



SHE'D BE FLOWING ALL HER LIFE, BUT WHAT HAD DOMINATED her edges and attracted them toward a center, what had illuminated her against the world and given her intimate power was the secret. She'd never know how to think of it in clear terms afraid to invade and dissolve its image. Yet it had formed in her interior a far-off and living nucleus and had never lost the magic—it sustained her in her unsolvable vagueness like the single reality that for her should always be the lost one. The two of them were leaning over the fragile bridge and Virginia was feeling her bare feet falter insecurely as if they were dangling atop the calm whirl of the waters. It was a violent and dry day, in broad fixed colors; the trees were creaking beneath the warm wind wrinkled by swift cool drafts. The thin and torn girlish dress was pierced by shivers of coolness. With her serious mouth pressed against the dead branch of the bridge, Virginia was plunging her distracted eyes into the waters. Suddenly she'd frozen tense and light:

“Look!”

Daniel had turned his head quickly—stuck on a rock was a wet hat, heavy and dark with water. The running river was tugging it with brutality and it was putting up a fight. Until losing its final strength it was taken by the light current and in leaps disappeared into the foam almost happy. They hesitated surprised.

“We can’t tell anyone,” whispered Virginia finally, her voice distant and dizzy.

“Yes ...,”—even Daniel had been frightened and was agreeing ... the waters kept flowing—“Not even if they ask us about the draw—”

“Yes!” Virginia almost shouted ... both fell silent with strength, their eyes bulging and ferocious.

“Virginia ...,” her brother said slowly with a rawness that left his face all angles, “I will swear.”

“Yes ... my God, but one always swears ...”

Daniel was thinking while looking at her and she wasn’t moving her face waiting for him to find in her the answer.

“For example ... that everything that we are ... turns to nothing ... if we speak of this to anyone.”

He had spoken so seriously, he had spoken so beautifully, the river was rolling, the river was rolling. The leaves covered in dust, the thick and moist leaves along the banks, the river was rolling. She wanted to respond and say that yes, yes! hotly, almost happy, laughing with dry lips ... but she couldn’t speak, she didn’t know how to breathe; how it unsettled her. With dilated eyes, her face suddenly small and colorless, she cautiously assented with her head. Daniel moved off, Daniel was moving off. No! she wanted to shout and tell him to wait, not to leave her alone above the river; but he kept going. Her heart beating in a body suddenly empty of blood, her heart skipping, falling

furiously, the waters rushing, she tried to open her lips, blow out any pale word. Like the impossible cry in a nightmare, no sound was heard and the clouds were sliding quickly in the sky toward a destination. Beneath her feet the waters were murmuring—in a bright hallucination she was thinking: ah yes, so she'd fall and drown, ah yes. Some intense and livid thing like terror but triumphant, a certain mad and bristling happiness was now filling her body and she was waiting to die, her hand closed as if for all time on the branch of the bridge. Daniel turned around right then.

“Come,” he said surprised.

She looked at him from the quiet depth of her silence.

“Come on, you idiot,” he repeated angrily.

A dead instant extended things lengthily. She and Daniel were two points forever hushed and immobile. But I already died, she seemed to think as she was letting go of the bridge as if being cut from it with a scythe. I already died, she was still thinking and on strange feet her white face was running heavily toward Daniel.

Walking down the road, blood had started beating with rhythm in her veins again, they were advancing quickly, together. In the dust could be seen the hesitant mark of the only car in Upper Marsh. Beneath the brilliant sky the day was vibrating in its last moment before night, in the paths and in the trees silence was gathering heavy with sultriness—she was feeling the last warm rays of the sun on her back, the thick clouds tensely gilded. It was nevertheless vaguely cold, as if coming from the shady forest. They were looking ahead with keen bodies—there was a threat of transition in the air being breathed ... the next instant would bring a cry and something puzzlingly would destroy itself, or the light night would sud-

denly soften that excessive, rude, and solitary existence. They were walking quickly. There was a perfume that was swelling the heart. The shadows were slowly covering the road and when Daniel pushed the heavy garden gate night was falling. The fireflies were opening livid dots in the half-light. They stopped for a moment indecisive in the darkness before mingling with the ones who didn't know, looking at each other as if for the last time.

"Daniel . . .," Virgínia murmured, "I can't even speak to you?"

"No," he said surprised by his own response.

They hesitated for a moment, restrained, quiet. No, no! . . ., she was denying the fear that was nearing, as if to buy time before rushing ahead. No, no, she was saying avoiding looking around. Night had fallen, night had fallen. Don't rush! but suddenly something couldn't contain itself and started to happen . . . Yes, right there the vapors would arise of the sickly, pale dawn that was like the end of a pain—Virgínia was suddenly seeing calm, submissive, and absorbed. Each dry branch would hide beneath the brightness of a cave. That land beyond the trees, castrated in the bud by the fire, would be seen through the soft mist, blackened and difficult as if through a past—she was now seeing quiet and inexpressive as if without memory. The dead man would slip for the last time among the frozen and sleeping trees. Like bells ringing from afar, Virgínia would feel in her body the touch of his presence, would get out of bed slowly, wise and blind as a sleepwalker, and inside her heart a spot would beat weakly, almost fainting. She would raise the window, her lungs enveloped by the cold mist. Plunging her eyes into the blindness of the dark, her senses beating in the frozen and sharp space; she would perceive nothing but the shady quiet, the twisted and motionless branches . . . the long

expanse losing its limits in sudden and unfathomable mist—there was the limit of the possible world! Then, fragile like a memory, she would make out the tired stain of the drowned man moving away, disappearing and reappearing among the haze, plunging at last into whiteness. Forever! the wide wind would blow in the trees. She would call almost mutely: man, but man!, in order to keep him, to bring him back! But it was forever, Virgínia, listen, forever and even if Quiet Farm withers and new lands emerge indefinitely never would the man return. Virgínia, never, never, Virgínia. Never. She shook herself out of the sleep into which she'd slid, her eyes had gained a shining and shrewd life, contained exclamations were aching inside her narrow chest; the hard and suffocating incomprehension was hastening her heart into the dark of the night. I don't want the owl to cry, she shouted at herself in a soundless sob. And the owl immediately cried blackly on a branch. She jumped—or had it cried before her thought? or at the exact same time? I don't want to hear the trees, she was saying to herself fumbling within herself, moving forward stunned. And the trees upon a sudden wind were rustling in a slow murmur of strange and tall life. Or hadn't it been a foreboding? she was begging herself. I don't want Daniel to move. And Daniel was moving. Her breath light, her hearing new and surprised, she seemed to be able to penetrate and flee things in silence like a shadow; weak and blind, she was feeling the color and the sound of whatever was almost happening. She was tremulously moving ahead of herself, flying with her senses ahead crossing the tense and perfumed air of the new night. I don't want the bird to fly, she was saying to herself now almost a light in her chest despite the terror, and in a tired and difficult perception was presaging the future movements of things an

instant before they ring out. And if she wanted to she'd say: I don't want to hear the rolling of the river, and there was no nearby river but she would hear its deaf wail over small stones ... and now ... now ... yes ...!

"Virginia! Daniel!"

In confusion everything was hurrying scared and dark, their mother's call was sprouting from the depths of the mansion and bursting between them in a new presence. The voice had not altered the silence of the night but had split its darkness as if the cry were white lightning. Before she was aware of her movements, Virginia found herself inside the house, behind the closed door. The parlor, the stairs were stretching in indistinct and somber silence. The lit lamps were flickering on their wires under the wind in a prolonged mute movement. Beside her was Daniel, his lips bloodless, hard, and ironic. In the quiet of the Farm some unbridled horse was slowly moving the grass with thin legs. In the kitchen they were rummaging through silverware, a sudden sound of a bell and Esmeralda's steps quickly crossed a bedroom ... the lit lamp flickering calmly, the sleeping stairs breathing. Then—neither from relief nor from the end of a fright, but in itself inexplicable, alive, and mysterious—then she felt a long, bright, high instant open inside her. Stroking with cold fingers the old latch of the door, she narrowed her eyes smiling with mischief and deep satisfaction.

Quiet Farm and its lands extended some miles from the houses clustered around the school and the health clinic, keeping a distance from the center of the municipality of Upper Marsh,

to which they belonged. The mansion belonged to their grandmother; her children had married and lived far away. The youngest son had brought his wife there and in Quiet Farm Esmeralda, Daniel, and Virginia had been born. Little by little the furniture had defected, sold, broken, or grown old and the bedrooms were emptying palely. Virginia's, cold, light, and square, had nothing more than a bed. On the headboard she'd deposit her dress before going to sleep and sheathed in her thin petticoat, her feet dirty with earth, hide beneath the enormous queen-size sheets with extended pleasure.

"It'd be preferable to have more furniture and fewer bedrooms," Esmeralda would complain lowering her eyes with rage and annoyance, her big feet bare.

"Quite the contrary," her father would answer when she wouldn't shut up. The stairs meanwhile were covered with a thick carpet of purple velvet, dating from the time of her grandmother's wedding, branching out through the hallways to the rooms in a sudden luxury, safe and serious. The doors would open and instead of the cozy wealth that the carpet announced you found emptiness, silence, and shadow, the wind communicating with the world through windows without curtains. From the high windowpanes you saw besides the garden of tangled plants and dry twigs the long stretch of land of a sad and whispered silence. The dining room itself, the largest room in the mansion, extended below in long damp shadows, almost deserted: the heavy oak table, the light and gilded chairs of an old set of furniture, a console with thin twisted legs, the quick air on the shining latches, and a long sideboard where a few glass and crystal pieces were shimmering translucently in smothered cries, asleep in dust. On the shelf of that fixture lay the washbasin of pink china, the cold water



in the half-light refreshing the bottom where a fat, crooked, and sensual angel was struggling, captive. Tall murals were rising from the walls scratching vertical and silent shadows over the floor. On afternoons when wind would roll through the Farm—the women in the rooms, her father at work, Daniel in the forest—on smooth afternoons when a wind full of sun would blow as if over ruins, stripping the walls eaten in the rubble, Virginia would roam in abandoned brightness. She'd walk while looking, in a serious distraction. It was daytime, the fields were stretching out brightly, without stains and she'd go ahead wakefully. She felt a diffuse nausea in her calm nerves—small and thin, her legs marked by mosquitoes and falls, she'd stop next to the staircase looking. The steps rising sinuously would achieve a firm loveliness so light that Virginia would lose her perception almost upon grasping it and stop short just ahead seeing only dusty wood and incarnadine velvet, step, step, dry angles. Without knowing why, she'd nonetheless halt, fanning her bare thin arms; she lived on the verge of things. The parlor. The parlor filled with neutral spots. The smell of an empty house. But the chandelier! There was the chandelier. The great spider would glow. She'd look at it immobile, uneasy, seeming to foresee a terrible life. That icy existence. Once! once in a flash—the chandelier would scatter in chrysanthemums and joy. Another time—while she was running through the parlor—it was a chaste seed. The chandelier. She'd skip off without looking back.

At night the parlor was lit up in a flickering and sweet brightness. Two lamps were resting on the buffet available for anyone ready to retire. Before entering the bedroom the light should be put out. At dawn a rooster would sing a clean cross in the

dark space—the humid scratch was spreading a cold smell all around, the sound of a little bird was scraping the surface of the half-light without piercing it. Virginia would hoist her dull senses, her closed eyes. The bloody young cries of the roosters were repeated throughout the neighborhood of Upper Marsh. A red crest would shake in a shiver, while delicate and decided legs were advancing slow steps on the pale floor, the cry was released—and far off like the flight of an arrow another tough and living rooster was opening his ferocious beak and responding—while the still-sleeping ears were awaiting with vague attention. The enraptured and weak morning was radiating outward like a bit of news. Virginia was getting up, getting into her short dress, pushing open the tall windows of the bedroom, the mist penetrating slow and oppressed; she was dunking her head, her face sweet like that of an animal eating from your hand. Her damp nose was moving, her cold cheek sharpened in brightness was moving forward in a searching, free, and frightened thrust. She could only make out a couple of metal posts from the garden fence. The barbed wire was pointing dryly from inside the frozen fog; the trees were emerging blackly, with hidden roots. She was opening wide eyes. There was the stone streaming with dew. And beyond the garden the land disappearing abruptly. The whole house was floating, floating in clouds, disconnected from Upper Marsh. Even the unkempt brush was moving off pale and still and in vain Virginia was seeking in her immobility the familiar line; the loose kindling beneath the window, near the ruined entryway arch, was resting neat and lifeless. But then only seconds later the sun was coming out bleached like a moon. Then only seconds later the mists were disappearing with the speed of a scattered dream and the

whole garden, the mansion, the plains, the forest were shining even brighter setting off small thin, brittle, still-tired sounds. An intelligent, clear, and dry cold was traversing the garden, blowing itself into the flesh of the body. A cry of fresh coffee was rising from the kitchen mixed with the smooth and breathless smell of wet grass. Her heart was beating in a painful and moist flutter as if pierced by an impossible desire. And the life of the day was beginning puzzled. Her cheek tender and frozen as a hare's, her lips hard from the cold, Virginia lingered for a vacant second at the window listening with some spot of her body to the space before her. She was hesitating between disappointment and a difficult charm—like a madwoman the night would lie during the day ...

Like a madwoman the night would lie, like a madwoman the night would lie—she'd go down the dusty stairs barefoot, her steps warmed by the velvet. They were sitting at the table for breakfast and if Virginia didn't eat enough she'd get slapped right then—how nice it was, his flattened hand would quickly fly and crack with a joyful sound on one of her cheeks cooling the somber parlor with the lightness of a sneeze. Her face would awake like an anthill in the sun and then she'd ask for more cornbread, filled with a lie of hunger. Her father would keep chewing, his lips wet with milk, while along with the wind a certain joy was lingering in the air; a fresh sound from the back of the mansion was filling the parlor softly. But Esmeralda always got away, her back upright, her chest raised. Because Mother would stand up pale and stuttering and say—while a bit of cold was coming through the bright emptiness of the window and looking at Daniel's hard and beloved face a desire to escape with him and run made Virginia's heart swell dizzy and

light in a forward thrust—while her mother would say:

“I don’t even have the right to a son?”

“To a daughter, she should say”—Virginia would think without raising her eyes from the cup because in those very moments the neigh of some horse in the pasture would hurt like a sad and thoughtful daring. Esmeralda and Mother would talk at length in the bedroom, their eyes shining with quick understandings. Every once in a while the two would work on the cut of a dress as if defying the world. Father never spoke to Esmeralda and nobody ever mentioned what had happened to her except from a distance. Not even Virginia had ever asked about it; she could live with an unrevealed secret in her hands without anxiety as if that were the true life of things. Esmeralda would clasp the long skirt she wore at home, climb the stairs, burn an angry, insistent, and solemn perfume in her room; you couldn’t stay in her room for more than a few minutes, suddenly the smell cloyed and stunned in a chapel-like queasiness. But she herself would stay absorbed before the bowl that served as a vase, seem to inhale the hot flame with her strong, feminine, and hypocritical eyes. All her underwear was embroidered by hand; Father didn’t look at Esmeralda as if she were dead. The last time he’d touched her had been precisely when she’d spoken once again of the journey that Daniel and Virginia would one day make to the city in order to study languages, business, and piano—Daniel who had such a good ear and practiced sometimes on a piano in Upper Marsh. With the other daughter, he’d say, he wouldn’t do the same because “you only set loose a toothless animal.” Esmeralda would sit with Mother at mealtimes; she’d always come down a bit late and slow, but Father wouldn’t say anything. And she could

also turn up pale and with bags under her eyes because she'd gone dancing in the house of a family in Upper Marsh. Mother would then come down invigorated by exhaustion, her body frightened, such was the excitement that would overtake her when she started going to parties again. Her eyes would go blank and she'd envision the salon again as she chewed. Sweet and shining the girls once again would spread across the balconies, the parlor, in calm and contained poses, waiting their turn to be entwined; then they'd dance, their faces almost serious; the more immoral ones would heave their bosoms with innocence, all of them coiffed and content, in their eyes a single and indecipherable thought; but the men, as always, were inferior, pale, and dashing; they'd sweat a lot; since they were few in number, some girls would end up dancing with other girls, excited, laughing, jumping, their eyes surprised. She was chewing, her gaze fixed, feeling the incomprehensible reality of the dance floating like a lie. Father would stare at them in silence. Before starting to eat and letting everyone begin, he'd agree with a certain sadness:

"Well then."

Virginia loved him so much at times like this that she'd want to weep into her plate out of hope and confusion. Mother would sigh with thoughtful eyes:

"Who knows, my God."

But she'd spend the days like a guest in her own house, she wouldn't give orders, taking care of nothing. Her flowery, worn-out dress would cover her floppily, allow a glimpse of her long breasts, fat and bored. She'd once been alive, with small decisions every minute—her tired and angry eye would shine. That's how she'd lived, married, and caused Esmeralda

to be born. And then a slow loss had supervened, she didn't encompass her own life with her gaze, though her body kept living, separate from other bodies. She was lazy, tired, and vague, Daniel had been born and then Virgínia, shaped in the lower part of her body, uncontrollable—a little skinny, hairy, their eyes actually even beautiful. She was clinging to Esmeralda as to the remains of her final existence, from that time when she'd breathe forward telling herself: I'm going to have a daughter, my husband's going to buy an upholstered living room set, today is Monday ... From the days before she married she lovingly kept a nightgown thin from use as if the days without a husband or children were glorious. That's how she'd protect herself from her husband, from Virgínia, and from Daniel—her eyes blinking. Her husband bit by bit had imposed a certain kind of silence with his cunning and still body. And bit by bit, after the heyday of prohibiting purchases and spending, she had found out with brooding joy, in one of the greatest urges of her life, that she wasn't living in her own home, but in her husband's, in her old mother-in-law's. Yes, yes; before she'd connect with joyful threads to whatever was going on and now the threads were fattening stickily or breaking and she'd bump abruptly into things. Everything was so irremediable, and she was living so cut off, but so cut off, Maria—she'd turn her thoughts to one of her little schoolmates, one she'd lost touch with. She was simply going on, Maria. She'd look at Daniel and Virgínia, calmly surprised and haughty; they'd been born. Even the birth had been easy, she couldn't even remember the pain, her lower parts were nice and healthy, she'd think while confusedly glancing quickly at herself; they weren't connected to her past. She'd say meekly: eat, Virgínia ...—and come up

short. Virginia ... She hadn't even been the one who chose the name, Maria. She liked names shiny and ironic like someone waving a fan to turn something away: Esmeralda, two waves, Rosicler, three quick waves ... And the girl, like a branch, was growing without her having decorated her previous features, always young, strange, and serious, scratching her dirty head, being tired, not much of an eater, drawing silly things on pieces of paper. Yes, Mother didn't eat much but her abandoned way of being at the table gave the impression she was wallowing in food. She did almost nothing but somehow, she seemed to feel so wrapped up in her own life that she could hardly even shake loose an arm and gesture. Seeing her stranded atop the table; her father chewing with staring eyes; Esmeralda sharp, rigid, and keen saying: where am I supposed to walk?! through those swamps?!; Daniel darkening proud and almost stupidified by so much contained power; and, when she closed her eyes, seeing inside herself a small dense feeling, full of joy, firm, mysterious, and undefined, Virginia would never know that people wondered whether one quality in a person excluded the possibility of others, if whatever there was inside the body was alive and strange enough that it was also its opposite. As for herself she couldn't even guess what she could do and what she couldn't, what she'd manage to get just by batting her eyelids and what she'd never obtain, even by giving up her life. But to herself she granted the privilege of not demanding gestures and words in order to show herself. She was feeling that even without a thought, a desire, or a memory, she was imponderably whatever she was and that consisted in God knows what.

The days on Quiet Farm were breathing as long and empty as the mansion. The family didn't receive guests all together.

Mother would rarely cheer up for the arrival of two neighbor ladies, she'd whisk them to her own bedroom as if trying to protect them from the long hallways. And Esmeralda would brighten with excitement and a certain brutality when her girlfriends, pale and tall under corn-colored hats, came to see her. She'd quickly put on shoes and, flushed, lead them to her room locking the door, time passing. And sometimes some member of the paternal family came from the south to visit Grandmother and Father. Uncle would sit at the table, smile at everyone with his deafness and eat. And also Aunt Margarida, skinny, her skin flaccid, her sharp dry bird face but her lips always pink and moist like a liver; she'd wear on a single finger the two rings of widowhood and three more with stones. Father would be reborn on those days and Virginia would watch him frightened, with a worried disgust. He himself wanted to serve the table, he excused the black servant from the kitchen—Virginia would look at him restless and mute, her mouth full of a water of nausea and attention. With wet eyes he'd bring Grandmother up to the table, saying:

“The lady of the house must dine with her children, the lady of the house must dine with her children . . .”—and you hardly noticed that this was a joke. Virginia would laugh. Aunt Margarida's gaze was hasty and in the fraction of a second it lasted she seemed to smile. When it was over, however, and her face was already turned the other way, something would float in the air like the aftermath of a revealed fear. With her head like a little bird's with combed feathers, slanted to the plate, she'd eat almost without speaking. You could tell she'd die someday, you could tell. Uncle was saying with a profound and calm mien:



“But this is so tasty.”

“Have some more!” her father was shouting blinking with joy.

Uncle was looking her father right in the eye with an un-moving smile. He was kneading a ball of bread and answering with tact and bonhomie as if needing to mollify his own deafness:

“Well then, well then.”

Father was looking for a moment with surpassing astonishment. He was suddenly grabbing his brother’s plate, filling it with food and pushing it back, emotive and happy:

“Go on, eat it all at once.”

Uncle was slightly gesturing by jerking his hand in front of his own head in a military salute. Father was watching him with his arms outstretched like a doll’s, overstating his happiness.

“Ah what a sad life, what a sad life,” he was saying laughing a lot.

When after a few days the guests would depart, life in the mansion was once again sucked up by the country air and the flies would buzz louder, shining in the light. Father would resume his solitude without sadness, push away his tablecloth and silverware, bring over a lamp, read the paper and never open his book. He’d later go up to sleep, climbing the stairs slowly as if in order to hear the whinny of the steps, a dark and calm hope, almost a lack of desire. On occasion, in his rolled long johns—he’d suddenly transform into a funny man and Virginia had trouble falling asleep on those nights—in his rolled long johns he’d go about living and stay until two, three in the morning watching the birds lay their small, small

eggs. With his body covered in chicken lice he'd then get into a tub full of water and kerosene placed in the courtyard and, lit weakly by the lamp, wash himself, rinse himself silently, the darkness was sprinkled by wet and abrupt noises, he'd go to sleep. Mother would ask amidst the forgetfulness of the dinner, in the heart of the mansion:

"How's the stationer's?"

"Fine," responded her father.

Virgínia would walk past her grandmother's door, stop happily for a second to listen to her snoring. She didn't snore in a straight sharp line but on a pair of wings. The sound would start off broadly, gather in a narrow center and flare out again. Her satisfied and strange snore was a flying wing. Virgínia would enter her room with closed eyes, feel surrounded by a flutter of tender, hoarse, and rapid wings, as if the old lady were releasing a scared little bird with each breath. And when she'd awaken—she'd always awaken suddenly, look around terrorized as if they could have transported her to another world while she was sleeping, and look at Virgínia with spite—when she'd awaken the sound would snap in a straight line, a little bird half-free in a mouth would hesitate trembling and luminous and was swallowed in a murmur. Grandmother no longer left the bedroom where the black servant she'd raised would bring her meals. She only came down when the relatives from the south were visiting, Esmeralda, Daniel, and Virgínia were required to go into her room at least once a day to receive her blessing and give her a sort of quick kiss on the face. And they'd never visit her more than that one time. When the black servant would get sick they'd send Virgínia to stay in her room and attend to her. She'd go in good spirits. Her seated grand-

mother wouldn't speak, wouldn't laugh, would hardly even look as if now living was enough for her. Sometimes she'd be reborn in a quick expression of a cunning and indecent face. Virginia would speak to her in a low voice so she wouldn't hear and get annoyed. Her greatest gesture of rage or contempt was spitting to the side; with her dry mouth, she had trouble mustering enough saliva; and by then, distracted from her anger, all she tried to do was spit—propped against the door, her face deeply still and thin, Virginia would peek. The old lady would seem to meditate for a second, her head bent to the side, in the position to which her rage had brought her; then she'd back down with a satisfied and agile look as if she'd saved up enough saliva for everyone; she'd freeze up again, her shining eyes blinking in their slits every once in a while. Virginia would shake from distaste and fear. She'd watch her move her hand leisurely and with a shaky slowness scratch her dry nose. "Don't you die, damned old woman," she'd repeat the servant's phrase angrily to herself. But her grandmother would suddenly let out a sneeze of a cat in the sun and something would mix with Virginia's fear, an ashamed and irritated pity would weigh on her chest. "Don't die, darling little old lady," she'd repeat. The bedroom would darken in her open and staring eyes while she'd press her whole body against the door. And suddenly a movement of life would seem to hurry and fall onto the same level—the feeling of falling when you go to sleep. Im-mutable, immutable.

But sometimes her life was so fast. Lights wander around, Virginia peers at the sky, colors shine beneath the air. Virginia wanders around, the brightness is the air, Virginia breathes brightness, leaves shake unawares, Virginia isn't thinking, the

lights wander around, Virginia peers at the sky ... Sometimes her life was so fast. Her small girlish head was dizzy, she was staring at the field in front of her, peering at Quiet Farm already lost in the distance and looking without trying to understand. In Upper Marsh there was no sea, yet a person could look quickly at the broad meadow, then close her eyes, clutch her own heart and like a child, like a child being born, smell the sweetly rotten odor of the sea. And even if just then the day were hard and new, the plants dry with dust, red and hot summer clouds, the rough sunflowers shaking against space at the end of their thick stalks, even without the happy moistness of the lands beside the waters ... once a bird blossomed from the meadow to the air in sudden flight, made her heart beat quickly in a pale fright. And that was free and light as if someone were walking along the beach. She had never been near the sea but knew what the sea was like, neither would she force her life to express it in thoughts, she knew, that was enough. When you least expected it night arrived, the owl would cry, Daniel could at any moment call her to take a walk, someone could show up at the door delivering some message, she and Daniel would run to find out what it was about, the servant could fall ill, she herself might wake up once a bit later—she was so finely simple during that time. The unexpected didn't exist and the miracle was the revealed movement of things; had a rose blossomed in her body, Virginia would have plucked it with care and with it adorned her hair without smiling. There was a certain amazed and tenuous joy without comic notes—where? ah, a color, the cold plants that seemed to give off small, vacant, and bright sounds in the air, tiny breaths, tremulously alive. Her life was painstaking but at the same time she was living

just a single streak sketched without strength and without end, flat and terrified like the trace of another life; and the most she could do was cautiously follow her glimpses of it. Could everyone know what I know? she would wonder with the stubborn and unintelligent look that was a shared characteristic of the family, her head drooping. She'd stop for an instant at the edge of the field and grow still lying in wait paying close attention to her own possibilities. A long minute would unfurl, of the same color and on the same level as a point emerging from itself in a straight and sluggish line. As long as it lasted everything that existed outside of her was seen only by her eyes in a clean and curious realization. But from one moment to the next, without any warning, she'd shudder delicately gathering all at once the movements contained in the things around her. She'd instantaneously transmit her own movements outside of her mixed with the load received; before long in the country air there was one more element that she was creating by emitting with small mute smiles her own strength. She'd move ahead and freely penetrate the wet grass, her narrow legs would get wet. Everything would spin lightly around itself, the wind on the leaves of the courtyard. Every once in a while, like a little almost inaudible cry and then silence denying it, she'd quickly gain the feeling of being able to live and then she'd lose it forever in a dizzy surprise: what happened? Though the feeling was fleeting as a perfume while you run, almost a lie, it had been exactly that, being able to live ... She said to Daniel:

“What's good and what scares us is that ... for example, I can do my things ... that I've got ahead of me a thing that still doesn't exist, you know?”

Daniel looked straight ahead inflexible:

“And then what? the future ...”

“Yes, but it’s horrible, isn’t it?” she’d say fiery and smiling.

Profoundly ignorant she’d do little exercises and comprehensions involving things like walking, looking at tall trees, waiting on a bright morning for the end of the day but just waiting for an instant, picking out one ant just like all the rest from many, strolling slowly, paying attention to silence by almost grabbing on to a slight sound with her ears, breathing quickly, placing an expectant hand over the heart that didn’t stop, looking emphatically at a stone, at a bird, at her own foot, swinging about with her eyes closed, laughing out loud when she was alone and then listening, dropping her body onto the bed without the least strength almost aching all over from such an effort to annihilate herself, trying coffee without sugar, looking at the sun until she cried without pain—space would then turn woozy as before a terrible rain—, carrying in the palm of her hand a little bit of river without spilling it, placing herself beneath a flagpole in order to look up and grow dizzy with herself—changing with care the way she lived. The things that would inspire her were so brief. Vaguely, vaguely, if she’d been born, plunged her hands in the water and died, she’d exhaust her strength and her forward movement would have been complete—that was her impression without thoughts.

In the afternoon the palm trees had been knocked down for some reason and great palm leaves hard and verdant were covering themselves nervously with ants that went up and went down mysteriously carrying out a mission or having fun for a reason. Virginia kneeled down peering at them. She lifted her eyes and saw white smoke rising in the distance, amidst the black kindling. A quick kaleidoscope movement and a still image was taking shape, insoluble and nothing beyond: grasses standing in the sun, hot and calm sun, warm rows of ants, thick

stalks of palm, the earth pricking her knees, her hair falling in her eyes, the wind piercing through the rip in her dress and coolly brightening her arm, veiled smoke dissolving in the air and all this connected by the same mysterious interval—an instant after she raised her head and made out the smoke in the distance, an instant before she lowered her head and felt new things. And she also knew vaguely, almost as if she were making it up, that inside that interval there was yet another instant, small, pallid, and placid, without having inside her any of the things she was seeing, like that, like that. And how poor and free were she and Daniel. The whole world could laugh at both of them and they wouldn't do anything, wouldn't find out a thing. People said they were sad but they were happy. Sometimes Daniel would come talk to her about running away someday—both knew that they didn't quite want that. She'd lift her head from the ground and see above her lips trembling from nascent imagination a badly drawn arc of already-dried coffee-with-milk! She'd turn aside eyes suddenly wounded in the most tender spot in her heart and haughty, frightened, stumble amidst repugnance, tears, and contempt, at wit's end, living, living. She'd finally fall into a deep and intolerable devotion, brutal with herself and that eventually drove her to a kind of intimate glory, a bit miserable too. During that time she'd feel quite sorry for herself, with an almost voluptuous violence, feeling in her mouth a flashing taste of blood. In secret, she felt sorry for everything, for the most powerful things. Sometimes, terrified by a scream from her father, her eyes low and frightened would light on those thick boots where a gray shoestring was hesitating to be of use. And suddenly, without warning, all her flesh hurting as if a sweet acid were covering her all at

once, she'd slide toward a martyrdom of understanding and her eyes would be covered with moist tenderness. People were so ridiculous!, she felt like crying from joy and shame at being alive. That was her impression. Father was coming in the wagon, asking:

"What's going on? Virginia's crying?"

"No, singing," the black woman would answer. "She's been singing loud, loud ballads for hours, it's awful."

She was skinny and dirty, the long veins of her neck were trembling—she'd sing awfully, pure sound screaming, going beyond things on their own terms. What mattered were the realms her voice was reaching. First of all, she was still small while standing on the doorstep; meanwhile the notes were rising like soap bubbles, shining and full, and wander off into the brightness of the air; and meanwhile, those soap bubbles belonged to her, to her who was small while standing on the doorstep. That's how it was. And it was also in her nature to know how to imitate the cries of animals, sometimes of animals that didn't exist but could exist. They were guarded voices, round in the throat, howling, crazy, and rather small. She could also make sharp and sweet calls like those of lost animals. But suddenly things were rushing into a resistant reality. One day Father found her crying; she was almost a big girl looking distractedly at the clouds that were moving past. Stupefied he'd asked:

"But why? Why?"

Everything had grown difficult then, he'd come and was boring her. And since she didn't know how to answer she made something up:

"Daniel and I can't live here forever ..."