

READINGS FOR WEEK 6

The Short Story / Friedman

- 1) **Toni Morrison (United States), “Sweetness”**
- 2) **Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), “Emma Zunz”**
- 3) **Julio Cortázar (Argentina), “The Night Face Up”**

Toni Morrison, “Sweetness”

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) was the author of twelve novels. She received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs for me to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of, yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different—straight but curly, like the hair on those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she's a throwback, but a throwback to what? You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white, married a white man, and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message of no message and let her be. Almost all mulatto types and quadroons did that back in the day—if they had the right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood hiding in their veins? Guess. Twenty per cent, I heard. My own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not to. She told me the price she paid for that decision. When she and my father went to the courthouse to get married, there were two Bibles, and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands. The Bible! Can you beat it? My mother was a housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate every meal she cooked and insisted she scrub their backs while

they sat in the tub, and God knows what other intimate things they made her do, but no touching of the same Bible.

Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color—the lighter the better—in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity? How else can we avoid being spit on in a drugstore, elbowed at the bus stop, having to walk in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, being charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers? Let alone all the name-calling. I heard about all of that and much, much more. But because of my mother's skin color she wasn't stopped from trying on hats or using the ladies' room in the department stores. And my father could try on shoes in the front part of the shoe store, not in a back room. Neither one of them would let themselves drink from a "Colored Only" fountain, even if they were dying of thirst.

I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute, because—just for a few seconds—I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color. I even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace. But I was scared to be one of those mothers who leave their babies on church steps. Recently, I heard about a couple in Germany, white as snow, who had a dark-skinned baby nobody could explain. Twins, I believe—one white, one colored. But I don't know if it's true. All I know is that, for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home.

My husband, Louis, is a porter, and when he got back off the rails he looked at me like I really was crazy and looked at the baby like she was from the planet Jupiter. He wasn't a cussing man, so when he said, "God damn! What the hell is this?" I knew we were in trouble. That was what did it—what caused the fights between me and him. It broke our marriage to pieces. We had three good years together, but when she was born he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger—more than that, an enemy. He never touched her.

I never did convince him that I ain't never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness had to be from his own family—not mine. That was when it got worse, so bad he just up and left and I had to look for another, cheaper place to live. I did the best I

could. I knew enough not to take her with me when I applied to landlords, so I left her with a teen-age cousin to babysit. I didn't take her outside much, anyway, because, when I pushed her in the baby carriage, people would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt. I could have been the babysitter if our skin colors were reversed. It was hard enough just being a colored woman—even a high-yellow one—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties, when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Leigh, though I know he upped the rent seven dollars from what he'd advertised, and he had a fit if you were a minute late with the money.

I told her to call me "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama." It was safer. Her being that black and having what I think are too thick lips and calling me "Mama" would've confused people. Besides, she has funny-colored eyes, crow black with a blue tint—something witchy about them, too.

So it was just us two for a long while, and I don't have to tell you how hard it is being an abandoned wife. I guess Louis felt a little bit bad after leaving us like that, because a few months later on he found out where I'd moved to and started sending me money once a month, though I never asked him to and didn't go to court to get it. His fifty-dollar money orders and my night job at the hospital got me and Lula Ann off welfare. Which was a good thing. I wish they would stop calling it welfare and go back to the word they used when my mother was a girl. Then it was called "relief." Sounds much better, like it's just a short-term breather while you get yourself together. Besides, those welfare clerks are mean as spit. When finally I got work and didn't need them anymore, I was making more money than they ever did. I guess meanness filled out their skimpy paychecks, which was why they treated us like beggars. Especially when they looked at Lula Ann and then back at me—like I was trying to cheat or something. Things got better but I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don't care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not.

Oh, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn't know the world. With that skin, there was no point in being tough or sassy, even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired.

She didn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and try to trick her. I once saw a girl nowhere near as dark as Lula Ann who couldn't have been more than ten years old tripped by one of a group of white boys and when she tried to scramble up another one put his foot on her behind and knocked her flat again. Those boys held their stomachs and bent over with laughter. Long after she got away, they were still giggling, so proud of themselves. If I hadn't been watching through the bus window I would have helped her, pulled her away from that white trash. See, if I hadn't trained Lula Ann properly she wouldn't have known to always cross the street and avoid white boys. But the lessons I taught her paid off, and in the end she made me proud as a peacock.

I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first I couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her. But I do. I really do. I think she understands now. I think so. Last two times I saw her she was, well, striking. Kind of bold and confident. Each time she came to see me, I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes.

Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget. As soon as she could, she left me all alone in that awful apartment. She got as far away from me as she could: dolled herself up and got a big-time job in California. She don't call or visit anymore. She sends me money and stuff every now and then, but I ain't seen her in I don't know how long.

I prefer this place—Winston House—to those big, expensive nursing homes outside the city. Mine is small, homey, cheaper, with twenty-four-hour nurses and a doctor who comes twice a week. I'm only sixty-three—too young for pasture—but I came down with some creeping bone disease, so good care is vital. The boredom is worse than the weakness or the pain, but the nurses are lovely. One just kissed me on the cheek when I told her I was going to be a grandmother. Her smile and her compliments were fit for someone about to be crowned. I showed her the note on blue paper that I got from Lula Ann—well, she signed it “Bride,” but I never pay that any attention. Her words sounded giddy. “Guess what, S. I am so, so happy to pass along this news. I am going to have a baby. I'm too, too thrilled and hope you are, too.” I reckon the thrill is about the baby, not its father, because she doesn't mention him at all. I wonder if he is as black as she is. If so, she needn't worry like I did. Things have changed a mite from when I was young. Blue-blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies.

There is no return address on the envelope. So I guess I'm still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I die for the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way I brought her up. I know she hates me. Our relationship is down to her sending me money. I have to say I'm grateful for the cash, because I don't have to beg for extras, like some of the other patients. If I want my own fresh deck of cards for solitaire, I can get it and not need to play with the dirty, worn one in the lounge. And I can buy my special face cream. But I'm not fooled. I know the money she sends is a way to stay away and quiet down the little bit of conscience she's got left.

If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn't do or did wrong. I remember when she had her first period and how I reacted. Or the times I shouted when she stumbled or dropped something. True. I was really upset, even repelled by her black skin when she was born and at first I thought of . . . No. I have to push those memories away—fast. No point. I know I did the best for her under the circumstances. When my husband ran out on us, Lula Ann was a burden. A heavy one, but I bore it well.

Yes, I was tough on her. You bet I was. By the time she turned twelve going on thirteen, I had to be even tougher. She was talking back, refusing to eat what I cooked, primping her hair. When I braided it, she'd go to school and unbraid it. I couldn't let her go bad. I slammed the lid and warned her about the names she'd be called. Still, some of my schooling must have rubbed off. See how she turned out? A rich career girl. Can you beat it?

Now she's pregnant. Good move, Lula Ann. If you think mothering is all cooing, booties, and diapers you're in for a big shock. Big. You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup—whoever—imagine, *Oooh! A baby! Kitchee kitchee koo!*

Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works, and how it changes when you are a parent.

Good luck, and God help the child.

1. What is the interplay of story and storyteller in “Sweetness.”
2. How can one sense the presence of an implied author in this story?
3. What are the key themes and messages of “Sweetness”?

Jorge Luis Borges, “Emma Zunz”

“Emma Zunz” is from the collection *El aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899-1986).

On January 14, 1922, when Emma Zunz returned home from the Tarbuch & Loewenthal weaving mill, she found a letter at the far end of the entryway to her building; it had been sent from Brazil, and it informed her that her father had died. She was misled at first by the stamp and the envelope; then the unknown handwriting made her heart flutter. Nine or ten smudgy lines covered almost the entire piece of paper; Emma read that Sr. Maier had accidentally ingested an overdose of veronal and died on the third inst. in the hospital at Bagé. The letter was signed by a resident of the rooming house in which her father had lived, one Fein or Fain, in Rio Grande; he could not have known that he was writing to the dead man's daughter. Emma dropped the letter. The first thing she felt was a sinking in her stomach and a trembling in her knees; then, a sense of blind guilt, of unreality, of cold, of fear; then, a desire for this day to be past. Then immediately she realized that such a wish was pointless, for her father's death was the only thing that had happened in the world, and it would go on happening, endlessly, forever after. She picked up the piece of paper and went to her room. Furtively, she put it away for safekeeping in a drawer, as though she somehow knew what was coming. She may already have begun to see the things that would happen next; she was already the person she was to become. In the growing darkness, and until the end of that day, Emma wept over the suicide of Manuel Maier, who in happier days gone by had been Emanuel Zunz. She recalled summer outings to a small farm near Gualeguay, she recalled (or tried to recall) her mother, she recalled the family's little house in Lanus* that had been sold at auction, she recalled the yellow lozenges of a window, recalled the verdict of prison, the disgrace, the anonymous letters with the newspaper article about the "Embezzlement of Funds by Teller," recalled (and this she would never forget) that on the last night, her father had sworn that the thief was Loewenthal—Loewenthal, Aaron Loewenthal, formerly the manager of the mill and now one of its owners. Since 1916, Emma had kept the secret. She had revealed it to no one, not even to Elsa Urstein, her best friend. Perhaps she shrank from it out of profane incredulity; perhaps she thought that the secret was the link between herself and the absent man. Loewenthal didn't know she knew; Emma Zunz gleaned from that minuscule fact a sense of power.

She did not sleep that night, and by the time first light defined the rectangle of the window, she had perfected her plan. She tried to make that day (which seemed interminable to her) be like every other. In the mill, there were rumors of a strike; Emma declared, as she always did, that she was opposed to all forms of violence. At six, when her workday was done, she went with El sato, a women's club that had a gymnasium and a swimming pool. They joined; she had to repeat and then spell her name; she had to applaud the vulgar jokes that accompanied the struggle to get it correct. She discussed with Elsa and the younger of the Kronfuss girls which moving picture they would see Sunday evening. And then there was talk of boyfriends; no one expected Emma to have anything to say. In April she would be nineteen, but men still inspired in her an almost pathological fear....

Home again, she made soup thickened with manioc flakes and some vegetables, ate early, went to bed, and forced herself to sleep. Thus passed Friday the fifteenth—a day of work, bustle, and trivia—the day before the day. On Saturday, impatience awakened her. Impatience, not nervousness or second thoughts—and the remarkable sense of relief that she had reached this day at last. There was nothing else for her to plan or picture to herself; within a few hours she would have come to the simplicity of the *fait accompli*. She read in *La Prensa* that the *Nordstjärnan*, from Malmö, was to weigh anchor that night from Pier 3; she telephoned Loewenthal, insinuated that she had something to tell him, in confidence, about the strike, and promised to stop by his office at nightfall. Her voice quivered; the quiver befitted a snitch. No other memorable event took place that morning. Emma worked until noon and then settled with Perla Kronfuss and Eisa on the details of their outing on Sunday. She lay down after lunch and with her eyes closed went over the plan she had conceived. She reflected that the final step would be less horrible than the first, and would give her, she had no doubt of it, the taste of victory, and of justice. Suddenly, alarmed, she leaped out of bed and ran to the dressing table drawer. She opened it; under the portrait of Milton Sills, where she had left it night before last, she found Pain's letter. No one could have seen it; she began to read it, and then she tore it up. To recount with some degree of reality the events of that evening would be difficult, and perhaps inappropriate. One characteristic of hell is its unreality, which might be thought to mitigate hell's terrors but perhaps makes them all the worse. How to make plausible an act in which even she who was to commit it scarcely believed? How to recover those brief hours of chaos that Emma Zunz's memory today repudiates and confuses? Emma lived in Amalgro, on Calle Liniers; we know that that evening she went down to the docks. On the infamous Paseo de Julio she may have seen herself multiplied in mirrors, made public by lights, and stripped naked by hungry eyes—but it is more reasonable to assume that at first she simply wandered, unnoticed, through the indifferent streets.... She stepped into two or three bars, observed the

routine or the maneuvers of other women. Finally she ran into some men from the Nordstjärnan. One of them, who was quite young, she feared might inspire in her some hint of tenderness, so she chose a different one—perhaps a bit shorter than she, and foul-mouthed—so that there might be no mitigation of the purity of the horror. The man led her to a door and then down a gloomy entryway and then to a tortuous stairway and then into a vestibule (with lozenges identical to those of the house in Lanús) and then down a hallway and then to a door that closed behind them. The most solemn of events are outside time—whether because in the most solemn of events the immediate past is severed, as it were, from the future or because the elements that compose those events seem not to be consecutive. In that time outside time, in that welter of disjointed and horrible sensations, did Emma Zunz think even once about the death that inspired the sacrifice? In my view, she thought about it once, and that was enough to endanger her desperate goal. She thought (she could not help thinking) that her father had done to her mother the horrible thing being done to her now. She thought it with weak-limbed astonishment, and then, immediately, took refuge in vertigo. The man—a Swede or Finn—did not speak Spanish; he was an instrument for Emma, as she was for him—but she was used for pleasure, while he was used for justice. When she was alone, Emma did not open her eyes immediately. On the night table was the money the man had left. Emma sat up and tore it to shreds, as she had torn up the letter a short time before. Tearing up money is an act of impiety, like throwing away bread; the minute she did it, Emma wished she hadn't—an act of pride, and on that day.... Foreboding melted into the sadness of her body, into the revulsion. Sadness and revulsion lay upon Emma like chains, but slowly she got up and began to dress. The room had no bright colors; the last light of evening made it all the drearier. She managed to slip out without being seen. On the corner she mounted a westbound Lacroze and following her plan, she sat in the car's frontmost seat, so that no one would see her face. Perhaps she was comforted to see, in the banal bustle of the streets, that what had happened had not polluted everything. She rode through gloomy, shrinking neighborhoods, seeing them and forgetting them instantly, and got off at one of the stops on Warnes. Paradoxically, her weariness turned into a strength, for it forced her to concentrate on the details of her mission and masked from her its true nature and its final purpose.

Aaron Loewenthal was in the eyes of all an upright man; in those of his few closest acquaintances, a miser. He lived above the mill, alone. Living in the run-down slum, he feared thieves; in the courtyard of the mill there was a big dog, and in his desk drawer, as everyone knew, a revolver. The year before, he had decorously grieved the unexpected death of his wife—a Gauss! who'd brought him an excellent dowry!—but money was his true passion. With secret shame, he knew he was not as good at earning it as at holding on to it. He was quite religious; he

believed he had a secret pact with the Lord—in return for prayers and devotions, he was exempted from doing good works. Bald, heavysset, dressed in mourning, with his dark lensed pince-nez and blond beard, he was standing next to the window, awaiting the confidential report from operator Zunz. He saw her push open the gate (which he had left ajar on purpose) and cross the gloomy courtyard. He saw her make a small detour when the dog (tied up on purpose) barked. Emma's lips were moving, like those of a person praying under her breath; weary, over and over they rehearsed the phrases that Sr. Loewenthal would hear before he died.

Things didn't happen the way Emma Zunz had foreseen. Since early the previous morning, many times she had dreamed that she would point the firm revolver, force the miserable wretch to confess his miserable guilt, explain to him the daring stratagem that would allow God's justice to triumph over man's. (It was not out of fear, but because she was an instrument of that justice, that she herself intended not to be punished.) Then, a single bullet in the center of his chest would put an end to Loewenthal's life. But things didn't happen that way. Sitting before Aaron Loewenthal, Emma felt (more than the urgency to avenge her father) the urgency to punish the outrage she herself had suffered. She could not not kill him, after being so fully and thoroughly dishonored. Nor did she have time to waste on theatrics. Sitting timidly in his office, she begged Loewenthal's pardon, invoked (in her guise as snitch) the obligations entailed by loyalty, mentioned a few names, insinuated others, and stopped short, as though overcome by fearfulness. Her performance succeeded; Loewenthal went out to get her a glass of water. By the time he returned from the dining hall, incredulous at the woman's fluttering perturbation yet full of solicitude, Emma had found the heavy revolver in the drawer. She pulled the trigger twice. Loewenthal's considerable body crumpled as though crushed by the explosions and the smoke; the glass of water shattered; his face looked at her with astonishment and fury; the mouth in the face cursed her in Spanish and in Yiddish. The filthy words went on and on; Emma had to shoot him again. Down in the courtyard, the dog, chained to his post, began barking furiously, as a spurt of sudden blood gushed from the obscene lips and sullied the beard and clothes. Emma began the accusation she had prepared ("I have avenged my father, and I shall not be punished ...") but she didn't finish it, because Sr. Loewenthal was dead. She never knew whether he had managed to understand. The dog's tyrannical barking reminded her that she couldn't rest, not yet. She mussed up the couch, unbuttoned the dead man's suit coat, removed his spattered pince-nez and left them on the filing-cabinet. Then she picked up the telephone and repeated what she was to repeat so many times, in those and other words: Something has happened, something unbelievable... Sr. Loewenthal sent for me on the pretext of the strike.... He raped me --- I killed him ----The story was

unbelievable, yes—and yet it convinced everyone, because in substance it was true. Emma Zunz's tone of voice was real, her shame was real, her hatred was real. The outrage that had been done to her was real, as well; all that was false were the circumstances, the time, and one or two proper names.

Translated by Andrew Hurley

1. How can one describe the role of the narrator of “Emma Zunz”?
2. What is the basis of the suspense in the story?
3. What precisely is Emma Zunz’s plan?
4. Does the plan work?
5. What is the narrator’s judgment at the end of the story?

Julio Cortázar, “The Night Face Up”

The title of “The Night Face Up” in Spanish is “La noche boca arriba.” Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914-1984) is the author of numerous novels, short stories, other literary works, and essays, the most famous of which is the novel *Rayuela*, translated as *Hopscotch* (1963). He is associated with the movement known as the Latin American Boom. Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blowup* (1966) is based on a Cortázar short story, “The Devil’s Spittle” (“Las babas del diablo”).

*And in certain epochs they would go to hunt enemies;
They called this the war of flowers.*

It had to be late, he thought in the middle of the hotel’s long corridor, and hurried onto the street to the motorcycle in the corner where the concierge next door had allowed him to park. In the corner jeweler’s he saw that it was 8:50; he’d arrive where he was going in more than enough time. The sun filtered through the tall buildings downtown and, because he needed no name to think, he got on the machine savoring the excursion. The bike purred between his legs and his pants succumbed to the whips of fresh wind.

The ministries in pink and white went by, then a series of stores on Central Street with brilliant shop windows. Now he entered the most pleasurable part of the commute, the true journey: a long street lined with trees with little traffic and huge villas which let their gardens come up to the pavements, hardly marked by low hedges. Somewhat distracted by perhaps, but keeping to the right side as was proper, he let himself go to the smoothness, to the light tension of that day hardly begun. Perhaps his involuntary relaxation prevented him from avoiding the accident. When he saw that the woman standing at the corner was rushing onto the road despite the green lights, it was already too late for simple solutions. Straying to the left, he braked with his foot and hand; he heard the woman’s shouts, and with the collision lost his vision. It was as if he had suddenly fallen asleep.

Having fainted, he woke violently. Four or five young men were pulling out him from beneath his cycle. He felt the taste of salt, the taste of blood, his knee hurt, and he shouted once they lifted him out because the pressure on his right arm was unbearable. Voices that didn't seem to belong to the faces suspended above him tried to encourage him with jokes and assurances. His only consolation was hearing someone confirm that he had had the right of way crossing that corner. Trying to control the nausea stirring in his throat, he asked about the woman. While they were taking him face up to a nearby pharmacy, he learned that the reason for the accident didn't have anything more than scratches on her legs. "You hardly grazed her, but the collision made your bike jump sideways." Opinions, memories: lay him down slowly; yes, like that; and someone in a work coat gave him a drink which relieved him in the shade of a small neighborhood pharmacy.

The police ambulance arrived within five minutes. They put him onto a white stretcher where he could lie comfortably. In all lucidity, but knowing that he was still under the effects of a terrible collision, he gave his address to the policeman accompanying him. His arm, he said, almost didn't hurt him anymore. Blood was pouring out onto his whole face from a cut in his brow. He licked his lips once or twice to drink some. He felt good: it was an accident; bad luck. A few weeks not moving and that'd be that. The guard told him that his motorcycle didn't seem to be too damaged. "Naturally," he said, "since the whole thing landed on top of me." They both laughed. Then the guard shook his hand as they arrived at the hospital and wished him good luck. His nausea was already coming back bit by bit. They took him by gurney to the back building, passing under trees full of birds. He closed his eyes and wished he were asleep or chloroformed. But they kept him for a long time in a room with that hospital smell filling out a form, taking off his clothes and putting on a grayish, stiff shirt. They moved his arm carefully without causing him any pain. All the while, the nurses were telling jokes. And if it hadn't been for the contractions in his stomach, he would have felt very well indeed. Almost happy.

They took him to radiography. Twenty minutes later, with his wet sheets still clinging to his breast like a black gravestone, he went on to the operation room. Someone tall, slim and dressed in white came up to him and began examining the charts. A woman's hands made his head more comfortable, and he felt that he was moving from one gurney to another. Smiling, the man in white approached him again with something shiny in his right hand. He placed his hand on his cheek and signaled to someone standing behind him.

A strange dream, this, because it was full of smells and he had never dreamt of smells. First, there was the smell of a swamp, there on the left side of the road where the marshes began, those moving bogs from which no one ever came back. But this smell ceased. It was exchanged for a fragrance both composite and dark like the night in which he moved, fleeing the Aztecs. And all of this was so natural: he had to flee the Aztecs because they were hunting man, and his only chance was to hide in the thickest part of the jungle and to try not to budge from that narrow road of which only they, the Motecas, knew.

But nothing tortured him more than the smell. It was as if, in absolute acceptance of the dream, something unusual had been revealed that contradicted that dream that then later had not been part of the game. “Smells like war,” he thought, instinctively touching the stone dagger across his sash of woven wool. An unexpected sound made him duck and keep still, apart from a slight shiver. There was nothing odd about being afraid: his nightscapes teemed with fear. He waited, covered by the branches of a shrub and the night without stars. Very far off, probably on the other side of the great lake, there seemed to be campfires; a resplendent reddish tint filled that part of the sky. The sound did not occur again. Something like a snapped branch. Perhaps an animal who, like he, was escaping the smell of war. Smelling the air around him, he straightened slowly. He didn’t hear a thing. But fear persisted there like a smell, that sickly sweet incense that belonged to the war of flowers. He had to keep on; he had to reach the heart of the jungle while evading the marshes. Feeling his way forward, crouching at every opportunity to touch the hard ground of the road, he took some steps. He would have liked to take off running, but quivering sensations beat at his side. In the path in darkness, he found the course. And then he got a whiff of the smell he feared most. And desperate, he leapt forward.

“You’re going to fall off the bed,” said the patient in the next bed. “Don’t hop about so much, buddy.”

He opened his eyes and it was evening. The sun was already low in the large windows of the long hall. While he tried smiling at his neighbor, he almost physically peeled himself away from the nightmare’s last vision. His arm, in a plaster cast, was hanging from a device with weights and pulleys. He was thirsty, as if he had run for miles, but they didn’t want to give him much water, hardly enough to wet his lips and take a mouthful. His fever was rising slowly and he could have fallen asleep again, but he savored the pleasure of remaining awake, his eyes half-closed, listening to the conversation of the other patients, responding now and then to a question. He saw them bring in a small white trolley and place it

at the side of his bed. A blonde nurse then wiped the front part of his thigh with alcohol and stuck him with a thick needle connected to a tube that reached up to a bottle filled with an opal-colored liquid. Then a young doctor came over with an apparatus made of metal and leather and adjusted it to his good arm to check on something. Night fell, and his fever dragged him blandly into a state where things began to assume forms one might find on the other end of opera glasses: they were real and sweet and at the same time slightly repugnant, as if watching a boring film and thinking that it was even worse outside, and then staying put in the theater. Then came a cup of gold filled with marvelous broth and scents of leeks, celery, and parsley. A little piece of bread, more beautiful than an entire banquet, was chewed bit by bit. His arm no longer hurt any more, and only on his brow, where they had sutured his wound, he felt at times a hot and rapid piercing. When the large windows opposite swerved back to spots of dark blue he thought that it would be rather easy to fall asleep. A little uncomfortable there on his back, but when he passed his tongue over his dry, hot lips he felt the taste of the broth, and he took happy and carefree breaths.

At first there was some confusion, an attraction for an instant of all the dull and confounded sensations towards him. He understood that he was running in total darkness, although the sky above, crossed with treetops, was less black than the rest. "The road," he thought. "I've gone off the road." His feet were sinking into a mattress of leaves and mud, and he couldn't take another step without getting his torso and legs whipped by the shrubbery's branches. Panting, he realized that that he was cornered despite the darkness and silence, and he crouched down to listen. Perhaps the road was nearby; were things different, he would have caught sight of it at daybreak. But now nothing could help him find it. The hand which had instinctively clung to the hilt of the dagger now rose like a swamp scorpion up to his neck where it seized his protective amulet. Hardly moving his lips he mumbled the prayer of the corn which bore the happy moons, and the supplication to the Most High, the dispenser of Moteca goods. Yet at the same time he sensed that his ankles were sinking slowly into the mud, and the wait in the darkness in the unknown chaparral made it unbearable. The war of flowers had begun with the moon and had already lasted for three days and three nights. If he continued to take refuge in the depths of the forest, abandoning the road more in the region of the swamps, perhaps the warriors would not be able to pick up his trail. He thought about all those prisoners who could have done that. But it was the sacred time, not quantity that mattered. The hunt would continue until the priests gave the signal to return. Everything had its order and its end, and he was in the sacred time on the opposite side of the hunters.

He heard the shouts and stood up straight, his dagger in hand. Just as if the sky were burning on the horizon, he saw torches moving between the branches very close to him. The smell of war was unbearable, and when the first enemy leapt upon his neck he almost took pleasure in sinking the stone blade into his chest. Now lights and happy screams had already surrounded him. He managed to slice through the air once or twice before a rope caught him from behind.

“It’s the fever,” said the man from the bed beside him. “The same thing happened to me when they operated on my duodenum. Drink some water and you’ll see that you’ll sleep well.”

Compared to the night from which he returned, the lukewarm darkness of the room seemed marvelous. A violet lamp kept vigil at the top of the wall in the back of a room like a protective eye. He heard coughing, heavy breathing, at times a dialogue in low voices. Everything was pleasant and safe, without this harassment, but ... He didn’t want to keep thinking about his nightmare. There were so many things to keep himself occupied. He began to look at the plaster on his arm, the pulleys which so comfortably held it in the air. At some point during the night they had placed a bottle of mineral water on the table next to him. He drank gluttonously from the neck of the bottle. Now he was able to discern the shapes in the room, the thirty beds, the glass display cabinets. His fever had to be lower now, and his face felt so fresh. His brow hardly hurt at all, as if it were just a memory. He pictured himself exiting the hotel and getting his motorbike. Who could have thought that things would turn out this way? He tried to concentrate on the time of the accident, and it really annoyed him to notice that it was like a gap that he couldn’t manage to fill. Between the collision and the time they lifted him off the ground either his fainting or whatever it was didn’t let him see anything. And at the same time he had the feeling that this gap, this nothing, had taken an eternity. And not even time, but more like he had passed through something and traveled across great distances. The collision, the brutal hit against the pavement. In any case, getting out of that cesspool he had almost felt relief while the men got him off the ground. Considering the pain of his broken arm, the blood from his brow that was split open, the contusion in his knee, considering all of that, it was certainly a relief to return to daylight and feel taken care of and helped. And it was strange. He would have asked any time for the office doctor. Now sleep began to take him over again and slowly pull him down. The pillow was so soft, as was the freshness of the mineral water in his feverish throat. Perhaps he really could have rested if it hadn’t been for those damned nightmares. The violet light of the lamp up high was starting to go out little by little.

Since he was sleeping on his back, the position in which he came to didn't surprise him. But instead the smell of humidity, of stone oozing with leaks, forced him to close his throat and understand the matter. It was useless to open his eyes and look all over the place; he was enveloped in total darkness. He tried to stretch out straight and felt the ropes on his wrists and ankles. He was tethered to a floor on a cold and humid slab. The cold had taken over his naked back, his bare legs. His chin searched awkwardly for contact with his amulet, and then he knew that they had ripped it off him. Now he was lost, no prayer could save him from the end. From a distance, as if oozing between the stones of the dungeon, he heard the kettle drums of the celebration. They had brought him to the *teocalli* [Aztec temple]. He was in the dungeons of the temple. And he was waiting his turn.

He heard screaming. A hoarse scream that reverberated within the walls. Another scream ending in a moan. He was the one screaming in the darkness, screaming because he was alive. His whole body was defending itself by screaming about what was about to come, the inevitable end. He thought about his companions who would fill other dungeons, and about those who were already ascending the steps of sacrifice. Suffocated, he screamed again. He was almost unable to open his mouth. His jaws stiffened as if they were made of rubber and opened slowly with incalculable effort. The squeaking of the bolts shook him like a whip. Convulsed and writhing, he struggled to free himself from the cords which were sinking into his flesh. His right arm, the stronger of the two, kept pulling until the pain became intolerable and had to stop. He saw the double doors open, and the smell of the torches reached him before the light. With the loincloth of the ceremony barely clinging to their bodies, the acolytes of the priests approached, gazing upon him with disdain. In their sweaty torsos and black hair full of feathers he saw the lights reflected. Hot hands, as hard as bronze, replaced the slackened ropes; he felt that he was being lifted, his face still up, and pulled by the four acolytes who carried him through the passage. The torchbearers were walking ahead, vaguely lighting the corridor of wet walls and a ceiling so low that the acolytes had to bend their heads. Now they were bringing him, bringing him, it was the end. His face up, a meter from the ceiling of living rock which at moments was illuminated by the torches. Once stars emerged instead of the ceiling and he was raised up the burning stairway of screaming and dancing, it would be the end. The passageway had not ended yet, but was about to end, and suddenly he would smell the free air full of stars; but not yet, they walked carrying him endlessly in the red darkness, pulling on him brutally, but he could not want for the center of life, because they had ripped off the amulet which was his true heart.

He exited with a start into the night of the hospital, into the sky, the high and sweet open air, the soft darkness which surrounded him. He thought he might have screamed, but his neighbors were sleeping in silence. On his night table the bottle of water contained something bubbly, a translucent image against the bluish darkness of the large windows. He panted seeking to relieve his lungs and forget those images which continued to stick to his eyelids. Each time he closed his eyes he saw them form instantaneously, and terrified, he straightened himself while enjoying the fact that he was now awake, that being awake protected him, that it would soon be dawn, as well as the good deep sleep that one has at this hour, without images, without anything ... Now it was hard to keep his eyes open, he was no match for his sleepiness. He made one last effort: with his good hand he sketched a gesture towards the bottle of water. He couldn't reach it, his fingers were trapped again into a black emptiness, and the passageway continued endlessly, rock after rock, with sudden reddish flashes, and face up he moaned lifelessly because the roof was about to end. It rose, opening like a mouth of darkness, and the acolytes stood up, and at that altitude he was struck by the light of a receding moon which his eyes did not want to see. He closed and opened them desperately trying to pass to the other side, to rediscover the open protective sky of the room. And each time that they opened it was night and there was the moon as they lifted him up the stairway. Now his head went downwards, and at this height there were bonfires, red columns of perfumed smoke, and suddenly he saw the red rock, shining with dripping blood, and the swinging of the feet of the sacrificial victim whom they were dragging in order to hurl him down the stairways of the north. With one last hope he squeezed his eyelids together, moaning in desperation. For a second he thought he'd done it because once again he was in his bed, unmoving apart from the swaying of his head downwards. But he smelled death, and when he opened them again he saw the bloodied figure of the man about to perform the sacrifice, who was coming towards him with a stone knife in his hand. Once more he closed his eyelids, but now he knew that he wouldn't wake up, that he was awake, that his marvelous dream had been his other state, absurd like all dreams, a dream in which he had ridden through the strange avenues of a darkened city with green and red lights which burned without flame or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that hummed between his legs. In this dream's infinite lie they had also raised him from the ground, someone had also approached him with a knife in his hand, and he had remained face up, his face up with his eyes shut between the bonfires.

1. How is “The Night Face Up” constructed?
2. What sets the action in motion?
3. How is the story narrated? Is the narrator reliable?
4. What happens at the end of the story? How can one interpret the ending?
5. What are the basic themes or messages of the story?
6. Would you advise a potential reader to read the story twice?

