THE DREAMS OF AN OWL.

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…. a parliament of owls, bearers of ill-tidings, dazzled and dazed, fleeing the light of day….

JOSE DE ESPRONCEDA, *Sancho Saldaña*, VII.

The Eyes of the World.

Once upon a time there was a woman who was lost. Her eyes were bottomless, her stare was vacant, but the pupils sank deep into her soul and disappeared whenever someone tried to get a hold on them.

Once upon a time there was a woman who was lost. Barely anything but the void of her own smile could be seen behind her smile, the want of joy behind joy itself, the endless sadness that exists only in the deepest corridors of the mind.

Once upon a time there was someone who sang alone and almost died for doing so. Once upon a time there was a lonely soul rambling through the passageways of a hospital that was deprived of patients, or doctors, or anything at all but white walls that led to the sole exit of madness. And madness was there indeed. Crouched. Hidden. Strained. Behind the wardrobe, wearing blue jeans that stood on a hanger, in the night of wolf-like winds.

Once upon a time there was a person who suffered until she had to cry out enough. And her scream was not heard, in spite of the trains rushing headlong through the deep nights of sleeplessness, through the delirium that keeps in bottles.

And then there was that cold in the doorways. The cold that passed through the marrow of the bones, if indeed those were bones at all. The cold that would not let you think or sleep or barely even exist. The cold that was like an ordeal sent from heaven for having understood everything, because ordained it is that die you must without having come to know anything at all. And understanding everything is like signing up to the payroll of distress, the one that so unmistakably leads to madness.

And madness was there indeed, crouched, listening, prying through the chinks, whispering incomprehensible words that soon became a speech crammed with hideous meanings some nights, the nights of ravings and of bottles smashed on colonnades, when the cold pierced you to the bone and you could feel that your pockets had been holed by broken hopes.

Or maybe you were simply broke, and wept. But you could not weep for the cold, because your hands were frozen, and the substance your eyes shed was but dirt from the pollution around you. And so, forced to weep inwardly, you recalled the time when you were a child. And you fell in love with your own memories. And so, and only so, would you fall asleep.

I met you very often. You would enter the most luxurious bank in the city, and flop into a cosy armchair, in a corner, seeking the warmth of the air conditioning to offset the cold of the night, to go on living and not to die, frozen.

Sometimes you hid in an entrance way. You were always forced to leave, and you left with a sad smile, once again to the streets you belonged to. The streets that fitted in no city, in no place.

It was a long time since you had forgotten what a coin was, or what one was for. It was difficult to imagine how you could go on living. But you were proud enough not to beg, not to plead for what by nature's right was yours, not to let the person who threw you a few coins have the satisfaction of being at peace with

himself, not to become a piece of human-waste machinery. You were a drop out, but you had your pride, and that, although not enough to keep you well-fed, at least made you feel like a human being.

You met lots of junkies on their road to Aids, turned into beggars, more and more aggressive, more cowardly, more trapped in the necessary egoism of their own survival. But, when they reach this point, the poor lack a place for compassion within their souls. The poor are a smear on the pavement, a gap to be avoided. Beggars are a neglected army, a problem that is left to the politician's speech. Beggars do not exist, they just bother, upset. I used to be afraid of insulting a beggar with my alms. And the funny thing about it is that the only thing they wanted, in a stubborn and blind way, were those alms which might help them to go on being poor, to go on being misfits, to remain alive in the same terrible manner.

Sometimes you screamed, and scared people. You craved once again for that injection that eased the dissatisfaction of your sick spirit, those wonderful pills that would cater for sleep, the priceless gift denied by your feeble frame and your terminal madness.

Other times you approached passers-by in the street. You did not look at them, and addressed only their children. You stroked them, as you whispered to them indecipherable sentences full of love. You loved them from the insurmountable distance of your mind adrift, a mind that could not ease away what life had done to you, the way life had injured you.

And that night, when I saw you kneeling down before a shop window in the pedestrian mall near Calle de la Plata. That night, cold as every night of your life. That night in which you kept staring at your own visage in a tiny mirror exhibited in the gift shop. That terrible moment, which I could witness from my seemingly bourgeois quiet. The moment in which you addressed your own image reflected in the tiny mirror, calling it by your own name until, folded into two impossible beings, you gave a bloodcurdling wail that arose from the depths of your soul: “Rose, Rosie, don’t leave me alone!”

* * *

I ran into her many times after that.

One afternoon, as I rambled, I met a old man wearing a gaudy-coloured jumper, walking purposefully. On his head he sported a plastic bag, like those offered at supermarkets, worn in the fashion of a chef's hat.

I was surprised at such a sight, although I did not pay much attention to it. I thought he was simply an ill-tempered and peculiar being in the universe of beggars.

The fairground was near, with its retinue of outcasts.

It was hot. Someone said that, with that temperature, a plastic bag placed upside down was not exactly the most suitable way to keep one's brain cool.

After a while I had to go to the centre. The city centre becomes a focal point for every manifestation of misery that wanders among the ignorance of the vast majority of people who coexist with it.

There were lots of people in the streets. It was six o'clock in the afternoon. A copper-like sun drenched gently with its light the cobbled paths and the white walls of the old city.

In a corner, those characters appeared once again. The old man was roughly disguised as a clown, his face painted white, with an old fake nose on his wrinkled face, his worn out multi-coloured jumper standing out as an icon of personal identification.

And on his hands, with the gestures of a magician or charmer, appeared two puppets that he animated clumsily, naively, with his fingers concealed under their ragged clothes. He was not begging for alms, or making any gesture that might lead someone to focus his attention on him, he did not demand anything for himself: rather, he resembled a child playing, enjoying the tattered costume he was wearing, which, nevertheless, fitted his true personality.

I could not help thinking that this old man was a former clown from an impossible circus, who accompanied the fairground people in their wanderings.

And there, sitting, crouched at his left, as if contemplating his game, even forming a part of it, was Rose, with her indefinable cinnamon-coloured clothes and a bundle of rags which she hugged to herself with a

dreamy air, her eyes fixed on the puppets. The old man was obviously using them to tell her a story. He was not begging; he was not asking for anyone's attention. He was entertaining Rose.

* * *

As if this story were destined to go on in my mind, a few days later I happened to meet those two characters who had been rushing around in my head once again.

The fair had left, but they remained in the city. They could be seen in the strangest places, always isolated from the people around them, isolated from the crowd that bustled about them.

They inhabited a world of their own, of pleasantly alienated minds, where other hapless beings from a world of drop-outs came together.

I almost became familiar with their presence in the streets, and I knew nobody had noticed that presence.

Did they truly exist? Were they just in my imagination? I even thought they belonged rather to a land of fantasy, real in its cruelty, desperately true, that had blighted our world.

Was our world more real than theirs? Were not we refusing true reality, which was the one these beings were living?

There are cruel beggars and unconcerned beggars. These ones were just possible beggars, imaginary beggars that had joined the lot of those who do not belong to anyone or anything but just to their own shattered fate. The lines of failure can be seen on the palm of their soiled hands, or in their bottomless eyes adrift.

Lost souls that look in on life, as if they would not recognise the conventional means of being alive, refusing any social convention, even the one their own poverty implied. Carrying on a conversation with angels and devils in the darkness of countless nights. Both of them lit by a childlike smile that they never squander, that they can hardly trace. Their mind fully engrossed in a fatal crime they committed when they were born, when they joined the army of distress that wanders the Earth.

Thus, like characters in a plot that does not exist but in their wretched hearts, I happened to meet Rose and the old apprentice clown again.

Now they walked together, with their bundles of clothes on their shoulders. Behind them was a scruffy dog that had also been banished from society.

They were two wretched and happy (?) fools walking, turning their backs to everything, becoming blurred in the distance. Their footsteps still ring out across the floor of my mind.

I could see their shoulders, and feel the tardy gait that led them to the infinite space that lies in the heart of nowhere.

The Jazz Band.

The night was warm. I was strolling across Recoletos in a certain dreamy and nonchalant way, recalling, I suppose, the good old times. Madrid appeared both distinct and picturesque amid the bustle of people at night, on that stifling August evening.

Youths skating in the wrong direction in a daring, graceful manner. Cars rushing unceasingly. Along the street, the unflinching lampposts showed their dark metal bodies, proud as young aristocrats from days of yore.

The night was warm. Recoletos thrived and bustled, a crossroads for all the people that breathed the urban summer of Madrid, scattered among the civilized revelling of the pubs and the lines of tables placed along the pavement.

Possibly they were Argentinian students those who, leaning on a makeshift table and sporting beards and spectacles, read some couples their fortune with a pack of tarot cards, churning out the ambiguous jargon learnt from psychoanalysis sessions in Buenos Aires with a drawl of slurred y's, picking up any unusual ideas from the mind of the hearers, clues that they unravelled, adding to them what they could not know but could suggest.

The entire street had a picturesque charm, the air of the bohemian night I had breathed so many times during my former stay in the capital. Under the lamplights, young couples walked hand in hand, and gangs of gay men with stealthy

gait, and some puzzled old man who had left the gloomy world of the boarding house he dwelled in to seek places that were forbidden to his boundless, childlike admiration.

I arrived at Café Gijón, now colonized somewhat unusually by couples, since the artists had fled the heat of the city, forsaking their long-cherished gatherings.

The night was warm, and laughter came distinct from visages almost hidden by the light shed from lamps that stood erect but contorted, spilling a purplish hue on those present.

I was amusing myself with the uninteresting everyday conversations that came from the nearby tables when, suddenly, the shrill sound of a trumpet pierced the darkness. This was responded to, in a clear and humble pitch, by a clarinet that coiled the notes together, pushing them upwards as if they resembled a snake. Then a trombone came in. And shortly after a small saxophone, so that all the instruments came together, backed by the lively, vibrating percussion of a drum.

The music was extremely joyful. Jazz from the twenties, with a touch of Charleston.

“Argentinian musicians”, suggested someone close to me. Unable to restrain themselves, as if under the spell of the Pied Piper, all those present began to drum their fingers, to tap their feet to the rythm of that music both charmed and charming.

Piece after piece was performed with a merriment that belonged to those happy times in life when one feels youth will last forever.

Then, a couple got up and began to dance. Undoubtedly they were professionals. And they danced in time, briskly. The boy's poise was more sober, and he smiled as he gazed at the girl's legs, that moved unbelievably, especially when the clarinet fired up its notes.

The girl seemed dressed for the occasion, as if she were part of the band that was playing in the street. She wore a dress covered with sequins that shook brightly with the movement of her hips.

The scene caught the attention of all the passers-by. The waiters were agog. A few people dropped coins, shiny and golden, into the instrument case the musicians had left open for that purpose.

The small jazz band had found its place on a bench in the street. The drummer produced unexpected thrills by hitting both sticks together, or beating in a thousand different ways the edges and the membrane of a small drum.

After so a splendid street performance, the dancers returned to their seats, and the musicians approached the bar to spend a few of the coins they had raised on vanilla-flavoured ice-cream and coffee.

I felt rewarded, and when the director of the improvised band, a short man with a grizzly beard that held a trumpet, walked past my table, I congratulated him on the show. “I am not a member of the band; I just play with them now and then. I am a psychiatrist”.

Those words, the fortune tellers, the Argentinian invasion, the bright, glossy feeling of that night at Recoletos...

I felt a bit upset after all those thrills. Someone said: “They came by boat from Argentina”. And I wondered where the hell that boat, presumably white and luxurious, might have docked, since there is no harbour in Madrid.

I had the feeling of being in Buenos Aires and not being aware of it. But the statue of Valle-Inclán, sauntering with gravity, and green, brought me back to Madrid and Recoletos. I stepped up my pace to get away from there.

When I got to the hotel and I took my clothes off to give in to sleep, some coins fell from my trousers. I recalled I had dropped a few of them in the instrument case the musicians had placed before them with a distant dignity.

I came closer to pick them up. Light fell dimly on the shiny pieces, in the loneliness of the night. I took them near the lamp and examined them, amazed. The coins had been made in the twenties!

I have returned countless times, countless summers, to Recoletos. This time with a slight concern that did not exclude fear. But I have never met fairies again.

The waiters

It was a long time since he last roamed the bars he had frequented in his youth. Madrid had changed a lot. He was considerably older himself, and now resembled any middle-class average man.

How far behind those bohemian days! What a wide variety of people he had met then! Above all, beautiful women that now had vanished, as if the earth had swallowed them. Whatever had happened to them?

He remembered how sometimes, to round off the night, he would take his unsuspecting partner to the lake in *El Retiro*. They would unfasten one of the boats in the magnificent and secluded loneliness of the park, and row across the murky waters, as the first glow of dawn began to break through the treetops, proud and gigantic. Those were times of freedom indeed.

First it was at the *Pub Santa Barbara*. To begin with, he noticed that the people were uglier and older. They chatted brightly, using an intellectual jargon that reminded him of the highbrow avant-garde of late Franco's Spain. This was a venue with a history in the annals of political struggle. The coloured stained-glass windows, once holed by bullets, just as was the nearby bookshop. The threadbare armchairs, of indefinable greenish hue. The wooden counter with a thousand bottles that showed their tempting charms, perhaps an imitation of English pubs, but retaining its own personality.

A stubborn drunkard – always different, always the same– stood absorbed, reading the labels of the odd-looking bottles exhibited in a semicircle.

But it shocked him to see that he did not know anyone. All the customers were much older than he was.

He came out, thoughtful and nostalgic, into *Calle deFernando VI* and wandered into *Bárbara de Braganza*. He walked fleetingly past *Café Gades* and continued along *Calle de Prim* until he got to *Recoletos*. He could appreciate the charm of that walk along the dark and bohemian areas of the Madrid he had fallen in love with. Nevertheless, he could feel the

air grown more oppressive. The odour of the underground exuded by the city was suffocating, even when walking on the surface.

He arrived at *Café Gijón*, the place of great occasions. And he felt secure within its old wooden décor, varnished with the colour of mustard.

He could not find anyone familiar there either. It was then that he felt old, hopelessly old.

At that moment, he remembered once again the features of the waiters at the *Pub Santa Barbara*, and he linked them to those of the waiters at the *Café Gijón.* Their prying visages, slightly mischievous, always complicit in the way they attended the customers – so many and so different– that shared the quiet adventure of every night.

He felt a certain sensation of panic when he faced the mystery. For the customers of these venues had been dying one after another, and leaving without trace... but the waiters' looks always stayed the same, impervious to time, as if bound to a strange spell that rendered them eternal.

The mute soprano

The concert was about to begin. The audience began with muffled sounds to take their place in the stalls. He had his seat in the central box, and it had cost him dear to get a seat to hear the gifted soprano.

He could sense the strange air of imminence that precedes an evening of music. The air was charged with omens. Lights began to go out leaving a faint glow in the ambience.

The atmosphere. He had been obsessed by that concept lately. Art was atmosphere. An uncertain surface of feelings that managed to penetrate ever more deeply, through a spiralling tunnel, until they reached the core of the heart, or of the mind. Where the submerged cities sleep, those that exist in the depths of every man's spirit, legendary cities, a Brigadoon made of Slumber, where we all tuck up our soul as if it were a child.

Art means verve, detail, quick impression, a brief instant of supreme ecstasy that cannot be described but in the very language of art itself.

Art is... atmosphere. The one he could feel that night, lit up inside his heart as an avenue in the City of Light, in the middle of midnight tales, tales made of mist.

He was amused to see in himself the clumsy and satisfied happiness of the very young. He had always wondered why children laugh all the time. Why adolescents laugh now and then. Why old men are sad. Why men forget laughter. But he felt as a child, immature, gleeful, smiling, ready to enjoy a night of music with the voice of that soprano he worshipped. He had collected nearly all of her albums. He had a wide collection of antiquarian long-play records, 33 r.p.m. vinyl albums, most of them unlisted nowadays. It pleased him to listen to those historical pieces.

But in spite of it all, in spite of his infatuation with music, he knew art was... atmosphere. Atmosphere that can only be perceived in a concert hall, crammed with big and small hints of imminence, with subtle revelations that might appear in any one passage of music. Music was the perfect art, an art unbound by reality, pure art, an autonomous world, a realm

of slumber, Brigadoon asleep at the bottom of his soul, where Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse dance forever their eternal love, because “one has to give all in order to get all”, the perfect tryst for lovers that never die.

Was he in love with his divas? He had pondered on it sometimes. As a matter of fact, he had followed their lives and their performances, recorded in albums and tapes, tracing their artistic biographies with the loyalty of an infatuated voyeur or a stubborn detective. He knew all about them. Their preferences, their romances, their customs, their best performances, the best period of their artistic careers...

Sopranos are fragile beings, feathers, fluff floating in the wind. Their voices cracked in the arias of Handel’s operas, in the highest reach of their pitch, the place where heavens of multi-coloured notes can be found, the supreme point, the deep quality, the limitless point that leads to infinity. Or they became playful melody in Mozart’s operas. Or the supreme evidence of death in Strauss’ last *lieder*. Or a song of lush joy in the triumph of Vivaldi. Or stately proof of passionate strength in Beethoven. Or lavish spirituality in Bach. Or faint sadness in Schubert. Or the witness of a withering soul in Schumann.

Schumann... Why was he thinking of Schumann? Schumann enshrined a child’s joy. Scenes with children, a musician leaning on a piano, studying tirelessly, until he is awarded the gift of madness, his mind haunted by a painless disease that leads to hell. His madness was hell. His hell was madness. Music delivered Schumann from this hell, it turned him into a child that evoked the children he had inside as he played the keys of the piano.

The keys of a piano did indeed begin to sound, and a *lied* by Schumann could be heard. That bottomless sadness, that dense melancholy, thickening the air.

The voice was there. The voice of his soprano, who looked as if she were not singing, as if she were mute. Sometimes it amazed him that the notes could be created with her own voice. Could there be a record player hidden behind the stage

curtains? Was she just opening her mouth, not producing any sound at all? But that was impossible! He sometimes relished thinking weird things. No, the soprano projected her own voice. But this time she had made a mistake. The strength and power with which she was projecting it was excessive for the small-town theatre where he was listening to her. Surely, the soprano had not rehearsed that morning, and she had overrated the acoustics of the building.

He had to hush the spectators that were sitting in the adjoining box. A dreadful fit of coughing had overcome a girl in that box. Finally, and very noisily, they took their leave. They had ruined the piece completely, but the soprano's voice went on cold and unperturbed. Most curiously... he thought she was looking at him, thankful for his strict politeness.

The air of imminence went on undisturbed. He could feel it. He wondered how such a gifted soprano could have ended her tour in such an uncultured provincial town as this. She was obviously a select soul. Only a few were able to understand music in that place, this he could assure. Tomorrow, a review in the local newspaper would include a few uninteresting lines, probably written before the concert had even begun. It was impossible for them to understand exquisite spirits. Music was not created for the masses. Music...

Again the music began to sound. The singer was now tackling more difficult pieces, and she did so with great skill, yet dispassionately too. Years and years of rehearsals could be divined behind those simple notes.

He was forced to call hush once again. People could not understand that, when listening to a set of songs, one must wait for the last to finish before clapping. Now they had interrupted the rhythm of the performance once again.

He sensed once more that the singer was looking at him with gratitude. Was she actually seeing him? She was old. She might need spectacles, or maybe she was short-sighted, so that she could only make out those sitting in the first row. Oh hell! He should have taken a seat in the first row. That way, she would certainly have become aware of him. Was she aware of him now? He could not tell. Privileged souls sense each other in the distance, they can perceive each other from

afar. From afar... But the box was just too far. Yes, she might be a bit short-sighted. Barbara Castrara, the best-known soprano in the last decades, short-sighted! Short-sighted! Well, he thought, it might as well be so: many years had gone by, and years do not go by in vain. Who cares!

The important thing was that the moment had not yet come. And he knew it would come. He had been longing for that night for so long, ever since he acquired the tickets after a cold night of endless queing, an endless night, an endless queue, queuing... Good God! What was he thinking of? Barbara Castrara was there, before him, looking into his eyes, while he was thinking of nothing but utter drivel that made him drift away from the music, away from the music. Her eyes. No, those were not the eyes of a myopic. He was certain she had beautiful eyes, and she seemed to keep them fixed upon him, as if...

Noises came again from the right-hand box. No matter how easy it was now for the students from the conservatoire to attend concerts... My God! And a nice lot of students they were! Sideburns, leather jackets covered with badges, tapering boots... How far from the romantic age called forth by Barbara's songs down there, those songs!

Now the soprano was going into a trance. Now she had reached her peak. Her voice flooded the auditorium, floated over the walls of the hall, broke at the corners, slipped over the glass chandeliers. It was sublime.

The longed-for moment was about to come. He knew it. The time had come. The hour was nigh. And, curiously, the soprano kept her eyes fixed on him... She...

He felt enraptured. He kept the whole span of his sight focused on the centre of the stage, where the soprano's silhouette could be seen –the pianist did not exist, nothing else existed–. And Music possessed him, took command of his brain, made him levitate mentally, as if in the centre of the spotlight, like a moth mesmerised by light, hypnotised by an ever-decreasing spiral. Ever-decreasing...

Then he thought. He thought that the soprano had fallen in love with him. That she might be pleased to see his body.

He did not realise what he was doing. So he began, slowly, to take off his clothes. Nobody noticed it, all of them wallowing in a drowsiness of incomprehension, of banal stupidity. When he was completely naked, he could hear the horrified comments of two ladies whispering near his box.

Then he stood up. He wanted the soprano to see him, proud as he was of the acquaintance that presumably they had started.

But the soprano must be short-sighted. Or perhaps she was blinded by the light of those disrespectful spotlights, that through their heat were beginning to melt her make-up away.

The soprano went on interpreting the piece. Suddenly, Barbara Castrara began to make out there in the distance a man upright in a box, showing a plump and hairy body, stark naked...

She was astonished. Notes froze in her throat. Now she did indeed stare at him.

And he, engrossed in that sublime instant of ecstasy, and wondering how he was going to immolate his body and soul in a sudden mystic rapture, climbed on top of the balcony railings.

The soprano had indeed become mute. Everyone in the hall fixed their eyes on him. Even the pianist stopped playing.

This was his chance. He imagined the newspaper headlines the day after. He imagined what they would say about him. Who cares? The only thing he cared for was this night, and the loyal love he felt for the diva.

At this point, the plump and hairy man, stark naked, standing on the balcony of the central box, shouted with a powerful voice drowned out only by the screams of the ladies down in the stalls: Barbara, I love you!

And before the astonished eyes of the mute soprano, who would later choose to tell it as an anecdote in her memoirs, the plump and hairy man, plunged, stately, and broke his neck against the stalls.

The Bride.

Once upon a time there was a thoughtful quiet man, lonesome and gloomy, who did not believe in anything anymore. Of course, love he despised.

One afternoon he entered a shopping centre to buy something. For a long time, he ambled through the different departments, but could not find anything that was of any interest to him.

Out of curiosity, he wandered up to the section where wedding dresses were on show.

And suddenly his attention was drawn to a thin, pale, ravishing woman. Discreetly, and with an air of shy and bashful coquetry, she was trying on a bridal veil, and she raised with her hands the fabric, all but transparent, that enhanced the beauty of her visage, the white gauze cloth that contrasted with her purple lips.

He never knew quite how their relationship began. It was probably a matter of glances rather than of words. Perhaps they found in each other's eyes a hidden eagerness to share the unbearable loneliness of their feelings.

The fact is that they ended up going out together, strolling hand by hand through the park of El Retiro. Sitting on a bench as the leaves fell from the mighty trees. Drinking the same beer quietly, hardly saying anything to each other.

The man was beginning to feel cheerful, although he never did see a smile on that woman's face.

One day, they were walking about around the suburbs of Madrid. They got to Plaza de Oriente, and sat outside the café of the same name.

Barely did they exchange a word. They drank beer for a long time, looking vacantly at the passers-by.

The man fixed his attention on a couple sitting in front of them. He could not help feeling a vivid curiosity for the subject of their conversation. He could only make out a few isolated sentences, mingled with laughter. But what are they laughing at? He gradually sensed they were making fun at them. And suddenly, a strong foreboding seized him. An idea hit his brain with tangible, unanswerable, solid certainty.

He looked at his partner, the woman with a bridal veil and purple lips. She kept quiet as usual, silent. Her stare, like that of a ravishing mannequin cased within a shop window, was focused on a fixed spot in the horizon, on a void that was nothing.

Just then he realised that he had been sharing his days with a woman that had all the while been dead.

The Poetry Reading.

That evening was particularly cold, and dense rain was pouring from a black sky. Car headlights were beginning to shine on the street tarmac, as night came on.

It was not probable that many people would show up to listen to his poems with that unpleasant weather, he thought as he turned a corner, raising the collar of his raincoat to protect himself from the untimely raindrops.

He finally saw the art gallery where the reading was going to take place. He kept the book in his pocket to prevent it from getting damp.

To his amazement, there were twenty people in the venue. The gallery owners, well-known feminists from the capital, approached politely to receive him.

That neighbourhood, darkened by dense palls of smoke that poured out from the cars passing by, looked darker still that wintry evening, and gave the impression of having born witness to many inexpressible things. It was the Madrid of the Austrias, that resembled an old armour, and retained a certain *clochard* and nonchalant air.

He answered his hosts' politeness with politeness, their wit with wit, but always with an air of distance, a quality inherent in him when he was in the presence of the opposite sex, especially when that adopted an attitude of all embracing arrogance.

They showed him the paintings of a female artist. He found them appalling. They were meant to be naïve, but in fact were merely childish. Tasteless still lifes with round apples lacking volume. Wrongly chosen colours. Disgusting.

Despite his puzzlement, he went on using polite expressions. When he felt tired, he kept still, listening.

Or maybe he was not listening at all, and the dull sound of the gallery owners' voice merely kept him company, their unlikely explanations aimed at supporting their protégéé, a girl wearing a black evening dress who was chatting with a man, an Andy Warhol wannabe.

He was feeling sick in that atmosphere. But people were arriving all the time. All of them smart, fashionable, classy. They were the upper echelon of the Madrid society, the elite of postmodernism.

They finally headed for a small table, lit by a tiny lamp, as in the spiritual retreats of former times.

The audience had been trying to take a seat where they could, and the room was crammed. There were journalists that would write their reviews for the best newspapers in the country, he said to himself as he tried to reckon the potential gain to be made from the reading.

A silence followed. He looked at the ceiling. He thought he could hear flattering phrases the gallery owner dedicated to him during the presentation. But once again it was like a dull sound of insects buzzing around his head.

He focused his attention on two girls that sported a boyish haircut who did not stop whispering, in the first row.

And silence fell once again. He noticed their eyes on him. Yes, that meant that his friend's presentation had finished. Now it was his turn.

He put his hand into the pocket of his jacket to take the book. He could not find anything.

He looked at the gallery owner in alarm as he sank his hand deep into the other pocket with the same result. He gestured with helplessness and smiled as the audience watched him accusingly.

It was the girl sitting in the front row with a boyish haircut who took out from her handbag a copy of his last book of poems and handed it to him with a disapproving smile.

He did not know why, but he felt wretched.

A heavy silence had fallen again, and grew more and more strained.

He opened the book on the page of his favourite poem and began to read.

He could not hear his own voice, but some dull droning, like the buzz of insects in summertime, coming out of his own throat.

Suddenly, what he was reading appeared to him odd. He could not bring himself to accept it, but... He had a look at the cover of the book: *Poems in the memory*, by Jules Warbler. Yes, there was no doubt. He was Jules Warbler, and that was his new book of poems, but... those poems were strange, not the ones he had written.

He had a closer look at the index, and, to the awkward amazement of the audience, he paused in his reading; some of them began to stir in their seats.

He did not understand anything. The index seemed to be written in cuneiform characters. What did it mean? What kind of joke...?

He cleared his throat and looked at his host. But she was watching him with an absent smile, as if she were a Greek statue from ages long past.

Does anybody have another copy of my book? Yes, indeed, a lady that donned a luxurious fur coat handed one to him. The journalists began to grin with blatant mockery. He searched again for page twenty five and examined the text of the poem.

He began to read once more, and again he stopped after the first few verses.

He kept silent, and cast his look upon the audience.

I would like to ask you something, and forgive me if I interrupt my reading. Does anyone know the work of Jules Warbler? Laughter. His host was not looking at him with an archaic smile anymore, now she looked overtly uncomfortable. But what are you saying. These are just artist's antics. No, you see, the problem is that these are not my poems. General disarray, laughter, whispering. Yes, I'm serious. I think I am Jules Warbler, and this book happens to have the same title of the book I have written, but the poems are not mine...

Do you mean you have written those poems? Laughter. No, not at all. I mean these are not my poems. I do not remember them. I do not think they are my own. Something weird is going on here. I do not know...

He watched his hands. Their material contour was vanishing in the air. In the dismal light of the hall, nobody seemed to notice. He...He...

You are obviously not Warbler. The poet died ten years ago. Why do you think we have gathered here today? You are merely an actor, a voice, a declaimer of poetry, a...

He could hear nothing. He was feeling lighter and lighter. His physical shape was blurring, he was losing his bodily substance. Now he was almost transparent. In fact, he was vanishing.

Only at that moment could he hear his host's voice. No one was paying any attention to what he was going through. No one. The host took the book of poems and began to read them. Yes, those were his poems, those... but the sound came to him in increasingly dull and increasingly vague tones.

Then he felt deeply sad and deeply lonely. Nobody understands ghosts.

The Double.

Please, come in. You can sit there if you wish. Give me your coat. Thank you.

They exchanged pleasantries. They sat opposite one another. The woman had put her hair up in a bun. He sported a crimson dressing gown, slippers, shabby looks and stubble. He gave the impression of being at the end of his tether...

I would not have made you come here had it not been my intention to confess important matters. I have reached the end of my tether indeed, though nobody can know where it exactly is. You know what I mean. But... will you have something to drink? I have some splendid sherry here. Let me serve you.

He was nervous, uneasy. His eyes were somewhat glassy, maybe because of the medication he was on.

I do not know if I should apologise for my aspect. I have not received anyone for a long time, and given my current state... You know all, I suppose?

She nodded in a grim manner. The make up on her face was excessive. She wore round shell spectacles, quite ample, surrounding her eyes. Her eyes were lost behind the glass, and she had a dull look, like that of an amanuensis, or of a scribe. She had started to take notes, and focused her prying attention on everything around the writer. She examined mentally all his *bibelots*, his stacked-up mementos, scattered untidily through the immense mansion in which he had decided to put an end to his life.

When I knew I was in a terminal stage of cancer, I went through a deep depression. I have never acquiesced to interviews in the last years. But now my time is running out, and I would like to tell all to someone. And who might prove a better candidate than you, the best-known journalist in the country...

The woman smiled coldly. She seemed to be used to flattery, and this just slipped through her mind and away. She then kept her eyes deeply on her interlocutor, who was growing more and more nervous.

Thus, I want to tell you my story. Please, let me have some more cava. It comes from a tiny cellar in Spain. Magnificent. Shortly I will not be able to enjoy these things.

The woman smiled once again, and with her smile she concealed vivid impatience. These were the preliminaries of an important conversation; she could see that.

Both champagne and cava stimulate imagination. As does vintage wine. But they must be sparkling in a natural way, not excessive, or else the stomach will suffer. Cava is excellent for brilliant conversations... But I do not know why I am telling you this. This one is not going to be brilliant, but at least it will be the final

confession of someone who, perhaps, does not know what repentance is. The truth is that I need to give vent to it, to share it with someone, as I have been living too many years with this inside. You see...

The woman got ready to write, leaning forward a bit. Her age was uncertain, just as the way she looked, and both seemed to be needful qualities for that sort of therapy on the edge, on the boundaries of life itself. On the other hand, she was so ambiguous that she retained the features of the perfect confessor, who cannot be seen, or noticed, or taken into account. She thought... what was she thinking of? His thoughts entangled in confusion.

It all began on a rainy afternoon. Why rainy afternoons are those most suitable for book presentations, he could not tell.

He had always admired that writer. He had collected all his works. He used to cut his articles, which he found superb, out of the newspapers.

He was a writer too. He had written a great deal, but he had never showed his work to anybody, not even to his friends. It was a hidden vice. He locked himself up every night in front of a computer and, harassed by creative fever, would type and type until dawn, when he fell asleep, as the radio softly churned out classical music, constantly, and it swathed his thoughts. His thoughts...

Can you understand what I am saying? You do not look surprised. You will when you know what came next. I have said that I admired that great writer, and that I was a mere amateur, with a humdrum job in a wretched tax office. But... How pleasant my dreams were! Behind every tax declaration, I created a character, a way of life. I knew all about those beings that hid themselves behind their identity numbers, their accounts, the names that meant nothing to me. Such was the power computers gave me, the excess of information I possessed.

He sat more comfortably and, as he sipped with delight that forbidden nectar, his speech went on.

You really do not like cava? I have this device, so that I can have it always cold. Had you seen it? It is funny, isn't it? Well. I had always wanted to become a great writer. And that day, when the book was presented, I sensed a chill when I saw the author.

But then something strange happened. An elderly woman, neatly dressed in black, with a necklace of fine white pearls and earrings of pearl and diamond, entered the premises, and tripped over my knee.

The writer began to speak. Brazenly, the lady left after having listened to him for a few minutes. I am sure I saw her walking past me, clumsily tripping over my knees once more. And then, after a while, when I turned my eyes, she was there, sitting, listening to the famed writer with a wicked grin... Curious. She could not have entered anywhere else. I was sitting in the first row, next to the door. I would have seen her. How did she manage to enter? I do not know. It would prove a good topic for a short story. Who was she? I do not know either. The only truth is that, once the writer had finished his speech, she raised her hand to address him. She asked him a question, imperious. Her words sounded like the knocking on doors. In short, she accused him of having dried up, of having run out of creativity, of being affectedly reiterative.

The journalist had an inquisitive glimmer in her eyes, one that could be made out behind her glasses, and now their glimmer grew faint in the light of sunset. Sunbeams, dimmed by the curtains, pierced a window with a dusky, receding light.

The man helped himself to the wine, drinking glass after glass, as if it gave him the strength to tell the truth.

Well, what happened was that the famed writer fell apart. It was as though the words of the woman in black had struck him at the very base of the skull. Whispers spread among the audience. Is it possible? Enrique Arentino, who always had brilliant answers, outwitted by someone unknown!

The journalist stirred in her seat. The shadow of a question came to her lips, but the man with the crimson dressing gown made a gesture, intending that she should keep her questions until the story had finished.

I felt a poignant sadness for that man with whom I had identified so much, after having read him for several years. This way, when he left the hall, alone and forsaken, banished from a snobbish society that was laughing at his inability to respond to that insult, I decided to follow him.

The story-telling man had opened another bottle, and poured wine in a glass. Now he was tasting it more slowly.

I was... Ribulo Rodríguez... Hardly a stranger... Hardly... But I had great, great ideas. I had the impression that this was the chance of my life. You know what? In my life I have missed big chances. At that moment I was a complete wretch, dreaming stories of unbelievable characters whenever an income tax form fell into my hands, especially if the taxpayers were rich. I admired too, the potential to become rich writing. Because my writing did not exist anymore. Do you know what I would do after being up till dawn creating stories with my computer? I would erase them. That way I could start again. I was like the shroud woven by Penelope. Do you understand?

The journalist nodded, frankly disappointed, as she had had to stop taking the shorthand notes she had been scribbling ever more passionately as the man's speech grew faster.

I talked to Enrique. Very soon I was allowed to address him by his name. And that night we got drunk, and we walked through the city, uncaring of the rain that fell upon our priveliged heads.

Then he told me the truth. He had dried-up, was empty. He had had an unhappy love affair and was utterly disheartened. He was unable to write anything. I availed myself of that and took him home. We went on drinking.

By chance, I had left my computer switched on the night before, so that the written text had not been erased. And he, drunk as he was, read it. He read it all, with great interest.

I must tell you something I have been thinking about, he said. But then he fell asleep on the rug. I also flopped to a couch and we both slept without a care in the world.

The journalist was leaning a little further in. She was truly engrossed in the story, but at the same time was taking notes with great dexterity.

The next morning, Enrique awoke before I did, and was making some strong tea. You know? I hate coffee. It shreds my nerves. I did not have any coffee at home. Why am I telling you this? Because I found myself having breakfast with him. He looked younger. I had a great idea last night, he said, and I want to know your opinion. Nowadays writers have become a mere text. A computer with a word processor operated by no-one. I am done. I do not think I will write again until I recover my cheer, and this depression could last for years. I truly like what you have written, and I think fate has resolved that you and I should meet. You could adopt my personality, cloister yourself in my house, and not receive no-one. At most, you could attend some congress in a far place for a fleeting stay, avoiding pictures, and coming back. You could write at ease in my house. You would be a famous writer. You have assimilated my style so deeply that you could ape it, and you have such new ideas that you might even surpass me. Nowadays the writer, like the painter, churns out consumer goods, texts with a hallmark of his own that is repeated once and again. Your printed name is the

only important thing, and not what you feel or how genuine the words that you write. If I succeed in convincing the press and the publishing houses, through the intervention of proper intermediaries, that I have begun a new stage, with ideas both fresh and new –that might come from you– we could sell anything, as soon as my name is upon it. Do not miss this chance. I would go to the Caribbean, seeking a native girl and a cask of rum, and you live my life of luxury here. What do you think? I could be back in two years' time and we would share the profits. It is a good agreement, is it not?

The journalist stood still frozen to the spot. Or that is what he thought. But, after a pause, she went on taking notes, her head bent over her notebook.

Wee is just what happened. I brought my belongings, as well as my computer, to the palacew where you are now. Which means that I am not Enrique Arentino! I am Ribulo Rodríguez! But do not be alarmed. I write better than Enrique, that is what the press pundits said, and I do not mean a few reviews written by friends. I made up a legend, and it proved profitable. I spread the rumour that poor Arentino was desperately in love with a film star who had forsaken him, and that he would not receive guests anymore. I succeeded in making

people think that he had given up his rakish life. And thus, I concentrated on the computer screen, and aimed all my endeavours only at writing. That is the reason why I have not granted a journalist, or anybody, an appointment... just a congress now and then in places afar.

The journalist had stopped writing and was smiling openly.

I piled up a great sum of money. There was nothing I could want in this palace. Not even the company of my dogs. Sometimes a sojourn to the property Enrique had in the countryside, to ride a horse and try a change of scene. That's all.

Ribulo –not Enrique– drank up his glass, and kept smiling in a rather stupid way, deeply drunk, as he watched the last light of sunset. He had already said everything, but...

But then, young lady, the worst possible thing happened. One day, when already accustomed to my new existence and devoting myself only myself to the appreciation of art and music – (I had even begun to take

violin lessons with a four-eyed teacher) - when by now used to the pleasures of money and the good life...

Enrique showed up.

It was a stormy night, just when these things tend to happen. Nobody saw him enter, none of the servants, who by the way I had all replaced in order to fit our strategy. I was truly surprised. He looked magnificent; it was clear he had recovered. The worst thing...

He paused as he opened the third bottle.

The worst thing was that he intended to change back our roles once more. Do you understand? He would be successful again, taking advantage of the ten books I had written in this time –five years, nothing less–, that had provided him with more fame and money than he had ever before dreamt of. It was not just a matter of money. Because the worst thing, as I have told you, was that I would have to work again, bending my crooked back over the wretched bank accounts of all those hateful beings about whom I would never again have the wish to tell a story. I had tasted the sweet nectar of success, do you understand? It was not

just the money. It was Fame. Fame reborn. Can you see, Enrique? You cannot do this to me! Leave me alone! How dare you throw me aside? Enrique, you ungrateful bastard, son of a bitch! Enrique...!

The man with the dressing gown, Ribulo –not Enrique anymore– was covering his face with his hands, and wept loudly. The journalist watched him with both astonishment and commiseration.

I killed him right there. I strangled him. I do not know what went through me. Maybe it was the image in my mind of my impending future, the result of seeing how all the happiness I had stored up in those five years would crumble away, how my former run-of-the-mill life would come back to stay... I do not know. I killed him.

He kept silent. The journalist looked undaunted.

Then I carried his body to the boot of my car, and I buried him a secluded corner of the country-estate "The Thrushes", where I would go to spend time with in my Mercedes of dark tinted windows.

Now the journalist did accept a glass of cava. They toasted. Why?

And to what will we toast? I do not know. I will be dead in a month's time. Cancer does not forgive. It is terrible. Just now, when I was at the height of my creative powers. Now you know this. This is why I have told you these things: for you must tell that artists have been swallowed by a machine, that we are faceless beings, deprived of any narrative but that which is generated by newspapers or by the interests of the publishing houses around us. Beings made of papier-mâché, not even human, enslaved behind the screens of our computers, creating impossible stories we would like to have lived...

The journalist had left. She was not there. How did she get out? He was sitting next to the only door; he would have noticed. The same once more... mysterious Women, women bound to mystery.

The Girl of Yesterday.

He was rushing to the bank. He had to send a cheque in dollars abroad.

He entered the building of huge glass windows. Through them could be seen the coming and going, sometimes gentle, sometimes brisk, of those walking outside.

He headed for the exchange bureau. There was a slow, tiresome queue.

The man behind the desk had the typical aspect of a pen pusher. With his back stooped over the computer, his round golden spectacles framing a pair of colourless eyes. He was a character reft of identity. He counted the notes over and again despairingly, holding up those who had come to change their money. He barely raised his eyes from the floor, or he kept them fixed on the foreign currency, which he was unable to count with any dexterity.

As he had already taken his place in the queue, he amused himself looking through those glass windows.

Nothing interesting. Run-of-the-mill people. A few youngsters walked past laughing, leaving behind a pleasant note of colour. Most of them were elderly people, all dressed in green, walking to and fro, doing nothing, as befits a small, uninteresting city.

And, all of a sudden, She appeared.

He was captivated. It was love at first sight.

A lovely young girl, about sixteen years old. He had always thought that, in this city, the truly adorable women were those from sixteen to eighteen years old. Once they got someone to maintain them, they became ungraceful,

plump beings, dead ringers for all the others, dressed in the same conventional way. Unlike the women of Seville, of more Roman spirit and improving with age, who kept their wonderful looks as they reached thirty or even forty years old. Or Catalan women, who matured with great dignity and a certain youthful air.

The visions from the summer that he remembered most vividly were those charming girls, their hair ravished by the wind, their blonde highlights, their curls waving in the air, as they glided through the residential areas, laughing, swift on those horrendous mopeds, usually without a numberplate. For them, rules did not exist. They invaded the pavement, or rode the wrong way. A simple bottle of coca-cola sufficed them to feel happy with their friend, male or female, as they luxuriated on the grass, or they got together in crowds –always in crowds– in the same places, that had for them the appeal of a gathering of fellow-teenagers.

Each season, those girls would exhibit a different part of their bodies, depending on the fad. Now their smooth bellies, ravishingly beautiful, their knavels for all to see beneath short denim jackets or torn t-shirts. Then their legs, a couple of pale legs, not yet fully developed. Later, the incipient curves of their minute, tender breasts.

Yes, those adorable young girls had a special sexual charm, he thought.

As for this exhibition of body, that winter had proved a prolongation of summer. Girls now wore tight trousers called leggings.

And that brown-haired girl´s lean, long thighs could be easily imagined, singularly attractive, truly arousing.

The girl was wearing a long woollen jumper of brownish yet lively tones, that concealed her intimacy up to the buttocks. And then came the legs, those delicate legs, that made her walk weightlessly, with a light-hearted freshness, as if there were hardly any contact between her and the floor, as if she were dancing on the miserable flagstones that supported her slender, young, adorable body.

How disgusting the people in the queue! How disgusting the man that counted the notes as he wetted his fingers on his lips in a most unhygienic manner, the living image of greed.

He stood there, mesmerized by the girl. The expansive glass windows, found only in a few modern buildings, made it possible for him to follow her steps. The girl was walking towards the far end of the street. Suddenly, when she had walked the whole length of the bank´s glazed front – something which forced him to forget himself ocurred, admiring and following her as he was quite blatantly with his head as she walked from one end to the other– she halted and looked with intensity through the glass window.

Eugenio thought the girl had noticed he was looking at her. At least, his ego induced him to believe it. Was he still handsome enough to attract young girls? He, in his forties, comfortably settled down as a well-off architect... At

this point, could he really think of...? Bah! –he said to himself–. Then he had a look at his growing belly. Well, he thought, who knows!

He smoothed down his tie, its colours matching marvellously his classy sports jacket. No one could deny that architects, if not for houses, do have a taste for clothing.

He followed again the steps of the girl, and he thought he could hear a few scales played delicately on a piano, perhaps Debussy, perhaps his imagination. No, it was not the music from the bank, so fake and unbearable. The hum-drum muzak that made real music seem as bubble-gum. It was music that flowered from his mind and seemed to beat time with the girl's graceful pace. And the funniest thing was that he sensed that She could feel it too. She was surely aware of his gaze, of the obsession he was beginning to feel towards the shapes of her body.

The girl halted, after strolling to and fro, constantly followed –like a cinematographic camera– by the eyes and the mind of Eugenio. She halted at the entrance to the bank, glazed as well, a door opening out onto the street corner. And she looked inside discreetly. Yes, now he was sure. The girl was looking at him.

It was his turn. A nudge from someone forced him to leave abruptly –too abruptly– his reverie.

The clerk behind the cash desk attended to his request. But as he explained it he watched the entrance door out of the corner of his eye.

Yes, it can be done. But what was the sum? Would he like big or small notes? What kind of notes? He answered all the annoying questions the cashier asked him, who then vanished for a while as he looked for the relevant forms.

Eugenio looked towards the door again. The girl stood behind it, behaving as if she were waiting for someone. Was she waiting for him? Now and then she looked inside, smiled and bit her lip. Maybe she expected him to approach and talk to her.

Behind Her, people walked endlessly over a pedestrian crossing, in successive herds, like anxious goats led to shelter. But She did not seem to have the intention to cross the street. Of course, an alibi is always necessary –Eugenio thought–. She might have noticed that he liked her, and was pretending she did not see him.

The useless man behind the cash desk appeared at last, and befuddled him again with dull and absurd questions that turned his brain temporarily away from the Vision. The pen pusher seemed particularly to relish his distress, in spite of the gestures of impatience Eugenio was beginning to make. The whole process seemed as if it were going to last forever. And he could not postpone that transaction anymore, because it was important.

The clerk vanished once more. The girl remained there, her arms folded now, looking at his eyes with tempting enticement, and biting her lips as she too made a gesture of impatience, her lovely legs inside those close-fitting

trousers that highlighted her figure until, until... My God! Eugenio was losing his head, a bundle of pure nerves. His mind was made up.

The man at the cash desk finally showed up with new forms. Fill this in if you please. Sign here. And here. When would you like it? You will have to wait a little more. If you excuse me one moment I can tell you the exact date, I will consult by phone with the person in charge upstairs.

Eugenio was getting desperate.

Finally, after the long and drawn-out paperwork, the transaction was complete. The clerk hardly raised his head from below his hump, covered by a grey jumper, to hand him a pale-pink form that he put quickly in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Ask for Mario Malva when you come for your money. Good bye, Mr...

Eugenio restrained a final gesture of annoyance and turned back. He made his way through the people in the queue, that had grown bigger than before, and he walked with decision towards the door.

But she was not there. The bird had flown, just as in the song. He was deeply sad. His eyes looked for her everywhere among the stultified crowd, all of them eager to squander their pay packets on the offers with which the advertisements coaxed them. He could find no trace of her.

The next time I see her... he said to himself. But miracles do not happen twice.

That night, the clerk in charge of the cash desk arrived home late. He lived in a house with wooden stairs and brown walls that in former times had been white. A house built in the nineteenth century, its wooden framework possibly eaten away by termites.

Mario Malva opened the door, and put his grey jacket and his grey jumper on the hanger. He was tired.

He entered the room, with a large double bed, also made of wood; wood painted too often, but wood nonetheless.

And She was there, waiting for him, lying there, barely covered by a blanket.

Hi, Mario. I´ve been waiting for a long time. You´ve been away too long. I was impatient...

Do your parents know you are here?

No. They are off, travelling, as usual. We have all the time you want. I went to the bank, but there were a lot of people in the queue.

Yes. It was not possible to leave my place. All of them were annoying as hell.

Mario was taking his clothes off, revealing an extremely thin and frail frame, with pale and drawn skin, through which blue veins could be seen among the withering hair that covered his arms.

And She stretched out her arms towards him.

Come here, my love...

Maria.

Maria is my one and only love. I first met her a long time ago, on a trip to France. I miss her so much! You cannot understand what my life has been like since I last saw her. It looks as if my not having been my own true self that time had cast a shadow of misfortune upon me.

You see, I admired her deeply. She was a tall, slim waisted woman, with commanding brown eyes, and her loose ravelled hair was plentiful and bulky, granting her a look both bohemian and ambiguous at once. Her visage was dark, her legs slender. Slim, classy. Profoundly sensitive and intelligent. She retained in the depths of her soul all the youthful beauty that comes back to me whenever I recall the happiest times in my life.

Once, in the south of France, one night I was singing and playing the guitar with some friends. I performed sad songs by Françoise Hardy, or melodious Italian ballads, Nicola di Bari, all that stuff. She was there, in front of me, amidst the darkness of the night, her tanned skin sprayed with the moisture of the sea, laughing with undecipherable joy.

I lost all trace of her after that. I only knew her name: Maria.

For endless days I sought her in the big city, in Paris, where I knew she was living. I gathered clues to her personality and customs from her numerous friends. They all spoke wonders of her character, of her joyful sensitivity. And I always recalled her deep dark eyes, her laughter.

You know Paris is a profoundly romantic city. I had obtained a grant as an English lecturer in the Sorbonne. But gradually I began to find my job uninteresting, and seeing her again became my only important aim. The memory of that night, singing by the light of the moon and the stars, the scent from the sea, the pleasant aroma of her body next to me, her eyes, above all her eyes, her entangled hair, her shapely legs.

I worked as if a detective during my stay in the big city. I covered all the quarters; I went over all the places she would frequent in the hope of finding her. They were places bohemian and charming, populated with artists.

And finally I came closer to her. I met her now and then in certain bars she used to attend, always surrounded by laughter and friends, easy laid-back people, and often attractive and charming as her.

I did not dare talk to her. Just a few distant gestures, a smile, an uncertain look aimed at hinting at the fancy of my feelings towards her. I am sure that, little by little, through our polite contacts at a distance, she progressively became aware. And finally, one afternoon I followed her.

I eventually traced her home in Montmartre, a building that was dark like her large commanding eyes, infinite in their depth.

That house retained for me a magnetism that grew stronger and stronger. As I wandered through the city, I always tried to walk past that doorway, hoping to find her. But the doorway was always empty.

And, at last, one day I summoned up my courage to phone her. It´s me, I´m in Paris. Yes, we have run into one another now and again. You see, I'm writing the script for a film and I would like to talk to you, just to find inspiration. Please, don't laugh. I would like to talk to you. When can we meet?

She did not turn up as arranged, and thus made her image became more interesting still for me in my imagination. So I went on with the chase. I would phone her, expecting she would answer, and when her boyfriend took the call, hang up without ado or explanation. Finally, I talked to her again. Her voice had a touch of annoyance when she answered. Yes, that very evening, at seven. I will be with some friends, but we can meet. Fine.

Nervous, I went to the appointment.

Maria was there indeed, accompanied by a lively bunch of somewhat affected dancers with whom she laughed carelessly. There were also two very tall girls who looked like haute-couture models.

I was feeling a bit shy. I joined them and I sat by her side, but I could hardly articulate a word. I remember that, to conceal my shyness, I even struck up a conversation with one of the two models. A shrill music, extremely loud, reigned in the venue, and a stuffy air, crammed with smoke and the odour of human bodies, pervaded everything. I felt sick. I think she did not give a damn about me. Perhaps I was not her kind of guy, or I was too short for her, who knows.

In a moment when she went to the lavatory, I followed behind and addressed her. Maria, I don't want to share tonight with just anyone, I want to be alone with you. It would help me no end with my job.

She looked at me with a hint of challenge and of doubt. She obviously did not know what was going through my mind, and she would not pay attention to my words.

We left in my car, hardly waving goodbye to anyone, among the uproar of the dancers that had been deprived of their main source of joy and complained in tones of discord.

I felt relieved when we got away from the dancefloor. She recommended a place she used to go, a tiny restaurant with a bohemian air and slight background music, the Eagles maybe.

I felt inferior and I knew not why. You know how I am. We have been through many sessions of psychoanalysis, and you understand me. Yet I could sense the looks of everyone upon me, and I had the impression I was doing something wrong; I do not know why exactly. Guilt, perhaps.

I will never forget that moment, as "Fool to cry", a ballad by Mick Jagger, played in the background.

Maria looked at me, a profound gaze, her eyes infinitely deep, and said: You see? The biggest mountain in the world does not exist.

I could say no more. I kept silent all the while, thinking, enjoying her company. She was looking all around her, I did not know if she was bored. Conversely, for me those moments were very alive.

When closing time approached, and we left, I felt helpless.

I remember I had to remove an enormous dustbin that had been left behind the car. The city was filled with light, the dark night above. I had a sudden fit of courage and I told her:

You are like Night to me. I am completely enthralled by you. I know you cannot understand me. I just want to be your friend, that´s all. I would like to be your only friend, your best friend, to get to the heart of your thoughts. Have you ever had a friend?

The psychoanalyst had got up for a moment, as he answered the ill-timed ringing of the phone.

In the meantime, he took his glasses off, steamy with the ardour of his feelings. He carelessly smoothed down his long, auburn hair. He was short, he thought, that was the crossroads where all his obsessions gathered together. Perhaps Maria embodied the unattainable, the impossible, the highest, the most beautiful, the most delicate: his antithesis. He thought he had to tell that to the psychoanalyst when he came back.

Now, he had always felt intrigued by those curtains on the corner. What was behind them? It looked as if they led to another room, or as if they hid a false window. Oh, how annoying! Just at this moment, as I was grasping the crux of the problem, this guy leaves! Freud, remonstrative, looked at him from the huge picture hung on the wall.

Don´t worry. I understand. I know it is nothing unusual in you. I was telling you that I should have been more persuasive, more sincere. For the love I confessed to Maria was not convincing enough. To such an extent that I mistook reality for dreams that night, and I am not even sure if I told her anything of what I have referred to before. Maybe I spent the whole night acting like a fool, making up soliloquies that perhaps only served to move her, a truly happy being, to a feeling of rejection before my grim silence. I don't know. I gave in to my fears, to my obsessions. I don´t even know if I would have enjoyed having sex with her. I only know that, at least at that moment, she was the only woman for me, and I would have transformed her. Perhaps if I had just had her friendship, all my obsessions would have been dispelled... After that, you already know. My dull life, my failures, the separation from my wife, my terrible lack of self-confidence, my inability to relate to people. You are almost a conjurer, you are curing all my problems. I am most thankful for that.

The phone bell rang again. The white-bearded psychoanalyst stood up murmuring an excuse. This had never happened before during the many years of long sessions in which, now at last, he had dared reveal the innermost of his thoughts. Had Maria known him better, had she understood the artist's depth that throbbed inside his soul...

He was really intrigued by those green curtains. What might they be hiding? In his sessions, he had learnt that there was no need to be afraid of anything, and so, he got up.

Woody Allen got up, indeed so. For a moment, he hesitated as he gripped the selvage with his hands. Then, summoning up his courage, he drew them apart, quickly and abruptly, to see what was behind.

And, lo! Behind was an enormous picture that represented Maria, sitting on a small chair, looking shyly at the floor.

Freud and the ghosts.

The next patient was pretty, Doctor Freud thought as the nurse let her in.

She was wearing a dress with complicated ruffles, and she held a small sunshade in her right hand, that rather resembled a symbol of the desire every Viennese harboured to see the longed-for spring sun.

The girl leant submissively back on the couch, as she smoothed down chastely the folds of her skirt and revealed the outlined shape of her truly erotic ankles.

The doctor felt interest for her case. The silence the girl weaved around her story. The breath that covered her words. The faint smile that disguised the sadness deep behind her adorable thoughts. Adorable like the curls of her hair, entangled around her ears. Ears with delicate lobes, shaded by a faint line of hair that crept down to the rising of her neck. A heron-like neck, slender, erect, noble like that of an Egyptian goddess, Nefertiti with the visage of a Viennese girl, chestnut blonde with marvellous curls that made him daydream, unconsciously, as he heard her story.

The girl was talking, trusting her feelings to him. He was a serious professional, with a white beard, with golden spectacles, with deep insight. He was Sigmund Freud, and all the publishing houses in the world were no doubt eagerly awaiting his death so as to publish hideous translations of his most considered thoughts. And all the students in the world were no doubt eagerly awaiting his death so as to discuss the problematic nature of his intricacies, the most serious matters in the world, he, who was a serious man, white bearded, golden spectacles, deep insight. He, who was falling in love like a child, hardly conscious of it, with that ravishing girl of chestnut-blonde curls and naïve eyes.

How enticing were the perversions concealed behind that innocent façade! How gifted that girl for a new concept of sex, for a new form of liberation, away from the constraint of Viennese society, prude and tight-knitted, unable to worship her beautiful thoughts, her beautiful breasts, her beautiful...!

Heavens! What was he thinking of? He did not know what the girl was telling him. He had drowned in erotic reveries. He had lost the thread. And the girl really was in a flutter, telling him more and more things, giving him an account of ever more exquisite treachery, sensual thoughts, and hidden yearnings that were not vile, but wondrous and innocent beyond the seeming vileness where she thought she was wallowing. All human beings are the same; we share but some slight variations in a small guide of perverted choices that we indeed regard as perverse, but are in fact so common, so repeated, so as to weary yet the most stern of confessors.

But, how to ask the girl at what point of her account she had arrived? He was lost. Indeed, he was pondering a new theory while the girl was talking to him. What would be the use of his theories in the future? Who knows! They would presumably pass unnoticed, they would be regarded as archaic, forgotten. And... what was the use of any theory?

The image, the presence of that adorable girl was much more important, for the living slice of life that she was, than all the deepest thoughts, than all the most acute explanations, than all the theories...

After many sessions of toil, not only to understand the problem, but simply to seduce the girl, he, in his fifties, getting on in years, but with a flaming passion for all that was youthful, something for him enrapturing, wonderful and divine, made a date.

You may wonder, Sigmund Freud a date? Yes, indeed. He arrived for it like a restless schoolboy, a bouquet of violets in his right hand and a small Mozart chocolate box in his left. He did not actually know what might please the girl more, so he chose both presents. And, what is more important, he had in his pocket a book with erotic engravings from ancient China, that he intended to show her in due course.

He wondered if he was behaving like a dirty old man, but, what the hell! You only live once.

The girl showed up, dressed in black velvet. She looked beautiful, her hair falling in abundant curls over her shoulders. The collar, white and of sumptuously delicate lace. And, behind, the skin, too exquisitely white, with the occasional mole that rendered more tempting the adventure of tracing the clues that led to her breasts. Small, smooth breasts, that fluttered and stirred impatient over a slim tight waist.

He took her hand, trembling with joy, and they got in the carriage, hiding from the sight of anyone around.

Once in the coach, he would always remember, she caressed his white beard, and he caught her passionately in his arms. In a not very scientific way, he became obsessed with imagining the embroidery of her underwear, the sort of surprises that awaited under that ample skirt.

And, as they reached the faraway hotel, girded by trees, that they had chosen for their first meeting, he indulged himself in daydream. He recalled visions from childhood, the first girl whom he had loved, more blonde, on a distant beach, as the scorching summer sun slid over their bodies. That first girl whose body ever obsessed him. Her long hair. Her long and lean legs, conspicuous through the long swimsuit that tried to conceal them. His first sexual experience took place in a dark room, as he thought of his mother, who might come and catch them at any moment.

He smiled to himself. If posterity found out the way he came across Oedipus complex! Bah! Did posterity matter at all? Only life matters... Life was that pretty girl in her twenties who gave him tiny cute kisses, grazing his lips just a little as she softly caressed his crotch.

Who was the idiot that said intellectuals were impotent? He, at least, felt like a force of nature. And he threw himself upon her once they were in bed; throwing her petticoats into disarray, frenziedly stripping her of all her lace, discovering

himself as an animal seeking to quench its desire, as he left both mind and science –at last, for the first time in his life!– hanging on the coat stand at the entrance, together with his old black hat.

Do you want to know what happened then?

I don’t know if I should tell you. I don’t know if you’ll believe it.

They finished making love, an orgy of panting, screaming, sighing, kissing, caressing... it was a marvellous moment that he would never forget... that he would never forget.

The girl, naked, drew nearer. She lay on his breast, as he lit the pipe and recovered that scientific air of a matter-of-fact professor, smiling with irony at the deliciously animal behaviour they had shared.

Yes, he said to himself, the theory of libido must be perfected. It is far more important than it seems. There are still several matters that require some serious research. I do not know if I will have time enough in my life to do it, but...

The girl caressed the thin hair on his breast, curling it around her fingers. She kissed him. And she told him a wish...

He never knew how important that wish would be for him and for his future life.

The girl looked ravishing: her tiny breasts, her white skin, her untidy hair, her slim and long legs, perfectly formed. She was beautiful, he thought. How adorable!

The girl... My God! I will go on...

The girl told him: I want to confide a wish in you.

What wish? He asked, still without paying the attention due.

I adore you; I love you. But I don't want just your body. I want your mind, your intelligence as well.

Then, inclining her head adorably over his, she paused a moment and exclaimed: I would like to enter your dreams!

Without realising the importance, he laughed openly, just as learned men do sometimes: just as do children.

Come now, girl, why do you want to enter my dreams?

I want to become one with you, I want to dwell in your mind, I want to be a somebody inside your head, I want...

You want to be my ghost, maybe?

I want to be your ghost. I want to dwell in your dreams.

He smiled. He put the pipe aside and kissed her. It was a long, pure, intense kiss, just like the kisses of children, I mean, of learned men...

They fell asleep, embraced, like two teenagers in love. Freud was happy. He had never been happy in his entire life, but that was a secret he hoped would never be revealed. Yes, he had been happy with the first girl, the one with lean legs and long hair, the one that was on that beach, when, hidden behind the rocks, they showed their sex to each other... sex... and death? Heavens! Sex and death... But, why was he linking them now? Yet the relationship was so profound, so intimate...

Yes, he had to write about all that, at once, as soon as he got back to Vienna. That girl was inspiring him. What delightful moments he was living! It must be true that we should live the present, and enjoy it as something unique when that present brings joy... if only it would last forever... if only that girl would stay with him forever... with him forever... as now, together, the adorable temple of her head resting upon his, aged by exhaustion and work, by barren days of building up theories, uselessly burning out his life for posterity, burning out his life...

Nothing justifies the crime that is burning out one's life, he said to himself. Life must be lived intensely. And love is the only way... love... love.

He stayed so, asleep, half awake and dreaming, thinking of his theories, of his conception of life, of the delightful young lady that had breathed fresh air into his days, buried under the everyday ordeal of routine, interpretation, and at times unbearable sharing of feelings with his patients, his patients, his patients... He was fed up of his patients. He nearly committed suicide because of them. He knew a few colleagues who had done so, unable to bear the burden of countless intimacies, of countless cases. The girl, the girl... To hell with the patients!

Sunlight came sweetly in through the window. Bird song could be heard. It was evidently springtime. Light filtered through the curtains of the discreet hotel he had chosen, in an idyllic and romantic place, with a delicate yet lush landscape, deep green, and gigantic trees that sheltered the wooden house.

He overheard, as if out of a dream, the voices of the guests in the adjoining room, as they went downstairs to have breakfast. He imagined the big mugs of hot tea, their pleasant aroma. He loved tea. He loved birds. He loved trees. He loved sunlight. He loved springtime. He loved love. He loved the girl...

But the girl... where was she?

There was a warm hollow, with a female scent, in the pillow, close to him. But the body of the sweet Viennese girl had vanished.

In vain he sought her; he could find no trace. And he sought her in alarm... Because he believed all the life, all the joy he possessed, rested in her. And because he was deeply in love. But in spite of his efforts, he could not find her. And he had to go back to Vienna on his own.

He didn't even know how to give a convincing explanation in the hotel But nobody really asked. He was too well-known a doctor to arouse suspicion.

And... once again the ordeal of sessions that wasted, emptied and exhausted, where he received his patients untiringly, where he listened once and again to the same old problems muttered with different words by different people each who thought their problem unique, distinct and, above all, secret, unquestionably secret, and more so in that close-knit and oppressive society.

Ah! How he missed the girl! Where could she be now?

When the visits of his patients came to an end, Sigmund Freud, tired, lay down on his couch. He crossed his legs. He relaxed. He took his pipe and, as the smoke rose in dense palls towards the ceiling, he closed his eyes and began to dream.

And, can you believe it? She was there, inside his mind, alive, real, living... She was there, talking to him daintily, caressing his forehead, kissing his lips, relieving him...

He never knew how the girl had managed it. The whole matter seemed crafted as in from magic. He had always thought, though he would never dare tell his colleagues, that science cannot explain everything –that is exactly the reason why it exists, he said, assuaging himself–. He, at least, was never able to find an explanation.

Because the truth, the plain truth, is that the girl with chestnut-blonde hair would inhabit his Dreams forever. What's more, the girl's dream became his own. This is why from that moment on –and this is secret– his texts waxed charming, lively and profound.

And, whenever he wished to write, he closed his eyes and dreamt. And the beautiful Viennese girl appeared in his dreams, and she came to sleep with him, to put her head close to his, her mind at one with his, her temple at one with his.

That is why, whenever he wrote or dreamt, Sigmund Freud had a ravishing woman that dwelled in the bottomless bottom of his thoughts.

A Tale of Mermaids.

The summer was blue and red, like sunsets in Galicia by the shore.

Evening drew on as a group of friends chatted, former secondary school teachers that told stories both real and invented with slow voices that enraptured, with that skill for narration common to the old.

They evoked the day, that had been splendid, full of light. And then, one of those among them spoke, his voice muffled and faltering:

“I had, he said, a friend who specialised in the literature of fantasy. He knew more than anyone on that subject; and sometimes, according to his own account, he seemed to have reached a point where he could not tell reality from fantasy. But he earned his livelihood giving lessons as a modest teacher in a province inland, far from the sea.

One day he went to an important congress that was taking place in the coast, where several aspects of fantasy as a genre were to be debated.

Others who were there tell that, in the days previous to his lecture, he would often withdraw to his room, suffering from splitting headaches that until then had not troubled him with such frequency and pain.

The day of his lecture came at last. As he was a well-know scholar, the room was full. He spoke for a long time about several aspects of the literature of fantasy, and everybody listened to him with attention.

At the end of the speech he was asked a few questions.

But there was one person in particular.

There, sitting in the first row, was a girl with long hair and unfathomably large eyes, of an indefinable colour that resembled the limpid sea when it rains.

The girl asked him about the existence of mermaids.

And, amazingly, the teacher hardly knew how to answer. He muttered a few confused sentences, mentioned the figure of Father Feijoo, who did so much to put an end to the suspicions and superstitions that were customary in Spain, but accepted the existence of these legendary beings. "I come," he said, "from the heartland, from a place where these legends do not exist, for we are far from the spell of the sea, but one of my deepest longings would be fulfilled if I had the chance to meet a mermaid."

This remark moved all to laughter, all but the teacher and the girl whose eyes had the colour of the sea, who kept staring the one at the other.

That is, they tell, the last thing that was ever known of him. The following day he had vanished.

Some say he left for the sea.

The sweet shade of that tree

What is left of life

If no more there are trees?

The sky was dark. The wind blew. Carobs fell on the garden of September with a dull thudding. It was the first storm, the end of summer.

The trees looked at each other, absorbed in the silence of insane children, in the calmness of blind birds. They flaunted the fresh sound of their newly dampened petticoats, as they trudged impossible steps along the never-ending alleys of their dead thoughts.

But they were alive. She knew that.

She had been eavesdropping as they chatted amidst the silence of starry summer nights. They spoke with a softened voice, exuding words and feelings out of the gnarled flesh of their trunks burdened with years. They talked about the sky, about the moon. They talked mainly about the wind.

They had been relishing spring as they spread their pollen with ample munificence, in search of a new germination that would lengthen their species. And they amused themselves telling preposterous stories, stories that lacked a

beginning or an end. Men, who live much less, were at any rate unable to find a beginning or an end in these summer stories.

But now the sky resembled a brawl, and vented its anger with sudden blasts as they danced to the strains of the wind.

Eva came near her most cherished tree. She admired its trunk, streaked with the years, and caressed the bark with her hand.

She recalled other stories in other gardens, when she was a child. She had always been obsessed by that account of the woman chased by the passionate rapist who was transformed into a tree as his hands, with a grip that was futile, tried to embrace her waist.

Neither did she know whether all of us, once we die, would become trees and live again every spring.

Maybe trees were alive and knew everything. Maybe they were human beings who, in a privileged condition, went on with their lives much longer, adopting a static stance, only disturbed by the gusts of wind, wind that blew with the force of a bull ready to charge, on that afternoon, at the end of summer.

She heard claps of thunder, and came still nearer to that beloved evergreen tree which kept stooped over the house, sheltering it. She thought it was a female, whereas the two enormous holm oaks that seemed to grow from a single stump resembled a couple of lovers, ravishing in their beauty.

She leant on the trunk. The pepper tree always grew by the stout pine, protected by its manly company.

She believed she could feel in it a slight ooze of sap, as if it were touched by her nearness. And she hugged the trunk, tightening her hold on it.

The afternoon was beautiful, and the storm drew closer.

Her dog began to retreat, loosing a mournful howl of indefinite foreboding, and ran for shelter to the other side of the garden.

But Eva felt at ease, holding firmly the trunk of the evergreen pepper tree that writhed ever more bravely, like a female on heat, with a rhythm that grew maddening.

Her hands were hurting, but she kept pressing, enjoying a fierce feeling of pleasure.

Maybe it was then she desired to become a tree.

Maybe it was then too when the terrible flash of lightning struck with a sharp blow right at the trunk of that tree.

In the fridge. (A tale for little girls)

Everything was shrouded in darkness. She could smell tasty meals, but was not able to distinguish them.

Suddenly, light came in, and someone took her out. She heard voices whispering, mirth, birthday songs. Someone sang a traditional melody and lit the candles.

The cake shone.

She could feel them coming nearer her body. They took a piece closer each time. Until the only place that remained was where she stood.

The child looked at her with greedy eyes. He was full, but he seemed eager to finish it all up.

As he began to put her into his mouth, the body of the tiny marzipan ballerina trembled, frightened.

The child let out a fleeting scream of amazement. All of them turned their eyes towards the feeble figure, who now felt out of danger.

But a few days later, tired of her because she was of no use, they put her into a glass bottle, and placed it at a corner of the child's room.

He grew up, became a man, forgot the extraordinary matter.

After a long time had passed, one night, as he was remembering with nostalgia his childhood, the mysterious affair of the ballerina in the centre of the birthday cake came to his mind.

He rummaged through piles of junk, looking for that bottle, and finally he found it covered with dust.

He had a closer look. The glass was by now almost opaque, and it was barely possible to look through it.

A light, faint at first but then more and more intense, could be seen at the bottom of the bottle, like a landscape covered by an unreal haze.

All of a sudden, dazzled by that strange light, the bottle fell from his hands.

There was a small explosion. And in place of the tiny imprisoned ballerina, a lovely full-sized girl appeared.

The boy was dumbfounded by her beauty. He understood she was the woman of his dreams, and he became one with her forever.

Jesters in the Prado Museum.

He took the opportunity to enter the Prado Museum. It was a cold afternoon. It was not long before closing but he considered it would take but a moment to achieve some sense of aesthetic pleasure. And that was exactly how it was to be.

He parked his car in the area reserved for staff, bypassing all restrictions, and entered the building with decision so as to check any desire of those on duty to reproach his conduct.

He walked straight past the pictures of Medioevo, pictures that had always interested him with their aura of another world, their demons, the delicacy of their Virgins. This time they did not interest him in the slightest, they left him cold.

He kept going until he found himself surrounded by the works of Rubens. They seemed to him wrongly proportioned and superficial, he ignored them too. At the far end of the hall were some examples of Roman sculpture, young men and women of balanced posture, adolescents, with their gaze averted and their heads down, humble in their beauty. And figures of Venus leaving the baths, surprised by the sun that filtered through the glass of the windows.

He reached the first floor after contemplating, in some lost corner of the staircase, a fine picture of what he imagined sought to represent the awakening of Apollo.

On this floor, he found what was the Spain of darkness, Spain under the yoke of the Counter-Reformation, under religion at its most repressive, under monarchs unyielding and stern. Just as every other country of the age.

What about the people? He wondered about the people. The people, he imagined, lived in freedom as they had always done, even under the most violent forms of repression. The people had a carnival-like, festive mentality.

He walked straight past the courtly and grandiose work of Velazquez without the least of emotion. They were works of necessity, kings, nobles, princes, to whom he had contracted out his brush. And there was Velazquez himself, portrayed in *The Royal Family,* a look of deep sorrow in his eyes, the sorrow of an artist sold to power, to survive, to create, to live and to be.

He ignored even the greatest of works, *The Spinners, The Surrender of Breda…* Yet pleasure he took from those canvasses that the public barely noticed. He delighted with spontaneity and glee before the jesters of the court. He lost himself in thought before the deep gaze of those everyday people, unfortunate in looks, sometimes almost subnormal – yet which with their very sadness were bound to make the court laugh. The tragedy of the clown. The hidden face of laughter. The depth of their expression! The agony of their eyes!

There was the jester who threw his arms to the floor and brandished a stick, to make fun, one supposes, of war, to make show of his own cowardice, and so to entertain a court of gentlemen, accustomed in battle to conquer, to challenge the world, to embroider the bravery of their own daring deeds.

That jester was possibly related to the poor Estebanillo González, the good-tempered man of burlesque literature. Just as does this writing, Velazquez showed us the face of the unprotected, of the discriminated, the underrated, the run-down, the ill-fated.

He refused to accept that the jesters portrayed by Velazquez were but the idle brush strokes of a bored artist, a mere exercise in painting. There in every visage could be found a dimension of depth such as might stir the most profound of feelings.

It was then that he thought of Spain, the Spain that set the standards for the ideologies and victories of the entire world, exactly the same for each and every nation. They all had their own version of the Inquisition, their own form of censorship, of oppression, of coercive religion. Just that

the Spanish had a considerably superior capacity for self criticism and showed off the sores of its wounds precisely where others would try to conceal them. It had always been so.

And thus, while the paintings of other foreign artists of the age consisted of sweetened representations of mythology, in which the defects of society and its very own sense of tragedy were exalted to new levels of hypocrisy, Velazquez pleased himself to show us the faces of those broken characters, those drunkards, made still more uncouth for not having any tomorrow.

The Dutch and the Flemish painted everyday scenes too but they lacked the depth, they were simple authors of local customs and manners who showed the everyday without any dimension of tragedy. The depth lay in the faces of the common folk of Velazquez...

Without being able to avoid that feeling, that way of thinking, he continued wandering through the galleries of the museum. And he was surprised too, at one particular moment as he admired the graceful elegance of a visitor to the Prado Museum, a young blonde girl who was standing before a dreadful painting by Murillo. And thus, from his looking on the painting, he passed

to the aesthetic comprehension of the everyday reality about him. The beauty was of the same tint both in the painting and in real life. But the young girl left hurriedly and joined another group of beautiful young girls.

When he reached the galleries of Goya, he amused himself contemplating the colourist portraits of everyday happiness that characterised his early work. No longer was Spain the unyielding nation oppressed under the yoke of the Counter Reformation, and the customs, those of the Court had relaxed. The everyday characters of Velazquez had in Goya that same poverty, the broken shoes, the half-clad feet, but they played with joy under an intense sun, under a sky that was blue and full of joy.

And suddenly he found himself again before the same face. He saw the face of the swarthy Spanish man, dark skinned, black-haired, of gypsy-like complexion, but now in a scene so terrible as to stop the rhythm of his heart beating within. There, illuminated by the light from the lamppost, his eyes popping out, was that same person, straight from Velazquez, the Spanish man, ever the same,

now brought low in submission before those who had said they would liberate him, he was on the point of dropping down lifeless under the firing of the rifles. On the floor, the dead were piled high. To one side, a group of onlookers covered their faces to hide their horror. And that man reached out, arms outstretched, defiant, in futile gesture, on the point as he was of being sacrificed by militarist barbarism.

It was the same man, the same face, the same Spaniard. He left the museum in a high state of emotion. He got into his car and drove back home.

On his way, he stopped at a red light. And a man approached selling paper tissues, his hair was black, his complexion gypsy-like. The same unkempt beard, the same skin… The same tragic look of the Spanish people through all the ages. Without doubt, the eternal Spain.

The Flight of the Gull.

Morning was breaking over the water. Seville loomed amidst the first colours of daylight, reflected in that shallow drift.

Lying on the grass, a man contemplated the sky, a lost look in his eyes, he who all night long had wandered through the city, among the street lamps that still shone, among their lights and shadows.

And his lost look found the flight of a gull that was following the course of the river. And his gaze yawned into an abyss of abstraction; he let himself float away on the soft turn of wings, off to the far bank and back to this, on wings that glided, white above.

And the gull flying, wavering on the breeze, appeared to him the most perfect symbol of freedom, his freedom. And so, he fell to thought. Freedom ...freedom was the flight of the gull which was playing, weightless, there on the wind.

Later, stumbling, staggering, he got himself to his feet. He didn't see the putrid waters over which the graceful white gull soared, nor did he sense their stench, so accustomed he was to finding such places, abandoned to debris and decay.

And sunken in mire, treading through remains of waste that he didn't see, that wallowed all around him, he went on thinking about freedom. Never knowing that the beauty vanishes with every spent fix.

An Angel in the Evening.

Evening-fall was when she would usually appear. Nobody knew quite from where she would show... She'd appear, with eyes tense and grey, pleading for life. Eyes that sank and shrouded all in doubt, as the sea when it deepens into shadows and darkens into the night.

She arrived at the last of evening, seeking to mask her infinite sadness with a pretty smile, but always drawn on the lips of a child lost in the forest of her own thoughts.

Sometimes I had seen her with a little boy, - her son maybe, - in the bar, while coarse well-to-dos, the type that a century ago should have finally been laid to rest, laughed at her expense.

And she moved as if a gazelle, shifting through the people, as if not to touch the earth, as if nothing existed that could ever disturb her smile, the eternal smile of an angel.

And forever smiling, as the evening fell, pale with the copper lemon light of Andalucía at the end of day, the angel reached out from her hiding places, and made towards those who she felt

might understand her sadness, melancholy and joy together. And she begged of them but pitiful alms, hiding the dirt of her face with that smile.

There, in the dark doorway, her companion lay stretched out, awaiting her. And maybe together at the coming of night, they would count the coins they had earned, each that brought a happy smile, so then to plunge back to that sad world which hid in the depths of her gaze, to the sad dream administered in the needle of every passing day.

Paris in springtime

She arrived in Paris with her hopes high. It was her first journey to Europe from the United States, where she lived in a small city in California. And Paris is always bustling, always inspiring.

She had dreamt many times of the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the Louvre, of the alleys in Montmartre, of the art exhibitions, of the concerts. If there was ever a romantic American, it was her. And Paris retains a special charm for every art-loving spirit.

When she got to the hotel, without unpacking her suitcase, she dashed into the streets of Boulevard Haussmans and reached Boulevard d'Italiennes. She walked past the door of the cinema Gramont, and arrived at the Opera. There, in a lovely café up in the corner, the *Café de la Paix*, she drank some aromatic tea. A clown in the Opera square, made-up as a mime artist, flung and unwound rolls of toilet paper, as a friend took pictures of him.

Montmartre cast all its spell on her. She let herself be mesmerized by its charm, in spite of the flood of tourists buying awful paintings, thinking that they were acquiring the works of painters who, though unknown today, might become valuable tomorrow.

She wondered through the alleys. She halted at the entrance of a creperie that resembled a Parisian cave, from where the sound of a piano could be heard, performing well-known jazz melodies. The pianist happened to be from Columbus, Ohio, and

invited her to a beer. But she, with a dreamy air, imbued with the magic of the quarter, decided to go on her way and not to share those moments in the company of fellow-Americans.

In a corner she found a mime artist, made up as a doll, making mechanical movements. She was about to leave, after having enjoyed so lyrical a performance, when he approached her, took her hand, kissed it and led her to the centre, making her stand out from the group of spectators.

The mime artist, among laughter from the audience, offered her a blue flower and she was moved by the gift. Then, as he begged her with gestures to stay, he approached one of the spectators, an appealing-looking man with a white beard, and took him to where she stood. With a tender gesture he joined their hands.

When the performance ended, without knowing how, she found that man´s hands between hers. They smiled at each other, and began to talk. They walked together, and spent a few instants admiring the stained-glass windows of Saint Pierre Cathedral, designed by artists from the Bohemian quarter. And they began their descent along the Sacre-Coeur, always monumental and chilly except in the haze of the night, when seen from the quarters below.

The following day they agreed to meet and visit some bookshops. She was impatient to find every new available title. Gaston, (such was the name of her incidental companion) was a professor in Paris-X, in Nanterre, but his position was not

entirely confirmed, and he was doubtful about his future in Paris. He might return to his native Amiens, but for the moment he was enjoying the city.

Gaston told her that he had not found anything of interest in the bookshops he had visited. It was, he told her, as if Paris had become anchored in an institutional culture, in a sort of classicism that was not completely worthless, but lacked the life that possessed all the artists who swarmed the city. How different it was in the seventies, when it was impossible to decide which books to take home! Now everything looked too official, too respectable.

To prove he was right, he took her to the Louvre and, not entering the museum, they just walked around it. There, Suzanne could hear magical melodies that came from flautists who improvised their own compositions.

They made their way to the Grand Palais to see an exhibition of Toulouse-Lautrec. At the entrance, a girl played the violin, her eyes closed the better to concentrate. This Suzanne would never forget.

They took the *métro* and arrived in the Ìle de la Cité. In a little shop, Suzanne bought some necklaces and bracelets, set with precious stones, and, as they walked, they entered the Taverne de Enri IV.

Suzanne could not help daydreaming in such a warm and cosy place.

In a corner sat two men, one of them very stout, with a long white beard. His appearance, his dress, made him resemble one of those impressionist painters that can be seen in books of art. The other was young and sturdy. He happened to be American, a writer. But Suzanne hardly exchanged a few words with him. She had not come to Paris to speak with Americans.

Gaston made her drink, perhaps too much. And then he took her to the strand of the Seine, to the arrow-shaped confluence of both streams of the river. There they gazed at the sunrise as might have two hippies in the seventies, Gaston told her.

That night, she made love with Gaston in a tiny garret down in the Latin quarter.

The next morning, after they awoke, they walked along Saint Michel, looking at the shops that displayed their products out in the open.

Suddenly, Suzanne felt weary in Gaston´s company. She would always remember that she gave him the slip, saying that she was going to the toilet, in a café in the Rive Gauche, after taking a walk in the flower market.

She felt released when she walked again on her own along the streets of Paris. She had had a chance romance. Gaston would never find her again. The memory of her body would always be a fleeting experience for him. Her decision to vanish that way –she mused deliciously– would increase the mystery of their meeting. A true French *idylle*.

She went back to Enri IV. There sat, as always, the American writer, Joe, accompanied by the old impressionist painter.

This time Suzanne started a conversation with him, and both of them talked as they drank innumerable glasses of wine. Joe told her that a consumer-based society was a dream woven with objects and material elements. That this consumer-obsessed society was about to collapse, and that the economists had yet to tease this out from their formulae. And that our welfare was as fragile as the hands that held sway upon energy resources. Joe told her that we all live turning our back to illness, turning our back to death. And she was enthralled by his words.

Evening came over sweetly, as their conversation wound on. The lights, seen through the wide windows of the inn, grew dimmer. And Suzanne asked her friend to guide her through another Paris, unknown to her.

She could remember that they went down to the *métro*. She also remembered, as in a haze, that a group of musicians from the conservatoire were playing in the underground galleries pieces of classical music to an astounding degree of perfection.

Almost violently, her visit to Paris changed in an abrupt way.

She told Joe that she wanted to visit the tomb of Jim Morrison, and he led her to the graveyard of Père la Chaise.

Evening came and she saw a congregation of shabby hippies dozing and dancing around a radio, in the place where the remains of the singer lay.

Joe disappeared, perhaps tired of acting as a guide without receiving a sexual reward. And Suzanne, later on, remembered that a girl with scruffy hair handed her a pill, and that she took it, regarding it as an invitation to experience unknown thrills. In

a way she felt nostalgia for the counter-culture generation, although the time gap and new customs made her see it as an aborted attempt that ended up turning man into utter failure. A good example was provided by all those long-haired tramps that... but, what was she doing with them? What the hell!

Night went on for Suzanne among nightmares and hallucinations. The following day, having eaten hardly anything she found herself, or rather did not find herself, at the entrance of the Georges Pompidou Centre. The building looked appalling to her, the result of a time deprived of a sense of beauty, but, what the hell! Jimmy played the guitar, and Frank sang a fashionable, catchy song. She might have thought that even music was in decline, and that trying to revive now, at the end of the century, the remembrance of the time that she and so many young people had dreamt of, made the whole thing look like a burlesque travesty, like a prostitute with too much make-up on, like that prostitute from Pigalle that looked at her, smiling, among the spectators.

She could feel her clothes, torn and sweat-drenched, and an unstoppable need to dance, to writhe like a bacchant, seized her.

Before she knew it, she had become the centre of attention, and those eyes stared at her with burning desire, admiring the quarry they had hunted that night.

Suzanne was so high that she went on dancing after Jimmy and Frank had left with the coins that would pay for their meal.

Many spectators seemed to have watched the show with a certain sadness. Everything has been a bit dull, she thought, but she did not mind. Or maybe she was not thinking at all, maybe she did not know where or who she was, or with whom. But it was irrelevant. There she was, dancing and dancing again, shaking her breasts under the torn and sweaty white t-shirt, sinuously gyrating in her tight black jeans, which had lost their classy brand-new look and were dirty, too dirty.

The stage had changed, but she kept dancing. Now she stood in the centre of a much more numerous chorus of spectators, and the scene was much more amusing as well. Suzanne laughed like an idiot, she saw without looking, and kept on dancing.

A plump sword-swallower with a bare torso, who looked like a Turkish executioner out of an old film, made the audience laugh with his authoritarian shouts, mocking every spectator near him.

From the top of that snake-like Pompidou there were a lot of people that had left the exhibition halls and were going out to see the magical sculptures of Brancusi, crowded together without the slightest taste, to see the sword-swallower´s performance, that went on in the square outside the museum, and that could be seen from the wide balcony at the top of the building. And in the square a numerous and motley crowd had assembled.

The sword-swallower had taken a plastic stick and was beating people with it, forcing them, among jests and outrageous shouts, to give him a few coins. In the middle of the crowd, a boy struggled to get rid of the chains that enveloped his body, and which had been wrapped around him by the truly funny executioner.

They all chorused with their laughter an astounding performance. The sword-swallower resembled a despot that despised the audience, and at the same time he forced them to yield to him, he captivated their gaze, acting as a magnetic axis that spawned utterly absurd situations, astonishing improvised gags.

Suzanne kept dancing, she drew near the centre of the performance, was rejected by the people and then went on with her dance. The sword-swallower, after rebuking her, and provoking new laughter with his bursts, took her wrist and handcuffed her to a pipe in a corner.

The Turkish executioner continued his show. He pretended he was cutting the arms of two volunteers with a scimitar. He swallowed a cutlass. He swallowed a burning torch and put it out in his throat.

The police, always invisible and always watching, approached Suzanne as she, turned into a human thing in tatters, asked people to release her. She was hallucinating, and there is nothing worse in a dream than the feeling of being deprived of freedom.

But as the policemen approached her, she could sense their contempt. There is nothing a servant of the law will despise more than an hallucinating person. The executioner explained, among jokes, that the girl would not let him go on with his show, and he seemed to justify it was the woman’s fate to be chained. The explanation was backed by shouts and jibes, and by Suzanne´s entreaties, unable to stop dancing as she wept. The policemen left, joking.

After a while, the Turkish executioner released Suzanne's wrists. And then she felt something similar to a special fascination towards him, utterly masochistic. Or perhaps she identified him with the figure of an authoritarian father towards which children –and dream and delirium make us feel like children– feel subjugated and controlled. The need for rebellion to find a check in authority, even if that authority only exists for authority´s sake itself. And she felt like a tamed animal, at the point where the only solution is to yield.

The executioner, who was also beginning to desire her, did not let her go. The show had ended with general applause. The sword-swallower sat on the canvas deckchair he had brought, and made Suzanne sit on his knees. Under his spell, she offered no resistance.

Suzanne could not understand that she had reached the self-dissolution her unconscious had been seeking, from the moment in which she had wished to revive Jim Morrison's legend. And at that point in which even the least quality of a human being slips into the abyss of oblivion, to the bottomless void where every socially adopted role vanishes and just the ego remains, she had found her deliverer. As if she were an Arab woman, she was bound to him, overwhelmed. She was Suzanne no more, but someone whom the plump, big-bellied executioner had saved from complete mental annihilation, from the loss of human condition, voluntary suicide in life.

Suzanne´s stare was rudderless, her eyes glassy. She could hardly perceive the shrill and confusing sound of laughter and music, of words that ricocheted off the corners of her mind and smashed into smithereens, stripping her of any rational reaction.

And it was then when she thought she could feel a hand pressing her wrist, pulling her, making her walk and walk. She walked exhausted until she got to a car. She fell asleep inside.

And she woke up, she did not know how long after that, in Gaston´s garret. With relief, as if she had woken from a dream, from a rave-ridden nightmare.

Now she was not held down by anyone, but retained a deep sense of gratitude, of tenderness, of humanity.

Another tale of doubles.

The sky was blue, intensely blue, lifting away his thoughts that swayed back and forth with the leisurely murmur of the waves upon the sea. Midday on a Malaga beach. The warmth of spring presaging the summer. A certain heat, not too much. A sensation of plenty and of light. The light of Malaga. An artist’s light. A light from a picture by Sorolla with wet children leaving the water.

He was having lunch with Celia, his wife. It was a restaurant next to the beach. The sound of the waves reached his ears and was lost in the soft tones of conversation that came from the neighbouring tables.

Perhaps he thought that Celia was charming, again. And that he was deeply in love with her. That he had known her now for many years and that she still stirred within him, each time a little more, a lustful and strange feeling, which he did not know quite how to define. Though too, he little cared whether he could define it or not. It sufficed him to enjoy her company, to follow the movement of her hands when she spoke, to feel the radiance of her green eyes every time she looked at him. It still gave him gooseflesh to gaze upon her even though it was many years now that they had been together.

He didn’t remember what they talked about. It didn’t matter. At any moment they would have a motive for interesting conversation. With Celia he was never bored. Life with her was intense, brilliant, different.

They ate some very fresh fish, now that indeed he did remember. Taken but a moment before, right there, from the sea.

And suddenly, it happened. He was looking without any particular intent over the shoulders of Celia. There, at another table, a couple was sitting. He was a fat man in his fifties. She… she…

He was dumbfounded to discover in the face of that girl, the very same features of his wife, Celia. They were identical. Or well, to be precise, the girl he was looking at now was an exact likeness of his wife ten years before. She was the very image of Celia ten years younger.

“The ironies of life!” he thought. And from that moment he gave himself to observing and prying into all that happened at that table. Celia remained unaware, accustomed to his characteristic absence of mind. But he was watchful of every movement that woman made.

Soon, an indefinable desire came over him, to meet her, to know her.

And so it was that he, when Celia went to the lavatory, and taking advantage of the fact that the fat man had disappeared too, summoned up his courage and approached the table. He met with her warm gaze. Soon he knew that her name was Virginia and that she had large full eyes, which too were green.

“Excuse me madam, I think I’ve met you before. I have a particular interest in talking with you. It might just be that this meeting will be the beginning of something that could change our lives.”

She laughed, she thought he was joking. But she was impressed by his grandiose words. And it was thus that they agreed a date, she hiding the truth from her overweight husband and he, keeping it from his beloved Celia on whom he was cheating for the very first time.

Indeed so, the likeness between Virginia and Celia was astonishing, as straightaway he could see. But Virginia, as we have already stated, was a lot younger and so, rather more beautiful. They had a memorable afternoon together. And that afternoon led to others, to other moments together

in which they would talk, ever more earnestly about matters private, pouring out their intimacy, each for the other.

He refrained, however, from telling her of the likeness she shared with his wife. His wife … she ceased to be so after a little while. And Virginia and Pepe,- for that was his name, left for a leafy neighbourhood on the outskirts of Madrid, to share their lives together, as gossip magazines would put it.

They were three years of happiness that these two enjoyed.

And now see the turnings of chance. When this time had gone by, Pepe and Celia happened to meet again, in the doorway of a fashion shop in Serrano Street where Virginia would go to buy herself clothes.

Do you know what Pepe thought when he met Celia once more? That the passing of years makes some women more beautiful. That these women, those that have a private world within, enjoy, as does good wine, a special depth that makes them more attractive and mature.

And he thrilled anew as he passed by Celia remembering those sweet moments which they had happily known together.

And he couldn't help but compare her with Virginia, more shallow and distant, less caring.

And the following day, as times before, it was Celia whom he phoned…

The Labyrinth of the National Library.

The library was at long last before him, exalting proud walls wrought with the passing of centuries.

When he directed his gaze aloft, the infinity of stone stairs seemed, as Jacob's ladder, to reach up to the heavens.

Noble stone sculptures, streaked through with black stains that slithered all over the naked bodies of their forms, observed him with enigmatic expression.

He showed his card and got past the entrance checks.

Once in the reference library, he was attended by a bad-tempered man wearing a grey or greyish apron who carted about books and cursed repeatedly. No sir, I am very sorry that you have come from so far and that you can only be here today but as I have already told you, those copies of nineteenth century journals are being bound. They are all being bound.

As a good researcher, he was stubborn. He waited for an hour and a half in the office of the relevant head of department until the man appeared. Now this fellow treated him more pleasantly. As you will understand, this has now happened on several occasions. It is as though you always ask

for precisely those books which aren't available. Well, I shouldn't have thought that in any case I could make a photocopy for you. Please don't insist. You really are quite trying. I remember that on other occasions, we have told you exactly the same thing. Yes I know that this is the fourth time you have made the journey to Madrid for this same purpose. I'm sorry…

The man in question seemed at last to fall back on the strategy known as passing the buck. Perhaps you wouldn't mind stepping outside. After going through a large room, on reaching the stairs at the entrance, go up on the right hand side. On the first floor you will find a big door made of old wood. Ask for the lady in charge. She will be able to give you more information for it is there where they bind the books.

The researcher, persisting, climbed the stairs, which he had found not without some effort. It was easy to get lost in that place. At long last he found the door, a lofty door, extremely high and of very fine wood. A shiver, heavy with foreboding, ran right through him as he decided to push it open.

There, behind this mysterious door, was nobody. Only corridors, to the right and to the left. Suddenly, an individual appeared, loading old books with affection and care. This time they did indeed treat him with courtesy when he put to them his case. They told him for where he should head, passing through corridors, rooms, doors. They even made for him a small map so he wouldn't lose his way.

And finally, he found himself before the door, the mysterious door, the definitive door.

He was about to open it when a young man appeared before him, opening the way through. Faint laughter issued from within and the young man joined their chorus as he receded with a stack of books.

This quarter was full of light. It was a kind of hallway, very spacious on both sides, with tables at which worked industriously a number of pleasant and delicate looking young girls.

He sighed with relief. He had conquered the beast. A girl in glasses with tortoise shell frames approached him and looked at him with a smile. He put to her his case. She showed him to another table, there almost at the other end of the huge room.

He approached the woman that was on her feet, joking and laughing with a friend as they leafed through volumes.

The woman was plump and extremely friendly. Her name was Isabel. He thought that he really should send her some chocolates. He said so. She joked. Chocolates are all I need. Well then, I shall send flowers. Well, we'll see, she said enigmatically.

Isabel solved his problem for him. She put in front of him those sought after nineteenth century volumes, extremely old journals, exquisitely bound. She let him have a table bathed in sunlight which came in from the street. How strange, he thought, these journals don't really need binding at all.

He worked for nearly two hours with those journals, wrapped in silence and in pleasant thought. And he felt like a king. Yet it seemed strange that all the girls there smiled at him. Why?

At length he reached the stage where he could work no longer. He approached Isabel who was still chatting keenly with a friend. Look, I know that making photocopies of nineteenth century journals is not allowed. In truth, it would only be a few pages I would like to reproduce, you see I just don't have the time to copy out the text. Would you be so kind…? Would it be possible…?

An obliging smile appeared on the rosy countenance of Isabel, who also, to his great surprise, winked at him. The only problem is that we have to go right over to the other side of the library, in amongst the most hidden of archives, in order to reach the photocopier. But for you, we will.

I am sorry to be such a burden, if I can return the favour in any way. No, don't think anything of it, don't worry. Though first I should speak with the head librarian.

Isabel busied herself consulting something with the head of department, a stylish young woman, somewhat more advanced in years, who too was extremely friendly, or as far as he could tell from the looks she threw him from the glass compartment where she had her improvised office. With real love and tenderness, she was leafing through some unique and decaying issue, in which, as he later discovered, a student had inked obscene poems to his teacher of literature after having ripped out various pages just to save himself the photocopies.

At last, the head of department wished him farewell with a wave from afar and a broad smile. I am being a bit of a bore, he thought. They must have a huge amount of work to do and they are worrying about me. Such charming people! In my earlier visits to this library, I have always been surprised by the friendliness of the librarians in contrast to the profound and deep-rooted irritability of the porters. But this department goes beyond all my hopes. I really must cultivate their friendship.

Isabel took some large keys out of a safe – how odd! – he thought, and smiling all the while, she showed him the way. They took a lift that was hidden at a far end. There was barely enough

room for the two of them inside. He could feel the pleasant quivering of the lady's body, her splendid shape. A pity, he thought lustfully, still feeling like a king, that I only like them slim. The jolt of the lift as it stopped brought him back to reality. I cannot go chasing after woman any more, I am no lady-killer now, I have come here to resolve a crucial question relating to the era of the Spanish Romantics. I am not some vulgar flirt in a discothèque.

The door of the lift struggled open. Beyond, there was little light. Isabel showed him the way. He felt perplexed. Around him was a gigantic maze of tiny corridors where books and more books in infinite succession were stored. He felt overwhelmed, crushingly overwhelmed. That there was not knowledge, it was an aberration of nature.

He joked fancifully. He imagined that at the end of the next century, so many books had been edited that, given the impossibility of storing them and consulting them, the librarians dedicated themselves to burning them, at least in the majority of cases. Isabel didn't seem to him to have been much amused by this, even though she had smiled. She kept on ahead, each step faster

than the last. It was incredible the ease with which that girl conducted herself through that huge labyrinth. To the point that he was even beginning to feel a little afraid. And yes… Good heavens, what rubbish! You've read too much Edgar Allan Poe. He kept on walking, by now he was tired, but Isabel kept on finding her way through that tangle of passageways.

We have to take another lift down to the basements, the girl told him. He wasn't prepared for that, so he limited himself to keeping quiet and obeying instructions. It even began to seem to him that he was leaving off being a king to be converted into a slave.

He continued to follow in her footsteps. They found a lift that was, if possible, even smaller and more hidden away, in a corner. He felt a little afraid when they stepped inside. The body of the girl was closer still. But this time he held the nineteenth century journals close against himself as might a defenceless schoolgirl. No longer was he a king.

Nor indeed was Isabel so affable. On the contrary, she was decidedly more despotic. When they left the lift, he found himself before another labyrinth of books, this one more complex still.

Such mass of printed word left him thoroughly anguished. Why had so much been written? Just to be forgotten, or sooner, or later? Or to disappear beneath the crashing of civilisation in atomic war? Isabel no longer deigned to comment on his thoughts, even though to him, in his scared and frightened state, they really seemed quite profound. Or perhaps they weren't profound at all but just some worthless trivia. Well, the reality was that there was continually less and less light and that they kept on going down, further and further down, and that while there were more and more books, there was less and less space, and a certain smell of urine and moths…

How did they manage to conserve the books here? He asked the question with childlike simplicity there in the damp of the surroundings. But Isabel signalled a shrug of her shoulders, as if the books, in truth, mattered to her but little.

He tried to think about something else, perhaps to forget his fear, a fear that was starting to seize up his throat. Or perhaps it was the anguish of seeing book upon books, he who loved them, who collected them, who chased after them, he who was giving over his life to literature, who…

This is a setting fit for a ghost, he found himself saying. He found himself saying this and it seemed to him that suddenly there was nobody there. Isabel, where are you? Isabel! He could hardly see. All he could make out was an abundance of books in volumes. Isabel had disappeared.

He turned right around. He sensed that there was something behind him. He gave a start. But the only thing in that basement was his distress, his despair.

Prisoner of his desperation, or perhaps, -he reasoned – to escape it, he leafed through the volumes on the shelves that were illuminated by a pale light which came from he knew not where, maybe from some spent neon lamp up there in the high roof, which could not be made out either.

He was surprised. The hell that was the library of Paris couldn't compare to the volumes that were to be found here, even though they were so very decayed. But at the same time, the damp, that accursed damp and that smell of urine, of… He stepped in a small pool. He detected noise far away. Perhaps a rat.

He was closed in, he was lost, he was sunken in a nightmare. It was his fault for being such a bore, he thought. But perhaps not, perhaps… What was the point of all that? What was he doing there?

It was the next day, in the grip of real panic, as he ran deranged down row upon row of never ending shelves, conversing with himself aloud, muttering words unintelligible, when finally he found company.

Just so, there, at the furthest end, an old man did he find, peacefully reading a book, sitting on a rickety old chair, trying to make out the letters in the dark.

He did not seem taken aback to see him. I am not surprised, you are just the latest. Do not get upset. You will end up becoming accustomed. How have I survived? I've been here for years. The same thing happened to me as has to you. I think it was during the years of economic growth in Spain. Imagine. I was like you, a restless young man, eager for knowledge, and trusting, naïve. How have I survived? Well well, I can see that what you are is hungry. Please, don't ask me again. You will

end up distinguishing the more succulent book spines. The gilded ones are indigestible. And there are some frankly quite admirable pages, well, in the sense of appetising, I mean.

Get out of here? There is only one way. As far as I know, the only solution is to become a porter, carrying books to and fro. One or other of them is up there, I think. Sure enough, the man with the grey apron. Bah! Don't cry. One gets used to everything… I, for my part, prefer to remain here, reading – he said, as he smiled with the face of a rat -.

The Handsome Pianist.

That noise before the concerts begins, the soft ripple of voices, the shuffling of seats turned round, the raincoats rubbing on the backs of chairs, the greetings of friends, the muffled sound of murmurs.

He felt a little Proust like. When the secretary, (an elderly person too, though considerably younger than was he), showed him to the privileged place where he was to sit, he felt pleasantly

indulged. These were the small tokens of consideration that they showed to the local musician. And now, he, in his eighties, was retired, and so believed that nobody remembered him, for all his authority he had lost… Authority…how brief is the authority of those who dedicate themselves to teaching. They take so long to secure this smallest of pleasures and so brief is the time that separates them from retirement and the oblivion that follows. Such ridiculous, puny authority.

But he felt a little Proust like as he sat down in his seat, a stall in the front rows from where he could make out the hands of the pianist.

He had asked for a place near the piano. It is well known that the acoustics of some halls are not perfect and so better to feel the resonance of the piano close up.

Such emotion that moment inspired in him! As if a child, he was alive to everything that happened around him, an innocent bewilderment in his eyes. Everything was so new, so different from that time when he himself would give piano recitals. Or perhaps everything was just the same

and that rite of concerts was just being re-run, as if some sacred ceremony, in which the everlasting memory of those composers being interpreted was to be offered up as sacrifice.

Now that he was retired and well advanced in years, indeed, hardly anybody remembered him. From time to time, some former pupil from the Conservatoire came to visit him, something which reminded him of days gone by. But they did so with a youthfulness that insulted, with a vivacity of spirit that contrasted with the slow steady drain of his own. He felt more humiliated than heartened in those encounters. Or perhaps he enjoyed seeing the body still youthful of one with whom he had shared a part of his life.

This was why he felt so grateful inside to the institution that had provided him with the ticket of entrance.

The emotion of it all! The concert was about to begin. He remembered some of those he himself had given in the great capitals of the world. He remembered his own compositions, those that when he interpreted, the public, by and large, had not understood. He remembered, he

remembered…and the memories made him drift, to wander with his gaze from one side of the hall to the other.

At least there was someone with some political authority that had remembered him, though it was so long since he had ventured out on the streets, while of course never had he returned to the Conservatoire where he had taught.

He tried to concentrate on reading the programme. From time to time, out of the corner of his eye, he looked towards the stage where that such good-looking youth had sat. He could only be about eighteen years old, perhaps even younger. Ah! Who wouldn't live again that tender age of freedom? Where was Mephistopheles?

The pianist got out of the taxi, a small case in his hand. He saw that the gaze of all followed him, there outside the theatre where the multitude crowded around, a public that had spent all night awake so to gain entry, enduring the cold and the dark there in place.

He got out with a young and jaunty air, shaking his long blonde hair, and smiled at some girls who screamed with emotion as they recognised him. He made his way to the interior of the artists' entrance and asked for his dressing room, speaking a broken and crude English that his long years of residence in New York had still not managed to polish.

Well! he said to himself. What a ghastly journey! I thought the train would never arrive! Is that the best train they have in these parts? I dread to think what's next! Finish the concert, sleep a little, and off again for another province, just as badly connected as this one.

Once in the dressing room, he looked at himself in the mirror. Yes, he was still good-looking. Who knows what would happen in ten years time, he mused, when he had lost these youthful looks yet still banged out the bass notes with the same uncompromising force. Thank goodness the music industry has improved so much and one can record with ease. Well, don't talk about it. We are in the society of the image, Rubinstein, Backhaus, Horowitz, Larrocha, - today they would be unknown. Or did they too have the good looks of youth? Is this generation so different from those before? Shit!

What do I care? Let's hope I finish the concert quickly, they pay me and I can get back to New York with Pretty Sue.

He put on his dinner jacket. He looked at himself again in the mirror, contemplated his hands and did some exercises. Everything goes so fast! In no time at all, I'll be in another train. I hope I won't have to give too many tips. Well, the pure routine of provincial touring. It's always the same. They won't understand any of the music, they'll just sit there stupefied as they contemplate each flourish of my long hair. Well, what can you do! I hope they applaud wildly, because I deserve it. Fancy coming here to play!

He received the call in his dressing room. Just a few minutes to go. He did a few exercises to warm up his hands. Hmm… yes, they were pretty hot, those little girls. But I'm not going to have time even to look at them. Bloody manager!

He was on the point of going on stage. He peeped at the public through the curtains. What a bunch of peasants! Well… I suppose it's what I'm paid for. Come on, let's just get on with it!

He stared in amazement as the young man appeared. Good God! Such beauty, such elegance, such finesse! He admired the gracefulness with which he bowed gently forward to acknowledge the applause. He looked at him in the eyes. It was rather late for this sort of thing, but even now, miracles can happen, he said to himself. Such beautiful and intense blue eyes!

He followed all his movements attentively, the theatrical manner with which he took his place before the piano and stretched out his hands invoking silence for the magic which was to follow.

The hall at last was in hush. The lady to his left stopped crackling sweet wrappers and that other young girl stopped coughing fretfully as if her end were nigh.

And the music began, exquisite, sublime, superb. Those hands seemed to fly over the keyboard, moving across it as if over his own body…What a sensation of beauty! It was so long since he had enjoyed a concert. He said to himself, each new generation seems to surpass the last!

The pianist attacked the next movement. Shit, shit! This is going dreadfully. My fingers are all seized up, this is just not happening. Sklovatski did warn me: you have to be rested in order to play. This is the last time I do this. Shit! I'm going to lose my prestige, and that, I don't like, even it is only in front of these peasants. The notes sound wrong, tinny, I'm all stiff, there's no fluency. And my left hand. Shit! My left hand is thumping away just as I feared. The bass notes sound awful.

What a beautiful young man! – he mused, leaning forward as if offering to him his body-. Such a sight just doesn't seem real. It's not that my giving him a few classes wouldn't go amiss but… yes, it would be great to give him some classes. But at his level, his standard, what would he want to learn from a poor old man, a retired local musician such as I? Better not to make a fool of myself.

Now who is the old man in the front row? Hell! He is putting me off. He must be some unbalanced queer. See how he stares at me… Well, I suppose I'll have sold a few records. Come on Pretty Sue, come to my dreams! I need your help… Today I'm clumsy, I don't feel anything. And now for the most difficult part. Here it comes! Shit! Another mistake. Good job they don't realise. Well,

there's no doubt that the smiling old man in the front row doesn't have the slightest idea – he's in his own dream world. One of these days, I'll have to play stark naked just to see what happens. What a load of shit!

What joy! He watched every flourish of his hair. He would have liked to lay his head down upon his breast and slowly caress all of those long curly locks. It goes without saying, to fall in love at eighty years of age is truly a wonder. Would he know how to accept him if only as a friend? Perhaps that might be the way to earn his trust… at least tonight before he flies to New York. Yes, they say that he is residing in New York and in San Francisco. What varied tastes! How he has triumphed… What would I give to meet him! I shall say so to the Representative at the end, maybe I'll get lucky… And Brahms… Brahms envelopes, enraptures. My heart pains me. Ah! I'm too old for these sensations…

Shit! That note too sounded awful… Perhaps I should go a bit faster now and just get it over with, because I'm just about up to the back teeth of this. Humph! What a programme this bloody

agent of mine has chosen for me! I'm going to end up with my fingers reduced to pulp. And this bloke… good God! This bloke, what is he doing?

Unable to help himself, carried away by his passion, he got up from his seat. He didn't care how many people were watching him. It was perhaps the sublime, essential, defining moment of his life. He took the white carnation that he was wearing in the lapel of his navy blue suit, one that he had bought in Regent's Street so long ago, and he threw it onto the keyboard of that piano.

Hell! What is this wanker doing? Now he's throwing me flowers! Bollocks! How am I going to finish this piece? Well, I suppose with my right hand, I can throw the carnation on the floor. There. Good job I've kept playing! I've lost my concentration. Perhaps the best thing to do will be to finish now whatever way I can, they won't realise and they'll applaud me anyway. What an embarrassment! How awkward! This is what I get for playing in places of no standing. And to think that I wanted to go to London…

I’m losing it! Well, I don’t give a blast about anything at all. This is heavenly, heavenly, fantastic! I am in love… So many years unable to express my feelings and now I have the chance. I’m going to take off my jacket, and my braces, yes…

God! He’s mad! Now he’s coming over here. Old pervert…! I’m in a madhouse. Shit! Just as I was starting to dominate the piece. But what is this? He’s coming on stage, he’s coming towards me, his arms outreached. This is going to finish with my fame as a Latin lover… All the queers in the world will laugh at me now… Shit! I come to a village and the news breaks for the New York Times…!

I can’t take any more! I can’t take any more! I love you; I love you; I love you… Ah, my heart! My heart is going! It’s goi…

Anselm fell to the floor in a heap after staggering a few paces forward on the stage, his arms reaching out to the young pianist. The people in the audience had got to their feet to see what was going on. The women were already huddled together and commenting upon what had happened. The police burst in violently from one side. The organisers put their arms over the shoulders of the

handsome pianist and led him away towards the dressing rooms while he all the while shouted aloud curses of bewilderment.

What a show! Oh, bloody hell, my reputation! I shall never play in a hall like this again… When I tell Pretty Sue and my friends in New York, I don't know if they'll laugh or if they'll make me cry…

The man who believed he was immortal.

I am very old. I am definitely getting on in years. My name is Manuel Orejero. I have always thought that life consists in the working out of opportunities. One has to take advantage of those that come our way. From there, we are presented with what is an ever-growing maze of choices that lead to happiness.

I would not say that I am a completely happy man, but I think I can safely say that the moments of happiness in my life have been unchanging and above all, intense. What is happiness if not the feeling of spiritual, corporal and emotional pleasure, in a word, sexual pleasure, such as requires contrast with other more dreary moments in which the trivial nature of most people's lives is revealed?

In any case, I consider myself an unusual being. At my age, for example, I need to relieve myself sexually at least once a day, which frankly, is a record, above all if one takes into account the wide variety of experience that I have in this sphere.

I don't have a particularly attractive physique, though I am of optimistic temperament and easy spirit. That, together with my wealth of experience learnt from youth, my penchant for jokes, wit, gift of the gab and natural aplomb confers on me a personality that women consider delectably immature, something which cannot be considered anything other than praise, given the years that separate me from the severing of my umbilical cord.

Both in spite of this immature personality, and thanks to it, I have a definite knack for connecting with young people, whom I captivate with my ingenuity and intelligence, rather than with my appearance.

Because of all this, I am particularly successful with young girls who don't fit in, those looking for someone as unsatisfied as themselves but at the same time, one capable of offering the security of a balanced, meditated reflection on life, such as it is, devilishly confused and well-nigh impossible to understand.

Now here I am on home ground, ready and willing to offer advice, or just a little company, which, given my fertile biological condition, leads, as often as not, to moments of ecstasy in bed. As I've said, at least once a day, and sometimes four, quite a record for someone of my age.

I have wondered sometimes whether Mother Nature, who has doted me with such startling potency, has not done so, has not made of me a Venetian Casanova, in order to break with the inexorable march of time that renders us ever more decrepit. Please note that for me, sex, - which is life itself-, is not only a question of biology but also of intelligence, a whole way in itself of understanding life.

For a long time, religions have tried to cut us off from sex, forgetting that if God gave man and woman certain characteristics and intentions, a certain capacity, - exaggerated in me, as I have already said-, then that constitutes a real talent of which we should feel proud. This ability, that brings man closer to God and his creative power, at the same time seems to me to be an irrefutable symbol of our supreme individuality. Sex and love arise from the perfect self.

My mind fills up with the memories of women, so many women …

And so I, Manuel Orejero, believe that freedom, and by extension, happiness, are born from sex; - sex that is raised to the category of the sacred divine, expression of love.

And I tell you all this because in the loneliness of my contemplation, I have come to believe that sex is too, a means of defying the eroding power of time. The way to avoid this inexorable curse of man, the slow and relentless minutes and seconds that little by little advance and take over the very self, until at last we are brought to that final resting place, of death and the decay that follows it, fit only for worms to consume.

Well now, to get back to the point, I am starting to think that thanks to my healthy way of looking at life, - both idealistic and at the same time, sensual-, I can bypass the laws of time. To be precise, I have come to believe that I am eternal.

Let me explain. During my long life, I have known many people. Some, regrettably, died young, and I still retain the memories of their features and of their bodies. Others have died later, one by one. But I, for my part, have not been affected by any illness.

There is nothing more beautiful than a young body, and I still love them, embroiling myself with them as I do, in ongoing games of love, each and every night of my life, with such luck - in the selection of these exquisite feminine forms – that rather seems as if it were determined by some form of witchcraft.

Yes, I have come to believe that I am bewitched. All my friends have disappeared one by one, as have my relatives and the people I knew in my youth. I have reached the point where sometimes I surprise myself when I look in the mirror and believe that I am somebody else, someone distinct, different from the person who is looking at himself, there in the reflection.

If life arises from sex – inescapably accompanied by the spirit – I still have at my age, a prodigious activity in this sphere which it doesn't seem as though anything is about to detain…

As a matter of fact, I know of no other similar case in someone of my age. Should I not think then, that I will remain in this state for all eternity, having sex with and making love to all kind of attractive creatures, all kind of beautiful young girls? To sum up, and yes, I do dare say so, might I not be, by some good chance, everlasting?

Everybody in some moment of their life has felt the dark hand of death close by, the sensation that we are ephemeral and that some day, everything will come to an end: perhaps in one's death bed, with the temple of the deceased held close to that of who was held most dear, and in the background, the crying of the loved ones; perhaps in a traumatic crash on some main road, face down on the tarmac or trapped among the twisted metal of a vehicle not built to cope with such excess of vehicles; perhaps … in a thousand different ways.

So, everyone has had fantasies of death in their head, has felt the closeness of the Grim Reaper, of the Unmentionable, of the True and Terrible companion of our days, that when we are born, hands us a plant in the form of a seed, which little by little begins to grow – as Rilke said – until finally taking from us our days.

Now all that said, I have never felt the slightest hint of such danger in my own life, which seems to me to be in itself, a perfect creation, the product of the healthy exercise of my contemplation in harmony with my own body. I feel alive, extraordinarily alive, brimming with good health, always ready to enjoy. I feel splendidly well. I believe, in fact, that some type of witchcraft has made me triumph in all my amorous

adventures, in all the varied women, always beautiful, that I have loved. And that this same witchcraft has kept me, as was Faust, young, impeccably built to last for centuries eternal.

I have said before that I considered myself an expert in the affairs of love. Perhaps this is because in love, I have never lost a sense of distance, I have never completely surrendered myself. I have always managed to make the woman I was loving tremendously happy without committing myself to a stable relationship for more than just one night. I haven't given my heart to anybody but I have felt as one with so very many hearts beating within those beautiful bodies.

Now that I think about it, there has only been one exception. A few days ago, an incident occurred. A bewitching young girl, passionate, hot, with eyes green as the waves and skin white as pearl. I took her home, we chatted, and had an informal dinner together. I began to feel deeply attracted to her, but this time in a special kind of way. That woman was Life, that was exactly what she represented, Life, Eternity. Her body was voluptuous, but not at all vulgar, her curves were delicate and slim, her hands were slender, her breasts small and firm… How could I possibly describe her?

I have never felt such pleasure making love with anybody as that Night. That woman was the Woman, she was Life…

I have always taken considerable care on my dates, on account of the custom I have already confessed, not to repeat too often the same encounter twice. In this way, they remain the product of chance which takes care of my fate, a fate which, I am sure, represents a guarantee of eternity. I fall in love with all these women for a few moments but with none of them forever. For ever, I am myself, alone, eternal, perfectly young, absolutely ready for new experiences, for new ways of savouring life. An immortal perpetual Don Juan.

But I should confess also that this time has been different. This woman is distinct. All the rest of them, I have forgotten, the short-lived product of an instant. She is seared into my soul. The hours hurt me, the memories of the moments I have been with Her scorch me. Not only the ecstasy of love, so intense as it was, but also the conversations we had beside the fire, talking over all manner of subjects, tirelessly, ceaselessly. Perhaps product – or so I think – of my own state of eternity, I feel a little lonely, and this time I

could not avoid depending on someone, for this woman, with her poetic, passionate spirit fulfilled all my secret longings, the most hidden corners of my soul.

If you knew how my spirit thrilled within me when I heard her words, when her lips touched mine, when I sensed the warm perfume of her hair, when I caressed the soft blonde hairs on her gazelle-like neck. How I started, as if touched by a whip run through with the flow of electric charge, when I gazed upon her deep green eyes.

This time, I could not avoid it. I asked her if we could meet again, the next day, that is, today. I have always been successful when dating, no-one has ever failed me, they all come, happy and full of hope, with the dream of finding in me, the happiness that their companions deny them.

I asked her for a date… it is now three hours since she should have arrived. And I cannot forget her deep green eyes, the touch of her body. And I am fired up by her memory…

It is now three hours ago that she promised to come, but now that I think about it, perhaps she did so without ever really wanting to, perhaps because she felt she had to.

She won’t come, I’m sure, and she is the only woman I’ve ever cared about, the only woman that has

fulfilled me, because she symbolised Life…

It’s curious, I am starting to feel old, extremely old, extremely tired, worn out, fatigued, fed up…

I am starting to feel really quite ill…

The Mortal Illness.

It’s been a while now since I’ve been wanting to express myself. To speak the Word, unique and unmatched, that dwells in the unfathomable depths of one’s own heart.

I´ve been waiting to burst out for a while now, to exclaim, “Break out. Go back to being sunshine,” as the old poet wrote. To break out on a journey of no return, one that never returns, the zenith of adventure inspiring one to thought, the white light at the very dawning of the path.

Do you hear me? I want to shatter to smithereens the customs that consume us, the incomprehensible and all-consuming links to the routines of every day. To fall into a living dream, among the raging turbulence at the reef, where the foam breaks up among the rocks and the sea whips itself into a nameless fury.

It’s been a while now that I’ve been wanting to be someone else. Quite a while. How long the path is that leads to the emptiness where sleeps the origin of our very own thoughts, the depths of one’s heart whence flees all reason, where only my madness remains! To break the daily round of lethargy, the coming and going of hours that makes us drowsy and lulls us towards the certainty of death.

I believed in inspiration, in light. I was perhaps, and it is terrible to contemplate, too near the limit: that part of our mind unknowable. Endless wanderings through the corridors of illness and madness, that is the sum total of

my consciousness in those days as I remember it. That is the diagnosis, the assessment, the caption placed beneath my photo: unbalanced, estranged, mad.

But, you know, I felt alive. I felt a pulse belying the judgement that the doctors wrote in my clinical records, my heart beat behind that repeated diagnosis, behind those symbols that represented their ignorance of my character.

I have always thought that we are but a vague text to be devoured by the eyes of another. They read us and they consume us. We are a constellation of symbols burning hopelessly behind the twilight, beyond the pale light that joins us to the motherly cloak of that darkness from where we came and were created.

You see? The birds are singing. They assent to all of this. They agree with me.

I am leaning back on a tree and writing to you from the garden of the rest-house, with its pre-planted grass and its nurses who run from corner to corner where they help so many defenceless beings, their looks lost, perhaps as they thread their thoughts through the eye of a needle that borders around the limits of their understanding.

I hear far off, the voices of children and the sound is as a caress in the midst of restlessness. I write to you. I write furiously, passionately, my mind seized, and I feel the pages burn as bit by bit I fill them with words which are pieces of my very own soul. I write to you because you are my only salvation, my only support, once I have decided to break with all those remaining members of society around that punish and exclude me.

Am I a different being? When is one oneself? Is the self a succession of commitments with one's surroundings or a shadow that flees from itself towards the lake, towards the invisible fountain where the first root is to be found, the humus from where we rise on the breath of a God or a Devil? Do we flee to the future, distrustful of a past made sweeter by distance, fearful later of finding us face to face with the end, with the limit that has been marked by someone on our lives? Is all this anything more than confused thought, anything more than words, such as the word "self" that hides nothing, and that defines my whole being and my feelings?

I want to stop my mind for a moment because I believe that doubt evaporates and appears exactly at that moment in which I put it into writing.

It is for this that I write to you. Writing. The healing power of the word. The terrible satisfaction of making my spirit last a while more as it breaks down in the web of symbols arranged in accord, artificially in a text, the text that I write, the text for which I suffer and cry. The text that says nothing, only that which I feel, with all its confusion and with all the babble of ideas and tears incarnate in symbols, clumsy symbols with which I try to define myself, to earn your love for me, if that is, there is still room for hope, if indeed I am not a being already relegated to the waste.

The self. Is the self anything more than a text? Are we perhaps the text of some multifaceted novel that is always being written in the life of everybody else, even in our own absence, when we disappear, when nothing remains of us except that which we leave about our self for others to read about, that is if this self hasn't been a lie, merely the sound and form of a word and a symbol?

I don't know what I was telling you.

I was trying to make you face my emotional state, of which today I have particularly clear perception, today that the nurse has still not administered my dose of tranquillisers which plunge me into the deadly side of life, far from the theme of this book I write to you.

Do you want to know what time is like here for me? Time is like a loaf of bread that goes stale and becomes hard until just crumbling away. And then the dark seed of nothingness to tell us that nothing matters. The terrible question. What is it? you ask. The question: WHAT FOR? But not a teleological WHAT FOR that opens out like a flower, passing through its cycle of life until finally it withers, but an awe-inspiring WHAT FOR that invalidates and finishes with all one does, that makes what one does as nothing.

And so I feel defenceless and separated from reality, far removed from the unchanging crowd of minutes, hours, days, years, that all go by with the same shape or form, the one copying the other as if they each wanted to be the same unique spaced out instant of time that never achieves – WHAT FOR? – its aim.

I feel very alone, Ana. And I withdraw into the bottomless galleries of myself as I contemplate the non-existent picture on the wall of my cell. And I try to snatch a real portrait of myself that I can send to you with this

letter but I lose myself, I leave, I lose myself forever in the shadow on the white of the plaster on the wall. And the features of everyone else become blurred and their words are sheets of paper flying in the wind.

Perhaps I would have liked to have been just some other anybody, one of them, so as to escape from me, from myself. And so to bear the weightless burden of my own self, my mind always working, drawing life from an empty focus, just as a moth fluttering around a light bulb, that bulb which will light at dusk, right on the edge of night.

And I feel that my relation with other people breaks and the most absolute solipsism begins. And everything becomes a desert. Or perhaps it is a complete weariness with the rules that demand one treats other people as if in some sort of theatre play that takes place on the great and gigantic stage of everyday life.

And now all these people flee from me, when they see that I am different. And my feelings are turned into a crumpled piece of paper upon the grey tarmac of a rainy afternoon. And my soul is a bucket upside down, inside out, with my privacy scattered all around. And my soul is a piece of the nothing that girdles my waist – the waist of my soul – with an embrace that becomes some grotesque gesture, as if one were shaking the hand of thin air and

taking off one's hat to the deceased. As an untimely tantrum from the guest of honour, who tolerates the stares watching his every expression, as a lapse in behaviour that labels us forever with a cursed adjective that sums up abnormality and divergence: mad.

And tonight I amuse myself looking at old photographs, and no more do I recognise myself. I find it difficult to believe that I have been this self, so different from my features, my appearance of today. And I look at myself in the eyes, the eyes of this other self that appears in this photograph. And I try to ask myself things, everyday things, don't think otherwise, nothing profound. Perhaps something like who you have seen today, who you are talking to, why you have put on this shirt. But the photo remains unchanged and does not reply and so I dream about it. I dream that I am not myself, that I have escaped from my self and I am another one who is sane, the self of the photograph. And that I am happy just as are the others. And that I have friends. And that you love me more not because you feel sorry for me but because you admire me, you admire the youth and beauty of this, my other self, that which I would like to continue to be and not this poor sickly creature forsaken in this hospital where we are all decaying and too tired to keep on living.

And you always had this air of helplessness that reflected, at heart, your incorruptible strength. And thus the camera surprised you as you put your arm around my shoulder, Venice in the background. And I in contrast, stand there with a forced smile, one that is the expression of that happiness which escaped and fled in that very moment when most of all I needed it.

And so I am a person empty of self, withdrawn, sunk in an immeasurable chaos that is the illness of our soul, there where our spirit no longer exists. And perhaps you still did not see me in this way, and you heard, as you embraced me in the photo, the music of a piano picking out weightless notes over the highest arch of the midday sun, when one scarcely can bear the intensity of the light and everything – the day, the street, the memories – becomes so sharp that it hurts. Yet now I feel, as I remember the history of that photo, like some dummy, or someone that has already died.

But let us leave the past. Let us return to the present. Let us return to you. For thank goodness that you are here and that you give me some company now, from time to time when you come to visit me. And you understand my pain and sympathise.

You would come in the afternoon and visit me, and I would wait for the familiar sound of the engine of your car that one can hear from behind the wall, the wall which separates me from everything, from everything normal, from everything.

All my senses would be hanging on your every word, a voice that sounded happy as you joked with the nurses. And then I would watch you pass through the entrance gates. I would note the look of compassion you would give to my other companions who each were suffering distinct torments in that hell of deadened minds. I would watch how you always walked quickly, fearful lest anyone approach you. You wouldn't have known how to react, perhaps you would have fled.

So, I saw how for you, I was not like the rest of my partners in suffering. You had still not given me up for a lost cause, or perhaps you clung to the memory of my other self, my other personality, the one I had before my first crisis. In this way, our walk around the garden chatting appeared to you normal and for me full of emotion, that same garden which I paced every day, up and down, that same eternal garden, every last inch of which I knew,

there in my confinement. Only that, walking with you, I didn't have that feeling of being shut up in those four walls with grass, that cursed grass which they looked after more than they did us.

If only I knew the origins of my ailment, I would tell you. If only I knew where my problems began… As if something of me had disappeared in some moment, as though my self control had broken down, and from there, the mind adrift towards the deepest chasm of darkness where lies the limit that both terrifies and fascinates.

But the limit was too in the depths of your eyes and I felt myself prisoner so to draw the final borders of your infinity, of your infinite spirit, of the beauty of your soul, infinite.

"Write," you would say to me in advisory tones.

I would make some ambiguous gesture that was barely indeed a gesture. Gestures. No longer did I know how to control my gestures, I, a hardened actor, a lady killer. When most I needed that my body respond to my craving to be loved, the uglier I became.

"About what can I write?" I asked you at length.

“Of your experiences, your thoughts, your memories, your life.”

Then I would fear that my writing would be totally incoherent, lacking in logic. I was afraid of showing the weakness of my thinking, of my mental condition. But I did not tell you. Quite simply, it seemed impossible for me to write. Yet, behold. I am doing so now. Soon you will understand what has emboldened me.

But you insisted, “Why don’t you try to look into the causes of what is happening to you? Why don’t you try to search in the depths of your soul until you discover the problem?”

This you would say in tones that charmed yet were not free from worry. And I knew that this strange affection you felt for me was the only thing that kept me alive and of course was too, the only connection I had to the outside world and to society there.

Far away, from her clock tower, an ancient church let her bells be heard. The indefinable sound of the bells, unusual in their warmth. Time. We are all engaged in a struggle against time, I thought, but in the end, we are always, infallibly, beaten. Time somehow gets right inside us and slowly starts to eat us away. The air that gives us

life ends up making our lungs grow old. The light of the midday sun makes our eyes go blind. The infinity of night is all that is left to us, nor even do we become stars. Words and thoughts desert us. Silence.

As we walked along, I asked myself how I had come to such a state of vulnerability and hyper-sensitivity. And all my memories of a childhood with you, Ana, all my past sensations, went round and round in my head with a vehemence that surprised.

When would the fury within me be unleashed once more? For the moment, there only existed an unhealthy excess of subjectivity in my relations with those about me. But I was still in control. My insecurity, my fear… Some day, perhaps soon, I will burst out once more, transform into a ruin, a brainless being that breathes the atmosphere of my own mortal illness. Madness, my madness, this was the mortal illness. Anguish at existing, an uncontrollable anguish that was becoming my own coffin, seed of the chaos in my mind, under the appearance, at least to me, of sound intelligence that hid those thousand labyrinths in which my poor self, my alienated being, was enclosed.

For the moment, my ocean within was still, was in calm, I felt as though I were a person who is acceptable from a social point of view. Until when? For the moment, I breathed the serenity of the countryside, and only the piano of Backhaus filled me with suppressed emotion, the sublime made perfect.

Perhaps my illness was a *mal du siecle*, or that of another century. Or perhaps my illness was eternal and symbolised that which lies dormant, concealed within each man's soul… The mortal illness. Life seemed to me to be something impossible which we slowly forge in our minds until we reach the total frustration and utter finish that is death, and disappear with the convulsed look of one who would not believe.

Life… Life appears to us in youth to be an open opportunity, the craving for triumph, the sum total of our ambitions. But woe betide he who does not quench the yearnings of his heart! He becomes but a shadow of himself, a mere façade. So often I find myself living a bad dream, trying to recuperate my sleeping conscience, my long-lost raison d'être. A film camera records dispassionately all that goes on around, flowing in a never-ending river of images witnessed by this, my opaque conscience. And I must see myself in the mirror to know who I am, what place I hold in this Dantesque film. But the face and the figure that the mirror throws back at me are those of

a foreign being, distinct from me, I do not recognise myself. I feel as someone in possession of a borrowed body. Some day I will give it back I think. Perhaps at the moment of my death I will find the true form that fits my opaque conscience which continues inexorably to register all the instants of a life that goes by as if it belonged to somebody else.

So I would find myself, suddenly, alone once more in my bedroom, pondering and brooding as I contemplated with steady stare the bare light bulb that hung from the ceiling, lying on my bed, tying to reconcile my body with my soul or simply recalling your visit, once you had gone. Your absence would last an age and more. Over and over, I would recall your words of cheer, your every gesture, your all-seeing gaze, the grace with which you moved your hands.

The love that I felt for you, Ana, was my only solace, my only reason for living.

I always knew, on crossing the belated threshold of adolescence, that I was in need of this bond of understanding, this union of affections distinct, that comes to pass between man and woman. I tried to find the

face of the woman that I have etched in my heart. A woman that would understand my ideals. And you fulfilled this image. You were the only one who embodied that ideal about which I had dreamed.

Upon writing this, there flooded into my mind images of my internal breakdown, of my profound crisis, of my desperate struggle. This was long before I created this distinct façade, before I felt as though I were someone else… And I think that I would like to have sat down for a long talk with this other person who I am not and yet who is like me. And to ask him why, after so many years, he had taken my place, turning himself into my double, a double that was my own self in the form of an empty shell.

And to write… The deep, profound, huge weariness of writing can be but a reflection of the fathomless, black and impenetrable boredom of life. The heroes always break their dreams on the waves of the storm, which, as a magnet, draws them in. One cannot for all one's life be, there within, an adolescent enraptured by one's own laugh, by the life-giving laughter that time implacably takes away.

To write… To write at times is to leave some illegible symbols in the sand that the sea undoes and takes away as secret. To write is to forcefully invoke the world around or whatever exists beyond and know that we are but a

ghostly shade of our true mind, a mirage in the desert of life. To write is to express loudly and clearly, a hidden feeling, to give out an inimitable and desperate scream with which to overcome the longed-for loneliness that sometimes satisfies and sometimes hurts as if it were a knife of glass.

To write is to pray with oneself. It is to make love with a will-o'-the-wisp that has risen from a cemetery, that of our own mind. It is to calm an insatiable appetite. It is to make the supreme sign of weariness in the sand of the day, before it disappears altogether… The best literary works are always those that were captured by the eyes of a man dying in his mind, in the very last moment of his life. The hallucination of a madman, of a madman…

I speak, I write, yet still, beyond the words, lies my mind's inability to resist madness. And I am tired of living with them, with my ravings, not knowing when the next one will come, when it will take hold of me once again.

I write and doing so, I pay cynical homage in my mind to its very own failings, to its ailing circuits. I think I am drafting a text and it is someone that is writing for me, a voice inside my afflicted mind, the same one that drives me to continue with this pointless letter… pointless were it not for you, you who have always been the only meaningful part of my life.

But within a few moments, they will come to bring me, yet again, the tablet…

I sense the steps of the nurse drawing near to my bedroom. All is in silence out there. Only the inconsolable song of the owl calling his mate once more.

I want to tell you something conclusively now, Ana. We are reaching the end. I want to tell you why I have become emboldened to write all this to you.

I sense the solitary tree of the hospital garden, upright, its branches moving to the leisurely rhythm of a gentle wind. They are the rigging of a eucalyptus tree, the sails of a huge galleon from another era. The sound of the branches waving, of leaf rustling with leaf. An unbearable wall of sound, an intensity of noise that makes me hold my hands to my ears. But also, the sight of shifting changing colours, of its branches ungainly and proud, as a giraffe most elegant, as an aristocrat from another age, as a survivor from another century. So too do I feel, closed in, isolated, detached, lost in my thoughts. The extreme loneliness of one who visits another time and another age and cannot find the way back to the place from where he came.

The nurse has left me the tablet on the table.

I think that now, only silence can cure me. Find peace, put the fury to sleep, calm the soul within, chaotic when overcome by the mortal illness of madness. But peace, at this moment, is the way out of a labyrinth that can never be found.

I have been many days now without taking my tablet, saving them up, little white pearls, little blue pearls…

You are my only solace and truth, the only door of light through which to leave this labyrinth. And today I discovered that you are to be married.

No longer will you be able to come back here. I will grow old alone. I will not have the comfort and hope of your company.

I feel that I have been groping my way through life, always searching. I have etched in my soul the deep and disquieting unease that beauty spawns. And I cannot conceive of life without your life, without your beauty.

What tenderness the recollection of you inspires in me! In other times, we made love between white sheets, now in my memory I explore your body once more. A shiver runs through me from head to toe. What tenderness you inspire in me! So many times have we loved one another wildly, passionately, united in the perfect ecstasy of a kiss, fused in one body alone. What tenderness, what passion you inspire in me!

I could not stand life without you. It is impossible for me. Nor can I find a way out of the situation into which life has led me, letting time go by here, like a vegetable, put to sleep by chemistry, subdued.

The human constitution is frail. Sometimes I believe that I am a giant and that everything is bright in my world. Until suddenly, like now, there appears once again, with a repeated insistence that brings with it depression, the implacable confirmation of my weakness, one akin to the human being lost in the pockets – the folds – of time.

We dream of a project for life. We are too young for it. And then, too old, we realise that time – messenger of death – has won the game against us.

I have nothing. Only your love which I have lost. And the certainty that I will not be able to cure myself, that it is all irreversible. Perhaps it is with an animal desire to survive that I write this text for you, one that could be for no other. But I prefer the dangerous freedom of my fantasy even though it leads me to madness, to the slavery of old spent coins, to this confinement that has been prepared for me..

My youth has gone. My love has gone. No longer do I have the look of grass in eyes of cloud. And yet I know that my eyes are the eyes of the world, dumbfounded witness of true reality, of the limit.

And it is in this limit that I want to speak to you tonight my love. A love that I know will not find caress nor reply since the time for kisses has left forever. What remains to us is called death.

In a few moments, I am going to take a whole bottle of these tablets. And I will sleep the last sleep, the eternal sleep. And my dream will be lost, deep within the eyes of the owl.

I do not know how you will have felt reading all this drawn-out raving for in it I have not been able to resist the vanity of showing myself as someone a little cultivated in letters and a little more so in truth.

Ana. At this point, I want to ask you just one question. After reading my text, this final testament that I leave you in words … Have you managed to understand me a little more? That is all I desire.

The Dream of an Owl.

The Lark Ascending of Vaughan Williams and she was as a skylark soaring to the strains of the music.

The music was alive; it seemed to be forever improvising and changing anew as from the strings of instruments it rose. The music was ever growing and flooded over all with a sensation of warmth that invited tears to slip softly down one's face

And she, there at his side. Her hands caressing his back while she chattered happily away as does a little girl, without feeling what he felt. She was a gull from Dover bordering the crags, the cliffs of the music, to the rhythm of the wind and the waves.

It was like a midsummer night's dream when Woody Allen saw the shapeless lights of the woodland lovers disappear.

It was one of those moments when time hangs from the tops of the trees and lets drift her wandering breath so as to convert us into elves or goblins of the Night, into creatures of the wood, of this wood that only exists in the minds of children and of those gone mad, when the sane sleep the sleepless sleep of the true and trivial madness of everyday life.

And the notes leapt up, forever shaping castles of sand that rose in the depths of his mind, embracing his thoughts and the most intimate of his feelings.

And he dreamt the fathomless dreams that rose from the strings of the violin, that inexorably drew him towards the ethereal core of the dark firmament, the black hole of his feelings: the deep well of loneliness where exists only that which wisdom hides behind the eyes of the wise.

And the Music rose from behind those waters, in the woodland of the mind, in the centre of the universe, in the endless magma of the stars, making themselves as one with their eternal love, beyond the times that are the other Time.

And he flew, feeling himself to be Vaughan Williams, as if he had risen from his tomb and was now smiling with pleasure from the rainbow of a long shawl of stars that fell from the damp centre of the night, there where the gods sleep through stories of love, mighty and veritable, in the recollection of centuries past.

And she was like a sparkling goddess, resplendent in a magnificent crown of stars. And her visage slowly became the wake of a white lady that swayed in the breeze, the breeze that the

rhythm of her arms and hands created as they caressed the air, as she chattered on, oblivious to his thoughts.

And he believed he saw Juan Benet in the darkness of the garden, he who was in eternal flight, taking with him a dark scarf that he had forgotten the night before, lost on a winter's journey, when he died with the sad eyes of one who knows it all.

Then it seemed to him that he was close to the heavens, while that magic moment stopped time both for him and for those in love who keep a hidden timekeeper in their hearts.

And the Parisian clochards played the same music in the metro stations. And the gypsies that begged in the station of Pigalle stopped for a moment to recite a Bulgarian litany learnt in their infancy and to break the charm of the music. A Music that went on implacably and that paused in heavy, magical, sorrowful silences until finding the very centre of all centres, there where the earth becomes fire and water, and where the fire becomes for one Instant, the caress of a bride.

The Music, the Music enveloped him and returned once again to his lips which drank from the invisible cup of the Delights that throng the mind of the initiated. There where Dvorak and Haydn dwell, Arriaga and Rodrigo, the joyful music of Spain, Berlioz – Les Nuits d'été – and Grieg and Richard Strauss and the arias of Handel sung by a voice that breaks on the reel of an impossible thread that unites us to the heavens.

There where one discovers that life is a long path towards Nothing, and that everything that Is is Nothing, such as Life itself, one's very own life that finishes in the earth beneath the tree of this garden, where the owls sing.

There, the ashes of the nothing, the dream of the silence, that can only be perceived in the Music, like some foreboding that will accompany us on this journey to nowhere, in which we have only been able to leave the memory of so much love sown. Of so much love for her…

And the Music would not finish, and was like a lullaby in the late of the afternoon that grew ever later, like an absent-minded Cinderella that would lose the very same leaves of the tree into

which slowly, but surely, she was changing. Those loving branches of the huge tree which he was going to nourish with his own body.

The Garden and the Night.

And the Music was continuous now and expanded with his mind across the stars, to places beyond the memory of God, behind the sky.

And now, no longer could he wake from his Dream, which was the dream of the owl whose song was of one enraptured, of one that there remained with a magic plaintive lament, hidden behind the tears of the night.