

One of the murdered teacher's poems went

Oh, bittersweet youth,  
object of my abject toil . . .

And nothing else. She had published only one book, entitled *Death*. She was timid in conversation and at times could not seem to express herself. When she got frustrated during the torture of her classes, she turned red and her mouth trembled. But she was incapable of raising her voice. And the classroom noise of the students' uninterrupted chattering seemed to envelop, disorient and paralyze her. She often talked about poetry. She tried to explain the magical power of poetic utterance. Something like the supreme effort of the poet to rise above the maddening crowd and to create. Somewhere in the back of the classroom a girl started going meeeeooww, smothering the poetry of the impassioned rhapsodist. The laughter sharpened in tone. The class became a single giant cat, glaring at the teacher with piercing, bloodshot eyes. Four girls in the front row were singing some pop tune that went:

When I love you  
from the bottom of my heart  
my brains go  
suddenly into knots . . .

The teacher left the room, crestfallen. Looking out at the empty schoolyard, she thought about her Calvary, about poets no longer having any place in this world. Why make teachers cover poets and poetry? It was laughable, and cruel to boot. A little bird swooped down and daintily snatched up a crumb from the gutter. The school's dog wagged his tail as she passed by, and without realizing it she glanced at him tenderly. At least he was sincere. The principal had called her to the office. When she went in, she couldn't help staring at a row of stuffed animals neatly lined up in an open cabinet. She remembered how the day before the principal had ordered them taken out into the

## DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

### OF A TEACHER

*Marta Teresa Solari*

The teacher was dead; she had been cut up by the girls who, after killing her, cannibalistically disposed of her remains. The teacher was a poet endowed with great sensitivity and a romantic temperament, having started writing at twenty, although her career was now over at thirty-five. They were going over the scene of the crime. All the students were presumed guilty. They were interrogating the top student in the class:

"Now please tell us everything from the start . . ."

The girl, a young thing with a blank expression on her face, grabbed one foot and sardonically exclaimed:

"Here."

"What's that supposed to mean? What are you doing with your foot? Get to the point!"

"I mean, I started on her foot. I took off her sock and bit into the heel."

"You can't be serious!"

The principal was nonplussed. Actually, all that was left were the gnawed-on bones. They left a little sign on the macabre residue: "Anatomy Lesson," it said.

sun to keep down the moths. The glass-eyed rabbit and the hawk with one wing stretched out got to sun themselves all morning. She felt the school was lifeless, and the principal just another stuffed animal.

"You don't seem to appreciate how serious the situation is. Your class is a madhouse, I've noticed it when I go by. The students don't respect you, you don't know how to make them respect you. You don't understand the principle of authority. You've just got to face them down and use a firm tone of voice—and make them afraid of you. You can manage them only if they fear you. But what do you do? You talk about poetry, sweetness and light, subtleties that they'll never understand and they don't care about! Stick to the program, right to the end! Hammer on those dates, yes, dates! For example: this poet was born in 1506 and died of tuberculosis in 1526! Therefore, he lived twenty years, wrote twenty books and a dictionary of poetry. Never made a red cent, nobody gave a damn about his books! The first was *Illusion*, the last, *Desperation*. Women wanted nothing to do with him, but now he's a great poet. That's all, enough for them to learn and then get on with the next writer!"

She left the office and her spirit seemed to mope along behind her, but at least it wasn't stuffed.

The day of the crime started normally enough. As she entered the classroom a student gave her a bouquet of red roses. Totally unheard of. Some others arranged them in a vase and placed them on the lectern. One girl got up and recited one of Bécquer's poems from beginning to end, the one that starts with "The dark swallows will return." And then, you could have heard a pin drop. One of them—the one that had recited the poem—suddenly came forward and plunged the knife into her before she knew what was happening. She died with a beatific smile on her face and then they simply are her up. Laughter was everywhere and spring was in the air, as befitted the month of October. Later they went home and no one was hungry, although some complained about upset stomachs. A few threw up, but they were mostly calm. Sensitive to the deceased's poetic inclinations, they buried the bones next to a rosebush, but the dog—who was always hungry—dug them up. And when the principal was

notified, she did not know what to make of them, since they did not march any of the bones in her collection. When the teacher did not show up the following day—she had never missed a class—the principal began to suspect something was wrong. Her suspicions were confirmed after questioning the class. There was no accounting for it; this had never happened before at her school. She tried to blame it on the noxious influence of television, but the psychologist she brought in felt that there was more to it: perhaps some of the girls in the class had a congenital predisposition to crime. She called an emergency meeting of the P.T.A. to discuss what should be done, whether to go public or adopt an attitude of prudent silence. More than one father during that long session embarked on a rambling digression on how damaging it would be to interrupt or perhaps even end his daughter's studies. Other, more draconian parents noted that the girls' sense of right and wrong would suffer if it were not made clear what they had done stepped out of line. Around midnight the sterner ones prevailed; they voted and it was decided to call in the authorities. But who would go to the police with the news? This duty fell to the gardener because, after all, he was the one who found the bones (and the dog chewing on them). So off he went. The police seemed more upset than anyone else. The whole thing was blown up in the press and newspapers sold like hotcakes, although after a while things quieted down and it was all conveniently forgotten. Some of the fathers had a lot of pull and reached an understanding with the court. Money changed hands, classes resumed and the girls did very well in their finals, and 99% of the class passed. The jury admitted that they were very bright. The principal decided to screen all prospective teachers for poetic tendencies, so as to avoid a repetition of this disagreeable and most inconvenient event. She found a taxidermist with literary inclinations to fill the recently-vacated position and keep her supplied with a steady stream of new specimens as well. She even felt a twinge of regret, reflecting on the lost opportunity to stuff the slain Lit teacher and label her "Poet," for an example to all the students: a dangerous breed, an egregious flaw in the Lord's creation. Later on, she and the new teacher started a Taxidermy Club which, to her surprise, proved very popular with the

student body, including many of those involved in the incident of the previous year. Not only with the girl with the knife—very bright and a lot of personality, by the way—but also with the best student in the class, who—she knew—had nothing to do with it except for the cannibalism part.

TRANSLATED BY JOHN BENSON

## THE TALE OF THE VELVET PILLOWS

*Marta Traba*

No one knew Nimia Sánchez until the moment she came forward, climbed the creaking wooden steps with great caution and, once on the platform, offered the mayor the velvet pillow which lay in her outstretched hands.

For a moment, however, she appeared to have changed her mind. She made a half turn, looked at the neighborhood people wearing their Sunday best, crammed together in front of the platform, and she raised the pillow so that all could see. She displayed the pillow as if it were the sacred host, and this action produced in the people, as it did in church, a moment of confusion and silence.

Perhaps there was someone, incapable of resisting the solemnity of the spectacle, who went so far as to lower his head and eyes. Then at once the pillow returned to its original position in the two outstretched palms. Nimia Sánchez executed a gracious circus-like movement, made another half turn, and at last handed the gift to its recipient. The neighborhood people were able to admire the center of the black velvet pillow on which the Colombian coat of arms was meticulously embroidered with crossed flags and gold stars that managed to shine even when the thick layer of clouds held back the sun.