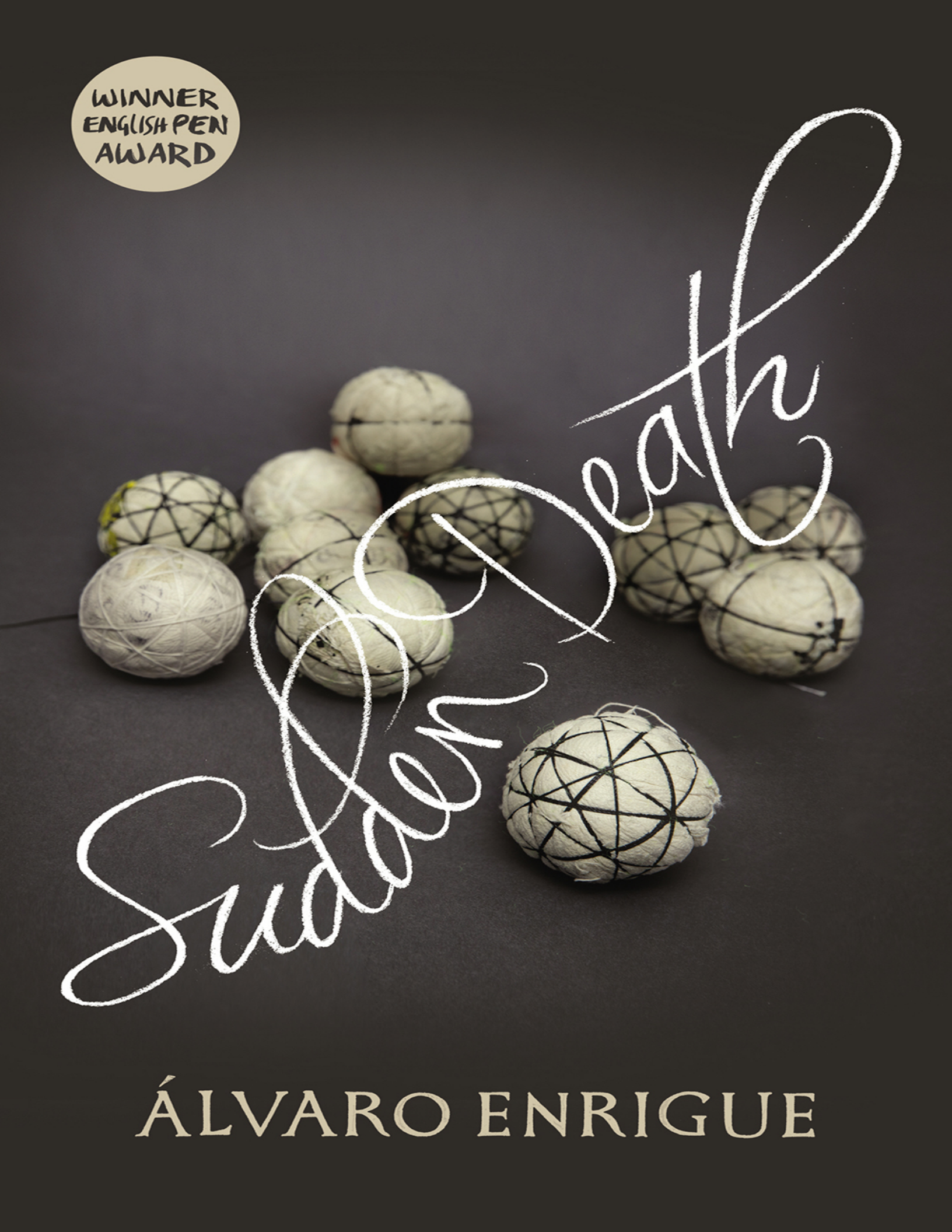
WINNER ENGLISH PEN AWARD



Sudden Death

ÁLVARO ENRIGUE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A brutal tennis match in Rome.

Two formidable opponents: the wild Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and the loutish Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo.

Galileo, Saint Matthew and Mary Magdalene heckle from the sidelines.

In England, Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII execute Anne Boleyn, and her executioner transforms her legendary locks into the most sought-after tennis balls of the time.

Across the ocean in Mexico, the last Aztec emperors play their own games, as Hernán Cortés and his Mayan translator and lover scheme and conquer, fight and fuck, not knowing that their domestic comedy will change history.

Over the course of one dazzling tennis match – through assassinations and executions, carnal liaisons and papal dramas, artistic and religious revolutions, love and war – *Sudden Death* tells the grand adventure of the clash of empires and the dawn of the modern era.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Álvaro Enrigue was born in Mexico and lives in New York City. He has taught at New York University, Princeton University, the University of Maryland and Columbia University. *Sudden Death* – his first novel to be translated into English – was awarded the prestigious Herralde Prize in Spain, the Elena Poniatowska International Novel Award in Mexico, and the Barcelona Prize for Fiction.

Natasha Wimmer is the translator of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. She lives in New York City.

Also by Álvaro Enrigue in English translation

Hypothermia

For La Flaca Luiselli

For the three Garcías: Maia, Miqui, Dy

For Hernán Sánchez de Pinillos

Sudden Death

Álvaro Enrigue

Translated from the Spanish by
Natasha Wimmer

Harvill Secker
LONDON

The oldest written record of the word *tennis* makes no mention of athletic shoes, rather it refers solely to the sport from which they take their name, a sport that – along with fencing, its near kin – was one of the first to require a special kind of footwear.

In 1451, Edmund Lacey, Bishop of Exeter, defined the game with the same suppressed rage with which my mother referred to the falling-apart Converse I wore as a kid: *ad ludum pile vulgariter nuncupatum Tenys*. In Lacey's edict, the word *tenys* – in the vernacular – is linked to phrases with the acid whiff of court cases: *prophanis colloquiis et iuramentis, vanis et sepissime periuriis illicitis, sepius rixis*.

At the collegiate church of Ottery St Mary, under Lacey's rule, a group of novices had been using the roofed gallery of the cloister to play matches against townies. In those days, tennis was much rougher and noisier than it is today: some were attackers, others defenders, there were no nets or lines, and points were won tooth and nail, by slamming the ball into an opening called a dedans. Since it was a sport invented by Mediterranean monks, it had redemptive overtones: angels on one side, demons on the other. It was a matter of death and the afterlife, the ball as allegory of the soul flitting between good and evil, scheming to get into heaven, Lucifer's messengers waylaying it. The soul rent asunder, just like my tennis shoes.

The prickly Baroque painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, a great lover of the game, spent his last years in exile for having run an opponent through with his sword on a tennis court. Today, the Roman street where the crime was committed is called Via di Pallacorda – 'street of the ball and net' – in memory of the incident. Caravaggio was sentenced to death by beheading in Rome and spent years living as a fugitive, from Naples to Sicily to the island of Malta. Between commissions, he painted terrifying scenes of beheadings in which he served as his own model for the severed heads. He sent the paintings to the pope or his

agents as symbolic tribute, in the hope of being pardoned. At the age of thirty-eight, Caravaggio was at last granted a reprieve and he was on his way back to Rome when he was stabbed on the Tuscan beach of Porto Ercole, by an assassin sent by the Knights of Malta. Though he was a master of the sword and dagger, just as he was of the brush and racket, syphilitic delirium and lead poisoning left him unable to defend himself. *Sepius rixis*.

A few years ago I attended one of the three hundred thousand book fairs held every week across the Spanish-speaking world. A local literary critic found me so intolerable that he decided to launch a jeremiad against me. Since he didn't have the time or energy to read a whole book and take it apart, he wrote on his blog: 'How dare he appear in public wearing tennis shoes like that?' *Vanis et sepissime periuriis illicitis!*

It's no surprise that anyone possessing a modicum of authority should agitate against tennis, or tennis shoes. I myself often issue complaints, like bad cheques, about my teenage son's Adidas. We cling to our tennis shoes until wearing them on a rainy day is agony. Anyone in a position of power hates them, impervious as they are to their agendas.

When this book first appeared in Spanish, a Canadian writer and very dear friend of mine told his father, who was wildly excited because he felt that fiction writing had yet to pay real tennis its due in the form of a novel. He doesn't speak Spanish, but he is perfectly fluent in French and Italian, which makes him capable enough of reading a book written in my mother tongue, so he had a copy sent to him from Spain and read it with the help of a dictionary. I can't imagine a greater honour for a writer, though I'm not sure my friend's father liked the book. In an attempt to save me from my own imagination, he wrote me a six-page letter pointing out all the physical impossibilities and imaginary rules I had come up with to be able to say whatever this

book says. The letter proves that the true art is reading, not writing, and it is a beautiful testament of loyalty: a friend of his son is a friend of his. Commenting on some sexual incidents described in the novel, he noted: ‘Now I know why you and my son are friends.’ This is a statement of complicity. It tells me that if we knew each other, he would forgive my defects just as he does his son’s. And his letter is full of authority. Not the kind that comes with age or rank, since I’m well past forty and a father myself, but the kind that comes with first-hand knowledge. My characters are playing *pallacorda*, a game whose rules are unknown, but physical memory, a sense of how the real tennis racket feels in the hand and how a real tennis ball bounces, made my friend’s father file a claim in the name of all realism. But the only real things in a novel are the sequences of letters, words and sentences that make it up, and the paper on which they’re printed. What they produce in a reader’s head are private and unique landscapes of objects in motion that have only one thing in common: they don’t exist. A game that is played in a novel has everything to do with that novel and nothing to do with reality. And even so, we tend to claim – as my friend’s father did – that certain things are to be believed and others are not in this or that book. As if a ball dropped by a character could roll out of a book onto the floor, run up against our tennis shoes, and stop.

In the opening scene of the British Renaissance comedy *Eastward Ho*, an apprentice called Quicksilver makes his appearance wrapped in a cloak and wearing pumps – slippers with thick woollen soles that are the earliest forerunners of our tennis shoes. His master, troubled by what he sees as a sign that the young man is about to fall into the company of ruffians, gamblers and assassins, lifts the apprentice’s cloak. From his belt hang a sword and tennis racket. Another in a line of authority figures – mothers, fathers, critics, bishops, bosses – alerted to someone’s essential flaws by his athletic shoes.

When leather footwear begins to look shabby, we take it to the cobbler to give it the sad newness of faces worked over by a plastic surgeon. Tennis shoes are one of a kind: there is no fixing them. What value they have derives from the scars left by our missteps. My first pair of Converse met a sudden death. One day I came home from school and my mother had thrown them away.

It’s no coincidence that when speaking of someone’s death in Mexico we say he ‘hung up his tennis shoes’, that he ‘went out tennis shoes first’. We are who we are, unfixable, fucked. We wear tennis shoes. We fly from good to evil, from happiness to responsibility, from jealousy to sex. Souls batted back and forth across the court. This is the serve.

FIRST SET, FIRST GAME

HE FELT THE leather of the ball between the thumb, index and middle fingers of his left hand. Once, twice, three times he bounced the ball on the pavement, spinning the racket handle in the grip of his right hand. For a moment he gauged the space of the court; his hangover made the midday sun seem unbearably bright. He took a deep breath: the tennis match that was about to begin was a contest of life and death.

Wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead, he rolled the ball again in the fingers of his left hand. It was a strange ball: very worn and much handled, a little smaller than usual, solid in a way that was recognizably French; it had a more hectic bounce than the balls filled with air that he was used to playing with in Spain. He glanced down and with his toe scraped the stripe of lime that marked the end of his side of the court. He would come down on his short leg just behind the line: this was the surprise factor that made him invincible with a sword, and perhaps – why not? – with a racket too.

He heard laughter from his opponent, who was waiting for the serve on the other side of the cord strung between them. One of the degenerates accompanying him had muttered something in Italian. At least one of them was familiar: a man with a jutting nose, red beard and sad eyes – the model for the tax collector saint in *The Calling of St Matthew*, proud recent acquisition of the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. Tossing the ball in the air, he shouted *Tenez!*

and felt the catgut strings tighten as he lit into it with all his soul.

His opponent’s eyes followed the ball as it flew toward the gallery roof. It struck at one of the corners. The Spaniard smiled: his first serve was lethal, untouchable. The Lombard had rested too easy, so sure was he that a lame man could be no match for him. In the quick, shrill voice with which Castilians pierce walls and minds, the poet remarked: Better a cripple than a bugger. On the other side of the court, no one laughed at his joke. But from his spot in the roofed gallery, the duke watched with the sly smile of a great rake.

In time the duke, the poet’s linesman, would become the Spanish statesman his title gave him the right to be, but by the autumn of 1599 he had done nothing but punish his body, sully the family name, worry his wife sick, and drive the king’s counsellors to distraction. He was a stout, brash man. He had a round face, an almost comically pointy nose, grapefruit-seed eyes that gave him a mocking aspect even when he was in earnest, short curly hair, and an unconvincing beard that made him look more of a fool than he was. He was watching the match in the same scornful, sardonic way he did everything, sitting in the arcade under the wooden roof on which the ball had to bounce for a serve to be considered good.

The Lombard took the centre of the court behind the baseline. He waited in a crouch for the bounce of the Spaniard’s serve. The gang of layabouts with him preserved a respectful silence this time. The poet served again, and again he won the point. He had put the ball almost on his own side of the roof, so that it fell nearly dead for his opponent. The duke called out the score: Thirty–love, though what he said was ‘lof’. The Italians understood perfectly.

Gaining confidence, the Spaniard dried the palm of his right hand on his breeches. He turned the ball in his left. He was sweating enough to give it backspin without needing to

spit on it. It wasn’t the heat but the fever that afflicts those who have yet to recover from too much drink, landing them in a purgatory of shivers. He rolled his head from side to side, closed his eyes and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He squeezed the ball. It wasn’t a normal ball; there was something irregular about it, as if it were more talisman than ball. This, it occurred to him, was why his serves were unstoppable. When he took his turn on the receiving side and the ball returned to the hands of its owner, he would have to take heed.

He gripped the racket and tossed the ball into the air. *Tenez!* He hit it so hard that for the fraction of a second before his lame leg came down again, the earth seemed to turn more slowly. The ball bounced capriciously on the roof of the gallery. The Lombard stretched for it. The Spaniard tried to kill the return dead, but didn’t manage it. The point continued: luckily for him, the ball struck one of the posts, and he was able to snag it on the bounce, driving it to the back of the court. It was a good save, but the manoeuvre took too long, and surprise was the only option he had for countering his opponent’s experience on the court. The Lombard found it simple to fling himself backward and hit a drive that the poet had no chance of returning.

Thirty–fifteen, cried the duke. The only responsible member of the Lombard’s entourage was his linesman – a silent and prematurely aged professor of mathematics. He walked onto the court to mark a chalk cross on the spot where the ball had bounced. Before he made the mark he turned to look at the Spaniard’s second. The duke shrugged in a show of indifference, agreeing that the cross was well placed.

The poet didn’t return immediately to position. While the professor took his time with the marking, he went over to the gallery. He’s good, the duke said when the poet was near; you couldn’t hit a ball like that on your best day. The

poet filled his cheeks with air and blew it out with a snort. I can’t lose, he said. You can’t lose, confirmed the duke.

The next point was long and hard-fought. The Spaniard had his back to the wall, returning balls as if besieged by an army. Move in, move in, the duke cried every so often, but each time the poet managed to advance a little his attacker pushed him back. At a desperate moment, he had to curb a drive by turning his back on his opponent – a showy play, but not very practical. The Lombard got to the ball close in and drilled the wall again. The ball struck very near the dedans – if it had gone in, the artist would automatically have won the game. Thirty all, cried the duke. *Parità*, the professor confirmed. The poet hit a serve that struck the edge of the gallery. Inside and unreachable. Forty–thirty, cried the duke. The mathematician nodded serenely.

The next point was contested with more cunning than strength: the poet didn’t let himself be trapped and he was finally able to force the artist to play a corner. On the first short ball he eliminated him. Game, called the duke. *Caccia per Spagna*, called the professor.

RULE

TENNIS. GAME OF a likeness to handball. One player defends and the other attacks, then vice versa. If there is a tie, a chase will decide the defender and the attacker in the third round, which is called sudden death. On the serve, the ball must strike a slant roof along one side of the court, from which it drops and is returned. Tennis is also called *pala*, after the racket with which the game is played, which is made entirely of wood with a little net of tight-strung gut in the centre. It is gripped by the handle and with it the ball is struck with violence and force. Tennis is scored by points, but he who hits the dedans wins a round and he who wins three straight rounds or four rounds divided wins the match.

Diccionario de autoridades, Madrid, 1726

BEHEADING

JEAN ROMBAUD HAD the worst of all possible tasks on the morning of 19 May 1536: severing with a single blow the head of Anne Boleyn, Marquess of Pembroke and Queen of England, a young woman so beautiful she had turned the Strait of Dover into a veritable Atlantic. The notorious Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII, had brought Rombaud over from France for this express purpose. In a curt missive, Cromwell asked that he bring his sword – a piece of miraculously fine craftsmanship, forged of Toledo steel – because he would be performing a delicate execution.

Rombaud was neither beloved nor indispensable. Beautiful and immoral, he drifted coldly in the tight circle of very specialized workers who thrived in the Renaissance courts under the blind eye of ambassadors, ministers and secretaries. His reserve, striking looks and lack of scruples made him a natural for certain kinds of tasks known to all and spoken of by none, the dark operations that have always been unavoidable in the conduct of politics. He dressed with surprising good taste for someone with the job of killer angel: he wore expensive rings, breeches lavishly trimmed with brocade, and royal-blue velvet shirts unsuited to a bastard, which he was in every sense of the word. Cheap gemstones were braided with gypsy panache into his gold-streaked chestnut hair, the gems filched from mistresses conquered with the various weapons over which God had granted him mastery. There was no knowing whether he was silent because he was clever or because he

was a fool: his deep blue eyes, which turned down a little at the corners, never expressed compassion, but they never expressed any kind of animosity either. Also, Rombaud was French: for him, killing a queen of England was less sin than duty. Cromwell had called him to London because he believed this last quality made him a particularly hygienic choice for the job.

It wasn't King Henry who had arranged for his wife's death by Toledo sword rather than by the lowly blow of the axe that separated her brother's head from his neck on the accusation he had slept with the queen, a sin that earned him the record sum of three death sentences: for *lèse-majesté*, for adultery and for degeneracy. No one – not even the notorious Thomas Cromwell – could bear for such a neck as hers to be hacked by the coarse blade of an axe.

On the morning of 19 May 1536, Anne Boleyn attended mass and made her confession. Before she was turned over to the Constable of the Tower so her body could be cleaved apart, she asked that her ladies-in-waiting alone be given the privilege of cropping her heavy red braids and shaving her head. Most of the surviving portraits, including the sole copy of the only one reportedly painted from life – now part of Hever Castle's Tudor collection – depict her as the owner of crimped and significant locks.

It seems that the royal bedchamber had a dampening effect on King Henry's libido, such a champion was he in extramarital affairs – and such an underperformer in his royal reproductive duties. No one knew this better than the marquess of Pembroke, who had managed to conceive by him after a single day in the country, while he was still married to his previous queen. They'd had a daughter as lovely as the marquess herself, for whom the monarch professed the thunderous affection associated with homicidal types. So Anne Boleyn approached the scaffold conscious of the statistical odds that her daughter Elizabeth would reach the throne, as indeed she ultimately did. She

delivered herself into martyrdom with a show of calculated cheer. Among her last words, pronounced before the witnesses to her death, were: ‘I pray God save the King, and send him long to reign over you, for a gentler nor a more merciful prince was there never.’

What is it about nudity, in theory the great equalizer, that excites us? In their naked state, only monsters should turn us on, and yet it’s the very sameness of our nakedness that we find arousing. The ladies who accompanied Boleyn in her trials had pulled back the collar of her gown to reveal her neck before escorting her to the scaffold. They had also removed her necklaces. They didn’t feel that the removal of her veil and tresses marred her beauty in the least: she was just as lovely with a shorn head as she was with hair.

The bluish gleam of her neck quivering in anticipation of the blow triggered an emotional response in Rombaud. According to one witness, the mercenary was kind enough to make an effort to surprise the lady lying there bare from her shoulder blades to the crown of her head. With his sword raised high and ready to come down upon the queen’s neck, he asked carelessly: Has anyone seen my sword? The woman twitched her shoulders, perhaps relieved that some chance occurrence might spare her. She closed her eyes. Vertebrae, cartilage, the spongy tissue of trachea and pharynx: the sound of their parting was like the elegant pop of a cork liberated from a bottle of wine.

Jean Rombaud refused the bag of silver coins that Thomas Cromwell offered him when the job was done. Addressing the whole gathering, but looking into the eyes of the man who had schemed until he unseated the queen, he said that he had agreed to do what he had done to spare a lady the vile fate of dying under an executioner’s blade. He made a sideways bow to the ministers and clergymen who had witnessed the beheading and he returned straight to Dover at full gallop. Earlier that morning, the Lord High Constable

had packed the categorical braids of the queen of England in his saddlebags.

Rombaud was an avid tennis player and this seemed sufficient payment: the hair of those executed on the scaffold had special properties that caused it to trade at stratospheric prices among ball makers in Paris. A woman’s hair was worth more, red hair more still, and a reigning queen’s would command an unimaginable price.

Anne Boleyn’s braids produced a total of four balls, which were by far the most luxurious sporting equipment of the Renaissance.

ON THE NOBILITY OF THE GAME OF TENNIS

FIRST WE SHALL see how the game of tennis has been ordered to excellent and rational ends, which is how all worthy and valuable art should be, in imitation of nature, which does nothing without great mastery. Note, for example, how the ancient and wise inventors of this game, considering that it inflames and impassions even the palest and weakest youth, contrived it in such a fashion that the player is never hurt. As will subsequently be explained, the ball is not hit while it is in the air, but rather after it has bounced on the ground, making it impossible for the receiving player to be injured. Similarly, the receiving player waits for the bounce to learn whether the point he intends to make is valid. If he wants the advantage, he is obliged to display the requisite decency and allow the other player equal time to recover.

Antonio Scaino,
Treatise on the Game of the Ball, Venice, 1555