Lunas и Moons:

Campus Poetica

(Flash Fiction, Short Stories, Translations and Six-word Breaths)

IVÁN BRAVE

Forward by Juan Pablo Gargiulo

2019

Foreword

Borges once said: "When writers die they become books. Which is, after all, not too bad an incarnation." And there is a certain magic that exists when one reads a book. As the saying goes about the same man never stepping into the same river, so it is with a reader and a book.

In graduate school, I was the lone dissident—some might say "asshole"—in the writing workshop who disagreed with Vladimir Nabokov's essay "Good Readers and Good Writers." Specifically the part where he stressed the importance of re-reading.

I loathe re-reading. And it's not that I have anything against the books I've already read—I love them! That's why I finished them in the first place. But I prefer to read new books—new voices, new stories, new experiences rather than re-live old ones.

I did a bit of depressing math, and I'll share some with you now, reader: I'm twenty-eight years old. (Or I will be, at the time of this book's publication.) Let's suppose that I live to a ripe old eighty years old. That would leave me with fifty-two years of reading. And let's say that I manage to read one new book per week—a superhuman effort, but I'm a writer, so this is part of my work—that would be fifty-two books per year. Fifty-two squared is 2,704. Which means I have 2,704 books left in my life—assuming I can live to eighty and maintain a maniacal reading pace. And that number doesn't only include every book and author you've ever wanted to read—it also includes every writer who will write a book—some of whom won't be born for decades—between now and your death. The greatest book of your lifetime might not be written for another thirty years.

The same can be done with anyone's favorite activity. You might measure your time in number of movies. Or the number of plays. Or the number of World Cups. Each of us realize our mortality uniquely.

But for writers, there is a special magic to reading. That's why so many of us continue making art in an age with so much noise. It's a ruthless, cutthroat time where a reader will get bored, double-tap their iPhone, close out your e-book, and open YouTube. Or Reddit. Or PornHub. Or all three.

Some of the best writers work for HBO, creating a fantastical world of CGI dragons and gratuitous nudity alongside some of the best writing in television history.

To make it as a writer these days—to earn your place on those 2,704 books left in my life—you will need to be *better* than tits and dragons. All the noise out there will either inspire you to be better, or it will make you hang your head and say, "You're right, Juan. I'm not better than tits and dragons."

Ivan has been more than a friend, in a way that only a fellow writer can understand. He has been my tether back to reality when I spend too long in those 2,704 books and not enough in the "real" world. Writers have always needed each other, and even the crotchetiest asshole had a team beside him.

Ivan and I have shared our loves of Shota Rustaveli and of *El Quixote*. We have commiserated in the way only dumbass men can about women. We have confided in each other about interrupted threesomes and drunk crying driving, of failed proposals and successful poetry readings.

But don't mistake my friendship—or my writerly kinship—with Ivan as any measure of credibility. Because, although this book earned its place on *my* list of 2,704 books, I cannot promise the same for you. Because that ineffable magic that happens when reader meets book—that moment when a writer can be brought back to life—is up to you. Ivan's work is done. The rest is up to you.

I began this prologue with a quote by Borges, and I'll end with one as well, as only befits the godfather of our literary heritage: "Reality is not always probable, or likely."

Juan Pablo Gargiulo

The Edge

"No. I *sometimes* think about ending my life, because I *always* think about death," Papa corrects me.

We are at the end of the Window Trail in Big Bend National Park, our legs kicking nervously over the edge. The sun kisses the far side of the desert valley. Strange. I only remember Papa's last line—in English no less, the bitter taste of bière anglaise followed by déjà vu. Despite what I feel—or perhaps in spite of it, or maybe, it don't matter—the sky looks beautiful: a full light spectrum unravels overhead.

Deep purples and wide indigos wash our necks. Greenish-blues and bluish-greens lace themselves over our plexus. Ovals of orange shine: citron de rouge clair, abricot, vermillon. They reflect, then expire, en fin.

Papa sighs. Tattered shadows dangle off his face. They remind me of how high the sun had been when we started the trail, how low it was when we got here.

I try to speak, but saliva chokes me. Yes, I thought of committing suicide too, Dad, Papa, mon père. S'il te plait. I'm not alone, I guess it's genetic. Now I get it, why you spoke: how else do you comfort a son—who pockets angst and x-acto knifes; who has "No Exit" tattooed upside-down where his umbilical cord used to be; who fakes it till there's nothing but a two hundred and twenty foot drop tickling the soles of his feet—when he admits, "I would jump right now…"?

Papa leans in. I lean in, too. Loads of tears and snot pool over his forearm.

If only I could confess how much we have in common.

If only we could keep the sun up a little while longer, for the walk back.

A Sylph Sketch'd

A man's soul or lack of it will be evident with what he can carve upon a white sheet of paper…

Charles Bukowski

If you want her to leave, she will;

If you want her to stay, she'll stay

still.

1. Imagine, first, a Knight wounded by his own hands, gripping the double-edge of a sword. It is long, sharp and dripping crimson. He strokes the weapon repeatedly, up and down, destroying one palm, blood gushing, while the other palm heals. He believes in the forest that surrounds him. But he has given up hope. Suddenly, a cloud covers the full moon.

Crack.

He stops.

There was a sound . . .

Another crack.

He turns around.

It's her.

The Sylph.

She sings:

Por favor

le ruego señor Caballero

¡No se lastime más!

que con esas manos

podrá

construir algo concreto

algo que hasta yo

una hada de cuento

podré

disfrutar

After a pause, the knight lets go his grip, however much his veins drip. He looks upon her and wonders the beauty radiating from her skinny figure. Her body naked is indescribable. Striking, yet undeniable. It is there, left to anyone's imagination, hard to attach adjectives to—the Knight's only way of labeling her. Instantly, he accepts the image of the wind goddess before him, and then, sending his blade into the wooden stump that has been his seat, the Knight ceases to try and label, and instead seeks to understand. He translates, then discovers: she is right. She speaks again, saying:

Pues, sí, Caballero, usted me debe seguir.

Le prometo, ajeno a su pena, un rico manzanar.

The Sylph beckons to the Knight with both of her index fingers, a double come-hither that levitates him to his feet. Once up, however, the Knight cannot step forward. He is weighed by doubt. She smiles, anyway, beckoning him to come, anyway. But he can't. Suddenly, and with a giggle, she disappears between some trees, leaving only a cloud of sparkling mist behind. The Knight cries. This has all happened so fast. She speaks again, off stage, saying:

Enamorado y autodestructivo
pasamos al otoño renovando
sin sentido
nuestra relación
con las estaciones:
un reflejo de piel a piel—
Su cutis diáfano y mi desnudez
siempre enzarzado
en lo abstracto—
Una nube, una miel
Atrapado en perpetua
los pies doblados
de mi corazón
vagabundo

Eventually the Knight shakes off his heavy mind and his weary armor, and runs past the mist and toward the grooves between the trees where the Sylph exited. Her body farther away

than ever, her words further away than ever, only a comet's stardust trail remaining. Gently lingering, slowly vanishing. He closes his eyes and loses himself. The Knight waves at the path before him. He turns around, and with new bearings tries to picture her, only what fills his imagination are words imagined—*"She preferred to dance than to sing; to laugh than to yell; to cry than to lie; to stand than to lay, though by and by her back knew well the itch of the grass beneath her, the joints of her body like constellations on a moonless night"*—So the Knight makes a pact with himself, for having lost her, to write about her until her return. She would not want a simple short story, he figures, but perhaps a handful of hand-written notes on white sheets of paper.

One sheet at a time, one shred at a time, the Knight sketches in quick bursts, dashing her cheek bones or other bones metaphorically with many a sharpened ballpoint pen. With his sword still stabbed in the wooden stump, near the spot where the forest sprite saved him, he promises himself something new. He will trade that weapon of yore for the arm of poesy.

The Knight leaves the forest and becomes a Monk; learns to build temples, and to worship inside of them. He images her voice, and responds in her language:

Tan dulces fueron

Sus frases halagüeñas

Sus derretidos caramelos

Zumo pa' mis orejas—

Y comiéndolos

pasé a no tener

un solo oprobio contra usted

2. Between the waning and waxing quarter moons, knowing he will not run into her on those nights, the Monk returns to the forest to build her a modest chapel of alabaster from the totems of his subconscious dreams. Abstract in theory, yet so clear in his mind, he works the material with his hands, until the chapel is complete. The Monk prays inside.

In the centerpiece of this sanctuary, in her honor, lays a shrine of sorts, a jewel box with an inscription in international script. Under the inscription, in the center of this shine box, holy of holies, is a slit with which to insert these shreds—his scattered thoughts, his penned secret prayers—wishing no outsider break its lock before the Sylph's eyes have had the chance to consume the words; truly afraid is the Monk—for he has traded his knightly oath for a saintly vow; one source of strength for one less obvious—yet he has faith the Sylph will unfold the sheets of paper before anyone else, his gifted prayers to her, inside this jewel box of a shrine.

Selfishness breeds selfishness:

A baby cries
while her mother replies
to a text
or looks up a word or decoration
or scrolls through a stranger's
masturbation

And the baby cries

still

yet louder now

and kicks about, strapped to her stroller

in desperate need of her mother's

attention:

to the baby, sacred

to the mother scarce

And the baby lets out its loudest cry

just as I walk by

Why doesn't she, the mother, attend to her child?

why is she on her phone

looking through posted photos?

Mothers don't behave this way

or at least I thought they didn't

Alas I don't say anything; and as I walk away

the baby quiets down—the mother still on her phone—

and she becomes distracted by the blinking lights of a faraway neon sign

selling us all something new

You read:

神棚

米国

(Kamidana Amerikana)

You:

Let me be your crème brûlée

with a silky puddling inside

under a caramelized layer of crunch

Press down hard on me, I say,

and break in

so that I may know your weight

and you the fullness of my cry

Rilke, drunk in love, passes the mic—

And I die.

How can I

try

if all you do is fly

away?

Why can't you stay?

Why can't you pray?

Will we ever be the same

again?

This might have worked better, the Monk thinks, as a collage, but opts instead for a more radical form: to amass, not paper, but shreds of laurel leaves dedicated to the Sylph. Suddenly, a caravan of Eurasian camels, carrying loads of loaded words, calls to him from the outskirts of the forest. It is time to leave again. It is time to go. But he stays to contemplate.

Mami, Papi:

A rhythm, a blast from the past as words run past, passing, we passed the glass:

here a spiral of words, golden, I hope; a pinch of Klimt.

It's a cinch…

Outrun and outlast

This loneliness

Of a glance

A chance

At once boring

And crass

Your words dressed in pink

You, my bubblegum—

Squish!—

And like magic we sink.

(Prose poem; tense change…) The Sylph's body wrapped around the Knight's ever closer, his center of gravity providing the wind goddess everything she needed, all she had asked for, and all at once. She was a narrowing orbit. Something strange, beautiful and sinister. Someone dirty, intimate and hot. She dripped sweat and shed tears. Her body, like a wet gemstone, young too, a shining opal upon which the Knight believed his insatiable appetite might at once be finished and satisfied. He wasn't as sure, though, if he was making love or not. To him, she, the Sylph, felt right. Would she come? She filled him as he filled her. She let him dance, as she danced. She let him sing, as she sang, saturnine colors dripping overhead. Babylon crumbling to the floor; the seventh wonder, the hanging gardens, played pretend with their bodies. The ending remains hidden to them.

The Monk allows the ashes of his burning ideas to continue falling on laurel leaves. There is no purpose in his ash-writing, no critique, no commentary, only a natural process, an expression, the need to please and be pleased. He rips yet another laurel leaf from a nearby tree of the endless forest, and another leaf, and sticks them one by one in her shrine, not to capture her physically, but to do it metaphysically; not in reality, but in art. "Write me a poem," the Sylph once enquired. When? No matter. Write a poem he shall, can, will. So, he closes his eyes, reimages the scene wherein she appeared: he feels her again, the tender body within his grasp, recounting her nakedness: repeatedly, ecstatically: O, how to speak of such things without fearing the thoughts be misinterpreted by non-romantics. Tis why he stows these thoughts in a shine, with a lock only lovers can break. A secret known to few if any.

Crispy pancakes and agave from the Mexican pulque: he takes a shot of her background, her history, her person. The Monk, self-conscious, not only of others, but of

her too, asks himself a question—how to add a mind to her body? He finds a way: to quote her, in her language, is to give light to a praise to the inner self of the Sylph. Her words:

Mi meta

No logró

meterse en tu camiseta celeste

ni mis deseos

alcanzaron

su destino

final—

No regresaré

Ni por más que me llames

Ni por menos que pudiera

Aunque quisiera

Mimeticémonos de lejos:

como dos más dos

son tres—

Como yo, una señorita

flaquita;

Con tú

sobre mí; Tu tú siendo:

un pelotudo

protagonista—

que sabe nuestros dos pares de brazos

forman

una divinidad hindú

The Monk achieves enough piety through his art that an outside force momentarily grants him the vision to pen down the next lines in one flaming flame:

(Another prose poem…) Forgoing monumental foolishness, he entered her. The Knight in a previous life had been a difficult man to approach, before that evening where his russet eyes met the lowercase Js of the Sylph's hair. Her kimono dragon eyes had vanquished his once regular source of embarrassment, and transferred in its stead a multiplying, multidimensional, ever-evolving sense of self-esteem; oddly in just over the course of a few lunar cycles. Before he knew it, he had within him a collection of lunatics, a bushel of voices telling him he was sexy, sexy. Sexy.

In his third to last thrust, her brain curled up like wilted leaves. Yes she was on her back; yes she lay on a hanging garden of Babylon. (Reminded of Toni Morrison:) And she was both afraid to come, and afraid she wouldn't. But of course she would. And of course she did.

Sometimes things weren't so bad between them.

Most times they finished together.

They got so intimate once, he recalled, that she reminded him of Reading's intimacy, that intimacy of reading (and rereading) the same sentence (over and…): as the Knight

penetrated her and penetrated her, even after they were done, even after everyone in the world—including the two of them—felt dizzy and exhausted.

Before the end of act three, he wanted to thank her. So he opened his mouth. But instead of exhaling words, the Knight inhaled the wind goddess's savory air into his lungs. It was in that moment that the Knight realized how important breath was. Not breath as in breathing—respiración, *prana*—but breath as in the actual taste of what exits one's throat.

The Monk remembers her cooking, her loving him with food, the taste of her breath after unions:

"Andamos a esa velocidad absolutamente vertiginosa donde nos llevamos por delante las cosas más sagradas… la posibilidad del olor del otro, del aliento más cercano."

(Carlos Fraga en la canción titulado "Vivir" por DJ Afro)

Salten mis sartenes,
pónganse de pie,
prepárense la lucha de
aceite, y caliéntense de un buena vez—
Ven, que ahorita marchan
implacable las tortillas
uno tras otro
en ruedas militar
un honor sin pereza

ante la guillotina

francesa—

Y que no se olviden

mis tomates

fruncidos por el horno

y una fragancia complicada

ajos pocos picados

saltados entre quínoa—

Y si picante lo prefiere

tres ajís de tres colores

meto

crocantes serán

cortados en bocaditos

By now the Monk has written so much of the Sylph, written so much of himself as well, that he forgets the exact catalytic words that galvanized his hope to honor her, and as a result, clearer than ever, he only feels the way the wind goddess had made him feel. He tags her image.

Lascivious Sylph.

Pensive Sylph.

Hesitant Sylph.

If only you would appear / let my shine be a beacon / nothing more / a gift

He wishes silently (tonight, now more than ever) to enter her heart again, to through osmosis fill her inner soul. But she is no-where to-be found.

He admits, without resorting to adverbs, that he has run out of adjectives to assign the goddess ("admirable," he had once dared to use; "elusive"?); at first he tries to gift her his own adjective (altivo: confident, with a sliver of arrogance) but he relies on another rip—this time from a Lorca stanza the Slyph in the form of a yogi may have underlined for him in another life:

La quilla de la luna
rompe nubes moradas
y el viejo estío
se llena de un rocío
más que frio
hasta ser otoñado—
Vocalizando este verbo
dentro de lo que nos rodea

(Remember, the Monk tells himself, what Borges wrote in *El amenazado*: "Me duele una mujer en todo el cuerpo." What you are isn't who you are. What you are is what you are: the things you love. Is she part of me forever? I feel her hurting inside. Time to transform.)

3. The Sylph has not yet arrived. At best she is late, the Monk figures. But eventually he bursts into a painful lament that stirs him to wreck the alabaster chapel to smithereens. For a moment there is nothing but ruin. But then, he rebuilds. Wrecks them again. Reconstructs. Cycling between tearing down, then building back up—so much so that thirteen years pass and the Monk ends up building a palace with the alabaster he had started with: A palace with grand doorways, pillars of salt, and seas of lava. In the middle lays an atrium filled with minor spirits, and a fountain of elixir juice with which to nurture the spirits' offspring (near the stump with the sword). Now, the Monk decides, finally, to stop being a Monk. Now, the Monk decides: to become a King.

In this palace, dedicated to the Sylph and to her return, he crowns himself, commander of all but love, feeling only lonely, like a pile of chewed sunflower seeds forgotten.

In the study of his palace, attached to his master chamber, pinched to the far wall, floats his favorite portrait of the Sylph, a framed picture with a title: A Sylph Sketch'd. This rendering is his final ode, accompanied only by an inscription in a national language, though it in no way does her justice.

He reads the title and the inscription out loud with the vague assumption that it might call her to him.

A Sylph Sketch'd

Your sex adorned me in a caparison.

But today you leave me alone

a war horse without his rider—

If I could go back in time, I'd take you to the 16th century

and paint the Pyrenees with you on my back

the empress on my saddle—

Please come back.

A man less modest than the King would have heard these words serve for incantation. The King, however much he commands recitations throughout the forest, knows words sometimes fail to attract. The call is made, but now, what to do?

In the end—his strength from having been a knight, and his piety from having been a monk help—but his greatest virtue becomes patience, the greatest virtue of all kings. If all he has to do is wait, then wait is all he'll do, for her to come back. The next move is hers. Unless there is no going back, no command to come back, no way to return, only the lament, the plea to go or stay.

Like I, his soul, told him so.

Naked Skeleton

"You look like you have seen a ghost, Dalí."

No matter how long Mr. Filobusto has known the world renowned artist, he will called his friend by his last name, even now, after knowing each other for five decades.

Dali turns to his friend, then back to the women on set, without responding, deep in thought, pensive and unsure of where his latest project has gone. It troubles him. Mr. Filobusto, who came to visit the studio per Dalí's request the night before, has known this troubled look a long time.

The two of them had met on one of two possible days, "many seasons ago," as Dalí puts it, before the war and before the love affairs. Ask either gentleman, both would give you roughly the same story of how they met, each with their own embellishments, their own twists and cliff hangers, never mind how the time or place doesn't match up. Mr Filobusto became a short story writer of considerable fame—"On his own," Dalí often adds, "and independent of me, Dali!" But Filobusto, easy to evade his friend's ensnaring ego, would break free of the cuffs with a trained roll of his eyes; a look Dalí in turn grew to recognize. Anyhow, cliffhangers and apostrophes, the general gist of each man's tale always mirrored the other's retelling, the main characters always remained the same, the energy spent over a girl they met at the same time, a woman in fact: *la señorita Villalobos*.

Villalobos is a common enough name—so much in the Spanish speaking world as in other worlds—that most people take it for granted. But for Filobusto and Dalí, both zealots of Roman history and mythology, had a strong affinity toward the image of, say, a werewolf breastfeeding two brothers out to kill one another, an affinity that translated to a

deep fraternal bond between them; despite their friendship, they certainly wanted to flatting the back of the other's cranium with an uneven stone from time to time. For Filobusto, as he tells it, this feeling of wanting to ram a piece of Mother Nature into the back of Dalí, first came to him moments after meeting the painter. For Dalí, as he tells it, reflecting, the feeling of flattening the curve of his colleague's neck came moments after meeting him as well. It occurs to me now, it must be because both disagree on when or where they met that maybe neither has followed through on their jealousy. But I am unsure.

The story, as Filobusto tells it, is thus: the two of them had been introduced at a party in Pamplona during the Running off the Bulls of '05. Dalí on the other hand insists they couldn't have met in Pamplona that year because that year he was on a tour of the bordelais wine country that Seventh of July; that in fact the two friends had met eighteen months later at a mutual friend's book launch in Valencia. Filobusto, on the other hand, fervently denies ever having met Dali in that southern city. "I can't stand the valencianos," Filobusto states on occasion. "They make the worst paella in the peninsula." What both gentlemen can agree on is that the radiant Villalobos made a startling entrance in both stories.

"She had the greatest pair I had ever seen up to that point in my life," Filobusto told me once—pulling out an image of her, a bust, from his wallet—"probably ever, to this day." The señorita's luscious mounds hang from her chest like two slices of quarter moons. As far as the image of Villalobos, from what I've seen, that is, from the wallet photograph, I can certainly attest that his statement is not inaccurate.

"It was the first thing I noticed about her," Filobusto continued, "when she walked up the stairs to the rooftop where we were watching the Run of the Bulls. I and some friends, including Dalí, who I also met that day, were all very accommodating to the señorita. Before

Villalobos could even sit down all of us boys had served her a cold glass of sangria and offered up our seat. I should probably also mention she was remarkably charming and receptive of our gifts and attention. She must have taken the invitation to watch bulls with a group of fifteen year old boys as a waste of time, but she soon realized we could be fun; though something deep down, a voice I don't want to believe, tells me she must have known what would happen to her, a beautiful woman surrounded by frustrated Spanish men. At any rate, I believe her kindness came as a surprise. Especially when she opted for my glass of sangria and drank it on the ledge, even if next to Dalí. That's when I really looked at the bastard, saw his scheming little smile as he nestled next to Villalobos, the new love of my life, watching below the bulls run with his hand nervously and calculatedly creeping closer and closer. I was there, behind them, on my own lawn chair, waiting, watching as the oldest and most confident of us sit next to Villalobos while the rest of us drank the sangria we had poured for her.

"The dry air, enough to chap your lips, raised the dust from the stampede below off the cobbled streets of Pamplona and into the atmosphere, where my unfulfilled desires were met with the back-turned woman of my dreams and that twit, Dalí, that geeky fairy boy and his hand getting closer and closer, but never making it to its target.

"The bulls ran. Glass shattered. No one died that year, I believe. Except me. I died. I died for not making a pass at Villalobos then (how could I?) or ever. And if the everlasting staleness of desire isn't death, then what is? What I mean is, if never realizing your love for another woman, no matter how much older she was, isn't death; or if living with my lips forever on the tip of my tongue, forever left to shrivel forever; if this isn't some sort of death, then what is? I stalked Villalobos party after party for decades like a puppy who had chased

a car into insanity and now couldn't find its way back home. This sole image I have of her is this token I asked Dali for, nearly twenty years after we had all met. I asked him—I hate to admit—after he destroyed my secret wish of meeting Villalobos as an impossible virgin on our impossible marriage bed, by telling me he had run into her at an art gallery and gone home with her. I have my doubts that Dali went through with laying with my heart's deepest desire, but I also admit that I am most likely lying to myself: Dalí, the bastard, would lay with Villalobos; and have the balls to tell me. He knew I loved her, which is why he confessed it to me—without malice, without ego, this I do believe about him, and forgive; and so I asked him to go back to her and bring me a hair brush, a garment, anything that would remind me of her, so that I may burn it to ashes and perform a love-break spell with it, and let her go forever…

"As you can see," Filobusto said, during our brief acquaintance—putting back the bust image into his wallet—"Dalí fulfilled his duty as a friend and brought me this lousy photo of señorita Villalobos. Of course I didn't burn it, and of course I am still in love with her, even today, three years after her death."

As far as what Dalí says about the start of their envious friendship, the story is different, inverse almost, still as ghostly and nebulous, but in another part of Spain, and over the same woman: la señorita Villalobos.

Groznyy / Грозный

(Ivan Murders Ivan)

Repeatedly, my students ask me for the meaning of a word. When I give them the answer out-right, they often nod their heads, and proceed to forget the definition. Instead, what I prefer to do and what helps them remember, is to provide the context of a word through a story. This way they can understand, beyond a dry translation, the essence of a word, especially one bathed in history and emotion. A word, like a name, has value not for its relation to another, but in how and when and why it is used, don't you find? I must be indirect, ultimately, because even if I tried, I could not give to a student what must be discovered on one's own.

For example, here, you encounter a strange sound and ask, "What does грозный mean?" I reply, "A bloody collection of incomprehensible letters; a terrible epithet; a form of formidable; at once the absence and the providence of God." Yet you are unsatisfied, and you repeat the question. Would you believe the story of its meaning were it told to you in plain words?

й й й

The last Rurik Tsar of Russia sat at his desk in his winter estate of Alexandrovsk. He had been staring out an icy window, looking at a frozen landscape, far from civilization. For a moment he had mistaken the waxing gibbous moon for a full one, so bright was it outside. And while he had stared, he had trembled. An open letter on his desk, dated November 1581, lay splattered with blood. Next to it was a letter opener, shimmering in the light, but

with its golden handle also splattered with blood. Next to them both stood an upright icon of Christ.

Ivan Грозный let his hand empty the last drops of crimson onto the desk, palm facing up. The old man had opened his hand while opening the envelope. After reading, after bleeding, simply sitting, there, a feeling of déjà vu overcame him. Ignoring whether or not he had lived this moment before, and distracting himself from the pain in his hand, he resorted to philosophy. Life repeats, or it ends, the Tsar thought. Whereas divine cycles repeat endlessly. He looked out the window again, and again looked at the moon before a single cloud brushed against its incomplete left side. The Tsar leaned back into his chair, and contemplated the frost on the edge of the glass. He compared it to the brown that forms on an apple when bitten and left out in the open. That's what his cut was beginning to do. Christ, the Tsar pondered, contemplating now his desk's icon. That boy never hid his stigmata. What were his last words in Greek, or were they in Aramaic? "Eli eli lama," Ivan Грозный murmured. "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The letter on the desk had come from the King of Polonia. In it, he mocked the Tsar for losing the Baltic Sea, and recounted the twenty-five years of war their frontiers had endured, which had ended in ruin for both, though one had won and the other clearly lost. This wasn't the first letter addressed to the Old Bear from a ruler whose barking signaled nothing but vanity. Taunts rarely follow the victories of a great leader, rather they often come from a ruler who fears the threat of retaliation. Thinking of his grandfather, who taught him this lesson, the Tsar recalled, "Ivan Дедушка did well to break up the Golden Horde."

The heirs of the original Golden Horde, who had occupied Russia for about 300 years, divided the empire after their fall into three separate tartar Khanates. Within two years,

Ivan Грозный had managed to break two of these Khanates, in Kazan and Astrakhan, annex their territory, and grow strong enough to threaten the last remaining one in Crimea. The letters from this last Khanate, addressed to the Tsar, only grew more violent the stronger Russia became. And yet these tartars were the weakest they had ever been. That's what differentiated those dogs from the Old Bear—in contrast to those beasts who divide themselves and quarrel, when the Bear is injured, he recomposes, shuts his mouth, and focuses his attention elsewhere. Hence, his invasions westward, only those diversions lasted longer than they should have. "The Black Sea will be mine," the Tsar slurred. "But what about the Sultan? Invade southward, too? So many years, so many wars. How many throats slit, and why? How many catapults blasted, and why? How many children sent to die, forsaken by their fatherland?" To the Tsar it brought a cold shiver down his spine to think: What has been made for one thing—like throats, catapults, and children—when corrupted, could be made to act against their intention. Then his thoughts drifted to his life's trajectory, as happens with men left alone in their dimly-lit study: "Crowned in 1547, and a fire devastates Moscow. Attack Polonia and Livonia for the Baltic Sea in 1565, and then another fire in my capital. Establish the secret army of 1565, and the boyars revolt. Yet here am I, a Caesar, a Tsar."

"In one successful siege," he pronounced, "of that damned city of Pskov, I shall renew my honor"—but running out of breath, whispered—"though prolong the war."

The Tsar knew there would come a second letter soon—one with the King's conditions for surrender—from the only man he could entrust to courier such important documents: Boris Godunov, an aristocrat, warrior, and recent in-law. "He taught my eldest son to wrestle, and married his daughter to the other one."

The possibility of peace seemed enticing. After half a century of waring with one ruler or another, the Tsar had had enough. The Tsar even considered, seriously that night, to reply to his arch enemy with an acceptance of the offer granted to him a decade earlier to assimilate Polonia into Moscovia diplomatically. All the Tsar would have to do is assume another throne. Why hadn't he done this earlier, before losing best friends and countless generals for nothing?

The word "Why" rung in the old man's head as if it had been said out loud. He rubbed his temples and glanced across his study. There were enough religious candles and icons to supply a small church. He could pray here, he figured, but enjoyed pilgrimages too much. He recalled his first, a 350 mile journey to Kirillo with his beloved first wife, Anastasia Romanovna, and their son Dmitri, who didn't live to see his first birthday. "And before him we lost two baby girls," Ivan mumbled. "We had traveled to the monastery in Kirillo to bless Dmitri. But, on the way, the Шексна River took him when our boat capsized and the nurse dropped him."

When the thought of corrupted things returned, the old man wept. It felt like the small tombstone in his chest, the one he had many times mistaken for a heart, was tumbling down. Heartless, but not guilty, the Tsar believed in the power of divine justice. Surely having paid his debts to God by now, the Tsar could renew his soul in this dark hour and sign a treaty. And if there were crimes of his yet unpunished in the eyes of the Lord, then his son, Ivan Иванович, heir to the throne, would in replacing him wash these sins, and continue diplomatic relations with the exterior. Twenty-seven years he had trained this Tsarevich for just this purpose, and with love. Aside from heir, the boy was living proof of Anastasia's grace, beauty, and good nature.

The Tsar wiped the tears from his cheeks at the thought of his son, his pride. Sure, the old man thought, there is his brother, but that fool is more of a plant, and less of a son. The Tsar, in moments of stress, could always fall back on this idea: that his Tsardom was secured. No matter how many times a plague decimated his men, or barbarians ravaged his women, or a city fire leveled his capital, his time as a ruler, a time which historian were already calling "medieval," would be reinterpreted through the rule of his son. Even if he had been rough with the boy lately, redemption was still possible.

"Plus," the Tsar remarked, in a quiet English, "it can't get any worse," before remembering it can always get worse, as clouds faded from the night sky and let moonlight in.

A knock on the door. A turn of the knob. The eldest son, the Tsarevich, entered.

"Father."

Ivan Иванович closed the door behind him, but not all the way.

The Tsar didn't notice his son's winter wardrobe. Nor did he notice the quivering upper lip. Not even the sabre strapped to the Tsarevich's hip, or the hand ready upon the handle. The only thing he looked at, truly stared right through, was the crisscrossed black hairs between his son's moonlit eyes and furrowed brow.

The son knew this would be his father's reaction, reticence. There was a lot more the son knew, a lot more he had held secret inside his heart. The only way to speak to his father, for example, was to ignore everything else, and to accept the context, this Russian world they ruled. For twenty-seven years, Ivan Иванович lived by Ivan the Father's side, imitating every move his father made. The Tsarveich, from an early age, came to understand the gravity of his position as heir. Unfortunately for the Tsarevich, his strict upbringing never allowed him

to see any possibility of life outside of his singular role. It was as if his entire existence served one purpose—and tonight he would find out exactly what, but not why.

"Father," the son repeated. "We must speak." He took a step in, and gripped his saber. Once its handle entered the silver light of the moon, it shimmered.

Growing up, Ivan Иванович was never out of his father's sight, and as a result they became inseparable. Not so secretly, his father did not want to repeat the same mistake he had made with Dmitri, but overall the relationship was positive. The father would let his son hear his advice, sometimes his thoughts, and the son would give his father a kind of worship no ruler receives from his subjects. Ivan Грозный had given his son everything: robes, horses, an identity, women, life, and the complexes of a young prince soon to vie for power from his implacable father.

The Tsarevich step forward, looked around at the candles. "Do you know," he said, turning to his father, "why I'm here?"

Ivan Иванович lost his mother at age six. He could not picture Anastasia, save with the aid of his imagination, sketching her face from the few portraits of her left. The father, to probably assuage some real pain, had destroyed most of the images of her after her passing, with the effect of depriving his eldest son from any prolonged exposure that might rekindle a memory. Thus, with time, his mother's face slipped from his mind. As a child, as with all good children, he had believed his father when he said it was best to move on. But in adolescence, he blamed his father for depriving him of his mother, because as it turned out the father's harshness had begun much earlier. The father would not allow his son to be alone with his mother even while she was alive.

"…Yelena lost the baby," said the son.

Match making was common among 16th century royalty, but what made it unique for Ivan Иванович was this: he had fallen in love with the daughter of a foreign king, but, because of his father's political wars, his heart would not be satisfied. A year later, Ivan Иванович was betrothed to a princess, and then another, and then a third. The first two matrimonies ended because the women weren't producing offspring. What upset the Tsarevich wasn't that he was childless, or that all three matrimonies were set up by the Tsar, nor that he did not marry his first love. It was the fact that the Tsar had selected these women from the batches of princesses brought to Moscow to replace the deceased Anastasia, for the Tsar himself. The father would pick his favorite, and then give his son the second best. Earlier this year, Ivan Иванович found himself in the third of his loveless marriages organized by his father, paired with a woman named Yelena Sheremeteva. In October she became pregnant. While everyone celebrated the blessing of the Rurik line, Ivan Иванович grit his teeth. A secret about this pregnancy wasted his heart. It rotted the Tsarevich, as he traversed half of Moscovia, one thousand miles, to meet the Tsar in his winter estate. The expanse he had traveled on horse, with soldiers and by caravan, paled in comparison to the two steps he had just taken, and the few left from where he stood to his father's desk. Each beat between the poundings his heart awoke in him that truth so long repressed, along with the one real question he had come to Alexandrovsk to ask.

"Did you hear me?"

Not even a week before tonight, Yelena had received a fist to the womb. The strike had come from the Tsar. It was claimed that she had been dressed too immodestly by religious standards. For Ivan Иванович this was just another tragedy in a heap of tragedies. Why would the Tsar injure a possible grandson? One logical reason would be because of

power, the realization that he would relinquish the scepter so soon. But this was Russia. And there was an illogical reason for the beating as well.

"Answer me!"

The father remained seated, remained silent, remained.

"She won't tell me," the son grumbled, gnawing his back teeth, taking small steps towards his father. "Not even now, with the baby gone. She won't admit what you really did to her."

The father pierced his son with his eyes. If the Tsar had stared at a candle this intensely, his stare would have put out its flame. Ivan Иванович knew that to avoid the gaze, or to look directly into either of those vast taigas for eyes, and not between them, meant to fall into his father's trap.

Rarely did anyone challenge the Tsar in person, and never for this long. The father trembled now with the same chill that had shaken him moments before, alone in his study, bloody letter in hand. With the breaking of the last cloud of the night sky, the letter opener glimmered at the desk, as did the Tsar's eyes.

"Now you know what it feels like," the father said. "To lose a son."

Ivan Иванович halted. One foot rested on the rug that covered the floor between him and his father. The wound of those last four words made the son brim with tears. The Tsar grinned to see this.

"You know as well as I that the baby wasn't mine," the son grumbled.

"What's that, boy?" the father roared. "Speak up!"

"Let me ask you a question," the son said, pounding his chest once, before bringing his palm to the end of his sabre.

The father blinked.

"How does it feel to murder your own son?"

Like God, the father thought, turning to face the icon on his desk. He reached for his scepter, as if to get up. But when he grasped the iron with his hand, he paused to reach also for the letter opener. The gold of the handle felt cold. It no longer glimmered.

"You still have a lot to learn about Tsardom," the father began, "and about the bedroom…" The old man clenched his chair's arms, braced himself to stand. But the son's words kept him seated.

"The church will recognize my divorce," the Tsarevich said. "And then I will remarry." The son spoke to his father, seeing the cut on his father's hand. "I've also arranged with the southern generals to lead an army into Pskov," he said, looking at his father's forehead now. "I'm going to recapture the Baltic."

The father recognized himself in his son, and grinned again. But the more the son spoke, the sooner the grin melted into a grimace.

"You've broken my heart, father, and this nation. God wills me to make right your wrongs."

The word God echoed in the room, as the flames from the candles in the room were extinguished by the draft of a window that just then swung open, shining one final flash of light against the golden-plated icon of Christ on the desk. Ivan Грозный remembered his wish for peace, but gave it up. There was no way. On his desk was also a portrait of Anastasia Romanovna. In darkness she seemed to look down with shame. There was no way.

"You remind me of her," the father whispered, recalling the jealousy he had felt when the mother refused to wean the eldest son.

He jolted into the air, banging the desk with his hip, and knocking the icon face down over the letter. He ignored the pain, and instead focused on the cool grip of the knife in his hand, and the rug's length separating him and his son. Smoke from the candles rose.

Then there came another knock at the door.

It was Boris Godunov, bearing the letter from the Poles. "Your majesty!" he shouted, swinging open the door, too rushed for formalities. Immediately, he sensed the tension in the room, but couldn't piece together the lightless candles, the armed prince, and the blood-crusted hand of his Tsar. Rather, Godunov felt his throat, and his nose, which burned as beads of sweat dropped from his mustache. He had sprinted from the fortress's gate.

"Your majesty, why is your hand bleeding?"

The Tsarevich broke not his concentration between his father's eyes. The Tsar, however, did break, again, and looked over at Godunov.

"If it isn't Boris Godunov," the Tsar spoke. "My beloved in-law."

Godunov let more sweat fall off his mustache.

"Wh-what is going on?"

No one in the room moved.

"A simple conversation," the father said, dropping the knife. "That's over."

A clock inside the study struck its many chimes. Ignoring the sabre at his hip, and with fingers spread open wide, the son lunged at his father as a leopard upon a bear.

The father's face came down over the top of his desk. No sooner did the son grapple with his father, though, did the old man swing an arm around his son. The scuffle led both men over the center of the rug. Red folds and thick tassels, along the rug's patterned perimeter, circled them as they fought.

With the steadiness one practices in dealing with royalty, Boris prepared to approach the two wrestling colossi. Before he did, he was moved to lock the door behind him.

"Let me lead an army into Pskov!" the son shouted at his father's ear, wrapping the Tsar in a choke hold. "Or I'll tell the church!" the Tsarevich shouted. "I'll tell the boyars, I'll tell the people!"

Godunov had no idea what the son meant. He only sensed that the Tsar was not giving in so easily, that is until Godunov heard the first crack of bone. The warrior managed to separate the two men apart when he tackled his Tsarevich, and left the Tsar writhing on the rug. Godunov then latched his powerful hands to the Tsarevich's arms, and with his entire body weight drove the youth back into the corner with the extinguished candles, step by step by step.

"Damn you!" Godunov shouted. "What's this madness, Ivan Иванович? Why?" Godunov spat as he spoke. "Honor your father it says in the book. Let your heart speak words!" He struggled, because the youth was thrusting back with all his might, but fortunately for Godunov, who weighed almost twice as much as the Tsarevich, he could keep pushing. "No one understands violence!"

"Violence is the only thing that animal understands," Ivan Иванович responded. "He's forsaken us all!"

Boris Godunov managed to send the youth far enough back to notice something else, something strange and vacant in the youth's eyes. They were void, save for the light of the waxing moon entering the room.

All things are clearer in retrospect, he would say later. But in that moment, Boris Godunov mistook what was in the Tsarevich's eyes for blind rage. What he should have noticed, instead, was their emptiness, the boy's very fate.

The Tsar pushed himself off the ground without a word. The father glowed with anger. The son noticed this, and glowed fire red too, but could not break free from Godunov's strangle.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, and of his savior, the Tsar popped his scepter into the air and with both hands gripped its lower end. Drunk with wrath, he brought the iron top down on Godunov's back.

He felt the iron strike like a lightning bolt. His hold over the Tsarevich slackened. The son to break free, planted a leg behind Godunov's heel, and with a shove sent him tumbling backwards, ironically, just as Godunov had taught the youth to do years ago.

Boris stuttered a curse as his body hit the floor, and his eyes rolled to follow the Tsarevich's second lunge upon his father.

But the father was prepared this time, having already brought the scepter high above his head for another bolt of lightning. Welded to the top of the scepter was the symbol of his nation, a two-headed eagle. In one fell swoop the eagle met the top of head of the man who could have sat on the throne. The heads shattered, and just like that the Rurik bloodline came to an end.

The rest of the scepter hit the ground, as did the rest of Ivan Иванович.

Moonlight again entered the study, illuminating the father knelt before his son. The son retracted into a grotesque fetal position, twitch by twitch. Blood gushed forth. The father looked down, at his boy, reduced to nothing but an animal in need of another bash to finish

him off. But the father, not out of cruelty, only out of disbelief, held back the second blow. Instead he shoveled his palms under his son's body and lifted him up to his chest. He hadn't held his son like this since before the war, since before the massacres, since before the tartar invasions, or the new torture techniques or the secret police. The son slowly spasmed in his father's arms, letting out cool breath after cool breath.

"My son!" the father cried. "My son! Please speak!"

The son looked up at his father, as if surprised at his wrinkles and beard. In an instant he saw both the leader of the Russian people, and the man who had held him at birth. In a second instant, the son saw the incarnate of pure evil, and the flesh of God. A third instant brought with it realizations and epiphanies, the color purple, the illusion of magenta, blue then red, and a spinning snowflake from the outside world, reminding the boy of a sled he had seen floating the river in Novgorod once before it flowed with the tens of thousands of dead women and children his father had thrown in there. Between each instant, the Tsarevich opened his mouth to speak but only let out drool and wheezes. Now he no longer twitched.

The father turned his cry upwards. "Lord, spare him!" He shook the body. He would have preferred his son's spasms to this now absolutely still body in his arms.

Godunov, who had watched the scene with horror, felt himself paralyzed. Not even the banging on the bolted door distracted him from the two human beings wrapped in one another's blood—for it was the same blood for both men.

The father bellowed, before his eyes fell upon his son, who had just tried to say something.

The son was now attempting to say what he had wanted to say all along, the simple question that had rotted inside. It was ready to come out. The father with a black sleeve

wiped the drivel from his son's lips, cleaned off the tears which could have been either man's, yet had pooled over the cheeks of the younger Ivan.

The son nodded. The father nodded back.

"Speak my son, yes, anything, you can ask me, please, God is with us."

The son swallowed a bit of goo from his mouth, and uttered his last word:

"Почему, папа? Почему?"

The father would never answer that question. And the boy's spirit crossed into purgatory, his body yet nestled in his father's chest. It wouldn't be until four nights later, on the actual night of the full moon, that the son passed away.

The father saw his reflection in those comatose eyes. No matter how hard he held onto his dying son, shook him, pleaded, the Tsar felt nothing but that same raw feeling of being a scared child at the mercy of the boyars, of fear and trembling. Not even the cut in his hand, which was open.

Boris Godunov stood up, grabbed the Tsar's scepter with one hand, and with the other squeezed his lord's shoulder. He asked the old man to stand up with him, to get help. But there existed no salvation for those three men outside of that room. They were damned. The son, because he had been killed on accident. Godunov, because he was made to rule as regent over the fool brother of Ivan, only to become ruler himself to devastating consequences. And of course the Tsar, because… The Tsar sat at the Tsarevich's deathbed, and for four days would not but shake his head and repeat a single word: the only thing left inside of him, the only thing coming out of that grave which marked where his heart had once been, in a whisper less than quiet, yet more regular than an old man's heartbeat:

"Грозный… Грозный… Грозный…"

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Do you see now what that word means? A word with two whys. Bears cannot express pain, for they have no word for pain. Heathens know not God, for they have no word for God. To translate грозный into English is to misunderstand the word. The English doesn't capture the history of that word; but to a Russian, in русский язык, hearing the word feels like drowning. Neither murder nor filicide comes close to defining the events of the evening of November 16th 1581. No word can fill those shoes but the one muttered over a murdered son: грозный.

No one to blame

(By: Julio Cortázar)

The cold always complicates things, in the summer one's so close to the world, so skin on skin, but now at six-thirty his wife awaits at a shop to choose a wedding gift, it's already late and he can tell it's chilly, he's got to wear the blue pullover, whatever goes well with the gray suit, autumn is all about putting on and taking off pullovers, closing yourself in, distancing yourself. Without wanting to he whistles a tango while separating himself from the open window, seeks the pullover in the armoire and starts to put it on in front of the mirror. It's not easy, he could blame the shirt adhering to the wool of the pullover, but it's hard to pass his arm through, inch by inch he advances his hand till he pokes a finger pass the end of the sleeve of blue wool, but in the light of the afternoon the finger has the air of being winkled and tucked in, complete with a black nail at the tip. In one pull he tugs the sleeve of the pullover and he looks at the hand as if it weren't his, but now that it is out of the pullover he sees how that it is his ordinary hand and he lets it fall at the other extreme of his loose arm and it occurs to him that the best thing to do its slip the other arm into the other sleeve to see if it would come out easier that way. It would seem that it is not easy, because the wool of the pullover has just barely stuck to his shirt again, the bad habit of usually staring with the other sleeve makes the operation more difficult, and although he has started to whistle again to distract himself he feels that his hand doesn't advance enough and that without some complementary maneuver he will never manage to reach the exit. Better to do it all at once, crouch the head to fix it to the height of the neck of the pullover at the moment that he sticks his free arm through the other sleeve while straightening it out and pulling

simultaneously with both arms and his neck. In the sudden blue twilight that envelops him it seems absurd to keep whistling, he starts to feel like some sort of heat on his face although part of his head should be outside, but his forehead and the whole of his face remain covered and both hands are not even halfway out his sleeves, no matter how hard he tugs nothing comes out and now it occurs to him to think that most likely he's made a mistake, thinking with the type of ironic anger that comes with starting a task over, and that he's made the dumb mistake of sticking his head through one of the sleeves and a hand through the neck of the pullover. If it were that easy his hand should be able to come out, but though he pulls with all his might he doesn't manage to advance either of his hands, apart from seeming that his head is at the point of making way, since the blue wool squeezes now with an almost irritating force the nose and mouth, suffocates him more than he could have imagined, forcing him to breathe deeply, while the wool begins to wet itself against a mouth, probably the colors will run and stain his face blue. With luck, at that same moment, his right hand peeps out into the air, into the cold of the outside, at least there still is an outside although the other hand remains imprisoned in the sleeve, perhaps it was true that his right hand was in the neck of the pullover, which would explain why he thought something was squeezing his face that way, suffocating him more and more, while the hand came out easily. In any case and to be sure the only thing that he can do is keep making his way out, breathing to the pit of his lungs and letting air escape a little at a time, although, this is absurd, because nothing impedes him from breathing normally, save that the air which he swallows is mixed with the fuzz of the wool of the neck or the sleeve of the pullover, and also it has the taste of a pullover, that blue taste of wool which must be staining his face now that the wetness of his breath mixes more and more with the wool, and although he can't see it, because if he

opened his eyes then his eyelashes would trip painfully against the wool, he is sure that the blue continues to envelope his wet mouth, the holes of his nose, to win over his cheeks, and all that complication fills him with anxiety, and he would like to finish putting on the pullover once and for all without considering that it must be late and his wife must be waiting impatiently at the door of the shop. He tells himself that the only sensible thing to do is to concentrate his attention on his right hand, because that hand, being outside of the pullover, in contact with the cold air of the bedroom, is like a sign that there is little else left to do and can help him out, climbing up his back until grasping the lower edge of the pullover with that classic move that helps one put on any pullover pulling downward energetically. The bad part is that although his hand pats his back looking for the edge of the wool, it would seem that the pullover has stayed completely bunched up close to the neck, and the only thing he discovers with his hand is that the shirt becomes more and more wrinkled and even partly coming out of his pants, and it serves him little to return the hand and to want to pull the front of the pullover down since over his chest he doesn't feel more than his shirt, the pullover must have barely passed his shoulders and will be there rolled up and tense as if his shoulders were too wide for that pullover, or would definitely prove that he has made a mistake and has stuck one hand through the neck and the other through a sleeve, meaning the distance from the neck to one of the sleeves is exactly half the length of the other sleeve to the neck, and that explains why he has his head a bit lopsided to the left, from where his hand remains prisoner in the sleeve, if it's a sleeve, and that his right hand which is now outside moves about with complete freedom in the air although it doesn't manage to bring down the pullover that stays, like, rolled up at the top of his body. Ironically it occurs to him that if there were a chair nearby he might rest and breathe better until putting the whole

pullover on, but he has lost his spatial orientation after having spun around so many times with that kind of euphoric gymnastics that follows the application of an article of clothing and that sort of looks like a dance in disguise, one that no one can reproach for serving a utilitarian purpose rather than a blameworthy tendency to choreography. The fact of the matter is that the real solution would be to take off the pullover that's on which he hasn't been able to wear, and undertake the correct entry of each hand in the correct sleeve, and the head through the neck, but the right hand disorderly continues going and coming as if it were already ridiculous to give up this late in the game, although at some point it even obeys and climbs to the very top of the head and pulls upward without him realizing in time that the pullover has stuck itself to his face so gummy from the humidity of his breath dyed with the blue of the wool, and when the hand pulls upward there's a pain like someone were rending his ears and would like to yank out his eye lashes. So a littler slower, so one can utilize the hand stuck in the left sleeve, that's if it's the sleeve and not the neck, and to do that the right hand must help the left have so as to advance through the sleeve or else retreat and save itself, although it is almost impossible to coordinate the movements of each hand, as if the left hand were a rat stuck in a cage and from outside another rat wanted to help it escape, unless, instead of helping, it were biting, because suddenly his prisoner hand hurts and at the same time the other hand sinks with all its might into what must be the hand that hurts, it hurts so much that he gives up taking off his pullover, he would rather try one last time to pass his head through the neck and let the left rat out of its cage, and he tries by fighting, with all of his body, throwing himself forwards and backwards, spinning in the middle of the room, if he even is in the middle of the room, because now he remembers the window which was left open, and that it is dangerous to spin around blind like that, he prefers

to contain himself although his right hand keeps going and coming without worrying about the pullover, although his left hand hurts him each moment more as if the fingers were being bitten and burned, and nevertheless that hand obeys him, contracting little by little those lacerated fingers, he reaches to grasp by way of the sleeve the border of the pullover rolled at his shoulder, he pulls downward almost without strength, its hurts too much and he would need his right hand to help, instead of climbing down or lowing itself uselessly to his feet, instead of pinching his thigh as it's now doing, scratching him and pinching him through his clothes, unable to stop the hand because all of his will has gone to his left hand, perhaps he has falling to his knees and he feels like hung by his left hand which pulls one more time at the pullover and suddenly there's cold in his eyebrows and on his forehead, in his eyes, absurdly he doesn't want to open those eyes but he knows that they went out, that cold substance, that delicious free air, and he doesn't want to open those eyes and waits a second, two seconds, he allows himself to just live in that cold and unlike time, the time after the pullover, he is kneeling and it is beautiful to be like that, until little by little, gratefully, halfway, he opens his eyes to free them of the blue drool from the inside of the wool, halfway opens his eyes and sees the five black nails suspended, pointing at his eyes, vibrating in the air before jumping against his eyes, and he has the time to lower his eyelids and throw himself back covering with the left hand which is his hand, that is all that remains of him to defend himself while inside his sleeve, so that he can pull upwards the neck of the pullover and the blue drool envelopes one more time his face while he straightens himself to escape somewhere else, to reach at last some place without hands, without pullovers, where there is only a squalling air that envelops him and accompanies him and caresses him and twelve floors.

The moon rises. The dress falls.

Between Arabia and India is Georgia

To His Majesty the King, Shota Rustaveli,

Enclosed you will find the letter entrusted to me for inspection. The seven wanderers of the night sky smile upon you, my lord. This letter is none other than the missing piece of our century's greatest love story: between Avt'handil and T'hinat'hin, matched in passion only by that of their friends, the panther-clad Tariel and the sun-faced one, Nestan-Daredjan. You would recall these lovers were I to mention that they ruled Arabia and India not long ago, with a munificence worthy of He who created the firmament, the one true God.

You are rightly occupied, protecting our northern border from the Cossack invasion, and yet you have sent me, your trusted vizier, this invaluable letter without so much as tearing the seal, or discovering its hidden gift. They are worth your time, I believe.

Until the butchering of our people is stopped, and our enemy toppled, I beseech you, O highest and noblest of kings: save this letter and the gift, pocket them deep within your breast, and never let them go. When the war ends, we must share these lines with our poets, who will in turn share it with our Georgians. To heal from this dreadful war we will need a great tonic. And this, I believe, is it: the love between Avt'handil and T'hinat'hin.

Sincerely,

Your faithful subject,

Ioane Shabash

:::

My light, my moon, T'hinat'hin, my beloved,

Who am I that should praise thee? One needs the myriad tongues of Athenian bards to praise thee fitly. Behold my heart upon the ink, behold mine eyes between the lines. It was for thee that I ventured in search of that knight in the panther skin who so disrupted thy father's health. Thou knowest of my journey past, and thou hast heard from me about this new one yesterday. Yet thou wert unsatisfied with my ramble, I feel, so I am pulled to leave thee with more than just spoken words. Let these written words, then, remain; these are not sweet-nothings whispered; let them mark thee like a nibble on thy earlobe.

The road ahead is long; it is arduous. I must hasten east to end the woe of that panther-clad knight. He is my friend; we are bound by friendship. He was shot in the chest by his own lover, a slayer armed with the long bow of distance, and an arrow of misunderstanding. Only I have his balm, wouldst thou agree? Thou hast given to me more than once that same remedy to a love-wrecked heart.

Thou art queen of all Arabia, and by far its most caring ruler. I have seen the way thou exhaust thy strength and treasury to put bread in the hands of those in need, even against sensible counsel: "Once a beggar, always a beggar," they cried in the forum; thou answered, "Were that true, then to thee I say, 'Once a nag, always a nag'; yet 'tis not the case; but a man who eats today, can work tomorrow; while a man who starves today, might die tomorrow." I have been there to witness thy pardons of the most heinous of criminals. "That evil-doer is not capable of regret!" they shouted in the court. "One who shows no

regret is an evil man," thou conceded. "But one who shows no forgiveness is just as evil. To balance the scale of justice sometimes evil must be met with benevolence." And who opened one hundred new schools in her short regency? Who founded countless more libraries? Who irrigated the northern deserts, and united the barbarous clans? O, though I worship thee, I mean not with this letter to pacify an insecurity, or praise vacantly. Remember: with a sword in my hand, I am thy defender. With a pen, thy poet-lover-scribe. These words I write to stamp thy deeds in history, despite thy blind sorrow, eyeless to fact.

"But without thee in sight," thou hast told me, "then I am as well as blind. Thou art my light, and too my air; when thy breath feels faraway, my lungs care not to breathe."

O my cloud, my rain, O my queen, my everything. I am the walking receipt of thy tenderness. Every breath I take away from thee, no matter how far apart, is made bearable only by the knowledge that our mouths touch the one air under this dome we call world. Deny thyself nevermore my breath; breathe, and I breathe with thee. On light, however, I must agree: On restless nights, my sight's thirst for thy presence leads me nearly to blind myself—the thought being, at least gouged of eyes, my mind might imagine thee better. Yet, will we not reunite erelong? Dost thou not believe in fate? A heart that does not completely mend or completely break at the thought of one's lover is not cursed with true love. Our love, then—deep as it is, cursed as it is, blest as it is—must either fill us with pleasure, or lead us to ruin. And I? I am filled with love for thee. Thy body, thy words, thy wiggle of a finger spin me into delirium. Thy jet-colored eyelashes crack a whip upon my neck, only then feel I so free to be mad. Mad, chained I am, but not destroyed. Hunched, crippled, broken-hearted I am, but not destroyed! What else could that mean, but that my body, and every atom in it, believes we will come together again, some day.

Yet, I must help my friend. I must leave thee lonely, must, O wretched souls we are! I smell thee on the collar of my suit of amour and feel defenseless. Yet, who could stab a heart like mine, filled with… about to burst… knowing… feeling… any day now as I promised, to return, yet only after I have cured my friend, and helped him return to his own lover. Broken hearts must console one another. Thou and I are bound, as he and she are bound, not unlike the orbs in heaven, by a certain kind of love. Though, Tariel and I through another kind, friendship. The difference betwixt these loves is thin, so thin that one needs to understand duty, a third form of love, the way thy father taught it to me in my youth.

At the age of six, I was like a young cypress replanted after a flood, loose roots and cast-about branches in all directions. Hark, those were anchorless years before knowing of thy existence. Shall I write to thee of how I live to tell the tale?

The Fates had sown my name among the luckless ones the winter they allowed the infamous Kadji magician to shapeshift into a lion and enter my bedchamber. The guards entered my room after hearing an uproar: they found my parents mangled to pieces, the magician still in the form of a lion, but with its eyes gouged out and its neck snapped, and my body bathed in hot blood and tears, standing above them. Had my father not first blinded the dark magician, nor my mother protected her only son from the assailant's surprise lunge, I would have never survived. The world over insists to learn how a child, I, wrestled the demon; but, I remember not. I wasn't old enough to write my parents' names, much less wield a sword, less yet to grapple with a dark magic beast.

My nerves had not yet settled, before thy father, Rostevan, king of kings, stole me away—at the tender age of six—from my palace, once the house of my parents' pride,

forthwith the site of their demise. I became thy father's ward. He raised me as a son. By fifteen I could wrestle giants. An armored elephant was no match for me. A hundred spear-armed men could not stop me. This was the training I received, and always in a hard, dutiful love.

It was thy father's affection that trained me, but also kept me from jumping off the western tower from grief; pray the lord has forgiven my obsession with suicide; though my life is as much due to his kindness as it was to his craft: he had servants barricade my chamber's oriel. From my window ledge, I would observe thy father's nation, observe the villagers below. There was also a tower opposite mine, with a mysterious blurred figure behind its own oriel. Unfortunately, grief kept mine eyes ruby-red and nearsighted. Ten years went by. And in those ten years never once did I catch a glimpse of the figure closely, though rumor had told me who it was (thou, princess), while something inside of me grew, a yet unrealized sort of love.

Ten years later, my sixteenth birthday. After supper that evening, thy father asked me to retire with him to his garden. I had one wish back then, etched on every secret piece of parchment, and I hoped that night to ask him for my one wish. Would I?

Thy father's garden looked fairer than all renditions of Eden. The song of nightingales above was sweeter than the call of sirens. There were fountains of jasmine-water for baths. Over the doors hung curtains of silk laced with silver. There was little illumination, I recall. The moon hid its shine on its backside. Thus, the ends of incense sticks glowed as brightly as the stars above, and with as much intensity as Rostevan's eyes.

I sat by his side the way a boy does with his own father. He spoke of inconsequential things, as his palm brushed the air above the sapling aloe plants jutted out

around us. So, I interrupted our conversation, impatient-me, to ask of him one gift, one wish: to allow me to return home. It was not nostalgia for a missed childhood, I explained, but the understanding that my city needed its ruler. He praised my precocity, yet shook his head.

"My sprout, my young Avt'handil: though many years separate you from adulthood, thine eyes today are as wide as the Tigris and Euphrates, the water-bearers of my people. I have no doubt one day thou too shalt support us." Then, inhaling a breath as if his chest were oak, he continued: "I had another honor in mind for thy sixteenth birthday: to knight thee as my army's youngest general."

A general, at sixteen! I knew the honor went far beyond his love for me as a son. I was flattered, and a glimmer of vanity washed over me as a salty wave. But quickly after, I remembered my home, the threat of never returning to my old castle marking the sands of my soul like foam left from a riptide. I felt that if I fought his wars, I might perish before ever visiting my parents' grave, which was all I really wanted at that moment. I fell into a true adolescent angst then and there, just as a light from that opposite tower of mine kindled, though I paid it little heed. My eyes turned downcast.

"Trust thy king," he said, pulling my chin up with his words. "What keeps a man's spirit floating above despair is not the heaviness of sorrow, lo, but the lightness of hope. Cast thine eyes about this garden. Heed its symmetry. Notice that nature has but three modes: wilt, let go, or grow."

With one hand, the king untied a dagger from his hip belt, and handed it to me. He let the handle's embedded gems glimmer in the twilight garden. He continued: "Take this, a token; today marks the tenth anniversary of thy parents' passing. Enough. Beat not thy soul

now, but thy chest. Thou art not at fault for the bitter dish that the Fates serve all men. What will unburden thee is faith and concentration. As our sages profess: 'Focus in a young boy's spirit is like clarity to the diamond.' Therefore, I shall continue to train thee like a son."

I cursed him right there. I cast the priceless gift he had handed me into a nearby fountain, and tried to break away. But his iron grip around my wrist proved tighter than a lion's jaws. So I ducked as children do, and made a ball of myself on the dirt floor of the aloe garden, but Rostevan hurled me into the air. After a swirl, I landed on my feet, dizzy yet obedient, and still in his grasp: as he led me through the exit.

Before leaving the garden, the darkness around us settling again into place, I turned, and stole a proper glance at the kindled light from the opposite tower's oriel. Over my shoulder, I saw thee in thy chamber; a lance pierced my mind and heart; a stone subjected to a hundred floods would not have eroded as I did in that instant. If the king's words had reopened the wound in my heart with truth, the sight of his daughter washed its infection with love. That night onward I would stare up at that hole in the tower as if Polaris itself were shining inside. No one but God knows the number of nights I prayed for the light to rekindle; sometimes it did, sometimes not, though in either case, thou wert hard to see from afar. But who needs eyes? Not I. Knowing was enough. And yet ever since love's lightning strike, I have been burning in eternal flames . . .

. . . Please forgive the tears that blot the letter's ink. Thou canst call them thine, for it seems my body has no need for them anymore . . .

. . . O, thou layest hidden in unharrowed ground! I could not find thee; not in the tower, nor in the castle, not during holidays or before foreign audiences. Only then did I

realize I had never met thee, only heard of thee through rumor. The king did well to hide his most precious treasure. Aye, I wilted like a rose bereft of sun. Although thy father's wisdom soothed the sadness that once ran rampant in my heart, it was not the goal to become the greatest commander-in-chief of his nation that motivated me; it was the hope that one day the love between myself and thy father would one day bring me closer to thee, his pearl at the bottom of the ocean. Inly I knew, I would hold my breath and dive deep into my training, stay in Rostevan's court, or in his barracks, until destiny brought us together. Which they did, the day we found all our joy in gazing at one another, the day thou became ruler of Arabia.

Thou must be wondering, "How hast thee never told me of those days?" Alas, let us believe, there are times when a lover's touch reveals more truth than an Oracle's polished words, but also agree, there are things that can only be painted upon the canvas stretched by a great distance between separated lovers; only far away from thy warmth, and aching for thy embrace, do those isolated nights of my youth return to haunt me in this still hour. Blame the candles around me, curse the smell of wet wood around me too, and blast the tallest minaret: only honesty can pour forth from my hand now. I write to thee from inside a mosque—were my other hand on a Koran, I couldn't pen truer words than these—and I know not if this letter be a letter or a prayer. Either way, I ask that it heal us, and leave my love on thee.

Like a Georgian poet once wrote: "What thou givest away is thine; what thou keepest is lost." Thus I leave two kisses, and the breath between, inside this letter, as well as a gift to match the pearl thou gavest me before we parted. I pray it pleases thee till my return.

მომავალ შეხვედრამდე,

Thy cypress, thy lover, a commander of thousands, but beholden to one,

Avt'handil

FRENCH TOAST

Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott

There once lived a man named Ludwig. He married a woman named Sue. Together they had seven children, a house, a greenhouse, a barn, and a farm. Their life seemed ideal by many standards, especially when compared to the challenges of their youth, and the obstacles they had overcome to be together. Mostly, miscommunication.

Every Sunday, the family gathered for breakfast, their favorite meal. Sue loved to cook pain perdu, with the week's leftover bread, battered eggs, and freshly ground spices, swelling the kitchen with her flavored smoke. The brothers would bring in syrup from the nearby maple trees, and fresh milk from their cows, while the sisters grew cinnamon and nutmeg, and brought sugar from the town market. Ludwig was usually last to sit at the table, spending a minute in his bedroom alone in secret, having cooked the bread the week before, finding it harder and harder to climb down the stairs these days without help. Once seated, the children might ask their father to retell the story of how the parents met. He would look at his wife, and she would lovely stare back at him, giving him permission to voice their painful memories.

The suburbs of Buenos Aires, the 1930s, a catholic boarding school.

Hermano Eberto takes four schoolboys into a classroom during lunch. Usually he takes five or six children at a time, but today he feels ready to whittle the group down to four. Only one of the boys has been brought in to this room before, the other three haven't. They look at Hermano Eberto's red gown as he lines them up before the chalkboard. He takes off his robe and folds it over the desk. Underneath that robe is a yellow robe. Underneath that robe is a green robe. Underneath that is a blue robe and a purple robe.

"Quedense quietos!" he orders, in a voice not unlike the one he uses during normal class.

He fidgets to remove the last robe, and when he does, he is left wearing business casual clothes. His right hand makes a fist, and with his left cracks his knuckles. He glares at the boys with a look of lust. They are about seven to eight years old. He approaches the youngest boy, who is trembling. There is no turning back, he thinks. There is no turning back.

The young boy farts. He is Ludwig.

"Hijo de puta!" says Eberto.

He darts for Ludwig. Poor Ludwig is trembling more than ever. Eberto asks Ludwig if he thinks that what they are doing is normal. Ludwig doesn't respond, not even when his belt is undone. Ludwig looks down at his sex, as does Eberto. The other boys keep their heads down, but sneak glances at their young friend. The oldest in the bunch, the one who has been brought to this room before, finds his teeth clattering. In his pocket is a fistful of sequence and glitter, which earlier that morning he had stolen from arts and crafts class. The older schoolboy reaches in his pocket and drops the sequence and glitter onto the floor. The

many robes also fall to the floor. Eberto peers over at the other boys, but doesn't stop inspecting Ludwig, until it is time to inspect them.

Ludwig's psyche might have been forever affected by the molestation, if it weren't for the following event. The father of the oldest boy in that group shows up for visiting hours.

"Ese es Hermano Eberto?" he asks, for confirmation. The eight year old boy nods his head. Next thing that happens, Eberto has his face completely disfigured by a whirlwind of fists. No charges are brought on either side, and broken Eberto is sent to Rural Patagonia, to work at a printing press.

Central Paris, also in the 1930s, at a train station.

Sue and her mother Mère Michelle hold each other tightly as they look out onto the platform, and wave their loved ones au revoir. Her father and baby brother have decided to wait out the economic depression. Sue asks why they have to leave them behind.

"Écoute moi," snaps Mère Michelle, grabbing hold of Sue by her armpit, sitting her straight on the chair. The mother explains that they are never coming back, don't even pretend like they will ever come back, and your daddy, well, just imagine your daddy acting smart for once in his life, wouldn't he quit everything he thinks he has going for him and follow us to America? Tell me, what's more important, ma chère, love that you have or money that you don't?

The train whistles.

"Mais il ne peut pas!" she wails, waving her handkerchief out the window, reaching for the train platform just outside. "Mais tu ne pouvais pas!" Mère Michelle calls out, to her husband, blowing him kisses with tear-wet hands. The husband waves back, and moans. His wife can hardly catch his words.

"Putain!" he cries, returning her tear-wet kisses with air hugs, running after the train, the baby brother in his hand trailing behind him like a kite. He wishes he could hold the woman he loves just one more time. "Putain, je te deteste!" he yells to her, waving. "Ne prends pas ma fille!" They shout one final au revoir from a distance.

Sue grows up in Brooklyn, a single child of a single mother. Like her mother, Sue picks up a typewriter and learns the trade. When the war starts, Mère Michelle can take on so much more work by putting her daughter to use. For a handful of years there is so much to do in the print copy industry that neither have time for themselves. But whenever they do have a minute, or ten, the mother reads her daughter a bedtime story, or the daughter types one up herself.

It is some fifteen years later, in the Lower East Side of New York City, at a dainty hookah bar, with lots of smoke and flavors, where Ludwig and Sue first meet.

There are enough hot coals to illuminate the dim dive bar, along with its many rugs on the walls and on the floors. The store owner likes to approach his visitors by sucking at their nargila, offering them water, and shattering their empty wine bottles on the floor for theatrical purposes. No one feels intimidated by the owner, mostly because everyone knows the drill here. As the owner goes to pour Ludwig more wine, Ludwig puts his hand on top

of the glass, as one does when refusing another pour. The owner is shocked, but smiles and twiddles his jet black mustache, pouring the wine between Ludwig's fingers anyway. The owner offers himself a hit of Ludwig's lemon orange mint shisha, blowing a heavy cloud into Ludwig's glass. As the owner hums, the smoke swirls, and the two men look inside, even the men and the women at the tables next to them look inside the wine glass. Inside the glass, every patron receives a different vision, each sees his or her individual future, which objectively creates a collective future, theirs. What Ludwig sees in the smoke is the name "Susana."

Out from the corner of the hookah bar, a professional soccer player steps into a spot light and begins performing a juggling routine. The crowd claps to each kick of his foot with the ball. Ludwig isn't impressed. He takes a sip of his wine with the smoke. He sees Sue across the bar. She is wearing a white cassock and a red turban. The crowd continues to cheer the soccer player's performance. Sue finishes her glass of arak, and then exits without seeming to pay.

"Who is she?" asks Ludwig, pulling up his argyle socks.

The owner replies, "Yes," and offers him another bottle of wine, which Ludwig refuses.

Upper West Side, a few years before that night.

Sue walks out of her astronomy class with a hand-written note clutched to her breast. She looks down at the note. It is a phone number. She brings it back to her breast and skips away. The astronomy professor steps out of his lecture hall and smiles at Sue's behind. His

name is Dr Doorknob. He has grown up quite self-conscious of himself. He returns to his desk and opens a desk drawer full of love letters, and puts a flame to each one, one by one. He pockets Sue's latest paper inside his chest pocket: an oversentimental confession of her love for him, a series of poems based on the thirteen moons of Neptune. Meanwhile, Sue carves a circle symbolizing the professor's name, and her name inside of that circle, on a tree right outside the astronomy building; then she carves another circle around her name on another tree, and then another, and then another. She carves their symbol on every tree planted on campus, and when she finishes carving it out on every single tree planted on campus, she starts climbing the trees and carving the symbol on every branch of every tree. Her name is so common, and the circle symbol so obscure, that the university is never able to follow up on this most unusual occurrence, and the two lover's relationship remains a secret well-kept for a long time.

Dr Doorknob takes Sue to the southern tip of New Jersey the following spring break. On the night of the full moon, he takes Sue up to the rooftop of his family's Victorian beach house. After a few cocktails up there, a few laughs, a long conversation about hopes and dreams, Dr Doorknob asks her to stand up. Sue wobbles, but manages to stand up. The astronomy professor gets on one knee, and presents Sue with his dead mother's wedding ring. Sue hyperventilates, and must splash the rest of her cognac on her face to calm down, wetting her silver eyeshadow.

"Let me get you a tissue, my dear," says Dr Doorknob, standing up, but losing his balance up there on the roof, and falling head first to his death. Indigo blood splatters the driveway, and the wood panels of the entrance. By the time Sue reaches the body, vultures have already descended upon it. Aside from the dripping eyeshadow, she is without

expression. She turns around, and opens the front door of the house, turning, creaking it open, and watching from inside the house at the vultures, plus now the raccoons, feasting on the flattened cadaver. Three days pass before neighbors arrive on a Saturday, and call the proper authorities.

That same night of the hookah bar, as Sue steps out, she fixes the red turban on her head.

She ambles, not in any particular direction, but following the brightest lights, until reaching Time Square. Ludwig has followed her. He finds her on 42nd Street, where she has stopped to watch a man in a gorilla suit pour maple syrup down performers' naked legs, while a woman in another gorilla suit throws eggs at the crowd that has gathered around the performance. Officers rap the ends of their clubs against their hands. They are waiting for the performance to end before they break it up.

Ludwig taps Sue's shoulder.

"What is your name?" he asks, in his best English.

"Susana," she replies, not looking at his reaction.

"Why don't we?" he asks.

"Why don't we what?" she replies.

"You know!" replies Ludwig.

"No I don't," responds Sue, looking up at him. "Maybe tell me your name?"

"Ludwig," says Ludwig. "Want to be my girl?"

Sue shakes her head.

"Why not?" says Ludwig.

"Because you don't even know me!" shouts Sue.

"Give me a chance, or tell me why not!"

"I don't want to explain myself," she tells him, strutting off, "least of all right now. I need a man who can read me."

"Let me read you," he tells her, catching up to her.

She nods. He breathes. The two of them continue walking around the bright lights of Times Square, where fancy cars drive in circles, and tourists put on lipstick to kiss sad clowns in kissing booths. Ludwig gets a hint when he notices Sue looking at his lips. He leans in. But Sue places a finger to his lips, then to hers, then wags her finger, pointing to her watch, which reads 11:58 PM. Ludwig puts two fists to his eyes and turns them, as he frowns. Sue puts her hand to her mouth and exhales as if laughing out loud. Ludwig flexes both of his biceps, then rotates his shoulders, letting Sue see his back, as he winks at her. Sue yawns. Ludwig jumps onto a trash bin and extends his arms and gazes at the night sky, then at Sue. She signals for him to step down, but he won't, so she bites her nails, and begins running around in circles around Ludwig and tugging at her cassock.

A puddle of bums exchanging poems for Benzedrine catch sight of the wild couple. The youngest of the bunch, with angel hair, stares wide-eyed at the dance between the two young lovers. He adjusts his wiry glasses, and wakes up his drunken sunken beat up friends.

"A miracle is happening, a miracle is happening!" he shouts. "Lo and Behold!"

They all chant. "Behold, behold!"

"Let us play our role!" cries the one with pens in his chest pocket. He grabs the flask from a friend's hand, and he stands up, putting the flask to his mouth as if it were a microphone, saying: "Tonight we are not a choir for tragedy, but a symphony of comedy!"

They gather around Ludwig and Sue, and continue chanting. "Marry her, marry him, when you two surrender, you both win!"

Sue and Ludwig do not break their vow of silence. Ludwig leaps off the trash bin and lands on one knee, before Sue. Sue blushes. She shakes her head. The choir angels gasp. The city lights burn their faces, and makes not blinking really, really hard. Ludwig extends his left hand towards Sue, while placing his right hand over his heart. A single tear falls down his face. The choir looks at Sue. Sue brings a tissue to her face, and then takes off her red turban, releasing a half-starved moth inside, and letting her nutmeg-colored hair unfurl to her shoulders. From inside the turban, Sue draws out a rusty metal doorknob. The choir faints, they understand. Ludwig doesn't.

"I could never love another," she says, explaining it to him.

Ludwig, unable to break the vow of silence, clutches the spot where his heart seems to have stopped, and crashes backwards onto the pavement. A Doberman comes and urinates on Ludwig. Then a Chihuahua does the same. There happens to be a pet shop open this time of night, and so many dogs come up and do the same on poor Ludwig.

"Phooey!" says the choirman with the flask, killing it, and then throwing it down, and kicking it hard. "I told you, you damned fools, there ain't no such thing as magic in this rotten, rotten world!" And that is how the Beat Generation became disillusioned, and began roaming America in search of answers to life's eternal mysteries.

Sue might have rejected Ludwig's first marriage proposal at Times Square, but that doesn't stop Ludwig. He is convinced that they are meant to be, having seen her name in the smoke.

Ludwig gets a job as a construction manager, getting paid adult money, but that doesn't convince Sue to take him. Ludwig starts working out, chisels his body into a Holy Roman statue. But still that does not convince Sue. Ludwig starts working at a homeless shelter, funds charities, and even replants trees the following arbor day, but none of this changes Sue's heart, in fact it kind of irritates her.

"You only do nice things to impress me!" she snaps at him, slamming the door of her office in his face, and stomping back to her desk, where her typewriter collects dust, and her accounting papers shuffle for her attention.

"Good riddance," muffle her papers. "Now you can get back to work."

"Always work," moans Sue. "Endless work." She massages last quarter's numbers to her employer's benefit, feeling bad about it, but making herself too distracted to care.

"He loves you," says the typewriter, off to the side, clicking letters against the yellowed scrap of paper rolled within. "He loves you, and you love him."

"Arrête!" screams Sue, folding her arms over her desk. "Please leave me alone…I must be mad . . ."

Her coworkers peep in, and shake their heads, until the boss fans them away.

"The magazine won't print itself," she orders. "Get back to work."

Ludwig meanwhile feels utterly destroyed, and decides to end it all, saying, "I will go to Europe, and find some other Susana—there must be millions—or I will die trying!" He jumps into the Atlantic Ocean and swims east for three days. On the third day however Ludwig loses consciousness, and drops to the bottom. There is only darkness.

"Son," calls a voice. "My son, awaken."

Ludwig comes to. "Go away, dad."

His trident shimmers in one hand, while a whelk shimmers in the other. He blows into the whelk, causing an underwater maelstrom that enrages the gods, but at least gets Ludwig's attention.

"My dear Ludwig, I am sorry."

"Let me die, dad."

"My son," bellows the messenger of the sea, "wake up and fulfill your destiny!"

"My destiny is to die, dad, we all can't be gods like you."

"I'm sorry," says the deity. "I'm sorry." He hoists Ludwig up with his trident. "I'm sorry I slept with a gentle penguin. I'm sorry you grew up mortal like her."

"Stop blaming mom for everything!"

The underwater god covers his face with the whelk and trident, reminded of how he had once said the same thing to his father, the god of the sea, Odysseus's tormentor.

"You're right, my little Lucho. What I mean is I'm sorry for sending you away to that boarding school, for not being around more… but, you know, my work as a messenger, I had to travel a lot…"

"There you go again, passing the blame."

"I said sorry, what more can I do?"

The two of them fold their arms. The two of them look at each other, but quickly turn away. Only the sea god turns back around, and puts his hand on Ludwig's shoulder.

"I heard about Sue."

"She's as good as dead."

"No, my son, she isn't dead. She's hurt. And you're not dead either, not yet. As long as you are alive, you can live for what you believe in."

The boy turns around, almost in tears. He wipes his eyes, then laughs because he remembers you can't cry underwater.

They hug. The father hands his son a precious family heirloom, a poem written on a clod of clay, by a poet from Saint Lucia, about finding love after love. The father tells his son that this poem is one of the many keys to happiness, but that for it to work it must be read out loud in front of a mirror.

"And one more thing," says the father, with a grin.

"Anything," replies Ludwig.

He swims even farther down, past the Titanic, past Atlantis, to the very depths of the ocean, where he finds the Bar of Love. His father's voice echoes in his head as he swims towards it: "The Bar of Love is set too low for you mortals. You must go down and raise it!"

Ludwig grips the rusty metal Bar with animal strength. He lifts it over his head with superhuman strength. Ludwig launches up, and raises the Bar so high that the sky turns pink for a day.

Even Sue notices. She goes to her typewriter. She starts typing again. Suddenly a rock taps her office window. Then another. She looks out. It's him, soggy, but smiling.

❁❁❁

The youngest son, Derek, was always late to the breakfast table.

He liked to be the first one to wake up, but he would dart straight for the TV and watch cartoons. Both Tom and Jerry have dates coming over, and they are soon to open the door for their date, when suddenly the TV turned off.

"Breakfast is ready," snapped Derek's older sister, Siggy.

"What will they eat?" asked Derek, mind still on the cartoon.

"Mom wants you at the table," said Siggy, pinching her brother's ear and dragging him with her. "C'mon."

Derek let himself be dragged all the way to the table, where he plopped down next to his father.

Ludwig pet the little boy's head. The little boy looked up at his father and saw that Ludwig's eyes were blood shot.

"Our little secret, ok?" said the father, a year before, when little Derek had walked in on him rolling a piece a paper with a bunch of sticky icky one cool Sunday morning. "Cuando seas grande como yo," he said, "te comparto uno."

Derek felt special being the youngest boy, but extra special knowing he shared a secret with his dad. They winked to one another.

There was always a mountain of French toast at these Sunday breakfasts, sliced fruits, globs of syrup, clanking of forks, kicking shins under the table.

Siggy, when she finished eating all but one bite of her food, put her elbows by her plate and rested her head on her hands.

"Papa," she said. "Tell us the story of how you and Mama met."

The siblings cheered. Ludwig looked at his wife. She raised an eyebrow.

"You want to hear that old story again?" asked the father. "Why don't I tell you the story about your names, or about the time I wrestled the golden alligator, or the time aliens visited our farm and I had to negotiate for your mother's ransom?"

"No!" the children shouted. "Those are fairytales. We want the real love story."

The father smiled. Derek smiled. Sue smiled. Siggy repeated her request.

"Fine," said Ludwig. "But only if you can tell me what French toast is called in French."

"I know, I know!" shouted Derek. "Paine perdu."

"Nah-uh," snapped Siggy. "You don't say 'paine.' It's pronounced 'pan,' like Peter Pan! On l'appelle pain perdu, dummy Dee."

"Don't call your brother names," Sue cut in to say. "And finish your pain perdu!"

"Sorry," whispered Siggy, not sorry, chewing her last bite.

"Ah, French toast, so many ingredients coming together to make what's old taste new again," pattered ole Ludwig, leaning back into his chair at the head of the table, exchanging another loving glance with Sue seated at the other end of the table, clearing his throat with a few sweet coughs, before recounting their story, somewhere not quite at the beginning.

"It was at a dainty hookah bar," he said, "with lots of smoke and flavors."

Afar

(By: Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos)

Once I wanted to go very far

And I got so far

That later I didn't know how to come back.

Of course I didn't remember the way

I had come.

And to make it so far is great,

Because afar

Everything is lighter,

People work,

The birds . . .

Well, the birds are the same

As in any place.

And when the sun sets,

Far mixes from afar . . .

De la lengua paterna

(By: Val Vinokur)

No tentar las lenguas paternas.
Sus raíces son flacas y hondas.

Justo cuando se piensa que las viejas palabras
se han olvidado de vos, entonces
los álamos de verano estallan y terminás
alquitranado y emplumado en una nieve
de conjugaciones farfulladas.

Genitivo, genitivo, ¿quién posee a quién?
Estamos a finales de junio en Petersburgo,
No hay noche en dónde esconderse.

En todo caso vivés bajo el nombre del padre,
como la anguila disparando de su piedra a manos curiosas.

Y ahora has regresado,
rápido, abrí la boca bien que
las papas palabras siguen calientes. A repetir conmigo:

Preposición aceptada, todo retiro,
Petersburgo, no quiero nacer,
todavía.

Wajdan

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing

there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Jalal Al-Din Rumi

A shimmer of breath, a stillness of light.

Dawn penetrated a bedroom window through the ripples of its carmine curtains to illuminate the particles above Kabir. He shivered under a meager, low-thread count bedsheet, shoulder blades under its dome. Breathing shallow breaths, and delaying his alarm, Kabir realized how important good bedsheets were, but accepted the fact that he could not have them yet. First he had to settle into his new apartment. Why? The "why" fell to the wayside, as much falls to the wayside, especially when hesitating. What mattered most to Kabir lay beyond the low-thread count sheets, past the delay, outside of the bedroom, and in the kitchen, so he could prepare the magic dish, a dessert for that evening's date.

Kabir began the evening dinner's preparations a ninety-degree turn of the long-hand from when he woke up. He had fantasized about the rendezvous all week, since the last quarter moon, the first day of the fall equinox. An affinity for the astrological has always loomed over Kabir. The fact that the planets were orbiting where they were, when they were—as the objects in Kabir's life were orbiting where they were, when they were, in parallel succession—was enough to prove that everything happened for a reason and that there were no such thing as coincidence. The same day he had set the date, he had moved into his new

apartment: both a week ago. Kabir now hoped the celestial orbs inside his plexus would again align with his coveted yet unrealized dream. To be with her. The date. The Dancer.

"Dinner at my place," he had said.

"Yes," she had replied.

An inopportune aside, of moon, hoona.

Raqs sharqi means "eastern dance" in Arabic, and counts on the passionate twitches of a dancer's body movements to irradiate heat like the jabs of a flickering flame; though under the right inspiration the dance can also unwind before the viewer as a continuous fluid, a stream. The curves of a dancer's body are multiplied when the right elements of the dance come together. The music, location, and audience; the last one, key, because when the relationship between dancer and spectator haps unbroken, it reiterates, multiplying the number of curves. The dancer's articulation of hips, her isolation of torso muscles, her twisting wrists, hypnotize its spectator through cyclical motion, loops forming between limbs that are themselves looping to form concentric circles of pure eroticism; which, like Eros, is best under the light of a full moon. Overwhelming to the eye, and allusive to intellect, words or thoughts may fail to capture the dancer. A block of unbroken text, when compared to the human body, compares unsexy. Meanwhile, under a raqs sharqi spell, the eye is seduced into hypnosis by the dancer's flesh and scent. From her dance flowing with focus, comes the eye's concentration. The viewer does not only see breasts, cheeks, inner thighs, but their unity; a unity cooked by the dancer's auto-hypnosis. The more in tuned she is, the more in tune the spectator becomes. And the cycle continues, staccato, legato, and in between, with shimmies,

shakes and shivers. Why do we watch? Why does she dance? These questions are irrelevant to the hypnotized. They only disenchant.

So long as the raqs sharqi lingers in its centrifuge of gaze and body, spectator and dancer, the nature of its movements will elude even the most articulate poet.

Yet, as to be revealed, a carved sketch may in the end unite sacerdotal Man and virtuous Woman.

The flickering fall.

It was at the park, exactly one week before that carmine morning, where Kabir met the Dancer. She donned not a traditional belly dancing dress—the weather too cold and gray for that—but the clothes of the city's commoners. What she did not reveal beneath her clothes, as she danced, was left to the imagination. It warmed Kabir's belly like haram to behold just her glistening earrings. They were fish hooks. And Kabir had taken the bait. He knew it. The Dancer's hips seemed at once dislocated from her body, yet orbiting her center of gravity, unscrewing her privates, stirring her inner challis. Her hidden petals, smooth as her wrists, shook so much that Kabir forgot he had been sitting on a bench for thirty minutes, dislocating himself from the park, as well as the neighborhood he had moved to recently, dislocating himself even from the city, if only for a moment to fall in, fall out, focus and refocus on the raqs sharki. The moment fell short of the sublime for Kabir, though, who, having known many a dancer in his life, began to notice this particular Dancer's narrow repertoire, her few moves; similarly, the strumming oud player to her left, who strummed the same four or five chords, who had known the Dancer his whole life, and yet could not

pick at the strings the way an experienced player could. Kabir wondered if a more experienced player would have freed the Dancer to find other articulations, other shakes, other shimmies that might complement her body. She was too young, hadn't learned the tricks, though it was clear she had spent a handful of years repeating those few she had mastered. The riqq player, on her other side, didn't add much to the spectacle either, only a procession of percussion jingles and a voice that spoke a mix of English, Arabic and Spanish, and accompanied his own black stone stare upon the Dancer. One glance at the riqq player's meteoric eyes would bounce Kabir's gaze back to the Dancer. Her exhales, visible and warm, tingled through the breath of noon light air. A slight smile with some uneven teeth, white and gold, pivoted as she sloped her head side to side. Then she closed her eyes. Bent backwards and shook her knotted braids in waves, pulled her torso back up, and spun a full circle with her body. As she did, her shoulders rotated in opposite directions, while her hips, first clockwise, then counterclockwise, screwed and unscrewed once more her flower's petals, the honeyed jewel inside her challis. Her body was the third instrument. It was a glass harp filled with water and arak. Would he clink her with his nails, or only run his fingertips? Kabir wished now more than ever to perform with her, the Dancer. She opened her eyes, they blazed green, and with a smile the raqs sharqi ended.

In exchange, Kabir pulled his hands out of his leather jacket pockets and dropped a business card into the oud traveling-case, along with a rolled, crisp Jackson, to which the Dancer closed her eyes and bowed deeply before Kabir.

"Thank you," she said.

"Please," Kabir responded. "Thank you." And he asked for her name.

A depth inside out, a night to be called.

The two agreed to meet again at the same park the next day. Then and there they walked. For Kabir, too many orbits were lining up. Soon there'd be an alignment. First, he moved in. Then, he met her. He reminded her of home, while she showed him the neighborhood. Her name meant Love in one language, Consciousness in another. This, to Kabir, was the ultimate proof fate had drawn him a favorable card. It was time to flip it.

"Yes," was the Dancer's reply. "But could you prepare a roz bhaleeb? It is my favorite dish, and it has been ages since last I had it. Were it a family recipe, I would like it even more."

"I have one," Kabir replied. "It is my favorite dish too."

Former sopor turned inhalation peppers tarot on the floor.

Roz bhaleeb is rice with milk. Not the most complicated dish, yet it requires time and attention. Between washing the rice, boiling the water, simmering the milk, cooking the rice, and mixing it together, Kabir had his morning not just carmine, but booked. An hour into his preparations, slowly adding the cooked rice to the simmered milk, and stirring a wooden spoon gently through the mixture so as to not crumble a single grain of rice (as his mother had shown him), he covered the pot halfway and waited by the stove. Every five minutes, for another hour and a half, he stirred the pot's contents, preventing them from sticking, a process which made Kabir's mouth water. It was during the final hour, when the mixture reached the desired thickness, that one hand unloaded a half-cup of cane-sugar into the pot,

while the other hand reached for the drawer overhead with Kabir's secret ingredient, a vial of imported rose water. As he brought it down, he saw it was empty.

The fragrance that rose.

Only one deli uptown sold the vials Kabir needed. Its liquid contained culinary powers as magical as the 13th century. It turned milk and rice into heaven on earth. There is no use explaining rose water in roz bhaleeb, dancing erotically, or eye contact with words. It is like trying to talk with your mouth full. The best way to communicate the idea is, then, to cook it and serve.

The subway ride uptown allowed Kabir's mind to wander, while his dessert chilled in the fridge. The candles stood wick erect throughout his apartment and awaited his command; the incense sticks cuddled together in trays and awaited his flame; and two bottles of wine kissed behind a bottle of corked tap water awaiting the twist of his hands. All Kabir had to do upon his return was hit the play button on his stereo, set the table with a bountiful centerpiece—a cornucopia full of fruits—and dinner would cook itself. What concerned Kabir more than the main course was adding that finishing touch to the dessert. Not even the uptown Yemeni deli owners, with their talk of politics, broke his excitement. To exit the deli quicker, he pretended not to speak Arabic well. He said it had been too long. They let him go after he bought some sugar. Shukraan, shukraan. Ma'a as-salamah.

An opportune aside, of sun, hana'alik.

Damascus, one score and ten years before. A memory now dressed in a dream: Kabir was walking along the top of the concrete fence that separated his parents' backyard and the backyard of his neighbors—"the childless neighbors," as Kabir's father often put it. Step by step, the sun above him baked the slabs of the concrete fence, as Kabir touched each one with his bare soles. He was sweating, too, but not because of the sun, but because of the sensation from the naked concrete; a sensation he would not again feel for a long time. Suddenly, on one of the many yellow patches of dry grass dotting the neighbor's lawn, Kabir spotted an ant pile. It was one small jump away from where Kabir had halted along the wall. He stared at the ant pile, questioned it, and recalled a recent dinner in which his father complained about the neighbors, about how they had brought more than just mat'eh from their recent vacation to northern Argentina. They had imported fire ants. And now the whole block had to buy a special kind of venom, which of course, the childless neighbors did not compensate. Kabir thought about this, and figured he would do his part to help. He couldn't buy poison for his neighbors, but he could still help. He could destroy the ant pile himself. So he jumped into the air, and planted his bare feet over the mound with a crash that splattered brown crumbs and red ants in three-hundred-and-sixty directions. Kabir was amazed by the veins of his feet reflected in the veins of the invaders' underground dome. It was in that moment that Kabir realized something: for the ant's home to exist it had to destroy another's.

And now Kabir had destroyed theirs. He screamed in pain.

That afternoon, Kabir's mother—the lush fibers of her dress sleeves draped around Kabir's trembling body—listened to the doctor as he explained the situation.

"Had the ants crawled a mere sixteen centimeters higher," he said, "Kabir's genitals would not have survived the allergic reaction. They would have been destroyed."

It set here, there, and everywhere.

Kabir pulled out the roz bhaleeb from its refrigerated repose and sampled a waft of its simple aromas. Simple, yet elegant, he thought, white and creamy and viscus; in need of one final ingredient, one last touch: the rose water. The vial streamed liquid in squirts. Between pours, Kabir stuck a finger into the center of the pool of rose water that had yet to seep to the bottom of the pot—putting the liquid to his lips so as to taste its purity, all while the dormant hues of his apartment awoke. Blue became azure, wood became mahogany, and bedroom became chamber. His dessert was complete, the candles were lit, the table set, the cornucopia full of fruits.

Kabir saw the way the candle light danced, and remembered her moves. He rearranged the fruits and thought of her body. He put dinner back in the oven and likened the clock's digits to her eyes. But there was no knock at the door. How long before she arrives? The planets move slowly sometimes. Did she lose his address, her appetite, her way? No knock, nor answer. Perhaps she remembered, as one tends to while walking, a forgotten purse, or her perfume. An old lover, an old fight, an oath to never again make new memories with men. Or perhaps she ran into that one ex, had dinner with him instead. Or she looked at a mirror and questioned her contours and figured, simply, no one deserves this but me. Perhaps, once out the door, she ran away from the city, which dominates its people, and took to the road, its horizontal concrete. Or maybe she was as dead as her phone.

Kabir worried and waited. Oh, he hoped she hadn't died. Surely she would show up when all the elements align. And that's when he realized there was one last key left to turn.

Back to his desert, through the clarity of rose water, Kabir saw the roz bhaleeb's final ingredient was not its final touch. That there was one last addition, one that would climax the dish past the ceiling of the mundane, to a holy zenith as far as the indescribable dance that had enflamed Kabir.

Freshly picked, Kabir reached into his cornucopia for its single orange, and peeled off a gash of its skin in one dashing motion. He bit his teeth into the fleshy wedges of the exposed citrus. Then, as he chewed, with his finest blade in hand, Kabir carved upon that peel the name of the woman that had stalked his every thought for the last quarter of a moon's cycle, the Love, the Consciousness, the name of the Dancer:

وجدان

She did not come hither or thither; O where was the field, again?

Rearranging the evening with what suited her absence, Kabir blew out all but one candle. He drank the wine by himself, shattered a glass in the sink, and gobbled the rice pudding—in it no magic, as it doesn't exist—straight from the pot with the spoon he had used to prepare it. He tuned his stereo to play country dirges. He sat outside on his fire escape and told himself it wasn't meant to be, his one night of joy, eclipsed reality. He sighed. He tried also to forgive the Dancer's forgetfulness. But he couldn't. "Why?" doesn't matter. There were so many reasons piled up during his lifetime that this latest woman could pick any of the

ones her sisters had used before as excuse for her absence. Not so suddenly, as loneliness loomed from the dissipating cloud of uncertainty, an image not so vague of those feelings appeared—one that had haunted Kabir since his exodus to the City of Dreams from the Sublime Porte, where his first love had shunned him the same, before this series of second loves ignored him one by one. The first absence weighed on him more than all the others combined. Kabir knew he would eventually let go of this latest second love, unlike the first, which he knew he couldn't let go. He has carried that etching on the heel of his foot ever since.

Before the final exhale that would extinguish the last candle's light, he took up a pen and jotted some lines.

A love come easy runs away, a love once rooted will stay.

Moonlight and fireworks: songbirds in love.

Lunas и Moons
(Un Voyage Fantastique)

●

To be in any form, what is that?
If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous shell
were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can
stand.

Walt Whitman

Dr Juan Saudade dreamed of writing a book on the moon, on the moon. He yearned for the orb like a lover does for someone that is always moving, always away. Until recently, those who knew him best considered him a bit of a lunatic. To himself, though, he was a romantic, not hopeless, but gray-whiskered and rough: pulled by the gravity of his desire, never deterred. With a lost look, he turned to the porthole of his space pod, and saw the sun hung

in the horizon, and the backside of a new moon burning with luminescence. The professor of philosophy was struck by the coolness of the quartz glass on his fingertips, and the pentagon of condensation it left when he pulled back his hand. If he wanted to write, he would have to start now.

In less than an hour he would land, the first writer sent to the LUNE colony. "The Farm," he nicknamed it. He had forgotten what L-U-N-E stood for, something complicated. "Lunar Umbra Novel Experiment," he imagined, struggling to recall the actual name, having heard it during his brief sixteen months ago—or was it eighteen?—at the start of his space training. "Just give me the contract," Dr Saudade had told the engineers. They were warning him of the dangers of space travel, reminding him of the reported hallucinations due to a strange cloud of alien dust that had begun orbiting the moon.

"Will the shell of the space pod protect me?"

The engineers looked to one another. "Of course."

"And it's fully automatic, this pod?"

"Just don't press any buttons," they joked.

"But, again, this dust, aren't the particles the size of neutrinos?"

The youngest engineer replied, "Smaller, actually."

"But then, gravitationally speaking, how does the dust orbit the moon?"

"You haven't read the reports?"

"It's invisible, except when stirred, like iridescent plankton," the newspapers read. "No long-term side effects according to research, but it may cause a tinge of momentary psychosis in some… visual or verbal thought bubbles about outer space…"

The professor lost his patience with the sensationalist reporters, and with the engineers in starched, tucked-in shirts. What's the worst that could happen? He figured the program's officials, pressed by rumor, were cautioning him only as a means of avoiding legal trouble. A few of the professor's acquaintances, who had gone up recently, claimed they don't experience any hallucinations. The only magic gas cloud Juan could imagine came from their mouths on the other of the line, talking about how "Tranquil life is up here," on the moon, "by the Bay."

"LUNE was constructed on the dark side of the moon," they explained. "Not that it's always dark here, just 28 days in a row." The "Farm"—the first ever extraterrestrial settlement—should be on the side of the moon that never faces the earth, "so as to not distract our brothers and sisters on earth, looking up at the night sky. In all honesty, Dr Saudade, our primary mission is to…"

The professor didn't care too much about what the space program wanted. For Saudade the mission up meant something else. He was going because of his dream, writing a novel on the moon. The solitude, the vacuum of space, the earthrises especially (on those journeys to the bright side of the moon), gave him the hope he needed to write something creative again.

He hadn't written a novel in three decades, almost; it felt like that anyway. His first book, written quickly and in bursts, was based on the sun. Saudade didn't even want to hear the name of his first book ever mentioned to him. That novel might have won awards, earned him seats on the shows he had seen growing up, guaranteed him a full-time faculty position in his hometown's university; but such popularity, in his late twenties, served more to stifle any subsequent, and much demanded, creativity. The success had closed him in, locked him

inside a callous shell. He couldn't put pen to paper after that, not without the fear of failure clamoring at him.

"The sun novel," they called his debut. Mainstream media's initial praise quickly curdled, fast to hype up a star, later wait for it to implode on "socialite media." Book critics, the literati, were just as harsh as the pop world, eager to join the bigger online conversation. His professorship did allow him the necessary space and time to continue producing philosophical writings and recordings, but not a single novel to add to the fiction shelves of bookstores. Few had understood his first and only creative work, inspired by *The Dharma Bums*, about a semi-autobiographical trip with his best friend, a photographer on the verge of international fame.

The photographer character, Samuel D. Atori, on the eve of a groundbreaking exhibition, disappears with his roommate, a self-proclaimed poet-philosopher, to Southeast Asia. The two friends explore beaches and jungles in search of answers to life's questions, things that the two young men grapple with through photography and writing. Among nature sites, banding with other bards and backpackers, they explore temples, monasteries, churches, and mosques. When reality forces them to return home, they decide to chronicle the last weeks of their yatra, utilizing their respective arts to merge all the lessons from their journey. The press's epithet for the book came from its central leitmotif, the sun. It had something to do with creativity being both kinetic and potential energy, something Saudade hadn't captured in the story (why he wasn't proud of the work), though the nickname stuck. His publisher printed it, without permission, on the cover of subsequent editions.

No one understood how young Samuel could have staged, much less mashed, the various religious scenes from the Torah, Bible, and Koran. Much less garnered acclaim for

them in any realistic sense. *"He's too young,"* they had written. The professor muttered the words he had read long ago. *"From the onset, it is made clear that Mr Saudade has no sense of fine art photography; the early chapters that deviate from the main, almost mediocre, travel narrative feel more like a mix between Wikipedia and wish-fulfillment, than proper location scouting, or set design. As one reads the novel, it also becomes apparent this adjunct professor of philosophy has no sense of realism, or science-fiction, not to say fiction in general. Devotees of Saudade, familiar with his philosophical works, will reach the end of his 'sun novel' and finally grasp the existential emptiness that they had so long read about."*

They're jealous, Juan thought, repeating his father's reassuring words. They're all jealous. (She likes it, though, and that's all that matters now: Filomena, his daffodil.)

The debate over Dr Juan Saudade's creative endeavor centered around three camps: 1, those who praised the book for its unique brand of autofiction, calling it the first truly *"Multilingual Pop Novel"*; 2, those who loathed it, because (according to its author) they never read it; and 3, those who tended to repeat themselves at cocktail parties with the phrase: "I've only read his essays."

If the detractors hadn't blocked Dr Saudade's creativity, then it had been the remarks that hit close to home. Were they criticizing his principal character, or were they attacking the writer himself? *"He's too young."*

Now, he is not too young. Now, headed to LUNE, he could start over. Reunited with his loved one—who awaited him, who flew to the moon two weeks before him—nothing would pull them away from their new home; he just had to get out of that cramped, dank—

The Weimaraner sharing the pod with Juan woke up from a nap. Yawning, hungry, and old, he looked up at his master with amber eyes, and grumbled. The dog was strapped

to the passenger seat like a person, with his hind legs on the seat, and his front paws upright over his elbows, dangling over the strap.

"You hungee, Argos?"

"Grr."

"I know, boy, me too."

Juan looked at his Speedmaster, and its long hand that marked the minute, a graduation gift from his father.

"They'll radio us soon," the professor told his dog.

The dog barked. His amber eyes glimmered.

"Ok, ok, let me grab you a snack," Juan said, reaching for a treat in the overhead compartment. Out, slowly, drifted an open box of cherries, a half-eaten bar of chocolate, candy wrappers, and loose leaf paper. "They'll clog the instruments," said Juan, as he picked one floating cherry at a time and placed them back into their clear plastic box. Meanwhile, the dog forced himself out of his unnatural seated position. Juan had sat him like that before their last nap, as a joke. Eventually Argos wiggled free from the belt strap and pushed himself off the seat. The pod was about half the size of the one-bedroom apartment Juan had rented during graduate school. Inside of that pod, the dog kicked and bounced and swam in the oxygen rich cocktail of the cockpit, snacking on the floating cherries that were too far for Juan to reach.

"Go, Argos, Pac-Dog."

The amber-eyed dog opened his jaw wide over the chocolate bar, and prepared to clamp down, when Juan yanked it out from over the tip of his tongue. The bite noise made a sharp click. The dog whimpered.

"Mine," Juan said, crunching a piece of hard cacao from his chocolate bar. Juan knew this would be his last bar of chocolate in a long time—why hadn't he packed more? Better yet, why had he eaten all the bars he had packed to pass around at the loading dock on the lunar station? Fifty hours from the International Space Station to the Farm is a long time. But Juan did feel guilty for eating all the snacks. Even the dog was upset, partly because of the empathy he shared with his master, but also partly because the dog wanted a bite of the forbidden treat himself.

"Silly Argos, you can't eat chocolate," Juan baby-voiced his pet. "You get salad." And with that Juan gave the rest of a box of crispy lettuce to Argos, one he had stowed away in another overhead compartment.

As the dog chewed on floating green fibers, the professor looked at the loose sheets of paper that still hovered about him. The dimness of the pod, otherwise broken by the single ray of sunlight from the one porthole window, was cut by the colored light of buttons on all sides. Each button blinked different hues, while a neon band of LEDs did too, along the floor—to the professor's specifications—glowing a playful, florescent rainbow at his feet. The professor straightened out the floating papers, brought them together with his palms. A dull and fuzzy pop-up message on the control panel behind his papers read, "Sleep mode: Autopilot Engaged." The professor hit "Ok" on the pop-up. It brought the screen to a spinning loading sign, before the same autopilot dialogue popped up, and communicated to Dr Juan Saudade to be patient.

"Dreadfully boring," said Juan, looking at his dog. "Isn't this?

Argos licked cherry juice from his lower lips. "Wooof!"

Juan recalled the advice of a writing workshop professor who had suggested years ago he never write a character that "just waits around," because that bored readers. But what all surrounded Juan, orbiting the edge of the moon in the stillness of outer space, aside from the risk of dying and the threat of never returning to earth, was anything but boring: the blinding light of the sun dotted the infinite horizon ahead of him past the porthole window, and, again, this eternal silence.

Juan pulled out a pen from inside his thermal vest. He could start now, he thought, a little preamble, something to clear the throat before starting on his life's goal, the moon book. Recalling a science journal's headline, *"200th moon discovered in the solar system,"* Juan thought: each moon would make a fine poem; though, The Moon, the earth's, has first dibs and called for a whole novel, or at least a short story.

Clicking the top of his pen, once, twice, many times, as if clicking it would spark a flame, Juan hesitated.

"Do it!" Argos barked, licking his nose.

"Fine!"

Juan closed his eyes and let the thing surge forth, his hand and his pen were one, he scribbled away, yes, yes, Moon, he was really doing it, no writers block in outer space, yes.

"Ah, no, damn it!"

Juan had packed his own pens, and was using his favorite one, but when he halfway opened his eyes at the end of his first line, he realized that it was not designed to write in zero gravity.

The buttons and console continued to blink colored lights, as the porthole-shaped light of the sun creeped up the inside of the cockpit like a ball of fire that stretched into a

spotlight, then an ellipse, later a ray, et cetera, up those buttons, before the cloud of alien star dust brushed against the outside of the pod, just as predicted, and sparkled like iridescent plankton. Juan murmured to himself, "Where's that fancy space pen she gave me?" Instead of finding it, fussy and unaware, he yawned, and amber-eyed Argos also yawned, two red curtains draped over both passengers' eyes.

Dr Juan Saudade fell asleep calmly gazing at the aurora borealis of his mind, entering a dream . . .

Necesito probar que sé escribir

No me quiero

Olvidar

Que en una nave me asuste

Que en tus pelos

Me caí

Ojalá no tenga que pensar

Ojalá me veas

Como yo a ti

Estrangement is normal in outer space. One feels so distant when one stands where one wants something else.

¿Qué le falta al sabio que al boludo no le sobra?

The Asteroid Belt: "Poetry 20wx-20yz"

De torpe, a atormentado, a apasionado, a establecido, a cometido.

Познакомьтесь

Filomena. She's already written the bulk of the book. We'll turn on our inward eye, her head and her ten thousand strands of hair I see clearly in a glance, tossing in sprightly dance. When her purple waves and fodder touch my milky ether and water, they form a saturnine moon; however, separated, I wander lonely as a cloud, she a simple sea anemone, something I cannot wrap a ring around.

Take one:

You are like me, who am like you.

Alternate take:

Lord on high

You are me

And so am I.

Some may say

I'm wishing my days away

Здравствуйте! Меня зовут Хуан. Я профессор. Я живу в Хьюстоне. А это моя жена Филомена. Мы красивы вместе. Но мы не существуем.

What he means:

Dr Quack and Mrs Pond swam vivaciously in a sea of anonymity

to the knee and back again—bend do her joints go but flat his bill be,

until it opens.

They amount to a pair, forget the nicked fruit, eat it they did

most delicately—kick kick kick—their webbed feet kicked

until the sunshine

shone from behind their backs

and starfish wiggled to a grin all over again

…in a soup.

In agreement with the critics, he hums:

Go away, cliché. Be gone!

Ladies and Gentlemen, space capitalism.

A bad poem in the early evening:

The night stands

On its two hands

Like 6:30

Quite dirty

Remember the last car we owned and I said:

Put the blinders on, cuz your headlights are out.

"What about Pluto's moon?" Ain't a planet, ain't a moon.

◐

If Dr Juan Saudade were granted three wishes, the last two would go toward fulfilling literary ambitions, but the first would be to see his wife, Filomena Rosa, safe and sound. She had flown to the LUNE Farm two weeks earlier. She had been a diplomat in the United Sates for ten years, at the UN. The time Juan first met Filomena, and that impression of her with the crescent moon earrings glimmering in the light of an overcast New York City, an impression that never left him, still blurring in his imagination their difference in age, was nice. When he called her his better half, he called her his Filomenauj. Juan figured she was probably buying groceries right this very minute, before meeting him at the loading dock. To see her, to be with her, made Juan happy. But his destination was guided by a damned autopilot, and this drove him to a nervous sweat. He was almost there, to his new home.

Juan recalled a line he had read in a book by Joyce. *Lal the ral the ra.* "If that got printed, then any sucker can right, I mean, write," Juan said out loud.

Recalling his wife's advice to simply transcribe the first thing that comes to mind, though difficult or lame it may be, Juan twisted the top of the space pen she had gifted him.

"Something to be read out loud," he spoke. "Some abstract verse that makes sense only as lines of enchantments, i.e., tongue twisters." Juan jotted cursive over the paper over his bent knee.

Should I? Yes.

Patterns in my mind

Unbeknownst to want

Sensibility of ear

And Reality to celebrate the

fancy writer of short fiction

Who beats the stick like

Campbell's like War-hall

In soho, bro,

Shaw shou shoe shay

Phay phei pho phuh

The thee though thech th

Thchsh phch phth phshch

Khockey khoe kho kh

Khphth phth phthshch

Phth phthshch space zhipe

Zheep shmoe phrow

Khphthzhshch

Juan twisted the top of his pen to a stop. He read and reread the lines he had just written.

"Ghastly," he whispered.

Amber-eyed Argos tilted his head, and scratched his nose.

"You're right, boy," Juan told his dog. "No one would read this in their right mind, lest he, or she, needed a good sneeze."

Argos barked, and annunciated the "kh" sound for his master, which made him happy.

"At least you get me," said Juan, later writing things he had memorized back on earth.

Illegitimi non carborundum.

How to be independent: focus on what you need, and what others want.

How to be in a relationship: focus on what you want, and what others need.

"Filomena," reads his previous sent message to her, a flash fiction story sent to the LUNE, "pulled her shoulders back and let the frilled ends of her gown flow in the black wind of a salt lake landscape. Meanwhile a falcon up ahead came down, pinions out. Naught else mattered. Pure, free, and unattached, Filomena felt rain drops land on her upturned cheek. Smiles came easier to her these days. She knew so deep down, she would be ok, be ok. Be ok."

I am free, and nothing can stop me.

Pluto was a planet in his childhood, whence/wherefrom he got his ideas.

Accept the whole of you. Ego. Shadow. Persona. But for real, though.

Где я?

Где ты?

Где ты живешь?

Я сейчас на работе.

Пошли!

Meow.

Что ты делали?

You didn't do anything? Dr Saudade shook his head. The only thing—eh, this change in cabin pressure, gripping his thoughts, the hallucinations, the dust, the cloud, heh—that made sense to him in that moment was the photo of Carlos Gardel (*The Argentine Frank Sinatra*, said the professor once, *listen to him*) pinned to the neon band of lights by his feet, changing colors. *Por el espacio*…

O

(Phantasmagoria)

—“Nightmare Kaleidoscope”

—ファンタスマゴリア

—фантасмагория

(fantasmagoría)—φαντασμαγορία

Cette poésie—fantasmagorie

This poesy haunts me—phantasmagoria

Esta poesía anda por mí—fantasmagoría

Esta poesia—fantasmagoría

الأوهام—(al'awham)

—אשליה

فانتاسگوریا—

Language can be foreign,
ever shifting shape;
thus the translator must play,
paint from our dreams one landscape;
this ghost, a stalker, illusion,
Faceless, but not without hope
like my favorite word—

Alan Watts a déjà dit dans un discours: *"If you don't know what to do, you simply watch."* Par quoi, nous supposons, il s'est référé à la perception claire obtenue à travers de la méditation.

Dr Juan Saudade wiped his brow of sweat with his sleeve. He ran his fingers through the side of his hair, long ago gone gray. And with a sigh, he put on his helmet, and strapped in Argos—with a doggy-space suit and all—in a cushioned kennel between him and the empty passenger seat.

Another glance at his wrist showed he was late to land. How? I hate waiting, Juan thought to himself. I hope she's there waiting for me.

○

They enter as animals from the outer
Space of holly where spikes
Are not thoughts I turn on, like a Yogi,
But greenness, darkness so pure
They freeze and are.

O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.
Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.

Sylvia Plath

Filomena Rosa has argued with herself over many a topic, but the one that has stayed with her the longest, and which right now occupied most of her thoughts, was that of having a baby.

She had decided during her university studies to never have children, as did many of her friends at the time. But unlike many of them, who had gone back on their vows, Filomena was one of the few who had finished graduate school without a significant other, or husband. Her career began, as many in her field, as a lowly translator in the Italian embassy in New York. Her literary ambitions never went past editing her first and only novel. For her it was enough to have it. Rather, after that, she found her joy for words in translating other's ideas, from the most banal government memos, to the emails between the highest officials. As she

quickly earned promotions, she also found pleasure in ghostwriting for the politicians who yet hovered above her on the totem pole of her country's bureaucracy. Whenever a leader made the news, Filomena Rosa knew her office phone would receive a call asking her to write the story that would clarify the situation. "We want you to present the whole picture," a publishing agent—or more often a PR rep—would ask. "We can set up an interview." Filomena's answer was always the same: "What you want from me is to tell the human story." And with an almost imperceptible smile, a smile that communicated nothing to the person on the other line, only to Filomena herself, which reminded her she understood the situation: "No need for a meeting. Just pass me an email."

Years went by, happy years. Filomena enjoyed her self-made independence, and perfect life: Translator, Diplomat, Ghostwriter. Her life revolved around her projects, friends, for half a decade, give or take, until she met Juan.

Two weeks plus two weeks makes four. Filomena flew to the moon two weeks before her husband. They needed her to teach French, the Farm's lingua franca, and had asked her to head the language center as lead administrator.

"Why not English?" she had asked.

"Most of the early astronauts were Russians and Canadians, you know that. The Americans and the Brits pulled funding. Anyway," they concluded, as all good scientists do, with a statistic, "studies show French is easier to learn."

Deep down she figured—knowing the Québécois were the ones populating the moon's ministry of culture—the real reason that space citizens would be asked to learn their language: first come, first serve.

It was a midsummer day, a July like any other, a little too hot, a little too humid in central Florida. Juan had driven from their home, interstate by interstate, probably listening to jazz, Filomena figured, to wish her goodbye at the launch site. Their eyes were windows, facing one another, reflecting the other's tears. There were many reasons for sadness. Would he have let her go if he knew what was inside of her? Not really. Filomena had missed her period two weeks before her departure date. Two tests, positive.

"Congratulations," the doctors had said, assuring her it was safe to travel. "This is historic. You will be one of the first women to give birth on the moon. As you know, we must populate the…"

Filomena wasn't the only pregnant woman sent to space. But she was the only one to hide the fact from her husband. He wouldn't have let her go without a fight. She would have flown against his will—of course Filomena would go with or without his consent. She also for years shared the dream of going to the moon. But what killed Filomena, the thought that drove her mad in that moment, was the threat of malfunction, some freak accident, a missed calculation or burnt rubber band at the tail of the rocket that would melt and cause the whole launch site to explode. Filomena Rosa didn't want her husband to witness both the loss of his wife, and add to her death the death of his unborn child. So she didn't tell him.

◑

A simple eclipse poem, from a lifetime ago:

(Not a dawn

But a new beginning

None the less.)

Bring on the darkness

Let there be light

There is nothing to fear

So hug her goodnight

The sun is half gone

My mind in tatters

But my soul feels complete

And that's all that matters.

Feet / they hardly touch the ground

Walking on the moon

I learned Russian for that son of a bitch! But he was cute when he sang to me that song, how did it go?

Спокойной ночи, спокойной ночи…

I'm tired of explaining his last name is Portuguese, but no, he's not Portuguese. He's about as Portuguese as American port wine. "Saw-dade," they say. No, no. "It's pronounced sou-DA-gee." I hear his voice when I say this—"sou-DA-gee, sou-DA-gee"—and every time we listen to Bossa nova, he sings the word with added stress, his last name. Dr. Asshole.

The love that remains, they say.

Though, he was happy when I taught him Italian, yes, then French. I would play for him Charlotte Gainsbourg.

In paradiscos (vos y yo-o, he would add*)*

We get bored with breaking windows (breaking bolas)

Turning beggars into heroes (turning hoes into tyros)

Bodies moving innuendos (you and I somos lindos)

In paradiscos (vos y yo-o)

And he would play for me Rock Nacional.

Ahí va el Capitán Beto por el espacio (pensando en mí, sí, I would add)

Con su nave de fibra hecha en Haedo (¿dónde?)

Ayer colectivero (what?)

Hoy amo entre los amos del aire (cómo te amo, my love…)

He's so self-centered, and when yours is too, tell him:

Put your vanity away;

Let my eyes be your

Mirror.

And now we're pregnant, meaning me. Why now? We didn't want kids. What happened? We Just Had To Go Without A Rubber. He did look so sexy that last night together, and myself not so half bad—amazing what space training does to your body. Should have done that regimen in college. And no contraception, why, I stopped, he didn't ask, I think, and to let him finish in me, we called it our mutual going away present. They say a baby conceived in love has a greater chance at happiness. But that was from a movie, not Disney, I believe. But is the saying true?

◑

"You'll know how to be one," her mother had reassured her, as she brushed her daughter's mass of curly hair. "We all do, when the time comes."

"If . . ."

Her mother had smiled. "When . . ."

Decades later, on the moon, in her diary: "Me? A mother? I will tell him today," Filomena had written. "He arrives oh so soon, in so few hours." Now she was in a grocery store, day-dreaming (there had been daylight for days), buying snacks and fruit. She knew he would be hungry after the fifty plus hour flight.

As she imagined and reimagined different scenarios at the landing station, Filomena drew sharper and sharper images of their first rendezvous on the moon.

Filomena wouldn't dare pretend like her husband would abandon her at hearing the news. (There is nowhere to run!) Or let her go. No. Not like that man in the *Shirt* poem by Pinsky, she recalled all of a sudden. "*Her into space, and dropped*…" She chuckled when she remembered seeing the old poet laureate do a commercial for the company in charge of sending people to LUNE. No, her pregnancy-reveal to her husband should be more poetic. Filomena got in line to check out.

In her mind: "Juanemolif, my dear," she would whisper, in his ear, tenderly after a tight embrace. "May I share with you a secret?"

"Yes, my love," her husband would say, unusually sweet, hands on her cheeks, caressing the caramel skin behind her ear, perhaps struck by a sudden re-falling in love, but most likely due, in Filomena's imagination, to the low gravity affecting his brain, or that damn alien dust cloud which hit again today. "You can tell me anything."

"You are a father," she would say, a tremble in her voice, and with an expecting look, as she shooed away their yawning, old pup with her foot, probably humping her leg all the while. Her husband would understand her completely in that vulnerable moment, and he would look into her eyes and not turn away.

"The best welcome present!" her husband would cry. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Filomena's fantasy ended when she pushed the bottom of her cart into the heels of the woman in front of her, also waiting in line, dressed as a harlequin, and carrying a loaf of bread and a jar of honey.

"Ehm, excuse me?" the harlequin said, and with a turn shook the bells on her head.

"I-I'm s-sorry," Filomena wailed, in an unaccustomed high-pitched tone, as she preceded to point her nose at her grocery cart. The mother-to-be didn't know if she would have a boy or a girl. She had asked the nurse to refrain from using the Chromo-Scan to detect the baby's gender, in accordance with what Juan's wishes may very well have been, for neither of them to know the gender of the baby, recalling a long lost pillow talk of theirs early in their relationship, before the wedding: Juan had alluded to the fact that he would want his eldest child to be a boy. "But a girl would be nice, too." "Why can't it be a girl, what's wrong with a girl?" "No, no, it's fine either way. But, what language would we raise the kid in?" Then pulling back from the conversation, as he tended to do—"Not that I want children." Juan had then turned away. "Oh, of course not," was Filomena's reply, rolling on top of him with bedsheets wrapped around her body, kissing his neck. "You're too old to have children." The muscles on Juan's jaws had tightened. And then Filomena thinks he probably made one of his stupid jokes about their twelve year difference in age to brush it off, the kind of jokes Filomena had grown so used to hearing that even she repeated them at house parties to her friends, as if they hadn't heard the jokes from Juan moments before.

"If it's a boy," Filomena began. "If… then Juan will be fifty-eight when he walks him to his first day of school. And seventy-one when, oh God…" Filomena didn't want to think about graduations. She played off the age, and the revulsion it caused her, with a shiver. Just because silver hair and rough skin turn her on doesn't justify him becoming a parent, though biology claimed their relationship for a purpose higher than pleasure. "What an odd thought," Filomena mumbled, distracting herself with a view of the lunar surface from inside the store, the green alien dust cloud mixing with the artificial, low atmosphere, and the ground's natural minerals. (Astronauts had found minerals from earth on the moon, proving

that it had most likely once been a part of it, and proving that it could be tilled, using the fancy new Soil-Desal machines, made to produce certain grains. All this to say, the moon was more fertile than scientists had previously imagined.) "Still, why move to the moon?" her sister had asked at a hair salon. "Life's perfectly fine here on earth." Filomena, back then, experienced the same sentiment pioneers must have felt before such trifling questions.

It was her turn to checkout. The woman at the register was the owner of the trading post, an American named Gennie Johnson, about twice Filomena's age, with a dozen kids, and all of them working different jobs at the store. That was the only thing Filomena envied about Mrs Johnson—not her dry hair, not her cranky attitude, not her job—but her motherhood.

The two women made small talk, gossiped about the men in their lives, and about the thousand or so inhabitants at LUNE as if it were a small town on earth, and then the groceries were packed.

Turning toward the exit, Filomena remembered Gennie had a brother also arriving on an inbound ship. She wanted so bad to ask about the store owner's brother, but she couldn't bring herself to talk about yet another man, fearing the conversation becoming a gender thing. As a result she said the second thing that came to mind:

"Where's the garden of milk?"

Gennie made a puzzling look. Then nodded her head.

"Are you stressed, my dear? Bechdel got you down?"

"Just answer the question," Filomena said firmly. "Please."

Gennie Johnson nodded her head once more, and pointed out the door and to the right.

"Right and yonder," she said.

Filomena thanked the owner of the trading post, walked out, and, not a hundred feet past, forgot altogether what she had asked the lady, what all they had talked about, but not before she forgot the directions to the garden she had made up. Her whistling could be heard from a kilometer, it seemed, and anyone who ran into her, said "Salut" with an accent, would have to avoid getting hit by the grocery bags she was swinging in circles, as her puckered lips with fresh rouge made melodies out of the air conditioned hallways of that Farm in outer space.

Juanemolif and Filomenauj: together their pet names reflect each other. In Florida, the last time they were together, the last time they kissed, they had promised to live the rest of their lives like the couple in that Andrei Tarkovsky film where the characters' innermost thoughts become real.

"You are so beautiful to me. You're everything I've ever hoped for."

"You've said that before, said you borrowed the lines from a busker."

"When we first met."

"And you asked me to be your daffodil."

"I knew you were the kind of woman who wouldn't let me change her last name otherwise."

"You said it was because I don't call for attention, I only ask it of myself."

Jadis, Elena Ferrante a écrit dans un roman: *"Each one of us narrates our life as it suits us."* Pour moi cette phrase est en fait une pipe, et toi et moi l'avons fumé.

Only 15th century Portuguese sailors were able to encapsulate the feeling of homesickness, yearning for lost time, and the nostalgia of old love in three syllables. Filomena Rosa hates to admit it, in public anyway, but part of why she married him was for his last name. (Definitely not to share the dog.) For the baby she would accept it.

She was late to the landing. He must have arrived by now, Filomena thought to herself. I hope he's at the landing dock waiting for me.

The Luminous Novel: Second Chapter

(By: Mario Levrero)

It's pointless: I will not be able to move forward with this novel. Today I have woken up full of fury, my eyes shot with blood, my fingers trembling with the desire to make shreds out of both the copy and the original of the first chapter. Not because it seems to me that what is written is definitively bad or irrecoverable, but rather for the certainty of the impossibility to continue it:

A) Because I am too young to produce autobiographical material; never mind I feel myself in total ruin, so much in the physical aspect as in the mind, the moral and the spiritual aspects too, and that in a short while I will face myself, unarmed, naked and with my senses torpid, under the surgeon's blade I am, objectively, a young man – at least to be writing about these kinds of things. I should wait at least another thirty years. These things are written when the majority of one's acquaintances have died or are sufficiently deteriorated so as to not even comprehend what one wrote, to not even recognize themselves in the writing, or to recognize themselves without feeling hurt, or even not finding out that someone has written anything at all.

B) Because despite believing myself too young for the job, I am sufficiently old enough to forget and confuse a ton of stuff; for example, that story about the dog that I recounted with such enthusiasm is plagued with errors and involuntary lies: it did not happen when I said it did (the year before the *daemon* in me began to write), but rather the year after, at least that's what I believe; in reality, what I did was confuse the story of the dog with the story of the young lady with green eyes. It's understandable, from a profound psychological point of

view, for its similar impact, which both stories hold over me; but, all in all, as a chronologist, I'm shit.

C) Because, peeking at the material that, were I to continue to write, I would need to control almost immediately, I must admit that I could not continue avoiding certain ideological definitions—definitions which would bother many certain powers that be: the government, the opposition party, the far left, the left, the center, the right, and the far right, not to mention that floating, anonymous mass that in surveys appears under the category of "undecided" or "unsure / no contest." Probably also bothered would be the Catholic Church, the Free Masons, the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian scientists, the various occult sects, Rotary International and the Lions Club International and, probably, some social club, sporting, soccer or other.

D) Because it seems to me almost impossible to assume so shamelessly my own narcissism: all of the first chapter brims in *I, me, my, myself*; and nothing makes me think that things will change moving forward.

E) Because, and this is the principle item, I know that this work is pointless; that it will be unpublishable, not only because it wouldn't interest any editor, but because I myself would hide it jealously.

So then, fine: because the job is pointless, for that very reason, I must do it. I am tired of pursuing useful things; for too long I have lived apart from my own spirituality, corralled by the urgencies of the world, and only the meaningless, the disinterested, can give me the necessary liberty to find myself again among what I honestly believe to be the essential thing in life, its ultimate goal, its reason for being first and last. But here enters a problem: when I do something pointless I feel guilty, and everything that surrounds me—family, society—

conspires actively to make me feel that way. To move forward, I must be prepared to resist with tenacity that phantom of guilt, to attack it at its very fortifications and pulverize it—armed only with the oscillating conviction that I have the right to write.

Once decided on this point, I will begin the chapter at hand by correcting the errors and completing the information from the previous chapter. Before anything: pressured by the urgency to maintain the line of argument, at no point could I break to reveal that I had stopped writing with Chinese ink over paper of very fine quality, as I had initially stated. As it so happened, fatigued by my own handwriting, at a certain point I needed to pass what I had written to the computer; and as I did, I went on correcting, suppressing, and adding details, until ultimately I ended up writing the last bit of the chapter on the computer. Only then did I manage to understand why I had begun writing by hand in the first place, a reason which will be explained later on, if I find the way to do it without harming certain vulnerabilities.

Now, I must address immediately the story of the girl with the green eyes; it's very simple.

I was riding a bike, not far from those places where a year later I would find myself with that providential dog. At that time, and though it sounds too good to be true, I would wake up every morning at seven and run a paper route. Even if it was cold, windy or rainy. And I did it pro bono, not earning a nickel. That's because it was something I believed I should do. I still live that way, doing what I believe is right—only that I believe different things now. It is actually deplorable how my thinking today doesn't lead to a similar compulsion nor lead to healthy habits like riding a bike; it is deplorable also that one's will can only be developed under the reign of an erroneous belief—as History well has shown

us. But I cannot extend myself today in similar considerations nor explain today my thought process then, or even now; I am getting to those green eyes, those fettered eyes, burning and liberating. The woman, very young, was sitting on a fence (more likely it must have been a wall, given that fences are not very comfortable for sitting, but I remember it being a fence), and there were other people around. I got off my bike, crossed a patch of grass or some dirt path, and I delivered the newspaper—I don't remember who I gave it to. I know that I saw the girl and that I saw her very well, although I don't remember having looked at her; one can see without looking and look without seeing. But I know that I saw her because later she was in my dream.

I've said that there was in me a prohibition on overthinking (in a certain predetermined direction), but I didn't say that there was a prohibition, in relation to her, one much more terrible: the prohibition to love.

I'm getting into big trouble. I cannot continue honestly with this narration without explaining exactly how my life was in that very moment, but neither can I go on without breaking the line of thought in such a way that leaves everything in smithereens; not to mention, it produces a sort of enormous fatigue just thinking about confronting yet again all of that, be it only in its evocation. I could, perhaps, while intending to stir this thing, to limit myself to only a few lines on the problem of consciousness.

One tends to perceive things in such a way that they could be integrated neatest-ly to the routine of everyday life. If any one of us were to step back and perceive any one thing as it were, with the intensity that any one thing deserves, there wouldn't be a single routine possible, nor social contract possible either. Perception is controlled by our consciousness at its discretion; the more narrow our consciousness, the more confounded our perception.

To perceive is a painful act, an act of submission, an act of mental disintegration. That's why we are so cautious in selecting and in reaching out in our perception. We are blind, because we don't want to see; and we don't want to see because we know, or believe, that we don't have the forces necessary to change everything.

It wasn't convenient for me, for my narrow consciousness, to perceive that girl. My sight must have slid off her agreeable surface. It's possible that I might have thought, "She's beautiful," but not much more. At the same time, there must have been an enormous amount of thoughts that in that moment were necessarily crowded, frenetically even, before the doors of my consciousness, yet wonderfully repressed. I followed the path back to my bicycle and I began pedaling, completely separated from the most important thing that had ever happened to me in my life.

That morning I woke up startled, sweating, and my teeth chattering, as if I had suffered a nightmare. I lit the light of my lamp and also lit a cigarette. I evoked the dream I had had and, when I finally turned off the light and made myself fall asleep again, I was, from then on, a different person.

Simply, I had dreamed of the eyes of this girl; it wasn't but the perception in blossom—belated, but it happened anyway despite the whole rigorous system of censorship in place—from what had happened so few hours before. What had happened was that she had looked at me with love.

In the dream, the eyes seemed to accuse me, trespass me, burn me, destroy me. But the look remained there, despite the tricks of censorship; and the censoring must have been what woke me up, appealing desperately to any recourse of a dumb vigilance to contain such a thing. But the look remained there. There wasn't anything accusatory, nor trespassing, nor

burning, nor destructive in her. There was only love, a love that I myself wasn't prepared to receive. A love that, moreover, wasn't necessarily directed at me, although I formed a part of that which she surely loved—which probably was all the things in the world—because to her, no one had destroyed her capacity to love. Until that moment I had never seen the look of love. Not even in the movies. They weren't those brilliant eyes of some lovesick damsel—it was the very look of love. And the look remained there. And the look remained there. And remains there. And remains here, I assure you that in me it remains living, great girl; it doesn't matter that I never saw you again, it doesn't matter if you are now a fat mother full of kids and your look now must be bovine; I assure you that this girl is alive and will be alive always, because there exists a dimension of reality where things don't die; they don't die because they were never born nor have an owner nor are subject to time and space. Love, spirit, is an eternal gust of wind that blows through the empty tubes that are our selves. It isn't the image of you that I carry in my soul, featureless girl: it's your look, precisely what was not yours, nor was you.

I did not know, nor could I have known, while smoking that cigarette waiting for my pulse to normalize, all that was going on in that very moment; had I foreseen it, I might have found the strength to repress it, to have suppressed those eyes definitively. Because in that moment my very marriage was proclaiming itself over, my next marginalization—to the edge of society—to what many consider, and I among them, to be my "craziness." Curiously, until that moment it had not occurred to anyone to say, and I suppose neither to think, that I was crazy. But I was utterly crazy. My consciousness was more narrow than the head of a pin. No one applauded me when I undid my marriage, I abandoned my job and devoted myself to impulses, and to do "weird things"—but I make another mistake here: there had been a

jovial man, frank to the point of brutality, Spanish the guy, who when he found out about my divorce he congratulated me warmly, between hearty bursts of laughter; to him I owe the scarce oxygen that I breathed for a long and difficult period of my life. In all the other faces of people I knew, so much in family as in friends, you could see painted there condemnation, suspicion, pity, or a mix of all those things.

If I went back to work, even with a certain enthusiasm not withstanding great margins to my liberty and unattachment, it was to compensate my isolation by paying myself in alcohol, culture and prostitutes. About the alcohol, unlike the other two, it shouldn't be taken too seriously; it was partly a front, fundamentally one to myself. On culture, I owe it to the movies I was seeing in those days, and to the books I read; whereas on the prostitutes, they deserve a chapter apart. One of them in particular deserves it.

All this was inexplicably resolved whenever I evoked the look from the dream and the real look, which were one in the same, smoking my cigarette, and I accepted her. In turning off the light to go back to sleep, I had surrendered myself to her completely. It would extend throughout my entire being, opening newer and newer channels of understanding, preparing me for a new destiny. Later, I did the right thing. I didn't search for the girl; in reality I forgot her for a long time, but when I could remember her it still didn't occur to me to find her. No, no. I did things very well. I had to shatter everything I had ever been, believed, thought, felt. I had to raze with the vestige of that delirious life that I had been dragging like a dumb caterpillar for twenty-five years. It wasn't a conscious decision, or a deliberate one either; worse so for me. Accustomed to a narrow consciousness, she remained with me; but that look of hers had shot me with the dimension of love, and it is known that such a thing works of its own accord. My narrow consciousness would oppose itself to the

dimension of love; worse so for it. The battle was lost—that is, won—because God didn't allow that that dream pass unnoticed. HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! WOULD YOU HAVE US BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN TALK ABOUT LUMINOUS EXPERIENCES, MYSTICAL ONES, ABOUT SPIRITUALITY, WHEN SO FAR YOU HAVE ONLY TALKED TO US OF WOMEN, OF DESTRUCTION, OF ALCOHOL, OF PROSTITUTES? DRUGS ARE THE ONLY THING MISSING! ALL RIGHT, MINIONS, SHOW THIS IMBICILE OUT, BURRY HIM IN THE MOST INFECTED DUNGEON. Little old ladies with dark green caps hit me with umbrellas over the head. One hears the beating of a drum. Multitudes of mothers, with their kids in their arms, eyes wet with tears, form silently with their lips the letters of a curse. The burning stake is almost ready. While my body burns, resigned, I think: "They have not had patience, nor curiosity. If only they had kept reading . . ." And I raise my eyes to the heavens, and wanting to exclaim piously, I say: "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do!" But later one last breath of life has me scream: "Mother fuckers! You mother fuckers!"

Reader, you will forgive this digression, a little matter that I had to debate with my superego. I return now to the novel. A little agitated and confused perhaps, be sure, but I believe victorious. Don't forget that to survive these last couple years, I had to adjust, had to be able to—by any means necessary—even to think like them. How much interiority destroyed! What subtle elaboration dragged away! But, now I am here with you—although I must make one more tiny concession to the superego.

To the youth, I say this: nothing good comes from alcohol, from cigarettes, from prostitutes, from pornography nor from drugs. They are all things that destroy the body and the mind. One shouldn't think even for an instant that they could serve us as instruments of

liberation: on the contrary, they create dependence, alienate you, destroy and finally kill you. My instrument for liberation came exclusively from that look of love that God had made reach me through the eyes of a woman; the rest of my story has only been one long mismatch between my means and my ends; ignorance; isolation; the lack of support and of affection; an entire world that that look undid in me and that I could not control. It had to destroy me, because I did not know the tools to build myself. It isn't a recipe. Don't try to follow in my footsteps. On a different note, the only thing that happened was a liberation—nothing conclusive.

In case it wasn't clear, to the youth I'll say it again: nothing good comes from television, from newspapers, from money, from politics, from religion, from work. They are all things that destroy the body and the mind. One mustn't think even for an instant that they could serve as instruments for liberation: on the contrary, they create dependence, alienate you, destroy and finally kill you.

Only in your soul, gentlemen, is the way. Wind it back, kick it go into gear, and let be what God wants. The sublime, the dimension which we don't take into account, what we are missing, is in no one place and could be everywhere; today here, tomorrow there, the day after disappear, in twenty years reappear, perhaps, or not; it all depends on Grace—and how well one gets along with oneself. Once, maybe by chance, Grace welcomed me in a Church. I was thirty-six years old, and that experience, which I will recount in its opportune moment, made it to where I communed for the first time. Even in a church can the hand of God reach.

But I return with urgency to the story of A, which I left interrupted in the previous chapter and which I must conclude necessarily in this one, to make room for the rest of this novel that, between one thing and another, would seem to be getting out of hand.

She came back. A lot of time had passed, I don't know whether a year, or two or three. But she came back. She wasn't the same. I noticed that other men had passed through her life, leaving new signs. Other men, other problems, who knows—in reality, I do know, but I won't say. I have no doubt that an abortion had had its way with her, and this was made evident by her sexual behavior: timid, worried, never fully letting go; sometimes not reaching orgasm, and later, of course, she would start a fight. She started finding defects in me. At times, we almost acted like a married couple. I understood all too well what was happening, when, once, she managed to push me out of her body for fear of getting pregnant a second time. So one day I decided to let her have it her way, give her what she often, though meekly, expressed she wanted, with that curious insistence that lasts a long time, something which I figure she must have had with other men though for me it was, and is, of little appeal to me. She wanted anal sex. Fine, if she feared getting pregnant that much, I figured I could concede; so that, at least once, she could surrender herself willingly. I slid in quick and comfortably into her interior; I felt myself narrowly pressured, but not so much that I couldn't also realize the necessary in-out motion. There was just one problem: a overstimulation on my end, to note: the excessive aforementioned pressure; the posture; and, last but not least, the sadistic beast within that is sometimes unleashed in such cases, that feeling of absolute domination, the desire to harm and to make someone suffer, mixed with the perverse pleasure of a transgression, of laughing in nature's face. In conclusion, very quickly I noted that the orgasm in me was becoming uncontainable, and that if I tried to detain myself via some mental trick,

the overstimulation would have beat me to death. I thought that this would result in some terrible failure, because of its brevity. Nevertheless . . . when, barely, the first drop of semen burst in her membrane, there unraveled in her the most frightening orgasm one could possibly imagine. All the muscles in her body began to shake, as if they were directly connected to an electrical outlet, shaking in massive uncontainable waves like those of a sea with strong tides, one over the other, in a cascade; and before the current of electricity finished its circuit, another drop of sperm unbridled an equal spasm, without a single drop in pressure, and it felt like the tides of ebb and flow were crashing against one another, the ones that came with violence pushed the ones that were just beginning, and the muscles shook uncontrollably from under the skin, in all the body, although the body was perfectly still; like background music, her voice, that I had always felt as if belonged to me, modulated the most profound and prolonged moans, full of hues, with notes that reached from Hell itself, cries of condemned souls, even songs of birds in the branches of a tree full of fruit, in plain sunshine, over and above still the sky populated by angels with mandolins that intoned canzonets and choral chants sublime, and a director of orchestra in an impeccable dress-coat with a rose in the buttonhole of his lapel, signaling with total precision the entrance of each voice, of each hue, of each gasp; and like that it went until squeezing every last drop of sperm that, I must confess with pathetic astonishment, few times had ever been so well employed. When the waves began to lull, so did the voices, until finally there was silence and stillness and, on my end, only astonishment and astonishment.

I don't know if you've noticed that I've given life to a delirious monster that pursues me incessantly; It's for something, for something, that so much of me resists and so many turns must be taken before bringing myself to write even the first lines of this novel. The

most far out episodes of my life crowd my mind and don't let me in peace; I am eating and sleeping poorly, waking up very late and going to bed just as the sun is coming up; yesterday there were serious threats of new gallbladder attacks and, before getting myself to write, I live in a permanent state of flu, false warning signs: they're an excuse to waste my time writing. I live for the novel; I think of her all the time; I revise the pages of the draft as I pass them to a new document; I add and I prune, I think, and I think, and I think. My life has transformed itself into a discourse, into one uninterrupted monolog that has made itself now wholly independent of my will. It is delirium, the search for catharsis, the self-imposed burden of the task I must realize—want it or not—with the faint hope of one day reaching some full stop, to lay empty, exhausted, clean—and ready for another. So I must insist on the point that none of the luminous experiences and none of the experiences of liberation have served to be able to say "it's done", "I did it," "this was it." Furthermore, if ever I searched—go figure if I ever did—to reach something that would allow me to say "it's done," "I did it", now I am pretty conscious of knowing that that is only reached through death, but at that thought, well, I shoot at more than at any demon. Let no one be fooled: I have no great wisdom to transmit and I hope to never get to have it ever. The name of wisdom is: arteriosclerosis.

I run, then, behind my thoughts because they force me to transmit them to paper, and to do it is the only recourse that occurs to me to confide in that they be drain.

Being as scrupulous as I am with my work, in retaking it now, I must at once realize some precision in this second chapter. One lets himself be carried away by literature and sacrifices often the facts of the matter; or simply takes just one small aspect, the one he wishes to highlight—more so in the case of defamatory pamphlets, as is the case here. In

this way many errors are committed, as well as injustices; that is how, almost on accident, the reader is lied to. For example in reading the episode about the girl with the green eyes, one might notice that I recounted it in such a way that it couldn't be interpreted correctly by anyone. I have described that look and its consequences in such a way that it reminds you of certain religious paintings, in the look of certain virgins or certain apostles or saints. In reality, there is some of that; but also there is something more: sex, desire, lasciviousness, substance. What I mean to say is that the presence of the overlooked dimension doesn't annul the presence of the habitual dimensions, rather it completes them. Nothing deceives more than the false idea that spirit and material are in opposition, an idea so deeply imprinted in us. I will return to this topic later on, with supports I consider not often disclosed—topics like the number four, the Virgin Mary and the Devil—the work of a distinguished thinker.

So much the philosopher as the scientist, as well as the occultist and the writer, have occupied themselves extensively to the "fourth dimension"; to some, this fourth dimension is time; others negate that the dimension of time could be incorporated into space; some talk about a "fifth dimension," and through mathematics we can deduce to infinite dimensions rather effortlessly, as effortlessly as any infinity could be deduced. I understand very little about all this, and when I speak of the "overlooked dimension", for lack of more precise terminology, I want to speak of something that forms part of the natural existence of things, but that only reveals itself when something special happens inside our most intimate being. I don't know of anything that could be done about it voluntarily, to reach this state. There is, nevertheless, a form of perceptions that guards certain affinities with the luminous experiences, and that can give certain reason to those who speak about time as a fourth dimension of space. I have reached it only from the necessity of intense communication with

someone. It happened that, suddenly, I began to see variations in the faces of the people that I had before me. The majority of the times, the face varied as if it were receding rapidly through time, and that in place of seeing before me, for example, some woman of forty years of age, I would see a girl of six. In very few cases could I prove the certainty of this perception, as in its correspondence with reality—be it via photographs or via some concrete fact: like if as a girl she wore braids, or if she had been chubby, etcetera. With less frequency I have reached to perceive the full gamut of ages, into maturity, or even into the old age of the person. I know, in my most intimate knowing, that a certain young girl I once knew some years ago is currently on the path of becoming a Big Beautiful Woman. And certain confirmations or certainties of reality of this perception have reached me indirectly, always obtained in the end, together with the image of the past, or of the future, some intimate detail of that person, generally of the medical type—being the frustrated physician that I am. A lot has been given me to think in respect to a painting by Velazquez, *Venus at the mirror*[1]; looking at it well, one notices these temporal variations in the face reflected in the oval mirror; including the eyes open, and soon closed; youth, old age and death. I have thought that Velazquez must have suffered from the same kind of perceptions. And I do not explain to myself how he succeeded in animating the painting.

This would make room to think of time in four dimensions—I wouldn't say so much in space, rather more like in life. This type of perception has not functioned ever with inanimate objects (and to speak the truth, very little with men), but I wouldn't want to say that it isn't possible. (In this revision that I am doing in the year 2002, I note that memory

[1] Levrero called this 17th century painting, incorrectly, perhaps on purpose subconsciously, as *The Madonna of the Mirror*. Also, the mirror in the real painting is rectangular. [Trans. note]

failed me when I wrote this paragraph. There was an extraordinary moment of this type, with inanimate objects, in 1968.) Nevertheless, to limit myself to my own experience, I will say that I have all the reason to believe that living beings are tetradimensional and that, be it as it may, we are only one object finished and complete, that includes our birth and death; that we see ourselves grow up and grow old only because we go on perceiving little by little, but that the old man and the young child coexist permanently in the same being; that we are like a kind of sausage that one passes through a groove, and that we only perceive what this groove lets us see of the sausage. There are infinitudes of people who, probably parting from a similar experience, think the way I do, more or less. But I touch my hands to a fire for this idea; and that for the moment this idea doesn't present any utilitarian purpose, when for the time being anything without a utilitarian purpose is highly dangerous to subsistence itself, plainly I have ceased to indulge these ideas. But, attention: together with having stopped these perceptions in me, and all other pointless perceptions regarding the "overlooked dimension", my states of depression have gone on accentuating and persisting.

Since I already spoke about the girl who is transforming into a Big Beautiful Woman, I should say that she occupies a good place in this torrent of thoughts that have unleashed in me, and not in relation to the point about my perceptions, that I remembered just now, rather to the idea of the imperative necessity that many have about a crazy person. When all else fails, when you completely lack any point of reference, when you feel that nothing and no one can help you, just find a crazy person. It is very likely that I not be remembered as a writer, although for some time I might figure in the critical analysis of this era, for reasons I suspect come from an emergency, or scarcity of talent; but I am sure of being remembered

for a time by those who know me, and will remember me, as nothing more than a crazy person. In other words, my authentic social function is to be crazy.

Proof of the matter: I have received consultations over personal problems from all types of people, above all by people who are considered "fit": physicians, notary publics, psychologists, psychoanalysts, dentists and, of course by far, artists. It was precisely a psychoanalyst who told me the key of this mysterious current that, since the pondering of the dog onward, has flowed, without ceasing, to my door: "I come to see you and to consult you about these problems," the analyst told me, "because you are crazy. I could not talk about these things with any other person, and least of all with my colleagues." Curiously, very recently, my daughter told me something very similar; until now I had not found a way to connect with her; until, that is, she felt the need for a crazy person. "I know that you are crazy," she told me, and from that instant on, and to my enormous happiness, we have started a dialogue most fluid and free. (As a parenthesis: this novel, which I promised her, forms part of the answer to her questions. Let the reader know that I put here in writing all the good faith and all the responsibility of a father towards his daughter. She has to know these things, so that her life can be worthwhile.)

That young woman, then (I am referring to the BBW), appeared one day accompanied by I don't remember which mutual friend. I was in the apogee of my insanity. A few days later, she reappeared, alone. Not exactly alone, rather accompanied by a most beautiful and enormous bouquet of flowers that, as I would later find out, she had stolen from a park. Let the reader now see how sad my narrowness of consciousness is: from that moment on I dedicated myself with absurd tenacity to try and rape her. She resisted me every time, and in truth I am not the type to rape someone, so things never came to, and she kept,

not sure to what end, her valued hymen intact. I also could never find out—although today I have some suspicion—what it was she was looking for. She would come and sit in silence. Later she would leave, and, despite my black intentions, she would return. Time and time again. It's pointless to try and deplore my narrowness of consciousness. I would have needed to know what I know now, to not have acted so foolishly. This story hurts me, belittles me, embarrasses me. She needed a crazy person, not a clod. And yet, and yet, I take comfort in the thought that something of what she was looking for she found in me, since she would come back and, from time to time, would bring me a new bouquet of flowers. Always serious, quiet, real concentrated—never did we slip from addressing one another formally, including the times I tried to rid her of her clothes—I believe that what she obtained finally from me was comedy. She surprised me very much one day when I heard her laugh for the first time, some crystalline, clinking laughter. I believe that that was due to having cured her of something because, soon after, she disappeared.

Some years later, leaning on my reflections concerning this experience and other experiences and, above all, with the help of the psychotherapy I received, I was able to face in a kind of relationship, in one certain sense similar, in another sense different, almost opposed. I saw, sitting at a table at a bar once, a girl, also very young, who I knew; I saw her so depressed, so sad, so lonely, that I entered the bar and I sat in front of her. I tried to find out what was going on with her, but she didn't want to say. So I told her that she keep me in mind; that if she thought at some point that I could help her in any way, to come see me. One afternoon, she came. She began to throw at me all the pus that she carried inside. Few things had resulted so sick, so painful, so difficult to endure. The girl played the part of the cynic, enjoyed—on the surface—recounting to me each and every one of her perverse

experiences, which didn't exclude at all any of the sexual perversions that exist in this world. I would listen with a monkish passivity, purely external; internally, each moral and affected fiber would agitate and twist. Then, she would leave. Only to return too soon, for another dose.

I knew with certainty that if I demonstrated even the slightest rejection or voiced even the least moral judgement or reproach, then that little soul of hers would lose itself definitively within the flames of her inferno. Moreover, I felt that I had to act, say or do something, but I didn't know what. I was desperate. I spoke with a friend, of the ancient sacerdotal persuasion. He told me: "You have to love her, love her a lot." It was, as it were, what I was doing, but the advice reassured me and helped me to resist. This wasn't, luckily, any problem with my sex. The therapy had helped me overcome to a degree the insecurity in my own virility, so that now I didn't need to sleep with all the women that I knew. Besides, I went on at that point in my life well-nourished in intellectual adventures and, also, besides, it was one of the active periods of my relationship with A—while at the same time it was gestation of a parallel relationship with a woman who danced and played the castanets. I could give in, then, to that truly paternal love which was demanded of me by the "little sheep gone astray", as my priest friend and I called the perverse woman. A difficult love, heartrending—that kind of love where I should give, give, give, give, give, give, give until ending up emaciated, receiving only the filthy darts of cynicism. One evening, I proposed to her that she come lay with me in bed. She looked at me with mistrust, but what she saw must have put her at ease because she lay herself. We remained, for a long time, in silence. Then, spontaneously, she extended herself over my body—clothed, still-quiet. Peace became something tangible and came over us and installed itself in us, a kind of peace that I barely

recall, like of a white that filled my body to completion. The genitalia, the mind, sensation—all seemed dead, gladly dead. There passed a time to measure; soon we felt that that had ended, we got up, she kissed me on the mouth and left. Another day she came back. We did the same thing; we didn't even need words anymore. And she came back. From time to time she would say something, some vestige of some sin that needed to be confessed, some little piece of trash that I could absorb with total placidness. One evening, during one of these strange sessions, at a certain point I felt the need to put my left hand over her waist and exercise a light pressure. Nothing more. But, as if I had turned the key to a machine, immediately and without transition, the little sheep started to cry. She cried and cried and kept crying and kept crying. An ancient, primitive cry that I knew very well from first-hand experience. And the more she cried, the more she became my happiness. She was now, at long last, free.

The story should end here, to finish nicely, but nothing is perfect in this world, and almost always there is a coda of little elegance. I have promised to be, and must necessarily be, truthful. So, she came, again, one more time. I was by now completely over her; the love on my end had ended, the crazy guy in me had completed his mission, so what more could she want now. Lying in bed didn't work, peace did not descend upon us, we were tense and annoyed. She said something that didn't sit well with me; I don't remember what. In response, I gave her some very sonorous slaps on her butt-cheeks. That did not sit very well with her; in her mind, I had failed in being the image of the father who was only good and permissive. She looked at me with fury and released some tears that weren't in proportion to the minimal physical pain that could have been caused her; and in an instant she made her clothes all fly off and with maximum contempt and rancor in her voice, told me that I take

her. I did it very unwillingly, with real effort and without any pleasure. Thus, yes, she left, and never came back. Years later I found her on the street. She had a healthy happy look on her face, and in her look there was purity and maturity. She told me that she felt much better; she had married, had kids, and that all the things that result from a good story in therapy. Sometimes, I think that what happened in her last visit was nothing more than the necessary consequence of her need to pay me for her therapy. Oedipus realized, et cetera? I don't doubt it; but don't doubt me, reader, that other dimension that I intend to patent with this work, don't deny me the tangibility of that mysterious peace, the white that would descend over our bodies and that from within would illuminate us.

El resplandor

Hace mucho que vengo postergando este cuento. El cuento del "resplandor," (al final de un tango). Entre comillas, entre paréntesis. No soy argentino, o sí. Pero quizá no importa, porque al fin y al cabo yo tomo clases de tango. Pues estoy autorizado por contarlo. Y aquí voy. A contar. A cantar. Un halcón. Ok. Mejor que empezar este cuento, será desengañarme. No sé cómo empezar este cuento, si en primera persona, tercera, con algún punto filosófico, o qué. Un franco-chileno, protagonista. Hah. Un gracioso. Jaj. Colorín colorado este cuento se ha acabado. Los niños. El niño de esta pareja. De alguna manera los padres bailan, y se enamoran. Lo contará el hijo de esta pareja, un americano, como yo. Muah. Mejor: se lo contara al narrador, otro narrador, como para complicar la trama.

Sitio: un club, en la decadencia, hecho pedazos, hecho babas del diablo, hecho papas fritas, un horno. Adiós pampa mía. Caminos que he recorrido. ¿Cómo he nacido? Tierra querida, quiero que sepas mi "¡Chau!" Así me gusta. Usté. Usted. Quiero, quiero, quiero escribir este cuento y deshacérmelo. Deshacerme deshacer. Ya de una vez y por todas. No es la forma más directa ni la forma más feliz. Pero antes de poder comunicarme tendrá que… puaj… escupir. Solamente la metáfora nos permitirá entrar a esta pista de baile.

Hace mucho que vengo postergando un bailecito, entonces maro el viernes para caer en el viejo club de tango. A pesar de las luces que no andan bien, y el escenario que permanece en perpetua ruina, los que pisan la pisa goza de las pilas de viruta en las esquinas. Antes

venía seguido, ahora no. No es donde aprendí a bailar, pero es donde me quitaba el peso de la semana, pasando los viernes acá, muchas veces entre la una de la mañana hasta a la madrugada, no siempre para deslizar, no siempre para comerme las medialunas que en su momento pasaban como las mejores de Buenos Aires.

Me encuentro con un viejo amigo, para no llamarlo un amigo viejo, "el caballero" como suelan llamarlo los solteros picadulces—que en realidad también lo llaman por otros nombres menos irónicos—con quién siempre lo trato de usted, aunque él me tutea a puñaladas.

Hoy pidió su quesillo—"el postrecito de siempre"—y una agua tónica. Esta sentado en su misma mesita de siempre. Siempre con bien aliento, aroma; un saco formal, azul, pero de corbata de cordón. Por la cantidad de sonrisas que tira a las mozas, da la impresión de que el caballero, si no fue buenmozo en su tiempo—pienso que lo fue—por lo menos tuvo mucha vida para practicar esa sonrisa; una con todos sus dientes, y arrugado brillo.

Hoy, como ya había dicho, vine para un bailecito. Son las tres de la mañana; no me pregunte, lector, por qué me perturba mi alma; sepa no má que aquí, en este viejo club de tango, debo estar. Me siento al lado derecho del caballero.

"Salute, señor Caballero," anuncio. "¿Cómo le va?"

"Buenas mañanas," responde él. "Sentate, joven."

Me quito el saco, y me arremango la camisa.

"Las mosas de siempre no están," comenta. Miro hacia la pista, plenamente vacía. El DJ en su rincón, toca temas para él mismo. No hoy magia, no hay movimiento; las

mismas cosas diría cualquier bailarín. De repente tocan un tema de Canaro, uno de los más tristes.

"Se fue todo para el carajo," me dice.

Pico uno de los quesillos en su plato.

"Hemos entrado en la decadencia, joven."

"¿Qué le parece?"

El caballero levanta su bastón del piso.

"Cuando yo ni había nacido, esta pisa era el lecho de la pasión pura," dice. "Uno no podía entrar sin sudar. Si entrabas a bailar tenías que entrar a codazos, como un pájaro, para que te den lugar a bailar. Era glo-rió-so. ¿Hoy? Madre mío, no queda ni un hongo de esa magia."

El caballero apoya las dos manos sobre la curva de su bastón. Lo pega contra el piso tres veces.

"Mis padres se conocieron acá," me dice, "en el año cincuenta." Me cuenta:

"Mi padre lo llamaban Il Sordo—porque siempre hablaba de su descendencia sardo, y porque cuando vino con sus padres en bote a Buenos Aires, se había caído al Riachuelo, y se le infecto el oído derecho. Quedo sordo enserio. Mis abuelos eran labradores, los tres vivieron pobres. Pero le encantaba ir a las milongas. Desde que tenía diecisiete hasta esa noche en 1950, había bailado nueve años. Debería haber tenido tu edad ahora. Bueno resulta…

"Mi mama la llamaban La Pintora—porque pintaba la pista. Sus padres eran milongueros también, y la habían criado como bailarina de ballet. Pero una vez ensayando se le partió la uña de su pie izquierdo, pero siguió bailando, entonces así pintó la pista con su sangre. Nunca más bailó ballet, pero entró al mundo de sus padres, al del tango.

"La noche en que se conocieron, tocaba una orquestra típica criolla, del famoso Mattos, el quien invento la frase: 'La gente feliz pisa mierda.' Bueno, este tocaba, y era su última noche—porque le agarró un infarto a causa del baile de mis padres. Escuchá.

"Este Mattos anuncia a la pista que la próxima será la última canción, una fantasía, y ¿quién se anima a bailarla?

"Todos los bailarines se esconden detrás de sus mesas y frascos de cerveza.

"Il Sordo la ojea a La Pintora, con quien ya se había cruzado varias veces en la pista. Los dos se levantan, así, re despacito, y son los únicos en la pista. Ella en un vestido de carmesí; mi padre, en un traje de un chamuyo.

"Mi mamá lo abraza. '¿Cómo le llaman?'

"Mi padre responde con una pregunta. '¿Usté como le llaman?'

" 'Valeria,' responde. ¿Y usted? ¿Usted?

"Ya había empezado la fantasía.

"Se miran bailar, se miran mirar. Dan vueltas. Abren y entran a una caminata. Allí, creo yo, ellos se dieron cuenta de todo. Mi padre, sin dejar a mi mamá sin respuesta, deletrea su nombre con sus pasos.

"Caminan, cierran, giran, van en diagonal, otro giro, caminan, hacen un cuarenta, otro cuarenta, hacen dos ochos de delante, otra caminata larga, otro giro, unos cambios de pasos, luego van para atrás, y al final dan un enorme gran súper giro así . . ."

Entre tanto contar, el caballero, con los ojos entreabiertos, va, mientras cuenta, deletreando el nombre de su padre: con la R, la O, la B, la E, la R de nuevo, la T, y con un girazo, la otra O.

"Se necesita una seriedad religiosa para bailar el tango," concluye el caballero. "Ya no existe más."

"¿Y Mattos? ¿Qué pasó con él?"

"Te conté huevon, murió de un infarto, de lo lindo que bailaron mis padres."

Miro a la pisa, a las pilas de viruta, de nuevo a la pista vacía, al DJ que solamente viene a levantar, al resplandor de unas llamas debajo de toda esta ceniza que hoy llamamos el hoy, el hoy, el hoy . . .

Y sólo puedo pensar en cuan rebuscado terminará este cuento. No quiere salir, no quiere. Me faltan unos años para madurar antes de intentar a corregirla. No basta tener la edad del narrador, de la edad de Il Sordo. No basta darle vueltas, o vueltazos. No basta profundizarla en multidimensiones. No basta. No basta. Basta. ¿Para qué bailar? ¿Para qué contar? ¿Para qué volar, cantar, disfrazar, ahogar? ¿Para toquetear mujeres, si al final y al cabo como todos somos cuentos acabados? Desde luego. Los pechos de miel de las damas con quien compartimos nuestros cuerpos, esas damas que se dejan llevar por el compás y el amor, un resplandor. Las quien pintan, las que sueñan. Juntos dejamos fuegos. Pronto dejamos almas.

La albiceleste

"¡Olé," gritaban, "Olé Olé Olé! ¡Se-mis, Se-mis!" Hace mucho que nuestro pueblo no canta así. Este entusiasmo lo acreditamos a la ingenuidad del nuevo entrenador, el señor Manzanar. A causa de su visión para nuestro equipo de fútbol nacional, el cambio de camisetas del anterior negruzco y blanco, a su actual alba y celeste.

Es el año 2018 y ha transcurrido casi un cuarto de siglo de estancación y recelo en nuestra tierra natal, la que también comparte el jugador de fútbol más conocido en todo el mundo: Leonel Andrés Semis. Nuestra economía está en la miseria, ni contar de la política. Ahora la gente, sin piedad, sin dirección alguna; de lo poco que nos une, la mejor es una pantalla de televisión, para celebrar un "¡GOOOOL!" nacional.

En este país especialmente es común celebrar con más clamor los derrotes de un equipo rival, que celebrar las victorias du un equipo propio. Podemos deducir una explicación: una derrota dura más tiempo en el espacio que una victoria. O podemos deducir todavía otra explicación: en este país nosotros llevamos adentro un daimon de autodestrucción; erramos por las calles adoquinadas de nuestro capital balbuceándonos un mantra de veneno: "A mí me fue mal en el último partido, ahora te toca a vos, ¡boludo!" Por ahora, manteniendo el rumbo que nos ha llevado tanto a la gloria como a la miseria, seguiremos tragándonos el mantra.

Después de la humillante derrota de la negruzquiblanca en el Mundial del 2014, con nuestra infame final contra Deulandia, al pobre Semis lo empezamos a llamar por su nombre anglosajonizado: "Lío." (Incluyendo yo, fanático que soy de él, lo llamaba por ese apodo ridículo por la simple razón que me causaba gracia pronunciarlo. Es que, siendo honesto,

nuestro Diez causó un verdadero lío.) Como ya se sabe, Semis falló en nuestro momento de empate mundialista, en la final, en penales, y luego al regresar acá, a su país, al nuestro, se encontró el pobre Semis con tanto odio y rechazo que no tuvo otra opción que refugiarse en su ciudad de infancia: Cóndoma. Por lo menos Semis, ahí, se encontró amado por su madre.

Cando el pueblo seguía sin registrarse con los cartógrafos nacionales, y la selección nacional, por su parte, ganaban mundiales, los humildes ciudadanos de Cóndoma se reunían en la entrada principal desde la ruta nacional que daba a su centro: una plaza-rotonda con una estatua de algún presidente. Cada tres por cuatro caía la estatua para abajo, cada vez que el pueblo fue tomado por un nuevo gobierno militar o retomado por algún nuevo presidente de una renovada democracia. Por lo tanto, en la historia de esta plaza-rotonda, que mucho no tiene que ver con lo demás de este relato, el pueblo adaptándose a los vaivenes de su gobierno nacional, llego a un punto donde decidió reusar el material la alguna estatua anterior para hacer la última estatua, en honor al más famoso de todo los condomitas: Leonel Andrés Semis. Desafortunadamente, por los albañiles del pueblo, hace cuatro veranos, a esta última estatua también la tiraron para abajo.

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My name is Zulema Eugenia de Manzanar. If you cannot pronounce my name, do not worry. I have always been a loner. Ever since my parents moved us back to the country where I was born, I have not had many friends. The few that I have are back in Texas, where I lived the last four years. I guess my parents thought they could start a life in North America, but realized that living the dream is much harder than the movies or the books make it out to be. Especially when living the dream actually means running away from a nightmare, which

was my family's case. Now we are back in our old Capital, only my parents are divorced, thank God, and so far things are turning out all right. If I write in English here, it is because my English teacher back in Texas suggested I keep writing so I won't forget what I have learned.

As I was saying, my name is Zulema. In the capital, where I was born, it is not a hard name to pronounce: Zu (Sue) – le (leh) – ma (mah). In Spain my name is pronounced "Thulema"—which I hate. And in the United States my name is pronounced "Zoolemuh"—which I also hate. When I was going to school in the United States, and a teacher or a classmate mispronounced my name, I would try and correct them at first. (It wasn't even just my name they mispronounced, or other Latin names in general; it was most names. Like, "Lily" for example, they would say "Le-li.") But then as a new school year went by it seemed the few students who actually got my name switched schools; naturally, also, the teachers who made an effort to learn my name also left. New teachers, new classmates. New bullies, new substitute teachers. Things cycled very fast, until I started having a bit of fun. I began making up names. At first I told the substitutes, "No, it is not 'Zoo-lima,' and no one calls me by my first name anyway, everyone calls me 'Thelma.' " And the substitute would nod his or her head and the whole class would snicker under the table at my joke. Sometimes I told people my name was Theodora or Theresa (usually names with the "th" sound, I am not sure why, probably because of what the trainers at a summer soccer camp in Barcelona used to call me: "Zu-zu" or "thu-thu.") I especially liked Theresa in English because it is one of the few times in English that the "h" is not pronounced, and works as an example of my two languages overlapping. "Honesty," is another example. No one says, "hhon-esty;" that would not sound "American;" that is, it wouldn't sound truthful. It isn't like I have anything

against the letter "h" in particular. My favorite word in English actually begins with the letter "h." Hope. I wish I had been called Hope. I sometimes tell people that is my name. It definitely would have made my life a (w)hole lot easier. At least in English. At least in Texas.

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Un periodista, desesperado por encontrar una historia que pudiera ganarle un mínimo de fama, manejó a Cóndoma en búsqueda de "Lío." El periodista a los pocos días de estar en ese pueblo remoto, descubrió que los ciudadanos no habían recibido a Semis con el entusiasmo que merece un excampeón de futbol internacional (o quizá, sí). Cuando regresó Semis a su pueblo natal, según se lee, con la vaga esperanza de recomenzar su vida, quizá como joyero de pescaditos de oro, o por lo menos como un kiosquero, la población le dio una bienvenida más apropiada para brujas. Habían atrincherado la entrada del pueblo, la plaza-rotonda; lo amenazaron, y hasta un condomita (no el más violento del pueblo, se cuenta) aparentemente agarró un puñado de mármol y se lo colocó contra la frente del pobre Semis. (Semis, años más tarde, afirma que la lastimadura sobre su frente fue un castigo Caíno por haber perdido la copa en penales, sin lugar a duda un acto divino, y que le sirvió como recuerdo recurrente de por qué valía la pena enloquecerse, obsesionarse, lanzarse hacia su nuevo propósito). Este "propósito" no lo sabremos nunca, pues Semis hasta hoy no ha entrado en detalles sobre que hizo después que le creció la cicatriz sobre su frente. Lo que sí sabemos—cuenta el periodista—es que en un país donde los locos fugan a sus pueblos natales, donde ciudadanos quiebran pedazos de mármol sobre sus compadre, donde se confunde el negro con el blanco, todo es posible. Terriblemente posible.

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No one believes me when I say, and I tend to say it a lot, that I can play soccer. Most of the kids back in Texas were really bad at soccer so it didn't even matter how well I played. But now that I moved back to my old capital, my skills are even less appreciated—and by that I mean, not at all. The boys here won't let me play, and now that everyone in my class is fourteen or fifteen, all the girls want to do is gossip about fulana de tal or fulano de tal, hang out outside of shopping centers, or make fun of the people getting on and off the buses. I would much rather practice soccer. Soccer, for me, is life. And I am not the only one.

***

Sigue el cuento del periodista. A poca distancia del pueblo, se encuentra una formación de rocas muy parecidas a las de *Los pica piedras*, donde se descubre que Leonel Semis ha pasado varios meses, viviendo la vida de un eremita. Cuenta el periodista (tengo aquí una copia del relato) que Semis no era más el Semis de la tele, sino un Semis cavernícola; mas "Lío" que Leo, broma el periodista. Tenía Semis puesto una camiseta trucha de la negruzquiblanco (la de 10-Semis, de las que por un tiempo se vendían en la calle, ya no más). El investigador no se interesó por donde había conseguido la camiseta trucha, ni cómo un excampeón de futbol no guardo una camiseta oficial. Quizá esto actuó de símbolo, me pregunto. De todas maneras, cuenta este relato a mano, que la camiseta estaba "echa bolsa;" que Semis se había radicado entre las piedras ajenas a su pueblo natal y tenía pensado conocer "El Sur," para olvidar del futbol, del país perverso que prefiere más crucificar el fracasado que reagruparse entre sí para ganar la próxima. Estaba flaco, cuanta el periodista, este Semis eremita. "Acerca del minuto noventa de nuestra entrevista, como si su cuerpo estuviera permanentemente

mimetizado a su obsesión futbolística, el excampeón frenó la conversación. Se sentó piernas cruzadas ante de mí, cerró los ojos, y, con una columna resplandecientemente recta, él jugose el mudo. No me volvió a contestar ni una sola palabra. Indudablemente, la vida de eremita no le ha tratado bien." Así concluye el periodista su relato, de la manera más pedante que he leído jamás en un artículo deportista. Ni vale la pena advertir que este relato sobre un Semis pos-2014, un fracasado delirante, fue totalmente ignorado. Yo mismo casi lo tiré, si no fue por este párrafo que precede la conclusión: "El silencio de la cueva resultaba pesado. Detrás de Semis se veía miles y miles de pelotas de futbol; en esto, sí, al profesional de futbol internacional no le falto la guita. Junto a las pelotas, y realmente eran miles, había un inflador bastante robusto. Sé que el inflador se usaba puesto que la mayoría de las pelotas de hallaban desinfladas. El aire pesado también forzaba a que uno baje los hombros, a que largue los pensamientos tóxicos que suelen pesarnos más allá de la atmosfera, llámense lectores [sus palabras, no las mías], Semis disimulaba ser un dragón acaparador en su locura dentro de esta cueva remota del interior del país. Aquí él ha permanecido los últimos meses, y se imagina permanecer un poco más, hasta alcanzar una perfección futbolística que él mismo admite es irrealizable. Aquí, en el aire pesado. Aquí, donde transcurrió mi entrevista con el Semis infame. Aquí."

A pesar de esta parábola, entre la conclusión del periodista que sigue esas líneas y lo del aire pesado, tengo mis dudas. Pienso (como pensé la primera vez que leí el relato, ya hace casi cuatro años) que no sólo era Semis completamente capacitado para hablar (o sea, no un mudo loco; porque demostró no serlo la semana pasada con su *return* al mundo de fútbol), sino yo insisto también que Semis no pasó los últimos tres años y medio en solemne meditación y vagabundancia por el Sur (aunque, desde luego, debió meditar bastante, por su

nueva clarividencia en la cancha de fútbol). Semis debió pasar día tras noche entrenando, con ese millar de pelotas, para este momento, hoy, el mundial del 2018, su regreso al mundo deportivo.

El mundo quiere saber: ¿Será Semis el mismo de antes (un choto), o será este nuevo Semis, un Semis renovado? ¿Será Semis el deplorable antihéroe de la negruzquiblanco, de sus primeros mundiales como parte de nuestro equipo nacional? O: ¿Será Semis un renovado héroe, un nuevo kosmos, un hombre redentor?

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After hearing of Semis's reappearance, I finally felt better about moving back to Buenos Aires. Something about his return to the world of soccer has brightened my day. Something about knowing we are currently in the same city makes me smile. Apparently he has been in a cave for the last forty months, starving himself to near-death, meditating, juggling a soccer ball to a new world record, busking for cash on the highway, running with wild wolves, dancing chacarera with the gauchos of Santiago del Estero, eating raw twigs with Francis in Tierra del Fuego, and making love to the penguins of Antarctica. No one really knows, so many people make stuff up anyway. Especially in this country. If exaggerating a story were an international sport, we would have won every mundial ever—though I hear the Iranians and the Kenyans are pretty good at making stories up, but I am not sure whether that is a fact or if in Argentina we just tell ourselves that they are as good as us at lying.

Sorry, back to Semis. Yes, he is back. Why did his own country (my country) treat him the way him the way it did? I don't know. And where was he the last couple of months? All we have are rumors, not answers, to both. Probably no one wants to see him play because

of his penalty flop in the last world cup. People are so unforgiving—in Argentina as much in the rest of the world (at least from what I know). All it takes is one mistake for people to completely ignore you, to sweep you under the rug so to speak, to forget all the good you have ever done for them. I guess it is also true that people wrongfully assume they can do one good thing and then expect all the bad ones to disappear. This I only know from watching my parents get divorced. As far as Semis, though, I am just glad he decided to come back and play for the national team after what happened four years ago.

***

El camino hacia la angustia, ¿para qué retomarlo? Me imagino a Semis, en esos momentos de contemplación de "cavernícola *zen*," reviviendo esa última jugada que hizo con la camiseta negruzquiblanco (la oficial). Minuto ciento-diecinueve: sobretiempo. Iban cero a cero: hasta cuando Deulandia metió un gol por entre las piernas de un defensor nuestro, apenas rozando luego los dedos del guante del archero negruzquiblanco. El defensor, su castración evidente en su rostro, fue la victima de mucha burla *online* por mucho tiempo después—esa imagen de total sorpresa, como una máscara. Nuestro arquero ni pudo levantarse; lo que ayudo malgastar el minuto ciento-veinte que quedaba del sobretiempo.

Recuerdo bien, aunque pocos se ponen de acuerdo conmigo hasta que les muestro el *clip* en el cual el único jugador que fue a levantar a nuestro caído arquero fue Semis. Sí, Semis; el capitán, como corresponde, pero se sabe que lo hubiera correspondido a cualquier jugador de la negruzquiblanco. Y cuando nadie del equipo, ni el defensor humillado, ni nadie, fue a levantar al arquero de su vergüenza, ahí se materializó la quiebra de nuestra selección

nacional. Que nadie se acuerde de que Semis ayudo a nuestro arquero no molesta. Sobre lo que paso próximo, ahí sí estamos todos de acuerdo—

El árbitro da dos minutos de extra-tiempo. Semis, líder, con su pie firmemente sobre la pelota, y el número Once, su más fiel compañero al lado derecho—y los deulandeses, borrachos con su gol, esperando a que Semis acabe el partido de una vez y por toda—empiezan. Semis se la pasa al 11, que de inmediato se lo devuelve a Semis. Semis cruza por la izquierda de la cancha, la movida más segura, mientras los delanteros deulandeses, atacados de sorpresa, se tropiezan uno tras el otro, y en tanto mandan cuatro mediocampistas de prisa hacia adelanta. Un error que Semis aprovecha rápidamente. Como un relámpago, él supera los delanteros y los mediocampistas, con toda facilidad, cruzando uno, dos, tres, seis jugadores que habían perdido todo aguante en un pique para alcanzar a Semis; y ahí, sí ahí, quedando entre Semis y su meta, dos defensores y un tal Heinrich Van Herr, arquero infame de Deulandia. Sus dos metros de altura deberían de haber parecido doble para Semis en ese momento extático. El estadio estaba en bochinche, una clamorosos ruina, una mezcla de lenguas entre los dos país representados en la cancha, todos unidos en un solo grito de algarabías extraordinarias. Finalmente, con cada metro que lograba Semis eliminar entre la pelota y el arco, se aclaró un solo sonido, que aunque no llego a achicar al arquero deulandese un solo centímetro, se nota, por lo menos, que le incite un gramo de nervios:

"¡Olé, Olé Olé Olé! ¡Se-mis, Se-mis!"

En mi grabación del partido, que ha quedado clavado a mi diviar desde el momento que pasó en vivo, intentando narrar todo lo inenarrable de un partido final de un mundial, la cámara hace un *zoom out* generoso en este momento decisivo del partido. Quedan segundos. Se ve, detrás del locomotor de Semis, un equipo, una ola, un tsunami de negruzquiblancos

siguiéndole. "¡Se-mis, Se-mis!" canta la masa. "¡Olé!" Uno tras otro defensor deulandes es cruzado, ni chance tuvieron, el primero entre sus piernas mal dobladas, y el otro; aunque el segundo pudo atacar a Semis con un poco más de violencia, tirándose de cabeza contra Semis, sacudiéndolo con un golpazo al plexo. ¡Paf! Al árbitro sopla el pito, pero Semis sigue, mareado un segundo por el cabezazo del torpe defensor. No se despreocupó jamás de su meta, el arco. El árbitro sigue soplando, pero Semis se lanza para adelante. Llega a tres metros de la caja del arquero, y de repente sale Heinrich Van Herr para barrerlo. Semis, apurado, planta su pie derecho al lado de la pelota y patea con tanta vehemencia que se cae; dejando que la pelota sigue de largo. Los pedazos de tierra picados por la zapatilla de Semis ni habían aterrizado al piso de la chancha antes de que Van Herr lleva sus dos metros de altura por encima del pobre Semis, planchándolo.

Pero la pelota entra. Todos gritan:

"¡GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
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OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOL!"

Pero, ya se sabe, la negruzquiblanca no cobra. El árbitro había soplado su pito, dos veces. Infracción contra el defensor, e infracción contra "La plancha" Van Herr. Ni el deulandes más enfermo diría que Van Herr no mereció la tarjeta roja después de ese tipo de

enfrenamiento de poca caballería. Donde hay controversia es si Van Herr lo había llevado por delante a Semis *antes* o *después* de que Semis había pateado la pelota. La opinión de la mayoría, y del árbitro en ese momento, es que Van Herr impuso su cuerpo sobre Semis *antes* de que Semis pateara. Tanto que a Semis le devolvieron la pelotita y le pidieron que pateara tres metros fuera del arco. No fue penal, sino *free kick*. Estimado lector, como he mencionado, yo aquí tengo la grabación y le podría demostrar sin lugar a duda que Semis había pegado la pelota un segundo antes de que el bruto de Van Herr lo barriera por el pasto. Es lamentable. Pero… no estamos ni acá ni acullá, porque así es el fútbol, amigo, y lo que sí sé es que lo que transcurrió momentos después no se lo olvidará nadie.

Semis, planchado por el Heinrich "*Bügeleisen*" Van Herr, queda un minuto tirado (si fuese posible regresar a un punto en el pasado, solo uno, para Semis sería, creo yo, este). Durante este minuto, en el que el árbitro lo echa a Van Herr, los deulandeses lo remplazan con un joven desconocido, pero eso no importa. Semis finalmente se levanta con la ayuda de su equipo y con solo diez segundos en el reloj. Y los números del reloj van subiendo. Hasta que técnicamente no deberían jugar más estos dos equipos. Pero el árbitro sabe que si no le deja a Semis patear el *free kick* se le pondrá encima todo el estadio. Entonces lo deja patear a Semis. La cancha empieza a cantar en total armonía nuestro himno nacional. Es uno de los momentos más tiernos que he visto en todo mis años (y he vivido varios). Los deulandeses, en cambio, atacados por unos nervios inigualables, preparan una fila entre Semis y el arco. El nuevo arquero, un joven sin picante, de apenas veinticinco años, trata de disimular su preocupación. Pero no puede. Los temblores de su labio inferior son tan notables, que hasta Semis los nota desde su posición desventajosa tres metros afuera de la caja mayor del arco.

Semis manda un beso al estadio, otro a Dios, y con una patada de zurda, paff, mete otro gol.

Nunca vi a tantos hombres llorar como había visto en ese momento, más que en el himno nacional del minuto anterior. Así terminó el sobretiempo de la última final de la copa mundial—en empate: uno a uno; y al terminar, entró en su acto final: Los Penales.

De los penales del 2014, ya se sabe, fueron para los Deulandeses, destacado por el peor *miss* de la historia de los mundiales, el fracaso de Semis, quien no pudo traducir el ímpetu de su último golazo a un golcito en penales—donde también meter un gol hubiera valido la pena. Y pena, en seguida, lo hubo.

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My father inspired me to like soccer. I could say he inspired me to love soccer, but I am old enough now to know no one can make you love someone or something. Another way to say it is: my father loves soccer and so do I, but because I want to. My father—though his passion for the sport sometimes overshadowing us—doesn't visit us too often these days. I understand why. Mama doesn't. Back when we were living in a small house outside of the capital, all of us got along. I don't remember my parents fighting back then, though, a lot of that part of my life I tend to forget anyway. It wasn't until we moved to the US, to Texas, that I clearly remember the start of my parents' arguing. My older sisters (they are all older) told me, before we were leaving for "America," that moving there would bring us six closer together. Then, when we actually moved to the United States (I keep writing United States, though what I mean to say is Texas; Texas, to me, is the furthest thing away from the United States, maybe more so than Canada, though I have never been to Canada) things didn't pan

out like my sisters had said. We didn't come together; we fell apart. Because we had no cousins or aunts to spend holidays with, you would think we spent them closer as a nucleus (word from my Psychology class). But no. My family, that is, my parents and my sisters and I rarely spent time together. And that is around the time I remember the earliest fights between my parents. First it started in the bedroom. My older sisters would tell me, "Lema, no seas chiquilina, no sabés nada de lo que hacen mamá y papá en su cuarto," but I knew what they were doing wasn't what I wasn't supposed to not know about yet. I might have thought it for a minute after my sisters ordered me to stop putting my ear to our parent's bedroom door at night, but after about a year, the same angry yelling began popping up in other rooms of the house. In the kitchen, in the living room, and even in the backyard during my birthday party. I will never forget the most awkward birthday party of my whole life—not that I've lived that long, but I've had enough birthday parties to know which ones suck. It was my last birthday party. A handful of my friends and I were in the backyard of my parent's house in Houston. We had a piñata, a few snacks, and cumbia music. Somewhere between the candles, blowing them out, and opening the present my father had gotten me (a brand new world cup soccer ball), my parents went back inside the house. Part of me wishes my older sisters had been right, that all my parents were doing was satisfying their insatiable lust (another Psychology word) for each other in odd moments of the day. But no. Apparently the soccer ball had reminded my mother of why she despised my father, despised the sport, despised the world. And so she took it out on papá. That was how my birthday, and my parent's marriage, ended. Candle wax pooling over the *tres leches* cake, no one eatting it, no one having fun.

My family and I moved back to our country, so my parents could finalize their divorce. And everyone blames someone else for it, except me. I blame myself.

***

Lo que más me sorprende, aunque si me pongo a pensarlo bien (cosa que me cuesta más y más cada dia), fue nuestra reacción colectiva como nación en contra de Semis. Mi intención no es separarme de la muchedumbre de este país, que justamente es el problema: la división, perdón no, la ruptura entre opinión popular, la grieta entre hermana y hermano, la separación y su mal aliento. "Vos perdiste, na na na," eso, la burla, el "a mí no me salió bien, pues espero que a vos te salga mal." Eso es lo que me sorprende. En el caso del mundial 2014, no tanto lo que dijeron nuestros enemigos (los deulandeses) de nosotros, sino lo que dijeron nuestros compadres de nosotros. "¡Sabía que Semis lo iba a cagar!" (¿Cómo?) "¡Nosotros siempre perdemos!" gritó un llorón descamisado en la tele a pocos minutos de los penales; sacándose, por supuesto, su camiseta negruzquiblanco. "¿Qué vamos a hacer?" La esquizofrenia psíquico de nuestro país, el tirar para abajo nuestro equipo y su líder a pocos minutes de cantar el himno nacional, jamás lo comprenderé. Desde luego, como quiera usted lector calificarlo, Semis "la cago." No vale referir de qué lado pateó, ni como el arquero jovencito deulandes atajo ni no atajo, ni nada. Solamente que al fallar, Semis se arrodilló, por decir, y hasta su reciente regreso, permaneció arrodillado.

Tengo escrito sobre un *estiqui* (en este momento no lo hallo, entonces parafraseo): "Si hubiera no metido el Diego su segundo gol de la semifinal contra los ingleses en el '86—y más si hubiera terminado el partido en un empate—nadie se hubiera ni enterado de que el primer gol fuese una "mano de dios." Simplemente hubiera sido "otro gol" del Diego, como

han dicho en el '14 sobre el tiro libre de Semis a veinte metros del arco fuera de tiempo oficial de un sobretiempo en la final de un mundial (un golazo, che, ¡la puta que te parió!). Desde luego, en la historia sólo hubo un barrilete cósmico. Pero me intriga el siguiente pensamiento: ¿Cuantos barriletes flotaron sobre la metafórica cancha de Fútbol, para después terminar bocabajo en la arena de la mismísima Miseria, en la del menosprecio, en la del olvido, de la amnesia, y hasta, finalmente, de la indiferencia?

***

"Se-mis, Se-mis, Se-mis!" That's how they chant his name across the world. I love Semis. Not in a fangirl kind of way (yes in a fangirl kind of way), but in a "he is my hero" kind of way. Heroes are different, right? I don't think I know any heroes in real life. I remember an essay my home room teacher back in Houston asked the students to write one day. The prompt was: "Write about a hero in your life." Most of us wrote about our mothers or father, great for them. I wrote about Superman. My teacher gave me a failing grade. I never showed my parents the grade. They would have asked me, "Why must you lie so much?"

I don't lie. And I don't have a particularly active imagination. All I want to do is become a soccer star. Is that so hard to ask? No!

"Can I be a soccer star, oh great soccer lords above?"

Semis got his big break at sixteen, that's when FC Barcelona picked him up and began primping him to be the beloved superstar he was (and still is in my opinion) four years before the infamous penalty kick. I am not even sixteen yet and already I feel like I am as good as he was (if not better) at this age. No one believes me when I claim I can kick the soccer ball really far. That sounds silly. But for me, that means a lot. Really. From center field I land the

ball inside the goal net. I have been practicing to make goals farther and farther away even, the goal always shrinking in my sight, and so far I haven't reached a distance far back enough so as to be unable to make it eventually with a little practice. The ability to make a goal as far back as your own half of the soccer field might not sound that impressive during a real game—with live midfielders trying to tackle you and a goalie blocking the door of his precious goal—but the way I see if is this: If I can make a goal farther and farther back, which implies my target getting smaller and smaller from my point of view, then should I ever be played as a forward Eight or Nine player then I will have trained myself to aim for a more accurate shot, which really, is all making a goal takes: Accuracy. Aim for the smallest point possible, between a jungle of elbows and a storm of cleats, through furious defenders and a jealous goal keeper, and kick the ball at just the right time, at just the right angle, with just the right force, and watch it shoot straight (or bent) for your target, your goal, never losing sight of the ball, never losing sight of the spot you marked until it all lines up. And that's how you make a goal. That's how you attack in soccer. And, yes, that is why I am training to aim for smaller and smaller goals by going farther and farther away. I will play for Barcelona in no time. My name will be chanted across the biggest stadiums in Europe: "Zulema, Zulema, Zulema!" And by then people will know how to say my name, because news anchors across every channel will have pronounced it correctly on television.

"Zulema, Zulema, Zulema!"

Just like they chant it for my new superman, my new hero.

***

Se cuenta del primero encuentro entre Semis y el nuevo entrenador de la selección nacional, el estimado señor Manzanar, ahí en Rusia, en un hotel de lujo moscovita. Ni habían empezado los partidos del grupo de la muerte, siempre el nuestro, todavía. El *coach*, pues, había llamado a Semis con el pretexto de planificar una nueva estratégica para ganarnos la copa.

Junto con su capitán de cancha, el entrenador sacó su *ace* desde una caja inidentificada de algún rincón del cuarto. "¿Qué es?" preguntó Semis. Manzanar sin respuesta, con una navaja rusa que había comprado en el aeropuerto, perforó la tapa de una de las cajas. Semis se acercó mientras Manzanar cortaba una y otra cinta hasta abrir por completo la primera de las cajas. Al abrirla, Semis quedó completamente asombrado, como un hombre ante un fantasma, su destino.

"Es la hora de abandonar el luto," anunció Manzanar. "Fijate bien, che: Las nuevas camisetas."

Semis, con pura parsimonia, levantó de la caja recién abierta una camiseta casi irreconocible, aun con las mismas dimensiones y rayitas de la vieja camiseta negruzquiblanca.

"La camiseta…" balbuceó Semis, casi en forma de pregunta, "…no es blanco y negro."

"Cierto, sos," respondió Manzanar. "No es blanco y negro. Sino blanco y celeste."

Semis tanteó las fibras laceas de la nueva camiseta. Todavía recordaban el caluroso labor de su taller—supuestamente fueron pedidos a hacer la semana pasada, en una maquiladora mafioso de los rusos del norte del país, seguramente hechas por unos niños tan joven como su hija, admitió el coach, pero que "Por favor las manden ni un día antes ni un día después" de su llegada al hotel de lujo moscovita. Todo fue hecho en secreto, y hasta ni

los árbitros la semana siguiente—al comenzar los partidos del grupo de la muerte—no supieron que hacer con este cambio de vestimenta. Los noticieros pasan horas todavía discutiendo la legalidad de este cambio de camiseta a último momento, pero a la selección, y menos a FIFA, no le importo un catzo. Para ambos, el único color que vale la pena es el verde del dólar.

"¿Somos los blanco y celeste entonces?" preguntó Semis, frotándose la frente cicatrizada. Manzanar dejó que un silencio nocturno recorra la habitación de hotel, antes de llevar su mano derecha al hombre derecho de este, como diciendo que a veces dos cosas contrapuestas pueden hacerse juego, como el alba de un nuevo amanecer y el celeste de lo que sigue. Y dijo:

"La Albiceleste, Semis. De ahora en más nos llamaremos la Albiceleste."

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I never stopped believing in Semis. Then again I don't let what I watch on television, or what I read online, or what or what the boludo next to me is yelling affect the way I think and enjoy a soccer match. Semis made his comeback. We passed the round of sixteen. Now, no one will play with his kind of guts, with his kind of passion. He has gone through hell and back. He won't back down, he just won't. He is like a beast, a superman, an Achilles with that calm serene look in his eye before a match, knowing he is going to parish eventually, but not before achieving the ultimate glory: holding up soccer's World Cup. Semis. The greatest soccer player of my generation, if not the greatest in the history of soccer itself. Will he win? Will we? I certainly hope so.

Good luck.

A boy counts: “Diez, eight, five…

The Brief Life: La Vie Est Brève
(Juan Carlos Onetti)

Only in dreams came Gertrudis now, her cheeks round and hard from her juvenile laughter, regaining the nervous quiver with which her head separated each laugh.

The invitation which la Queca had made me to go to Montevideo had separated me from Arce, made me irresponsible of what he thought or did, filled me with the temptation to see him descend with sluggishness to a complete cynicism, to an invincible bottom of vileness from which he would be obliged to rise to act for me. It also served, this invitation, to discover, mature, my old desire—so many times insinuated and rejected—to find again a Gertrudis in Raquel, of being once more with my wife, with the most important parts of her, by way of her skinny younger sister, so different but in Gertrudis's age at that time, a little sillier and full of that Nordic blood from their father, but, just now, in this year, truly the other's sister.

Sucking on his empty pipe, the old Macleod had whispered to Stein that he would throw me in the street at the end of the month; had traded with a check for five thousand. Meanwhile, I almost didn't work and barely existed; it was Arce who attended the regular binges with la Queca, in the budding pleasure of hitting her, in the shock of it being easy and necessary to do so; it was Diaz Grey, writing about it or thinking about it, shocked by my power and the richness of life. Now the generous old friend of la Queca came to visit her on Saturday afternoons and—tired of hearing from behind the wall of the apartment a silence that inhibited the imagination because I offered her everything—I threw myself in the street, would buy a cheap bouquet of flowers, dared to be ridiculous the whole long ride in the subway and went to offer it to Mami, to contemplate with a little disgust the indolent

fondness with which Stein, in his button up, attended as a host should to the ghosts of the old guard, chalk full of scars and heroism.

I greeted Mami and the immortal women; there was, also, a little Jewish man, bald and with gold-rimmed glasses; perhaps it was Levoir, the one who played rounds of rummy and daring nights on the plane of Paris. Stein went around, laughing with the women, his shirt unbuttoned and his cup in hand, breaking maybe deliberately the ambience which Mami created, Saturday to Saturday, with skill and patience. As if the women, I thought, the colors of their dresses and the tones of their voices, together with her and the little taciturn Jew, reduced themselves to flowers set by Mamie in the living room with an identical flare to the ones revealed by the flowers heaped over the table, the piano and the floor.

I got bored there thinking about the consequences of the loss of employment, in la Queca, in Arce and in the quiet old man, in a Raquel who was thicker, in a Gertrudis who was younger. Mami allowed that they halfway open a window to the evening sky, that Stein turn on a lamp next to the piano, and finally resigned himself, blinking equitably towards me and the bald visitor, to leave the record needles and approach the piano. She balanced heavy in marching there, stretching her sash, passed before us the smile of condescension; she hit in passing the cheek of Stein, grouped me with a joking look, went bending to buzz next to Lina Mauser's head. Mami lifted herself over the laughs and transported toward the angle of the piano a new smile, equally sad, but of higher brightness, in which her tolerance had been separated from the others and she directed herself now to herself. She waited with her head inclined over the end of roses and tuberoses.

"The one about the warriors!" yelled Bichito.

"Oh please…!" replied Mami, without moving, almost without disturbing the face with which she kept the result of her silent invocation.

Stein went to place himself behind the immortal Elena and put his hand on her head.

"Whatever Mami wants," he said; he raised the woman's hair and spun it around his cup. "The first and the last belong to God."

"Always of love," groaned Bichito. "And old-timey, like the ones my grandma used to sing."

"The ones I sing, the ones I sing…" repeated Mami sweetly; she raised a different smile, with less light and more humbly, facing it to me. "If you would be so kind…" she clucked the little man with the glasses.

"Please." The guy smiled, he moved a hand to swat a fly. "You don't need me, really."

"It's that we're such good friends…" recited Stein, mimicking Mami. "…such pals, that we could pass the whole day insulting one another without rancor."

"How about the one we heard at Esther's?" said the little Jewish man, "you all remember?" And he began to hum swaying his body.

"Ah…" remembered Mami; she blinked, her chin filled with furrows. "*Une autre fois*, yes. But that, good sir, is not a *chanson*…"

"In any case, he has a point," said Stein bent to kiss the nape of the immortal Elena. "It's very pretty."

"Right?" the little man hurried to say; he was smiling, but he wouldn't abandon himself to courtesy.

"It's truly beautiful, Julio," agreed Mami, lovably and stubbornly. "But it is not a *chanson*."

"Of course," exclaimed Bichito. "For her, if it isn't sad, it isn't a *chanson*."

"Neither for me, honey," affirmed Lina Mauser with a rent smile. "The ones no one forgets are the always sad."

"We're waiting," said Stein. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached the limit…"

Mami interrupted him shaking her hand as if conducting a fan. She had her eyes half closed, as her old face shook in a trance; from the unbearable perfume of the flowers over the piano, from her heart submerged in the past were reaching her the words she had to sing.

"And so, *Si petite*," Bichito decided. "Have it your way. Sad, it is."

"Yes, you are much too kind," said Mami. "But you don't have to go on guessing. No one can know what I want to sing, not even why."

"This brute is biting me, Mami," shrieked the beautiful Elena.

And so Mami returned to a condescending smile, appropriate for a mature and busy woman who is gracious enough to play with a group of kids; she made to spin her smile and held it at last over the little man who executed in silence *Un autre fois* hitting his knees with the egg yolk of his fingertips. And all of a sudden, as if just now hearing the rhythms which open the way, he threw his head backwards without violence and appeared to submerge it, while she began to sing, in a reduced atmosphere of nostalgia, in a personal world of death. And there, stuck there the flabby face of a baby, so solitary and far away from anyone and, notwithstanding, for us, for those six representatives of the present moment, the three men and the three women which were listening to her, for the decked out prostitutes which squirmed dramatic expressions and thoughtful too under the phrases of the old *chanson*, Mami revived the woman who had emigrated from a victorious Paris, thirty years ago, to meet the language and soul of a new people through the melancholic clients of Rosario, San

Fernando, Mataderos and the cabarets; who had stumbled across her husband, Stein, and had taken him back with her to Europe—in a short bitter sweet excursion to the past, with her fixed smile, sad, blissful and defiant—nurturing him and dressing him by way of repetition of *chansons* and ancestral positions.

Perhaps we ourselves didn't know what we were listening to, perhaps one of us could intuit it with a sentiment of piety and ridiculousness; during those five long minutes of the song, during the pauses which coincided with the imagined orchestra, she, stripped of fat, years and havocs, sang with the aggressive self-assurance of young blood, with the love for surrendering and the risk born of a body that's only been enjoyed by the one it has chosen. I was looking at her, myself stirred and incredulous; an elbow touched the top of the piano, a left arm hung, arched, following the form of her hip; languid but firm, making her voice well up from the hole that her head in dizziness was undermining in the past, pained and in pleasure, singing:

Revien, veux tu

Ton absence a brise' ma vie

Aucune femme vois tu

N'a jamais pris ta place dans mon cœur, Amie

Revien, veux tu ?

Car ma souffrance est infinie

Je veux retrouver tout mon bonheur perdu

Reviens, reviens, veux tu ?

Without coming back to us she began another song, and because she had her cheeks moist and read, some of the other women murmmered, "But this woman is killing herself!" So Stein abandoned the beautiful Elena and went to kiss ravenously the Mami's neck; laughing, without letting her go, he began to say:

"You all know the game; the girls, I mean. Of course it is better to play it at night and drunk; of course that today we have these respected gentlemen. It's a game in which come into play all the qualities which men pride in. And not only the five senses; this game involves hand-eye coordination, imagination, our potential for reason and deduction. Easy rules, although severe. An incomparable game if one can count on the good faith of one's companions. An object is selected, known by everyone, preferably tiny for obvious reasons to anyone who has intervened in such jousts. Someone is selected to search for the object, and that person leaves the room; the object is stashed, that person returns. He knows what to look for; he knows the first letter of the place where the object is hidden. He can look for it anywhere, without exceptions, furniture or property, animate or inanimate, whose name, or some of its names, begin with the letter which has been stated, the first initial of the great secret.

But no one wanted to play—they looked to Mami, immobile still, smiling with humid eyes—and the little Jewish man shook his head, No. Stein returned to kissing Mami's neck.

"No one wants to play with me," he complained. "Mami, dear, are you crying?"

"No, it's nothing," murmured she, separating herself from him sweetly. "I'm a jerk, Julio." She inclined smilingly towards the little man. "You will forgive…"

"Please, madam!"

"I would wager," said Stein, "he is thinking in how many languages he could play the game."

The little man started to laugh in his chair, his hands under his legs, swaying his body from one side to the other. Mami sighed at the first silence and bulked her tiny round mouth.

"If you would, good sir…"

He neared the piano and found the keys. Sat on the stool the little man pressed his fingers and made them sound; he sank the keys with his ring fingers.

"When you're ready, ma'am."

"Is that Levoir?" I asked Stein.

"No," he whispered. "Marvelous. I love her more every day. What spontaneity and delicious rapture!"

"Anything," said Mami. "Wait. Go on playing, meander… when I feel like I have just the right song…"

"Impromptu," Stein whispered to me. "And yesterday they spent the whole night rehearsing. That's what I call a woman. The last one on earth."

The little Jew jousted from one rhythm to the next with sluggishness, moving by desponding his hands in front of his chest. He guessed that up there, between his shoulder and the flower vase, Mami's head finally fell backwards; and then he began to play with notable clarity, softly, almost in sordina.

La vie est breve

Un peu d'amour

Un peu de reve

Et puis bonjour.

La vie est breve

Un peu d'espoir

Un peu de reve

Et puis bonsoir

sang Mami.

Samo como alternativo
(By: Ahmad Al-Ashqar)

--para jean-michel basquiat

~~regocijarme en jean-mi~~

~~regocijarme en jean-mi~~

quiero regocijar en psicosis:
tejido de prisa canasta be-bop
arma aguda matiz-hez y funk;
jero-prisma heroísmo hecho
heroína-ismo particulado croma-
adorno hecho calle profeta
zigoto borracho borrado

en este rincón,
un negro sin título en contra.

el ensayo del dicho destacado
ensaya una pinchada sonrisa radiante
(des)cortesía la misma vieja mil veces
adelante era Samo por la cual.

regocíjese en su altiva altura salpicando

untado por noches atados picando

colgado con caballeros sin sal

píntese sobre ventanas sin marcos por donde

él pega vistazos a ver la arcadia urbana desnudo

a carne y alma.

Asesino

(Assassin)

> El nombre «Viejo de la Montaña» no designa a una persona individual sino que era el título—en árabe, «Sheik-al-jebal»—de una serie de jefes que presidieron de 1090 a 1258 una comunidad u orden militar de fanáticos sectarios musulmanes, llamados Los Asesinos, que se hallaban repartidos a través de Persia y Siria. La etimología original de la palabra Asesinos se trata de la palabra árabe hashishin, «bebedores de hashish», y se atribuye al hecho, o a la suposición, de que cuando los agentes del Viejo de la Montaña partían en misión criminal, iban fortalecidos a la tarea con la embriaguez del hashish o cáñamo indio.
>
> Thomas De Quincey

Bajó el libro, y hubo silencio en la casa. En general, Alma no disfruta de los libro, aunque fuesen traducidas del inglés y plegada de un tema macabro: el asesinato. Pero este libro sí lo disfrutó, a pesar de su falta de experiencia con semejante temas, a pesar de las muchas oraciones de adornación superflua, a pesar de que abría las páginas monótonamente. Simplemente no tenía nada que hacer excepto rozar libro por libro los estantes de su inmensa biblioteca—un dormitorio del primero piso en realidad, entero, lleno de libros. Más que nada, disfrutó de la lectura por el silencio que produjo el acabar de las imágenes. El silencio mata pánico y fobia.

Alma no conoce la palabra *abandono*. Y menos su definición. Pero siente su significado igual. Lo mismo pasa con las palabras: escondite, soledad, nostalgia, Lápiz Azul, llanto, desasosiego, vértigo, infraestructura, otoño, pétalos, sépalos, oscuridad y esperanza. Los padres la abandonaron hace mucho tiempo. Sola vive en la casa. Ella tiene edad suficiente para cuidarse a sí misma. Pero poco más. Sabe sobrevivir, pero no cazar; sabe vestirse, pero no maquillarse; sabe hablar, pero no amigarse. Peor de todo, no sabe exactamente el día en que se huyeron de su vida sus padres para siempre. Y, con el vagabundeo del tiempo, sin fotos como recuerdos o birome para escribir, ella fue olvidando lo que es un cumpleaños, tener compañía, usar un reloj, y pedir ayuda. Hoy en la vida de la joven existe muy poco fuera de higieniza personal y perseverancia.

Sí, Alma no recuerda cuando se fueron sus padres, pero recuerda que empezó a escuchar *las voces* poco tiempo después. Por eso disfruta tanto de estos momentos sosegados. No son como otros gustos que desvanecen al prestarles atención. Como la salud, el descanso, un cumplido. No. El silencio. Eso, para Alma, duraba. Y mientras duraba, establecía estabilidad. Su mundo volvía a tener algo de sentido. Porque estas voces que ella escucha no es la voz que la guiaba cocinar una simple tortilla o la voz que la acompañaba entre párrafos de un libro de aventuras, sino era una voz intangible. Una voz compuesta por otro, quizá en otro idioma. Idioma: otra de esas palabras que Alma no conoce.

De su falda a la alfombra, el libro desliza y cae.

Wake up.

Alma levanta la cabeza. Se había quedado dormida. Mira a los costados, los cinco metros cuadrados de piso; mira a los rincones de esa biblioteca, las pilas de libros acabados,

los estantes de madera barnizada, el tragaluz, primero fuera de foco, luego presentando un sol no tan borroso. Han vuelto las voces. Se agarra de su silla hecha de paja.

You must feel pretty weird after your nap.

Una inmensa ansiedad toma la garganta de Alma. Un hambre, quizá. Algo. Ella tiene que salir, ir corriendo. Nunca en su vida sintió algo igual. Como la primera acidez que come un esófago infantil. Su pie bate. Bate. Bate. Ahora bate con tanta furia y abandono que la silla la catapulta al piso. Dolor abraza sus hombros y casi grita Alma.

Go outside, now.

Revolea la silla. Sale corriendo. Choca contra paredes. Es una casa cualquiera. Ni la reconoce. Casi ni la ve. Colgados cuadros vacíos giran como mollinos. Empuña varios picaportes, pero empapan su mano con grasa. Y no encuentra su dormitorio. Parece no estar. ¿O nunca tuvo? Una "L", la escalera. Desciende, pero solo termina subiendo un piso. Da vuelta, y baja a la planta baja. Lluvia, en el salón. Un horno, el baño del pasillo. La cocina, violeta. Después amarillo. Luego blanco. ¿Siempre fue así? Los cubiertos saltan y se paran de un pie. Son de plata. Alma se ve en el reflejo de los cuchillos, incluso los tenedores. Al ver las cucharas bailar el Samba, pagándose una contra la otra. Alma huye. Encuentra la puerta principal. Que cae para abajo. Y luego pega un capirotazo a su lado, y vuelve levantada contra la pared. Alma alcanza el picaporte. Cálida. La gira. Abre, y su vista choca contra un muro de ladrillo. Se gira y le asombra una sección de metales flotante. Alma traspira. Espera que la puerta principal vuelva a caer. Alma vuelve para atrás. Respira con dificultad, jadea. Ahora todos los muebles bailan el Samba. Le saludan a Alma. La puerta principal aparece. Ella sale a todo lo que da.

A nice autumn day, isn't it?

Alma fricciona sus brazos expuestos al viento fresco por el bosque que rodea la casa, la vida, todo que Alma conocía. Ella camina sin rumbo. Las pocas hojas que no tapan el lodo de este bosque, oscilan como banderitas. Parecen apuntar en una misma dirección. Alma vuelve a friccionar sus brazos.

Keep walking. Just keep walking. You are almost there.

Alma tiene puesta un vestido de verano, pero no la abriga bien. Es un vestido corto, juvenil, de algodón anaranjado y decorado con pétalos blancos, caricaturados no realísticos. Donde Alma no está cubierta, tiene piel de gallina. Suspira con las dos manos en dos copas para atajar el vapor caliente. Es lo único caliente en este el bosque marrón, hojas secas por todos lados. De repente escucha una corriente. Lejos, suave, pero se escucha. Sus pies dejan de crujir las hojas secas del suelo, y ahí la corriente se escucha más todavía. La localiza, y se hecha a correr. Al correr deja de sentir frio.

Once you reach the bridge, you will walk down to the river. At the river you will see my arms. Go to them. You will get wet. Do not be afraid. Focus on the hands. And fall in, upwards.

Wait for me.

Llega a un puente al final del bosque. Es un puente hecho a soga y tabletas de madera, estrecho sobre un precipicio no muy profundo y un rio fácil. Casi no se necesita el puente, piensa Alma. Al otro lado hay más bosque. Sin pensar, no aturdida por nada más que el viento contra sus brazos, Alma corre hacia el puente, pero ni bien llega a pisar la primera tableta, la madera se quiebra. Alma retrocede un paso, los pétalos caricaturados de su vestido se derriten sobre la tierra que marca el comienzo del puente, o su final, dependiendo de donde viene uno. Alma no reacciona, apenas recuerda que su vestido no sirve de nada en ese frio. Alma ve que los pétalos derretidos sobre la tierra han cristalizado como peldaños que

van al rio. Lo lógico sería seguirlos, se dice Alma. Y los sigue. No teme. Va bajando, bajando hacia el rio tranquilo, hasta que el puente llega a estar sobre su cabeza y nota dos brazos en el rio alzadas hacia ella. Los trata de interpretar, pero no los comprende. Mete un pie en el agua. Fue lo más caliente desde estar en aire libre. Más caliente que el picaporte principal de su casa. Sus pies descalzos—¿estaba descalza? se pregunta—sus tobillos, y luego sus rodillas se sumergen bajo el rio. Alma. La corriente intenta llevarse los pelos de sus piernas, pero no llega a arrancarlos. Los brazos misteriosos, pálidos, piel de oliva, arrugados, siguen alzados hacia arriba, hacia Alma. Ella llega a lo más profundo de rio, pero alcanza caminar en punta de pie sin ahogarse. Una bailarina soñadora. Cruza los dedos de sus manos con las diez que la llaman. Luego suelta. Se rompe burbujas entre ellos. Ella se lanza. Los brazos la abrazan. La ahoga. No queda ni pánico ni fobia. Se llevanta.

Eunoia

1. From Ancient Greek *εὔνοια* (eúnoia, "goodwill", literally "well-mindedness"), from *εὖ* (eû, "well, good") + *νόος* (nóos, "mind, spirit").
2. (*rhetoric*) Goodwill towards an audience, either perceived or real; the perception that the speaker has the audience's interest at heart.
3. (*medicine*, *psychology*) A state of normal adult mental health. (See opposite, *Paranoia*.)
4. In book eight of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the term to refer to the kind and benevolent feelings of goodwill a spouse has, which form the basis for the ethical foundation of human life.
5. (Curious fact) How the word is pronounced in English gives little indication to how it is pronounced in Greek, despite the etymological roots. Imagine two lovers who want to express a reciprocal feeling, but miscommunicate due to something as simple as pronunciation, or spelling. Of course, lovers don't often need words, when one glace says it all.

And suddenly, remembering the man who was run over the day she first met Vronsky, she realized what she must do.

Anabelle's heart beat together with the one she imagined Anna Karenina had in that exact same moment.

With a quick, light step she went down the stairs that led from the water pump to the rails and stopped close to the passing train. She looked at the bottoms of the carriages, at the bolts and chains and big cast-iron wheels of the first carriage slowly rolling by, and tried to estimate by eye the midpoint between the front and back wheels and the moment when the middle would be in front of her.

Here is it, Anabelle thought, the moment we've all been waiting for, having previously heard about this final scene from her classmates in seminar. Yet she still couldn't believe it. Anabelle didn't want to believe it.

'There!' she said to herself, staring into the shadow of the carriage at the sand mixed with coal poured between the sleepers, 'there, right in the middle, and I'll punish him and be rid of everybody and of myself.'

"How could she think of that idiot in this, her final moment!?" Anabelle yelled to her two cats, Pee and Vee. They each stopped licking themselves to look up at Anabelle, for a moment, before continuing to lick themselves. Behind the cats, the curtains of her bedroom shook with an autumn wind blowing in. This draft played over the goosebumps around the scars on Anabelle's forearms. "Only one paragraph left," she thought, "before the end." Every single detail in this coming paragraph will be important—every single detail. Anabelle took a deep breath, and read the following words outloud in her head:

She wanted to fall under the first carriage, the midpoint of which had drawn even with her. But the red bag, which she started taking off her arm, delayed her, and it was too late: the midpoint went by. She had to wait for the next carriage. A feeling seized her, similar to what she experienced when preparing to go into

the water for a swim, and she crossed herself. The habitual gesture of making the sign of the cross called up in her soul a whole series of memories from childhood and girlhood, and suddenly the darkness that…

Anabelle paused. She looked up at her curtains; they were red; they swayed with the wind. Was much written about Madame Karenina's childhood? No. But the crossing, that habitual three step gesture, like counting the beats of a waltz on your chest: hadn't the couple at the last train station crossed themselves? And going in water for a swim? Anabelle remembered herself as a preteen, diving head first into a lap pool. She shook her head, and continued reading, muttering these words as they came to her pink lips:

The habitual gesture of making the sign of the cross called up in her soul a whole series of memories from childhood and girlhood, and suddenly the darkness that covered everything for her broke and life rose up before her momentarily with all the bright past joys. Yet she did not take her eyes from the wheels of the approaching second carriage. And just at the moment when the midpoint between the two wheels came even with her, she threw the red bag aside and, drawing her head down between her shoulders, fell on her hands under the carriage, and with a light movement, as if preparing to get up again at once, sank to her knees.

Her book shook in her hands. Anabelle couldn't breathe.

And in that same instant she was horrified at what she was doing. 'Where am I? What am I doing? Why?' She wanted to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and implacable pushed at her head and dragged over her. 'Lord, forgive me for everything!'

Anabelle felt like her eyes had strings, and some invisible hand pulled on those strings. She wept.

She wanted to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and implacable pushed at her head and dragged her over.

"She wanted to live."

She wanted to rise, to throw herself back… the candle by the light of which she had been reading that book… went out for ever.

Wind blew out the candles on Anabelle's desk and the distinct noise of skateboarders grinding off the apartment complex's stair rail could be heard, but Anabelle didn't notice either. She had her face in her arms and her arms on her pillow.

♀♂♀

It didn't feel like four a.m. It didn't feel like she had class later that day.

Anabelle tossed about under her blanket. She kicked off her copy of Tolstoy from the foot of her bed as if it were the writer himself occupying that space.

"Son of a bitch! Writes a book about himself, calls it the name of his anti-hero, kills her, and exults himself as the model human. I can see Sofia's point about her husband, why the old lady couldn't stand him."

Anabelle grumbles. And lifts the book off the floor, sets it on the bed next to her, and pats its front cover. "Or why Sofia couldn't leave him."

Anabelle made a cocoon with her blanket, and thought to herself: Anna made the mistake of taking herself too seriously. Anna took the death of the muzhik in Moscow as a bad omen. Anna mistook her dream about the French-babbling muzhik for a premonition. Can a dream tell you the future? Or does it speak about the present? Was Anna foreseeing her death, or was her dream of death only wish-fulfillment?

"Tell a dream, lose a reader." Anabelle lay her hands over her navel. "I get a stomach ache; I dream of a stomach ache. I dream of an alarm going off; I wake up and see my alarm has gone off. I read the Gary Saul Morson essay on *Anna Karenina*, and then that night I dream of reading an article detailing my own life. Dreams and real life are connected," Anabelle speculated, "in so far as they are in conversation. Tolstoy: the king of realism, the prince of modernity, the fool of philosophy. He pisses me off, his details, but what he wanted to do was echo real life. How many details do we ignore in real life? How many traffic lights, strangers' faces, how many dirty dishes, and cracks in the wall, how many wrinkles in the bedsheets, and number of leaves on a tree do we overlook? We might see a tree, but not its leaves. How? Only a botanist cares to look deep or long enough. Can we be botanists for books?" Anabelle figured that's what a literature professor was, a botanist for books.

A flare of sensation went off in Anabelle's belly button, where she had scratched unknowingly. The sting felt new, like a surprise, and she could only assume that she had caused it; but maybe not?

"What if I were a character in someone else's story?"

Ana toyed with the idea. "It would make life a hell of a lot easier."

¿Por qué?

"Because then I wouldn't have to worry about what I did. It would all, I mean, all my actions would be the writer's fault. I wouldn't have to take responsibility."

Anabelle stared at the blank ceiling above her bed as if her thoughts were scrawled upon it. Her eyes scanned as if to read those thoughts. She exhaled. The headlights of a new thought blinked quickly, as if through the window, like a car's blinders making a signal. Then the thought came.

"Maybe that's why Anna felt so out of control: she blamed it on external forces, premonitions, omens: she tossed herself unto the tracks, but really she had tossed her free will long before, tossed out any responsibility, made herself out to be a victim."

Vee hissed at Pee, as she usually does. Anabelle snapped, "¡Caprichosa!"

Anabelle admonished herself for her temper, and remembered to feel pity, not anger, for the dead heroine: poor Anna Arkadyevna. She sprawled her limbs across her queen mattress, seeing her dream-catcher with purple feathers on the wall behind her.

"Madame Karenina," she whispered, "was a woman of high society. She learned the rules, no, rather, she was trained from infancy for one thing: to get married. She never had a say, but that doesn't matter, because playing the part of high society woman she was good at—she was, after all, beautiful—and because playing court came so naturally to her, she learned all the rules and gave herself to the game. This was her first entreaty," Anabelle mumbled, reaching for the notepad under her bedside lamp. "This she must escape, because…

"Young Anya was snatched up by Alexei flunkey-ovich Karenin. Who could blame her? We don't know her childhood, but I bet she was all in for this older dude—some sexy

ass government type, a suck-up, but rich, manicured, but good-smelling. Yes, and didn't Tolstoy write, let me find it—"

Anabelle flipped through the earlier pages of the novel. Pee could be heard caterwauling, grating the ends of the red curtain with his claws.

"What a tome," she whispered, noticing now and then how she was speaking outloud to herself, turning to the section where Monsieur Karenin first confronts his wife about the rumor of a possible affair, "page 145."

'Anna, I must warn you,' he said.

'Warn me?' she said. 'About what?'

She looked at him so simply, so gaily, that no one who did not know her as her husband could have noticed anything unnatural either in the sound or in the meaning of her words. But for him who knew her, who knew that when he went to bed five minutes late, she noticed it and asked the reason, who knew that she told him at once her every joy, happiness, or grief – for him it meant a great deal to see now that she did not want to notice his state or say a word about herself.

"Were they in love, then? Did she change?" Anabelle flipped back to the last scene, to an underlined passage around the time Anna is at the last station, "bottom of page 763, top of 764."

Remembering Alexei Alexandrovich, she immediately pictured him with an extraordinary vividness as if he were standing before her, with his meek, lifeless, extinguished eyes, the blue veins on his white hands, his

intonations, the cracking of his fingers, and, remembering the feeling there had been between them, which was also called love, she shuddered with disgust.

"They were in love. But I don't think she changed; something overcame her. She was tapped like a beer can that had been violently shaken; no, Anna is classier than a beer can. She was shaken like an active volcano, at her roots, to eruption. What was that bit in Jenny Offill's book?" Her copy of *Dept. of Speculation* had four pages dog-eared. The third marked page came to a passage with two sentences underlined. *Go back to the beginning,* it read (advice to a broken couple). *How did you meet?*

How? When? That was in Part I, yes, yes, cha-a-a-pter, Anabelle thought, returning to her copy of Tolstoy, X plus VIII:

Vronsky followed the conductor to the carriage and at the door to the compartment stopped to allow a lady to leave. (That's Anna, ok, this is how they met, and how I met her too. But how does Tolstoy describe her? In what order does he build this first impression?)

…*she belonged to high society*… (Ok, her social class at first glance.)

…*He*…*felt a need to glance at her once more – not because she was very beautiful*… (Which of course she was.)

…*not because of the elegance and modest grace that could be seen in her whole figure*… (Her habits, her personality; we're getting deeper.)

…*but because there was something especially gentle and tender in the expression of her sweet-looking face as she stepped past him.* (Her humanity; a face that says it all.) *Her shining grey eyes, which seemed dark because of their thick lashes.*

The narrow mirror hanging over Anabelle's closet door ran from the floor up. The light of the bedside lamp, which Anabelle had on to reread the "meet cute" between Vronsky and Madame Karenina, illuminated the whole of that mirror. From Anabelle's bed, at a side-glance, she saw herself in an incandescent glow that played with the color of her own eyes. Her lavender colored eyes. The tiny folds under those lavender colored eyes. Would her eyes in her thirties turn gray, like Anna's? Anabelle hoped so.

(More body, more body, and more)…*rested amiably and attentively on his face*, *as if she recognized him, and at once wandered over to the approaching crowd as though looking for someone. In that brief glance* (aha! this book is like one long glance at Anna) *Vronsky had time to notice the restrained animation of that played over her face and fluttered between her shining eyes and the barely noticeable smile that curved her red lips.* (What is her body, a metaphor? Or the natural expression of a woman, and the voiced turmoil of a soul begging to be discovered?) *It was as if a surplus of something so overflowed her being that <u>it expressed itself beyond her will</u>, now in the brightness of her glance, now in her smile. She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but <u>it shone against her will</u> in a barely noticeable smile.*

Anabelle had underlined the parts about her "will"; this was important. If Anna had changed, was it her fault then, or Vronsky's, or society's? Was her suicide an act of free will, or vanity? Anabelle couldn't figure it out; nor understand why Tolstoy repeated himself in this description about the eyes and the smile, over and over; three times, was it? Anabelle only felt the effect of his prose: its hypnotic effect over her. The repetition effect. Tolstoy writes

inward from Anna's exterior to her interior, and back out, and back in; giving Anna a heartbeat; giving Anna a soul.

¿Alma?

"Again, page 145, with Karenin."

He saw that the depth of her soul, formerly always open to him, was now closed to him. Moreover, by her tone he could tell that she was not embarrassed by it, but was as if saying directly to him: yes, it's closed, and so it ought to be and will be in the future. (Is Anna choosing to close herself to her husband? She certainly seems to lie to him on purpose.) *He now felt the way a man would feel coming home and finding his house locked up. 'But perhaps the key will still be found,' thought Alexei Alexandrovich.*

Anna, a house? A key, flunkey. Where's that book? Symbols, dreams, ah, my Jung! Anabelle picked up her copy of *Man and his Symbols*. The cover shows a cartoon by James Thurber. In it a henpecked husband sees his home and wife as the same being. Anabelle turned to the page with the same illustration also inside. On that page there is a story about a patient who dreams of his doctor burning inside a house. Three weeks later the doctor dies of phlegmon, a kind of high fever. Jung here connects this story to an old dream quoted by Artemidorus of Daldis in the second century A.D.: a man dreamed that he saw his father die in the flames of a house on fire. Not long afterward, he himself died in a phlegmon (fire or high fever), which Jung presumes was also pneumonia.

"Damn! Are dreams premonitions, or are they our body's barometers? A message from the future, or an indication of a present bodily state?"

Anabelle had trouble differentiating the potential of reading dreams with their actual message, their relation to present experience with the future. She became frustrated with herself the way a child does who can't seem to fix a toy she has broken, folding her arms, and bringing them to her youthful chest. "Does the past inform the present, like a decision becomes an action? Or is it like Alan Watts says where the present creates the past, the way a boat's foamy wake spans outward from the boat itself; if so, then maybe the future creates the present. If that's true, then the future could send the present a message in the form of an omen. But wait, I don't want to believe in omens. Tolstoy wants us to remember reality; that much is clear. What the hell is a dream!? A boat's path doesn't create the boat; it's the other way around. What the hell is a metaphor? And why the hell did I read this whole damn book!?"

Time did not fly this early morning, but trudged, as dew on the green grass of the apartment's front lawn began to form.

What value did Anna Arkadyevna have for Anabelle Zena? They weren't the same person. They only shared similarities, rich upbringing, unsatisfying relationships with men, an outspoken inner nature, the desire to do good for children in spite of an unexplored ambivalence toward them, a similar ambivalence toward their own beauty, the ability to create life, write children's literature. Yes, Anna Kay wrote children's literature. And now Anabelle wanted to write children's literature. It was as if reading that same fact over and over in that book had the effect of infiltrating more than her imagination: the text had fueled Anabelle's literary ambition.

Any details missing about Anna's life, the childhood, the girlhood, that flash of life before her death, all of that Anabelle was able to fill in using the details of her own life.

Jumping into water, for example, Anabelle had been a swimmer. Anna must have been one, too. Anabelle, now eighteen, felt herself embodying the first half of the thirtysomething Anna Arkadyevna: from birth to eighteen. Now Ana wanted Anna to have a whole second half to her own life, from her mid-thirties to some imagined late seventies.

"I must save her," Ana thought. "I must save Anna. She must have a happy ending. I can't explain it. I don't know why. But she deserves a second chance. What she did was no worse than Oedipus, and he lived after his crime. Yet, what if she survives? Will Anna not commit the same mistake? True, she would need the one thing Tolstoy never gave her." Anabelle read the fuchsia-colored sticky note stuck to the inside front cover of her book, a note with a single word written on it in cursive—"I will give her this," Anabelle said, "but how?"—and thought of ways she could weave a motif that honed on in this new trait written in cursive, in fuchsia.

Anabelle reread that fatal last paragraph for clues: Anna Arkadyevna crossing herself; a rush of impressions that follow; Anna immediately regretting the decision. Ah, there it is, her most inner feeling…

♀♂♀

As if with the help of wings, Anna throws herself off the rail road tracks. She doesn't see her life flash before her eyes. Instead, she watches wafts of her black hair wisp in the vibrating air of the second train cabin at arm's length from her nose.

Then it passes, and then the rest of the train.

Not far, a muzhik drops his hammer and rushes from the iron he has been working on.

'Miss, miss!' he yells, closer now to Anna, herself still on the ground, looking at her red bag split open in two pieces over the train tracks: its contents spilled and scattered.

'Miss!' the muzhik cries, attempting to raise Anna, latching on to her bare arms. But she refuses his help. She won't get up, nor wants to, which confuses and frustrates the muzhik. 'Miss, listen to me, you were almost cut in two! Hey? Do you speak Russian, miss?'

'I am Russian,' Anna says, pushing the muzhik away, and wiping the sand and coal off of her palms with her palms. 'And I am not a miss, thank you very much.'

A curious crowd is drawn by the bantering between this society woman on the ground and the sweaty peasant. 'Yes,' Anna says, her gaze fixed on the spot on the tracks where she had tossed herself, hyperventilating all of a sudden. 'T-t-thank you v-v-very much. B-b-but please…'

The muzhik holds her arm, and doesn't let go. He is squeezing her too tight, he realizes, but is afraid, irrationally, that if he let her go, the train would somehow roll backwards, and this strange, beautiful woman would suddenly throw herself back onto the tracks.

'I beg your pardon,' the muzhik says, finally releasing Anna, and noticing the bruises he has left on her peach-like arm. "Only making sure you are well, Madame." Only after he has let go does Anna turn to him. The muzhik sees her gray eyes, notices her breathing, and is reminded of a woman he has once loved, the look she made when she apologized for breaking his heart half a lifetime too late; he takes a step back, and in doing so gets an even bigger image of this woman on the floor. The woman is smiling now, not exactly to him, he can tell, but to some inner thought, some new revelation; or perhaps he is imagining, or perhaps she is struck by his unusually formality, which he himself is

unaccustomed to. She steadies herself up to her feet, and continues to smile, brighter and brighter, though breathing strangely. The muzhik takes it as a sign that she must be coming to her senses.

'I…I…' Anna looks at the ground, at the rails, at the spot she has been transfixed on: there the shimmer of a small vanity mirror shines with exaggeration, on account of its dozens shards scattered about, mixing in with the sand and the coal. Only the gold rim of her glass remains intact, and scintillates more and more the longer she stares.

'I, uh, dropped my mirror is all,' she says, 'and tripped trying to get it. Please, let me breathe, I can't breathe.' Anna snatches her glassless mirror, and presses it to her bosom.

The muzhik takes yet another step back, and gives the woman, who does look so young, more space to breath. She is breathing in quick short breaths, like a bunny, he notes. But at least she is standing. 'I understand, miss, I mean Madame. I again beg your pardon. I was only making sure you were well.'

This rascal is at a loss for words, Anna thinks to herself, getting up on her own. And so am I. Although, my, he is handsome. But what was I thinking? Oh God, look at what that damn man made me do… no it wasn't that man that made me jump. Not him, or what's his name. Neither one. No, this was me, I chose to jump. And I pumped myself up to do it. And I actually did. Now this babbling muzhik, did he save me, or was it I? Yes, me. I could have easily lay on the ground. I could easily jump off another train track. What a rush! It's true what they say, suicide survivors, almost all of them, regret their decision immediately after. The will to live! The human will! Say, what? What now?

The muzhik is pushing away the crowd that has formed near Anna, who still stands by the train tracks where she isn't supposed to be, attracting attention as always, only now

she doesn't view all the people, the crowd, as ugly as she had a minute earlier. To her they are as angels; they all glow with curiosity; they abound with piety; and they have big wide eyes for her.

No, no need to exaggerate. But, they are big. And this muzhik, bless his heart, stuck on the fact that I asked him to give me space. Ah, Anna, you silly girl. Breathe.

Anna Arkadyevna walks up the stairs, back onto the platform, thinking the thoughts of a free woman: Where to? What next? My life can only get better from here. I know: I'll open up a shop: Anna's Classy Cakes!

Her hands hurt to make a fist, one of them is broken. But her red lips curve with a smile anyway, as she runs the other hand through her mass of black hair, and smiles at this, her hair too, and thinks, oh God, yes, I am alive, choking up at the thought, stuttering to herself, brimming with joy, brimming with excitement; it's like each little thought coming to her wasn't coming one after the other, but all at once, like a gentle snowfall of thick snowflakes that wouldn't melt upon hitting the ground, if only they landed on one's tongue, if only she just so happened to stick it out as a joke to the world.

'I will go to the next town,' she says. 'I will start over. No one can judge me but God.'

♀♂♀

Anabelle clicked the top of her pen. It was bright with the light of a new day. The cats were asleep, one on top of the other, purring.

Anabelle recalled the novel's strange epigraph: *Vengeance is mine; I will repay.* And she remembered all the hate from her classmates: about how Anna deserved what was coming

to her, about how the book wasn't even that good, about how pretentions Tolstoy was, all this judging, the same talk that Anabelle would have gotten from the girls in her sorority… "But it isn't for us to judge," Anabelle says, turning off her bedside lamp. "Vengeance is 'His,' the epigraph should say, to clear up any confusion. It's only our job, our joy, to understand a character, a person. All we need is a clear mind, and goodwill."

She reads the word penciled in cursive on that fuchsia colored sticky note of hers.

"All we need is *eunoia*," she says, praying that her story, after an edit of course, would inspire people to reread this classic about a woman who lost all hope, but perhaps wouldn't have, given a second chance.

Karass

I can't fully describe him. I am too busy thinking of myself. From his movements, he would seem to possess an inner calmness, but I am not sure, unable to make eye contact, which is how I can usually tell. Folks call him the ferryman, and something else. What was it, again, his name?

He climbs aboard his patina-chewed boat, and unties a line that thumps against the hull when dropped. The boat now floats free. He balances over one of the two bronze boards with bare feet. Four of him could sit inside comfortably, or two of him and one of me. I don't feel ready when he reaches out to grab my hand. Before my feet are off the pier, before I touch the boat, I feel his hand. It is rough like tree bark, but fleshy at the same time. I wonder if it hurts him to have hands like that, ferryman hands. The wooden oar he uses—likely carved from one of the many nearby cotton trees—is pretty splintered, and I figure his hand is too, so I flinch as I hop in. Missing the tiny leap, my foot plops into the water, but the ferryman catches my jacket collar and pulls me up in time. The water is so dark, and the night too. I can't see my reflection, much less my oil-black loafer sinking to the bottom of the river. I couldn't care less. I am distracted by the two bronze boards that seem to shine, and feel cool. The board I sit on is like ice. The ferryman pushes off the pier with his oar. We are off.

"Thank you," I tell him.

He nods his head. He doesn't speak.

"Gracias," I repeat. "Tusen takk. Merci. Cảm ơn bạn. Спасибо. Dankie."

He nods again. He doesn't know the words, but seems to understand them. And also, somehow, he manages the brisk wind in only his plain handwoven shirt, and equally plain cotton pants. For me, it is cold. I rub my shoulders from over my jacket's shoulder pads.

"My chauffer said we could drive to a bridge, but that it is better I cross with you. He also said he knew your wife. Terribly sorry."

The ferryman only narrows his eyes, as he strokes the water. I almost recall his real name. It was one of those names you hear, simple enough, but easily forget.

"I have wanted this for a long time," I say, rubbing my pleated pant legs before exhaling hot breath into my cupped hands, eyes on the riverbank opposite of where we launched. "I can't believe I am almost there. My days of stress are over."

The ferryman is standing up, bare feet set firmly inside the hull. His eyes, which I can't bear to look at, never leave the horizon. The distance to the other side of the river would take two minutes to walk, if one could walk on water. Riding with the ferryman means something, I have been told. Now, seeing him row, I relax, and ponder what that something may be. I will probably figure it out later; for now I am grateful.

I ask the ferryman about his occupation, about how long he has been here, about why he lives on one side of the river as opposed to the other, but receive no response. So I proceed to talk about myself.

"I owe money," I tell him, light-headed all of a sudden. "Pray you won't tell anybody? I owe a lot of money. First I borrowed from friends. Then from family. Then from the government. I paid back many of the loans, but, you know, interest. I was good at turning a dime into a dollar"—I laugh nervously—"even better at turning a dollar into a hundred. But

the problem was that there were always more things I wanted to buy for a hundred than for a dollar, so I couldn't hold on to any of it for too long. In the end, debt caught up with me. You know, just because you surround yourself with stuff doesn't mean you are rich. It could mean you owe a lot of money. I learned that the hard way. Debt weighs more than gold."

I pull a flask out and, after taking a swig, offer it to the ferryman. He rejects my offer with a wave of his hand. I finish the liquid, then toss the thing over the patina-chewed boat, into the dark water. The splash looks like a wink. I am learning to let go, I remember.

"Money," I tell him. "If I have learned anything, it is that it doesn't mean a thing. It's only accounting. It can't keep you warm, can't feed you, can't talk to you, can't listen. Oh, money can buy you these things, but money itself can't do these things, you see? It isn't a good in itself, only the promise of goods. And I suppose next you'll say a promise has never been broken."

I flick my chest pocket—think to myself, and it can't fill an empty heart—where I have rolls of cash and bank notes. I sigh, and close my eyes.

"There's a story that tells of how all the bankers in the world got together to do away with gold, jewel and material bartering. They collected their bars of gold, and such, and hid their precious metals in an underground vault on a beautiful yet secluded Polynesian island. They decided, 'From now on, we will track our business using this new invention, money.' Life goes on, and civilizations prosper, because, you see, no one had to carry around heavy bars anymore. Bartering was a terrible waste, really. Folks began trading goods and services on faith, using notes. One day, the bankers came up with the idea of having a big retreat on this Polynesian island. They said, 'Let us gather our wives and children, head off to the island and celebrate our prosperity.' So they did, and they traveled to the island with their families.

They enjoyed parties and music and cocktails and even some alternative, adult entertainment. You know how bankers are. But, see, all the children who had been forced to lounge around the island got anxious. 'We want to see the gold, daddy!' they asked. 'Of course,' the bankers replied. So the bankers, wanting to dazzle their children with all of the world's wealth, asked the head caretaker of the vault to take them underground. The caretaker, normally not a nervous man, said, 'Well, sirs, the gold and the gems, ehm, why would you want to see that old thing? Wouldn't the children prefer to watch our new fireworks display?' The bankers replied, 'Don't be silly, we want to see the gold, take us down right away!' Having stalled as long as possible, the caretaker took the men down, and when they got there, oops, all the gold and all the jewels were gone. The caretaker confessed to the gentlemen that a terrible earthquake did away with all the gold months before. The bankers turned to one another. They had been trading all this time on nothing."

I tug at my jacket collar. "Funny what ties people together, isn't it?"

The ferryman drives the nose of the patina-chewed boat forward. We have reached the other shore of the river, full of mushy silt that embraces the ship with a gentle crunch as it lands.

I chuck my other oil-black loafer overboard, somewhere behind us; and stand my bare feet in the water, which here feels warm and looks greenish despite the night. I ask the ferryman what I owe him for the ride, and reach for a roll in my chest pocket. The pocket feels deeper than I remember. I actually don't need money where I am headed. A cool breeze bathes my face.

We make eye contact. I see his eyes are the same color as mine. I hand the ferryman all the money I have, all of it, literally empty my pockets of rolls of cash and bank notes:

enough to buy a small tower in any major city in the world. The ferryman bows as he receives the money. Not the overreaction one would expect from a normal man.

He launches toward his side of the river with what I understand now is definite inner calmness. I turn towards the path, take one step, then vanish.

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The ride back to his side of the river feels longer than the ride out to the silted shore, as always. Was he a ghost? the ferryman wonders. Most don't even know they are, too busy wanting something to notice. And his passengers tended to overpay, though he never overcharged. This time it was the money, but it could be anything. The ferryman doesn't need much. With the surplus he brings home, relieving himself of this burden his passengers pass on to him, he makes sacrifices to his miniature shrine.

Once at his side of the river, the ferryman ties his patina-coated dinghy to the pier, and steps into his shanty dwelling. It is close enough to the river to hear its current, yet far enough away for the ground to be dry. The inside is mostly earth, with a cot on one side, a bucket underneath it, and a shrine devoted to his patron spirit, the ultimate ferrymen. The shrine sits at the brightest spot in the shanty, under a crack in the metal siding that passes for a ceiling. The two most precious objects on the shrine are a pair of photographs of the ferryman's deceased wife. They are the last remains of what was once a stack. Last autumn, the ferryman vowed to burn each and every one of these souvenirs of his wife's image. By destroying the images, the ferryman believes he is letting the painful memory of her death go. He is down to the last two. After making a pile before the shrine with money the last

passenger has given him, and placing a photograph of his wife atop the pile of money, the ferryman lights a match. He watches it all burn, turn to smoke. It reminds him to forget.

The fire lasts a long time. The crackling of flame does not stir the ferryman, nor do the scattering of embers in the windswept shanty, as much as the smoke does. "Nirvana means to blow out," the ferryman chants, in a language few use. "Blow out like a candle." After the money and the image of his wife have blackened to ash, his thoughts and ego subside. He steps outside to do his job, and awaits the next traveler who needs to cross the dark river.

A few hours later, a woman atop a royal litter approaches, petting a gray-eared bunny in her lap. No men carry her litter. She hovers. The woman, even from afar, shines with a moon-like radiance. Though the ferryman has never seen or heard of her before, he figures she is an immortal. Stopping at the head of the pier, she steps off her cloud-like litter. The bunny hops off her lap and scurries into the woods. The goddess, lifting the bottom of her sapphire laced robe, steps forward and greets the ferryman with a deep bow.

"You are the one I have heard so much about," she says, in her native language, words so foreign, so gentle, so beautifully taken for granted that they remind the ferryman of falling leaves. "There aren't enough clouds tonight to cross this river. Will you carry me across?"

The ferryman has already returned the goddess's bow, and is now nodding his head. He doesn't know the words, but again, from experience, he understands what they mean.

The immortal glides from the pier onto the patina-coated dinghy effortlessly, without revealing her covered hands from the inside of her sapphire sleeves. After settling in to one

of the bronze boards inside the hull, waving a loose hair away from her radiant face, she asks, "Shall we?"

They launch.

"My name is Chang'e," the lady says. "I am the goddess of the moon."

The ferryman only rows, and lets the goddess speak.

"Do you know why I travel? Oh, never mind. You won't know what I'm saying. But, I will tell you anyway, if only to know myself."

Reaching over her head, she draws a pair of hair sticks made of ebony, shakes her hair loose, and casts the jeweled accessories into the water. The water is darker than the sticks made of ebony. They cause the tiniest ripples, which waver in the current. In the sky, the stars twinkle; but in the river they shimmer; and in the eyes of Chang'e, as if excited by her words, the stars glisten.

"I was born in a land far, far away," she says. The ferryman senses pain in her voice. It makes her sound honest, but distant.

"I drank an elixir of immortality. My husband asked me to hide it. We promised never to drink it. But I had to," she says, and looks up at the stars. "Hm. I should tell the whole story."

The goddess clutches at her robe, where it parts at her bust.

"Long ago, the world used to be scorched by ten suns. No food could grow. Imagine, no wheat, no barley, no rice. So my husband, our country's greatest archer, shot all but one of the ten suns. The one that sets at night and rises in the morning is the one he left." A tear drop smears the powder under her eyes. She wipes her cheek, revealing the skin underneath.

"The other gods, as a gift to my husband, presented him with the elixir. He was moved, but dared not to drink the potion himself, that is, not without me. There was only enough potion for one person. So we promised never to drink it, unless we could find a second. Then, one day, while my husband was out fighting a war, and I tasked with caring for our castle, misfortune befell us. No secret is kept long in my province. A wicked man broke in with the intention of drinking the gods' drink. He demanded I hand it over. He hit me, and beat me. I was ravaged, and destroyed, but not defeated. As he ransacked the castle, I got to the bottle first, and drank the liquid. Enraged, this evil man found me and thrust a sword into my belly. But I was not harmed. I was immortal. And soon the gods whisked my body into the air, up to the moon, where I became its goddess. If you look hard enough, you might even see my rabbit there."

The riverbank's sediment crunches under the bottom of the patina-coated dinghy. They have landed on the other side.

"I haven't shared that story with anyone," Chang'e says, gazing the path before her. "Not since I returned to earth two thousand years ago. I came back to apologize to my husband, for drinking the potion without him. But I never found him."

The goddess cries. The ferryman wishes he could comfort her, but says nothing; he waits. She turns up and, with a sudden lightness the ferryman hasn't seen yet, she smiles. The gray-eared bunny has reappeared on her lap.

"It's silly, I know," she says, petting her bunny rabbit. "My only regret is not having died long ago, together with him. I should never have broken our promise. If I could, I would ask for forgiveness. Do you think he would—Hey, come back!" The bunny has hopped onto the silt. He scurries off on this other side.

Chang'e and the ferryman exchange glances. It has been a long time since a passenger reminded the ferryman of his wife in this natural way. She looks back, over her shoulder. "They were right," she says, returning to face the ferryman. "Seeing you, I feel better."

She bows, and offers the only currency left to her: mooncakes. She pulls out a bag of them nuzzled in her bosom from the parting of her robe. "My people offer these to me every mid-autumn. It is all I have to give."

The ferryman accepts the bag, and returns the bow the only way he knows how, deeply.

Chang'e inhales a great breath. Upon releasing, she closes her eyes. She is ready. She walks out towards her new horizon, and vanishes.

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The ferryman heads for his side of the river. The water seems darker now than it has been all night. He can't see anything. Suddenly, it hits him, tonight is the night of the new moon.

Between strokes, he pulls a mooncake from the bag. He takes a bite, pockets the rest. It is delicious. He crunches on five different kinds of nuts. He tastes loads of butter, and gnaws at a clump of sugar. His mouth tingles, and his forehead grows light. There are enough spongy cakes to perform a proper sacrifice at the shrine, he thinks, counting them. Perhaps even an extra one. He casts the extra mooncake over the side of his vessel, into the water. Before he reaches his shore, the cake drifts away, turns soggy, and dissolves into the current so fast it would seem the cold water had hungered for it.

The ferryman is back at his shanty home, burning the bag, along with the last photograph of his wife. He is afraid of burning it completely, though, so he only burns one

corner. He saves the rest. It is his way of mourning her, sacrificing her images. His eyes water. He cannot let go of this last picture just yet. It is, after all, his favorite. He remembers the silly promise they made long ago, till death do they part. Not without sorrow, he thinks, death didn't tear us apart, it parted you.

A khadi hat cocked on his head, he leans against a wooden post. The ferryman draws the bitten cake from his pocket and takes another bite, awaiting the next traveler.

A man, wrapped in a teal and orange animal skin held by a hemp rope, emerges from the forest. The ferryman recognizes the stranger—taller, and built stronger than any he has ever seen before or since—whose face glows in the night like that of a divine king.

"Greetings," the tall strong man announces. "I thought I might leap over this river, but figured I would ask you to take me first." The ferryman doesn't speak his language, but does admire its resonating tone, as one admires the sound of a guitar without knowing how to play it. The ferryman anticipates the man's following question.

"May we cross? I have failed my mission. I want to return home."

As they go, the boat tilts down at its head, where the giant man sits, but the ferryman rows them softly forward, standing far back enough on the bow to balance the patina-layered vessel.

They aren't halfway across the river before the passenger recounts his tale.

"Remember me?" the man asks. "My name is Gilgamesh. I crossed this river not too long ago, though, you were much younger than, striking even, muscular. Now your hair is as thin as spider web, and your arms as flimsy as ivy. Yet you row with style. This I admire. My best friend, he too, had style… before he died." Gilgamesh puts a bicep to his eyes. "The

gods presented him to me as an equal, we became the best of friends, but as quickly as he came into my life, they tore him away. Why? Why?"

The ferryman remembers the passenger having been particularly dreary the first time they met. He still seems sad somewhat, but reformed somehow, despite his sobs and stutters. The half-naked king, composes himself, pops his neck and stretches his arms, before continuing to speak.

"Aye, ferryman, I must have told you, for I tell it to all I come across: I couldn't bear the loss of my best friend, Enkidu. His death, grim, brought me closer to my own. So I ran away, in total agony, from the great-walled city of Uruk, at the mouth of our world's fertile crescent, with the hope of meeting a certain outcast, a hermit whom had been granted immortality. In search of him, I did travel to the end of the world. I did meet him. He told me his story. Told me it was impossible to conquer death, that his victory had been a fluke. He challenged me to stay awake for six days and seven nights, to prove that I, a king, a half-god, couldn't even conquer sleep, much less death. He was right. I fell asleep on the third day . . .

"No one can stay awake. We must sleep. We must dream. We must die…

"When I woke up, later, he asked me to leave, and handed me as a parting gift this herb. Look, it glimmers. Apparently it refreshes old age to youth."

Gilgamesh draws, from inside his animal hide, a plant that looks gangly, thorny, with flowers of five purple petals. The herb seems small in his hand, compared to his thick wrist and large forearms.

"I was stronger than my best friend," Gilgamesh says. "I had used him to feel young. That's why his death disturbed me so. It reminded me of my mortality. Have you ever used

a friend to feel better about yourself?" The giant is so overwhelmed by his oncoming insight that he crouches into a ball and rolls around what little space there is in the hull. "All I have is this," he whimpers, a thumb in his mouth. "All I have is this herb."

A wave crashes against the hull of the patina-layered vessel, and splashes water over the giant's face. Gilgamesh grunts, then rises. "What's the point of being young," he says, "if you can't share your youth with your best friend?" He plucks a violet petal, then another, and drops them into the water.

The ferryman keeps rowing, paying little attention to the plant in the giant's hands. Gilgamesh leaps off the vessel just before the boat rides into the pebbled mushy silt, to a halt.

Turning around, knee deep in water, Gilgamesh says, "What I liked most about my best friend was growing old with him. Now that he's gone… Ah. Fuck it. Thanks," he says, "again."

The ferryman figures the passenger won't pay him for the ride, given the rags he is in, but to his surprise the giant offers him the herb as compensation.

"It's all I have," Gilgamesh says. "Unless you want this." He begins to untie the knot holding up is teal and orange animal hide, but the ferryman waves his arms and shakes his head at the giant.

"Have it your way." Gilgamesh gives the ferryman a thumbs up, then takes a glorious inhale. For the first time in years, he feels the relief of a man who is close to home. He isn't far. He accepts that he will one day die. At least he reached for immortality. He may not have grasped it, as no man can, but at least he reached, and in reaching grasped something more, something even the gods lacked: equanimity.

The two part ways, one feeling heavier than the other. The lighter one disappears into the night, sure to evaporate with the morning dew; while the other rows back to his shanty.

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The ferryman considers tossing the herb, worthless to him, overboard. He does like how the violet petals shine in the dark, though. It reminds him of the boxthorn plants he and his wife used to pick. The memory pleases him as it comes to mind. But pains him in staying, in not leaving. Instead of sacrificing the herb to the river, the ferryman decides to burn it at his shrine, along with another corner of his wife's photograph.

He burns too much, however, more than a corner, more than he wanted, over the flames of that boxthorn plant, which shoots embers the size of fingernails: all but the top half of his wife's image remains: her upper-body and head, wrapped in a simple handwoven scarf. The charred image trembles in the ferryman's hands. This is for the best, he thinks.

The white light that precedes the aurora of a new day stains the sky. The ferryman isn't outside of his shanty before a visitor calls.

"Buen día," shouts the visitor, a knight, raising his palm. "Hermosa el alba."

To the ferryman the words resound as a chant in a temple. The knight requests the ferryman carry him, his squire, and their two animals across. The ferryman slowly readies his patina-rusted ferry, all the while gazing at his visitor's platinum suit of armor and lance, regal steed and accompanying squire: a short round man with a sizeable paunch, perched atop his own steed, a weary donkey. The donkey has half closed eyes, and can barely stand without

quivering from exhaustion. It is almost asleep. The man atop the donkey is definitely asleep, snoring loudly.

"¡Sancho!" shouts the knight, stirring his squire awake. "¡Caray, hermano, prepárese!"

The big-bellied squire is lobbed off his donkey with a quick poke of the knight's lance, and tossed to the ground. Upon waking up, the squire returns the knight's attack with a verbal jab, accusing him of something. The knight, taking off his helmet and showing a full set of wild locks, retorts. The two bicker for a while. Meanwhile, the ferryman concerns himself with how he is going to take the two men, their steeds, and himself across the river in an efficient manner.

Understanding that he is in a foreign land, the knight drops to the ground and draws lines in the dirt to suggest how they may cross the river, though in a most complicated series of maneuvers. Lines get drawn to and fro, single rocks are employed to signal multiple landmarks, and the last of a cantina's fresh drinking water is poured to signal the river through the whole plan as if it were a battle they needed to visualize.

The squire, still insulted by the rude awakening, curses his lord for wasting the last of their water.

The ferryman doesn't know what the men are saying, but he gathers that the three men cannot cross together in one ride, because that would leave the animals unattended. He also gathers that while the knight might be able to rein both the horse and the donkey, the short round man cannot. In no way, figures the ferryman, should the squire be taken first.

The knight, after another tussle with the round man, pushes his squire forward, signaling to the ferryman that he go first. The ferryman shakes his head and points a finger

at the knight; but the knight only nods and smiles: as if being pointed at were an indication of his idea being right, and not the complete opposite.

So, the ferryman takes the squire across first. Then comes back for the donkey. Then returns to pick up the knight, as planned. It is then, returning to the pier, that the ferryman shows that if he were to take the horse or the knight next, then the squire would lose control of an animal, or the horse would be left unattended back at the pier. The knight, devastated, credits his miscalculation to a myriad of yet-to-be-slain witches, and their black magic; the ferryman goes back to cross the river, twice, to bring back the donkey and the squire safely to the original side.

The knight (now claiming to be rid of any lunacy, in a language still foreign to the ferryman, who finds these characters more fun than annoying), insists they carry across the donkey first, because, pressing his palms together by his ear, forming a pillow, explains the donkey is tired and most likely won't run away. The ferryman takes the donkey. It falls asleep on the other shore, as predicted. Then the ferryman returns for the knight. Then returns for the horse. And then finally takes the squire across.

"If the donkey falls asleep," the squire moans, as if weary from the back and forth, "then it could have just as easily have been taken last."

The ferryman doesn't acknowledge the round man, or his foreign words. He rows the patina-rusted ferry from alternating sides, seated on a bronze board now.

"My master, he speaks well, but not in English," the squire continues, readjusting his pant belt. "Nor in any language shared between rational men. He speaks the language of fools, synonymous with romantics. For him, a sleeping donkey shipped last isn't the same as

a sleeping donkey shipped first. But for me," says the squire, "a sleeping donkey is a sleeping donkey!"

The ferryman—pleased with strange company, yet more so when it leaves—would have accepted as fair compensation the two travelers' immediate departure. But the knight will not leave right away. He vows to share his wisdom with the lonely ferryman in the form of a ten-minute monologue. The more he speaks, the knight figures, the higher the chances are that the ferryman will catch at least one word.

"¡Santos panzote, mi Sancho, revélese!" The knight interrupts his speech to awaken his squire, who has dozed off, in order for him to translate the final sentence.

". . .And so," moans the squire, "would it please the ferryman to know that the knight repays thee in continued retellings of your story, which we solemnly swear to retell, of thine most gracious generosity, so that your deed here tonight may live on in the minds of men for generations to come . . ." The squire wipes his mouth with the bottom of his shirt. "Also, he asks that you . . . thou . . . accept this as a token of his . . . our . . . gratitude."

The knight claps his hands twice, and out from the saddle pocket of his steed the squire draws a heavy tome: a copy of their 1000-page biography. After a most ceremonious departure, they leave for their home town, a place whose name one would not care to remember, to rest in peace forever.

The ferryman does not know how to read their language, but appreciates the gift none the less. He holds the book to his chest with his left arm, as he paddles with the cotton tree oar in his right.

The book fits perfectly between the shrine and the metal siding of the shanty home's interior, leaned upright, spine facing the cot. He could sacrifice it, but the ferryman figures

time will do the job for him anyway, eat up the pages like rust did his boat, or wear did his hands. Why not enjoy the book, hold it and imagine the hard work that went to crafting it. That is worth something.

He burns the last bit of the photograph of his wife (except for a pinch, her diamond-shaped face and it's indiscernible expression that mixes the melancholy of old age, the nostalgia of youth, and the understanding that one day the expression would outlast the subject of the image, perhaps even its observer; if he failed to burn it completely).

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Now, it is morning. The shanty sparks with earthen colors. The ferryman knows he should sleep. The days this time of year are terribly hot for him. He much prefers the still night, the gentle breeze, the light of the stars: even if tonight was cold, even the ferry job ties him down, so to speak, to riding between riverbanks day-in-day-out, helping travelers cross this obstacle along a well-beaten path. Rowing is all he has left; it is the center of his world.

The real world is too big, too mysterious. He doesn't want to see it all. But at least he helps others who do. Given the various kinds of strangers who ask him for help, maybe this river, as he has always assumed, really does hold together all the lands in the world. Maybe it really is its center.

Thinking these and other thoughts, the ferryman is approached by one final passenger. This someone, the ferryman definitely recognizes, for he is the ferryman's patron spirit: Yamaraja, the ultimate ferryman, the god of the underworld.

The ferryman rushes to greet the god, drops to his knees, and gropes his bare feet with hands and kisses; speaks in a tongue used nowadays only in sacred writings and prayer.

"Yamaraja, dear Yama, greatest of all ferryman, he who carries the spirits of men to the underworld, he who took my wife's soul from me, but never her memory—praise, praise be to you! Your four arms, lo, are stronger than any I have felt before. Your golden crown is brighter than any dress I've laid eyes upon. O, your jet black mustache is thicker than my oar! How can I serve you? What brings you here to my tiny river? Is it my turn to die? Please speak, for though I know few words, I can understand a great deal more."

The ferryman lauds the god, but the god does not swell with pride. Instead, Yamaraja blushes red, in spite of his blue skin, and lifts the humble ferryman up to his feet. The god bows his head before the man.

"You give me too much credit," says Yamaraja, still bowed. "I did not take your wife, you know that. I only carry the souls of men who avoid death. She did not fear death. Nor do you. Thus I am not here for you. I do come, however, to ask for a favor." While the god speaks, the sounds of his syllables are well-defined and intoned like the chime of brass bells, interspersed with accents like the crack of whips, and a vibrant hum. The ferryman, despite what he has heard, is most in awe by the sounds. He remembers growing up with images of Yamaraja always riding a creature.

"Where is your buffalo?" asks the ferryman, drying his nose with his plain handwoven shirt.

"I had to let him go," says the god of the underworld, turning up to the ferryman. "Eventually, we all let go."

"How can I let go?" asks the ferryman. "It is all I desire."

"Believe it or not," Yamaraja begins, clearing his throat, "I don't know."

Both their faces are flushed. Yamaraja averts his three eyes, so as to not stare at the ferryman; the god fears frightening the ferryman precisely when he must ask him for a favor.

Yama is too considerate, thinks the ferryman, and too modest. He will not answer my question, for I must answer it myself. And I know, without Yama even asking, why he is here. So, just as silently, I will offer to take him across my river.

The ferryman points an up-turned palm to his row boat. Yamaraja accepts. The two step towards the wooden pier. But before climbing aboard, the bud of an idea sprouts inside the ferryman's mind. The ferryman may have found his answer!

"Wait," says the ferryman, with a gleam in his two eyes. "You must have walked a long way to reach this river. Allow me to wash your feet. It is said around here that you broke the curse on a princess turned to stone by touching her with your feet. Now, if you enter my boat, I am afraid you will turn it into a beautiful woman. But then what would I do for a living? This boat is all I have left. So, please, allow me to wash your feet."

Yamaraja recalls the young princess he saved, and how pretty she was, as he cranes his godly neck to see his hobbled toes. He concedes to the wash like a god, most humbly, and quietly puts his four palms together for a bow.

The ferryman draws water from the river into his bucket, and invites Yama into his shanty. He offers his cot to the god to sit on while his feet are scrubbed.

Yamaraja is pleased with the ferryman's shrine, the statue of him riding a buffalo, noting also the last chip of an old photograph placed there. The god compliments the ferryman's devotion; the man accepts the compliment; they share stories, speak of the characters who have passed over their respective rivers. As they talk, and the ferryman scrubs, the bucket of water heats up. The ferryman knew this would happen; godly feet raise

the temperature of water when they are washed. By the end of the scrub the water is hot enough to steep tea. The thought of tea moves the ferryman. He remembers his plan. But before the plan can blossom in his mind, Yama distracts him.

"What is your name, ferryman?" asks Yamaraja.

"They call me Karass," says the ferryman.

"Karass?" repeats the god, so as to remember the name. "What does Karass mean?"

"My father read it once in a story. Karass means a group of people who work together to fulfill a divine purpose, yet without knowing one another."

Yamaraja looks up through the crack in the shanty's roof, at the moonless sky, turning as blue as his face. Few and far between are the men who surprise this god. Pulling his cleaned feet out of the bucket of hot river water, Yama twirls the ends of his mustache and points all four of his index fingers to Karass.

"All men are Karass," says Yama.

"I am all men?" asks Karass.

"No," says Yama, shaking his head. "You are one man. But all men are Karass, not vice-versa."

"Not everyone knows me," murmurs Karass, "but I have known myself in those who do. My only fear is that when I die no one will be able to cross this river; that the bond between men will die with me."

"That is the illusion of ego, of an 'I' that comes and goes, the part one of all stories. But stories aren't real. After you die, surely, men will find another way to cross your river."

"There is Karass without me?"

"You are not the bond between men, only its name. Let go, Karass."

"But…"

"You fear both dying and not dying?"

"I do want to see my wife."

Yamaraja rests a hand on Karass. "You will, in time."

Making their way to the boat, Yamaraja, so as to not wake the river with his voice, whispers: "Everyone you have helped cross your river has been connected through their knowing you; just as all men who cross my river are connected through their delusions about death. To want immortality, in this world or the next, can take many forms. Men who accept their birth, but not their death, consider themselves immortal: they will live forever, they say, here on earth or in the hereafter. Men who don't accept their birth, in other words, who wish they had never been born, still desire immortality insofar as they desire their image of death as a 'permanent solution.' But no mortal can fully imagine itself, much less death. Thus, no matter how you put it, to not accept life-and-death is to be delusional, like wanting an apology for being created, always anxious. *Live at peace*, I say. Don't be like most men: stuck, unable to cross the river without me, yet unwilling to ask for help. In the end, to ask to cross my river is to ask for forgiveness for ever wanting immortality: to go from wanting an apology, to apologizing."

Karass helps Yamaraja aboard the patina-chewed boat, then rows. The two make jokes and share a squishy mooncake that just happened to float down the river. They laugh and talk all the way to the other side; reaching it too soon, they feel.

They land on the crunchy silt. In the daylight, the silt shines emerald green, and the horizon shines sky blue. The smell of temple incense is in the air. Then again it always smells like temple incense around Yamaraja. They press one another's arms in a fraternal way, as if

to say farewell, not in words, but with their bodies. Then, Karass bows, deeply, atop a bronze board.

Yama shakes his head. "Karass, please, none of that. Tell me, what do I owe you for taking me across your river?"

"Yama, you please," says Karass, running a rough hand through his hair. "You are the god of the underworld. I took you across my river this time. When the time comes for me to pass, I want to cross your river with you. Take me and we'll call it even."

Yamaraja agrees. They go their separate ways. The light of a new day shines on the ripples of this never ending stream. Karass knows the river's distance wide, but not its length long. As far as he is concerned, there is no point where the upstream begins, or the downstream ends. For the ferryman, he has always been somewhere in the middle, helping others who weren't bothered with finding the beginning or the end of the river either.

Karass ties his ship to his pier, and skips to the shanty, before kneeling at his shrine. He takes the bucket of godly foot water, and in one chug drains the liquid breathlessly: attaining enlightenment, as predicted. He then burns the remains of the last photograph. The flames consume the portrait before consuming themselves. Nothing is left but the exhale of a puff of smoke at the end of this story, where the ferryman reaches nirvana.

Yamaraja, meanwhile, somewhere down the path, takes note of where the sun has risen, and snaps his fingers. In spite of himself, he has been going the wrong way this whole time.

Kurt Cobain

To David Lehman

"What do you think of Kurt Cobain?" I ask.

Jerry puts his fork down. He clears his throat. "Why do you ask?"

"Immortality…" I pick up my glass, and shake it in the air.

Jerry coughs, grunts. "Why do we come here?"

"We always come here," I reply.

Jerry narrows his eyes, and strokes his gray chin whiskers.

I tell him, "I want to write a story about a ferryman, see, and this ferryman will cross a river with different passengers and each passenger will need to be forgiven for a different crime, or sin, or ill-though, and after they cross the river they feel better, but each one will weigh the ferryman down, with money, or with a story, it doesn't matter yet, I'll come up with the details when I get to the page, but basically, I want the man, this ferryman, to want the opposite of immortality: I want him to want nirvana."

"Nirvana?"

"Yes, thank you."

Jerry asks for more syrup. He turns to me with a calm smile. "I feel good," he says, "although I still don't know why he killed himself."

Afterword

Here: a moment of reflection, an attempt to be simple and clean, concise, a little more self-aware. I did enough singing and dancing—so now I will be as straightforward as possible, like in a will. (Burry me on the moon.)

What is *Campus Poetica*? It is Latin for "field of poetry." In this field, the pieces aim for range, each experimenting a different technique of prose or poetry. Any deficiency you find within them is wholly mine. They were written and translated between 2016 and 2018, as a student at the New School—with the exception of the opener, *The Edge*.

Why bind them? They represent what the moon represents: phases, dichotomies, language. The language of the moon is light and dark, refractory, cyclical, loony, revolving but never penetrating, sometimes spoken, sometimes subtle. The stories, then, deal in opposites, in external influences, repeated transformation. The poetry is concerned, while also playing with language, the narrator's place in the world (metaphorically in Ramos's work; physically in Vinokur's work). The very last page of this collection, by contrast, for contrast, is the first page of my debut novel focused on Earth, on home, picking up where this collection leaves off: a moonrise.

Why share now? For your consideration, for your consumption. A glorified business card, take it—wrapped in a statement—saying: I am reflecting, I want to go to the moon, I will tout until—a plane or field of works done on a campus, my time at the New School, of interest to the reader, as he searches for his voice, as she comes into her own.

Context? *The Edge* taught me to trust someone when they say they want to become a writer, because when I wrote it, I became dead-certain. It was the story, in 2013, that I wrote and convinced me to become a writer.

A Sylph Sketch'd was assigned me by the poet I was dating at the time. Just that week I had taken a class with Fredric Tuten on experimental fiction. "I don't want to read another well-written book," he complained. "I can watch TV. It's just too good. So what does your book offer that only your book can offer?" He vocalized the power of taking a white sheet of paper and doing what needs to be done: create something that can only exist on the page. His class showed me I could be pure.

I had also just finished a collection of letters by Bukowski, where the *Sylph* draws its epigraph from. That epigraph, plus the lesson learned from the fiction class, and the inspiration from a loved one, urged me to pull together all the notes I had in my journals and notebooks, and carve out the wildest most pure thing I could ask the page to handle. The result was what I call the "collage form," from what the cover of this book also takes its inspiration.

Naked Skeleton came from another call from another woman in the program. We had taken a class on text and images, on the connection between the two. This peer and I work on a few paired exercises during class, and after class we agreed to work on one more project together. She sent me a photo of Dali's face, looking quizzical and emotional, before a group of naked women forming a human skull, titled, "The Morphing Body."

With this image on the screen, I wrote what I thought was the first part of a two part story, a fictionalized friendship between Dali and the Filibusto, the love triangle between them and the senorita Villalobos.

Unfortunately the second part never came from my co-MFAer, but at least a little story came about from the attempt to collaborate. It is an experiment in writing text from an image, and a stab at coauthoring a story, even if it never happened.

Groznyy was the first time I wrote in Russian (in Cyrillic), serving as the baby steps before attempting another project, which would later become my thesis, mixing Russian and English. *Groznyy* was also a toe-dip into historical fiction. The summer between my MFA semesters I had read two biographies: one on Ivan the Terrible, and another on the Romanovs. These works gave 500-years of bloody history, and the drive to experiment in a new genre. The result is a kind of "two truths and a lie" in that two of the causes for the Tsarevich to appear before the Tsar are real, and the twist part-way through their conversation is fiction.

The following story, *Between Arabia and India . . .*, is a trial in literary amendment. My friend, the jazz singer Sopio, introduced me to her country's national poet: the 13th century Shota Rustaveli, and his epic poem. One of the central figures in the epic is completely without a "backstory"—that beat-to-death plot element. Whereas the background of the titular knight, the Man in the Panther Skin, is treated at length; his friend, the central figure we follow throughout the book, Avt'handil, doesn't get the same amount of ink.

Thus, for *Between Arabia…*, I echo the language of the English translation by Wardrop, experiment with the letter-form, and set it at a certain point in the original epic's plot: when, before adventuring to rescue his beloved friend, Avt'handil prays at a mosque. It is a short, odd, and meditative chapter, in an otherwise sprawling and loud epic poem. For this reason, his letter is "written" there, with an added dimension: the frame-letter by Ioane Shabash. The word shabash is used often in the Rustaveli poem, and it means brave.

Last spring break the inestimable Brendan Kidd, the indelible Erik Kristman, comrade Daniel Benhamu and I ventured to the southernmost point of New Jersey, to a little Victorian town called Cape May. Together we stuffed ourselves with protein bars and watch movies and read work and debated and wrestled, fully bro'd out for several days. One thing that changed our narrative outlooks on life, not exaggerating, was watching the new Jodorowsky films. The night we watched *Poesía Sin Fin*, it completely blew us away. Jodorowsky writes with such freedom, with such passion. That very night, the four of us wandered out to the cold spring star-speckled shore, and howled at the Delaware River like wolves in snow and sand. I asked Brendan, "How can we write like Jodorowsky?" He replied, "Only Jodo can write like Jodo." I thanked him, I guess. But Brendan followed up with something I will never forget: "Jodo does not give a fuck!" And then he howled again, to the moon and the halo around the moon.

Thus *French Toast* was born. It isn't an obscene, or shocking piece. I took the "don't give a fuck" sentiment and wrote something using only imagination, no preconceived notion of what to do, no plot no plan, just the keyboard and the seat of my pants. The result, in my opinion, is an experiment in free-association.

Of note, the writer Courtney Luk and I co-read it at KGB Bar this year (after successfully coauthoring different story), and after the reading *French Toast* some friends came up to me and called the story "subconscious" and "Freudian." I suppose those elements are there, but for me, it is much more about not caring for once and letting the mind rage on bright like the one and only Jodo.

The next story has three sources worth mentioning. The first is a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, titled *The Art of Waiting*, which my friend the translator-artist Yasmin Zaher shared

with me. Darwish's poem is about love and heartbreak. When I read it, it sunk into my bones. (Parenthesis: Darwish is the principle poet who Al-ashqar translates in his release on Poets & Traitors, from which his poem dedicated to Basquiat is taken to include in this collection.)

The second source came from my friend Ahmed Shaibani, a city planner, descendant of Syrians and Iraqis, but who when he and I get together both reckon ourselves Texans. He introduced me to the films *Latcho Drom* and *Gadjo Dilo*—both Gypsy narratives, which inform this piece. When Ahmed read a draft, he called it "great." When his friend read it, she said to him, "Kabir is you."

The third and final source was a student of mine from the language school I was teaching at. Chaperoning an event at a put-put course on the Hudson, I met a real Wajdan, a kindhearted Saudi Arabian woman then applying for her Masters. She explained how her name meant one thing in Arabic and another in Persian, and then I believe yet a third thing in Turkish. I will let the curious reader look these up herself, but what I will say is that with this name, coupled with the conversations with my friends, I suddenly had enough inspiration to pen a new story.

Wajdan is my attempt to focus on texture, mood, and language, as opposed to plot, or character. Two of the most vocal criticisms against the story were that it started and ended wrong, and that the mysterious dancer character was too mysterious. These are completely valid critiques, only, I don't mind, because the point is the story's stitching, not its size or dimensions.

The eponymous story was an experiment in autofiction, I thought. But when my professor Sigrid Nunez read it, she explained autofiction is when a writer makes up a story using his or her own name for the protagonist. So it wasn't that, though it remains the most

autobiographical of all these stories, yet set in the future. *Lunas u Moons (Un Voyage Fantastique)* is an experiment in science-fiction, I thought. But when my workshop peers read it, they said I hadn't done enough world-building or tech-talk. So the class settled on calling it "fantasy," a title I liked, considering the personal relation I have with this story. So it is, then, an experiment in fantasy, literally.

I was in crush with a woman of Italian descent. I have always wanted to be the first person to write a book in outer space. And I wanted a story that encapsulated, again literally, this character Dr Saudade, who is the only character I have ever written about that could be me: not even my alter-ego, but a future-me, an ego in text. With these three whimsical fancies for fuel, I shot for the moon.

Additionally, this story was my second attempt at the style of *A Sylph Sketch'd*, the pastiche style, the collage form, the piecing together of poems and notes and quotes from inside my journals and notebooks.

The next two stories are the only other two, other than *The Edge*, which I wrote before the MFA. I wrote both in Buenos Aires, around the time I was applying to MFAs and dancing tango and drinking yerba mate. *El resplandor* is an experiment in "experimenting"—like an experimental short film, but after reading *Las babas del diablo*—while *Asesino (Assassin)* comes from a dream a friend of mine once recounted to me, with the hope that I would turn it into a story: so it is an experiment in writing someone else's dream—hence the external voice. These two stories are included in this collection, not just to round out the number to an even twelve, but because the techniques explored in them are found in the other ten stories.

Eunoia, for example, uses the same intervening narration as *Asesino*…. Anabelle's story is a chapter from a longer work in progress, but was originally composed as the final project for a class I took called "Style, Form and Meaning." The bulk of the class focused on *Anna Karenina* (but also on other texts, like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which inspired *Un Voyage*…). I thought this story was pretty straight forward, but when I shared it with a friendly reader, she told me, "It makes absolutely no sense." Her feedback is generally hot or cold, so I took it with a grain of pepper.

Overall it is an experiment in different levels of narration: borrowed text (from Tolstoy), third-person past (the narration), third-person current (the intervening omniscience), character interiority (thoughts and exclamations), meta-narration (the story within the story), and cats. I am trying to simplify what I once read from the literary theorist Gérard Genette, avoiding his beautiful and accurate terms on "diegesis." The curious reader will have to look the term up herself. Basically, lastly, what I wanted to do was what I did with *Between Arabia* . . . do a little legwork for a passed-away author.

Finally, *Karass*, well, I will let it speak for itself, except to say *Karass* is an experiment in parable. (Shout out to Yuxi Lin, a poet oft on language highs, a geological heroine, a purveyor of the lower east side, a kosmos to be, who spoke to me of the moon goddess, and mooncakes.)

Kurt Cobain, I wrote in preparation to *Karass*. The first line is borrowed from Adam Johnson's short story titled *Nirvana*. (Why?)

The printer at the creative writing office runs out of paper. I am printing out Adam Johnson's story. David Lehman walks in.

"No paper?" he asks.

"No paper," I reply.

He peers at the last page printed out.

"This sentence would make a great first line of a poem," he says, pointing.

I read it, agree.

We search for more printer paper.

Final posdata: I must thank the author of the foreword, Juampi. He is the Borges to my Bioy. He is the Tariel to my Avt'handil. The Juan to my Ivan. One goodshaped and wellhung man, as Whitman put it, searching for his perfect and independent mate, today a million miles away, residing in the town where our forefathers sailed from, what for, to be himself, and ultimately, to become himself. Keeping up with him overseas has been an absolute joy and steady trickle of weekly chats. Thank you to Juampi. This book is dedicated to him, and to all writers, and to all those who with confidence call themselves writers, in the year 2019.

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INDEX

THE SUMMER ABROAD
(First Page)

Earth rose.

And a gust of spring wind blew dandelion seeds up and far away. In its place followed an air of buds and blossoms and evening mist, fresh under the cat-eyes glow of north-central Austin. The cedar trees were crying, as squirrels chased one another up and down wet branches. Spring was here, and soon would night be too. Finals week did not concern us, nor had it ever, and neither did class the next day—Monday. What mattered most to Rick and me was where to kick up our feet while we sat on the porch couch, to chill before the weekend's end. Comfortably, we sat in silence, numb after having discussed what the earthrise from the point of view of the moon must look like when the beat of a nearby drum solo passed by.

"The Earth," Rick said, fervently, "the Earth wouldn't rise, it would spin."

He finished his hit and passed me the joint, still cherry. That's how spring would end for us: still cherry. Now the season's electricity prepared to send jolts down our spines. When I finished my hit, I returned what pinch was left of the jay.

"I'm too bored to yawn," Rick said, holding his breath in, rubbing his hands over the holes of his jorts, and flicking the roach to the front lawn he had mowed earlier that day. My eyes retraced the jay's arch, its trail of smoke, until the gray hues thinned out and vanished. Between blades of grass the herb surrendered its crackling breath with one last puff that disappeared like a dot in the air.

"Think that'll fertilize the…?"

"Yuh."