

THREE DAYS OF RAIN

by Holly Phillips

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They came down out of the buildings' shade into the glare of the lakeside afternoon. Seen through the sting of sun-tears, the bridge between Asuada and Maldino Islands wavered in the heat, white cement floating over white dust, its shadow a black sword-cut against the ground. Santiago groped in the breast of his doublet for his sunglasses and the world regained its edges: the background of red-roofed tenements stacked up Maldino's hill, the foreground of the esplanade's railings marking the hour with abbreviated shadows, the bridge, the empty air, lying in between. The not-so-empty air. Even through dark lenses Santiago could see the mirage rippling above the lakebed, fluid as water, tempting as a lie, as the heat raised its ghosts above the plain. Beyond stood the dark hills that were the shore once, in the days when the city was islanded in a living lake; hills that were the shore still, the desert's shore. They looked like the shards of a broken pot, like paper torn and pasted against the sun-bleached sky. The esplanade was deserted and the siesta silence was intense.

"There's Bernal," Luz murmured in Santiago's ear. "Thirsty for blood."

She sounded, Santiago thought, more sardonic than a lady should in her circumstances. He had been too shy to look at her as she walked beside him down from Asuada Island's crown, but he glanced at her now from behind his sunglasses. She had rare pale eyes that were, in the glare, narrow and edged in incipient creases. A dimple showed by her mouth: she knew he was looking. He glanced away and saw Bernal and his seconds waiting in the shadow of the bridge. Ahead, Sandoval and Orlando and Ruy burst out laughing, as if the sight of Bernal were hilarious, but their tension rang like a cracked bell in the quiet. Santiago wished he were sophisticated enough to share Luz's ironic mood, but he was too excited, and he had the notion that he would do this hour an injustice if he pretended a disinterest he did not feel.

Sandoval vaulted over the low gate at the end of the esplanade, dropping down to the steps that led to the bridge's foot. Orlando followed more clumsily, the hilt of his rapier ringing off the gate's ironwork, and Ruy climbed sedately over, waiting for Luz and Santiago to catch up. Luz hitched up the skirt of her lace coat to show athletic legs in grimy hose, but allowed Ruy and Santiago to help her over the gate. The gate's sun-worn sign still bore a memory of its old warning—deep water, drowning, death—but it could not be deciphered beneath the pale motley of handbills. One had to know it was there, and to know, one had to care.

An intangible breeze stirred the ghost lake into gentle waves.

Bernal and Sandoval bowed. Their seconds bowed. To Santiago the observer, who still trailed behind with Luz, they looked like players rehearsing on an empty stage, the strong colors of their doublets false against the pallor of the dust. Bernal drew his rapier with a flourish and presented it to Ruy to inspect. The bridge's shade gave no relief from the heat; sweat tickled the skin of Santiago's throat. Sandoval also drew, with a prosaic gesture that seemed more honest, and therefore more threatening than Bernal's theatricality, and Santiago felt a burst of excitement, thinking that Sandoval would surely win. Wouldn't he? He glanced at Luz and was glad to see that the sardonic smile had given way to an intent look. Belatedly he took off his sunglasses and her profile leapt out in sharp relief against the blazing lakebed beyond the shade.

The blades were inspected and returned to their owners. The seconds marked out their corners. The duelists saluted each other, or the duel, and their blades met in the first tentative kiss. Steel touching steel made a cold sound that hissed back down at them from the bridge's underside. The men's feet in their soft boots scuffed and patted and stirred up dust that stank like dry bones.

Santiago was there to watch and he did, but his excitement fragmented his attention, as if several Santiagos were crowded behind a single pair of eyes, watching everything. The fighters' feet like dancers', making a music of their own. The men's faces, intent, unselfconscious, reflecting the give and take of the duel. The haze of dust, the sharp edge of shade, the watery mirage. The rapiers hissed and shrieked and sang, and in the bridge's echoes Santiago heard water birds, children on a beach, rain falling into the lake. For an instant his attention broke quite asunder, and he felt blowing through that divide a cool breeze, a wind rich with impossible smells, water and weeds and rust. The duelists fell apart and Santiago heard himself blurt out, "Blood! First blood!" for scarlet drops spattered from the tip of Sandoval's sword to lay the dust. Bernal grimaced and put his hand to his breast above his heart.

"It's not deep?" said Sandoval worriedly.

"No, no," Bernal said, pressing the heel of his hand to the wound.

"Fairly dealt," Santiago said. He felt he was still catching up to events, that he had nearly been left behind, but no one seemed to notice. A grinning Ruy clapped his shoulder.

"A good fight, eh? They'll be talking about this one for a season or two!"

"Talking about me for a season or two," Luz said.

Ruy laughed. "She wants you to think she's too modest to take pleasure in it, but her tongue would be sharper if we talked only about the fight, and never her."

Luz gave Santiago an exasperated look, but when Sandoval came to kiss her hand she let him. But then, she let Bernal do the same, and Bernal's bow was deeper, despite the pain that lined his face. There was not much blood on the ground, and what there was was already dulled by dust.

"Does it make you want to fight, Santiago?" Ruy asked.

Yes? No? Santiago said the one thing he knew was true. "It makes me want to feel the rain on my face before I die."

"Ay, my friend! Well said!" Ruy slung his arm around Santiago's neck, and Santiago laughed, glad to be alive.

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He held the crucible steady with aching arms as the molten glass ran over the ceramic lip and into the mold. The heat from the glass scorched his arms, his bare chest, his face, drying him out like a pot in a kiln. He eased the crucible away from the mold and set it on the brick apron of the furnace, glass cooling from a glowing yellow to a dirty gray on its lip, and dropped the tongs in their rack with suddenly trembling hands. The glassmaker Ernesto leaned over the mold, watching for flaws as the small plate began to cool.

"It will do," he said, and he helped Santiago shift the mold into the annealing oven where the glass could cool slowly enough that it would not shatter. Santiago fished a bottle of water from the cooler and stepped out into the forecourt where the glassmaker's two-story house cast a triangle of shade. It was only the day after Sandoval's duel and Santiago did not expect to see any of that crowd again, not so soon. Yet there Ruy was, perched on the courtyard's low northern wall, perfectly at ease, as if he meant to make a habit of the place.

"I was starting to think he would keep you working through siesta."

Santiago shrugged, refusing to make excuses for either his employer or his employment. Ruy was dressed with the slapdash elegance of his class, his doublet and shirt open at the neck, his light boots tied with mismatched laces. Santiago was half-naked, his bare skin feathered with thin white scars, like a duelist's scars, but not, emphatically not. Still, Ruy had come to him. He propped his elbows on the wall and scratched his heat-tightened skin without apology.

"What do you have planned?" he asked Ruy, and guessed, safely, "Not sleep."

Santiago expected—he hoped—that Ruy would grin and propose another adventure like yesterday's, but no. Ruy looked out at the northern view and said soberly, "Sandoval was going to spend the morning in the Assembly watching the debates. We're to meet him at the observatory when they break before the evening session."

The debates. Santiago swallowed the last of his water, taking pleasure from the cool liquid in his mouth and throat, and then toyed with the bottle, his gaze drawn into the same distance as Ruy's. Because of the fire hazard, Ernesto's workshop had an islet to itself, a low crumb of land off Asuada's northern rim. From here there was nothing to see but the white lakebed, the blue hills, the pale sky. Nothing except the long-necked pumps rocking out there in the middle distance, floating on the heat mirage like dusty metal geese, drawing up the water that kept the city alive. For now. Perhaps for not much longer, depending on the vote, the wells, the vanished rains. The empty bottle spun out of Santiago's tired hands and clattered to the baked earth beyond the wall. Ruy slipped down, one hand on his rapier's scabbard, to retrieve it. One drop clung to its mouth, bright as liquid glass in the sunlight, and Santiago had a glancing vision, a waking siesta dream of an earthenware pitcher heavy with water, round-bellied, sweating, cool in his hands. The plastic bottle was light as eggshells, an airy nothing after the crucible and glass.

"Thanks," he said, and shaking off the lure of sleep, he dropped the bottle in the re-use box and gathered up his clothes.

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The observatory crowned the higher of Orroco's two peaks, gazing down in academic tolerance at the Assembly buildings on the other height. More convenient for Sandoval than for his friends, but such was the privilege of leadership. Santiago felt no resentment as he made the long, hot walk with Ruy. He was glad of the company, glad of the summons, glad of the excuse to visit the observatory grounds. Too glad, perhaps, but he was old enough to know that he could have refused, hung up his hammock for a well-earned sleep, and it was that feeling of choice, of acting out of desire rather than need, that let him walk as Ruy's equal. Their voices woke small echoes from the buildings that shaded the streets, the faint sounds falling about them like the dust kicked up by their feet. Even the short bridge between Asuada and Orroco was built up, and in the evenings the street was a small fiesta, a promenade complete with music, paper flowers, colored lanterns, laughing girls, but now even the shady balconies were abandoned. These days the city's inhabitants withdrew into their rooms like bats into their caves, hiding from the sun. There was an odd, stubborn, nonsensical freedom to being one of the fools who walked abroad, dizzy and too dry to sweat, as if the heat of afternoon were a minor thing, trivial beside the important business of living.

"Why does Sandoval attend the debates? I didn't think..."

"That he cared?" Ruy gave Santiago a slanting look. "That we cared? About the Assembly, we don't. Or at least, I don't. They talk, I'd rather live. No, but Sandoval's family holds one of the observer's seats and he goes sometimes to ... Well. He says it's to gather ammunition for his lampoons, but sometimes I wonder if it's the lampoons that are the excuse."

"Excuse?"

“For doing his duty. That’s the sort of family they are. Duty! Duty!” Ruy thumped his hand to his chest and laughed.

Santiago was—not quite disappointed—he decided he was intrigued. He had not thought that was the kind of man Sandoval was.

Sandoval himself, as if he knew he had to prove Ruy wrong, had gathered an audience in the shady precincts of the observatory’s eastern colonnade. He mimicked a fat councilor whose speech was all mournful pauses, a fussy woman who interrupted herself at every turn, one of the famous party leaders who declaimed like an actor, one hand clutching his furrowed brow. Santiago, having arrived in the middle of this impromptu play, couldn’t guess how the debate was progressing, but he was struck more forcibly than ever by the great wellspring of spirit inside Sandoval that gave life to one character after another and made people weep with laughter.

“And where is he in all of this?”

Santiago turned, almost shocked. He would never have asked that question, yet it followed so naturally on his own thought that he felt transparent, as if he had been thinking aloud. But Luz, who had spoken, was watching Sandoval, and by her manner might have been speaking to herself. Santiago hesitated over a greeting. Luz looked up at him, her face tense with a challenge he did not really understand.

“Isn’t that what actors do?” he said. “Bury themselves in their roles?”

“Oh, surely,” she said. “Surely. Here we see Sandoval the great actor, and in a minute more we’ll see Sandoval the great actor playing the role of Sandoval the great actor not playing a role. And when do we see Sandoval, just Sandoval? Where is he? Buried and—”

Luz broke off, but her thought was so clear to Santiago that she might as well have said it: dead. Worried, confused, Santiago looked over her head to Ruy, who shrugged, his face mirroring the eternal puzzlement of men faced with a woman’s moods. Sandoval’s admirers laughed at something he said and Luz gripped Santiago’s arm.

“It’s too hot, I can’t stand this noise. Let’s find somewhere quiet.”

She began to pull Santiago down the colonnade. Ruy pursed his lips and shook his finger behind her back. Santiago flashed back a wide-eyed look of panic, only half-feigned, and Ruy, silently laughing, came along.

The observatory was one of the oldest compounds in the city, built during the Rational Age when philosophers and their followers wanted to base an entire civilization on the mysterious perfection of the circle and the square. Life was too asymmetrical, too messy, to let the age last for long, but its remnants were peaceful. There really was a kind of perfection in the golden domes, the marble colonnades,

the long white buildings with their shady arcades that fenced the observatory in, a box for a precious orb. Perfection, but an irrelevant perfection: the place was already a ruin, even if the roofs and walls were sound. As they left Sandoval and his admirers behind, the laughter only made the silence deeper, like the fragments of shade whose contrast only whitened the sunlight on the stone.

Luz led them across the plaza where dead pepper trees cracked the flagstones with their shadows, through an arched passage that was black to sun-dazzled eyes, and out onto the southern terrace. Even under the arcade there was little shade. The three of them sat on a bench with their backs to the wall and looked out over the islands with their packed geometry of courtyards and plazas and roofs, islands of order, of life, scattered across the dry white face of death. Ruy and Luz began to play the game of high places, arguing over which dark cleft on Asuada was Mendoza Street, which faded tile roof was Corredo's atelier, which church it was that had the iron devils climbing its brass-crowned steeple. Santiago, tired from his work, the walk, the heat, rested his head against the wall and let his eyes stray to the lake and its mirage of water, the blue ripples that were only a color stolen from the merciless sky. Suddenly he found the city's quiet dreadful. It was like a graveyard's, a ruin's.

"Why do they bother with a debate?" he said. "Everyone already knows how they're going to vote. Everyone knows..."

Luz and Ruy were silent and Santiago felt the embarrassment of having broken a half-perceived taboo. He was the outsider again, the stranger.

But then Luz said, "Everyone knows that when they vote, however they vote, they will have voted wrong. To stay, to go: there is no right way to choose. They argue because when they are angry enough they can blame the other side instead of themselves." She paused. "Or God, or the world."

"Fate," Ruy said.

"Fate is tomorrow," Luz said.

"And there is no tomorrow," Ruy said. "Only today. Only now."

Santiago said nothing, knowing he had heard their creed, knowing he could only understand it in his bones. The lake's ghost washed around the islands' feet, blue and serene, touching with soft waves against the shore. A dust devil spun up a tall white pillar that Santiago's sleep-stung eyes turned into a cloud trailing a sleeve of rain. Rain rustled against the roof of the arcade. White birds dropped down from the high arches and drifted away on the still air, their wings shedding sun-bright droplets of molten gold. Sleep drew near and was startled away by Luz's cry. Some scholar, despairing over his work or his world, had set his papers alight and was casting them out his window. The white pages danced on the rising heat, their flames invisible in the sunlight, burning themselves to ash before they touched the ground.

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The day of the vote was an undeclared holiday. Even the news station played music, waiting for something to report, and every open window poured dance songs and ballads into the streets. Neighbors put aside their feuds, strangers were treated to glasses of beer, talk swelled and died away on the hour and rose again when there was no news, no news.

Sandoval, trying as always to be extraordinary, had declared that today was an ordinary day, and had gone with Ruy and Orlando and some others to the swordsman Corredo's atelier for their morning practice. Santiago, summoned by Ruy, entered those doors for the first time that day, and he was not sure what to feel. While Sandoval strove to triumph over the day's great events by cleaving to routine, Santiago found it was impossible not to let his first entry into the duelists' privileged realm be colored by the tension of the day. And why shouldn't it be? He looked around him at the young men's faces, watched them try to mirror Sandoval's mask of ennui, and wondered if their fight to free themselves from the common experience only meant they failed to immerse themselves in the moment they craved. This *was* the moment, this day, the day of decision. And yet, Santiago thought, Sandoval was right in one thing: however the vote went, whatever the decision, life would go on. They would go on breathing, pumping blood, making piss. They would still be here, in the world, swimming in time.

"You're thinking," Ruy said cheerfully. "Master Corredo! What say you to the young man who thinks?"

"Thinking will kill you," said the swordsman Corredo. He was a lean, dry man, all sinew and leather, and he meant what he said.

"There, you see? Here, take this in your hand." Ruy presented Santiago with the hilt of a rapier. Santiago took it in his burn-scarred hand, felt the grip find its place against his palm. The sword was absurdly light after the iron weight of the glassmaker's tongs; it took no more than a touch of his fingers to hold it steady.

"Ah, you've done this before," Ruy said. He sounded suspicious, as if he thought Santiago had lied.

"No, never." Santiago was tempted to laugh. He loved it, this place, this sword in his hand.

"A natural, eh? Most of us started out clutching it like—"

"Like their pizzlies in the moment of joy," Master Corredo said. He took Santiago's strong wrist between his fingers and thumb and shook it so the sword softly held in Santiago's palm waved in the air. After a moment Santiago firmed the muscles in his arm and the sword was still, despite the swordsman's pressure.

"Well," said Corredo. He let Santiago go. "You stand like a lump of stone. Here, beside me. Place your feet so—not so wide—the knees a little bent...."

Ruy wandered off, limbered up with a series of long lunges. After a while the soft kiss and whine of steel filled the air.

By noon they were disposed under the awning in Corredo's courtyard, drinking beer and playing cards. Santiago, with a working man's sense of time, was hungry, but no one else seemed to be thinking about food. Also, the stakes were getting higher. Santiago dropped a good hand on the discard pile and excused himself. He would save his money and find a tavern that would sell him a bushel of flautas along with a few bottles of beer. Not that he could afford to feed them any more than he could afford to gamble with them, but he had heard them talk about spongers. He would rather be welcomed when they did see him, even if he could not see them often.

And then again, the holiday atmosphere of the streets made it easy to spend money if you had it to spend. In the masculine quiet of Corredo's atelier he had actually forgotten for a little while what day it was. The vote, the vote. Red and green handbills not yet faded by the angry sun fluttered from every doorjamb and drifted like lazy pigeons from underfoot. Radios squawked and rattled, noise becoming music only when Santiago passed a window or a door, and people were still abroad in the heat. One did not often see a crowd by daylight and it was strange how the sun seemed to mask faces just as effectively as evening shadows did, shuttering the eyes, gilding brown skin with sweat and dust. Santiago walked farther than he had meant to, sharing the excitement, yet feeling separate from the crowd, as if he were excited about a different thing, or as if he had been marked out by Sandoval, set aside for something other than this. Life, he thought: Sandoval's creed. But wasn't this life out here in the streets, in these conversations between strangers, in this shared fear for the future, for the world? Didn't blood beat through these hearts too?

The heat finally brought Santiago to rest by the shaded window of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Standing with his elbows on the outside counter, waiting for his order, he ate a skewer of spicy pork that made him sweat, and then cooled his mouth with a beer. The restaurant's owner seemed to have filled the long, narrow room with his closest friends. Santiago, peering through the hatch at the interior darkness, heard the same argument that ran everywhere today, a turbulent stream like the flash flood from a sudden rain. Life's no good here anymore, but will it be any better in the crowded hills, by the poisoned sea, down in the south where the mud and rain was all there was?

"But life *is* good." No one heard, though Santiago spoke aloud. Perhaps they chose not to hear. His order came in a paper box already half-transparent with oil stains and he carried it carefully in his arms. The smell was so good it made him cheerful. All the same, when he returned to the atelier he found that as impatient as he had been with the worriers outside, he was almost as irritated by the abstainers within. They seemed so much like stubborn children sitting in a corner with folded arms. Like children, however, they greeted the food with extravagant delight, and Santiago found himself laughing at the accolades they heaped on his head, as if he

had performed some mighty deed. It was better to eat, he thought, and enjoy the food as long as it was there.

Like normal people, they dozed through the siesta hours, stupefied by heat and food. Santiago slept deeply and woke to the dusky velvet of the evening shadows. With the sun resting on the far hills the bleached sky regained its color, a blue as deep and calm as a song of the past, a blue that seemed to have been drawn out of Santiago's dreams. They went out together, yawning and still pleasantly numb with sleep, into the streets where a hundred radios stamped out the rhythm of an old salsa band. It was impossible not to sway a little as they walked, to bump their shoulders in thoughtless camaraderie, to spin out lines of poetry at the sight of a pretty face. "Oh, rose of the shadows, flower in bud, bloom for me..." It was evening and the long, long shadows promised cool even as the city's plaster and stone radiated the last heat of the day. It was evening, the day's delight.

"So who is going to ask first?" Orlando muttered to Ruy. Ruy glanced over his shoulder at Santiago, his eyebrows raised. Santiago smiled and shook his head.

"We won't need to ask," Ruy said. "We'll hear, whether we want to or not."

But who in all the city would have thought they needed to be told? Holiday had given way to carnival, as the radios gave way to guitars in the plazas, singers on the balconies, dancers in the streets. It was a strange sort of carnival where no one needed to drink to be drunk. The people had innocent faces, Santiago thought, washed clean by shock, as if the world had not died so much as vanished, leaving them to stand on air. But was it the shock of being told to abandon their homes? Or was it the shock of being told to abandon themselves to the city's slow death? Santiago listened to an old man singing on a flat roof high above the street, he listened to a woman sobbing by a window, and he wondered. But no, he didn't ask.

They wound down to Asuada's esplanade where the dead trees were hung with lanterns that shone candy colors out into the dark. The sun was gone, the hills a black frieze, the sky a violet vault freckled with stars. The lakebed held onto the light, paler than the city and the sky, and it breathed a breath so hot and dry the lake's dust might have been the fine white ash covering a barbecue's coals. There were guitars down here too, and a trumpet that sang out into the darkness. Sandoval took off his sword and began to dance. Sweat drew his black hair across his face as he stamped and whirled and clapped with hollow hands. Ruy began to dance, and Orlando and the rest, their swords slung down by Santiago's feet. He ached to watch them, wished he with his clumsy feet dared to join them, and was glad he had not when Luz spotted him through the crowd. She came and leaned against his side, muscular and soft, never quite still as the guitars thrummed out their rhythms. Santiago knew she was watching Sandoval, but he did not care. This was his. A paper lantern caught fire, and when no one leapt forward to douse it the whole tree burned, one branch at a time, the pretty lanterns swallowed up by the crueller light of naked flame. It was beautiful, the bare black branches clothed in feathers of molten glass, molten gold. The dance spread, a chain of men stamping and whirling down

the lakeshore. In the shuffle of feet and the rustle of flames, in the brush of Luz's hair against his sleeve, in the rush of air into his lungs, Santiago once again heard that phantom rain. It fell around him, bright as sparks in the light of the fire, it rang like music into the memory of the lake. It was sweet, sweet. Luz stirred against his arm.

“Are you going, Santiago? When they stop the pumps, are you going to go?”

He leaned back against the railing, and smiled into the empty sky, and shook his head, no.

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