THE HELIOTROPE WALL
And Other Stories

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THE KING OF THE ZENNOS

Why did you disinter me from the sea?

RAFAEL ALBERTI

Ferbe was a goatherd in his first infancy, but since the age of nine he had served as an apprentice to a shoemaker. One night he revealed to Mōs, his teacher, that he had seen the zennos near Margarita Cove.

It was a rocky island with vast strands. The sounds of the village —women repairing fishing nets, barking dogs, and the beating wings of a bird—gusted through the beds of reeds and green bulrushes like fanned ashes. Mōs warned Ferbe to keep a prudent silence about his hallucinations. But Ferbe would not admit that they were and he maintained that as he tended his flock in the interior of the island, where moss and a soft, perfumed, and rare herb grew, the zennos had revealed themselves to him on more than one occasion, although in a rather veiled manner.

Again Mōs warned him to keep silent. The times were in turmoil, neither Ferbe's origins nor his own was very clear in the eyes of certain High Ones and Dignitaries. Silence was the best policy.

Ferbe remained quiet for several days. But one night he was absent from the workshop where he usually slept between the sacks of cuttings. Late the next morning he reappeared, pale and with shining eyes; he was covered with sand, and dry seaweed, like that tossed up on the beach by the sea, clung to his clothes.

It was the end of October, the sun was ripe, and a chilling breeze had killed the last flowers in Mōs's kitchen garden. Mōs warned him, "Don't talk to anyone, not even to me, about where you've been."

But nothing could still Ferbe's tongue and he disclosed that the night before he had been crowned king by the zennos. Upon hearing him this time, Mōs became angered and beat him with his staff in an attempt to get some truth out of the lad concerning the so-called zennos. But to no avail, for Ferbe only repeated stubbornly that "When man attains his true and final form the zennos will rise up from the seaweed and sponges in the depths of the sea; and the sea and sky will be as one, and truth and justice will reign; but for that to happen I must not die, nobody must touch me, because I alone was able to hear their voices, see them, and understand them. I must not die until these things come to pass; and for that they have crowned me their king, and I must make the people understand this."

Mōs was unable to grasp any of these confused words pronounced in an opaque voice, as if by a sleepwalker. Never before had he heard such a long paragraph from the lips of Ferbe, a quiet boy with dark, sullen eyebrows and an air about him between rebellious and dejected. Mōs warned him again, grumbling, "Don't repeat this to anyone, stupid boy."

But Ferbe did not heed his advice. He even went to the Plaza del Mercado and recited to the merchants the rules of those singular zennos who had crowned him king.

(It served no purpose to tell the truth. The world, they said, was enormous and full of revenge; men desperately sought out victims through whom to expiate their great guilt. With what ferocious and cutting laughter they persecuted future hostages so that they could drag them to the sacrifice where they could face the Implacable One and say: Look, we give you this one who does you harm. This is how he sometimes saw things, and he kept quiet and said nothing to anyone about himself or the hidden and patient zennos at the bottom of the world, on the other side of the tapestry, in the woof beyond the savage facts. But now they had ordained him, "You will be our king," and he could no longer remain silent. Nor should anyone touch him.)

Mōs reprehended him, trembling: "Leave, go away, and seal

your mouth, or you will burn like a candle!" Mōs was fond of Ferbe and had watched over him since he was a boy, when he still smelled of goat and pastures. Now he feared for both of them, and for his shoe shop. "Seal your mouth, idiot, go quietly to the mountain and pray . . ."

But, instead, Ferbe announced in the Plaza del Mercado: "I am the King of the Zennos."

At first he was mocked and pelted square in the face with fruit peelings, rotten eggs, and the laughter of women and children. Then one day the bailiffs took him away and told him, "You're drunk, sleep it off here," even though not a single drop of wine had touched his lips. The following day they gave him a beating and released him with a warning: "Get out, and don't stir up any more trouble."

But Ferbe's mission forbade his silence. The zennos had told him, "We have been waiting for centuries upon centuries," and he gleaned from their words: "Let us not blind them with so much ire. The anger will explode and the entire world will burn like a horrible sun, fetid and black."

And he said to the potters, to the muleteers, men who came from the East with laden-down asses, and to those who sold vegetables, wine, and cloth: "Last night the zennos made me their king." And if anybody asked, "Who are these zennos?" he replied: "They live and they do not live, they await at the bottom, rocking themselves in the deepest place, and they cry out and proclaim that they will rise up, arriving at the exact hour, and all men will be just. That is why they have made me their king and told me: 'You are clean and innocent, you are our king because you have understood us.' Because no one had ever seen them before, only I."

Ferbe was arrested again and detained for twenty days, and he was given forty lashes. Finally they locked him up, tried him, and condemned him to burn at the stake.

Toward the end of November, on a cold and luminous morning, Ferbe was led, along with ten others, to the designated place. Tied to the stake, he was exhorted again to confess to witchcraft and

dealings with the Evil Enemy, which he denied. He refused all help.

(I am another, it is not the same, we have different causes, and I am horribly tied to this multitude; one of them resists and sobs, and that one there cries out in anger. Fathomless ire consumes the atmosphere of the earth, and none of this is mine, none of this is me. I do not even have a place apart, so have they confused me. What different questions beg to be settled now! I have cried out to Mōs: They have elected me their king, and no one can touch me now. They will come for me and take me to the promised secret place. I know all that a human being can know, the roots and final branches of all things, because I am ignorant and stupid. Mōs says, "Idiot, stupid fool, you are ruining yourself, be quiet." But I have spoken the inevitable, my new condition obliges me, and I cannot help but proclaim it: They have made me their king, I am the king, and no one must touch me.)

Ferbe burned at eleven o'clock in the morning. His body caught fire with great splendor, a white brightness consumed him before his companions, and he betrayed no signs of pain or fear.

At two in the afternoon the smell of burnt flesh filled the entire city, and a mist, black and oily, stuck to the walls of the houses, the trees, and the clothes people wore.

The wind blew above the plazas and strands and ferried the ashes to the sea.

Ferbe's personal belongings—that is, his bowl, his bone spoon, his clothes, the stool where he sat, and the tools he used—were either burned or broken, and thrown to the sea.

Mōs wept all night. But time passed and he forgot all about Ferbe.

(II)

Mario Green-Jacket was born a sailor, and in his old age he had purchased an ancient café-tavern near the wharf.

Some mornings he would rise early and go down to the beach to fish for crabs around Margarita Cove.

One such morning—the sun had scarcely detached itself from the sea—he saw the boy. He was moving through the water toward the shore, advancing with difficulty, shining like a star, with the sun at his back. As the boy approached him Mario saw that he was naked and exhausted, like the victim of a shipwreck.

Mario hastened to remove his jacket (which was no longer green but almost black) and he held it out to him.

"From what shipwreck are you, son?"

But the boy gave no answer. He shivered, shining and soaking wet. Mario Green-Jacket closed the lapels over the boy's damp and resplendent chest and took hold of his hand, strangely warm, and questioned him. The boy remained silent, and Mario thought that he must be dumb, or afraid, or maybe he had lost his mind.

Mario took him home to the tavern. He gave him clothes, made him coffee, and sat him next to the recently lit stove, talking to him as gently as possible.

The boy backed away from the stove; his lips and cheeks were pink and not at all blue like those of someone who had fought for his life in the sea.

Mario Green-Jacket went to report his find to the Authorities. But there was no news of any shipwreck. Peace reigned along those shores and the sea seemed pacified like a sleeping dragon. Mario told himself that perhaps the youngster came from some contraband boat, of which there were many in those waters, and regretted that he might have said too much. He washed his hands of the boy, and the Authorities and Responsible People committed him to an insane asylum not very far from there.

But Mario Green-Jacket did not have any children of his own and could not stop thinking about the boy. He requested permission to visit him. Finally it was granted. They had cropped off his hair, which had been long, and he was dressed in a coarse, woollen-cloth shirt. Mario thought he looked like a young saint because of the dreaming limpidity of his blue eyes. Docile and

surprisingly indifferent, the lad seemed incapable of resistance of any kind. They told Mario that he had caused no problems and that he was submissive and quiet to the point of making himself unnoticeable. He appeared to have been mistreated, judging by the scars of whippings on his back and arms. "Perhaps," said the Director, "he was a Sarracene slave, and a miracle has brought him to these shores. I can divine in him a marvelous tenacity." Mario was no expert in these matters but he assented obligingly, since these words were in no way unfavorable to the boy. On the other hand, the young survivor of the shipwreck—or whatever he was—seemed neither to remember nor to desire anything. Nor could he read or write.

Mario Green-Jacket initiated a series of arrangements by which he could take the boy home with him. After some time, and the imposing of certain conditions, he was able to do so.

It was the beginning of spring when he finally took him home. He had bought him an old frock coat which, although a little large, gave him a certain royal look. Mario took him by the hand, sat him down, and made coffee for him. Several times he asked, "What's your name?" But he received no answer.

As the days passed he taught the boy how to make coffee in the big tin pitcher, how to fry ring-shaped crullers, and how to serve anisette in the mornings when the tavern filled with people either going to or returning from the boats. The boy learned how to prepare and serve crabs, scalding them in boiling water and cooking them in an aromatic sauce from the Widow Salvadora's recipe. She was one of Mario's relatives and his nearest neighbor.

Some mornings Mario would take him to the rocks of Margarita Cove and teach him how to fish for crabs. The shipwrecked boy would sit off to one side and stare at the sea, quiet as a dead person. Nothing could shake him from his abstraction. But Mario needed his company and together they would return home in silence. Maybe the boy was deaf, he had thought, but if he was asked for something in the tavern he responded unerringly. Soon he became known to everyone: they called him the Shipwrecked

Boy. Sometimes Mario would take his left hand and say, "Son, your hand is very strange. I can't read the lines because they move like fire and become confused like flames. They aren't like those of other men."

Almost in the same breath he would chuckle to himself and run his hand across his forehead, adding, "But, then again, you're not yet a man . . ."

It was a gratuitous statement because Mario Green-Jacket did not know just how old the Shipwrecked Boy was. He could barely venture a guess from his skinny, ungainly body; sixteen, or maybe eighteen, years old. But why not twelve? The Shipwrecked Boy's eyes had that strange innocence that sometimes floats across the crust of the earth like cloud shadows.

Several meters beyond the house-tavern was the Widow Salvadora's place. She was a woman who in days gone by had been the talk of the villagers. But now she was old, fat, and tired. The Widow Salvadora would wait for the arrival of the boats and help with the unloading and arranging of the baskets, mouthing special incantations in the distribution shed, between acetylene gas flames. She shouted out numbers and codes in her masculine voice: unquestionable, mysterious orders and adjudications. Now that her buttocks sagged (sacks of sand torn from an ancient and beautiful sea coast), her voice was prized. But vestiges still snaked their way around her, lubriciously melancholy specters—perhaps the belated spoils of a vanished love, delicate, never mentioned. Now even the women liked her and called out affectionately, "Salvadora, come help me in the kitchen tomorrow" (above all when there was a wedding celebration because the widow knew the conjurations for remote and exotic sauces, and she alone could aromatize stews with the spices she kept in leather bags, like those exhibited by Judas on the girdle about his waist). But what really brought the Widow into favor with her neighbors was the presence of her only daughter, Neila, seventeen years old.

Neila seldom left the house. She looked after it and did the cleaning while her mother went like a man to the hardest jobs.

Neila blossomed like a rare flower—a tulip or a blue daisy in the middle of an ordinary, narrow garden. In time she also inherited from the hand of her mother the sorceries with which to perfume roasts and pies. Every year she learned a new and strange secret and already, at her age, her mother took her along as a helper. Like a tender little witch she appeared at weddings, baptisms, and all kinds of celebrations. They were related to Mario Green-Jacket and sometimes went to help him out or to buy crabs from him for a special order. Even in the old days of slander the Widow and Mario had been fond of each other.

The men who frequented the tavern thought that Neila, as a woman, was too tall and thin. But they would not admit that from her black and curly hair, and from her fresh and wide mouth, there emanated a savage attraction. Neila was proud and hard, and moved among them like the sun or moon, and never heard any rudeness or flattery.

Forty-three days after the Shipwrecked Boy went to live at Mario Green-Jacket's tavern, Neila stopped by with a message and saw him. Her eyelids, the tone of a soft mandarin-rose, covered her eyes; but the brightness of her glance fluttered when she wondered aloud, "That's the Shipwrecked Boy?"

The following day, and the one after, Neila returned under trivial pretexts. On the fourth day the Shipwrecked Boy was alone, washing the glasses and cups in a smoky vapor, his newly grown hair sticking to his temples. She went behind the counter, rolled up her sleeves, and began to help him.

From that day on she looked for similar occasions to find him alone and seek his hand, long and ardent, in the soapy bubbles.

One Sunday Neila did not go to church. She went to look for the Shipwrecked Boy, who was alone. When she raised the little curtain to the door, the glasses sparkled on the kitchen shelf. The tavern seemed drowsy, and the pounding of the sea could be heard through the window. Autumn was ending. The Shipwrecked Boy had his back to her; he was staring at the sea.

It was winter when Neila told her mother that she was preg-

nant. The Widow Salvadora lamented in great howls because, though she admitted that she herself had made mistakes, for her daughter she had wanted and sought the best that life had to offer.

Tearful and cursing, she went to see Mario Green-Jacket and told him, "It's that ingrate you've taken in, that crazy boy, he did it!"

Mario Green-Jacket denied it, saying that he was innocent and still a boy.

But Neila said, "It was Ferbe."

"Who is Ferbe?"

Mario went to find the lad and tested him by calling out: "Ferbe!"

The Shipwrecked Boy raised his head.

"Well," said Mario, "we can fix this."

That night he said to the boy, "Look Ferbe, you must marry Neila."

Ferbe continued to pile up splinters of wood in the little stove.

From that time on, the Widow Salvadora, Mario, and Neila met every night, making plans and settling accounts by candlelight.

"But how do you know his name is Ferbe? How did he tell you?" Mario Green-Jacket inquired from time to time. Neila could not explain it.

"Somehow he told me so. I don't really remember . . . I only know that his name is Ferbe."

"That's an ancient name, from the remotest times of the island," Widow Salvadora would say, since she knew a little of everything if she looked back far enough.

When they brought the parish priest to set the date for the wedding and all its details, he said to them, "Ferbe? That's not a Christian name."

They registered him as Mario-the-Younger.

On the eve of the wedding Ferbe made a big pile of wood on the beach. Neila watched him, thoughtfully. He lit a beautiful bonfire; but the smoke that billowed forth was black, thick, and oily. The sight of it filled Neila with dread.

Ferbe approached her with his hands extended and she noticed that they were shining like two torches held out to her. Fear made Neila fall silent. But even stronger than her own will was the desire to embrace him, and her clothes caught on fire and she burned alive, screaming, by the sea.

Upon hearing her screams, Mario Green-Jacket ran toward them. But Neila was already something black and nauseous, writhing in the sand; and the edge of the waves still could not reach her. She died in the sea-foam, which was not enough to put her out.

There came a great thirst all around, which neither person nor thing could quench, a thirst that filled the earth from the reddish clouds to the grim mountains in the interior of the island.

"Damn you, damn you!" Mario hollered, sobbing.

The men and women of the village hastened to the scene of the crime, armed with old oars. They surrounded Ferbe and beat him with an ancient and implacable ire, until his blood soaked the ground. And Ferbe appeared to turn into a large sponge, strangely mobile, which the water reached and took into its waves.

As they waited, with oars held on high, to finish him off—because the sea returns what it cannot assimilate—they witnessed how the strange red sponge withdrew further into the water and receded definitively toward the sun.

Since they were not yet appeased, they killed Mario Green-Jacket too.

(III)

A woman, still beautiful, having lost her first and part of her final youth, one day saw the youngster who sang in the Rasputin, an old mill renovated for tourists. When he was addressed, the youngster, who had moist and distant eyes, talked a lot of nonsense, whether he was singing or not. For example: "On the day of my return I shall find empty snails, everything uninhabited, sand made wet by the sea that steals all memories. And, when I

bend over, I shall discover echoes of names, shadows left behind by men no longer alive or who never really lived. But in spite of that I still invent: I invent the yellow furze of abandoned highways, the printed sounds of footsteps inside a green bottle—the one, for example, that asphyxiated a sailboat." Once, as she waited for a response to her caresses, he said: "When shall I return? Perhaps you will hear the rustling of a dry pine-needle, slumbering on the edge of a forbidden road; because the only sure thing is that one never returns, one dies." She would kiss him, then say something like, "Don't be foolish, child."

But she imagined that the youngster was merely composing his songs for the evening, and she felt a mixture of respect and pity.

One day she asked him where he came from, because of his strange accent which she could not identify. But he never replied to a question unless it was, "Are you thirsty?" To which he always answered, "Yes, I am." And he would imbibe great quantities of alcohol that could not make him drunk. It was truly possible that he had been born that way. The marquee introduced him as "Ferbe, the King of Modern Song."

The woman was interested in the young man, as few adventures were now easy for her. She gave him rings, bracelets for his ankles and wrists, blue velveteen jackets and some other things of a more intimate nature. Upon barely touching his skin, the stones—false or semi-precious—would begin to sparkle like rubies, the gold became lion-colored like live coals, and the clothes took on a blazing iridescence. The woman, who was somewhat well-read, especially if it was erotic, recalled a verse from Sappho: "Me quemas," "You burn me" (it was bilingual). But the young man was busy composing his songs, and just when she thought that he was about to confide something to her: ". . . no one knows me, why I awaken and turn to face the Orient, or if I shall make a turn at the opposite corner: because no one has ever seen me, I never passed beneath a window where a child was studying . . ." (when he reached that point she realized that he was composing) "I never knew anyone, never defended anything that was truly

mine, no one will ever penetrate this husk; nobody shared anything with me, not even words; no one came to visit my house, and if I did have a house it would be like an egg, without doors or windows. No one knows my street, my face or my name. Because nobody knows me, nor do I know . . ."

Until one night she got fed up and told him, "Get out, and don't come back, child, you're a bore."

The young man seemed to be expecting these words, like a command. He smiled and left.

A short time later she felt a great pain: "I don't deserve anything beautiful; I am a vain, coarse human being, offal; and my heart is a fat mussel stuck to a ship's hull. I'm going to call him again, the poor boy."

But she was unable to find Ferbe, the King of Modern Song, at the Rasputin. He had been replaced by a trio.

The woman was melancholy all night long. She drank too much and removed her shoes in the wrong company. She wandered through dives and nightclubs in the old section of the city, and in the Golden Crab she buried her earrings in a small dish of leftover Romesco sauce. The owner recognized her and felt sorry for her.

"Don't do that, those earrings are worth a fortune. Come on, pick them up and clean them off with your napkin."

Not that it mattered much, but the woman understood that the man, in his own way, was telling the truth; and with a breath that reeked of whiskey plus red wine plus cazalla gin with raisins, she lowered her eyes in grief and contemplated with impious curiosity the nakedness of her own feet, dirty now, at such hours, covered with ridiculous and insulting bunions. "I'm old," she thought. "Old and sentimental, the old cow of the world, stupid like all of humanity." She left without saying good-bye to anyone, retreating along the beach with great howls in her heart, holding her head upright, rigid, like a good soldier.

She passed beneath the rocks where little gypsies with dark stomachs lived in the caves, and also women justly ferocious, men

with errant sadness, flowerpots of geraniums, silver birds. . . . "I'm not going to compose any songs, not I, that's the last thing I need to do." She cut short the thread of her digressions and found herself on the dirty sand of that stretch of the beach.

Then she saw Ferbe, the King of Modern Song, facing the sea as if he and the water were conversing. She ran toward him with a sudden intoxicated joy, a joy that returned from earlier years. But Ferbe did not hear her when she called out to him, nor did he see her when she knelt at his side, nor feel her as she began to caress him, asking him to come back to her, insisting that nothing had really happened, begging him to return. Until her joy began to leave her like the swipes of a fish-tail, like the sea, and the waves returned only nausea and great emptiness to the indifferent sand.

"If you don't come back to me, I'll kill myself," she threatened.

But Ferbe did not even look at her. Perhaps he was busy composing again, his ridiculous and frightening songs.

"Hey, I'm going to commit suicide if you don't come," she insisted, her voice the lamentable whimper of an old woman. She stuffed his pockets with all the money she was carrying, including foreign currencies; she gave him her bracelet and her earrings still sticky from the Romesco sauce, in effect, everything that she thought might be of some value to him. She roared like an old lioness:

"It's not suicide but a crime, a crime that's about to be committed . . ."

The red wine mixed with the whiskey was rising to the surface. "A bad mixture," she said to herself. She went to the edge of the cliff and threw herself into the dark void. Even then, she still had time to remember that fat toad (when she was seven years old) that she had crushed under a stone.

A day and a half later the Authorities burst into the pension where Ferbe, the King of Modern Song, was living. They found his habitación-chambre-Zimmer-room and handcuffed him. Then they led him away after seizing the money, foreign currencies, bracelets, sauce-covered earrings, and some other little personal

effects that had belonged to the gorgeous, middle-aged, smashed-to-pieces lady.

Some time later they condemned him to death. The owner of the Golden Crab said:

"I told that poor woman, I told her so: Don't do that, you're asking for trouble, there are a lot of bad people out there, especially the young ones, they're completely rotten. But people are like that, what can you do. With what I see from behind this bar —you can't imagine!—I just don't believe in anything anymore."

On the appointed day the judge thought it strange that the prisoner, an obscure King of Modern Song, seemed to have died long ago. An hour after the execution a fire was reported and the entire wing of the building burned in a bloody way, unexpectedly, and almost beautifully.

At that moment some kids were busy arguing in Kim's Tavern (formerly called Quim). One of them, nervous and thin-faced, swore that he had discovered an enormous bank of sponges, the finest quality, at the bottom of Margarita Cove. The rest of them denied it, saying that sponges had never been found there before, and that it was a lie. Besides, one of them advised him:

"It doesn't matter now, the plastic ones are too much competition, and it's not worth the effort any more."

But the young man said that was precisely what made them more valuable.

The world—blue, mallow, and green—swayed, sprinkled with strange stars, and a mysterious murmur of voices enveloped the young skin diver, it seemed to nail itself inside his ears, he almost thought it would drive him crazy. The sponges formed an eerie world, alive and undulating, and he remembered that when he was a boy his grandfather had told him tales of evil sirens who took hold of the hearts of young sailors and tore their life from them. But his good sense prevailed. He did not believe in old wives' tales.

The venture turned out well. He managed to obtain the sponges, of an excellent quality.

When he was finally paid a good sum he headed toward the city,

whistling. It was a calm day and he was walking along the beach. Not a single cloud sailed above the sea.

Suddenly something descended and perched in his heart, like a bird whose name he did not know. He stopped and looked out at the sea, at the rocks along the coast, and toward the bay where the yellow and grey mass of the city appeared. A great silence surrounded him. He was suddenly the prisoner of an unfathomable bell of silence. He lowered his eyes and contemplated his shadow extending along the sand. Then, with absolute certainty, he said to himself: "Something has vanished from the earth."