

## *The History of the Measure of Memory*

The eldest of our elders tell that the first gods, those who gave birth to the world, parceled out memory among the men and women who walked in the world. "Memory is good," the greatest gods said and told, "because it is the mirror that helps us understand the present and promises the future."

The first gods measured out memory with a small cup in order to parcel it out, and every man and woman came by to receive a measure of memory.

But some of the men and women were larger than the others, so the measure of memory seemed not equal to the rest. In the smaller persons, memory shone clearly and in the larger persons it was made opaque. That's why it is said that memory is greatest and strongest in the small people, and it is difficult to find in the powerful. That is why they also say that men and women become smaller and smaller when they grow old, so that memory will shine more brightly. They say that it is the work of the eldest of the elders to make memory great. And they also say that dignity is nothing more than memory that lives. That's what they say.



*The Story of the Sword, The Tree, The Stone and the Water*  
(TOLD ME BY OLD DON ANTONIO)

Old Antonio is chewing on his pipe. He's chewing at his words too, giving them form and meaning. Old Antonio speaks. The rain stops to listen, and the water and the darkness take a rest.

"Our grandparents from a long time ago had to confront the foreigner that came to conquer these lands.

"The stranger came to impose a different way of life upon us—a different way of talking, a different faith, different gods and different justice. It was only his justice that mattered to him and so he stripped us of ours.

"His god was gold. His faith was his superiority. His words were lies. His way of life was cruelty. Our heroes, the greatest warriors, confronted him. There were great battles between the peoples of these lands to defend the land against the hand of the stranger.

"But great also was the strength of the stranger's hand. Great and excellent warriors fell fighting and they died. The battles continued. Few were the warriors now, and so the women and the children took up the weapons of those that fell.

"The wisest of the grandfathers came together then and they told each other the story of the sword, the tree, the stone and the water.

"They told each other how in the oldest of times and there in the mountains men banded together to work and defend themselves.

"The gods were hanging around as was their usual habit. Or it could be they were sleeping, because they were really loafers, these gods, not like the greatest of gods, the ones that birthed the world, the first gods.

"In a small corner of the dawn, the man and the woman were exhausting each other's body and growing in their hearts. The night was being silence. It was quiet because it knew that only a little of itself remained. Then the sword spoke.

"A sword like this one"—Old Antonio interrupts himself and grabs a large double-edged machete in his fist. Sparks from the fire flicker a brief moment, then shadow. Old man Antonio continues:

"Then the sword spoke and said, 'I am the strongest of all and I can destroy all of you. My blade cuts and I give power to those who hold me and death to those who confront me.'

"'That's a lie!' said the tree. 'I am the strongest. I have resisted the wind and the fiercest storm.' The sword and the tree fought each other. The tree made itself strong and hard and fought against the sword. The sword slashed and slashed at the trunk until it toppled the tree.

"I am the strongest," the sword said again.

"'That's a lie!' said the stone. 'I am the strongest because I am hard and ancient. I am heavy and solid.' And so the sword and the stone fought. The stone made itself hard and dense and fought against the sword. The sword slashed and slashed and could not destroy the stone, but it broke the stone into many pieces. The sword lost its sharpness, and the stone was scattered in pieces.

"'It's a draw!' said the sword and the stone, and they wept together about how futile their battle had been.

"Meanwhile the water in the arroyo was watching the fight and saying nothing. The sword looked at the water and said: 'You are the weakest of all! You can't do nothing to anybody. I am stronger than you!' And the sword slashed against the water of the arroyo with great force. The sword made a great big fuss and a lot of noise. The fish got scared, and the water did not resist the sword's blow.

"Little by little, without saying anything, the water took its shape again, wrapping itself around the sword. Then it went on its way to the river that would take it to the big water which the gods had made to cure themselves of thirst.

"Time passed, and the sword in the water began to grow old and rusty. It lost its edge. The fish would approach it without fear and would mock it. Embarrassed, the sword retreated from the water of the arroyo.

"Without sharpness and defeated, it complained: 'I am stronger than the water, but I cannot harm her. And the water, without fighting, has conquered me.'

"The dawn passed and the sun came to wake up the man and the woman who had tired each other to make themselves new. The man and the woman found the stone in a dark corner, the stone broken into pieces, the tree toppled over, and the water of the arroyo singing...

"Our grandfathers finished telling each other the story of the sword, the tree, the stone and the water by saying:

"'There are times when we must fight as if we are a sword confronted by a wild animal. There are times when we must fight like a tree in the midst of the storm. There are times when we must fight like a stone confronting the elements. But there are times when we must fight like the water fought against the sword.

"Now is the hour of turning ourselves into water so we can continue on our way toward the river that carries us to the big water where the gods cure their thirst, the gods that birthed the world, the first gods."

"This is what our grandfathers did, says Old Antonio. "They resisted like the water resists the most savage of blows. The foreigner came here with his power and scared the weak. He thought he had won, but with time he became full of old rust. The stranger ended up in a corner full of shame and without understanding why, if he had won, he ended up lost."

Old Antonio once more lights his pipe with his wood of the campfire. And he adds: "So this was how our greatest and wisest grandfathers won the great war against the foreigner. The stranger left. We are here, and like the water of the arroyo we continue traveling to the river that will take us to the great water where the oldest of gods cure their thirst, those gods that birthed the world, the first ones..."

## *The Story of the Cold Foot and the Hot Foot*

(TOLD ME BY DURITO BLACK SHIELD, THE LITTLE BROWN BEETLE)

Once there were two feet that were together. They were together, but not united. The one was cold, and the other was hot. The cold foot said to the hot foot, "You are very hot." And the hot foot said to the cold foot, "You are very cold." They were fighting each other like that when Hernán Cortés arrived and burned them both.

"Is it over?" I ask, unbelieving.

"Of course! It is a story, not one of your press conferences," he answers me. I look at him with reproach. He says:

"Enough. It's fine. Let me think . . . mmmh, mmmh, I know! At the end write: 'And Hernán Cortés lived happily ever after . . . and that's not the end of the story.'"

"It isn't?" I ask him, while I put the paper in my pocket.

"Of course not! There are still many cold and hot feet, so Hernán Cortés might end up having a very disagreeable surprise."

## *The Story of the Bean-brown Horse* (TOLD ME BY DURITO)

There once was a brown horse that was brown like a bean, and he lived in the home of a very poor farmer. And the poor farmer had a very poor wife, and they had a very thin chicken and a lame little pig. And so, one day the very poor farmer's wife said:

"We have nothing more to eat because we are very poor, so we must eat the very thin chicken." So they killed the very thin chicken and made a thin soup and ate it. And so, for a while, they were fine; but the hunger returned and the very poor farmer told his very poor wife:

"We have nothing more to eat because we are so poor, so we must eat the lame little pig." And so the lame little pig's turn came and they killed it and they made a lame soup and ate it. And then it was the bean-brown horse's turn. But the bean-brown horse did not wait for the story to end; it just ran away and went to another story.

"Is that the end of the story?" I asked Durito, unable to hide my bewilderment.

"Of course not. Didn't you hear me say that the bean-brown horse fled to another story?" he said as he prepared to leave.

"And so?" I ask exasperated.

"And so nothing—you have to look for the bean-brown horse in another story!" he said, adjusting his hat.

"But, Durito!" I said, protesting uselessly.

"Not one more word! You tell the story like it is."

## *The Story of the Little Wisp of a Cloud*

Once upon a time, there was a cloud who was very tiny and very lonely and used to stray far from the big clouds. She was very little, barely a wisp of a cloud. And whenever the big clouds made themselves rain so as to paint the mountains green, the little cloud would come flying to offer her services. But they scorned her because she was so small.

"You have nothing to give," the big clouds used to tell her. "You're so little."

They made terrible fun of her. Then, very sad, the little cloud would try to go off somewhere else to make herself rain, but wherever she went, the big clouds would push her aside. So the little cloud went even farther off until she came to a very dry place, so dry there wasn't a single branch growing, and the little cloud told her mirror (I forgot to tell you this little cloud carried a mirror so she could talk to herself when she was alone):

"This is the perfect spot to make myself rain because nobody ever comes here."

The little cloud made a great effort to make herself rain, and finally let out one little drop. That is, the little cloud disappeared and turned herself into a little raindrop. Little by little, the little cloud, now a little raindrop, came falling down. All on her lonesome, she fell and she fell, but there was nothing waiting for her down below. At last, the little raindrop splashed down all by herself. Since that desert was so very quiet, the little raindrop made a lot of noise when she splashed down, right on a stone. It woke up the Earth, who asked:

"What's that noise?"

"It was a raindrop falling," the stone answered.

"A raindrop? That means it's going to rain! Quick! Get up! It's going to rain!" she warned the plants hiding underground from the sun.

And the plants got right up and took a peek, and for a moment the whole desert was covered in green, and then the big clouds saw all that green from afar and said:

"Look. There's a lot of green over there. Let's make ourselves rain on that place. We didn't know it was so green."

And they went to make themselves rain on the place that had been desert.

They rained and rained and the plants grew and everything seemed to turn green at once.

"It's a lucky thing we're around," said the big clouds. "Without us, there'd be no green."

And nobody remembered then the little wisp of a cloud who let out one raindrop whose splash woke up the sleeping ones.

Nobody remembered, but the stone kept the little raindrop's secret. Time passed, and those first big clouds disappeared and those first plants died. And the stone, who never dies, told the new plants who were born and the new clouds who arrived the tale of the little wisp of a cloud who let out a little raindrop.

# JUNGLE STORIES

as told by El Sup Marcos



## The Parrot's Victory (UPDATING AN OLD STORY)

Once there was a parrot who knew only one word: "victory." Yes, sir, the days came and went, and on one of those days when our poor parrot was sitting on his perch without a care in the world, a hawk set his eye on him and swept him away through God's air. The poor green thing clutched in the hawk's claws began to complain, but he couldn't say a thing except the one word he knew by heart. Each peck the hawk gave drew forth a cry of "victory." A peck, a "victory," another peck, another "victory." The whole while he was being pecked to pieces, he kept saying "victory."

Today, you can replace "victory" with "democracy," "independence," or "justice." The role of the parrot can be played by the bureaucrat of your choice.

## The Tale of the Little Newsboy

Once upon a time there was a little newsboy who was very, very poor and he only sold old newspapers because he didn't have enough money for new ones. People didn't buy his newspapers because they were all so out of date, and they wanted new newspapers. So the little newsboy never sold any, and every day he accumulated more and more old newspapers. What the little newsboy did was put up a paper recycling plant, and he became a millionaire, bought out all the newspaper businesses and the news agencies, prohibited publishing current news, and thus obliged people to read only news of the past. In the papers on sale today, for example, you'd read that the Zapatistas are about to arrive in Mexico City and that they'll meet with the Villistas there. You can't quite make out the date, but it seems to be either 1914 or 2001.

## The Tale of the Little Seamstress

Once upon a time, there was a little seamstress who sewed mightily on his sewing machine. The other machines in his neighborhood laughed at him, and shouted: "Fairy! Only old women are seamstresses!" So the little seamstress sewed shut the mouths of everyone who made fun of him. That's why, to this day, we don't know how the story ended, because no one could tell it.

## The Story of the Live Person and the Dead Person

Once there was a live person and a dead person. And the dead person said to the live person: "My, I envy your restlessness." And then the live person said to the dead person: "My, I envy your tranquillity." And there they were, envying each other, when suddenly, a bean-brown horse went by at full gallop. The moral of the story is that all "final options" are a trap. It's imperative to find the bean-brown horse.

## Above and Below are Relative to the Struggle Waged to Subvert Them

Once upon a time, there was a little floor who was very sad because everything happened above him. "What are you complaining about?" the other floors asked him. "What else can a floor expect?" So the little floor never spoke of his dream that, suddenly light, he could fly up into the sky where the little cloud would fall in love with him, the little cloud who showed up, from time to time, and never paid any attention to him. The little floor just grew more and more unhappy, until his sorrow was so great he started to weep. To weep and weep and weep and weep. And weep and weep and weep. The little floor wept so much that all the things sitting on top and people walking above him began to slip off. The next thing you knew, there was nothing and no one above him, and the little floor had wept so much that he became very light. Now that nothing was on him, the little floor started to float upward and flew very high up. He finally got his own way, for now he is called Sky. And the cloud in question became rain and fell to the ground, from where she writes him letters, in vain, saying: "Cielito lindo—pretty little sky." The moral of this story: Don't look at what is down below you, for when you least expect it, it could fall on your head.

## The Story of the Tiny Mouse and the Tiny Cat

There once was a tiny mouse who was very hungry and wanted to eat a tiny bit of cheese, which was in the tiny kitchen of a tiny house. Very decidedly, the tiny mouse went to the tiny kitchen to grab the tiny bit of cheese. But, it so happened that a tiny cat crossed his path, and the tiny mouse became very frightened and ran away and was not able to get the tiny bit of cheese from the tiny kitchen. Then the tiny mouse was thinking of what to do to get the tiny bit of cheese from the tiny kitchen and he thought and he said: "I know. I am going to put out a small plate with a little milk and the tiny cat is going to start drinking the milk because tiny cats like very much a little milk. And then, when the tiny cat is drinking the little milk and is not paying attention, I am going to the tiny kitchen to grab the tiny bit of cheese and I am going to eat it. That's a veery good idea," said the tiny mouse to himself. And then he went to look for the milk, but it turns out that the milk was in the tiny kitchen, and when the tiny mouse wanted to go to the tiny kitchen, the tiny cat crossed his path and the tiny mouse was very frightened and ran and could not get the milk. Then the tiny mouse was thinking of what to do to get the milk in the tiny kitchen and he thought and he said: "I know. I am going to toss a tiny fish very far away and then the tiny cat is going to run to go eat the tiny fish, because tiny cats very much like tiny fish. And then, when the tiny cat is eating the tiny fish and is not paying attention, I am going to go to the tiny kitchen to grab the tiny bit of cheese and I am going to eat it. That's a veery good idea," said the tiny mouse. Then he went to look for the tiny fish, but it happened that the tiny fish was in the tiny kitchen, and when the tiny mouse wanted to go to the tiny kitchen, the tiny cat crossed his path and the tiny mouse became very frightened and ran away and could not go to get the tiny fish. And then the tiny mouse saw that the tiny bit of cheese, the milk, and the tiny fish, everything that he wanted, was in the tiny kitchen, and he could not get there because the tiny cat would not allow it. And then the tiny mouse said: "Enough!" and he grabbed a machine gun and shot the tiny cat, and he went to the tiny kitchen and he saw that the tiny fish, the milk, and the tiny bit of cheese had gone bad and could not be eaten. So he returned to where the tiny cat was, cut it in pieces, and made a great roast. Then, he invited all his friends, and they partied and ate the roasted tiny cat, and they sang and danced and lived very happily.

Old Don Antonio says that when he was young, his father Don Antonio taught him how to kill a lion without a gun. Old Don Antonio says that when he was Young Antonio and his father was Old Don Antonio, his father told him the story that he now whispers in my ear so the sea will only be able to learn it from my lips.

## The Story of the Lion and the Mirror

First, the lion tears its prey apart. Then he drinks the blood, eats the heart, and leaves the rest for the vultures. There's nothing that can overwhelm the lion's strength. There's no animal that can confront him, nor any man who doesn't flee from him. Only a force just as brutal, bloodthirsty, and powerful can defeat a lion. The Old Don Antonio of then rolled his cigarette and, pretending to mind the logs forming the bright star of the campfire flames, looked out of the corner of his eye at the Young Antonio. Antonio asked him: "And what is this force great enough to defeat a lion?" The Old Don Antonio handed the Young Antonio a mirror. "Me?" asked the Young Antonio, looking at himself in the round mirror. Old Don Antonio smiled good-humoredly (that is what the young Antonio says) and took the mirror from him. "No, not you," he responded. By showing you the mirror, I meant the strength which can defeat the lion is the lion's own strength. Only the lion himself can defeat the lion." "Ah!" said the Young Antonio, just to be saying something. Old Don Antonio understood that the Young Antonio hadn't understood a thing, so he went on with his story. "When we understood that only a lion could defeat a lion, we began to think of how to make the lion confront himself. The eldest of the elders in the community said that you had to know the lion and they named one boy to get to know him." "You?" interrupted the Young Antonio. Old Don Antonio's silence became his confirmation, and after rearranging the logs on the fire, he continued: "They took the boy up to the top of a ceiba and left a tied-up calf at its base, and they went away. The boy was supposed to watch what the lion did with the calf, wait for the lion to go away, and then return to the community to tell them what he'd seen. And that is what he did. The lion came, killed and tore the calf apart, and afterward he drank its blood, ate its heart, and left as the buzzards were circling, waiting for their turn. The boy went back to the community and told them what he'd seen. The eldest of the elders thought for a while, and said: "Let the death the predator inflicts be his death," and they gave the boy a mirror, some nails, and a calf. "Tomorrow will be the night of justice," said the elders, and they went back to their thoughts. The young boy did not understand. He went to his hut and stayed there for a good while, watching the fire. And that's where he was when his father came and asked him what was happening; the boy told him everything. The boy's father sat silently next to him, and after a while, he spoke. The boy began to smile as he listened to his father. The next day, when the afternoon had already turned to gold and the gray of night had draped itself over the treetops, the boy left the community and walked to the ceiba carrying the calf. When he reached the foot of the Mother Tree, he killed the calf and took out its heart. Then he broke the mirror into lots of little pieces and stuck the pieces into the heart with some of the blood. Then he opened the heart again and put the nails inside. He put the heart back in the calf's chest and made a frame with stakes to keep the calf on its feet as if it were still alive. The boy climbed up to the top of the tree and waited there above. While the night let itself fall from the trees to the ground, he remembered his father's words: "The same death the predator inflicts." It was night when the lion returned. The animal approached, and with one leap attacked the calf and tore it apart. When he licked the heart, the lion became suspicious because the blood was dry, but the broken mirror shards cut his tongue and made it bleed. The lion thought the blood from his own mouth was from the calf's heart. Excited, he chewed up the whole heart. The nails made him bleed even more, but the lion still thought the blood in his mouth was the calf's. He chewed and he chewed, and the more the lion cut himself, the more he bled, and the more he bled, the more he chewed. The lion kept chewing until he bled to death. The boy returned with the lion's claws strung in a necklace, and he showed it to the eldest of the elders in the community. They smiled and told him, "It isn't the claws you should keep as a trophy of the victory, but the mirror." That's how Old Don Antonio says the lion killed himself. But along with the mirror, Old Don Antonio always carries his old flint rifle. "Just in case the lion doesn't know his history," he tells me, smiling and winking an eye. On my other side, the sea adds: "In case the lion doesn't know..."

## The Story of the Fish in the Water

Old Don Antonio tells a story that the eldest of the elders in his community once told him. He says once upon a time there was a very beautiful fish who lived in the river. The lion saw the fish and had a sudden craving for it. But when the lion reached the river, he realized that he couldn't swim and get to the fish. So the lion asked the opossum for advice, who told him: "It's very simple. Fish can't live out of water. All you have to do is drink all the water out of the river. The fish will be left high and dry and then you can catch him and eat him." The lion was very pleased with the opossum's advice and rewarded him with a position in his kingdom. The lion went to the edge of the river and began to drink. He died when all that water burst him into pieces. The opossum became unemployed.