

FIVE GOLD RINGS

The man of nobility is like pure gold, sometimes under the hammer's blow, and sometimes in the crown of a king.

—Ibn Hazm, Cordoba, 994-1064

I. His Qualities

The Gold Man has a bad back – a chain of vertebrae fused together – legacy of a youthful bullfight. But still he dances, clapping his thigh in a Flamenco that tells the story of the first discotheque after Franco.

The Gold Man is an architect. Every room of his palace speaks a language of volumes, of light, of diabolic pipe organs – of the day he burst naked through the bank window, screaming *I am the truth, I am the truth*, terrifying the children as he ran glittering through the streets until the paramedics arrived and poured him into a van that drove off, weeping.

At times, the Gold Man takes the form of a building with an enormous head, too heavy for his shoulders. The Gold man needs two tiers of bricks between his stones to keep him stable because his walls were constructed hastily, in anticipation of attack, and his mortar is so granular and poor.

As the Gold Man is an architect, he was designed by architects, working against their will, and masons inscribing subversive messages along the ribs of his dome, disguised as efflorescence.

Creo que El Gold Man, animated for 25 pesetas, can dance as well as any, even if he is a machine.

The Gold Man, like other nobles, is a patron of dwarves.

On the promenade in the Retiro Park, the Gold Man encircles the waist of a young woman whose face grows broader and lighter and darker and who at this moment believes she has been born only for this moment in the encirclement.

The Gold Man, on his off-hours restores the Mudéjar gateways, cleanses the minerals from the fountains' plumbing, whose gentle burbling comforts the strolling men who look like Franco and their armada wives.

The Gold Man guides you through skylit rotundas, past chairs with exaggerated stuffing for the forearms and banquettes with finial daisies of cyclopean proportions looking more or less like fried eggs. You sip an unconscionably expensive café solo, stirring in the granular white refinement of the Indies, and absorb a rare simulacrum of privilege. Meanwhile, in the Retiro Park, the young woman's face has settled into medium broad, mestizo, but all you can see of her tan is the inversion line of her backbone where the shirt pulls up as she wrestles in the grass with the Gold Man in his aspect as a young Velázquez.

The Gold Man flies so quickly he hardly feels the rails. He pisses dark purple, like an octopus.

Fue muy niño, the Gold Man went on a long voyage. After landfall, he sailed for days up a winding river. As he approached the city, two hundred women and the same number of beautiful men riding even more exquisite horses accompanied his barque along the riverbank where, at a many-towered city, he was imprisoned – but not for

long. After his release, much transformed, he journeyed 'round the world again. When he returned, the Gold Man found his beard was reaching to his knees. Unknown and invisible, except to the blind barber, he wandered across the river, past the feria tents, and into Los Remedios.

The Gold Man wears gold goggles that do nothing to conceal his extraordinarily seductive eyes. If he were to remove them, one could see the X in each socket, 'cause he's a millennial guy – the secret confidant of all statues: bronze, gilt, and alabaster, and the statues who have palm fronds for limbs.

Returning, the Gold Man gives and receives roses.

The Gold Man paces up and down the wharf in an agony of indecision. While he is pacing, the coin of his soul turns to stone. Which is a mixed blessing, because the Gold Man owns shares in a quarry that might at any moment turn into a mine. But the time comes for him to make a decision, and since the miners have yet to strike a vein or the quarry to turn a profit [they are looking for the right thing in the wrong place], he is forced to pay for his name with only a pebble. The Cossack into whose hand he places it is a fine soldier and besides relishing a good joke, knows a rare fellow when he meets one and so the Gold Man becomes, for now, Goldman, and the miser just behind him in queue walks away scratching his head in confusion, until reaching home, he reads the new brass nameplate above his doorbell inscribed "Herr Stein."

Now I could go on telling you for years about the Gold Man. I could tell you about his love of apples – *manzanas* – his penchant for trains and ships, his dislike of dirigibles, his experiments with vodka and other forays into rocketry, but since we each have but one lifetime you and I, I will make an end of this chapter – though not of the

Gold Man – and leave him for the moment where I saw him last: driving his heavy-laden Chevy out of La Habana, past the Playa Girón and heading for Guantánamo, with sufficient *escudos* in his trunk to buy the place lock, stock and barrel and turn it into the José Martí theme park. And with enough left over to present every Taíno, Yoruba and Chinaman, every Irishman, Extremaduran or Galician and all their heirs, assigns and successors with a first-class plane ride home.

Oh yes, and the tolling of bells. And then the threat, if not the promise, that should you shift you attention, even for an instant, you might come to life in another time, another city, with another self.

II. What Befell Him

It was on the 25th of April, I recall it exactly – although perhaps the symptoms had been hitherto invisible – that The Gold Man began having difficulty recording graven images. Which is to say that after emerging from a famous mosque, and snapping a touristic pose of a white statue dancing *con una chica guapa*, his film unaccountably ripped in two, and refused to be rewound – his clever machine for recording images sprang open and even the picture of Saturn eating a child like a snowcone was illuminated beyond recognition. So, we ask, what are the fates that may befall a Gold Man, however refined?

But since a discussion of the Gold Man's vulnerabilities might quickly turn dolorous, so I would prefer tell of his victories, his golden caliphate and how in the heart of his palace he would practice, for hours on end, his slow, infinitely deliberate

clockwork routines, perched upon a pedestal island, dead center in an immense pool of mercury. How he got there I don't know. But this is the Gold Man I came to know and, after a fashion, love, though I realize that if what I have said thusfar seems improbable, then what I am about to relate may render it altogether as transluscent as the pantaloons billowing from the sumptuous thighs to the slender ankles of the Gold Man's harem, which numbered more than the days of the year on Jupiter, and whose aforementioned billowing pantaloons, while tinted a myriad of colors by the light passing through and reflecting off the flesh beneath, exhibited a marked tendency toward green: the Caliph's color and the Gold Man's acknowledgment of the immutable law of tarnish which is the provenance of G*d alone. And though she was a mortal woman, and not immune to gravity or stretch marks, nor what the Gold Man's scribes recorded as her "orange-skin ass" – in homage the rind of the fruit that grew so abundantly in his gardens – nonetheless the Gold Man prized her above all other creatures and named her Az-Zahar, which means "plugged in and shining" – this at any rate is as close as a scribe can come to calling a thing what it is without having his hands wither to chicken feet and his tongue freeze in his mouth *como un SuperHappy* rainbow popsicle, purchased from a vendor on a steaming day outside the Mesquita – except that if the Gold Man whammys you, it's for keeps.

But I'll go one step further and tell you that Az-Zahar, the Radiant One, was, beneath her veils and damasks as black as the ace of spades. And you could have driven a Mack truck between her front teeth had lorries been invented yet. And this treasure, corporeal and breathing, lived eighty-four years – unlike the Gold Man, who persists, illuminating a myriad of smiles, and accompanied always by the *ting* of a small cymbal sounding of alloyed brass, smelted, hammered and incised before the Mack

truck was even dreamed, sounding the hours for prayer, and afterward, the hour for making love.

Rest assured: the truth is that the Gold Man has more fates in the tip of one finger than you or I possess in our whole bodies combined.

III. The Gold Man In The Architect's Garden

And besides devaluation – which in any case he fears not at all – what fates may befall a Gold Man? Well, resting at the bottom of the ocean, perhaps for centuries, is not an appealing prospect to contemplate, and this nearly happened, once when he rode a galleon out of Cartagena, and many years later, in the hold of a transatlantic flight, whose fatal moment witnessed beanie babies blown to rags, tiny Nescafé bottles of retired tourists fused into vitreous freeforms and laptops showered upward into the inverted lap of G*d. And so, submerged, the Gold Man might have remained, encrusting with barnacles, if not for his wondrous faculty of dispersing and accreting at will – for which he earned the name Orillo – and we thought we knew everything about him!

Left to his own devices though, he'll seek out high and low places and leave the middle path to lesser metals, and after recouping himself off the Middle America Trench, the Gold Man made straight for the Alhambra, in the guise of an architect for this was one of his professions as I recall mentioning an hour or so ago – and passing for a man of bones, organs, flesh and skin – same as you or I – or a woman if necessary, but that's another story. And he didn't halt at the gate of the Mexuar like a common

petitioner, but hung a hard ralph and crossed into the Generalife where he ascended to the cascade stairway and straightaway dissolved himself into the rushing waters, tumbling down the banisters and then by turns burbling sedately or gushing like a firehose, always redder and redder, through fountains, reservoirs, rills, and a thousand hidden conduits, finally gathering in a pool at the base of the mountain, where, as it happened, a certain Solomon, Ibrahim and Felipe were passing by, about to commence their climb, the three of them locked in a pecuniary disputation to be aired before Sultan Mohammed V, the wise and almost just.

And from his til'd pool the Gold Man beckoned to them with his *lux*, if not his *veritas*, and they leapt as one man to draw him sparkling from the waters, exclaiming thanks to their three separate gods, and shared him equally amongst themselves and went away forgetting their dispute, which was in any case quite unimportant. And the three then bought land, and high offices, or purity of blood as they thought necessary and advisable and founded clans – dynasties actually – with what they possessed of the Gold Man's trisected body, and today Solomon's sons and daughters shuttle back and forth between Amsterdam *y calle cuarentasiete de Nueva York*, and who knows what became of the children of Ibrahim [subsequently known as "The Mad"], or the good-for-nothing progeny of that rascal Felipe, who vanished like smoke into the great pool of the Indes?

IV. Free Beer: Gold, Red Gold, Brown Gold

¡Cerveza, cerveza! ¡Cerveza para todos! shouts the Gold Man, gesturing toward the empty chamber of the Bourse, dawn's light streaming through broken windows, the functionaries fled, some suicided by rope or defenestration, others marooned in unshakable catatonic funks. *¡Cerveza, cerveza, cerveza!* he cries again: red beer, gold beer, brown beer – crunching through a pavilion of wastepaper and tickertapes, head thrown back, doublet bursting buttons, fat as Señor Cruzcampo leaning long and hard on the handle of his everlasting pump.

All the while he is, of course, laughing like a jackass, a *perogrullo* – knowing they'll be back, cutting their losses, swallowing their decimated pride. But for now, every hanging monitor broadcasts either snow or else the flapping banner of Santiago on an endless loop to give heart to the vanquished. When the Gold Man sobers up, nostril deep in the gutter, he will feel a pang of sympathy for the losers in all their wretched inevitability. He will even make sure that Elena – the future Santa Elena – is visited by the plumber of G*d, who miraculously recovers the ring she does not have the courage to tell her lover she accidentally washed down the plughole, bathing her hands the more deliciously to caress him. But of course, her lover was him all the time, in the aspect of a chef [of surpassing volatility] – whose whims no speculator could predict, nor whose incandescent feasts might a belly-loving *perogrullo* bring himself to abjure: so savory the meats, so scalding the fat, so irrepressable the spun sugar armadas.

The Gold Man realizes that a clever operator could make millions – *¡millones!* – supplying liquid soap to the airports of the world, but he himself takes no interest in commerce.

What force is it that draws the Gold Man ever closer to the brink of personal cataclysm – despite his knowledge, his erudition, his legendary gravitas? Frankly I don't know, but I suspect it has something to do with aging and the [some say] inevitable process of others' misdirected energies stamping their corruption in ever higher relief upon the coin of his soul.

In his youth, the Gold Man, like so many others, had idealized uninhabited wastelands and worshipped for their purity all things untainted by the human hand, including his own beauty. Today, when he stares at some expanse of glacier or tundrascape, it still thrills him, of course. But its stimulation arrests at the visual level, glancing off his deeper chemistry – the rapture never suffuses the spirit's core. No, these rare moments of supreme connection are reserved for experiencing the creations of the laboring animals: apartment blocks, billboards, just intonation, imploding hotels, a damask, marquetry – the near perfectly inset frets on the neck of a charango or the nasal, grandmother-like sound of the Flamenco.

The Sultana left her session with the Gold Man in a considerable state of confusion. There was nothing for it but to take a nap *en plein aire*, so amidst the gurgling fountains she reclined and began systematically to relax every muscle and fiber starting with her toes and working her way north. By the time she reached her knees, her calves had already decided the issue and she was fast asleep, before even the superb aqueduct of her spine, shoulder architrave, wrist maneuvers or radiant spread from wrist to palms to fingertips. Not to mention her jaw, ears, nose and the great

caravansary dome of her mouth which had witnessed the silken passage of so many strings of words.

Now the first thing the Sultana dreamed was an image, or rather an animate image of her own face, ungilded and seen through the eyes of her lover, the Gold Man, and she noticed how the Gold Man saw her: ten years younger and so pale in the dawn light that one would have thought her made of alabaster. And in the dream it dawned on the Sultana that the reason she had found her session with the Gold Man so disturbing was that in her ecstasy, she had finally, after lo these many years, seen him for what he was.

But it was not what she saw that left her mind unquiet, but *that* she saw, meaning neither he, nor she, nor their separate or overlapping dreams would afterwards remain the same. How precisely her world altered in the light of her knowledge was not revealed by the dream, nor can I tell it lest my tongue wither and my hands turn to chicken feet consumed by the shining-eyed bride and bridegroom in their fifteen course dinner in the upstairs banquet room off Confucius Plaza sometime in early 199*. But this I can say... and here the Sultana awakened.

V. His Good Works

The Gold Man begins his campaign by drawing, with his index finger, an apparition of Jesus in the shower mist clinging to the window of a bathroom in a public housing project in *alto* Manhattan. And since G*d is eternal and showers are a fleeting thing, the Gold Man teaches the youngest child of the family – almost before she has

language – to stand on the edge of the tub and recreate his design every evening to the amazement, and it is to be hoped, potential salvation of the throngs of believers, heretics, apostates and the godless who gather in the street below at the hour when the lambent rays of the bathroom bulb show His visage to best advantage – and stare fourteen stories upwards running enraptured tongues across domes of shaved ice suffused in a sweetness tinted the thousandfold colors of paradise.

In some quarters of the city it is believed that G*d sends an angel, disguised as the devil, just to test your faith.

And the Gold Man will tell you himself how false are the legends of the mountains that shit gold.

At the toll of the bell, the Gold Man wakes up feeling like a billion dollars. Then inflation sets in and all day long, he feels better and better. And this at a time when the citizens of the most privileged barrios had been reduced to roasting and eating their pet bulldogs even as their children, waving the smoke away from their eyes, asked – *why?* And this at a time when the Gold Man's form still glittered in the otherwise impassive eyes of the banker whose armored limousine was gently rocked back and forth and then upended like the turtle whose nourishment Vasco da Gama's men starved for the lack of, rolling over and over on the steaming macadam.

The Gold Man dances inconspicuously amidst a flood of revelers shaking their arses in the most unseemly fashion. And he mixes seamlessly with those in the full flower of defeat. He spends the spring of the five hundredth anniversary of the

Genoese navigator's landfall planning the family reunion of all metals. He makes certain that his friend, the notable ex-goldsmith from Mainz receives the contract to print the invitation for which he must hire half a dozen new journeymen and commandeer three new wine presses so as not to suspend work on either his sixty-four line Bible nor the brisk trade in indulgences that gains him his daily rice and beans.

For diversion, the Gold Man sometimes reposes on the hammered bronze table in the psychiatrist's office in his aspect as an immense pile of cash. If each patient took an armful, they could all go about their work: some to writing, some to painting, others to shopping – but in any case, it is much better for everyone that the Gold Man has pulled out his heart.

Thus begins the transformation – the refinement – of pure aggression into useful, exchangeable, social energy. Through the power of therapy alone – transference – the Gold Man convinces his unwilling patients to invest in the abstraction of stocks. Yet whenever he hears the sound of drumming, the Gold Man seeks out the timekeepers of history and offers them codfish and bread to sustain them – those whose rhythms urge on the dance of the twirling orb and embarrass the numbing tempo of Mussolini's trains. And what becomes of the race of giants wearing at first shiny, then fibrous clothing – the race that raised its immense head on immense shoulders, nurtured on the irradiated milk of cyclopean cows?

Who can say. But the Gold Man will let you stand next to him and witnesses the demolition, brick by brick, of the last simple woman and man left on earth. *Piensa El Gold Man: polvo, polvo y polvo.* And, though we still have a few paragraphs to go, I'll tell you now what happens *after* this story ends. No one prays for him, weeps for his loss, confuses with him with Al-lah. No one extracts him, heats him, beats him, or

otherwise tortures his gorgeous substantiality. No longer does his temporary absence trigger a headlong rush for the morgue. No crusader builds a bonfire on the marble floor of the future Hagia Sophia to liquefy him into rain. But in his new form, he becomes, at last, a standard by which one can safely judge. In the end, the Gold Man finds himself stripped of his halo. But he no longer wanders alone and unknown. He has become a worker, just like everyone else.

Yet, as before, girls still tumble in fascinated raptures before the huracán of aftershave struggling to mask the attar of his sweat. Women shift their hips in their chairs when he walks in the room. Click. Boys worship his physicality. And to certain men, apperceiving themselves in his eyes, he becomes a mirror of mirrors, a wide, unending river: a home for fish and birds, and for the fishermen who look to the birds for signs of the coming storm.

I can sense that as ending approaches you feel like weeping. You also realize that something's been lost. And you are right, it has. Never to be replaced. *Nunca*. But this evening, as the sun filters through the cypresses where once the Sultana and the Gold Man trysted, on its way to light up other side of the world, you'll hear the scraping of a chair across the kitchen floor as the Gold Man pulls himself toward the table – the chair we forgot we'd kept empty, and the always-expectant place setting. And as the rays sweep the grass and the fog begins its rise, night closing in, we'll break bread with the Gold Man.

Si.

Compañeros.