

## Patrick Roscoe / RORSCHACHS II: MUTILATION

The flies are drunk and drowsy in the African sun. Inside the house they bumble against the mesh screen all afternoon, fat and full of blood. They are content beside the web of wire that prevents them from having to vanish into the air outside. The small boy kneels on the floor of red tiles which his mother drives the houseboy to polish once a week; the scent of wax lingers in the air for days, like a reprimand. The small boy leans toward the window ledge. A pin is pinched between the thumb and third finger of his right hand. He contemplates the flies, discerning which is the fattest or biggest or most lazy. The fingers of his left hand hold the chosen fly in place, and his right hand guides the pin into its body. There is a crucial moment when the pin must be forced through a thin but hard protective skin, then a sense of relief as the silver sliver eases into soft blood. The wings of the fly beat and buzz as red liquid drools upon the window ledge. With one finger the boy paints lines and shapes. He can draw numbers, letters of the alphabet or more elusive symbols. Recently, he has learned to spell his name.

The ants are always very quick. Before the blood can begin to dry, they are marching toward the tantalizing aroma of an easy prey. Tiny, efficient teeth nibble the body of the fly, tearing away choice morsels. Some ants are too excited by such bounty to decide if they should eat the food on the spot or take it to some safer place to savour. Some are insane with greed, piling more plunder upon their backs than they can carry. The boy watches this scene carefully, intently, now and then scattering away ants he finds overly voracious. Only once do his eyes look out through the window, and then they are swallowed by the sight of a world too much larger than the small one he controls. The southern sun hits his body flat and hard, like an iron. At the edge of the yard the houseboy and gardener are each holding one end of a thick, long snake. Their Swahili words twist and tangle inside the boy's head. He cannot remember the place that he is often told is his real home.

He decides to save this fly, for no reason except this is what he wants to do. He withdraws the pin, then nudges the body away; it is surprising how after such an experience a fly can often limp away, apparently just a little more dazed than before. The other flies are unalarmed by what has occurred nearby: disaster is always far away, drone the sun and heat. Perhaps the boy will sever the head of the next fly with one quick slice of the pin. Or he will tear off only the wings, or only the legs.

He shifts his bare legs, which have grown stiff and sore against the hard tiles. He feels someone behind him. Turning, he sees Rogacion, the houseboy, staring at him with black eyes floating in pools of white. The dark skin is pulled very tightly across the high cheekbones; the face appears without expression. It is set as still as when the boy's mother shouts because the housework is not properly done. The houseboy turns silently back into the kitchen. His feet make no sound against the floor.

The boy reverts his eyes to the window ledge. Suddenly, he is sick of greedy ants and he is tired of flies that are so fat and easy to kill. He looks out the window again, down the hill that slopes toward the west. The dirt is red and hard and baked, and heat has cracked it. There are signs that the world has been broken, as if by earthquake.

There is no telephone in the apartment the boy moves into ten years later, when he learns the truth at seventeen. No one knocks upon the door; he does not see or hear other people in the building: it is very quiet. Occasionally he goes out into the cold to buy food and a few times a week attends a nearby university. He sits silently in the classroom, his face set still. Staring at the instructor, he makes no marks upon the white paper before him. He knows he is supposed to understand this language that marches into his ears; they tell him this country is where he belongs. At night cars ease down the street below his windows; their headlights crawl along his walls. He likes the rooms in darkness, when only the element of the stove glows red. He rests the blade of the knife against the electric fire, bends his face close to feel the burning heat. When the metal is ready, he presses it against the skin of his arms. He must reheat the knife several times, if he wants it to keep working. He applies it to various places on his flesh. A subtle scent rises to his nose. Later, when he switches on the light and the room jumps out at him, he will study the pattern of marks upon his arms, as if trying to interpret hieroglyphics. Often, they will seem very near to possessing some meaning he can almost remember; he will hear a foreign language that is very familiar, nearly understood. Years later, the marks will have faded into small pale spots, and when his skin is tanned they will be invisible. The boy still stands in darkness, the coils of the element continue to glow red. They will keep burning until the boy flicks a switch.

At evening the young man lights three candles, the same variety of which old Spanish women dressed in black burn beneath miniatures of the Holy Virgin or The Saviour. The thick tubes are encased within a skin of red plastic, and, as the wax burns down, fire fills the plastic with red glowing light. Three flames waver in the air that wafts into the room. It drifts inland from the Mediterranean, all the way from Africa.

On the bed the young man lies reading and drinking wine. A burning cigarette is pinched between two fingers of his left hand. His other hand continually and unconsciously worries the skin of his face, disturbing it, scratching it. When he turns off the light at last, Spanish voices reach him from other rooms, the hallway, the street. Although he understands the language well, over years of living in foreign lands he has learned to flick a switch in his head, turning any words in the immediate air into only sound. He allows the candles to burn through the night, beneath white walls bare of miniatures or photographs. Waking at morning, he looks into the mirror. His forehead is marked by perhaps ten small scratches where the nails of his fingers dug deeply into skin. They are disfiguring and red. The smell of wax is heavy in the room. He turns to see the three candles still burning. Carefully, he blows them out.

Upon his terrace the light is very clear, and the mountains to one side and the sea to the other appear in sharp focus. The November sun is almost hot. The young man leans back in a chair, tilting his face toward the sky. His eyes are closed. When they open an hour later, their vision is darkened for several moments; then sharp light forces itself painfully back into them. He looks again into the mirror. The red marks are still there, resembling the war paint of a native tribe, but they are vanishing already into the expanse of darkened skin. In a few days or a week they will be gone, and the young man will gaze into the mirror, trying to remember his name and age and place of birth.