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Daguerreotype

by Richard Wilding

Colombia, 1846

“I am a daguerreotype, with my shutter open,” mumbles Alciabades. His voice comes from behind a towel which was once, I imagine, white. Now it is a mixture of reds, browns and greys, none of them signalling cleanliness. He holds the towel to his face with fingers shaped like thick tree roots. They, like the towel, are no less covered in earth. It is mid-afternoon and the heat has sucked all energy out of the day. Nothing moves. No bird makes a sound. In his cage, Cortez sits with his left hand on his head trying to shade it from the sun. It is so hot that Cortez has even given up trying to pleasure himself. We sit side by side on the veranda, Alciabades and me. His trousers are rolled up to above his knees. He is covered in thick black hair, almost as hairy indeed as the orang-utan. Even his kneecaps are hairy. They are also sweaty. His feet, with their amber-coloured toenails, gently circulate water in the bucket to keep them cool.

Alciabades removes the towel from his face and gestures for me to take it. It is rank.

I gesture that I do not wish to take it. I think I would rather drown in my own sweat.

He shrugs, dips the towel in the water at his feet once again and places it over his head. Then he sits back. “I see everything,” he says. He taps his forehead with one of his tree roots. “I see everything and I record everything up here, like a daguerreotype. Nothing I see can ever be unseen. I recall it all. The images might not be in perfect focus but...”

He lets out a long sigh and doesn't finish his sentence. I have no interest in following him down whatever track of thought he is pursuing and besides, even the smallest energy expended in conversation is sapping.

I look away and watch as a door opens on the far side of the square, the side that benefits from the shade. An aged mestiza emerges, dressed like a macaw in garish greens, yellows and blues. Her skirt hangs down to the cobbles. She stares at me then unties her horse and leads it away out of sight. After she has disappeared all that is left is the clip clop sound of the beast's hooves. That sound is all that is left, it seems, of life on this earth. With this heat, I could indeed be in hell.

Ten minutes pass. Ten minutes of utter silence. Then: "I will know my horse when I see him again. If I am blind, I will know my horse."

I turn my gaze back on Alciabades. He is a thin man, made it appears out of wire. Yet his coal-black eyes have an intensity to them that suggests it would be not be a wise idea ever to cross him.

"She stole my horse," he says. "No man can stomach this."