around it. Linking the lit candles left to burn on each mountaintop with the rising and falling path they march. At KALVARYO he puts her down in front of the crosses. After decorating it with the flowers, the pines, and lighting the candles, the incense, they pass on. (She is left to kneel.) The candles burn

by the crosses and the upright pine bough, which stands in the shelter of an earth wall. She kneels. She feels the pebbly ground with her cold hands and her head bows. Slowly until her chin rests on her chest. She sees the light from the candles flickering on the ground and her knees. The wind in the trees cannot put it out. But out there the wind is terrific.

They will return soon, with tortillas and cold chicken. But not yet. For just now she is alone. For now the wind howls and her stomach growls. Her head bows. Her back bends. The bandage hits the ground. Her forehead. She jerks back up, her spine stiff. Aah! So she looks up into the sky, the stars. The moon is set.

"I come kneeling, then,
I come bowing low
At your lordly side,
At your lordly front,
Receive this, and let me step,
Let me walk
To the descents of your feet,
To the descents of your hands.

If you will accept this graciously,
If you will think well of me,
This lowly little bit,
This humble amount,
These four lowly pine branches
These four lowly candles,
From your daughter
From your child,
This humble bit of incense,
This humble bit of smoke,
From your daughters
From your children
For this I beseech divine pardon
For this I beg divine forgiveness."

She sees her. Her mother sits weaving. She does not speak. She simply sits weaving. Maruch watches. The threads switch back and forth. Every other one goes up and down, then down and up. She watches her mother's hands move. One unrolls the wool, one works the shaft. Back and forth. Up and down. Her eyes trace the cross. Up and down. Back and forth. Behind the tip of the cross the morning star rises. Bright red to sweep the path. The sun will rise now finally. Day will be day now. Night will not.

You remember that girl I hit that time on the Pan American Highway. Well, on the way back I decided to go and find out about her. I mostly just wanted to see if she was ok, if I could. So I started asking around, around the spot where I hit her in the direction she'd been running from. And, well, I came to this little village where they'd heard of her. At least they said there'd been a girl there who'd been hit in the head not too long ago. Only they weren't saying she'd been hit by a car. The guy I was talking to, he said she'd been raped and attacked by a black man and that that's how she got cut on the forehead. He said she'd been running away from getting married to this fellow her father had said she should marry and so God was punishing her. The way I knew it was her though, he said they'd had to steal her away from the hospital in town where the black man took her. Now I'm no black man and I certainly did not rape that girl, but I wasn't going to interfere. So I asked him how he knew that; he said it was by divination. He acted pretty reluctant to tell me these things, but I was feeding him pesos and he admitted that he was the shaman, that he had read it in her blood. So I

asked him what happened then and he said he performed a curing ceremony. When I asked him what that was he explained real patiently (I guess he's used to telling it to curious Americans who come through asking) that that is what they do when people have lost their souls, it's their way of asking God to give it back. So he had to perform a curing ceremony on her. I asked him what that meant he did and he gave me a pretty long story about what they do and why. But mostly it sounds like they just dragged the girl around to all these mountaintops that they say are sacred places, prayed a lot, burnt a lot of incense and then brought her home. Then they sacrificed a chicken, took its head off and threw it on the girls bed. You can just imagine her lying in bed with a dead chicken flouncing around on top of her. Well, supposedly the more the chicken bounces the better. If it bounces a lot and then lands with its head pointed towards the east, towards where the sun rises the guy said, she'd live, otherwise her soul would be gone for good. Well the chicken bounced around an awful lot; I guess the girl's got a lot of spunk in her, and then it landed just right so now she's alive. She had to stay around the house for a few weeks after that I guess with people watching her so, while she was weak, her soul wouldn't get away again, but then she was pretty much better all in all. This probably sounds pretty weird, but when I was sitting there with that old guy, just listening, I felt like he was weaving that story right around me, so I was caught and I couldn't get up. He said her soul had been too hot for such a young girl, running away like that. He said for old people like him it was ok, a hot soul just kind of made him stronger. But he said inside a young girl it would just break her open, like a, like an overripe ear of maize, that's how he put it. She would break open and her soul would run away and leave her too soon, much too soon. I guess that means she would die.

He told me that as soon as she was well she got married, that she was living now with her husband in her father's house and he pointed it out to me. Now I didn't plan to butt in on her. I'd just about figured that the Indian's costumbres were there own and that Ladinos have probably done about enough interfering. But I was curious, you know, I just wanted to see her. I guess it was mostly for myself by that time you know. I'm sure it sounds strange, but it's made me think a lot, all of this. And I think I just needed to see her.

So I came to this kind of yard with about three houses around it and closed in by some fences, with a lot of chickens running around and a mule. So I went up to her house and of course there was no door, only a cross in front. There were crosses in front of all the houses, as though they were really Catholics or something. But I called into the doorway cause there was no one around right there. And she came out.

It seemed like she was really beautiful, Indian woman style. I mean the scar was pretty bad on her forehead, but for some reason it didn't matter or even somehow it added to her. I can't say how. So she stood there. And I stood there. I don't know it's crazy but I guess I expected her to recognize me. Of course she didn't.

I stuck my hand in my pocket and took out some money, I don't know how much. I tried to give it to her but she just backed away. I wanted to say something, but I figured, a woman, she wouldn't understand Spanish. It's probably just as well. I think I would have tried to tell her if I could have. Right then I probably would have tried to make her understand. So it's good I couldn't try. I just tried to put the money in her hand. I couldn't catch her hand. She wouldn't let me. But I caught her looking into my eyes with those same brown eyes only this time they were trying to understand. I caught them trying to understand. Only she couldn't take the money. So I left.

I'm glad now though. You'll probably think I'm a little cracked cause I care so much. I'm glad though that I saw her, and I'm glad she couldn't take the money. It's good that she's not just like the way we'd think all Indian women are, that she wouldn't take money from just anyone without knowing for what. □