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Three Stories

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DIVERSIONS

Among the methods they used to demoralize the enemy, one was truly odd. A border factory made ten-faced dice, numbered from one to ten by means of little black stars stamped in bas-relief on a white background. They also made some in other colors: white on black, red and blue, ochre and black, etc.

In general, they came in pairs of complementary colors. The objective of constructing ten-sided dice was to make quick discernment of a throw difficult, a difficulty that was increased by the astigmatic effect the little stars produced on the homogenous background. Besides, the very shape of the die—a regular decahedron, hard to distinguish—was disturbing, irritating.

When the die fell, one couldn't easily know on what face it landed nor which was, definitively, the face aimed at the sky, the one that would give the result. The dice came dangerously close to spherical form—in the smallest models the edges appeared to be almost rounded, and the die often rolled like a little ball.

This game produced interminable and fierce discussions among its contestants. During the breaks that followed long marches through the desert, dice filled leisure time and caused more deaths than the war. One never knew the outcome with certainty: soldiers bet and argued among themselves, believing each other to be cheating. A fistfight and a body falling to the ground didn't end the debate. The cadaver was hardly covered with sand and the army continued its march, but on the next break the game resumed and with it debate and death.

Soldiers gambled for junk, almost never for money: a medal, a couple cans of conserves, sometimes a snuffed out cigarette were wagered. They died for those trifles. For them and because of the dice of ten faces.

Curiously, the number "nine" replaced the traditional "six" of the cube dice, and whoever threw it was considered either enormously lucky or enormously unlucky, depending on the mood of the game and the temperament of the gambler.

In general, "one" was considered bad, and shifty players perforated the one star with a tiny prick at the center, filling it with liquid lead or mercury and sealing it again, so that the "one," weighing more, would always land on the down side.

Suicidals and neophytes always bet on the "one."

Sergeants preferred the "five," corporals the "two," and women soldiers, out of superstition, abstained from betting. The same policy was observed by lieutenants and captains.

The High Command considered statistics which indicated that the number wounded in gambling disputes significantly surpassed those wounded at the front and even the

number wounded in related accidents, like the explosion of a munitions depot or the crash of a transport vehicle. They were afraid to prohibit the die of ten faces because it had already taken root in the ranks, and in any case, it wasn't possible to ban it without thinking of what would substitute for it.

Since several planes landed face up, bettors began to work together, and when they won, collected the prize and celebrated together. This created groups of bettors and, soon enough, rivalry between groups. In certain companies, the gambling groups operated like a real fraternity, and their fellow feeling made them undertake foolhardy acts: if one of them needed to leave the trench to cover a retreat, the others followed suit. If one had to move near a mine field, they did it en masse, with the predictable disastrous result.

Entire companies were lost because of the gambling group problem. In the cities, on liberty, gambling groups went to taverns, all asked for the same brand of beer and simultaneously inhaled their lines of cocaine. Even in the brothels, the gambling group spirit caused problems. The soldiers went in five or six at the same time with one woman, and truly grotesque scenes took place.

The rapid decay of bodies in the desert resulted in an abundance of human skeletons. A foot bone, the talus or anklebone, fitted back to back with a lead plate (in reality, a 0.650 caliber shell, previously flattened by a tank) rivaled in part the dice of ten faces. The "duca," as it was known in the border meridian of the desert, was a game infinitely more simple. "Duca full" meant the bone fell "upwards," with the lead plate face up; "duca empty," meant the lead side faced down.

The process by which the two faces had equal probability of landing face up or down, consisted in putting a shell of equal weight, disguised by white paint, in a natural crevice of the bone on the "free side."

The duca was a more peaceful game that, curiously, led soldiers to stupefaction and to pervasive fatigue because of its monotonous mechanism.

The number of casualties due to duca was sharply less than those that the decahedron dice produced. At most, in some camp and due to a lack of supplies, some soldier was killed and boned to extract the two anklebones and thus acquire the game pieces needed to combat boredom. Arguments were less numerous and also less passionate. The soldiers were also more suppressed, less active. The ten-faced dice inflamed them, arousing them to fight in a state of high physical and emotional capacity. The duca, on the contrary, tended to make them somnambulant, distance them from actions and things. A vanguard group died because its members continued to throw the duca even after the enemy had been seen on the horizon. When the enemy fell on them, they surrendered to death with resignation and indifference. A head rolled and stopped a few meters from the duca with which it had played, the open eyes locked on the "full face" of the device. Surely the dead man had bet on that outcome.

The enemy, then on an accelerating advance, succeeded in taking two key positions that included provisions storehouses, munitions depots, and a small communications center. Intelligence officers found what they at first thought was a secret code. Actually, it was a crude rule book for the game of duca, hand written by a private. The enemy soldiers found

various anklebones of different sizes together with numerous games of ten-faced dice that they immediately recognized as tools of war.

The Enemy Allied Staff couldn't prevent their own soldiers from beginning to play with the ten-faced dice, occupying thus their hours of idleness and repeating (now on the other side of the war) the same situation of continuous quarrels and pointless deaths. The game of the duca, with its provisional rules, resulted in the same drowsiness and apathy in the enemy ranks.

In the season of the East Winds, the war began its traditional recess and that occasion was used to arrange a provisional truce. Decahedron dice and duca championships were organized between the opposing bands. A brewery was built near the front to supply contenders and spectators. A general was killed in a confused episode in which two dice players of divided opinions had applied to the general to settle the dispute. A general of the other band, witness of the incident, declared that the death was due to an unfortunate misunderstanding, and the episode had no further consequences.

Two duca addicts boned a woman who had served as a soldier and as assistant cook in one of the big tents with the end of extracting the bones needed for the game. To cover up the murder, they dumped the chunks of remaining meat in the stewpot. When the disappearance was discovered, it was already too late: more than two hundred members of both bands had devoured the stew with pleasure, among them a score of ranking officers. The shock was taken so philosophically by the respective High Commands that in time a custom was instituted of sacrificing a female soldier chosen at random by a throw of duca, with the stipulation that her flesh would supply the inaugural banquet of the truce, and her anklebones would be used in the Opening Game as guarantee and pledge of peace.

The protests of the women were silenced by adding an extra game, the proceeds of which went to purchase nylons and fine linen that were distributed to those interested at the conclusion of the banquet when the games were officially inaugurated. On signing the Total Peace Accord some time later, the placement of the cornerstone of a "Decadeum" was celebrated—a stadium and sports complex seating a hundred thousand people with giant screens to broadcast games, a coliseum that would be dedicated exclusively to the promotion and growth of activities linked to the game of decahedron dice.

By agreement, the other band laid the cornerstone of a "Ducadrome" of similar specifications.

The principal cemeteries bordering the major cities of the two countries even today continue the practice of offering anklebones, essential material for the manufacture of the simple "duca."

Substitutes of acrylic or synthetic material have been repeatedly rejected by the aficionados of this game, who prefer the nobility and the subtle corrugation of the touch of the original material.

CASANOVA

for Edgar Lee Masters, wherever he is

William Denninson, William Olaf Denninson.

Such is my name. I live on a section of property which I inherited from my father when I was twenty. On it I built a modest house, and in it I put modest furniture. I supplied the kitchen with the essentials, and I have practically nothing else except the clothes on my back. And a Bible.

My history is like that of many others: gray, average, absurd. But there is a detail that makes me distinct, by which they know me in the county, and because of which women dream timorously of me in the hot nights. It is a part of my body which ostensibly glows, a deformed lump that takes root at the nape of my neck. It is its shape which attracts and repels people.

The history of the world has given us thousands of hunchbacks and deformed people, anonymous and famous. I count among the former, but I'm convinced I am not just like them. No sir. The rock of my back isn't a mere alteration of the dorsal spine; it isn't a hardened callus of dry flesh covered with shoe leather. Through the years, I've seen and even touched other humps. Even palpitated the hump of a dromedary in the local zoo, but it wasn't like mine. None of them are like mine. I have to walk very carefully on the street, shouldn't let anyone slap me on the back or cause a hematoma with a blow. But those precautions are in general easily taken because no one comes too close to me. I ought to take more precautions with women. They certainly cause me problems! They are curious; they want to touch, they want to see, they want to take hold of. They aren't satisfied with passing their hands over it. No! They want to gently rub and then squeeze, as if the brief shiver in which they submerge me gives them pleasure.

Some go too far. Frequently they are the ones who in the beginning were the most timid. They are slow to approach, put on disgusted or disgraced faces, even looks of extreme loathing, but then when I am naked they don't restrain themselves: they throw themselves on me, and I can't stop them. Women who with their husbands close their eyes, require a nightgown and the lights out, with me turn themselves loose. I have been inconvenienced by that, but I'm not complaining.

Some day I will tell the story of some of them, those who, completely leaving their cocoons of shyness, demonstrated their capacity to explode, let themselves be transported by the frenzy I provoked in them. When I see some of them on the street, they turn their heads, but I know they remember every moment they spent with me. They know how to pretend.

The more maternal among them give me things. My house is permanently sprinkled with breadcrumbs, my kitchen accustomed to always having a few apple or strawberry tarts, secretly sent. Once, a woman knitted me a cover for the hump, and I will never forget the passionate words written in the accompanying card. I use the cover to travel the long county roads in winter.

On occasion, from one or another little house, a shapely young woman will come to hand me some hot rolls or a little jam and invite me over. I'm not in the habit of resisting,

but I do everything as fast as possible and don't enjoy it much, since I fear the imminent return of the man of the house. Although this has never happened, nor will happen, I prefer to do it in my own house, in the tranquility of my own home, although it is colder, and they sometimes have misgivings about entering. But it ends with them enjoying themselves, and they come back again. So much so that I am obliged to throw out the most insistent ones, or I wouldn't be able to handle it.

The mayor's wife has asked me to come to her house on Sundays, when her husband goes rabbit hunting with the town notables. The pretext is that I go to read the Bible to her, as she claims that the tone of my voice calms her. I know very well that it's a question of something else. But I will go.

Given my attractive peculiarity, I practically don't have to work. I get a little money here and there, wrapped in belts of silk with daring letters. But I don't sell my services. That would be dishonorable. Nor do I give them for nothing. I accept gifts as gestures of approbation and love, but I never ask for payment. I don't make a business with my gifts. They give stuff to me because they want to, and I receive it willingly, grateful to them, but especially to God, who gave me his measure.

Young men have also come to consult me, to ask my opinion about this or that. Often their motives for consulting me are related to the best way of approaching and seducing a woman. Poor boys! They don't understand that I can't help them. My secret is in plain view, and I share it with everyone, even permit them to caress and touch it. I can't do anything for the average man, no matter how young and ardent he may be, besides offering him my judgment and my experience. The mayor's son, a big boy of sixteen, has tried vainly to imitate me: he puts a plush pillow under his navy coat, below the nape, and goes out to roam the neighborhoods at twilight. Some unwary women approach him, but they soon discover the artifice, and they spurn him, making him feel the diminished, ordinary shoulders he was hiding. They shame him with scornful voices.

He told me that one time he had success in an obscure alley, an hour before dawn, but it was because he managed to get the woman drunk first, and she didn't notice the artifice. Poor boy.

"Willie, Willie Denninson, don't lose what you carry on your back," yells some local child when summer arrives and I have to wear lighter clothing, making my attribute more obvious.

"Willie, Willie, show it to me," calls another shameless young girl.

I, poor snail called William Olaf Denninson, follow my road smiling because I recognize that whatever is said about my appearance or my art is said for good in this place. I bless everyone equally! Sometimes I think the husbands suspect something or know something of my game, but they accept it gladly, incapable of emulating me.

In a way, I bring them peace: they know where their women can go when they are long absent from home. My presence gives them security, permits camaraderie among men short and tall, among bald ones and curly, fat and thin. They all drink their beer in the tavern. No one mistrusts anyone else.

Someone even makes a joke into a game of it:

"Where would your wife be now, Jimmy?" the gravedigger asks insidiously.

"Not with the mayor," responds the chorus.

"Not with the pastor," says a voice at the back of the room.

"Not with the artist," says another. And the chorus, again:

"With Willie! With Willie! With Willie the hunchback!"

The tavern explodes in peals of laughter, and even Jimmy Stevenson, the butt of the joke, crows with them.

I seldom go to the tavern; I prefer to be here, silent in the few moments of repose that these people give me. Sometimes I get together with Printon, the maker of epitaphs. He is one of the few who earns his living honestly in this place.

He reads me the rough draft of an inscription. I sometimes amend it. On occasion, I correct some date, a fact older or younger. Especially if the addressee is a deceased woman I have known, which happens once in a while, since I know almost all the women who die. Then I tell him:

"No, no, no. Laura wasn't envious; what happened was she had a wretched childhood. Privation brought her to that precipice."

Then Printon corrects and sometimes retracts what he said completely. He's a person in whom piety fits like water in a glass, this Printon. He even modified the epitaphs of some of his personal enemies at my suggestion. He destroyed others that could have harmed the next of kin. Entire quatrains of satiric verse that they would have published with pleasure in the Capital, paying good money.

Printon doesn't have a wife, so he's comfortable being with me and shows less fear and caution than other men. But I know that Printon often goes to Rosi's house, and that he pays very well for her services. Rosi came to see me three times in her life: the first when she was a virgin (on leaving my house she wasn't one), the second after her marriage, and the third when she already had dedicated herself entirely to prostitution as a way of life. She thanked me for those three times. She said she needed them.

But getting back to Printon, I maintain before anyone that he is a man of integrity, fair, and by no means lacking poetic talent. That he has had bad luck, that he has chosen a profession poorly regarded by the rest of mortals is another thing. His work is necessary. In a certain way he's like me: he excites fear in people, but they come looking for him. Women also pursue him intensely, harass him, but for very different reasons.

They are curious to know what he will put on their tombs, what he will engrave on their headstones. And they ask him to reiterate the word "virtue" as many times as he can, and they ask that he puts here or there "self-sacrificing mother" or "infinite beauty."

He also receives tempting offers to insult an enemy of someone powerful, or to slander a dead person, engraving in their marble filth that has no more truth than the grudge that the survivor nurses, a grudge which becomes more certain with the death rattles of the one departing, and with his own bile.

He declines to do it, rejects all shady propositions. To no one living does he show his epitaph.

He has made only one exception. And it wasn't because the concerned party asked; it was because he wanted to do it, because he insisted and needed the approval and support of the future dead man.

I don't know if he's written his own, although I suppose that he has to have envisioned it. A man like Printon, very meticulous, wouldn't leave that detail undone. He's confided in me his supposition, which is obvious to anyone who looks, that people hate him because he reminds them of their deaths. And death is pleasing to no one. He knows that when he walks the streets, the mayor's wife shudders because when he looks at her it is to see the cause of her death, the condition of her corpse. He knows that when his own Pastor nods his head briefly and touches the brim of his hat in a sign of respect, he does it with conflicted feelings, desiring to avoid his demise, although he ought to fleetingly remember

Paradise; he knows that when Sam, the barber, cuts his hair, a thousand black thoughts collect in a sigh of the larger blade of his scissors.

Printon knows the frailties, he knows in which direction the dead walk.

He sees everyone equally: the girl in braids as a future death by drowning; the newlywed as a body struck by lightning; the artist, an incandescent meteorite, soon to bum out; and his own Rosi, the prostitute, a cavernous fountain of infection.

Like no one else, better than anyone, Printon sees death in others. Like the women see in me attraction and passionate frenzy.

Yes, Printon has shown it to me. Printon has shown me the epitaph. And he unites destiny and suffering. The virtue of the misfortune and its joy.

It says:

William O. Denninson.

He wore his manhood on his shoulders.

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PERSISTENCE OF THE WEAK

I was born in Sparta almost 3,000 years ago. I lived exactly thirty minutes from the moment I emerged from my mother's womb, my mother who was ashamed of having engendered such a weak son.

The surgeon and midwife who examined me came to the same conclusion: I was not worthy to be a citizen of Sparta. My pale complexion, my brittle bones, my skin wrinkled at birth like an old man's, with forests of small broken veins on the backs of my minuscule hands, and an inhuman transparency like fish skin, like a tadpole's thin membrane, contributed to the grotesque spectacle. I was born frail.

Even my mother was ashamed of me when she saw me: "I was made to bear men, not frogs."

I lived little more than half an hour. Thirty fleeting minutes, passed between the thick, rough palms of those who examined me disdainfully because I was not fit to belong to their warrior class.

I spent those minutes, my brief ration of life on Earth, in the midst of weeping and discordant voices. The doctor, designated by the elders to judge the aptitudes of those born, held me scarcely seconds between big fingers like wood drained of sap, covered with hard bark calluses. In vain I searched for the breast of my mother, who rejected me from the first to the last moment.

My brothers, my companions of genesis, were born strong and muscular, with durable and pliant bones that resisted falls and blows to the flat of the back. They, and only they, were born worthy to wear the coat of arms bearing the bee.

Their muscular torsos, their thick and agile legs have been buried for many centuries already under the weight of oblivion. Their powerful arms, their terrible glands have all disappeared. I died at once, half an hour after being born. I never knew the light of day, since I was born at dawn and before sunrise was cast into the ravine for weakling children,

the abyss of the useless and lacking in valor, the ghost town of the miserable innocents of Sparta, who did not merit a chance on Earth.

I had wanted to write a long poem. A poem hard as the rocks that struck my newborn face in Sparta. A poem with silicon edges and stone fingernails to dig into the meat of things, to shatter destiny as the lime of my spongy bones was shattered.

I had no foundations, nor was I made to endure. Before sunrise of the first day of my life, I lay in the bottom of a ravine and was bland lunch for spiders, another ration with little arms and legs in the feeding trough of crows.

Nor did my father, whose warrior shield disappeared long ago under an ocean of days, see my thin face, which slipped from my mother's womb to fall into life for only a moment. My muscular father, flexible as a cane, glorious with a fleeting glory, for it has already been centuries since anyone remembered his name, did not deign to see me.

I was not. I did not have a name. I have the names of those discarded in that Spartan ravine. My only name is of the embers, not the fire. No more remains of me than the little I was able to be: minutes under the shade of night. Therefore have I come. Therefore have I this brief space of paper on which to return in the hand of another who writes me.

I have endured. My brothers, the strong ones, rotted long ago, and their ready strength and skill, their fierce defense, inspire nothing. They have been.

I am. Dead in Sparta nearly 3,000 years ago, after a breath of life. I return on this paper and in this strange language because I, the weak one, didn't know any language. Unborn for articulated sound and the love of women. I knew only the harsh cry of reprobation, the quick growl of abhorrence in grimacing mouths, not the kiss. This hand writes me, and now I am.

There's an unending river composed of the cadavers of the powerful, the river of the strong, who fall at every moment, the gloomy waters of those who yearn to conquer.

I am on higher ground, far from those shores. And I remain.

translated from the Spanish by Patricia Dubrava

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