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Naked Songs

Ortuoste de Jesus

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Naked Songs

ORTUOSTE DE JESUS

IT hits you—this thinking back, while you're sitting there listening to the rain outside try to wash away the packed sod sins of the earth with all that frenzy of drumming on the rooftops, rushing in the gutters and chasing people and stray dogs out of the streets and into open doorways, store fronts and under awnings where they stand, all shoulderless and bland-eyed, staring weightlessly at something they don't see and thinking about things they don't know they're thinking about, until, exhausted by its own diligence, the rain gives up and abandons the futile task. It hits you like that—the rain outside asserting its impetuous rhapsody above the wet flourish of irreverent horns and the grievous humor of doughty peddlers driven indoors spitting oaths, and you inside looking out but not really seeing because actually you're looking in, into a corridor where you see the minutes, hours, days, months and years behind you, niched like relics along the walls. It belongs to you, this long, exitless corridor and its mute, still frieze, and you know every little spider there, every little cobweb once spun from taffy dreams and now hanging limp as a sigh on the crevices, dents, nicks and chips on the walls all the way back to where it begins—if you know where it begins. Some people don't know, and they stand there, cross-armed along the rim of the race tracks, getting sprayed with gasoline rainbow and mud, thinking about nothing. But I do. Mine begins with Sebastian.

Sebastian. It has a poignant sting, that name. I whisper it all the time, and each time my tongue curls up against my

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teeth, refusing to lose the soundless end of the refrain for that is all it is: a sigh in the end, no more than a soft, humble echo in the throat, and soon even that will be no more. So I say it over and over again to myself, to my pillow, to the walls, up the ceiling, out the window through the grills, on top of the shrill cricket cantata at dusk, after which I come around back to the middle of the room and I drink to it and after a while, I'll need to say it again—very softly for that's how It should be said: *Se-bahs-tian-n*. It is not a name you can shout nor utter unless you are tender-hearted and compassionate, good and strong, and you forgive your fellowmen of the things you cannot forget. That, too, is Sebastian... ah, but what is not Sebastian? Even ugliness and all things unlovely is his absence. He is a forgetting you do not forget, a leaving that takes you with it; roaming through nights of far sounds of harps and philandering breezes and other things just as beautiful and perfidious that spin around you until you sink into that warm, sweet drowse that laps at your body and beats tomtoms on your temples and makes you exult while you drown, while your arms float out to meet its own sunset because your body has gone away, away to an abysmal bed where the shadows weave and dance over you like the whisperous fingers of a shaman. That is where you find yourself later: bathed, washed, naked and unbound.

Oh, I think about other things too... I go to church and I work. I brood over the draftboards of Contemporary Decorators, Inc., slaving grounds for the martyrs of the new art. That's what we think of ourselves at Contemporary—martyrs of the new flawless lines and neuter angles, strokes and drips that threaten the soul and press on the senses. I do not resent it when I ache with mind and body as I scheme, plot and disguise in order to qualify the sham pageantry of the rich, their status symbols, their cocktail lounges where they breed ulcers like fighting cocks, their calligraphied, neurotic gardens, their contemporary fetishes. They have crass, philistine words for it all, taken off the coated pages of magazines: streamlined, fluid, functional, artistic... but they don't fool me. They know nothing about it except how much it costs! But why should I whimper. I do not. On late after-

noons, I forget them, out in the streets where I watch faces in the buses, listen to the street songs of survival of little boys and beggars and the crying laughter of girls standing by their doorways, waiting patiently, resignedly, for doom to come. But even while I watch and frown and listen and shrug my shoulders, I sing of Sebastian. . . No! I do not sing of Sebastian. I hum because I can only hum now. Once I sang of him to a six stringed guitar and would not stop even when the hawk-vultures heard and descended on me with a tremendous flapping of wings, shrill cries and loud blasphemy. I counted four of them. They tore the tale from my throat and flung my guitar away to a corner where it moaned out its broken soul. They only left when I had been made mute—mute of Sebastian. But who could be made mute of Sebastian? To this day, I still hum of him here in my underground.

It is damp here and soggy in my little cavity in the earth but I have Momza who was stolen from a dark pocket in the blinking red lights and smuggled to me by a sailor—a Greek. "Take her," he said as he tried to unwrap himself from a lamp post. "I don't know where I got her." He was quite drunk and still thirsty. He squinted at the early sun and shook his head palsiedly. "Last night. . . over there. . ." I did not care to follow the direction his thumb gave. I knew it led to nowhere, for where do drunken sailors come from in the early morning? And so, that is what Momza is: a bastard gift from a gift-bearing Greek who suddenly found shame waiting in the sunlight the morning after, but I took her home and christened her with coffee and raindrops and after I had sat her down, lit her, wrenched her switch chain and threw it out among the lily pads in the pool, I gave her a legacy. I gave her a face that held no infamy in spite of her name. Momza: bastard. "Be proud of it," I said. It is the only intentional name in this whole universe where every other face is romantic and every name is a glut. It is your name, Momza, and nobody else's." I drained my coffee mug. "Let's live in peace."

We live in peace, a peace that is always here. You don't have to close your eyes and wait to have it. When a train rumbles by a half mile due north where the tracks run away

to the happy hills, there is a small, indistinct earth-snore but it is a gentle earth-snore, with no sternness, that they do not hear upstairs. Upstairs, they only hear—and they grit their teeth when they do — the whistle and the scream, the angry clamor and the bells clanging like the stirrups of the apocalypse scattering plague. Upstairs my mother pricks and my father snarls and their children snub. They clink their silver when they eat to drown out the radio and they fight over the bathroom in the mornings and they sulk for want of peace. But I have no more room here to share with any of them. It's all filled up, every space, with Momza and me and peace. We sing every now and then; we clap our hands and release an opiate spiritual or we sob to the lament of a blues . . . "Oh let me go, Mister, let me go. . ." It would seize us and fold us into the unrest until we disappear, this soul song . . . this plea! But it is all a fantasy; it ends, and after the last murmur I am always alone. I have clapped alone, sobbed alone, strummed alone for Momza can only smile. That's all she can do. Oh, that she could clap and sob and strum with me! That she weren't just what she is . . . nothing but a lamp, a big red lamp sitting there uncomplaining, and smiling from her haunches like a squat, much travailed woman who must have smiled through her travails too. No rest for you, friend. I am afraid of the dark for even the day has shadows more terrible than the shades of the night. So Momza must beam on, day and night, my beacon light fed with half the rent for my burrow. I fold bills into an envelope and march upstairs every month to "contribute to the family finances," my mother says. It's a more decent phrase than I could have said. She would tuck the envelope under her make-up box without counting the money because she has such decencies, such proprieties. "You wouldn't have to give me as much," she'd say, "...if you'd switch that big lamp off."

"I can't," I'd tell her. "There's no switch."

"Well, my goodness!" she'd screech past me to the cringing trees outside, curling their leaves away from the onslaught of hellfire. "Get a switch! or a smaller lamp with a switch! My goodness, it's not the world's greatest problem!" She's a

very nervous woman—my mother. “Your father thinks it’s barbaric living down there in that... hole down there. We don’t live under houses here. I mean, when we can afford better, more decent rooms. Why, none of the neighbor’s children live in tobacco holds. *Madre de Dios!* I keep thinking maybe...”

You can see I have to run away, which I do. I run and I keep running until all I can hear is my own breath panting after me and after catching up, turning into a hum. And once again, there is Sebastian to sing about out there where no one can hear me; to roll around in my mouth, to lick on my lips and feel on my cheeks and from wherever I may have run away to, I come to Momza and home. To this home that is like none other. I’ve preened on that thought. It is like none other. It has so much remembering in it, so much soul in it; for that I would not yield to anyone. Some people have homes that they come to life in and die in and leave behind for their children to swear by, but I have this home that speaks to me and shares with me a bosom. I have these walls: four alfresco walls, green and blue with some specie of weed and vine that have sprouted from my fingers when, on the heat, they cried to create things that live and tell tales of the sun glistening on their sides and on their chlorophyll veins, hold such awesome secrets as only bugs and bees know about, the brotherhood of love and death. Four live, sylvan walls and their deep-tinged forest that surge with elemental life, that wave ... I swear! I’ve seen them wave. Once a curious breeze pushed in through the grills of my lone, high window and ruffled the tender twigs as it sniffed around my corners like a little street wandering about in God’s meadow with its fingers tucked into its mouth. It only stayed for a little while. Its mother, the dank and ill humidity outside, sucked it back through the grills. “Get away,” it scolded. “Get away from their strange smells.”

I snatched a scarf and flailed. “Out!” I screamed. “Go away and leave us without smells.” For it is true, there is a smell here, a certain aroma that spills no history, no evolution. I have thought once or twice that it may have settled here

from the tobacco that once filled this room to the rafters but no, this is not a smell of prosaic tobacco. This is a curious aroma I offer no explanation of. It blends with the pungent peace, mellow as the smile of angels and spiky as the thorns in Herod's garden, at once sweet and bitter—like the pith of man. It has soothed me, assured me, oppressed me. I cannot say how many times... once, twice, a hundred times, five thousand times! yet I cannot hate it. I can not even think of its not being here; faint on the hangings, running to and fro, barking like a little cocker spaniel, whipping past me and rushing back with an acute scent of lac and gall, resin and ambergris and I do not know what other soft and shadowy secrets. I could not lose it. I would not for if I did, who could tell what horrors of the lost it must be? Asphyxia perhaps. Suffocation! I would leave at once and wander along the fringes of doors and exits out there where madness roams the streets until another smell calls me in and thus, home. But I do not fool myself. There is no other aroma like this. It is a man smell—a good and evil smell. It wedds well into the fragrance of coffee brewed black as sin, into the infirmity of whispers when Perlita and her asthmatic prostrations are here. It mates with the rhythm of the pour when the rains come and when silence congeals deafeningly in the wee hours, it breaths a salve on me and strokes my hair... strokes my hair! I quiver to say so, for when it does, when it runs those browsing fingers through my sweat-drenched hair, I am lost... drugged, my body shot through with this craving to reach out and with my own fingers, stroke too, some pain away, any pain; to heal a wound as if I were God, to blow coolness out of my own fever; on some seared skin, to assure, assuage, give rest, release doves of peace and forgiveness, to do all the gloried goodness I can think of. But I lie there, very ill and let those stroking fingers taunt me to listen again to the Omar's voice that I had once sworn away to regions of fire and ashes. "Forgive," I tell myself and that's what I do. I forgive all the Omar-voiced charlatans born into this world to be damned by virgins and chaste wives as they leave their doorsteps, scalded by the night before but eager again to set fire to the morning before them. But there are bars on windows and bolts on

doors and I cannot banish them. I strain from this proscription. I want to fly out, away, all over the earth, to pour on the gravid terrain everything beautiful and godsent because although I have toasted to gall and wormwood and lynched with my thoughts every woman born, I am undone by fingers stroking my hair. I cannot hate this man smell.

We have fought, maybe as people would fight if they lived together in one bomb shelter with no means nor desire to escape from each other. Once it was over Lito. It had to be Lito because he was like that and at one time or another, all women whether pristine or putrid, lush or juiceless have fought with their mothers and their consciences over him. He was the legitimate son of the devil but he wore white socks—white as bridal lilies, all the time. They gave him a college-boy freshness that pleaded and imposed on women who have kneeled endlessly and patiently in lengthy appeals for deliverance from plebian maidenhood, for behold: the Lord sent them Lito to make them happy. I looked up one night on the second hour of overtime, and there he was, with a fresh scratch on his cheek, standing in front of my draftboard and flicking ashes on the roughs. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm asking because it's very late. Very late, did you know that?"

How was one to ignore a question like that? I glanced briefly at his contriving white socks. "I'm making more money," I told him and thereby shocked him into the new omelet chair sample by Maro, who swore on its appeal.

"Save me from the non-proletarian, the mammon-worshippers," Lito prayed. "Save me from women who yearn to earn more than I do so that they can pay my bills for me," he entreated. "Are you listening?"

I should have left, I knew. I should have packed my folders and run home but I did not because in truth, I had no desire to. That is the memory I have of it... Lito sitting there, just sitting there with his legs hooked over the side of Maro's ideal and making me feel airy, deliciously away from safety and its frustrations. He looked, to me, like pleasure, like a high-color festivity, like fireworks. At length, he rubbed

the cigarette out on the rim of the urn and dropped it in. "What's that?" he inquired.

"Mrs. Juan's bathroom."

"Mrs. Who's *what*?" He squeezed his right cheek up against his eye and looked at me as if I had just said something in Swahili.

"Bathroom," I said as plaintively as I could manage. "Mrs. Juan's. See, she didn't like the first one."

"Ah-h! she didn't like the first one!" Lito howled with obvious distaste. "What makes you think she'll like that one? Take it from me, baby, she won't. She'll come up here and want another one done with a built-in fishpond this time, I bet on it. She's nuts! Oh God, I don't know why that husband of hers puts up with her."

I was going to say something but Lito waved me aside. "You know what she did to that Swedish bar... Danish bar... whatever you call that crazy bar she had us draw up for her?"

I shook my head.

"She killed it!" Lito shot forward on the chair. "She had it done in wrought iron by some guys from some alley and she poured red paint on it. I tell you, Maro almost had a nervous breakdown over it. God! You should see it. You'd get sick on her rug." He squeezed both cheeks up against his eyes wrinkling the livid scratch down the side of his face. It made him look beautiful. "Red paint! I swear I haven't seen anything like it. It was all beautiful lines and planes and she slaps red paint on it!"

I found I had to sympathize. "That's awful," I said. "What did she do a thing like that for?"

"What for!" Lito raged. "I don't know what for!" He lit another cigarette and waved it around. "How am I to know what for? She's nuts, didn't I tell you that? She's way out there. She thinks she knows art... art! She has these chirpy women with her all the time and they talk about art. Ugh,

I refuse to think about it. The last time I was at her house, they were going to put up a garden show of landscape painting that they did themselves and... they were asking me to... ah-h what's the use? She's crazy. I guess she figures she wants a new kind of Swedish bar. Nothing's coming out of that bloody bar except tomato juice, maybe."

That's how words go with Lito; frantic and sharp but weightless as headache flashes. It appealed to me—the way a child's tantrums appealed to me. The helplessness of it. I joined him in laughter briefly, that is, he howled some more and I smirked politely, in effect to agree that Mrs. Juan was indeed nuts as everybody is, except Sebastian. Then Lito demanded to know why I was sweating over another one of that woman's lunacies. I said I had to if I wanted to meet the deadline, for, indeed, the current fate of the Design Dept. rested on Mrs. Juan's bathroom. He made a face. "Tell me," he said. "When you're through, how many days would you give us to install it in her highness' royal palace? A couple of days? Twenty-four hours? Would a couple of hours' allowance be permissible for bathtub installation? After all, we still have to put in a completely furnished fishpond."

"Oh," I shrugged. "You can take all the time you want. The commission is mine."

"Fink!" Lito said dispassionately. "Fink, that's what you are! But don't be smug about it. Someday Designs will burn up in fire and hail and you will all roast with your commissions."

I did not blame Lito. He belonged to Production. He was Lord Chesterfield of the shop two flights down where his vassals look up to us at Designs with their onion eyes peeled to fumigation point because they hate us—the smart ones who dreamed up the shapes that draw the sweat out of their deadline-pursued brows and rub the callouses into their palms and cheat them out of the commissions, but we never shed tears over them. At Contemporary, there are diverse races and they stalk each other with such timely dedication and live up to its name.

"Give them a pre-fab and forget it," Lito said. "They won't know the difference. After all, they really never know anything about all these things we're killing ourselves for. I'll tell you what they want..." He strode up to the window and raised the blinds. "...Anything, just anything that everybody else has, except they want it worse-looking. Take rock gardens... I was making one for a widow friend of Mrs. what's-her-name there. Terribly beautiful thing, that rock garden I was making. I had ferns in it, three graduated boulders, rock steps, everything! Then she comes to look and bang!" he jerked the cord down making the blinds slam hard against the window ledge. "She didn't like it. She didn't like rocks in her rock garden, what do you know?! She wanted them in her head, I think. Anyway, she had me clear them out and now she has one of those tennis lawns with the same old potted palms and iron chairs and lots of shining plastic..." He shook his head quite helplessly. "You know," he said. "It always turns out like that. By jingo! that's what they all are... all they really want is a lot of something with nothing in it." Back to the chair he sank, exhausted.

I knew what he meant. It was a personal grudge he had which sprang from having been dispatched too often to deal with the ten-cent imagination of status-loving non-moderns. It made him writhe, he told me, to see such abortions as he'd seen; it shot him with unfulfillment. I would have writhed too, I'm sure of it, also shot as I was with sympathy for him.

And so, that night, we writhed our way to dinner, for that night, we shared a frustration and what else could bring two people out to dinner together? At Salenco where Perlita embroidered her songs with the burning end of a cigarette we, Lito and I, talked away the ires of the hours. We whispered, giggled, sent and received codes, semaphores, significs back and forth between each other. We toasted with here-today-gone-tomorrow glasses of gin bitters which I drank urgently because I knew I couldn't have it for long. I had other loyalties to return to. He had dreams. I had memories. He had hopes. I had this long-term washroom assignment. And where was Sebastian? Away, somewhere, I didn't know. I still don't

know, although it seemed only hours ago that my father broke the lock on my door and shouted, "Where is he? Tell me where he is?" and shook me and slapped the cry out of me. I didn't know even then. All I knew was that I had him and then he wasn't there anymore to be had. I drank to him and touched Lito's arm. It was there and Sebastian was far away, very far away, out of reach. Sitting there at Salenco with the others of the faith, watching Perlita bathe herself in a crisis of emotion under the wash of the small spotlight, I could see him as I had always seen him: all fire and gold like a molten god. But under my hand Lito's arm was warm. Where was my molten god? Perhaps on the other side of the world charming tigresses out of their lairs. Meanwhile, back at Contemporary, we fight revolutions during the day and at night, we lick each other's wounds at Salenco where we also tell each other tales, dreams, delusions, our fondest mirages. Or, like Lito, we travel. That night, he traveled far, shot from a Singapore sling to Tangiers where he came upon his miniature minaret with a floating bar, see? You'll never know what the mysterious east may be hiding behind its veils. I was the sort of thing that Lito would want to see around here, this miniature minaret, this little dive. Ah, but how does one describe what it was like? Lito narrowed his eyes to slits. It was all catalyst and aphrodisia. Slave girls, an undulating horde of them wandered around under the gauze that hung from the scalloped ceiling in armlets and ruby belly buttons and the tables came with whips made to order. Lito sorted the dollies but they had put out in front the big and the brassy ones that everyone, even in Tangiers seemed to be accursedly hooked on and kept the exquisite ones somewhere. It took some waiting as these things generally require, but finally he spotted one with his jeweler's eye, out in the shadows and she was neither big nor brassy. She was like a blade of grass—beautiful. Around her Lito showered his white hot gaze until the whip twisted like a live thing in his hand and the dusky, skin-clad one heaved in expectation. Closer and closer she came, gliding eloquently on the balls of her hennaed feet until she was no more than a whip's length away from the moment of truth. "Now!" thought Lito. With a smart flick of his wrist he

lashed a neat coil around her waist and drew her to him hand over hand on the whip, slowly, sensuously, the way it was done in the movies to show her his extremely cruel good looks. Fastened thus to his hypnotic gaze, she obeyed, but as Lito reached for her, an olive stone dug into a cavity in his wisdom tooth and he had to fly home very fast for a tablet of aspirin. Good-bye Zorahayda, but there are such short lived expectations. The waiter brought the aspirin and a lull in our concerted pitch and it was then that I heard this man smell calling—sharper and clearer than the lonely sax in the corner sobbing of that awful lonesome feeling. It was calling me home.

So, dragging Lito by the cuff of his dribble-soaked collar, I ran home and would have gone straight down to Momza and her glow and into the welcoming arms of home and its strange soul were it not for the trifle of graciousness. Lito would not leave. He just stood there by the bougainvillas in the porch, hanging by his thumbs on his trouser waist and refused to go. "Go home," I said. "It's been a lovely evening but it's late now. Go home." But he just went on looking pathetic. That's the truth. He looked lost even as he inveigled to stay longer.

"You don't want to hear about this jellyfish? He went down to oyster bay, see? and..." He reached for me and he stroked my hair and all was lost! His face blocked out the bougainvillas clinging to the beams and in the shadow of his face I saw Sebastian far away, a little light in the dark. A light of fire and gold. He has this kind of etched eyebrows and he can push them together in an effortlessly intimidating manner over his deep seductive eyes and I could not miss them, not even from thousands of perfidious miles away. I saw them through the darkness of Lito's face, those eyebrows... and under them, his eyes. I slapped Lito. I have terrible hands and that night, they drew a terrible pattern on Lito's face over the fresh scratch. I fled to my underground trembling with revulsion for myself and for all the lost journeyers of the street. I ran to Momza and held her warm orb in my hands, letting her light wash my face until her warmth was heat and

sweat poured down my wrists and dripped off my elbows. Around me, the smell was acrid. I could not say it was foul. It is never foul. It was foggy with whatever hell I had brought in with me. It darted around like a winged menace scattering a pharaoh's plague. "Shame!" a thousand voices hissed from everywhere. "Shame! Shame! Shame! Here grow scabs on your belly and boils on your back. It's a far better thing to do than play that slatternly game." Momza only laughed.

I dammed Lito. I jumped on the bed, pulled the covers over my head and stared through them because I knew that if I closed my eyes, Sebastian would be there. He had a way of shining through the dark. I'd get lonely and I'd close my eyes and there he would be. That night, I did not. Under the covers, I kept them open and held my eyelids up with my fingers when alertness threatened to desert me.

The man smell had turned evil. "Maudlin woman, maudlin woman," it chanted. "Why do you come here to hide, maudlin woman?"

I thought that by playing into its mood I would end the mocking game. "Because I am hideous," I said. But I was wrong.

"Silence!" it snapped and I could still hear that snap now. It is like a whiplash in the wind. "Because you are mad!" Then it pressed on the bed clothes, smothering me under its weight. "Talk now of Sebastian whom you worship. There's the guitar, sing of him. Go ahead. Sing your throat raw of Sebastian."

It stung like iodine on a burn, this barefaced taunt that tugged with a leechlike clinging on the back of my neck. For a while it stunned me but I tore from the covers incensed, ripped apart the hooks and snaps that bound me and flung the clothes they held together to every corner, wall and plane, and in its stead I wore a heavy coat of windscent which I daubed on the arches of my soles, rubbed behind the backs of my knees and poured down the valley in my chest. Our war, mine and the now-evil man smell's, was on and from the battle, a stench rose and looked down from the ceiling amused. I didn't care. From its finger hook on a map tack, I took the guitar and I

did sing. I sang a long song, a soul song we call it. It is slow and lingering, playing with shy smiles and groping hands, girls' voices, closing doors and mute sobs behind those doors. A soul song is a patient song sitting somewhere in some corridor with its hands folded on its lap. Outside it had started to rain but I did not rise from under the vine to push the shutters over the grills to keep the cold spray out. Over the strings, my fingers wove a blanket of memory that came short of a second to sustain and give life and I wrapped this blanket around me against the night, which like a woman spurned, howled and clung to the trees outside. On such a night, the mothers locked their daughters in from the rodents of the streets, and lonely girls, swallowing the salt of their tears clawed their pillows and unbarred their doors. But I sang under a damp vine in the wall. I paced my voice to a Sunday stroll and leaned back and closed my eyes to the thin shower of rain from the window. I let it take the rhythm in its silvery hands while I caressed the thought of a going away with no good-bye and hummed a prayer chant. The acrid smell withdrew to a corner and sulked there; the giver-grabber, the father-tyrant, the janus-faced, the hair-stroker, beaten to a corner by a song. I ignored it. Pleased with the taste of satisfaction in my mouth I tossed my head and that way we fought well into the dawn and the evening of the next day.

That was the evening Perlita came, all blue ice and tinsel and blazing around the eyes. She grabbed my breath as soon as I opened the door for her. "Bitch!" she whispered hotly. She had the asthma again. "That sister of yours. She's a bitch! She almost never let me in through the front door. Did you know that?" She turned to me and I thought she was going to choke me for it. "She says it's a sin the way I come in and go out this house dressed like this. What can I do? What does she suggest I do... beg for a living?"

"Next time," I said, running back under the vine, "...come in a space suit."

"Hah!" she spat. "Won't she be surprised." She unhooked her shimmering belt and slapped it down on the bed. "Oh, won't she just be surprised the next time I come. Hah!"

"Hah indeed," I said. "How?"

"Naked!" She said triumphantly. "Naked as a chicken on the spit." She kicked off her shoes with the same fervor of vehemence that she used to dispose of her belt and sent them to a corner opposite me where they spiked each other in the throat. Perlita was a sight to see; standing there spread-legged on the floor like a tiger woman, mauling mama with her hands astride her hips and her inflamed eyes frowning down the peak of her bosom. "What I can't stand," she complained, "...is that bitchy whine of hers."

I forgive Perlita, this cumulus cloud of a woman, for she is nothing but an orphan of the storm that blew her into my cavern. She came from under the penitentiary skirts of Sister Somebody in a private school where rich men send their private sins, and thence, Salenco, our little hole in the wall. She was there from its moment of birth when public relations men with visions of unveiling waving before their eyes, and long-lost Apollos weeping coins into their glasses over the ripples that now rut their bellies, pierced it into the corner of Lopez and Pardo. She has been there ever since and weathered every squall. There were many squalls. "Great!" the alcohol swimmers would shout spheres into the smoke after each of her numbers. "Ole! Bravo!... Come again!" and just about every nonsense they could shoot from their slobbering mouths. "And now, Señorita, peel off the top and give us C'mon-A My House." I've seen them and heard them but they were not from our quarters. They were the thick walleted slobs who had wandered away from their tasteless avenues while their wives lingered over the mahjong tables or gossiped under the driers. They knew nothing of the flights in Perlita's songs, the flights from the aches that they were disgustingly ignorant of. Surfeit had deadened them. Yet they come to Salenco to flaunt their corpulent corpses and flatter themselves into thinking that when she sings her fangs into her pleas, she pleads with them. How were they to know that it is for her soul that she pleads? Still they did not know even when, later on, she'd sink the same fangs into their arms when ronricos have stripped them of their

smuggled wool suavity and they have retrogressed into leering gorillas, pawing savages. Perlita must whet her teeth everyday and keep them sharp under her wet lipstick for she fights alone to be left natural, to be herself, to be left undaunted to look at every face in the streets, eye to eye, to spit on the shadows of jealous wives, matching venom for venom. "I like my women strong," Nando had told her before they ran away to get married, but she spat on him too, months later when he refused to take her away from the rhumba and the cha cha cha and the malaise of the ole, baby, ole, to a little love nest in the woods. She took her money from among the undressed women in his wallet and went to live in a little room two flights above Salenco. Double locks clasp faithful hands on her door and her windows are screened with gleaned metal matting and she would not see him again, would not even remember her oath of allegiance.

"Listen," she had told me once. "Listen. You haven't gone to bed with a man who stunk of booze and other women's perfumes. I have." Perhaps she had gone through the agonies of the dammed as she sang the song of life that for generations and generations have exhausted its ranks to pay for the sins of the grandsires. Yet Perlita lives on faith and each Wednesday, she goes to church to pray, "Dear Lord, forgive my father his sins." But no one would take her in nor even share half a name with her. That is why she rams in through the picket line by the front door with her head still high. Standing there with a wrestler hold on herself and with the lights of armageddon jousting in her eyes, she was the soul of strength. No one could have chained her or destroyed her breed, which, the shame of it all! Perlita does not have. A long time she stood, perhaps listening, perhaps thinking of things such as one would be compelled to think about when one wishes not to hear anything. I don't know. Perhaps she wasn't even thinking nor listening. She just stood there very straight, too straight as a matter of fact that looking at her made my spine in its more comfortable slouch ache. Eventually, she came to, backstepped towards the bed and dropped on it or as she did it, sagged down on it. I remember I had the feeling of watching buildings sag, bend to one side and finally sink into the earth. It was in

a movie I saw where the earth ate buildings for lunch—not so much crunching them in her jaws as sucking them into her self until they disappeared. It was a thoroughly disconcerting scene.

“You weren’t at work today, were you?” Perlita asked. “I called your office.”

I said I wasn’t.

She tossed her hair away from her face with a backward snap. “I tried to get you here but your line was busy all day. All day.”

“It’s my sister,” I said. “She hangs on that line all the time.”

Perlita nodded derisively. “She would,” she said. “If I knew her she would.” She pulled her legs up on the bed and examined her knee bringing it about as close to her face as she could in spite of the tightness of her dress. “Damn,” she murmured, “. . . run in my stocking.” She touched a fingertip to her tongue and applied it on the accursed spot where the run ended.

“Does it help?” I asked her, straining to see for myself if it did.

“Oh, I don’t know. If it doesn’t, hell with it.” She looked at me suddenly as if it had just hit her with a terrible impact that I was there and had been there all along, watching her. “What are you doing?” she blurted out. “I mean what have you been doing?”

I said I had been sitting there and singing and now I was going to play cards. What did it look like I was doing?

“Well,” Perlita said. “If you weren’t at work and you’re not sick, what could you be doing here all day? You’ve been here all day?”

I told her I’d been home all day and did not feel like going to work although I wasn’t exactly sick.

“Yes,” she said reflectively. “It’s that kind of what-you-call-it syndrome. I’m not working myself tonight.”

"Cough?"

"Yes," she said. "Asthma. I told Ruben I wasn't working tonight. 'I can't,' I told him and he said why don't I just go up and get some rest and I'll probably feel better in a couple of hours. I mean . . . you know, he made it sound like all I had was a silly headache, and all I needed was an aspirin and a little time in bed and he expected me to come waltzing down in a couple of hours. He actually did, the judas!" She caught her breath for a while and stifled a cough, keeping it down until her eyes turned red.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"Not yet," she waved me aside, clutching at her breast. After a while she recovered. "Listen to this," she said. "He said if it was that bad and I really couldn't sing and all, maybe I could just be around, sit with the customers, keep the place looking the same. Oh, he's that cold-blooded."

"You should have told him off."

"Oh sure, I told him off. I went right up to him—he was fixing those wires on the dais and I said, 'Look, Mister Damian, I'm sick and if you think I'll make myself sicker by sitting up here a whole night tonight, you're wrong.' And I got a cab and beat it here."

I told her "that's the girl" or something like that and as a matter of fact it was such a triumph for the bourgeoisie that it called for a celebration. I got up and started making coffee for both of us from thermos and jar.

"No sugar in mine," Perlita said. She picked up my guitar and began applying the balls of her fingers on the strings—she had carefully polished nails. "She's still okay," she observed, tapping lightly on the shell studs. "After all these years."

"Two years," I reminded her. "Your coffee." I placed the mug near her elbow.

"Ah yes. But it seems such a long time." She picked out a chord and began to hum. It was obvious that she could not

sing; her voice caught on bramble bushes and barbed wires and waved feebly there like rags ripped off a thief's back. But she went on humming, or rather, her mouth kept forming words with no real sound except a small secretion of tune that trickled from her red mouth. It had a phantom-like look. I sipped my coffee. She did not touch hers. "I saw Nando today," she said suddenly as I got the deck of cards spread on the floor.

I stared hard at the king of spades. "Oh?" I managed to say. "Where?" It was the first time she ever mentioned seeing him since their split.

"In front of Nardi's waiting for a ride." She went on with her miserable strumming and humming while I flicked the king of spades over and watched it land on the floor, face down.

"What did he look like?"

"The same, I guess. Only leaner... thinner." Suddenly she reached down and grabbed me by the shoulder almost spinning me around where I sat. Her eyes were strangely wild and bright with a glazed look. "Listen!" she cried. "I was a good wife to him. I tried to make our lives better. We were going to buy a small house somewhere and plant a garden. You know, little flower garden in front and a small vegetable garden in the back and we were going to have only two children so that we could send both of them to school and keep up with their every wish." I wanted to shrug her hand off my shoulder but it gripped tight and I saw that her other hand—her left hand was closed around the neck of the guitar, almost crushing the strings into the wood. "But...but he couldn't get off the beer." Perlita gritted her teeth. "He saved the crowns from the bottles to show his friends how much he could take. He insulted me with them. He had this plastic bag and he stuffed it full of crowns and he emptied it on me and he said it was for me to make into a doormat for my damn little house when I finally get it built." I tried to say something but Perlita was like a dam breaking into a cataract. "I wanted to kill him, that instant. Oh God! but I could have forgiven him. I could have asked him to come back even after he'd kicked those crowns all over the floor at me when he was going out. I was

a good wife. I made him eat and prepared his bath and did everything! I did everything for him... even dressed him up." She took her hand away from my shoulder and pressed the guitar close to her, the string cutting into her cheek. She sniffled. "I was a good wife to him." Then she turned to me savagely. "I was, wasn't I?"

Before I could say anything, she coughed, loud and long and she doubled over on the bed with her fist crammed into her mouth. I got her a glass of water but she waved it aside and thumped on her chest with no pity. "Come here," she said. "Let's sing."

"You can't," I said.

"Oh yes I can." She struck a faulty chord. "Let's sing Hit The Road." She did and came out in the middle of the song. I took off from the start and she stopped for a little while before joining in on the line, singing wilfully, a little too desperately. It made me feel very silly—as if I was sitting down there by the foot of the bed and singing with Perlita and at the same time, I was walking around looking and wondering what it was all about. I stopped and let her carry the tune in her pitiful rasp. "Hey," I said. "What are we singing about?"

"What?"

"What are we singing about? I mean... what are we singing for?"

"Hell! I don't know," Perlita said. She tossed the guitar over to me and I caught it in mid-air and cuddled it close. "But let's sing anyway. Let's sing the heck out of every song we know. Go on," she nudged me on the small of my back with her knee. "Play something."

I ran my fingers over the damp wood and gave her a good chord. Why not? I gave her a tremulous sound, low and fluid and substantial. Then I was off on my own with a salty ballad that Sebastian had taught me once. To each her own Perlita. Join me if you know the chant. It's fleeting chant. It's a handful of ashes that the wind snatches away before you can even feel its weight on your palm. It's a life chant,

woman. A very short and sorry romp in the meadows before the rains come to make us sad, and after that, the demon sun, to bake us into clay. It does not belong to any jazz cult. Not even to the Soul that we swear by nor to the hate sounds of the Congo Square or the Mayday voices of lovers. Not to the Funk, the Freedom nor the Swing. This is a mourning song to be happy by. When sad people want to be happy, they open their mouths and their hearts and they refuse to listen to anything else while they sing this song, and the man who taught it to me is somewhere—not gone. Just somewhere working madness and seeking forgiveness. Don't sing it, Perlita, unless you can pick up the crowns and stuff them into the plastic bag again.

On the bed, Perlita slumped against the wall. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was wide in a painful grimace but as soon as she breathed once more, she joined me and we were off, singing our way in and out of doorways and gateways and we unlocked them all as we passed and left them afar. We serenaded the world from horizon to horizon over the bounding main through storm and hail and inquisition until my fingers smarted against the taut strings and Perlita's contralto was no more than a vaporous sigh. "That was good," she said. "That was one big wa-hoo!" She stood up in the bed and stretched her arms up... up... up! I thought she would break in the middle. I let my fingers tease tinkling notes by themselves and watched as Perlita swooped down like a bird and swung the mug up from the chair where I had earlier placed it. "It's not hot anymore," she said.

"It's been there a long time."

She eyed me over the rim. "What time is it?"

I said I didn't know. Neither of us had a watch. She walked on the heels of her feet to the window and peered out through the grills. "Ugh!" she said. "Stinking outside but here I go." She thudded back, picked up her belt and buckled it on like a soldier buckling on his sword, slipped into her shoes and took one sip from the glass of water I had offered her. I saw her to the door outside.

I cannot remember how many nights ago that was. It was quite a night. But now another dawn is here and already Momza's light is paling a little but she still catches on the small, frosty drops of dew clinging to the grills, and a soft, damp scent hovers over me protectively while I sit in bed and watch my toes wiggle. Upstairs, I can hear them moving about restlessly and from somewhere up there I can hear a singing, a blurred metal sound and then a head-on clash of noise that make me wince. Upstairs, they have started again to listen to the song of the myna bird.