

# ***Mambe* Mania: A Green, Green Night in The Solitude**

Jimmy Weiskopf

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“I stepped on board a vision and I followed with a will”  
*Spencil Hill* (Irish folk song)

## Apologia

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**T**his story revolves around *mambe*, a sacred plant preparation of a number of indigenous groups of the Amazon, among them, the Nipode, who call themselves the “People of the Center”. In general terms, the aim of the ritual use of these plants is to sharpen thought and cleanse the spirit to make man harmonize with man and men with Nature and the cosmos. The medicine is thus comparable to the better-known ayahuasca, but it is exempt of the latter’s visionary, purgative and traumatic effects, the effect is more gentle and meditative and instead of focusing on a silent contemplation of other-worlds, the ritual takes the form of a sort of Platonic dialogue among the participants, led by the healer. Another contrast lies in the fact that whereas knowledge of ayahuasca is fairly widespread in the West nowadays among those who are interested in the traditional medicine of native societies, the ritual use of *mambe* is still practically limited to its original cultural context in the jungle. But there are a handful of exceptions, exemplified by the character who is based on a White doctor I know who officiates such ceremonies in a big city.

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Loosely speaking, the employment of this preparation for self-knowledge, healing, reconciliation, the propitiation of Nature, etc. presupposes a shamanic cosmo-vision whereby occurrences in the “real world” are ruled by spirit forces. Nevertheless, as the native experts I have learnt from will attest, *mambe* does not involve such cathartic experiences as spirit possession, self-loss, near death and wild flights into parallel dimensions, as occurs with ayahuasca. We might say that the wisdom it brings is “of the heart”, but not of the arcane or esoteric kind generally associated with indigenous “plants of power”. Thus, this story should not be taken as a factual chronicle or anthropological account of its powers but a work of fiction, with a strong dose of fantasy, which has welled up from the imagination of a writer.

To round off this apology, and related to the above, unaccomplished as it may be, my ambition here has more to do with form than content. The idea is to do a reverse George Gordon and:

Let the fictive approximate poesy  
Put a music in story somehow  
But, though I wrote it myself,  
For fun, not for pelf  
Its score is  
For me  
Hard to  
(long) FOLLOW.

\* \* \*

It was late and we decided to spend the night there, in the Solitude. “Anywhere upstairs,” Doc Fabian said, but apart from the salon where the ritual had taken place, we weren’t familiar with the house. On closer inspection it was like traveling back, on eve of the civil war, to an upper-middle city manor of the provinces: an age of servants, large families, many rooms, heavy furnishings and a comfortable indifference to the hygienic décor of the Swedes. From ceiling-high bookcases to breakfast remains, all was sprawling and dusty and messy and stuffed.

It nevertheless suited us to find a profusion of spare bedclothes and cushions, and warm wooden floors to put ourselves on so littered with stuff we’d barely be noticed. Were it not that others already had the same idea and motioned us onwards from where they lay. Exactly who they were I couldn’t work out. Most of the attendees left as soon as it was over and of all there in any case only a handful were intimates enough of the doc to ask for the favor, and none now present so far as we saw. Nor were they the type to go to such things, who, close or far, were the educated and arty with new age leanings.

Instead, the sleepers were the kind of miscellany you'd see sprawled over the tiles and benches of a terminal when there's a long, all-out delay of flights.

It didn't seem like a problem, however, due to a space more than ample, indeed labyrinthine, as we penetrated the interconnected corridors and bedrooms beyond, and finding most empty, were relieved by a wealth of choice a little burdensome too... had we been fussy, which we weren't, satisfying ourselves with that nearest to hand.

As hunger is the best sauce, weariness made a featherbed out of mat, foam and counterpanes. Almost at once, with a contented sigh, my wife fell asleep and I was about to follow when I felt a shoving around me and noticed that the room was filled with others camping on the floor who were angry about our intrusion. Imagining that we'd been too sleepy to notice, I apologized and plunging deeper, located another room which, when double-checked, definitively proved to be empty.

But no sooner did we settle down than the same transposition happened. As I was still weary and all round dark, I might have put it down to another mistake, had it not been that the phenomenon was more radical now, as though we had undergone a dimensional shift, or *they* had, the transient sleepers, who were somehow multiplying and passing through walls and those walls themselves transmigrating, for, as we grudgingly rose, trudged first forward, then back, I noticed the original boundaries lost.

The rectangular demarcation of the whole second storey was now stripped of walls, doors and passages and replaced by an irregular, meandering area, wide here, narrow there, a little like a forest path but still floored by wood. And on every square foot, huddled *they*—the anonymous figures—blanketed, dim, dormant yet restless, so at the slightest brush, we were warned to piss off.

It was the trail itself which beckoned us to follow, and as we did, the sleepers thinned and we were about to bed down when we met, a few steps ahead, a setting quite different—bright, neat and welcoming with TV, rugs, sofa and armchairs. At a cautious approach, we ascertained, then confirmed: no sight or sound of the *others*. As if we'd just passed a test and this our reward, we made ourselves comfortable. But after what we'd been through, it was too good to be true and I still a little wary, fortunately, it transpired. A clanging of pots alerted me to a kitchen alongside and a glimpse of a family clearly not Doc's in a house clearly not his either, and gave us time for a clean getaway.

We retraced our path, regained the last stretch and flopped more than lay on the first gap we saw. My wife fast fell asleep once more. Myself, it was hard to tell. I was on that threshold where conscious thought grays to merge

into reveries tinged by recollections, green, green ones from the sermon of the day by Doc, entitled “To know how to sleep.”

Sleeping, he'd instructed us, is travelling in a conscious way and learning. One's head must face the east, one leg resting on the other, the right hand on the abdomen, the left below the neck or near the heart. In that way, we may begin to play with the senses. A ribbon hangs from the roof with our colors, which ends just above the belly button. This is the thread of the reality, which takes us through the worlds until we reach the origin. In this way, we begin to play with the senses. First, we try to move the ribbon with our willpower alone, until we achieve it. Then, we focus our attention on what we see, then on our forehead, “that which schemes,” in order to understand the intellectual implications which that has. After that, we move to the heart, to feel our emotional reactions, and finally, “we guard” the whole process in the abdomen. The same is done with the other senses: hearing, taste, smell and finally, touch. A moment will come when we feel that we are asleep and from then on, we will consciously be able to heal, learn, etc. in our sleep.

In the midst of recalling that, the moment did indeed come, yet the conviction that I was fast asleep brought with it the curious sensation that I'd fallen into a deeper level of the state I'd already been in as soon as we climbed the stairs and the mishaps we suffered since then a delusion, meaning in actual fact that we'd found where to sleep and did, at once, and the *they* who had shoved and cursed and drove us desperately on were imprints on the unconscious of the ambient stimuli of an atmosphere alien and uncomfortable.

At the same time, however, I felt compelled to rebel against a false interpretation of a waking truth and the key to its demonstration would be to turn the dream I was in against the preceding one that was not with the employment of the Doc's procedure, learnt from the People of the Center.

I made my head face the east, assumed the right posture, guarded the energies in my belly, grasped pendant thread, but all lay in the astral of course. Either that or I did it wrong and from the signs Doc had warned us of—heat instead of cold, heaviness instead of flying—I was misusing a potent and dangerous sorcery, soon proved by reawakening to my previous state, which was far more lucid and intense and disturbing. Looking back, it is possible, I admit, that some one of them might have bumped me awake, but only for an instant before I plunged into soma again, to unconsciously recapitulate.

At the time, on the other hand, the sequence was too long and vivid: a laborious rise, shaking of wife and further pilgrimage through the warren, ending where it started, in the deeps but those depths perturbed as never before by the shoves and groans and body stink of too many *they* into too

tight a space and those *they* unaccountably rude and uncouth in light of the type of people known by me to be the followers and/or friends of Doctor Fabio.

To top it, the torture I feared most, which followed me for years over hill and dale of city and country, invading my very apartment at times, began its scourge. Music, the loud music of rumba, the music that's not music but noise for its own sake, the noise that no one attends to but me. As always, I felt it physically, as a veritable panic attack that choked, flushed, nauseated and sent my heart racing, concurrent with the ire of one persecuted.

Since it was unavoidable in this land, I'd learnt to avoid it. At the slightest presage, I would shift bed to a different manse, whenever not caught by surprise. But to encounter it *here*, at the sensitive Doc's, was outrageous and unendurable. If awake, I'd have protested; if not, digested. But trying as each was, to be neither was worse.

On whatever plane, our host fortunately caught the abuse of his guest. First, the music muted, then he loomed over us, big fellow that he was, looking a little stern.

I explained that I was desperately tired but my nerve-wracked state wouldn't permit me to sleep and suspected that, real or not, the noise and other disturbances were a curse from Nofiniyeiki, the devourer of stones, the protagonist of the myth about knowing how to sleep which he had interpreted for us earlier. He, the devourer, was a powerful old man who created a daughter from light balsa wood and placed poisonous substances in her genitals in the form of scorpions and serpents. From there on, he invited those who visited him, especially young men, to sleep with his daughter. After doing so, they died and the old man ate them. One of his victims was Nonueteima, who, unlike the others, was a knower, so that his spirit transmitted to his little sons the secret of the old man's magic, which is the power to put Nature to sleep, and they eventually avenged him by burning the devourer of stones in the fire of the *maloca*.

"Maybe, in invoking that power, I did something wrong and it rebounded, as it were," I inquired of the Doc.

I knew he didn't like me trespassing on his territory, but the contempt in his gaze was fleeting and slight and his manner remained very kindly.

"That happens when you take an intellectual approach. But let's leave that for now."

Helping me up and onto a stool, he bade me to close my eyes, relax and concentrate.

“Now, with your inward sense, I want you to tune into your body, starting with your heels and traveling upwards.”

“No, you’re too tense,” he warned, hands kneading my shoulders from behind.

“Better, concentrate and tell me where it hurts.”

I was familiar with the technique, which he used in his sessions in a sort of group therapy, collectively addressing the whole circle of chairs and diagnosing the different responses, one by one, without leaving his healer’s bench.

“Nothing particular.”

“Concentrate,” he admonished.

“Well, my feet are a little itchy.”

“That’s because you always running ahead of yourself to find the answers. You need to be patient.”

I was doubtful, but his tone soothed and after a while, I did tune into sensations, which seemed to signify, though they weren’t really pains but a subtle crackling, as if of organic static.

In my throat, as though choked of breath, because, he claimed, I was unworthy of the fire of the universe, which nourishes. In my biceps, like wet string and so on and so forth through three or four other organs.

I had heard these assertions before, in answer to others, but was always too skeptical to call on them for myself. Insofar as they were suggestive, fortune-telling was too, I decided. Now they began to resound, partly because I’d lost my psychic markers—the confines of awareness itself—which made me receptive and grateful, but particularly due to a weird transposition by which none of the successive complaints were uttered in my own voice.

In all my confusion, the one thing I was sure of was the last and I even had a clear mental picture of the persons to whom those voices corresponded: this or that member of the monthly ritual circle I’d attended for several years—some friends, some not, but familiar by now, one and all.

Thinking to ingratiate, I remarked on that, but the Doc was curt and rebuked me for wandering.

“You’re mentalizing again, it’s a question of *feeling*.”

True, but it was also the perennial contest between us, irritated no doubt in his case by the fact that that conviction of mine implied a previous doubt.

Above all, to be fair, nevertheless, it was the unavoidable condition of the profession of healing. Like any doc, he was wearied. Too many laments, too little time, too much blindness and self-satisfied ego. The more he strained to help patients heal themselves—the secret learned from the Center People, the more evident it became that most actually liked to be ill. Hence, to do any good at all, he had to be authoritarian. And when he failed, distant, having to protect himself first before saving others.

Withal, and part of the same, he was always *courteous* and when he took his leave, he left me relieved to a point. So where did the lumbering bear he next became come from when I felt the thrust of a bulky sack and found it was he alongside, snoring, in the same cardigan, slicked hair and eyeglasses worn before.

Why crash on the floor instead of the master bedroom? But even as I considered that, I was assailed by another conundrum in the form of many little feet prancing around and on top of me, shouting all the while. From the paternal growl that stilled them—but only for seconds before turning more rowdy—I deduced that the kids were his—but only for seconds before I recalled that his were but two and all but grown up.

At my anguished appeal, the Doc scolded again in a way that confirmed his paternity yet undermined me, since it was not severe, but token, amused and with *laissez-faire* pride, after which he fell like a log.

By then it was impossible to distinguish one injury from another as noise, insult, crowding, foul air and discomfort merged into insanity. This was my hell, not made of sulfur nor other people but of disco effects designed to be dark and deranging. And trap me in an impenetrable, over-full void.

Left with no choice, I surrendered to pandemonium, far beyond care for which was the real and which was the nightmare. Apart from being indignant and fearful, any consciousness I had became deaf, throttled and scorched. I only knew that I sank and each level was more hellish than the one before. To start with, that of Fabian, which wheezed like an accordion as it expanded and compressed persons, spaces and sounds. At one moment it was like a cage and I in collision. At the next, like being in the dilapidated palace of a fallen regime where you reach a blind alley, turn a secret knob and enter a whole hidden wing peopled with bewildered courtiers, dozy servants, looters, whores and revolutionaries. And following that, in turn, as if I had intruded on the inner conclave of an esoteric confraternity, passing robed figures who pointed, jeered and brusquely turned aside.

On the succeeding level, the latter was reaffirmed but transmuted. Now I was in a commune, retreat, rock concert, house in Brazil, and alien because I was too old or not hip or didn't speak the language or buy the creed.

Nevertheless, every ambit had the same overcrowded confusion, the common elements of which were elaboration, angst and hostility.

But to recur to Kafka or Freud would have been futile because nothing referred back to conditioning at work on the commonplace. All that now passed was much more vivid and vivid because original and original because beyond the compass of self, be it mine or another's.

Call it imagination or subconscious, I could never be that inventive. Call them dreams or delusions, they would have never been that precise: veritable landscapes of a kingdom unknown to mankind, at least without the aid of the plants the Doc called "facilitators", but that only replaced one abstraction with another at a time when I'd lost all control and no term sufficed.

I continued to plunge down through realms beyond end, ancient and modern, recognized yet nowhere, until it tightened a core of defiance in me and like a swimmer too deep I fought with my last breath to ascend, but when I finally gained the top, I'd merely regressed to the start and the air was as stale as before and *they* just as crude and disrespectful.

Having achieved that, I was now at least resolute. I shook wife awake and hurriedly explained where I'd been and our urgency. Still sleepy, and thus perplexed, she cross-examined, concluding in doubt. In *her* recollection, after sharing a light supper, our host had escorted us upstairs and through a number of entirely vacant rooms, chosen the most cozy one, provided us with air mattress, blankets and pillows and practically tucked us in with a wish of sweet dreams. The nest being so tranquil, she slept at once and throughout, except for a brief interruption by myself, tossing and turning and groaning "help" in my sleep in what was clearly a nightmare. And one into which I'd clearly incorporated elements of the prior session, the hospitality of the Doc and neuroses drawn from all sorts of sources, as usual.

Instead of calming, however, her gentle, maternal patience was a slight to the incredible voyage I'd been on and I wanted her to listen, share and marvel rather than condescend.

"So if it wasn't a nightmare, it means I'm a lunatic!"

"I'm only saying what's obvious. See for yourself: there's no one else here and everything's quiet."

"Only for now, when I'm onto them. They're hiding and ready to pounce again."

"What for?"

"Didn't I just tell you they're *cunning*?"



She changed from cossetting to quarreling. Roughly lifting and grabbing, I took her by the hand and pushed us past the door, viewed the surrounds and vengefully indicated... nothing!

It was like when you can hardly stand, make an appointment and no sooner does the physician attend than the ailment vanishes. In the face of discredit, it was my turn to be patient and, as rationally as I could, I reiterated. The reality I'd been in was real enough but also *projected* and at my momentary faltering, caused by *her* disbelief, they took advantage, without any diminution of danger, the only answer to which was to flee and at once.

She returned it in kind, arguing quite rationally. Whatever was plaguing me, I was no longer alone and hence less defenseless and to hit the mean streets at three in the morning was not a safe option. It would be better to wait and see, relax, even pray, and more so with dawn just a few hours away.

When it was escape or perdition, I wasn't in the mood for a reasoning so banal. Knowing her neurotic, she knew that obstruction would exacerbate the fit and it would be wiser to hasten its course toward apology, one of many she'd later remind me of and thus turn the sword 'gainst me. Self-satisfaction aside, it was not with mean purpose. To instruct and heal was her hope.

When I rushed us downstairs and we gained the front door, she seemed to have second thoughts. From the bike in the well to diplomas in frames, all was entirely normal and at my sigh of relief there were faint groans up above, heard by both and suggestive of gnashed teeth.

Since an old house has old beams responsive to subtleties of wind, damp and chill, her thoughts were not my convictions. But once outside, like the wife of lot, she was compelled to look back and in that instant, the lights went off, in there and the whole street.

That too happened at times in this city, she said, but the fact of just then proved my point all along.

"That being?" she challenged.

"Nothing compares to the horror of the ambiguous."

As we walked two blocks to the thoroughfare, such concerns were subsumed by the atmosphere: bracing for release and fresh air, otherwise sinister. In the pallor of arc lamps, the frontages and window displays looked ghoulish and artificial, like an abandoned stage set and we abandoned in turn, the last left on Earth... barring muggers.

"'Twas on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June," she reminded me.

"The day before the fair?"

“Stop it, this *isn't* a dream.”

The idea was a taxi, but none passed. Just when we felt desperate, we spied the approach of a bus, which, at an hour so late, was unaccountable, unprecedented and providential as well, for, from the plaque of the route, this out of hundreds was ours.

In a bubble protective and mobile, I felt beyond reach of harm. Unusually placid for me, in fact, till we reached the Petroleum Headquarters and instead of veering east at the corner, the bus carried on straight. On inquiring, I learnt it was foolish to be nervous, for as the conductor explained—and logic should have told me—that one and only post-midnight service, by definition, was and had to be comprehensive.

Heading south, the bus rode through the center, where I lived, and the neighborhoods became less and less familiar, but it did not make the promised loop back at any intersection where it stopped. Nevertheless, there was no reason to distrust the driver and I was able to orient myself by the mountainous wall we paralleled, the eastern border of the city, otherwise flat.

Patience, I was telling myself, when, with a sudden swerve, we began climbing a prominence that shouldn't have been there or anywhere short of the high Himalaya. Not exactly a hill or cliff, it was a natural roller-coaster, with sheer sides, which rose at an impossible angle and did a near 180 degree turn at the summit, where, in the few seconds before it fell, I glimpsed, on the far side, a huge, brightly-lit, futuristic installation of towers, storage tanks and interlocked pipelines, like an oil refinery but centered round a circle of cement resembling a launch pad. Yet, as all knew, the nearest of the first was hundreds of miles away and the second far surpassed the capacity of this or any other country of the continent.

The descent brought us back to the urban, but of districts even more distant, a cross between Poznan and the Tyrol: houses narrow and gabled of stone or chalets of wood with overhung eaves. They hemmed in the road we were on, the only it had, which was further clogged by peasants, push-carts and organ grinders. Behind either side was a void, as before.

Several times on this odyssey, I resolved to get off but, afraid we'd be stranded, postponed, fearing worse. In the transhumant hope that the next pass would clarify, I looked to my wife to confirm, who, glued to the window, as I'd been, was virtually hypnotized by the weird scenes beyond. It took several taps for her shoulder to turn and when it did, she looked straight through me, as if I weren't there, and relapsed.

At the thought that she was a hallucination within the larger one, I nearly gave way to panic. She, my only firm foot on the ground of the real! She, steadfast through the thick and thin of this night!

Or the other way round? The glass made reflective by darkness outside failed to mirror my face either, it seemed.

Then, nearing the bottom, by the circle which funneled traffic into the city from the Highway of the South, gateway, landmark, salvation. Though more broad than tall, the building rose above all around and had an institutional look, like a hospital walled in glass and illuminated at all hours, except it was dark now. It exerted a strange hold on me, as if I'd invested a psychic currency in the place over the years that was finally being returned as a message I knew to be vital but was unable to articulate:

*Misero giovane!  
Che vuoi, che mediti?  
Altro non abita  
Che lutto e gemito  
In queste orribili  
Soglie funeste.*

Its chorus trailed me, muted, then silenced by vehicles as the route righted itself, as it were, and longing and dread gave way to security. The bus, now moving south-north, returned to downtown along another main avenue parallel to the eastern wall but more close.

By day, crammed by trucks, it was contaminated, slow and ugly with sidewalk bazaars of second-hand restaurant fittings: rusty sinks, mottled freezers, seats stacked to the sky. Now, it was a smooth, silk ribbon, unspooling towards home, which debouched at the President's Palace, and was succeeded by a lane through colonial temples and vice-regal mansions (for once free of ghosts) which merged into the ring road that took us past the campuses, funicular station and, as it rose, the roofline of our very street, three blocks below.

Since the sectors thereon were perimeter, the bus should have turned down, as all others did. Speeding, as it was as well, I didn't react in time and we overshot by and got off at about half a mile. By that estimate, we were at the top of the Perseverance, the neighborhood adjoining our own.

The penumbra made a warren of the side-streets up there, but, fixing on the skyscrapers of the International Trade Center, further below, I more or less knew where we were, at the edge of a piece I traversed every day, and that made me confident. Just as I was assuring my wife that it was right at that store, and down past the butcher's, however, the layout went through a perverse shift and that happened again several times, without altering my composure. Factoring in tiredness and culture shock, I admonished myself with the Doc's "patience!" and the reward was a sight which undid the error.

Namely, the clumps of tall pine and eucalyptus at the summit of the Park of the Nation, which, understandably in the circumstances, meant that instead of a descent to the south, we'd wandered to the north, without loss of altitude. That being determined, the rest would be child's play. As soon as we wended our way down through the grove, we'd be on Fifth Avenue and at a backtrack of ten blocks at the foot of our house.

As we did, the air became muggy and warm. In response, the vegetation seemed to mutate as well: the way it did when we'd make a weekend getaway to a hotel with a pool, a journey of mere hours during which the transition from Alpine bluegrass to coffee bush to banana was so gradual it was impossible to demarcate high plain from temperate from sub-tropical.

After all I'd been through, I attributed it to the just said, not crediting till I pinched myself that we'd arrived at the jungle!

"Look, there's the Amazon," I exclaimed, a removal of last doubt which filled me with joy, when it should have been an anguished astonishment, you'd have thought. The fact is that I'd not lost my mooring but having been scared and adrift, was now beached on my most favorite spot on Earth. As it was full of friends too, food, lodging and companionship would be likewise afforded, without need of airfare, what's more, as if we'd won a free holiday.

Glimpsed midst the palms a few score meters ahead, the broad gleaming band of the river was magnetic, as if it were beckoning me to be blessed after a troublesome time. As we neared, the forest was invaded by mist, clouding our view and the river looked ever more dull and narrow. At a few steps from the bank, the mist thickened and spread a pestilence which forced our retreat, all aghast, as my benevolent Amazon bubbled like a cauldron that emitted noxious fumes and made waters, tree line and sky livid and lifeless.

*Who'd dare to cross the tepid waves of Lethe?*

*Not I, buzzed the flies*

*Nor us, whined the bugs.*

Retracing the track, I stumbled on a turning, and after a brief penetration, realized it led to the *maloca* of William. It wasn't the idea of refuge which reversed my perception to gladful again, but its representation of warnings, his and repeated. As he told it, the jungle was full of evil spirits, singing Siren songs, but so long as you *concentrate on your path* you'll be immune to their lures. Like the mumbo-jumbo of the Doc, I tried to but could not dismiss it or not entirely, for whatever its literal truth, the words stood as a metaphor for the hazards of a whole night, if not a whole life before, and if not redemption, an explanation I sorely needed just then.

Practically knowing it by heart, I remembered that after a level part, the trail to William's dipped into a messy bog, spanned by logs and enclosed by impenetrable thickets which, with the damp, made everything murky and fogged, and guessed that we had pierced through the Park to *there*, then deviated (*mea culpa*) and wound up, not bewitched, but confused, as many jungle explorers before me, and the river hadn't been the river nor the stewpot but effect of a short-lived sensational short circuit.

The theory was soon confirmed when the logs underfoot were replaced by the firm ground at the entrance to the large clearing where his *maloca* was. In no more than minutes, we ducked through the low door and were subsumed in a blindness which reigned even by day 'neath its windowless thatch but nevertheless suffused sense with the vast dimensions of the dome. Nearly in a crawl, guided by touch, I inched my way towards the far end, where the dim outline of a human form sat on a zoomorphic bench before the embers of a fire. William no doubt, from the baldness of skull and broad, muscular torso. William, what's more, from the silent, immobile reception which would only break when I was right on top of him, done as a test of my worth.

Not much, as he knew, proved once again by my making the conversation other visitors would respectfully wait for him to initiate. As his spectral smile showed, nevertheless, the lesson was playfully meant from a humor shared between us and not him and the others.

"Thank God, you're here. I've had this fearful night and I can really do with some *mambe* to figure it out, with your help of course. Let me tell you what's happened, best as I can and *briefly*. Then I promise to shut up while you center yourself and tune into the voice of the spirits."

"Daughter!" he ordered and a girl, about fourteen, I guessed, emerged from the shadows to hand me a spoonful. My eagerness was such that the gulp left chin, neck and chest powdered, causing a scornful hiss on his part. Irreverence, I admit, but it was also because there was no comparison between the sweet, nutty flavor of his freshly-made stuff and the oft bitter and stale powder you bought in the city. It wasn't just that the medicine didn't travel well but the dubious source and commerce that got in the way of the reverence the plants require.

At the first taste, it seemed a bit off, but, as had been drilled into me by now, that was probably the fault of my impatience. From long experience, I was aware that its potency didn't erupt just like that. In the most literal sense, any wisdom to be had was a matter of *absorption* and I thus had to do well what I'd been repeatedly told I was weakest at: still and focus myself and *concentrate*.

And in this particular instance, on the thought of my maestro, not my mean self, who was talking to the girl about the fish traps he had inspected

that afternoon. In their culture, the mundane opened into the symbolic and I had a recollection of a previous instruction based on the same analogy. When you are going to heal an illness, William had explained, you never begin by tackling it head on. You must approach the entrance of the illness sideways. But it was too vague and I couldn't recall what that had to do with a fish trap. In fact, it was unlikely that I'd grasped it at the time, since, having never seen one, I hadn't a notion of how it worked.

That in itself didn't bother me: one way or another a lesson would come. What did was a feeling that I still wasn't sharp enough, and this at a time when my salvation depended on being much more open, alert and receptive than I'd ever been.

Anticipating my concern, he muttered that I needed some more and the girl obeyed his command. I felt a lift, flattened once more and considered the possibility found in the refrain sung by my circle of urban aficionados:

*If, as it's absorbed  
The stuff doesn't serve  
You do have a nerve,  
You dumb white man.*

*If it doesn't taste good,  
It's just dust, understood?  
And the bad mambe blues  
The sure outcome.*

*When you splutter and wail  
The mambe is stale  
And your doubt,  
Dim, dumb and futile*

*If you grimace and cough  
The mambe is off  
It's not you  
But the blues  
You dumb white man.*

I immediately discarded it, sensing that any unease was due to the opposite. Precisely because the *mambe* did kick in, it alerted me to the probability that something *else* was off which I wouldn't have otherwise noticed. The "daughter", when I knew he didn't have one? Unlikely, on second thought, since that was a conventional way to address a daughter grand or in law,

several of whom lived in the same *maloca* by virtue of his grown-up sons. His voice sounded odd too, equally explicable by, say, a cold.

To maneuver more easily in the dark, I'd taken off my shoes and socks at the door. The feel of the rammed-earth on my bare feet was a delight, but an intermittent itchiness became bothersome, so it was not only curiosity but comfort which made me shift my full attention to what the two were talking about.

"That so-called boyfriend of yours... whassname again?"

"Nonueteima, father."

"Yeah, that's the dumb-ass. You'll be pleased to hear he won't be bothering you anymore."

"I thought you liked him. Why else promise to share the catch if he helped you with the fish trap?"

"I was only pretending and he was too stupid to realize, so stupid in fact he fell for a trick even a little girl like you would have noticed."

"I don't understand."

"Bring me that petrol lamp and I'll explain. And a stick."

"You, gringo, got a lighter?"

I did and he lit.

In the momentary flare of the wick—a rag in a can with petroleum—I had first my clear look at the girl and was astounded to behold, not an adolescent but a stunning woman of twenty-five, with a slender waist, raven braids and fully formed breasts which I longed to suck. Fortunately, the darkness kept my wife from spotting my lust.

I was also perplexed. In their culture, "grandfather" was the obligatory term of respect for an elder, related or not, and binding even on me. Yet for her William was "father". One alternative was he was lying. Another was that he wasn't William at all. But if the former, what for? It wasn't to his advantage, nor especially his nature and from long acquaintance with the man that nature was in the latter defied common sense. True, I couldn't see him, but who else could have been the master of a *maloca* I knew so well I'd reached it in distress and the dark

He drew in the dirt.

"You, gringo, watch too."

“This here, the wide end, is the opening; the other, where it’s narrow, is the end.

“Son-in-law, I told him, I’m an old man and the trap is too heavy. Please swim into the wide part to get the fish out for me. Which is exactly the wrong way round, as any idiot knows, so it was *him* who got trapped and drowned. Then I fished him out and ate him.”

He lifted the lamp.

“You, gringo, over there, hanging from the beam.”

I feigned recognition of a round shadow, reckoning it to be a papaya or cocoanut.

“The arse-hole’s head. Kept it as a trophy.”

At his feet, on the parcel of dirt that was lit, stood a little film canister alongside the plastic flask of drinking chocolate which held the *mambe*. It was for its complement, *ambil*, a paste of tobacco and vegetal salt William had licked all along, to which I was welcome as well.

In general, I liked it, but his was too bitter for my taste. When proffered, I’d do a tiny dip in friendship, but this night, it wasn’t and so far, none done. Now, remembering its use, I relented.

Ghastly as the goings-on thus far seemed, I was, on the one hand, tired and disoriented (the itching didn’t help either), and, on the other, I suspected that, to test me again, William was telling me scary tall tales on purpose. To reassure myself, I had to ascertain and to do that, wake up and be keen. *Ambil* would be ideal for that.

The substance was *nauseating*, but I was too desperate to care so long as I made sense of a night never-ending and ever more enigmatic. Possibly due to the paste, my eyes now adjusted better to the faint light and I looked at him, this time hard and long. But, again, it was barely a silhouette and my impression of a back more stooped and flesh more sagged than his should have been was, I decided, deceptive.

If offensive to us, such scrutiny was more so for them. In almost one motion, he thrust me the film canister and extinguished the lamp, harshly saying:

“You’re never going to learn if you don’t respect our customs. For us, anyone who is afraid of *ambil* isn’t a real man. Didn’t you say you want the guidance of my familiars? Then stop acting like a pussy. Scoop it up, the way we do.”



I was beginning to feel woozy when he groaned, clasped a foot and clawed at its sole.

“Ay, it hurts! It’s like my feet are on fire.”

After a quick examination, the girl said it must be chigger bites.

“I want your damn brats down here. Now!”

In this *maloca*, as in any, there were lofts on either side which afforded privacy to the members of the extended family. I heard a creak of hammock ropes, followed by steps on the log ladder which linked the two levels and two kids, one eight, the other ten, timidly appeared.

“There are plants in the *chagra* for this. Get going.”

“What’s wrong, grandfather?”

“Go! Or I’ll tan your hides.”

“They’re only asking so they won’t bring the wrong ones.”

“Those spiky ones, you fools.”

“Please, grandfather, we know a better remedy. It was our father who taught us.”

“Now! or [nodding to the beam] it’ll be your heads alongside his.”

Confidentially, the mother reminded him that their father had been a great sorcerer. The reason for the murder, I assumed, knowing how envious these wizards were.

Overwhelmed by the burning darts, he grudgingly assented.

For the medicine to work, you needed a lot of heat, the boys told their mother, who stirred the embers of the fire while they went out for firewood. They were no longer cowed, and their carefree scampering and the unholy noise they made summoned a memory. Their statures, voices and gestures were the same as the cubs I’d presumed to have been Fabian’s. Due to the paste, however, the whole dome was spinning by now and I might have imagined that.

I saw, with the wood, the fruit the figurines brought too. They rubbed him with juice, and meanwhile chanted over the remedy:

mabi, mabi emodo jirare deitoy jijijiji kuemodi iraimokaideiate ji ji

It was same that was used to put Nature to sleep.

To thus activate, beckon and ward off was standard procedure, I knew, but unusually accomplished in ones so young and voices so shrill. Amateur as I was, there were cases I could have cited, but I wasn't myself and even if I had been, not lucid enough to apply them

It and the remedy nevertheless seemed to soothe. He heaved, shivered, sighed and signed to go on with his chin. Then slumped.

“Grandfather, don't fall asleep. Move to the fire or it won't work.”

When he did, the itching intensified.

“Ay, it stings!”

They prodded, gently... a little harder. He hurled them aside and swore. They conjured louder:

*“mabi, mabi emodo jirare deitoi”*

“What are you doing! The fire makes it worse. Those howls drive me crazy!”

“Please, a little closer. It only hurts because the fire is drawing the venom out. Bear it a few seconds more and you'll be fine.”

Hopping in pain on one foot, he used elbows in vain to block the boys' forward prodding. Oblivious to decorum, man, girl and boys shrieked (and oblivious to guest) in their own language:

*Kuema* [they]  
*Ze . . Ze . . Ze* [he]  
*oroyi* [she]  
*Pentiti, cangia vita,*  
*è l'ultimo momento!* [they]  
*No, no, ch'io non mi pento*  
*vanne lontan da me!* [he]  
  
*Sì!* [they]  
  
*No!* [he]  
  
*Ah! tempo più non v'è!* [They]  
*Che ceffo disperato!*  
*Che gesti da dannato!*  
*Che gridi, che lamenti!*

*Come mi fa terror!* [She]

*Si!* [They]

*No! No!* [He, unbalanced, pushed, fallen]

The pyre roared, scorched and flared like a solar storm in the split-second before I blacked out and a death rattle made the whole forest tremble:

*“Aieeaieeaieeaiee!”*

A ghost seized my hand and pulled down. I resisted, wrested and pulled up. And up again to the thatch. I shot through the smoke-hole like the rocket not seen, soared over jungle, river, valley, cordillera; hovered over the Nation’s Park and my home and was blown by a fierce wind: north-south, then south-north by northwest.

A bumpy landing left me on the floor of Fabian, in dirty blankets that strangled like a boa.

*“kuema... kuema...”*, I intoned.

And with the power I am, pulled up, floated over the Solitude, steered my thought east and fell, fell, fell... into daylight and my own bed, wife alongside.

Alone at last and at last safe from the different types of *they*. Cuddled like a babe, I was just savoring sleep when I heard a disturbance in the living room, irritably went for a look and saw Doctor Fabian wrestling with some shadowy figures, the they of his place I thought I’d escaped from some moments before. Looking pathetic and shriveled, they pleaded for shelter like moo cows. But he firmly herded them through the front door, saying:

*“Out! Out, all of you! You’ve caused enough trouble for one night.”*

I clambered back into bed, arching myself into wife, felt a response that was more than comfort and my loins started stirring. While exhausted, as she must have been, I decided that if there was ever a time for a conjugal celebration, it was now! Closing my eyes, I turned and full front, interlocked.

When the occasion was ripe, she was an ardent woman. Now she seemed to have found a novel expression of her passion: nothing so vulgar as a change of “technique” but a magic that melted and remolded haunches, shoulders and breasts. The woman I pressed, kneaded and mouthed was herself yet much more. The salt of her skin, the dew of her lips tasted different and her same fragrance more aromatic.

Ratiocination being adverse to pleasure, I ignored that and yielded to Eros, delirious to such a degree it took the same mind some seconds to register the involuntary jab of her knee to my ribs as she lurched to the right, writhed,

spat, cursed and scratched at a presence that loomed over us and had her pinned down.

It was the Doc; she, not my wife; and I, at first glance, overpowered. Not a clear one, because she was twisting and turning as she fought off Doc Fabian and her features in any case shrouded by long, raven locks. It was her nakedness, and in that was her all. Never had I known flesh so sleek, soft and glistening. Never a body so tantalizing and well-formed.

Now, that ours was a felicitous marriage didn't rule out my being a *real man*, despite my weakness with *ambil*. And so being and the occasion now ripe, I was enraged, as you'd be, I'd bet, if your privacy was imposed on in the throes of what is nobody's business but your own... if wife's unawares. Even if I had had religion, he wasn't my confessor but physician and should have kept his morality to himself.

Bear that he was, Fabian pummeled, crushed, yanked off the blankets and hoisted her over his shoulders, head down, hair dangling. Meanwhile, I protested tempestuously. Instead of answering back, the Doc adroitly flipped her over, using one hand to clutch her midrib and the other to seize her head, part her locks and silently present her face to me like a trophy.

Noticing that my eyes wandered towards her bush, the Doc glared at me disapprovingly. My rebuttal crossed his recital of a verse in the tongue heard some hours before.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I sarcastically asked.

"*Nonuetima* looked at her vagina, remarking, 'now I see where all my brothers have perished, since all the poisonous animals were there: snakes, scorpions, etc.' "

All at once I was mortified. It was she, the Black Widow, and he'd saved my life!

In my vermin-free bed, I gratefully sank into a void.

I awoke from my customary late-afternoon nap, which I'd purposely keep shallow and brief because I always had a good deal of work ahead. It had been usually relaxing this time and following the same routine, I drank a strong, black coffee, turned on the computer and returned to a translation I'd been doing, a warm-up for the true task, in this case, a story about a therapy group run by a naturalist doctor. That done, I would then fortify my thought with the first spoonful of *mambe*.

Nervous, as any writer is when he takes up where he's left off, I started by re-reading what I'd written, which would highlight the faults not noticed till

then. But instead of daunting, as it usually did, I felt exceptionally placid, now realizing that the problem was implicit in a narrative which blended actual personal experience with myths from extraneous sources and then bent the blend back, as it were, with fantasies that came on the winds. With the first, I, as the narrator, commanded the what, where and when. With the second, I could impersonally let all that roam free. With the third, on the other hand, the equilibrium between the first two would be skewed and the enterprise hazardous. I was out for allure. The risk, plausibility slain for enigma. I had to depict the teller, not as inept, but overwhelmed, a speck of dust in a storm of opposing dimensions – dizzy, buffeted but *observant*.

When your stock in trade's that, you have to be delusional, so I bowed to the whims of the words that leapt up, though it was oft rued in the cold light of day. *Mambe* concentrated, to be sure. The quality of what it concentrated the writer *on* remained a function of talent. Nevertheless, the pros and cons were likely more complex for me than most others, insofar as concentration is just another word for *cutting yourself off* and when that went too far, which was a lot, my wife definitely did not like it.

It was essentially a points of view clash. From mine, inspiration. From hers, monster-movie. One in which the person she trusted and loved was transformed into a loathsome beast, mouth dribbling mush made of the same verdant dust which soiled his keyboard. And worse, absolutely autistic towards herself.

Resigned at times, annoyed at others, particularly when a domestic issue came up I was deaf to, she would needle me in a subtle, womanly way with a sardonic catchphrase, uttered around nine that night, when I was in full flood.

“Another wild *mambe* night, heh?”

At times, it bounced off, at others it caused guilt or resentment, but it was also a game played by both and this time I good-naturedly entered into its spirit.

“Yeah, you've told me a million times and you're right. Won't let me sleep, hangover tomorrow, dependence on a substance, etc. But, my, the *results!* Just now, anyway. Take a look at what I'm doing and tell me if it isn't worth it.”

Sitting before the screen, she reluctantly scrolled up, then down and so fast it was practically speed-reading until one paragraph arrested her and smiling, she read it aloud:

“It took several taps for her shoulder to turn and when it did, she looked straight through me, as if I weren't there. At the thought that she was a hallucination within the larger one, I nearly gave way to panic. She, my only

firm foot on the ground of the real!”

“See what I mean?”

“Well, without realizing it, you certainly get to the heart of what *mambe* does to you. I don’t even exist for you!”

Undeterred by the own goal, I took that to mean that she liked it.

“Maybe not that part. In general.”

“Writing’s your thing, not mine.”

“Doesn’t matter. Your honest opinion.”

“Since you insist... it’s impossible to follow whatever’s supposed to be happening. All these shifts of time, place and perspective, the crazy mixture of characters who are real and made up. And that’s me, who’s familiar with some of the things it’s based on. Imagine the effect on your readers!”

The same doubts had been assailing and wounding my morning-after post-mortems. As always, however, the *mambe* that made me autistic made me immune. As soon as she left, I became more frenzied than ever, so lost to the real world, in fact, that when she eventually returned, it cost me an effort to recognize who my wife was and why she was there.

She undressed, got into bed and pointedly silent, burrowed into the covers with a will.

I should explain that my desk was nearby and I angled the lamp so as not to disturb her.

“Is that better?”

Her only response was an irritable roll of position.

“Are you cold? I can get you another blanket.”

After a long silence, she unveiled, raised her head and hit back.

“It isn’t the cold or light. It’s *you* and your goddamned *mambe* vibe!”

“Sorry, won’t be long. Just need to finish off this part.”

I did that for a while, then paused.

She was right, it *was* late and, tired as I was, anything after that would be counter-productive. But the green grip was such it kept her awake even after I joined her in bed and I wanted to stop but I couldn’t. A few minutes more at the most, I promised her.

She was right, someone wrote, and I started to type again. She was right, the same someone wrote, writing I was so weary I didn't know whether or not to put what I typed in quotation marks.

It was late and we decided. As hunger is the best sauce, weariness made a featherbed. Almost at once, with a contented sigh, my wife fell asleep and I was about to follow when I felt a shoving. Left with no choice, I surrendered. I only knew that I sank and each level was more hellish than the one before.

I continued to plunge down through realms beyond end until it tightened a core of defiance in me and like a swimmer too deep I fought with my last breath to ascend. Having achieved that, I was now at least resolute. I shook wife awake and hurriedly explained where I'd been and our urgency.

“So if it wasn't a nightmare, it means I'm a lunatic!”

“I'm only saying what's obvious. See for yourself: there's no one else here and everything's quiet.”

“It's either escape or perdition.”

“Do you have any idea of the hour!”

Looking at my watch, I noticed the date.

“Strange, it's the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June.”

“Stop it, this *isn't* a dream.”

“Which proves my point.”

“That being?”

“Nothing compares to the horror of the ambiguous.”