

Julio Cortazar

# MOEBIUS STRIP

In memoriam J. M. and R. A.

*Impossible to explain. She was leaving that zone where things have a fixed form and edges, where everything has a solid and immutable name. She was sinking deeper and deeper into the liquid, quiet, and unfathomable region where vague and cool mists like those of morning hovered.*

Clarice Lispector  
*Close to the Savage Heart*

Why not, maybe it would have been enough just to try as she would try eagerly later on and she would be seen, she would be felt, with the same clarity that she was seen and felt pedaling into the woods in the still cool morning, following paths wrapped in the shadow of ferns, in some place in Dordogne that the newspapers and radio would later fill with a fleeting infamous celebrity until quick oblivion, the vegetable silence of that perpetual half-light through which Janet passed like a blond splotch, a tinkle of metal (her canteen poorly fastened onto the aluminum crossbar), her long hair offered to the air that her body broke and altered, a lightweight figurehead sinking her feet into the soft alternation of

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the pedals, receiving on her blouse the hand of the breeze grasping her breasts, a double caress with the double defile of tree trunks and ferns in a tunnel-green translucence, a smell of mushrooms and bark and moss, vacation time.

And the other woods too, even if they were the same woods, but not for Robert, turned away at farms, dirty from a night face down on a poor mattress of dry leaves, a ray of sunlight that filtered through the cedars, stroking his face, vaguely wondering if it was worth the trouble to stay in the region or go to the flatlands where maybe a pitcher of milk and a little work was awaiting him before going back to the highways or getting lost in the nameless woods, always the same woods, with hunger and that useless rage that twisted his mouth.

At the narrow crossroads Janet put on the brakes indecisively, right or left or straight ahead, all equally green and cool, held out like the fingers of a great earthen hand. She'd left the youth hostel at daybreak because the dormitory was full of heavy breathing, fragments of others' nightmares, the smell of people scarcely washed, the merry groups that had roasted corn and sung until midnight before lying down on the canvas cots with their clothes on, the girls on one side and the boys farther off, vaguely offended by so many idiotic regulations, half-asleep already despite their useless sarcastic comments. In the open countryside before the woods she'd drunk the milk in the canteen, never again to meet the people of the night before, she too had her idiotic regulations, to cover France while her money and time lasted, to take pictures, to fill her orange-colored notebook, nineteen English years old already with lots of notebooks and pedaled miles,

a predilection for open spaces, her eyes dutifully blue and her hair blond, tall and athletic and a kindergarten teacher whose Kinder were happily scattered over beaches and villages in her happily distant homeland. To the left, maybe, there was a slight slope in the shadows, letting herself coast after a simple push on the pedal. It was starting to get hot, the bicycle seat was receiving her heavily, with a first dampness that would later oblige her to get off, unstick her panties from her skin and lift up her arms so that the cool breeze could get under her blouse. It was only ten o'clock, the woods were revealing themselves, slow and deep; perhaps before reaching the road on the opposite side it would be nice to settle down under an oak tree and eat the sandwiches, listen to the pocket radio or add another entry to her travel diary, interrupted so many times by the start of poems and not always happy thoughts that the pencil wrote and then, with embarrassment, with difficulty, scratched out.

It wasn't easily seen from the path. Without knowing it, he'd slept sixty feet away from an abandoned shed, and now it seemed to him stupid to have slept on the damp ground when behind the pine boards full of holes he saw a floor of dry straw under an almost intact roof. He was no longer sleepy and it was a pity; motionless, he looked at the shed and wasn't surprised that the woman on the bicycle had come along the path and stopped, she was the one who was disconcerted by the structure that rose up among the trees. Before Janet saw him he already knew everything, everything about her and about him in one single wordless wave, taking off from an immobility that was like a future crouching in wait. Now she was turning her head, the bicycle tilted, and one foot on the ground, and she found his eyes. They both blinked at the same time.

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There was only one thing that could be done in cases like that, infrequent but always probable: say bonjour and leave without excessive haste. Janet said bonjour and pushed the bicycle to give it a half turn; her foot was lifted from the ground to give the pedal its first push when Robert cut off her way and grabbed the handlebars with a hand that had black nails. Everything was quite clear and confused at the same time, the bicycle tipping over and the first cry of panic and protest, the feet looking for a useless support in the air, the strength of the arms encircling her, the pace—almost a run—through the broken boards of the shed, a smell both young and savage at the same time of leather and sweat, a dark three-day beard, a mouth burning her throat.

He never wanted to hurt her, he'd never hurt anyone to possess the little that had been given him in the inevitable reformatories, it was only like that, twenty-five years and like that, all at the same time, slow, as when he had to write his name, Robert letter by letter, then the last name even slower, and quick, like the movement that was sometimes worth a bottle of milk or a pair of pants laid out to dry on the grass in a garden, everything could be slow and instantaneous at the same time, a decision followed by a desire for everything to last for a long time, for that girl not to fight absurdly, since he didn't want to hurt her, for her to understand the impossibility of escape or of being rescued and to submit quietly, not even submitting, letting herself go as he was letting himself go, laying her down on the straw and shouting into her ear for her to shut up, not be a fool, to wait while he looked for buttons and fasteners without finding anything but convulsions of resistance, gusts of words in a different

language, shouts, shouts that someone would end up hearing.

It hadn't been exactly like that, there was the horror and the revulsion at the attack by the beast, Janet had struggled to get away and run off and now it was no longer possible and the horror didn't come only from the bearded beast, because he wasn't a beast, his way of speaking into her ear and holding her down without sinking his hands into her flesh, his kisses that fell onto her face and neck with the prickle of the stubble, but kisses, the revulsion came from submitting to that man who wasn't a hairy beast but a man, the revulsion that had always been lying in wait, ever since her first bleeding one afternoon at school, Mrs. Murphy and her warnings to the class in her Cornish accent, the crime news in the paper always commented on secretly at the boarding school, the forbidden books where that wasn't what was hinted at rosily in the books recommended by Mrs. Murphy with or without Mendelssohn and showers of rice, the clandestine comments about the episode of the first night in *Fanny Hill*, the long silence of her best friend back from her honeymoon and then the sudden weeping, clinging to her, it was horrible, Janet, although later with the joy of the first child, the vague evocation of the past one afternoon on a walk together, I was wrong to exaggerate so much, Janet, you'll see one day, but too late now, the *idée fixe*, so horrible, Janet, another birthday, the bicycle and the plan to travel alone until maybe, maybe little by little, nineteen years old and the second vacation trip to France, Dordogne in August.

Someone would end up hearing her, he shouted into her face although he already knew that she was incapable

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of understanding, she looked at him rolling her eyes and begging something in another language, fighting to get her legs free, to stand up, for a moment it seemed to him that she was trying to tell him something that wasn't just shouts or pleas or insults in her language, he unbuttoned her blouse blindly looking for the fasteners farther down, holding her onto the straw bedding with his whole body crossed over hers, asking her not to shout anymore, that it wasn't possible for her to go on shouting, somebody was going to come, let me, don't shout anymore, just let me, please, don't shout.

How to stop struggling if he didn't understand, if the words she had tried to tell him in his language came out in pieces, got mixed up with his babbling and his kisses and he couldn't understand that it wasn't a question of that, that horrible as what he was trying to do to her, what he was going to do to her, was, it wasn't that, how to explain to him that up until then never, that *Fanny Hill*, that at least he should wait, that in her bag there was facial cream, that it mustn't be like that, it mustn't be without what she'd seen in the eyes of her friend, the nausea of something unbearable, it was horrible, Janet, it was so horrible. She felt her skirt give way, the hand that ran under her panties and pulled them down, she contracted with a last shriek of anguish and fought to explain, to stop him at the brink so that it would be different, she felt him against her and the attack between her open thighs, a sharp pain that grew until the red and the fire, she howled from horror more than from suffering, as if that couldn't be everything and only the beginning of the torture, she felt his hands on her face covering her mouth and slipping down below, the second attack against the one who could no longer struggle, against which there were no longer shouts or tears.

Plunged in her in a sudden end of struggling, taken in without that desperate resistance that he had had to beat down by impaling her time and time again until he reached the deepest part and felt all her skin against his, the pleasure came like a lash and he dissolved in a thankful babbling, in a blind, interminable embrace. Taking his face out of the hollow of Janet's shoulder, he sought her eyes to tell her so, to thank her for being quiet at last; he couldn't suspect other reasons for that savage resistance, that struggle that had obliged him to rape her without pity, but neither did he understand her surrender, the sudden silence. Janet was looking at him, one of her legs had slowly slipped to the side. Robert began to draw away, come out of her, looking into her eyes. He understood that Janet didn't see him.

Neither tears nor breath, the breath had stopped suddenly, from the depths of her skull a wave had covered her eyes, she no longer had a body, the last thing had been the pain time and again and then halfway through a shriek her breath had suddenly given out, expired without coming in again, replaced by the red veil like blood eyelids, a sticky silence, something that lasted without being, something that was in a different way where everything was still there but in a different way, this side of sense and memory.

She didn't see him, the dilated eyes passed right through his face. Getting free of her he kneeled at her side, talking to her while his hands somehow or other adjusted his pants and he looked for the glittering closing as if working independently, smoothing his shirt and tucking it in. He saw the half-open, twisted mouth, the thread of pink drool slipping down over her chin, the arms crossed with the hands clenched,

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the fingers motionless and shiny with blood slipping slowly down the half-open thighs. When he shouted, leaping up, he thought for a second that the shout had come from Janet, but from up above, standing like a swaying doll, he saw the marks on her throat, the unacceptable twisting of the neck that turned Janet's head to one side, made something of it that was mocking him with the look of a fallen marionette, all its strings cut.

Different, perhaps from the very beginning, in any case not there, becoming like something diaphanous, a translucent medium in which nothing had a body and where what had been her wasn't located through thoughts or objects, to be wind while being Janet or Janet being wind or water or space but always clear, the silence was light or the opposite or both things, time was illuminated and that was to be Janet, something without a handle, without the slightest shadow of memory to interrupt and fix that course as among crystals, a bubble inside a mass of Plexiglas, the orbit of a transparent fish in a limitless lighted aquarium.

The woodcutter's son found the bicycle on the path and through the boards of the shed he glimpsed the body face up. The police verified that the murderer had not touched Janet's overnight case or purse.

To drift in the immobile with no before or after, a hyaline now without contact or references, a state in which the container and the contained were undifferentiated, water flowing in water, until without transition it was the impetus, a violent rushing projecting her, drawing her along unable to grasp the change in any way except in the dizzy rush on the

horizontal or the vertical of a space that shuddered in its velocity. Sometimes it would come out of the shapeless and accede to a rigorous fixedness also separated from all reference and nevertheless tangible, there was that moment when Janet ceased to be water of water or wind of wind, for the first time she felt, felt herself closed in and limited, cube of a cube, motionless cubeness. In that cube state outside the translucent and the hurricaned, something like a duration was being installed, not a before or an after but a more tangible now, a beginning of time reduced to a thick and manifest present, cube in time. If she had been able to choose she would have preferred the cube state without knowing why, perhaps in the continuous changes it was the only condition where nothing changed as if there she were inside given limits, in the certainty of a constant cubeness, of a present that hinted at a presence, almost a tangibility, a present that contained something that perhaps was time, perhaps an immobile space where every displacement remained as drawn. But the cube state could give way to other vertigos and before and after or during you were in another medium, you were once more a thunderous sliding through an ocean of crystals or diaphanous rocks, a flowing without direction toward anything, a tornado suction with whirlwinds, something like sliding along through the entire foliage of a jungle, held up from leaf to leaf by a weightlessness of devil's drool and now—now without a before, a dry and given now there—perhaps again the cube state coming closer and stopping, limits in the now and the there that in some way were rest.

The trial opened in Poitiers toward the end of July 1956. Robert was defended by Maître Rolland; the jury would not admit the extenuating circumstances of early orphanhood, reformatories, and unemployment.

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The accused listened to the sentence of death in a peaceful stupor, the applause of an audience among which there were a great number of British tourists.

Little by little (little by little in a condition outside of time? a manner of speaking) other states were presenting themselves, had perhaps already been presented, although *already* would mean before and there was no before; now (or any now either) a wind state prevailed and now a crawling state in which each now was painful, the complete opposite of the wind state because it was only presented as a dragging, a progression to nowhere; if she had been able to think, Janet would have passed to the image of the caterpillar crawling over a leaf suspended in the air, passing over its faces and passing again without the slightest sight or touch or limit, infinite Moebius strip reptation to the edge of a face to arrive at or already to be on the opposite side and to return ceaselessly from one side to the other, a very slow and painful reptation there where there was no measure of slowness or suffering but where one was reptation and being reptation was slowness and suffering. Or the other (the other in a condition without comparable ends?), to be fever, going dizzily through something like pipes or circuits, going through conditions that might be mathematical sets or musical scores, leaping from point to point or note to note, going in and out of computer circuits, being set or score or circuit running through itself and that was given to be fever, given to run furiously through instantaneous constellations of signs or notes without form or sound. In some way it was suffering, the fever. To be the cube state now or be the wave held a difference, it existed without fever or without reptation, the cube state was not fever and being fever was not the cube state or the wave state. In the cube state now—a now suddenly more now—for the first

time (a now where an indication of first time had just been given), Janet ceased being the cube state to be in the cube state, and later (because that first differentiation of the now contained the feeling of later) in the wave state Janet ceased being the wave state to be in the wave state. And all that contained the indications of a temporality, now a first time could be recognized and a second time, a being in wave or in fever that succeeded each other to be pursued by a being in wind or being in foliage or being again in cube, being each time more Janet in, being Janet in time, being what was not Janet but which was passing from the cube state to the fever state or returning to the caterpillar state, because more and more the states were becoming fixed and established and in some way delimited not only in time but in space, there was a passing from one to another, passing from a cube placidity to a fever mathematical circuit or foliage equatorial jungle or interminable crystalline bottles or maelstrom whirlpools in hyaline suspension or painful reptation over double-faced surfaces or faceted polyhedrons.

The appeal was denied and Robert was transferred to the Santé to await execution. Only a pardon by the president of the republic could save him from the guillotine. The condemned man spent his days playing dominoes with the guards, smoking endlessly, sleeping heavily. He dreamed all the time, through the peephole of the cell the guards would see him toss on his cot, lift up an arm, shudder.

In some one of the steps the first rudiments of a memory would be born, slipping among the leaves or at the end of the cube state to be in the fever she learned something of what Janet had been, unconnectedly a memory was trying to enter

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and be fixed, once it was knowing that she was Janet, remembering Janet in a wood, the bicycle, Constance Myers and some chocolates on a nickel-plated tray. Everything was beginning to cluster together in the cube state, was being sketched out and confusedly defined, Janet and the woods, Janet and the bicycle, and with the gusts of images a feeling of person was becoming clearer, little by little, a first disquiet, the vision of a shed of rotten boards, being face up and held down by a convulsive force, fear of pain, the rubbing of a skin that scratched her mouth and face, something abominable was coming close, something was fighting to be explained, to say it wasn't like that, that it shouldn't have had to be that way, and on the edge of the impossible the memory stopped, a spiral running in acceleration until nausea pulled her out of the cube to sink her into wave or into fever, or the opposite, the asphyxiating slowness of crawling once more with nothing else but that, being in reptation, like being in wave or glass was once more only that until another change. And when she fell back into the cube state and returned to a confused recognition, shed and chocolate and quick visions of belfries and fellow students, the little that she could have done fought above all to the last there in the cubeness, to maintain itself in that state where there was detention and limits, where she would end by thinking and recognizing herself. On occasion she reached the last sensations, the scratch of a bearded skin against her mouth, the resistance under hands that were pulling off her clothes before getting lost again instantaneously in a thunderous careening, leaves or clouds or drops or hurricanes or explosive circuits. In the cube state she could not pass from the limit where everything was horror and revulsion but if will had been given her that will would have become fixed there where a sensitive Janet was blooming, where there was Janet wanting to abolish the recurrence. In full struggle

against the weight that was crushing her against the straw of the shed, obstinately saying no, that it didn't have to happen that way with shouts and rotten straw, she slipped once more into the moving state in which everything flowed as if being created in the act of flowing, smoke spinning in its own cocoon that opens and wraps around itself, the being in waves, in the indefinable decanting that already so many times had held her in suspension, alga or cork or jellyfish. With the difference that Janet felt coming from something that was like waking up from a dreamless sleep, falling into the awakening one morning in Kent, being Janet and her body again, a notion of body, of arms and back and hair floating in the hyaline medium, in the total transparency because Janet couldn't see her body, it was her body finally again but without her seeing it, it was consciousness of her body floating among waves or smoke, without seeing her body Janet moved, put out an arm and stretched her legs in an impulse of swimming, differentiating herself for the first time from the undulating mass that enwrapped her, swam in water or smoke, was her body and enjoyed with each stroke what was no longer a passive race, an interminable transfer. She swam and swam, she didn't need to see herself swim and receive the grace of a voluntary movement, of a direction that hands and feet imposed on the course. Falling without transition into the cube state was the shed again, remembering again and suffering, once more up to the limit of the unbearable weight, the slashing pain, and the red nausea covering her face, she found herself on the other side, crawling with a slowness that now she could measure and abominate, passed to be fever, to be a rush of hurricane, to be in waves again and enjoying her body Janet, and when at the end of the indeterminate everything coagulated into the cube state, it wasn't horror but desire that was waiting for her on the other side of the end,

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with images and words in the cube state, with pleasure of her body in the being in waves. Understanding, reunited with herself, invisibly she Janet desired Robert, desired the shed again, desired Robert who had brought her to what she was there and now, understood the madness under the shed and desired Robert, and in the delight of the swimming amidst liquid crystals or strata of clouds on high she called him, stretched out her body face up to him, called him so that he could really consummate in the pleasure the clumsy consummation on the foul-smelling straw of the shed.

It is difficult for the defense attorney to inform his client that the recourse of a pardon has been denied; Maître Rolland vomited when he came out of the cell where Robert, sitting on the edge of his cot, was staring into space.

From pure sensation to recognition, from the fluidity of the waves to the severe cube, coming together into something that was Janet again, desire was looking for its road, another step among the recurrent steps. Will was coming back to Janet, at first memory and sensations had been given without an axis to modulate them, now along with desire will was coming back to Janet, something in her stretched out an arch like one of skin and tendons and viscera, projected her toward what couldn't be, demanded access inside and outside the states that enveloped her and abandoned her dizzily, her will was desire opening a way in liquids and flashing constellations and very slow dragging, Robert was in some way a kind of end, the goal that was being sketched out now and had a name and a touch in the cube state and that after or before in the now agreeable swimming among waves and crystals was resolved in clamor, in a flame caressing her and throwing

her to herself. Incapable of seeing herself, she felt herself; incapable of thinking articulately, her desire was desire and Robert, was Robert in some unreachable state but which Janet will sought to force, a Robert state in which the Janet desire, Janet will, wanted to accede as now once more to the cube state, to solidification and delimitation in which rudimentary mental operations were more and more possible, strings of words and memories, taste of chocolate and pressure of feet on chrome pedals, rape in the midst of convulsions of protest where now desire nested, the will of finally giving in amidst tears of pleasure, of thankful acceptance, of Robert.

His calm was so great, his politeness so extreme, that they left him alone at times, came to spy through the peephole or offer him cigarettes or propose a game of dominoes. Lost in his stupor, which in some way had always been with him, Robert didn't feel the passage of time. He let himself be shaved, he went to the shower with his two guards, once he asked about the weather, if it was raining in the Dordogne.

It was being in waves or crystals that a more vehement stroke, a desperate blow with her heel, launched her into a cold and enclosed space, as if the sea had vomited her up into a grotto of shadows and Gitanes smoke. Sitting on the cot, Robert was looking into the air, the cigarette burning between his fingers. Janet wasn't surprised, surprise had no course there, neither presence nor absence; a transparent partition, a cube of diamond inside the cube of the cell, isolated her from every attempt, from Robert there under the electric light. The bow of herself stretched out to the ultimate had no string or arrow against the diamond cube, the transparency was silence of impenetrable material, not a single

time had Robert raised his eyes to look in the direction that only contained the thick air of the cell, the swirling smoke from the tobacco. Janet clamor, Janet will, capable of reaching there, of finding, smashed into an essential difference, Janet desire was a tiger of translucent froth that was changing shape, stretching out white claws of smoke toward the small barred window, threading off and getting lost as she twisted in her inefficacy. Thrown in one last impulse, knowing that at any moment she could once more be crawling or careening among a foliage of grains of sand or atomic formulas, Janet desire demanded the image of Robert, sought to reach his face or his hair, to call him to her side. She saw him look toward the door, scrutinize for an instant the peephole empty of watchful eyes. With an explosive gesture Robert took something out from under the mattress, a vague noose of twisted blanket. With a leap he reached the window, slipped the noose through. Janet was howling, calling him, the silence of her howl smashed against the diamond cube. The investigation showed that the prisoner had hanged himself by letting himself drop down with all his weight. The jerk must have made him lose consciousness and he couldn't fight against asphyxiation; scarcely four minutes had passed from the last visual inspection by the guards. Nothing now, in the full clamor of the break and the passage to the solidification of the cube state, broken by the Janet entry into being fever, run up in a spiral of uncountable alembics, leap to a depth of thick earth where advance was an obstinate biting of resistant substances, a sticky climbing up to levels vaguely sea green, a passage to being in waves, first strokes like a happiness that had a name now, a propeller reversing its spin, a hopelessness become hope, the steps from one state to another didn't matter much now, being in foliage or in sonorous counterpoint, now Janet desire was provoking them, was seeking them with the

bending of a bridge sending itself to the other side of a metal leap. In some condition, passing through some state or all of them at once, Robert. At some moment being fever Janet or being in waves Janet it could be waves Robert or fever or cube state in the now without time, not Robert but cubeness or fever because the nows would let him also pass on to be in fever or in waves, would be giving him Robert little by little, would filter him and drag him along and fix him in a simultaneity sometimes entering the successive, Janet desire struggling against every state to sink itself in the other where still not Robert, to be once more in fever without Robert, to be paralyzed in the cube state without Robert, to enter blandly the liquid where the first strokes were Janet, feeling herself whole and knowing herself Janet, but there some time Robert, there surely some time at the end of the warm swaying in crystal waves a hand would reach Janet's hand, it would at last be Robert's hand.