

THE WOUND

Ihab Hassan

They joked about it at first: the wound wouldn't heal. The knife had slipped over a hard stub of Reggiano and blood streamed till she applied a large Band-Aid. At the ER, they put five stitches in her hand. Back home, her blood continued to ooze, two or three drops at a time.

He wondered where it came from, this thin, hidden stream. His jokes about bleeding statues, lunar cycles, and vampire stakes gave way to long moments of silence. At odd hours, he wept; he hid his tears.

One night, she woke up from a viscous dream feeling sticky stuff on her hand. Under the warm sheets, across tundra, she heard the sound of a creature dying. It was the sound of his gasps. They lay there, watching each other in the dark.

WHEEL

Robert Maslen

For months we said little more than '*Gracias*', '*De nada*' when she brought food to my table. She was prim, irresistibly ascetic. I wondered if she even had a television.

One night at the car park, Tonio, who guarded the place for our well-to-do students, was counting his tips, dozens of coins, way more than my teacher's wage. As we talked, he raised his hand, and when I looked round, it was her, coming down the hill from the café. '*Hola, gordito,*' she said, patting his belly where it hung out of his T-shirt. He introduced me and I shook Clarita's strong, dry little hand.

I began to hang round more after classes. She often came by, but if Tonio wasn't around she didn't stop. The students, I supposed, were as alien as I was.

On the Day of the Dead, just for a moment, I thought there was a chance. The wheel at the fair rose over the city like a gaudy tiara. I was standing with Tonio as he schmoozed his clientele, when Clarita appeared. She ran down the hill, waving, calling out, talking too fast for me to follow. When she got to us, she pulled Tonio's arm, imploring him, jumping up and down like a little kid. But Tonio shook his head. He couldn't let the fair get in the way of business. 'Take the *güero,*' he told her. 'Okay,' she answered, dropping her eyes. And, side by side, we walked towards the pounding music.

Half an hour later, the wheel was creeping slowly to its zenith. The stars in the sky seemed a misty reflection of the hot constellations on the ground, of the megacity, its twenty million acolytes facing towards heaven. Clarita smiled down on it all like a

saint conferring a blessing, simple and immaculate, but as distant from me as the ground, as my home. We kissed, of course. Everybody kissed at the top.

Then she looked back down at the lights. And hanging at the pinnacle I knew, if she'd been free to choose, she'd have pushed me off, there and then.