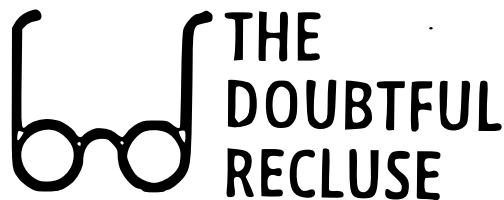


Robert Moscalewk

Ripe, a novel



www.thedoubtfulrecluse.com

Dear Reader,

Words, you'll say as you go through these pages, they're nothing but words. I agree with you, that's the absolute truth; they're nothing but words, thousands of them. Yet, please accept my apologies when I say there's nothing more I could give you, nothing more and nothing less. You see, it's the words that matter here, and just because they matter you'll have to read each and every one of them, word by word, breath by breath, until you reach the end. There is no sense of satisfaction in doing that, absolutely not. The only satisfaction you could *actually* derive from this is that, at one point, you'll realize that there is more to words than meets the eye and that the eye sees not itself, but by reflection.

*To M.L., who never knew the truth, and hopefully never will, and to
A.C., alma de mi vida.
This is for you.*

Robert McCalister

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

I was always good at conceiving scenarios. Good at placing my mother in the center of my mind when in need of advice. I thought of it as an inner mechanism. Each time I got languid my mother's voice echoed in my thoughts telling me to continue my work and be the best in what I was doing. I was a leading figure in making my brother seem dull and his words futile and my father to be the father I always wanted, influential and neat. I dismissed things which I could not budge with my mind and one of those things was my love for her. I continued to defer it until its last consequences. The question was definitely not 'to love or not to love' but it was rather 'is there something to love in *me*?' I was definitely one of those guys who were angry with the entire world because they didn't like the way they looked and consequently were bound to the disturbing habit of comparing themselves to others. The sole thought that there were others out there, much better-looking than myself, made me sick every morning. I knew it was a trap and I fell into it knowingly. It was a duty I had to perform. Their shoes were always shinier than mine. They all looked like they had loads of cash to spend on their looks. I didn't want to be like them and I didn't want to be regular. I hated myself each time I looked in the mirror, each time my shirt was too large or the collar did not stand as I wanted it to. I knew that comparisons brought no happiness. Still, I could not stop making them.

My love for her produced no scenarios and the only thing left for me to do was to imagine that possibility. Our love was a statue, outlandish, unattainable. I wrote poems about that and she liked them because I always left traces of her between the lines. I used to slip all sorts of bits and pieces: a look, her hair and hands, the way in which she held her feet in her shoes, all seasoned with a touch of metaphorical language. I was unhappy and I avoided her because of that. I did not want to make her feel miserable beside me. I sadistically enjoyed all those quiet

sobs I made during the night when I was alone in my bed. I loved being wretched. In front of such force I could only stand and admire. Yet it was as if I had no feelings for her, as if there was someone out there, another person much better than the present one and I hated myself for that, because deep down I knew that she was the only one who could see the ocean in its entirety despite having access to only a part of it. She had very good eyesight. The difference between us was that I had eyes only for the surface of the water and was forced to feel and imagine the depths while she was able to see the fish and smile at them, and caress them. From that point of view she was superior. That was what I actually liked about her, she was superior and I could praise her, build statues in her honor, and write poems for her pure delight. I felt so little beside her despite the fact that I knew she felt exactly the opposite. I was actually proud of that because I had the possibility to walk and discuss with a beautiful girl next to me. I saw the way in which the other guys were looking at her and then at me. My conditional pride was on the other hand enforced by my obsession for controlling the others. Having her on my side of the side-walk permitted me to stare down the other guys and laugh in their faces. That was only done in my mind. On the outside I was thankful to my present situation.

Still, that was it. She could see the fish and do those things but she had the wrong sensation that she was not the only one. She *was* the only one but she thought that that kind of perception was something natural. I had to offer her material: I imagined chimeras and built stories around them and she believed me. Next she would say that she saw one of my chimeras looking at her from the depths with sparkling eyes. I fed her on chimeras because the love between us was itself a chimera. I avoided the word 'love' because it seemed pathetic and something designed for people who had nothing else to do. I personally thought there were other ways and I made plans about that. First, say that she smells pretty and then say she looks beautiful, no, actually stunning, maybe gorgeous, the choice of words is vital, and then offer to walk her home, stay close to her and protect her from danger etc. I never said that, I never did those things. It was still too pitiable for me. I preferred our chimera, it was threatening but silent. It had long hands and feet, a faultless face, dark hair, cobalt eyes and a heart that burst out like laughter in the middle of

the chest. It was our child, born out of years of reading and idle contemplation. Dali's paintings also played an important part in the creation of our offspring. I could do nothing to it; it just stood there, waiting, like a mentally challenged horse, immovable.

Now when I write this I can easily see the horse, like a stain on paper. It was all over me, she was all over me. I washed like a hundred times a day trying to get her off of me, rinse those feelings away. I got baptized under the shower again and again and hoped for sudden amnesia. I brushed my teeth five times a day to see whether the taste was just in my head. It was always there, a flashy but loud taste as if I chewed her lipstick all the time despite I never kissed her. I often promised myself that I shall try to kiss her once when she least expected it and that I shall hold her chin and press my lips against the white skin. I was afraid that my lips are going to be too dry and that I shall not manage to kiss her properly. I did not know the extent of a 'proper' kiss. When the moment came I was too much of a coward to do it. I was too much of a coward to come near her despite the fact I knew she loved me. At least she said that openly. We both waited for the bus to come after classes were over and when she looked the opposite way I watched the line of her chin and imagined my fingers following it. It seemed so barbaric to me. It felt as if I would mar the beauty of that line even by looking at it, by thinking those gruesome things. I trembled like a painter who is about to make a final move of the brush notwithstanding the inevitable completeness of the painting, despite knowing the fatal consequence of that last move. At night I used to squeeze a pillow between my knees and suppress the wave of sensations that invaded my pores. I went to sleep thinking what she might say in the morning, what she might do, what her smile would be like. I kept imagining how she would put her arm around my chest and lean her head against my shoulder. Our chimera came at times and I could see the huge transparent heart pumping blue blood in its veins. Love is not as red as we think.

Then things suddenly changed for the better between us. I did not, *she* did not. Only our between-ness did. When I went to bed I hated her because she had a thing for me. It was a general thing. I frowned at women who got in love with one particular type of man; it was probably because of my mother, she had to suffer so much from the group of men

that were a part of her life: my father and his perpetual hope for the best, my brother and his daily gargantuan pile of laundry, my lecherous uncle, my hypochondriac and self-pitiable grandfather and my out of the ordinary wannabe self. My mother was bound to us through this wretched and gold plated chain which we all (men) called love. At first I had the sensation that cleaning and doing laundry were things made out of pure pleasure and my mother had nothing better to do. Later I discovered I was terribly wrong. It was all made on the account that there is an unconditional affection which is actually conditional. I do your laundry and you offer me love and we live happily ever after. Laundry left no pity or self-remorse. Laundry was what unconditional love and affection left behind.

One day I discovered that my mother read novels about love and that kind of stuff. It was my utmost achievement at that moment: I realized by myself that my mother did have something *better* to do and reading was a superior thing as opposed to laundry and cleaning. I went to the library and brought her more books. The librarian smiled when I asked her for some books for my mother. I think that she actually had the feeling that I read those books instead of my mother. I asked for books that women like my mother read during sleepy Sunday afternoons. I fetched only best-sellers and books which had handsome men and women on the cover. The people on the cover were usually kissing, or holding hands, or looking at each other with that look which meant 'I love you' or even better 'I can't live without you' and things of that sort. There were also cases in which they looked different ways just to make the book seem more interesting than it really was. I tried once to read one of those books but I was too afraid of reading about people making love. There was always a young and pretty doctor who had an affair, or had a wife who had a liaison with his best friend. In that world people instantly fell in love and men had testosterone bursts just by looking at a woman's cleavage. For me, love was not like that. At that age love was when a girl was forced by her parents to hold hands with you and have an awkward smile on her face while the adults watched closely with a huge smug. Or when your older brother and his best friend left you alone with a girl that had exactly the same age as you. They always had a facial expression which said something like 'play along, there are important matters which we must

attend to' and I had to say nothing and play with a broken Santa Claus toy. Or in a best case scenario when a girl cuts her apple in half and offers you a part of it while your uncle has a meaningful look. At that time, love was what only mothers could offer when you have a sore throat or a tooth ache. It did not imply appealing young doctors and beautiful women. That seemed so far away, as if from another planet. Back then there were only little girls in colorful dresses. Back then love was a state of humiliation invented by cruel parents who had the cruel intention to tease you. When I tried to read those books I was afraid that my mother might catch me and have that smile which meant 'these are not for you but you can read a little if you want'. For me 'little' was a synonym for unpleasant, I wanted to read either the entire book or nothing. I was too afraid of reading back then.

Now I shivered at the thought that the chimera stood beside me. 'My love' I wanted to say but I was afraid that it might scare it and make me seem pathetic. There was nothing worse than being pathetic. Using that phrase was like acknowledging the fact that this form of affection was a smoother form of egocentric thrust and ultimately a scam. Saying that *I loved her* was like a case of high treason, like the rape of a virgin Queen, like Paris being bombarded by the Nazis. I was afraid that she might be one of those underwater creatures which stood hidden and then ran away at the slightest movement. The huge heart continued to pump the blue blood. I was not sure if water creatures had that kind of blood and I assured myself that it must be some sort of special water creature. It must have been so because it was *our* water creature. So I looked at her but said nothing thinking that it was the intelligent thing to do. I wanted to look intelligent but this love made me see myself like a fool.

Before sleep came I pondered on all the gestures that she made the previous day. A thorough analysis of them would knock me out in a matter of hours. It was much more effective than the old-fashioned sheep count. One by one the gestures kept repeating in my mind: she touched me in what seemed a motion of care. However, it was an inconclusive gesture because she touched me and then suddenly withdrew her hand and laughed nervously. Her hand brushed the lower side of my cheek and lingered there for a second which seemed like an eternity of pain for me. Her sudden withdrawal made me think of all kinds of stuff, maybe my skin

was too rough and maybe it was because I did not shave that morning. From then on I tried to shave every morning because I read a study in which scientists said that women prefer shaved skin. I used my best aftershave and the finest cologne I could afford. The pain of her touch was agonizing because I did not know the significance of it: was that friendship talking or a deep sign of attachment. Then I turned my hunting towards signs of affection. I tried to display the same warmth and put my hand over her shoulder from time to time, *and* I held her hand in public. I particularly liked holding her hand; it felt like I had butterflies in my stomach. It was like she did not touch my hands at all but rather the hair that was on them. Her hands were so soft and when she touched mine I had goose bumps. She used to slip her hand under my elbow and rubbed her fingers against the inner side of my arm. I felt like a dog whose back's being scratched. I tried to be mature at that; any sign of affection tends to fail by becoming pathetic. Once we were at school and we got out of the class holding hands and one of the other girls looked at our hands and then at me. I was swollen with pride and she was beautiful.

I knew this love was bad for my health; it was bad for *her* health. I was similar to a drug user who had an addiction and was afraid to face the truth of it. I invented theories just to make me feel better: I was like a smoker who suddenly remembered that I once knew a friend who had a friend and he smoked terribly but lived happily ever after without having lung issues, or any other health issues. I thought that maybe she was in love with my mind, but she could not love *me*. It seemed like there was nothing for me in it not to mention there was nothing for her in it. I had nothing to offer, I had no secrets in my sleeve, I had no hidden powers and I was definitely not the lover that she wanted. I was just the armchair lover that could not stop loving her.

Other guys were happy with their cars; they took pictures of them and often cleaned the rubber carpets. I on the other hand was happy with her but didn't take pictures of her and I never saw her unclothed. She had no plastic carpets to clean. She fed on my inexistent affection and our blue hearted chimera. My affection was inexistent because I couldn't call it otherwise and I often imagined scenarios in which we both discussed this *thing* that was between us. She always smiled and played my game. We were like two kids who discussed things which were inappropriate for

our age. I was the smart and cute boy and she was the girl in the colorful dress. The difference was that there was no broken Santa Claus toy and no elder brothers or uncles or cruel intentioned parents. She took these discussions very seriously like there was somebody else watching, not a human being but rather a video camera and we were both actors in a film.

‘Is this affection?’ I asked and passed my arm around her shoulders. Her shoes were red and so were her clothes, her earrings and her heart probably. I was so happy to be there and ask her that because I felt all those pairs of eyes watching us and I was the guy who held his hand around a gorgeous red clothed girl.

‘What? This?’ and she slipped her arm around my waste. I felt chills all over my spine. This was an improvement to the status I already had because I was no longer the guy holding a girl but also the guy *held* by the gorgeous girl. She smiled like she knew where I was heading and I loved when she did that. It meant I had her full cooperation in this.

‘Everything’ I said. ‘After all, affection is just a word which is never enough.’ She laughed.

‘That is a cliché and you know that. Words are never enough. However, affection is like a social contract, a means to keep the world in control.’ She knew there is something more to it and continued to look at me like a colorful dressed ten year old girl.

‘I think it is just another thing that proves we are fools. I mean, everything is ultimately reduced to a habit. I’m here, you’re here and we care for each other because we spend some moments together. We both go home and do different things and occasionally we think of our relationship. But that’s it, no more. I think it is utterly selfish to do that. I care about you because you own a part of my life and I own a part of your life. And because neither of us wants to lose that little part of our lives we make a pact and swear to hold to each other for the rest of our existence.’ The smile suddenly disappeared and I thought of sick people dying, toothaches and headaches, my mother and the gargantuan pile of laundry, mornings that mouth bad images. She leaned her head against my shoulder and held it there for a few seconds like she waited for the words to vanish into the air. I could only hear the sound of her shoes on the sidewalk. Finally she gave in.

‘I can’t believe you just said that.’ Now we were a couple who got home from a ravishing party where I accidentally met a former girlfriend who still had a thing for me. She was not angry but I felt that she did not agree with what I just said. It was like I blemished her system of beliefs and didn’t apologize.

‘Let me ask you something.’ I was again the painter with the brush and the finished painting. ‘Do you love your brother? Do you offer him your affection unconditionally?’ The smile did not reappear. Apparently I was the magician who couldn’t provide a decent rabbit.

‘Yes, I do love my brother unconditionally. But this has nothing to do with what you are talking about.’ The sound of her shoes continued to toll. She wore rainy October days instead of shoes. The repetitive sounds were a procession to my dead thoughts.

‘But you love him because he is your brother and you know him for a long time. Maybe there is nothing more to it; maybe you care about him because he has been a part of your life.’ She looked at me and withdrew herself from my grip and put her arm under my arm. The October days seemed longer than ever and the rain crept in my skin and bones.

‘You always generalize things and turn discussions about feelings into discussions about the nature of language.’ This is what I was afraid of, a discussion about the essence of love with October days on our backs. In autumn I liked *love* to be felt not talked about. There was something in her which got activated the second I started rationalizing about affection and stuff like that. She never agreed with me at this level and started saying that love does not stand in the discussions we have about it but rather it stands in the second we look at each other before we go to sleep. Love is when we are both late and reach the train station or the bus station in the last second and we seem to be from different worlds. She used both her angry voice and her beautiful hands to bring credibility to what she was saying. The words were accompanied by the ever present orchestra of her October shoes. My mind struggled to reach a blissful place and I recalled a bench in the park, autumn leaves, the smell of her perfume and of new books, going back to school, lunch in the cafeteria. She got a few steps away from me as if she was afraid that she may get infected by my rationalism. She said that love does not stand in walking, holding hands and smiling to each other but it rather stands in that look we have in the

car when we are alone going home. I think we never had that look: I didn't have a car and we never went to fashionable events. I had no good friends, no family, no dog or cat, no bike or anything similar, I didn't have a room with purple walls and a colorful bedside lamp. I only had myself; I was the pile of pirate bones next to the shiny buried treasure. I wanted to stop her and say that love lingers in the way she sat at the table with her right hand under her chin, in the way she smiled. But I couldn't say that because it seemed impossible to me, entirely knotty. I thought what my mother or my brother would say. From their point of view I was probably some sort of mentally challenged person because I couldn't love a gorgeous girl. How could I tell my mother, who expects to have grandchildren, that I can't love her because I couldn't believe in love? It would have been a blasphemy, my mother would have asked me to leave my philosophy aside and love her in the limits of my imagination. She wanted me to be one of those love-me, feed-me, never-leave-me type of guy. It would have been a nourishing state of affairs. That is why I never said anything to her about my feelings. Our love was our little secret.

I did not particularly like hiding it, I wanted to display it in its true force for the world to see, I wanted to put that on a cardboard and walk the streets waving it here and there. But I was afraid of that, I was afraid that I couldn't make out the line between romantic and pathetic. My mind forged a self-defense mechanism because when I wanted to be romantic my nerves contracted and imagined all kinds of situations. There was always a boy nicely dressed, wearing a tie and holding a bouquet of roses, waiting for his girlfriend. It is a cold night and I can see his breath freezing in the air. By the looks of it she is late but he thinks that for women it is fashionable being late. I never felt sorry for that guy, actually there was a combination of sensations. I felt pity and remorse at the same time because there was nothing more beautiful than the lovers' ultimate meeting. I also thought of how pathetic he is and if I ever had the chance to speak to him I would have laughed in his face and tell him that his tie is not very smart. For me love was irrational, it had to be irrational because my whole system of values would have crumbled.

Every man I met on the streets was waiting for his lover. Flowers or no flowers, they had to be waiting for something and I eliminated the possibilities one by one: I looked at their faces, scanned their expression

and jumped to the conclusion immediately, force my thoughts into their head. They wanted to be somewhere else, doing something else except waiting. Everything except waiting because for those who waited time value is always over assessed. Waiting was painful, and there was nothing worse than waiting. They *had* to acknowledge that because I personally saw no other way; waiting was a toothless terror. I filtered my thoughts through their way of standing and imagined how the left leg hurt. They had to change their weight on the right leg. The pain seemed excruciating. Then again the left leg and the right, and left and right, and left and right, like a dance which seemed everlasting, perpetual, undying, unending dance. Thousands of men joined in as their faces multiplied into sickening infinity. Above them, in the background of this right-left-right-left hopscotch, a mighty laughter escaped through a pair of red painted lips which moved and made this uninterrupted movement. Men always knew how to read lips and screamed in horror 'being late is fashionable, being late is fashionable.' Then and there they stopped changing feet and started walking, considering rational suicide. There is nothing worse than waiting. They disgorged little wrist watches which falling on the ground howled like *cry-du-chats*, fish struggling for air. They clenched their fists against the moving lips and stepped over flower bouquets and crushed the buds with shiny leather shoes and went home making a promise to themselves. There is nothing worse than waiting. Love is a perpetual, never-ending, everlasting, eternal bloody type of waiting. There is nothing shoddier than love. They promised revenge, but men did not have red painted lips and women did not have nightmares about those. Women kept their left hand in a white glove and caressed the right side of men's faces. The white glove did not create nightmares; white gloves were like genies in pockets, brought pleasure. There were some men who forgot about revenge and let their swords down. Others suppressed their guilt in the back of the stomach and only at times indigestion and gastric ulcers reminded them of that forgotten revenge. I said to myself that revenge is for the fools. I knew that by myself, without the help of the others. Revenge was no fun compared to the hypnotic white glove.

It was a pain to look at her and I imagined groups of men eye-eating her. I wasn't jealous because I could not say I loved her. Cohorts of men were singing praise songs around her, unleashed their

body force and flew over her like a little cherubim crowd, yelled that they had so much money that she could live happily ever after beside them. I had none of that but the thought that she had eyes only for me encouraged me to dismiss those thoughts in an instant. Nevertheless, I was not one of those men to be feared. I feared them, I feared their cars, their shoes, socks, their underwear, their cell phones, and the carpet they had at their front entrance. The grass was always greener in the neighbor's yard. To attain perfection was the ultimate goal, I thought. Everybody wanted that, but I always feared myself because I knew perfection was not attainable for me. The other men were perfect, it seemed like they had their haircut every day, there was always a perfect straight line following their neckline, always smelled better than me and had this perfect slick smile that could make girls fall in love instantly. Their V-neck pullover fell in a strange way on their chest and their shoulders seemed bigger, stronger. I had none of that. It was an unbearable threshold which I could not surpass. Perfection seemed an imperfect goal. I controlled my voice; I controlled the way in which my muscles contracted in every gesture, every word. I felt a monster creeping into my thoughts. When I was with her the monster smiled and I imagined a shiny spear which emerged out of nowhere and impaled the crooked smile. It propagated, showing the white teeth, I grew silent, dark, and lowered my eyes. I contemplated shoes, side-walks and butts.

'A penny for your thoughts' she said. Each time we were going to meet I prepared answers to possible questions. Each answer had to be intelligent, but I had no intelligent answer for this one. I stood there waiting for something to come out of the darkness and stain that smile. Kill that snake.

'I wasn't actually thinking; I was lost in my thoughts' I lied. I drowned into her enticement and hoped that no one saved me. Her dress grew larger and moved across her body its folds attacking me in waves. She took out her white glove and my right hand stretched grabbing her left hip. My body bended and contorted, my neck muscle turned into a snake. My lips congested into the crooked smile I knew so well. I wasn't watching her. I was looking back as if there was someone else keeping an eye on us and as I peered into the darkness I realized that it was actually me who watched over a loving couple. There was a voyeuristic pleasure in

it; deep down I desired to be him holding her. I wasn't that good-looking and I was incapable of touching her in that way. She liked it because her smile mirrored his. Her right hand stretched around his neck and I could feel numbness going up my body. Her snake-head hand went up on his head caressing it. He stopped watching me and turned his eyes towards her and focused on what he was doing. It was an open invitation to this voyeuristic tribal dance. Figures appeared on his back as his scapula moved in slow motion drawing a battle. Her left foot caressed his right calf.

'You like that?' he whispered and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to her because no one answered. It was most likely meant for her because her smile deepened and her claws contused his black-shirted back. His muscles flexed. She pulled him closer softly pushing his head towards her neck. This gave her an opportunity to look at me, eyes bright with desire. Her fist immobilized his head there, on her neck, as if something was there, a spring through which he could engorge her soul.

It was like a mushroom trip despite the fact that I never experienced one. I thought that if there really was a mushroom trip it had to feel like this. I also knew that this was not my experience because each time I met her everything was sharp and well defined. Each splinter of reality seemed cooler and stainless-steel perfection invaded each gesture. I could perceive every wrinkle, every fold of her dress, and every drop of breath she took, her beating jugular. This, on the other hand was nothing like it. I couldn't focus; details seemed to get lost in the intensity of what was going on around me. I stopped my breath thinking that maybe in this way I could stop the painful watch over the two. Still, there was the other side of me which inhaled every spore of pleasure that floated in the air. The other side seemed to challenge the man standing beside her, trying to win over the chill of her caress. It absorbed every movement of the man, strengthening in his pleasure. Drew pleasure out of pleasure and it engorged their fizz. The boy was hissing while she murmured softly under his chest, trapped in the circle of his body. My inner monster smiled and gave me a blaming look. The lover turned again towards me like he was waiting something from me. I opened my mouth but didn't know what I should say. His look was burning but the burn was not on my skin; it echoed somewhere inside my guts. I knew that burn from my childhood

because it appeared only when I felt there was something inevitable coming. Undone homework, spilt milk, visits at the dentist's office, they all produced this reaction which I could not avoid. So I tried to derive pleasure out of it. Nausea caught me each time I did that. First it made me feel dizzy and then the nausea came. It spread and I tried to make it go away shaking my limbs. With my open mouth I suddenly felt a handful of words in my throat. The fingers were crawling on the back of my tongue, scratched the roof of my mouth, piercing through my teeth. I saw it coming out, a fist with words that were striving at the sweet escape. Then it burst open and the words flew, exploded in the air.

'I beg you' I watched the sentence go up in the air and dance around the room. 'I beg you' the words exploded again 'tell me, tell me what I should do to be like you!' The hand closed into a fist, chocking me as I watched it in horror. Then its muscles arched and I could feel a shudder going through its nerves and while it quaked I could feel its roots deeper into my guts. It opened again and the words drizzled, running sentences with thoughts and blurry intentions attached.

'Tell me what should I do to be you?' The lover turned his back on me. The hand retreated and went down my throat like a flattened swell. Another hand appeared out of nowhere and sealed my mouth shut. I felt a vile compulsion to stare him down thinking that my look would have the same effect on him. It did not. It had no effect whatsoever.

He loitered there his flawlessness like a pang into my ribcage. His torso turned to his right side, his shoulders turned to face me, like a menace. She always told me I lacked that sense of threat which any genuine man has to have. His white teeth were departed while his lips contracted into a wicked smile. I wanted to crush him while screaming 'maggot, you maggot' but his acquitted attractiveness and daintiness were too awe-inspiring. His equine face was disquieting. His neck seemed long and repelling when he swallowed and his Adam's apple pierced through the skin. His eyes seemed too big and too blue to be real. My hate elongated his features, his bones snapped under my glance. Maggot, maggot, stop that maggot, his calves shouted. He was probably the man every woman wanted to have, young or old, they all wanted him, fantasized about him, preserved him in little memory cases, keeping him like a pill in a pillbox. Whenever headaches came he prayed to get out of

the box; they prayed him to get out of the little pillbox. With the press of a button he went out. His torso flexed and his lips pulled back from his teeth. Headaches disappeared like magic.

I could see why she wanted him so much. He had the smile of a child and he probably used lavender scented oil. He was the man with no existential issues, slept well, dreamless, without questioning his own integrity, had good teeth, no cavities, no root canals, full lips and little squares punching through his abdomen. He was the man that kept his childhood in a locked compartment and had a division of neurons that prevented even him from going in. He kept his childhood for those particular moments in which he wanted to become thoughtful. He was the continuous reminder of his own childhood: never did his homework but always got excellent results in school, several girls had a crush on him but the apple of his eye was always someone else, meaning nobody, but he just wanted to feel important by lying to himself; there was also a teacher that had once a crush on him. He was the cutest guy in class and he was always chosen for beauty contests. He was the hero of all those fairy tales with princesses and frogs that instantly turned into gorgeous princes. The hero of all stories never needed to be saved, never needed a haircut. Maggot, maggot, stop that maggot, his back shouted. She held her claws around his back as if she wanted to cut it open but the disillusionment that came with it stopped her. She stretched her womb towards him as if there was a magnet inside his guts and she was a piece of metal. Their bodies crushed against each other, molecules merging into each other. Divide and unite. There was no him, there was no her but only two bulks trying to squeeze into each other. Maggot, oh maggot, stop that maggot.

Everything seemed shallow and pale. Truth was ultimately a lie and rivers ran backwards. Compared to this thing we call love everything seemed worthless and as much as I tried to suppress this feeling it got bigger, engulfed cities and helpless people. A hybrid love in which revulsion and queasiness became happy relatives, overwhelming like a forgotten weft that burst the moment you put your new shoes on. My emotional control worked best when I had no idea about it but the instance in which I began to think of it I started to lose it. It went like a bike with one bent wheel. I wanted to be like him, I wanted to be him, and

I wanted him. I deeply desired to wear his skin on my hunched back just like tribe chiefs wore the skin of their nemesis. I hoped she wouldn't recognize me like that and love me in the way she loved him. I also wanted him to be mine; the sensation of having him on my side was a thirsty passion because she could have had us both at the same time. Still, there was my inner monster which screamed revenge and pushed me onward towards the voracious edge of my resentment. I wanted her so bad that he seemed a feather in the way of my sweeping thought. The monster howled and there was no spear to punish it. I agreed with it. No one can stay in the way of my affection.

Because of him I dreamed of shedding my skin, letting it behind, under the shiny shoes of those who were always behind me whispering, laughing, stabbing me behind my back. Under the dry skin there was another layer that I wanted to expose, to make it public. I hoped it to be a better skin, a mysterious skin, my skin multiplied by a thousand times, empowered by Nature's finest talents. I hoped to keep myself under this new skin, to keep my memories, to keep her. I wanted her to like this new skin, to love it, forget about the others even though I knew there were no others.

First there would be a fissure under my foot. I swore I could walk long enough to make it bigger, force it to reach my toes, then my ankle. I swore to myself that I will let it rot, let it beg to get off of me. Then I would hang my foot on the fence; throw it on the streets for others to see so that it would die of shame, so that people could say to other people there was a shameful skin on the side-walk that begged a strange man to let it rest just for a few seconds. Then they would say that the bizarre man shouted at it and said that if anyone wants to shed his skin he must do it using cruel means. That was the truth and nothing but the truth. Shedding skin does not happen to those who are careful, those who use hydrating crème when a petite crack appeared on their feet. You have to dig in, stick your fingers in it and pull. When the skin realizes that there is no escape it will try to run, then you have to let it go. If you are lucky it will go by itself.

My skin seemed harder than ever, painful as it wore off. First it was like a map, it got yellowish as time passed. Wrinkles grew where mountains and hills supposed to be. I was sweating only where seas, rivers and oceans supposed to be. Those were hard times with stormy

weather. Then it was like a puzzle. I pulled out the pieces that had my eyes drawn on them when I wanted to go blind, pulled out my ears when I wanted to go deaf, and pulled out my mouth when I wanted to listen. I knew when to do that because my mouth hurt from time to time. It was a sign that I needed to shut up and listen. I had to forget all means of communication, erase my knowledge. There were times when I took out the pieces that had a brain drawn on them. Everything went dark. My heart started to pump irregularly, it went off limits, my lungs inflated until pain crept into my ribs. Then I started losing pieces. They disappeared. I found one under my bed but it didn't fit back because there was another piece missing. Each morning there was a missing piece and instead of it there was nothing else. I expected the other skin to come out, show itself but it kept me waiting. Each missing piece was replaced by a quantity of darkness. I was afraid to get out of my room because the darkness started to win me over. First, my feet went dark, then my left hand along with the wristwatch I got for my twentieth birthday from my parents. I forgot about time because I had no means to measure it. One of my ears disappeared one day, along with my lower lip. My upper lip followed the lower after a few days. I was forced to smile all the time because I had no lips to cover my fangs and in one way I resembled my little monster. I started losing more and more pieces as darkness started to compete against my skin. Day by day darkness crept upon me like a woman trying to make love to me. It embraced me. I had feet and hands of darkness. I had a few dissipated pieces left. I lost one eye and locked myself away from the rest of the world. Now I had my death head ugliness.

Then I forgot how to breathe, I was heartless. At the beginning I thought I could live with one missing piece. Then I told myself I could survive without two of them. When I had only one left there were no more hopes. With my last eye I crept into the wardrobe closing the door behind me, waiting for something to happen. The ray of light that came from the door crack kept me company and I forgot about time. I failed to recall her gorgeous face, his handsome features. Then the ray of light left me; I never saw it again. I sensed that something fell, like a leaf, like a sheet of paper. It felt like sleep even though it wasn't. I had no eyes to close, no brain to rest, and no heart to soothe.

CHAPTER TWO

Our body is a denial of wings. I could have never imagined a man with hands and wings at the same time. One thing is always a renunciation of the other. You could have either wings or hands. Birds have wings because they lack hands while people ought to have hands because they lack wings. When I was little I dreamed of flying, back then dreaming was my way of building scenarios. First, dreams came alone. At night, colored visions cobwebbed my eyes and I swam through them, I had to give them significance because all dreams were a sign given by providence. Once, my brother and I caught a salamander in a pond. I was the one to see it first because it was stranded in a smaller pond out of which it could not escape. Its dentate back pierced the mud and I ran away because back then all muddy animals were poisonous and dangerous. I started to yawn miming an inexistent nausea.

Death came yawning.

We fed the salamander on cherries and grass and kept it in a jar on the stove. Each night we dreamed that our bed was beside the little pond. I felt the hideous smell of the pond and the mesmerizing song of the frogs. My brother felt the same, or so he said. The salamander died two days later because it refused to consume the cherries and the blades of grass we provided. One of our godmothers told us that salamanders fed on nothing but meat and they grew as big as crocodiles. We left it to dry in the sun and threw it away in a place we thought to be our secret hiding. Back then we thought we stood alone. Next day the salamander was gone and took our pond-dreams away with it. From that moment on we expected the salamander to reappear, like a ghost, with a pack of pond-dreams on its back. We saw it hunting birds in the garden like a cherry-thief, attacking our crops, leaving messages for the adventurous spirit lingering in our ten year old minds. We named inexistent paths after it, built monuments and waited for the final encounter when we had to fight against the crocodile-sized salamander. Then we found out about snakes that lived under peoples' homes and fed on their rubbish,

protecting them against rats and other such creatures. I threw cherries each day imagining that *our* home snake was being thankful and delighted to live under *our* feet. One day I saw the snake under the house as it slept in its hotbed nurturing peaceful thoughts about my cherries.

God could not have fashioned malevolent serpents.

My pond-dreams were little revelations. If a salamander was capable of dreaming of its desires then I could have not been bereft of this gift. So I started forging my own dreams and I dreamed of flying without wings and seeing without eyes. At first, my dreams were colorless, inodorous and deaf. After a while they had a cinnamon scent and apples started to be red. I dreamed of red apples and occasionally a blue hearted chimera troubled the cinnamon aroma. My dreams mellowed as I grew a scenario expert and my desires materialized into handmade dreams.

I dreamed of sweets and having best friends.

I did not understand why the other kids avoided playing with me, it was true I had no toys but they kept leaving me behind when I couldn't run fast enough. Later I found out that they ran faster on purpose, so I couldn't reach them. Still, they had no reason for doing that and I hated them. When they finally accepted me I felt as if my horse was always weaker than theirs, feebler in its run. Their friendship was like nail scissors: throbbing. My true best friends were anonymous and featureless; they just did things like smiling, hugging me once in a while, and saying nice things. After a while I realized that they were not human because humans were so much different. In my dreams humans had black holes and huge horologes instead of brain. I was not human because I was just a child, and children did not act like the other people and consequently they were not human. I had a hidden inside desire to become one of them, one of the humans. They were always clever, dressed well, and they did not seem to lust for best friends, and they did the things they liked. There was nothing better than doing what you like. I wanted to escape childhood's dark con. The incorruptibility of parents weighed mightily over the children's innocence which was always subject to high responsiveness from any kind of incentives. Evil or good, there was no difference and this lack of variance made us vulnerable. Children were ready to consider even the crummiest argument that was brought to them. Parents did things when nobody was looking while children were under the constant

observance of a pair of dissecting eyes. There was nothing outside those scrutinizing eyes except three-penny pranks. I loathed this openness, this saintly exposure and craved the post-Adam-and-Eve cast-iron certainty my parents consumed through each word that came out of their mouths. Hence, I conceived one of my *when-I-grow-up* scenarios and it was filled with smiling suns.

I hunted for butterflies and preserved them in jars for hours, and studied them, their symmetry and colors. I had a little notebook and I took notes, invented terms for their unclassifiable perfection. When the studying was over I let them go and watched their flight towards death.

Butterflies lived for one day only.

Then my mother told me to stop eating because I was turning overweight or so she said. Days grew shorter and there was no more purpose in the short life of the butterfly. Flies made out of butter *had to* melt in one day. I no longer studied my butterfly subjects but rather watched as their day passed. At first, they trembled with the bubbly force air gave them, and then as it consumed they turned quiet and had an intermittent sugar rush. I examined them as their terrified antennas searched for cracks in the glass wall. The two wings became one and the butterflies died like closed books. Their wings darkened by the rage of death. That day I lost all my horses and my gym teacher stopped asking me to play soccer with the other boys. I was the substitute in case they needed another player. They never did because there were always *just* enough boys for a full team so I stood by the field waiting for something that was never going to happen. I finally resigned and started doing my homework while I waited there. My father forbade me to go on field trips because after long walks it became harder and harder for me to breathe. My nose started bleeding once in a while and the suns were no longer smiling and I felt something breed into my thoughts.

I avoided crowded places because everybody looked at me and smiled as if I was a source of entertainment. They pinched my cheekbones and laughed and asked me what I ate. I always told them I had yeast for dinner. Sometimes I forgot about the way I looked and found myself happy with what I was, with what I had. However, there are always things you cannot forget under any circumstances. I wanted to dance in school but they wouldn't let me because I was too fat for that. I tried once and the

teacher screamed at me 'dance fat boy, dance!' I dedicated myself to a life of seclusion, wrote insignificant things in notebooks which were used afterwards as toilet paper by my grandfather, I cried because the laugh of my inexistent friends was at times unbearable. So unbearable that I wished I could split their faces and watch how their smile faded out in an unforgettable grin.

The dark hour of reason grew even darker.

I hated people because I was their child and they were my parents and I couldn't escape them, couldn't fight against them because I had no weapon, I had nothing against them. That is why I hated my childhood. At school the priest told us that children were the love of God, even my grandparents tried to inspire me through the image of Jesus surrounded by children, as a shepherd with his sheep, his pack of lambs. Priests told us that swallows were saint creatures and consequently were untouchable. Any malevolent touch was punished by death from a stair fall. Every religion handbook showed pictures of this wicked kid that tried to destroy a swallow's nest.

Picture number one: malicious kid climbing a wooden ladder, the grass is green; the sun is up, no wind is stirring.

Picture number two: the same malicious kid attempting to put an end to the felicity of a swallow nest.

Picture number three: kid down with the wooden ladder over his chest, dead; the grass is still green, the sun is still up.

Picture number three haunted me because I looked at things from the perspective of the kid's parents and a dead child was not a pretty thing to see. If I looked at the events from the point of view of the kid I felt a sudden rage which filled my thoughts. Then I asked the priest whether the swallow is more important than the child and he said that every creature on Earth is important to God. His answer was so cold-blooded that from then on I promised myself that all priests were phlegmatic people preferring wine instead of beer.

Each time I encountered a swallow I had a tremor going through my chest, I was ashamed in their presence because they gave me mixed sensations and they always looked like they were pushing their feathered chests forward in a gesture of pride.

After all, swallows were God's favorite creatures and I was just a child that could have easily been killed with a wooden ladder.

I hated priests because almost all the things that they taught us had a connection with swallows and their forbidden nests. They told us we should pray more than ten minutes each day and we learned prayers by heart despite the fact that certain things were incomprehensible for me. I always thought that I prayed more than ten minutes each day but in fact each prayer was two minutes long and I had only three of them. In fact, those ten minutes were only six and that meant I lied to the priest. I hated priests because they had a long beard and a fuzzy moustache which was filled with snot, because they spoke as if they had access to a thing which was beyond our understanding, unexplainable, untouchable and every time priests came to our house I hid myself under the staircase. I noticed that they also liked women and wine, made dirty jokes but they wore protective snotty mustaches.

Instead of swords the priest had a snotty mustache.

At times, mushrooms and swallow feathers got caught in the grey threads.

I went to church because my grandparents forced my parents to force me to do that. I found no absolute pleasure in going to that place filled with old women and leather coats. The painted figures on the walls gave me goose-bumps because they all had this grotesque allure which made them saints, or at least that is what they seemed to be, a pack of people favored by God. Even though they had grotesque figures I sensed that they were human because they had eyes, mouth, ears, hands that resembled mine. I always stood in the back, close to the door with the corpulent women that knelt while making grand gestures in the air. I couldn't listen to what the priests said because I couldn't see in front of me. My height allowed me to contemplate the ceiling and the backs of the women in leather coats which went up and down and made a screeching sound.

Each breath went out with a flap and a clack until it smelled like burnt leather.

The voice of the priest came from the other side of the church and I couldn't see it and I didn't understand the words, they went right through me. I couldn't understand why I had to sleep in a very small bed beside

the stove while my brother had to sleep in the same bed with my uncle during the winter while God had this imposing house with many windows. The room in which I slept had only one window, three beds and a huge stove like a dormant giant. During the winter my grandmother installed a massive loom in the middle of the room so that the space was again limited. We had to eat in pairs: mother and father, my brother and I, and finally grandparents. My uncle was most of the time absent because he travelled a lot.

The ceiling of the church grew higher and higher as it filled with the air we expelled from our lungs. When the religious service was over people oozed through the heavy door and the room got bigger. God was once again left alone in his room.

Then we went home and on Sunday noon my family always gathered up in the other kitchen. I lingered behind because I wanted to be alone in the big room while the three beds were empty and the loom was silent. I felt strong because for the first time I had managed to steal from God a little part of his spacious room and bring it back home where I had to sleep on a very short bed by the dormant giant. While I was alone in the room I felt that God was really alone, secluded in the tower of his church on top of the village hill. At night I feared death because my teeth kept falling and I had to swallow them. In the morning I was left with empty spaces between my teeth.

Death never came through fallen teeth.

When my teeth grew back I thought that maybe the empty space escaped through my lips and filled the room because it grew wider and I no longer had to sleep in the short bed. My uncle never came back one night and I saw my grandmother sniffing and crying over his clothes. Later I found out that he left the country for reasons I could not understand.

I hoped he had taken some swallows with him because it seemed that God always took something in return: I took his church space and he sent my uncle away. I went to church because nobody said anything to me, nobody laughed at me, and everyone was sober. Outside the church I was a chubby kid with unhealthily prominent cheekbones. My uncle did come back after a while but not because we waited for him but rather for his money. He had to come back because back then my family, or any family for that matter, was not allowed to have private holidays not

because we didn't want to leave our home but because financial resources were always destined for other things. My parents avoided buying toys while we were in the company of my grandmother. In the eyes of the latter there was always time for toys, later, after we bought the summer sausage and the chicken thighs. Of course, later we didn't have money for toys because toys are always too expensive for my parents' pockets. I had to shut my mouth because our house had to have an interminable stock of summer sausages and chicken thighs. My uncle brought money. I knew that not because I actually saw the money but because he had to bring the money, a bale of clean paper-and-ink smelling money. However, nothing happened afterwards, the money failed to show up, no changes occurred except the fact that my uncle drank a drop of water after every drop of coffee. He seemed so strange to me at that moment.

Deep down I was thinking he forgot about the swallows.

I stood on the floor beside the big bed and watched television. The door was white and had a big window at the top half. I saw a dark figure pass through it, a figure that resembled my uncle. It had the same hat on its head and the same type of clothes he used to wear. I didn't trust my memories at that instant. Memories are never to be trusted. He couldn't have been my uncle because he didn't have his swallows with him. I ran to the door window and looked through the flowered curtains. The dark figure embraced my grandmother, and my grandfather, and my mother. It looked so big that it engulfed everyone, like a shadow merging with other shadows. I crossed the two flowered curtains and went into the other room to find out who it was. My uncle turned to see me and smiled.

I watched how swallow flocks lost their way through raging winds.

'Where are the swallows?' I asked the smiling dark figure that stood in front of me. Then the smile turned into a grin and into a smile again.

Clouds ran through the sky.

'I lost them all on my way to that foreign country. They don't allow swallows at the customs,' the dark figure answered. One drop of coffee followed by a drop of water, and another drop of coffee and another drop of water and the swallows got lost. As long as he brought the money I had to forget about the birds. My family needed money, not birds. Grandfather made me a wooden swallow out of the bed I had slept all winter. Its wings were spread imitating the noble and elegant flight of the swallows. In the

spring I wanted to let it escape into the woods so I climbed the tallest hill and threw it hoping it would fly. Everything that has wings ought to fly. So I watched it plunge into the valley like a broken kite and each and every second I kept thinking there wasn't enough wind. A second passed, now it shall rise, another second passed, now it shall rise, and another second, now it shall truly rise.

Wooden birds like men were meant to run towards the earth with all their strength.

'I told you it won't fly' my brother laughed, but even he hoped, just like myself, that it would rise the next second. Even he had his hopes shattered when the swallow refused to move its wings and disappeared in the grass. A few days later, grandfather brought the swallow back headless and with a broken wing. Grandfather never found the missing head and I didn't find it either. The salamander must have got it and hid it in its underwater lair. The next time salamander visited my dreams it had a big swallow head made out of wood.

My great-grandmother died and with her the whining that haunted our house disappeared. She held us responsible for the pain she had in the morning. The same guilt swarmed on us during the evening when my parents and grandparents rested from hard-working in the fields. Great-grandmother threw at the door of her room whatever she could reach because she could not move too much. She said that every sin, every ruthless word, and every malicious thought she had during a lifetime got accumulated and stuck inside her articulations. Each movement was a pain for her or so she said to me. I had to trust her because that is why great-grandmothers are called *great*-grandmothers. She had to be great and grand at the same time, while grandmother was only grand.

I was coming back from school. That day I told my schoolmaster that my great-grandmother was almost ninety-four years old and I was proud because all my classmates were amazed by that age record. On my way home I saw my mother crossing the street. She seemed so small against the snow wearing a black shawl on her head and smiling when I approached. I had to smile too, being sad in front of a mother is much more painful to her than to you. I did not want her to know about the problems I had at school, the other kids, the occasional test failures. That

day she had a bizarre look on her face and when I came closer I saw the open jaw of my dying great-grandmother. I saw great-grandmother's eyelids stiffening under the look of death.

'Bàba is dead,' my mother said and she took me by the hand dragging me towards the gate. Her clothes smelled like wet ash.

'But I told my classmates she is ninety-four years old' I said and followed the warm hand.

The house was filled with the smell of ash and all the carpets were removed. A yellowish light bulb was on at the entrance despite the fact that it was only noon. My grandmother was bent over a wooden trough with her hands full of flour.

'Bàba is dead,' my grandmother said showing me her hands. The dough stuck to her hands and she removed it quickly by rubbing her fingers against each other. Then she plunged again in the pillowy dough. She pushed her hands against the dough as if there was a disease in it she wanted to cure. Another woman appeared in the doorway. Her hands were wet and she kept them down as two dead chickens. Drops of water dripped from her fingers. She looked at me.

'Bàba died,' she told me and then looked to grandmother and spoke to her. 'Where did you put the pickled cabbage? I need it for the force-meat rolls.' Water dropped from her fingers. Grandmother took one hand out of the dough and pointed outside.

'Go in the cellar, you'll find everything there!'

The woman disappeared from the doorway and I heard her steps outside, water frozen on her husky hands. My mother took the woman's place in the doorway her hands frozen together like in a prayer, stuck to her stomach.

'Come and see her,' she said and I followed her into the other house. Everything was changed inside the house; chairs were all against the walls and a path of additional woolen carpets were laid. The path led to the middle of the living-room where a big coffin stood on the table.

That day, great-grandmother wore her best clothes. Maybe those were the best clothes she ever wore.

Mother lifted me up to see the dead body. Great-grandmother looked so old as if she kept this oldness to herself until she finally died. I expected that peaceful look which everybody talked about but I saw

nothing. Her face was expressionless and cold. Later I thought that maybe peace hid between the wrinkles of her skin or lingered on the lips that let so many words out.

Her hands horrified me and I touched them to make myself sure they were real. Her fingers joined in a bizarre way and mother told me that only dead people had to hold their hands like that. I thought that if I undo her hands she might be alive again but grandfather said that Bàba was dead and there was nothing we could do about it. There was no possibility to force life back into her because people were not made to have that possibility. This was another denial our body had in its records, another thing which we could do nothing against.

People do come and go but they don't seem to talk about Michelangelo. They never talk about Michelangelo. Bàba never talked about Michelangelo.

I never saw Bàba talking about Michelangelo but she occasionally taught young chicks how to peck. Her nails elongated and became white peckers.

The funeral was quick and I was thinking that maybe Bàba had a lot of time to think about her own funeral. The more you think about it the faster it passes. Mother and grandmother cried a little but not too much; grandfather just pressed his lips together and brother cried a lot. I didn't quite understand why he did that but at that moment I thought he was influenced by the general state of things.

The bearded priest said things I could not understand. First he brought up a list of names, people I haven't heard of, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and relatives. They all seemed to gather together for great-grandmother's last show. The list of names the priest held was like a rope which held the coffin on the surface of the pit. When the last name on the list was pronounced the rope snapped and the coffin fell. I couldn't refrain myself from staring into the pit. It opened like a door in the ground as if it was a cellar door. I thought that it was rather a stage that had a secret entrance in the wooden floor and great-grandmother performed her last trick disappearing behind it.

When we got home the front yard was filled with symmetrically arranged tables that had pretzels on them: one pretzel for each person that participated in the funeral. I sat at a table behind the front well under

the vines, along with the other kids that were around. We all had force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves and they were so good because death had made us hungry. Grandmother told me that I had to eat them all because they were served as dole for the soul of great-grandmother. I took the cabbage leaves off because they felt under-boiled. With each leaf I gave great-grandmother away. With each leaf I let her go.

I covered her tomb with cabbage leaves.

Eating the force-meat rolls was like underestimating great-grandmother and all the things that she had done to us. People went home with their cracknels and threw them to the chickens because they smelled of death. I sniffed them myself but there was nothing wrong, no queer smell caught my nose. I told myself that death was inodorous. With each force-meat roll I swallowed the memories I had with her. Each cracknel that was thrown to the chickens gave great-grandmother away. The chickens pecked our memory of her.

People didn't understand the thing with the cracknels and the smell of death. I thought it was because of the hands. When Bàba died we all washed our hands more often than usual because there was this slime that stuck to our hands. We feared Bàba hid in the slime and we did everything possible to remove her from the family.

With each drop of water Bàba went away.

'You can't dance,' my father told me. 'Bàba died! You can't dance!'

'Why can't I dance? She is already dead,' and I took my mom's scarf and put it around my waist so that the show I planned would be a little bit more spectacular.

'She raised you, have some respect for her!' father shouted.

I put the scarf back on the peg and the next moment I was lying on the armchair. I took a cookie from the jar and started eating it. Father looked at me again furiously.

'Are you sleeping or eating?' he said. 'Stand up and eat properly!' I had to obey because Bàba was dead and we could do nothing about it.

When Bàba was close to her death she used to stare a lot. Grandmother told me that Bàba was going to die and when I asked her why she said that Bàba was very old and old people usually die, they're taken away by God. I stood beside Bàba and she turned away towards the window. I heard her bones cracking and along them the ceiling of the

room sighed deeply. She said I should go away because she had a terrible pain in her back. I left the room and closed the door. She was cold even during the summer. I looked in the mirror and finally understood why Bàba had to die. She had to die not because grandmother said so but because where my cheeks were full and reddish Bàba's were dry and livid and while my eyes shone with desire hers were vacant and heavy with blood.

Then she died because for a long time she had been thinking about her death.

In her contemplation Bàba finally resembled death itself. She had the hands of death.

I was happy in a way, happy because only old people died while young people could enjoy happiness and the other beautiful things life offered. I was little and thought that I had a very long way until I reach ninety-four. Time consumed by itself. There was no need to fill time because it was this sort of bucket which came already filled with something. I built houses and all sort of burrows and found imaginary jobs to make the best of what was in the bucket. A house and a well-paid job were the ingredients of happiness. At least that was what my parents did and they seemed happy. Mother cleaned the house and did the laundry and she looked happy. Grandmother did the same thing and she looked happy. Father and grandfather went to work and brought money home and they looked absolutely happy. What else was there to do besides eating, drinking, going to work and having occasional fights over spilt milk? Except those things I forgot to mention the fact that people were always subjects to hate and pride. These were the vices that surpassed even those that were a threat to health.

Hate was soul's indigestion.

I went to a deserted merry-go-round every day not because I was so much into socializing but because new people seemed at that time fascinating, especially kids who came on summer holidays from town. They always had cool wristwatches and shoes which were different from those we wore. The merry-go-round was old and we expected it to fall off any time. It was not so merry but it went round. In a collective effort we used our feet to make it go round.

The new kid came and joined the general effort of pushing the merry-go-round. There was no place for introduction. Friendships came

and went so there was no need for too much sweat in putting the bricks together. After a while the merry-go-round gained enough speed for us to rest. We chatted and the conversation turned to the new kid's wristwatch which was fascinating because it talked. When a button was pressed the watch spoke. Everybody rushed to see the wonder except me. I kept my position because it seemed awkward to talk to the new kid just like that.

'Can I see it?' I said after the spirits were a little bit settled.

The new kid looked at me and smiled in a sardonic way. My guts growled.

'No, you cannot see it because you're a fatty!' the others laughed. My guts growled with fury. There was this pressure in my chest as if my organs were suddenly too big for my body. I didn't say anything and hoped the indigestion would go away along with the rattle of the chains from the merry-go-round. I decided never to go back there. However, the second time I went to the merry-go-round was because my brother persuaded me to do so. Of course, other kids were there but they were all old kids, people I already knew.

I joined the general effort of making the merry-go-round go round as it should do. One of the older kids got off because his shoes were new and he didn't want to ruin them.

'See, these are the shoes I was telling you about,' my brother told me. I looked at the shoes and the older kid had the same sardonic smile. My guts growled.

'What's so special about the shoes?' I said in an attempt to shield the indigestion. The older kid reacted in the same way as I did.

'What would you know pumpkin? What do you know about shoes like these?' And he was right; I knew nothing about shoes like those. I had no smarter means of getting back at him so I wanted to jump on him and smack him in the face. I left and hoped that next time I'll know more about shoes like those. I never went to the merry-go-round again because kids went there to show off their new gadgets and I had none. I was the pumpkin that had indigestion.

It was always 'you're too fat' or 'stop eating' and 'don't talk to me fatty!' Each time the indigestion got worse. The monster got larger than me and I hid behind the trees and wept and cursed because somebody was being unfair to me. I took my mom's shoes and her dresses and sang

in front of mirrors. I invented songs for my silent public. They applauded me in silence.

I had a very good friend once, it was a girl. She was real; I knew she was real because I was afraid of imaginary friends. They were figments of a troubled imagination and madness was the other major thing I feared besides death. What I like about my friend was that she liked to listen to me while the others dismissed me as a very boring person with a pumpkin shaped head. Just like me she believed in magic creatures and magic powers and she freely participated in my mirror shows. She did not applaud but at least she was not as silent as the other participants. We built houses together and pretended to be other people. I was Jack and she was Mary and our home was made out of a few blankets and a rope to keep them up. Then we changed names and built shelter in another place. We made food out of mud and rotten fruit. When hunger came we ate green apples. At first they were acrid but as we got used they were the sweetest apples ever tasted.

I met her only during the summer and other long holidays. The rest of my days were limited to my wish of being with her. The rest of my days passed through me.

I loved my mom's high-heel shoes. I was taller wearing them.

When school came I had to put my mom's shoes away. Back then summers were long and autumns unexpected. When corn was stored in the attic I knew that autumn was inevitably there. She went away only to come back the next summer with new clothes and news from the city. Along her came all the urban adventures that I could imagine: nights under the light of the streets, grey side-walks and hundreds of windows like eyes in the crowd. At the countryside things were different, it was always dark and the side-walks were absent. At the countryside you could sit on grass and dream of the lights that came from the faraway city, you could watch moths because they were your moths. In the city moths were anonymous or non-existent. Under the city lights moths were always somebody else's moths.

'The sky is so blue today', I said to her.

'Don't do that', she replied. Then she told me that God doesn't like when people say the sky is terribly blue because people don't have faith in

him, so it was better for people to have faith in God instead of saying that the sky is blue.

There were countless moments in my life when I wanted to say the sky is blue but I didn't because she stopped me once and I wanted to learn from my mistakes. Each time the sky struck me as being perfectly blue I stopped and prayed to God because I was an unfaithful subject. Every time I painted the sky I tried to use a less perfect blue and I adorned it with clouds and black birds. The answer which I gave to all the people that questioned the blueness of my less perfect sky was always 'it is better this way'.

Besides the unripe apples we started eating this sort of plant which had a slight sour taste.

I used to walk with her for hours without any reason. Except hunger nothing disturbed us. Even our thoughts were absent, just like the nakedness of a new-born. Once we had to search for my brother and take him home. We ultimately found out that he went to the river to take a bath. He went there not because we did not have a bathtub at home but because it was the way in which he socialized with the others. We saw a group of kids playing in the water as we reached the valley of the river and I recognized my brother as one of them. There were also older guys among them. My brother was old enough too but he was my brother and he didn't seem to have changed too much since I last saw him. There were also girls that joined them in the water.

My brother approached me as we came closer to the water. He wore only a pair of pink underwear and one of his balls came out as he walked. One of the older guys also started towards us staring at my friend in a way I could not understand. He rubbed his boxers and took out a tuft of pubic hair and made it look like a moustache.

'Why did you come here for?' my brother asked me and pushed his ball back into the pink underwear. The other girls were screaming because the water was chilly.

'To take you home', I said. She took one step towards the pubic hair guy. His wet chest had an incipient hair growth.

'Look, I have a moustache!' the pubic hair guy laughed and pointed to his hidden genitals. She produced a nervous laugh. I took a step forward the older guy.

‘She’s not like that’, I burst. The pubic hair guy smiled.

‘How do you know that?’ he said. ‘Have you tried her yet or you want to keep her all for yourself? What do you say pumpkin?’

I had neither an answer to that question nor a very good punch line for that. My indigestion growled and punched my guts with all its forces like something was trying to get out of me. I didn’t know if my ribs could take it so I left without looking back, without knowing if she was there or not. So I walked away through the yellow blades of grass killing the crickets and the bees until I heard her call for me. She did follow me and the sky was so blue that I prayed to God because I was unfaithful.

My brother grabbed his clothes and followed us because he was afraid of mother. He pulled his half-pants on but pushed the t-shirt in one of his pockets so that a part of it stood out. Water drained on his chest and left white traces. We jumped the fence. I went first because I was too angry to be polite. My brother came after me and offered his hand to help her over the fence. She took his hand and smiled as we passed under the shadow of a tree and her smile was the same in the sun as under the shadow. A dog barked somewhere. The grass cracked under the heat. It was like the grass drained the water out of me as I stepped over it. The air was a continuous lisp like the hiss of a snake. My brother started playing catch with her and tickled her when she was caught and she laughed. The heat melted my thoughts and I couldn’t understand why she was wasting such amounts of energy on purposeless things like playing catch under the midday sun. And she laughed like she never laughed before and at times the hissing sound took over her laugh. We sat down under a savage apple tree. Its apples were small and red, so red that they seemed poisonous. They kept playing that game I could not understand. He tickled her and she laughed and she pushed him away and she dragged him back upon her and then pushed him back and he tickled and pinched her.

‘We should go!’ I said and stood up. In a way I was afraid to stay there under the savage apple tree. I was afraid to leave them there; she was not that type of girl. I left thinking that they were behind me but when I realized that there was only me and the hissing grass I turned and looked back.

The apple tree sprung like an umbrella. Under the umbrella my brother stood with his naked chest picking apples for her. She looked at

him with a pair of eyes I did not know. He gave the apple to her and her laugh ate the hissing grass. I looked at them and again I could not understand this strange game in which men picked apples with their naked chests. She tasted the apple and laughed again.

I went back and picked some apples to fill my pockets. We went home because the grass consumed all our water resources. She went to her house and we went to ours. There was somebody waiting for her there, a boy that said he loved her very much. She left with him leaving me behind. I ate one of the apples and mother told me not to. Despite their redness they were acrid and made my heart bitter. Despite their appealing redness they were still unripe.

Crab apples do not ripen and there is always a way out, there is always an upturned rabbit hole, mother told me and I believed her.

CHAPTER THREE

There is a pleasure in slaying memories. Almost the same pleasure comes up when you invent other memories to fill in the blanks.

When rivers flow, winds blow, and fetters seem feeble, I refuse to be imperiled by the sorrows of life: I usually say that when I go to sleep. I feel safe once the lights are out and I'm between the sheets. It is my only moment of bliss because I know dreams will follow.

To dream is to slay memories of you. Memories rise from their own death.

When I dream I put my memories on the grater. Dreaming is making your memories suffer because in a dream they come mutilated. One memory comes eyeless; the other comes without its left foot, a missing toe, a missing nose.

Slaying memories is like selling your soul.

I sometimes say there are dreamless nights. I say that to my brother and often to my mother. I don't truly believe myself when I say that because deep down I know I always dream. I always kill memories. I remember telling her that I can't dream and she told me that when I don't dream I have to either wake up, or make up dreams. There was something else I told her but I don't remember anymore. I want not to remember because I do not want these memories. These do not belong to me any longer.

I made a pile of memories and put a cancer-shaped cardboard over them. The fire consumed them. The cancer reddened and then burned to ashes.

Memories smell of burnt skin, fried brains, and new shoes. Shiny leather shoes stacked on iron shelves. Burnt memories smell of mirrors and give you an acute sensation at the back of your nose.

I have eyes to close, a brain to rest, and a heart to soothe.

The smell of shoes is piercing my nostrils.

When I wake up I expect the sun to shine even if I wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, when I saw her beside me sleeping, entangled in the threads of a half death, I urged the sun to come because then she would be freed from death's treacherous proximity. She would

clench her teeth once again around the margins of morning life. She would tighten her arms around the smell of coffee to become coffee herself.

At two o'clock in the morning she was this mark of light that couldn't disappear. In that never-blue darkness she was the reflection of a blade against the sheets, one of night's moods. And in that mark of light she kept the night's memory of mornings to come.

Old shoes, new shoes, ironed shirts come and go and under them a golden line, like a closet knight, chases the monsters away.

We are like two bodies on the moon in black and white films and only the music of empty space surrounds us. She is untouchable. She is black and white and I have stopped trying to touch her.

The closet knight chases the monsters away and somewhere above I hear water dribbling. At the end of a war everything seems beautiful, even dribbling water sounds like celestial mutter.

Someone told me to get out of here but I don't know if there is actually something to get out of. A flip of the coin and the hourglass turns upside down.

...

Someone tells me to get out of here and I really want to do that. The smell of leather shoes is too strong to bear.

I get a hold of the golden line as it gets clearer in the darkness. There is always a way out, mother told me, there is always an upturned rabbit hole so I stretch my leg out and the golden line grows thicker.

A woman's voice urges me to get out of here so I try harder and push the golden line to the side. It makes a terrible sound like a child in pain. The hourglass turns topsy-turvy.

'You should tell you father to fix that, it makes a terrible noise!' somebody said. I looked up as my foot got stuck in a pile of shoe boxes.

'What?' I asked. At the end of the room a tall mirror showed a woman's back and another man in front of her. He was naked except for a pair of blue and white boxers.

'I said, you should tell your father to fix that door, it gives me the creeps, and by the way, what were you doing in the closet?' she said, 'where you hiding from me?' I did not know what to say so I looked at her and marveled at the golden color of her skin. The other man stared at me and seemed to be miming my movements because when I raised my hand

to scratch the back of my head he immediately followed me with the same movement. I smiled and he smiled.

I looked at the closet door and pushed it back to its place. It made a terrible sound.

‘Well, get dressed, we’re leaving!’

Horror struck me. I made a pact with myself once, promising that I shall avoid every opportunity to be naked in her presence, and besides that, there was another guy in the room which I personally did not know. I had absolutely nothing to show. She moved and sat down but the guy persisted on the right side of the mirror, like a stain on my retina. I looked down to avoid his piercing stare and realized that I wore a similar blue and white pair of boxers.

‘You would expect people getting out of their closet already dressed.’ She looked at me and laughed. She looked like she did not understand what I was doing.

‘There’s a guy here...’ I said and waited for her to introduce me.

‘What guy?’

Memories growl like hungry stomachs.

I suddenly remembered...*she sat down. The waiting room changed faces, caught color over the metallic chatter of chairs and windows. The intense light coming from the huge windows made her seem like a rush of gold...*there were stories I wanted to live in, scenarios to conceive.

I took a step towards the guy but he mimed my move flawlessly. I looked at her and her golden skin burned my eyes in a pleasant way, like a flutter or wings. I knew hunger, thirst, illness, and even death could not stand in front of this golden rush. I was one of those men who knelt in front of such a woman, who left their swords and shields to touch her. I looked in the mirror and realized that the guy felt the same way about her. A golden light oozed out of his eyes. A beautiful man is he who knows how to shed golden light out of his eyes, a man in front of whom demons feel overwhelmed.

‘I think I can love you now’ the guy said using my voice.

‘Don’t ever say that to a lady while wearing boxers!’ she said and stood up. I was still staring at the handsome guy in the mirror while packs of words rushed into my veins.

Maggot, maggot I wish I were you, I wish she had you.

My mind was trying to recall when the purchase of a magic mirror that reflected handsome guys could have occurred. The next moment she was beside me and placed her arm over the guy's left shoulder. I felt something warm on *my* left shoulder along with a flutter of wings. Then she kissed me on the back of my neck and the blue-boxers guy smiled. She put her other hand on my other shoulder and led her fingers down my chest. The flutter of wings and the golden rush ran like horses down my spine. You could only wish for immortality in moments such as these. Immortality and every mirror cracked, vanished, burned to ashes, spread in the four corners of the world, thrown into the deepest ocean so that this moment would last forever and happen nowhere else but here. To walk on water knowing that under it there is a deep chasm, an unknown immensity, to wander knowing that at the next corner of the street you shall win the lottery, knowing that just behind the corner you'll stumble upon the person you'll live all your life with, to flip the coin thinking that you shall definitely win. Or to find her standing there, waiting for you to get out of the darkness of your own thoughts, all dressed in gold.

I sat down.

I am somebody else, this is not me. I might as well change my name.

Maybe all the other women are dressed in gold.

She took some clothes out of my closet and helped me get dressed like I was a child of her. At the end she kissed the corners of my lips, the ghost of a kiss. I put my shoes on and looked again in the mirror. The blue-boxers guy faded into this well dressed young man with a radiant smile on his face.

'Come on, handsome! Let's go, there are people waiting for us.'

I am beautiful. This is not me.

I am gorgeous, I am handsome. I might as well change my name. I don't have a name.

We left; she pulled me by the hand. The blue-boxers guy stayed behind, in my room, trapped in the magic mirror. I think I took something of him with me, in my pockets, and that night every mirror I met reflected him. The mirrors showed a demon, a monster shadow, a man that was more than me.

There were moments in which I felt she was not close enough and I wanted to drag her closer so that my pores would feed on her flesh. She was close enough, a closeness which physical laws permitted. Each time she was close to me her skin reflected its gold tint, it left marks wherever she touched me. The other women lacked that golden aura. I could have seen her from miles away. She glowed in the dark.

We took the bus. She was telling me about going somewhere and meeting some friends. My memory was blank; it was like, as things went on, new memories were formed and suddenly I knew everything even though at a first sight those things happened for the first time. Each object popped up out of nowhere bringing memories back, memories which were not mine. But they were not the memories of someone else either.

I am gorgeous, I am handsome. This is not me.

'This is for you!' she said and took a little black box out of her purse.

'What is it for?' I asked.

'Oh, will you stop pretending already. Come on, we're going to be late!' she replied and dragged me along the crowded side-walk. I opened the box and took the silver object out. It was a wrist watch and it suddenly reminded me that a few days before I had seen it in a showcase. It all came to me in a flash. I always wanted that watch but it was too expensive for me at that time. She did not listen to my protests and ultimately bought it without my consent. It looked good on my wrist.

We finally reached the place. People were laughing a scary laugh and the music was loud. She was dragging me across the dance floor and I could see faces staring at us. People coming and going, people dancing, white teeth piercing the darkness, I felt a pleasant nausea. I could get used to this smell, cigarettes, perfume and sweat. A thousand bodies pulsing like a giant heart. In this chaos I felt her hand keeping me warm, pulling me out of the dance, her feet stuck into the floor, escalating the mountain of faces following us.

Black, white, black and white, one by one faces vanish into the darkness while the music screams into my ears, bluish teeth smiling in the

dark. Thump, thump, her heels catch the rhythm of the music and I follow her. Thump, thump, the music is screaming into my ears. In this cold night of dancing faces any sound is obliterated, every breath is lost. This music freezes every instance. People are jumping; faces are smiling, bodies turning into spirals. I follow the warm hand.

Great musicians have slept inside this music and are still sleeping, undying their deaths, having nothing against death. Other people dance on it, but this music was meant to be slept. It makes me forget about sleep, it makes the sheets feel rough. I'm sleeping covered in blank pages as I repeat to myself that I have nothing against death. But these great musicians tell me that every night words come and go over these pages. She tells me to cover her up because she is cold but how could you feel cold covered with these sheets of music. Layers of music, thick and then thin layers of music.

'Yes, it is chilly!' I told her. Layers of music fell between our eyelashes.

She looked at me and said the music was too loud to be chilly. Here, on the dance-floor I wanted to tell her how I felt about music but her beauty would have ruined my speech. So I said nothing. I had to listen to some more music so I could drown her beauty in it, like a pissed-off man who drinks too much because he feels lonely. I was not lonely but my music speech would have felt lonely next to her beauty and speeches about music should not feel lonely. She dragged me across the room. Other women were unbuttoning shirts in front of me, pulling me in the opposite direction, but I followed the warm hand and let myself slide through the black-and-white dancing bodies. She stopped. The room accelerated in its up and down movement. I stopped and watched how another golden colored body got out of the crowd and looked at us, his face full of recognition.

These days memories come rushing in. So fast they make me throw up.

He sat down beside her. The waiting room changed moods, colors roared through the metallic flutter of chairs and windows.

Memories come with the speed of invention. Yes, I remember now, I say to myself, there was something of Italian descent and a pair of really nice shoes, and a tie, I remember the tie and the smell of aftershave, a

blue pool under a red evening sun, white tablecloths and a huge white umbrella and 'have-a-cold-drink' voices coming out of the pool. Beside me a warm hand pulling me back. That is true, I remember now, only hands can pull you back. And then there was another voice, a golden colored voice, telling me about going into the water because it was pleasant.

It's not deep, why don't you try it?

But I can't go into the water. I cannot swim, and how could I tell people I am in my twenties and I cannot swim. That is a ridiculous thing; all boys know how to swim. The blue water is so alluring and I want to prove him that I am not afraid of water. I say to myself I am not afraid and then I tell it to him. He smiles and the pool is an open mouth sucking me into it. A body which is not mine jumps into the pool and the water swallows it. Underwater our bodies are reduced to circles. Blurring circles like music. So I watch the body going to the other side of the pool, the yellow bathing suit disappearing into blurring circles of music.

'She is beautiful, isn't she?' he asked me.

'Yes, she is' I told him.

His hand stretched forward, I raised mine to mirror his gesture. I told myself that is what men do. Music returned into the room as the blue pool drained to leave the dance-floor empty. The next instant dancers flooded the air. I looked up and saw him and then I looked at her. My pockets got heavy with the blue-boxers guy.

I am handsome, this is not me.

'Happy birthday!' he said.

This is not me. I might as well change my name.

And he said happy birthday then by the pool, through the long glass of colored liquid. There were also other places, unknown ones, where he wished me all the best things in the world. Other places and other times when he looked into my eyes and said things I do not recall with clarity. But he must not be remembered, he must be invented, he must be pushed like a hot-air balloon over the smells and sensations of this unremembered past, this pleasant present, and desired future. Yes, there was no pool, but only the smell of a blue pool surrounded by white umbrellas and tanned people, and that smell was felt from the protective distance of a flying airplane.

'I didn't get you anything,' he said. 'I totally forgot about your birthday.'

'It's all right. You don't have to get me anything.'

Each year I said the same thing. There was something about the way he said things, using a vocabulary taken out of words and sentences. Despite the apparent normality of his talk the words were not screaming. They came with the smell of tobacco, and perfume, and sweat, with the heat of rubbing skin against the skin of somebody else.

Yes, he sat very close to where I was standing, under one of those white umbrellas, next to the blue pool. He smelled the same, had the same smile, a smile which bursts out of the pleasure of fretting skin against skin. And he put his left foot over my right foot and I could say nothing about that because I barely knew him and he seemed to know me more. So he sat smelling of himself, his body resembling the slim glass of colored liquor. Then he asked me if I saw her, and I asked him who he was referring to and he pointed her. She wore the same yellowish bathing suit and looked at us with the same hunger we watched her. She was the most beautiful thing.

I heard somebody else saying happy birthday but the music was too loud for me to discern where it was coming from. I scanned the crowd to find the pair of lips that uttered those words. There were too many faces, too many pairs of lips so I ignored it. She told me that it was somebody I did not know but who wanted to get our attention. There was a time when he was one of those unknown people. She was also one of those unknown people that lived around me. He had an orange shirt and an unknown face. Like the man of solitude he was, he stroked the objects which happened to be in his way. Margins of tablecloths, the slim and long glasses of green liquor, pencils, benches in the park, they were all subjected to his daily stroking. Later he told me that stroking objects was like a tactile contemplation. When you are alone you look at doorknobs and expect them to move. Besides doorknobs he led a glamorous life.

Feather by feather I put your wings back together.

I had a picture of him once. I believe I still have it in a drawer.

We all went on a trip. I waited under one of the maple trees in the front yard of our high-school. There were other people waiting under the same tree, talking to me, saying things I couldn't understand because

they were people I did not know. He had the same orange shirt and he introduced himself to me. Then we were all on the terrace of a restaurant in a city far away. I drank a lot of tonic water, people made me tired and I wanted to be fresh. He didn't say a word.

I slide back to that moment through the photograph somebody else has taken. There was a woman at the other table who was kind enough to take a picture of us. I can still see her unfinished piece of cake on a white plate. We are all caught in that picture, me, him, and two nameless girls.

'The music from the opera, listen!'

There was this metallic sound mixed with fatigue and high voices going up in the marketplace, the smell of chocolate cake and coffee under plastic umbrellas, and skin, a lot of skin, rolls of skin walking on the street and that heaviness you get when you walk a lot, stony feet and a terrible hunger.

In the drawer that picture still smells of skin.

And the smell of skin invaded me every night. The sheets were made out of skin as he slept beside us one night. He was not sleeping because his eyes looked as if he was watching his toes. I stood up and threw a glance outside our window looking at the colorful light bulbs of a five-star hotel. We had no money and one bed was big enough for the three of us. Others were sleeping on the floor and in the morning the room was filled with the smell of skin.

Sweat and cigarettes. This dance-floor is like a cauldron around which I dance like a wolf. She is dancing beside me, he is somewhere in the crowd living the music in his way.

Dance steps come with the speed of invention, so rapid they make me sick. Unknown music turns into known music instantaneously. Unmasked artists and swirling notes. Under the white umbrellas the music seemed hollow. The pool reverberated with the fallen bodies of smiling people. Fat parents in tight bathing suits, sunglasses so big they could cover their whole faces and bowls of grapes on plastic tables. I believe it was a pool party. When the evening drew to a close the three of us stayed behind as all the guests retreated to other plastic tables and silk tablecloths, red and gold towels, the soft glow of bedside lamps, and the smell of a cheap novel, a bestseller, ten pages every night, keeping eyes

open until the plot gets caught in its own threads, and being acutely awake when sex scenes happen.

The sun lingered now in other places and for one moment I thought how lucky those other people were when the sun left us and went to them. Outside us people were living other lives as under our feet the city died away like a distant beehive. This was the glamorous life we led when doorknobs were not moving anymore, when we were left alone with the sensation of bearing the sun on our foreheads and the lightness of over-hydrated skin.

Three long white armchairs.

Memories smell like the overheated guts of an old TV set.

The fatigued, jagged wheels of a wrist watch.

Actually, I wanted to say chairs. Those were not armchairs; they were too uncomfortable even to be considered armchairs. Dogs slept on them during the night. Beyond the railings of the cottage I could see little houses where people slept on floors while we slept on high-heeled beds. I stood with my back against a wooden pole and waited for something to happen. I had woken up too early; everybody else was still sleeping except a girl I didn't particularly know.

'Have you seen the little houses?' She didn't look at me while saying it.

'Yes, I've seen them. I personally couldn't sleep in those!' I said it with the assurance of having a very well prepared speech even before questions were to be asked.

'They are so small. I slept in one with a friend of mine a few years ago while we were on a camping trip. I just couldn't sleep because the forest was so close and I could hear all sorts of strange sounds.' She leaned against the other pole of the terrace.

'Oh, I see. They do seem feeble. I don't imagine how you could survive a rainy night in one of those.' I heard her saying earlier to one of my colleagues that the roofs were always leaking. She repeated the same words, with the exact intonation.

'The roofs are always leaking. You need to cover yourself with a plastic bag to survive a rainy night.'

Somewhere else somebody is repeating the exact same words.

He came out on the terrace. Sleepy. I said nothing because I had nothing to say to him. Other people were coming out bearing under the eyes the consciousness of bad morning breath.

'A plastic bag?' I suddenly broke the momentary silence.

'Yeah, you need to be prepared for everything here in the mountains. The nights are cold and rainy.' She offered her advice like the experienced backpacker she was or maybe pretended to be.

I noticed that he was looking at me attentively, waiting for me to say something. I said nothing.

'That is why I like the sea.'

'Good morning,' he said.

Maggot, maggot, stop that maggot.

'Morning,' I said.

He was a man with the appeal of a child keeping under his flesh the architecture of a promise, of great things to happen. Keeping parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents at the root of each tooth. Bearing projected desires on his forehead. Living under and out of the chatter of all those people who looked at him and admired him for who he was.

I followed him once going nowhere and pretended to go somewhere else. Later he asked me how could I go somewhere else if there is nowhere else to go except nowhere. I told him there was a second nowhere. I myself lived in an invented nowhere. Then he told me he was wounded but refused to tell me where. He said it looked like a piece of paper had cut his flesh and he cannot show it in the daylight.

Wounds are felt only during the night, in the darkness, when the monsters come out and solitude sounds like a liberty bell. I did not sleep that night. I waited for the wound to show itself under the sheets, but he was silent. Silent for the next few days. It was a silence I did not desire because it made me sick and I was afraid that the wound would heal, and disappear in burned flesh, in silent scars, in the stubbornness of ligaments tied together. He slept beside me. I could feel that golden color growing inside him. When I woke up there was a strange light coming from the window. It travelled over the perfume bottles, shampoo, then the chairs, and the bed, and the faces of the people that slept in the same room with us.

Last night the radio caterwauled. The eclipse was going to be visible only in certain cities; it was going to illuminate the sick and the faithful, those who believed that a sun eclipse was a sign from god. The end of all things was screeching beside their ears. Can't you see it? You shall burn in hell; I'm going to be saved. But how could you be saved, I told myself, when nobody has yet invented flying horses with wax saints leading them towards the skies. And then, when those saved by these flying mechanisms would reach the outer limits of the atmosphere they would asphyxiate, their eyes popping out. He told me once that he didn't believe in god, but he had to. Are you being true to yourself by doing that? I asked him. He said no. He did not have a heart.

So I listened. Every night.

The faint beat came out solemnly with the smell of aftershave and lavender. In the morning the golden skin was even shinier.

So I listened to him every day. He was cancer. She was the cure to it.

The next day we went into a cave made out of salt. Each breath was like a mouthful of salt. Our biology teacher told us that it was the healthiest air on earth. I could not force my body to breathe. The salty air exorcised old illnesses out of me, forgotten ones.

'How are you feeling?' he asked. I was already on my way to one of the merry-go-rounds from the huge cave.

I had no words for that. It was an unexpected question.

'I'm...fine.' An awkward silence broke between us.

'Here, I want to show you something. Come here.'

It was a sunless pool still bearing the blue attributes of a normal pool but when he threw a rock into the water it went down and then back up, floating like a plastic toy.

'It's floating,' he said.

'Yes, it's floating.'

'I simply cannot be happy' he confessed.

Of course people cannot be happy. Generations after generations speak about happiness and dreams into a dream-shattering reality. We make our lives out of the broken glass of dreams, looking at the sun through those pieces of glass, thinking that great things might be

revealed in that unconscious act of discovery. Life lacked that series of eureka moments.

'Have I told you about the wound?'

'Yes, you did tell me about that, but not too much.'

'My father asked me to help him with something. There was an old swallow's nest at the corner of our house. For three years now it has been empty, no birds. So I took a ladder and climbed to clean the wall.'

It was a beautiful day, the grass was green and the sun was shining. Because he couldn't reach the nest he had to climb until he reached the sharp corners of the roof.

'One of the tiles was very sharp and it cut open my chest.'

Crushing through the ribs and the sternum it revealed the fleshy inside of his ribcage.

'But there was no blood and I was scared because wounds have to bleed. My father didn't notice it.'

He was silent as if that silence would cauterize the wound; force it back onto the margins of that sharp roof tile. He pulled me aside in a dark corner of the room which reeked with salt.

I was unsure and afraid of what he was planning to do.

He unbuttoned his shirt to show a long scar spreading across his chest from the base of his neck down to the bellybutton.

He said he was scared but he had to show it to me.

His fingers outlined the margins of the wound and just like two lips they flexed miming an inexistent kiss. He pushed his fingers forward somewhere in the middle of the opening and pulled the lips aside. I could see the whiteness of the bones, that yellowish and reddish color of sick tissue. The darkness of the cave trembled like heat in the summertime as hot vapors escaped out of the ribcage. The chest hole remained open like a question mark.

'Come closer,' he said. 'Look inside, look at this!'

He pushed his hands against the layers of skin, muscles, crumbled bones and seemed to hold to something inside as he brought it closer to the opening lips.

'You see, I bear a green apple instead of a red heart.'

But I did not see it because of the darkness. I took one step forward and looked carefully inside. With two protecting hands he held a greenish

apple pumping golden blood into his veins. Like an insect caught in a complicated web of veins, it breathed and moved rhythmically. I could see its muscles twitching, sending the serum of life into his face, and feet, and hands.

'What should I do?' he asked me.

What could you do? I thought. What else could you do but sleep, eat, love, read poetry, all the things that make a heart like that work at its best?

He withdrew his hands and the wound closed, the apple vanishing into the many layers of flesh and bones. Then he buttoned his shirt. He took the shape of the normal man he was before showing me the wounded chest.

'Is there any pain?' I asked him.

'No pain, just the empty chest.'

In this city men do not walk with empty chests. They do not turn iron into gold. In this city men sleep and have nightmares. They do not bear green apples instead of red hearts. In this city men do not ask what time it is or what they should do when out of nowhere their heart turns into an apple and their blood into liquefied gold.

This voluptuous question what should I do bears no answer.

'Have you tried seeing a doctor?' I asked him.

I did not recall any doctors that may be specialized in apple hearts.

But his sorrow was excruciating even for me. It made me shudder. He said he was afraid to sleep at night because somebody might come and take his apple-shaped heart away. He felt vulnerable carrying a hole in his chest.

Every night his skin grew shinier than ever. I watched him in his nightmares and waited, prepared, for those apple-shaped heart snatchers.

The music stopped, the entire room was like a beehive. Voices got louder as the music rested in each corner of the room, like a mouse, ready to attack again. Musicians needed some rest from that sleepless outline of notes their ears ringing, vibrating, sensing the voices too loud. Each stomach growled for more music. The absence of music was like the absence of movement, like when you're driving and you have to stop at the crossroads and you don't want to stop. You want the light to turn instantly green so that you could feed your hunger for movement.

She sat beside me, on the couch stretching her long legs. The room turned along with her thighs. He lit a cigarette and held it elegantly between the fingers. He had this virtue in holding a cigarette. Across the room another girl watched me and smiled every time I got a glimpse of her. I ignored her, they eventually lose interest and leave.

I am handsome, this is not me. I might as well change my name.

I have no name. I might as well write something about beauty and names and colors.

'I think that girl is watching you,' she said to me.

The girl was now staring at me. She did not lose interest after all. I smiled back at her and she winked.

'I don't know her,' I said. 'I've never seen her in my life.'

But I did see her. Every morning at the coffee shop she flexed her hair and hips and bought a cappuccino. She always had a five-minute-flirt with the guy at the counter, gave him smiles and money every morning. She never looked at me.

I am handsome, this is not me, I might as well change my face.

She winked again. I stood up and went to the bathroom and she followed me entering the men's room.

'Do I know you?' she asked me.

There it is that line again. Of course she did not know me, but that was the only way she could start a conversation.

'No, I don't think you know me because I definitely don't know you.' I said as I was washing my hands.

'That's really strange because I feel like I know you.'

The conversation could have ended here, but I wanted it to continue because she smelled of flesh. Deep down I knew what was going to follow. She unbuttoned my shirt slowly and I took control of her left thigh. There it is, the end of that conversation and the beginning of new ones. I will not be able to look at her anymore. I'll have to change my coffee shop. Here it is, the cursed simplicity of that consummation coupled with the multitude of thoughts and guilt. The trail left behind by a moment like this, traced at a snail's pace along the left hand, like a snake going around the wrist and then up, caressing the elbow and gripping the biceps. Cold on the shoulders but hot in the bones.

She urged me not to stop.

And how could I stop when there is no turning back. People have not yet invented time machines. I cannot deny a body which is sympathetic to itself, cannot deny its fast pace towards decay. It felt like nothing had happened. I took the blue-boxers guy out of my pocket and smiled. He smiled too as I looked up and saw him in the mirror, almost shirtless, his chest going out against a girl I did not know. Then his smile disappeared and dripped over the bathroom sink.

The girl was already gone, probably smiling at other guys.

I am handsome, I am beautiful, and this *is* me. I might as well write something about beauty and names and colors. And dreams. Yes, dreams are good-looking, the healthiest things on the market. Here, have one, trust me, I just had sex in the men's room with a girl I did not know, trust me, this is my best offer. I know dreams. I may not know other things but I happen to know dreams. How could I not.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sall I start with 'dear journal'? Still, this is not a journal. So here I go, writing is like investing words into the air, waiting for the atmosphere to change colors, seeing stars where there aren't any.

...

There is this smell coming from the middle of your chest every morning, the smell of cradled skin and lavender remnants from a late night shower. As you draw your breath out of the many deaths you have tried on for the last four hours I can smell your toothpaste and the digested events that made your life yesterday. Thoughts like the crumbs left behind by this shy machinery called dreaming. We stand suffocated into a room where there is no space for drollery or resentment. Here, I'm afraid you are going to wake up and not like me anymore, like the child you were nineteen years ago, filled with the joyful expectancy that, any moment now, somebody will come in and bring you another dog, younger and cuter than the one you already have.

I can't change my face just like that.

It takes years of pain and suffering until, out of mere mercy, one of your gods steps over his pride and uses ten per cent of his brain to change me into somebody else. And only after that decision was taken, it takes about forty years until the lines start appearing like wrinkles. Those are the lines along which death will take pieces from you, and then put you back, reshape you, erase any leftovers and shove you into another woman's body and then wait patiently.

Until you are ready to be a patient again.

Etherized upon white sheets washing machines weave carefully.

But you will be gone by then, transported with the patience of perverse gods dressed in white robes into another woman's body sucking your future out of that woman's nerves, anxieties, and an absent minded father.

But then younger and cuter dogs will come and every morning will be different. I shall stand beside you but in another shape, death's recovered patient who now lives a normal life. With you, but alone,

thinking that the biggest present for your birthday would be this illusory other whom I imagine keeping in my inner pockets, feeding it with the illusory sweetness of words, telling it illusory stories about others who lives just like us and nothing happened to them while doing it.

You wake up and tell me that I couldn't possibly know that.

I don't know how mornings felt to them.

As I open my eyes I only know how mornings feel to me. The smell of sweat and closed windows and that of morning's fear of solitude. These mornings are the constant reminder of other mornings closing an imaginary circle of mornings. Those with bitter sorrow dancing hand in hand with those in which I feel the joy of unpredicted moments to come. Mornings bear the features of afternoons. But out of all these, fear, excruciating fear, the fear that I might have lost that yesterday born out of the contradiction of wanting it back and not wanting it. Desiring and despising it.

This might be me. I don't really know.

I cling to the pillow in this poetry of awakening and I want that yesterday back. I want at least a piece of yesterday. Right now I'm afraid I am going to wake up and not want me anymore, like the child I was nineteen years ago.

I'm wearing my blue-boxers but I'm not the blue-boxers guy I had in my pocket yesterday. I believe he went away and left behind his scent on the sheets of my bed. This is his way of saying good-bye. People usually send letters or leave notes behind. But just like one of those people he wrote on my sheets using his scent, like a dog marking his territory.

I get up and stand in front of the mirror. I am still wearing that yesterday me and as I look closer I am built in such a way that when others look at me they remember me, that which I was the day before yesterday. Despite these new features they will be able to discern me and have the same feelings they had two days ago. Today I am two days old.

(22nd of June) *I'll say it. Dear journal, once, while I was trying to sleep, he told me a story. The TV was on. He urged me not to think of it as a bedtime story because it wasn't. Today, I don't know the meaning of that story. It was the story of a gargoyle and it went something like this.*

I mean, first he told me about a wall whose coolness pierced through his shirt while he was waiting for somebody.

And then?

Well, then people were screaming and running, hunted by the mortifying silence of a city with too many tall buildings.

What's the name of the city? I asked him.

This is a nameless city with nameless people. Don't you get it? For a story to be universally meaningful you don't have to use too many names.

All right. Carry on.

So, one of them, one of those nameless people followed his steps and sat beside him, leaned against his shoulder in that murky corner, then left. So, he says to himself they often lose interest and leave. People came to him in silence and went away screaming.

Why did they do that?

For so many times his mother had told him not to stay alone in silence. Silence will kill you, she would say to him. Then she knit a hat with a little bell on it. Each movement was a sound until he couldn't make the difference between sound and movement. He would sound not walk, making sounds was like walking. But then the silence grew stronger and the bell died away. And walking became walking again, rare, a language of signs. His fingernails grew longer and turned ash grey. His mother knit another hat with bells.

I fell asleep.

The sheets were like the carefully weaved silk walls of a cocoon, nurturing her, soothing her shoulders. Her golden colored skin pulsed. As I left the mirror behind, the blue-boxers guy no longer remained there, he came along and covered himself with the sheets. My head felt strange when I placed it on the pillow like for a very long time you forget to touch yourself and the fullness of your cheeks seems far away. Strangely enough, fingers tend to forget things, even their own shape. I looked at her and I thought that the sun was going to rise on her neck this morning, turn the margins of her flesh transparent, like the exposed body of a patient, x-rays outlining the contours of her bones.

Her beauty was like a raised fist thrown against a monotonous white, like the sudden, unexpected synchronisation of two bodies in a dance. One foot going up, the other going down, attached to two different bodies. She had an educated sleep and for a moment the sheets seemed to be growing out of her own skin. Sheets like a continuation of skin, white papery limbs. For one moment I wanted to be one with the sheets, try on the sensation of covering her with that softness which lifeless textures have when your body is tired and is able to ignore almost any discomfort. I would offer my best side to her and try not to move too much fearing that I might scratch her gentle skin, that she might lose some of her color while sleeping.

This is not me.

I am the white papery sheet covering her shoulders, carefully following the trail left by her body, bearing the shadow of her face, absorbing her smell. I open my pores and swallow her perfume, storing it in the many layers of my texture. When they clean me in noisy washing machines they often say I bear the smell of sweat. But, they don't know, or they don't want to believe I actually bear the memory left behind by their own bodies. My texture bears the history of resting bodies, nightmares and sweet dreams, pleasure and despair, faith and renunciation. Each night I sing the poetry of sleep and try to soothe the wounds opened up by whispered prayers addressed to cruel gods.

For so many times I wanted to be somebody else or at least something else. That depends on the moment of the day I am in. In the morning I am her papery sheet covering her skin, then as she wakes up to become her coffee cup, the golden spoon to sweeten the bitterness of mornings, her favorite chair, and the smell of lavender from her shower gel. Every day I would travel around her like an aura.

This is me.

I have hands instead of dividable atoms, flesh instead of airborne particles, skin instead of intricate molecular bonds. The only thing I could do is reach out and touch her. I don't need the internal combustion of the universe in order to do that. This act of will is like the uncomfortable stare of an unknown person.

This is not me.

I am the speck of light on the ceiling. My entire existence resumes to dodging curtains meant to block the sun from coming in. Once the ceiling asked me why people try so hard to stop me from visiting them, especially in the morning. I giggled at that question and if you can see me now I'm still giggling though you can't hear me. In my own body language giggling resembles the hazardous run of a fly, or like that laser beam dot which people use to play with curious cats. But the ceiling was serious. Ceilings always look sumptuous and sober. So I said there is no better answer than the fact that sometimes, mornings included, I am painful to the eye.

Mornings come with the painful sensitivity of darkness.

Mostly, I come to see her, I told the curious ceiling. To indicate morning's progress. When I'm by the door she knows the sun is barely up and as I slowly go towards the green armchair she feels it is about eight am so she starts thinking about getting up. But when I'm by the mirror she knows it is time to wake up. Then I contemplate her body in the mirror and for one moment I get to pierce her skin and throw a ghostly shadow on the metallic surface of the painted glass. She can't see it, she can't take her eyes from her visage, but as I go through her back I hit the lower part of her heart. It throws a strange reflection as if her heart is misplaced or has an unusual shape. The ceiling cracked in one corner.

(23rd of June) *It was probably after midnight. In this world there are no clocks to strike twelve and no ghosts to follow the lugubrious tolling. I could hear him breathing beside me, a low murmur coming out of his mouth.*

He said that the people from that nameless town were very scared. More and more youngsters disappeared. Each disappearance was preceded by the toothless presence of silence. There were a lot of little bells involved.

Then he mimed a strangely pitched radio voice. The voice said that cathedrals in town were inaugurating new statues and artists were currently working on new ones, more realistic.

The sad mother was knitting a string of little bells now.

One day, an artist came to visit him and was utterly fascinated by the perfection of his body. After that visit, each shirt, each pair of trousers had little bells on them. Silence grew mightier than ever.

He grew silent and came closer to me. I could feel the heat of his body radiating. A sigh escaped his lips.

I asked him what had happened to the artist and the silent guy.

That cursed artist took him away and the bells were left alone. He never went back home because he couldn't. The artist had told him to stay still and so he sat, watching over that nameless city with too many tall buildings.

His face took on a bizarre form. With his eyes closed he resembled one of those paintings in which people sleep and you could smell the feebleness of their condition, ephemeral, ruled by an unholy pack of tissue. As you look at that painting you know there is something missing. Eyes like leaves of tea. The eyes are missing even though you could see all those things which anatomically correspond to the presence of a human eye. The eyelids brought to life by the painter do not cover the whiteness and the blackness of jelly bulbs but the blankness of a yellowish canvas. Take the eyelid out and there's nothing behind it. A painter lacks the time and the patience to paint a pair of open eyes and then close them with another layer of color.

Right there, I wanted to immortalize him, keep his figure tamed like an unbreakable ribbon of silk over time, wrap time with it. But these are just empty words.

A body made out of skin. One, state, of, the, art, hands, down, chemical composition of water held, like in a cup, by tissue tied together and garnished with a pair of nipples, fingernails, lips, and other forms of tumescent skin.

Half asleep she looked at the ceiling and at the little speck of light which travelled around the room.

I am the speck of light on the ceiling.

She went back to sleep. I wrapped my arms around her and drowned my face into her back. She pulled me closer. I kissed her shoulder and the golden color trickled down my lips and my chin. The formation of drops sank into the skin when it reached my neck.

I should wake up; she said and pulled the sheets around her.

I am the white papery sheet covering her shoulder, I could feel her body wrapping around me like a mother's bosom. My pores are absorbing her scent.

I went belly up. The little speck of light was by the mirror. It was time to wake up but at that moment my body was incapable of finding enough energy to do that. So I sat on my back looking at her beautiful shoulders. She lingered on the margin of the bed as if she was in one of those bohemian films in which the female partner suddenly feels sorry after a madly performed night of sex. The next thing to do for her was to light a cigarette while I watch the smoke going in circles filtering the morning light. But she did not do that. She gathered her hair in one thick tail and let it loose over her right shoulder. For one moment she resembled the little Madonna my mother had on her wall at home. The only difference between the two was that she was not praying but murmuring this post-modern prayer which we do every morning. The disappearance of that sweetness of sleep and the emptiness left behind by it being pumped with adrenaline and the crucial craving for coffee and fibers. Then the anxiety steps in and every guilty thought coming in at once through a very small door, forcing your eyes to open widely to grasp every piece of reality. See the air coming in and out, in, and, out, in, and, out. And you think how come you are still alive when everything you do is sustained by this repetition. The light coming from the window threw her transparent shadow on the opposite wall. I could see her bones. I turned my head to look carefully and there it was, a glowing shadow revolving around a dark spot, like a heart, only misplaced, distorted.

I'm going to become the coffee cup and the golden spoon dipped into sugar.

She drew the curtains a bit letting a shy sun inside. The little speck of light moved frantically like the laugh of a child. She became a dark unknown figure thrown against the flames of the morning sun. The shadow on the wall trembled becoming clearer. I found myself between two dark figures.

(24th of June) I believe it was a train station or an airport. I don't remember it too well. I was waiting because that's what people do in train

stations and airports. They either travel or wait for something to happen. I was one of those who waited. I find a perverse pleasure in waiting, watching other people wait, talk, eat, speak to each other. It's like in a theatre. The voluptuous pleasure found in following characters and thinking what those actors do in their real life. Do they sleep? Of course they do. The lack of sleep is always good when it refers to somebody else because no matter how much you sleep you always feel sleep-deprived. So I waited, contemplating that huge skull which now and then appears smiling behind the comedy of train stations and airports. There was this beautiful girl there, strangely familiar to me.

She sat down. The waiting room changed faces, caught color over the metallic chatter of chairs and windows. She pulled the scarf closer to her skin and threw her hair back. The intense light coming from the huge windows made her seem dark, an unknown figure to those who entered the waiting room. Her fingers clutched the scarf again and loosened it.

Bags, cases, and suitcases came and went in silence. No one talked, all smoked.

She looked up from where she was sitting. A young man came to her while trying desperately to find something in his pockets. She smile but he didn't see it. He took out a cigarette and pushed it softly against his lips. Her hands slid down her thighs and rested on her knees. She kept looking up at him, waiting, as if the briquette was absent without her uninterrupted vigil.

A wheel suitcase passed them making an annoying rumble.

Occasional coughs disturbed the smoky silence.

He sat down beside her. The waiting room changed moods, colors roared through the metallic flutter of chairs and windows. He pulled his leather jacket tighter to his shoulders and drew a long breath out of the cigarette then pushed it out slowly. As he sat down he became another dark figure in the room, an unknown outline to those who entered the waiting room. He looked at her and smiled but she did not see it. I did not see it.

Above the window a black and gold sign said Smoking Allowed. No one talked, all smoked.

He bent forward with his elbows on his knees and looked down. She leaned her head on his left shoulder and stroked his hair gently. He

led the cigarette to his lips and took a long breath. The cigarette burned like a red eye against their dark figures. Suddenly she turned her face toward the windows and rested her chin on his shoulder while blinking violently as if to stop a tear from coming out. He took another long breath and spit it out.

Suitcases came and went like in a big dance routine. No one talked, all smoked.

The cigarette was more than half done. She came closer as if to smell him. Her face rested on his neck for a while and he propped his cheek against her dark hair caressing it slowly. She gave an arid kiss to his neck or so. He smiled but she didn't see it. I didn't see it. Nobody saw it. They were two unknown figures in a waiting room, on a metallic bench, beside a gold and black sign which said Smoking Allowed.

Flight seventeen bound for Bern is now boarding at gate six.

I remember it now, it was an airport. I've never been to an airport. Still, they were in an airport looking strangely familiar to me. No one talked, some walked away.

The cigarette was almost finished. She nested her hand inside his and moved it continuously like a baby in a womb. He brushed her hand with his fingers. One long breath and the cigarette was over. He pushed it against the metallic rubbish can and threw it away. He gave a short kiss to the corner of her mouth and stood up to search for something. She looked up as another man came to sit beside her.

The other man sat down beside her and took out a pack of cigarettes while searching his pockets for a lighter.

Bags, cases, and suitcases came and went in silence. No one talked, all smoked.

The young man found what he was looking for and made a sign with his head to the girl. It was probably time to go. He offered his hand to help her up. She stood up and looked at her bag.

Do you happen to have a lighter, the other man asked her. She suddenly looked at him.

I'm sorry, she said, I don't smoke and she went away quickly to catch up with the young man. He went away with his strangely familiar look. She went away with the same strangely familiar look.

There is something so bizarre in I-missed-you-so-much-today as if this little cliché has the power to sum up the complexity of an entire day. Like all the problems, daily worries, lack of future prospects, and all the thoughts melt and coalesce into this little sentence. It is not coffee, not artificial energizers, not life sustainment which keeps people walking every day, functioning at full speed but the thought that there is somebody at home waiting. Maybe waiting to say hello or just being there. There is this voluptuous pleasure in going home and finding out that the air in your house smells like it has been filtered through somebody else's lungs. I try the same voluptuous pleasure when I go to sleep every night and when I wake up every morning. I say to myself that every night is just another phase through which I'll have to pass in order to get to her. There, she is waiting with the morning in her arms her ears awakened by the echo of my breath.

She sat by the mirror and the little speck of light danced around her. She cannot take her eyes from the face which shows itself in the cruel waters of the mirror. The sheets are pulling away from her as if the floor, like a fatigued sculptor, has finally decided to reveal its latest work of gravity. Bones mathematically put together and muscles and flesh and dead tissue. The little speck of light dances around then stops and for a moment it seemed like it pierced through her skin. Its sharp nose jutted out of her chest touching the surface of the mirror. A pigeon got scared and suddenly flew away from the window. I turned and looked and the little speck of light laughed and danced making big circles around the mirror.

Each dance step is one closure of the eye.

Two steps two closures of the eye. Three steps three closures of the eye.

One closure and she moved away, another closure blocked her way and brought her back. In between there is the fluttering of silence with elbows thrown up instead of wings and a barely visible heart. I put my eyes over my hands to see the in-between. Make the heart visible and suppress the rush of guilt mixed with fear coming out of the contemplation of a strangely shaped heart pumping rivers of gold under the skin.

One closure and the apple comes closer, another closure and it goes away.

One object can carry many other objects and situations with it like an animal carries its tail. A dog or a cat has a tail. As well as horses, elephants, lions.

A table has a tail of chairs and towels, tablecloths, knives and spoons, and there, at the end of that tail a sunny afternoon and a mother's pearls, teeth taken out of smiles. An apple-shaped heart has a long tail with a leaf at its end. Crab apples never ripen.

Escape. Run. Leave this cursed body behind. Then curse the gods. Cry your eyes out. Smoke your lungs out. Speak your tongue out. Think your brain out. Blame yourself out. Then weep in silence. Sob. Then try fury, lots of it and mix it with the feeling that you could do nothing but be furious. Invent doors to knock at because you need to talk to somebody about your pain although you know that words are never enough and the pain won't purge as they say. Things are nameless and those things you know are actually empty promises of objects that are not. But, yes, you could sleep. Sleep beyond that fury, let it sleep beside you like a lost lover.

She is silent, drowned into that narcissistic contemplation.

Angel, have I ever told you that you stand like a chair attached to the wall with your feet frozen into that readiness of lifeless pieces of furniture? Like God's drugged cherub waiting for an order you mask your knowledge with beauty. As you materialize in the air the wall in front of you seems displaced, your beauty like a wrinkle on it. Angel, your foot is caught inside the wall as you climb into the painting I have done for you. You told me that the painting is empty and you need to fill it. How could I paint you? There are too many layers in you. First I'd have to paint your absence, leave the canvas empty, and with the stroke of an empty brush pour the color of the disturbance you leave behind, and have a good look at the other disturbance, that disturbance preceding you.

I leave the canvas dry for a few years and let you inspire other colors.

Then I draw your back and shoulders like mountains of snow. Cover those mountains with nerve fibers and cover them with bones. Cover those bones with muscles. And there, in the center of your body place this green apple-shaped heart. Then laugh the laughter of that creator who,

after following the symmetry of human anatomy, suddenly comes up with a blasphemy and considers it a stroke of genius.

I leave the canvas dry for a few years and let you breathe once in a while.

In the end, this god of yours was left alone with a lifeless body so he looks at you for years and years which seem seconds for him. And out of that contemplation your soul suddenly comes to you and smiles and you smile back at it because beauty would vanish in putrefaction, decay, it would catch roots on metallic tables.

So I paint you in words because I know that my contemplation during years which seem centuries to me won't revive you once again. In this way I shall leave others see you, admire you to make that god feel sorry every fucking morning. Every day, I shall remind those who look at you that they are not admiring creation or any god but yourself, the very result of that creation. Tell me, angel, do you think that your perverse god, covered in white sheets, wearing gloves filthy with blood, sweating his ass off desperately trying to put you together, looks better than you? Do you feel like the pairing of organs generically called love is much more important than who you already are?

I simply cannot imagine this world with two people in it having sex under the protection of cherubs singing because singing cherubs are not condoms or birth control pills though some wish they were. Chemical reactions don't turn into love just because cherubs are singing above.

The cherub's gift of knowledge is shame masked with cherubic wings like fans.

Perverse gods have turned us both into meat dust. You are the meat dust I sprinkle my mornings with. I pour the dust into the cup, it's not like sand, and it's rather like the powdery white of flour. Baking dust.

The dust I pour into the cup is grey. It promises me that my shy dreaming machinery shall keep up with the symmetry and the repetition of breath and morning solitudes hand in hand with the heaviness of your absence.

I pour water over the grey dust and wait for that color to get out of it. I mix my colors with water to make your body touchable, like that of a real person. Ninety per cent water and nine per cent chemistry, half of one per cent divine inspiration and the other half a sweating forehead.

The dust vanishes into the water and the water smiles with the greyish grin of a medicine smelling of oranges. I drink it and feel the margins of the cup like a kiss. I fall into this temptation faster than drops of water so I kiss you again, angel, as you stand on your chair in front of the mirror while I try desperately to stop you from drowning. I sink and I tremble. Then every object has margins of whisper and every look is no longer linear and wide open. I watch others watching me with half open eyes like a neophyte awakened out of sweaty sheets.

Yes, angel, our love is consumed on the same bed we slept last night. A bed smelling of royal purple and flamboyant cushions and that fuss of overused sheets and occasional sounds of refuted smiles, the pain and the pleasure combined. Until the movement withdraws like a cat that had lost its prey and our bodies stand mesmerized and the wooden floor or the old ceiling makes a cracking sound like an exhausted bone. Outside I could hear the cars once again, a bicycle, and people talking. You say we live in a cosmos which stubbornly refuses to participate in what we are doing but is this not a sign of its insignificance, I ask you again, and you say no. Every time we touch the cosmos feels like a growing numbness into its feet. A tickling sensation at the back of its tongue.

But that is not possible I think because now we are left alone with two bodies which once were one and the same and now are split and thrown into solitude, like two dead bodies after the murderer has left and the detectives are yet to come. As if all our life could be resumed to that instant immediacy of a detective's presence. Just like death is summarized by the presence of drops of blood all over the room, like the painful struggle between the murdered and the murderer is reduced to a lifeless object, possibly a knife, and an elusive motif, a crime out of passion or something similar. And there, silent, lost, forgotten, the black eyelash of a murderer filled with intention. Some of the most important things, like the horrified look of the victim when it starts to see itself as a future victim, the furiously calm movement of the murderer, the dislocated lumps of air caught in that swirling of bodies and then the silence of death, all are lost. They all get lost in the process of discovering the maniac who did it and left the scene unlatched like a painting.

We find ourselves alone only when that moment of pleasure has gone and I seek your hand between the sheets and I want to sleep

surrounding you with my entire being. On top of you I feel nothing but the growing pleasure of turning into the effervescent element of a flawed chemistry. So I seek your hand then and I can't find it because you don't want me to stop and the cosmos must feel numbness, lots of it.

But the music is not coming back anymore. The music is waiting for that boiling reaction to end so that it could continue, carry on its display of greatness and of perfect symmetry. The music stands silent, offended.

Angel, you can't see what I'm thinking as you can't see my heart beating. It is not strange. It is not bizarre as you say it is. They say it is absolutely natural. We stand blindfolded making love as if this love is manufactured with precise canine teeth and the miraculous synchronization of brain – thoughts included – stomach, and that innocent rush of blood which fills the sole male organ which in its structure resembles a sponge. Another pairing of organs and butterflies shall use your bellybutton as an escape plan.

The little speck of light is out of control now. You say you can't tell the time anymore because its position on the opposite wall has not been registered yet.

So I tell you, angel, love is not one of those important moments. I say death is more likely to be the perfect candidate for that because then, at the peak of your human function, when the jagged wheels of the grand mechanism get clogged with cold blood, the angels start to sing and even the toughest atheist – leaving any remnants of cynicism behind – enunciates his fake faith in no other gods than oxygen itself. Because then, in the last moment, knowing that your last breath is going out like a candle with no more wax to keep it alive and burning, your supposed happy life flashes in front of your eyes in one second, and if one second is enough to do that then what of the importance of all that happiness? Any act of love does not make up for that in any way because there is no one-second-flash in front of your eyes. The fight given during our life is always given between unequal partners.

But there will be youth to fight with, she said and smiled.

Yes, youth to use as a weapon against death even though death is often more wicked than the wicked smile of youth. Death will smile like a horse and what am I supposed to do about it than smile back because I

simply cannot fight against a body made out of grotesquely muscled neck and feet. When you see a horse...

Will you stop with the horses, she says and laughs, death is not like that.

I'm sure Charon has such a lovely face and the Styx is like a dragon glittering in the sun, its body flowing through flowery valleys of happiness and joy. But we'll be fine, two stowaways, welcome to my world, fly straight into my heart, you, pulchritudinous creature, the soul can wait, at the door, like an umbrella. Your beauty is why. Is there something else? Just like undeniable beauty, death's desire is reflected in every puddle you meet, after every rain, when the sky meets the clay. Even the sun has black spots even the sky is sometimes lying on the ground.

And even the ceiling could be seen lying on the floor, she said, when that happens you can be happy.

Who was it? What creature did make you, angel, and the most beautiful thing on Earth? And with what right? Was it a mother and a father? Or the long genetic thread of blue eyes, blond hair, brown and black eye, chromosomes and blood types? What was it? God's wish or the octopus-like hands of fate?

Happiness is when you have nothing against death. Yes, she said, you have to leave death in peace, let death live, and then let it die drowning in the luxury of its own insanity. I say, but how could you have nothing against death, how could you let it live when both of us live like shadows on this Earth, waiting to hear the church bells that never come at our own funeral, leaving our shoes on the threshold for everybody to see. How can you die when the dog is still hungry and the flowers need to be watered? We live this life not only to make room for ourselves and for those who are to come but also to avoid living another life. That which we think is not suitable, insanitary, delirious, on the verge, choosing the opposite of it, that which is safe, that in which we pay taxes so that when we are old and old-fashioned we could have a pension and a lot of free time, that in which there are no verges except the verge of payment deadlines.

That which you don't see has the miraculous talent of fashioning itself invisible while that which you see is like the guilty grinning of the invisible. You only see the workings of the invisible, a chair is the

machination born out of the almost perfect relationship between the floor and the legs of that chair. The back of the chair is the making of the front of that same chair. That is why each chair, no matter what shape it has, no matter the color, resembles the hunched back of a mermaid. And that is the point, to avoid seeing hunched mermaids in chairs.

I would say your beauty is the machination of a viperous vanity and I know it would be wrong to say that. The devil's got an eye on you.

She left. But only to come back. I hoped. Clothes marched onto her body and I slept again, lost into my words, controlling my intonation. I got up and drew the curtains wide open. The little speck of light trembled and died away. The light invaded my pores, the sun coming in. I could feel vitamin D growing like a plant inside me. Here it is, our immense love for the sun outlined by this need of vitamin D and the pleasure of disturbing the calm vigil of latent illnesses. I watched her steps as they disappeared around the corner and as she entered gracefully into my imagination, unknowingly stepping into one of my scenarios. And just like that, there was somebody waiting for her around the corner.

So I bring you back. Silence is one of the things I cannot stand. At night I hunt cars, their lights travelling around my room. Cars bring something I cannot live without during nightmares. They ooze with silencing words and pictures and I know I am not alone. There is a soul outside travelling on rubber wheels its face lit up by the green and blue and red signs and numbers which turn steps into the oblivion of speed and the moroseness of a waiting but forgotten death.

Silence reminds me of that yesterday which was mine and no longer mine.

Yes, I do live now in a future which is no longer coming closer but going away, fading into words which sound like prophecies. Silence reminds me of that time when I could not love you because I was in the way. Steps were in the way. And now I am a prophet when I say you come back or that you are coming back. I have tied my prophecy onto your heels. You carry it like a piece of gum that got stuck while you were walking.

(7th of August) *He looked up from the leather seat he was sitting on but said nothing. I waited by the window looking down on him. The*

desk was definitely not positioned correctly as it obliged me to ignore the boiling sun pouring from the huge window. He smiled while looking at the computer screen. I knew that smile, that poetic smile he had.

I asked him if he wanted to tell me one of his stories again.

He didn't reply to my invitation but took his shirt off and said the room was awfully hot. The whole in his chest was healed entirely. He looked rather preoccupied about something. He didn't say a word. Impressive youth. That is what he had. It was like his eyes and lips were filled with that passionate desire for life. He would have went to bed with all the women in the world and rejoice in his sexual capabilities. Be proud of them.

I flooded my bathroom today. He said it with the addictive praise of a joy-rider. He did it on purpose. Forgot the water running one morning. Drank his coffee and ate his chocolate-chip brioche while tap water eroded, like ants, into the concrete ceiling of his neighbors. He cleaned it afterwards and acted like the surprised man who forgot the water running one morning.

I'm still waiting for the neighbors to come but nobody had called and the evening was already dying. I blame the washing machine. Washing machines can't fight back, they are silenced with every washing cycle because with each cycle they realize how much of their own step is mechanized, meaning a lot.

I saw the ceiling lying on the floor, he said. I'm still waiting for the neighbors to come and tell me about their ruined ceilings. Mine was lying on the floor. So then he said he stood alone watching how the ceiling went down like archangels on leave from heaven's daily duties.

So I wait for you and hope, like all self-fashioned-respectable prophets, that I shall be who I am now when my prophecies come true and when people shall nod rhythmically. To make this silence go away I cover my eyes and say: to dream is to see things through keyholes. Keyholes resemble the hooded figure of death. To see too much is to be addicted to keyholes. Take keyholes on a joyride and you might find something worth blackmailing for. You never know when a savage minded bird comes and takes your eye out. I put my thumb on every keyhole I meet. It is the only way of touching death's figure without perishing into ether. Without being

blown to smithereens and meat dust. Besides, it is your one and only chance at pre-marital and pre- pre- something cynicism and arrogance when it comes to deadly matters like death itself. Then you put your hands together for the final performance of the evening and let the others do the most important things for you. Like covering all the mirrors in the house. Those around you will have to realize for themselves it is time to point their noses somewhere else. Force their face to look to other grounds, sing other songs, and smoke alone, in the doorway, where you used to. Suddenly there are gaps between words and the sounds refuse to pair up.

Perverseness indeed, the perverseness with which you have opposed love to death. The pride and even the wickedness with which you have opposed death to love. The sick comparison between the actuality, the permanence, the ever-visible presence of death and the ephemeralness, the playfulness, and the instability of love. Imagine this world without fairy tales. Step into my lair and I won't know. I won't know some of the things that happen behind my back. The things I do not wish to know. That people are not as they are keeping secrets in little boxes and wearing fake smiles on their faces. They are not as they say. So I desperately try to find a name for this pain, almost muscular, almost in my chest, almost there, almost too close to a medical evaluation.

CHAPTER FIVE

could hear the TV talking indistinctly in the background. A new cosmetic product brings joy to the public. New discoveries, even the smallest ones, make you feel more and more comfortable with yourself. I am not sleeping but keeping my eyes open in the company of a blurry reality. He is beside me. He is becoming one of those never-ending presences and as I look at him I can see he is perfectly lucid, not fighting against sleep.

Tell me one of your stories, I said to him. He didn't look at me. It seems that new discoveries make him comfortable too. Then he moved his head quickly towards me. Like he was searching for something.

I have one, he said and nested between the cushions of the sofa.

I waited for the story but a few minutes passed and he was still searching for something with his eyes, the ceiling, then the door, then stopped.

This story, he started, is about a baptizer.

It was a baptizer whose left shoe got stuck. The humid leather refused to let go. So he sat on the rocky shore of the river and pulled the shoe with both hands until it gave in. He placed the shoe symmetrically next to the other one and looked at them with a boyish pride, then watched as the river went like a snake between the sharp corners of a bare mountain. It was a sunless day. Still, it was a promising day, he had thought. Let yesterday die with its shameful face, he said to himself. That morning had to be a blessing. On his way to the waiting spot he met a very young fellow with a handsome face and such apparitions were rare except those people who stopped their cars and took pictures of him. This young fellow did not have a camera and was wearing a rather fancy suit. The only strange thing was that he had a little notebook and took notes. So he must have been one of those sent to test his faith or to see if he was still doing his job. He works in mysterious ways. The people with the cameras were also testing his faith. Each time they came he could barely stop himself from swearing and doing obscene gestures with his hands. But good-looking fellows were a good sign.

The greenish water shyly caressed his toes. It was cold as ice. And smelly too. But suffering is a virtue of the flesh, just like pleasure. Still, pleasure has nothing to do with it, at least not here, not now. A few meters away the mouths of three sewers opened hungrily. A guardian at the gates of an unknown hell tied together with an endless highway. People in cars coming and going.

Today is the day. The water is so cold.

He forgot his stick on the shore. He went back to get it. Then resumed his position, ankles completely submerged in the slimy water. He could see his toes from time to time. And feel the numbing sensation of cold. So he waited for somebody to come and ask for his services.

And then the day drew to an end. The next morning the young fellow came again and took notes in his little notebook. He wore a different shirt but the same fancy suit. Then another day ended and the next morning the same fancy suit took notes. And every morning the same thing. He must have been a customer.

Then he asked the fancy suit what his name was and his name was Ycnaf Tius. And what kind of name is that. It was his father's name and the name of his son and the name of his future grandchildren. And the name of his wife was also Ycnaf Tius. And how do you call your city? Horse, Ycnaf Tius replied. And every object bears this name, horse. And how do you say 'I go to sleep every night'? And Ycnaf Tius said 'I go to horse every horse'. Linguists were working day and night to simplify the vocabulary and the syntax so lately everything was horse, horse, horse. 'I go to sleep every night' becomes 'horse horse horse horse horse horse'. And so horse (on) and so horse (forth). Et horse (etcetera).

Would you like to be baptized? he asked Ycnaf Tius.

Horse horse horse horse horse horse. Ycnaf Tius replied.

I said would you like to be baptised into the true faith? he asked Ycnaf Tius again.

Horse horse horse! Ycnaf Tius replied and left. He never came back. Other people came instead of him and they all spoke the same language. Kids laughed at him, pointing and saying 'horse horse horse horse horse!' He took every horse in silence pretending not to hear. By night groups of horses attacked him, by day his vision was flooded with white doves.

People came and questioned him but he refused to answer. He kept repeating the word 'dove'.

Dove dove dove, dove dove dove dove dove...

I had fallen asleep and the windows and the doors caught wings and flew away. I could hear the beating of their wings. Like a sick heart with its irregular beating. People were now speaking different languages. Will I ever be able to understand you? But he was gone. I don't know why but his absence reminded me of her absence. I preach on the importance of absence to my beloved solitudes. The words come out like vapors.

Avoid leaving and coming for now. Avoid these words of mine, try on other sentences. I prefer not to speak. Let us love in silence. Tell the light and the dark to shut up. Let us live in silence with the words hanging in the nearby trees. I do not want the others to know about our love because if the others know then the gods would be given justice and the gods are unjust. Deny this world its righteousness. You say no, you cannot trust me because this world is righteous and this life is the most beautiful thing in the world. But I do trust you. So I sink and I tremble. It is true. How can you trust me when I say there is no soul to be divided? That I do not search for you and for some things that can never be found because they can never be found.

You say, oh, our extravagant love!

I say, yes, this flower-bearing bed of orgies floating through the smoke of illness and interminable creative capabilities, grotesque and humanely beautiful. The two separate paths of cells getting together. A poetry of gods gone wrong, then worse, and worst with each generation. I can't find a name for this pain.

(19th of September) *I share my bed with visions of white nights and the illusory craving for sleep. During the night the mirror is like an open hand. In the dark the mirror resembles a sweaty palm. When I look into the sweaty palm I see you and your eyes are like pores. I turn the mirror over the sheets and I can see your elbows. I see everybody's elbows. All the people in this world have elbows and every cup of tea would be incomplete without an elbow.*

I could put my finger under your elbow and pull you out of the sweaty palm. I take the cup to my lips and feel the odor of boiled leaves

of tea and lemon. Each time I pull you to my lips I hold you by your elbows. That is why in the morning your elbows look like the smooth white ceramic of a teacup. You smell like lavender. I'm thirsty but the cup is empty and you say I shall never have this drink because it is forbidden. By the use of malevolent hands this drink is cautiously hidden under many layers of elaborate movements and mind traps. And thoughts and islands that swim in never-ending oceans. I'm thirsty and I want to have a sip.

So I go back to the mirror in my room and have a sip from it.

The mirror that once reflected you.

And say get off me! Nobody's going to take care of your flowers while you are gone! This sip is forbidden!

People shall look at you with a wicked eye. I cannot deny the sculpted look of this cup resembling your parted lips. I cannot say that here. The mirror has eyes and might talk. I plant olive trees every time I want to have that forbidden sip. Have a mouthful of it. I still have enough space for olive trees.

So I play, play, play with this shirt of yours.

I can't find my words between its folds. You haven't used too many words here. Just the usual stuff I guess, nice weather, really hot outside today, it is the time of the year when true beauty comes out. You throw words like crab apples.

So I play, play, play with the sheets.

I try to find some lost word. I look at you and try to forget about the grapes. I watch you and forget about the olive trees. None of your words is lost. I can see that. They've trained you well. So we stand asunder, far away from each other because this sip is forbidden. In one of the other lives we stood hand in hand. In this one we have to be apart.

Sip and stop. Take a sip from every cup.

And for once, when the chatter of steps is lost, you become an extension of my arms. And for once, your shoulder puts mine into the right place. Because they can't see we can use pillows instead of wings. They can't see we live by wires and lines that with time dig deeper into the skin and tell stories about us. The frontier of the skin is a collection of our lives. They can't see because they confuse the approach of death with the occasional loss of memory and the petrified threads of grey hair forgotten in the bathroom sink.

Sip and stop. Sip and stop.

And sip and stop and sip and stop and stop and sip and stop and...

She did not come back yet. And I'm afraid I have lost her. I have suddenly become a fallen prophet. I'm in the car and I'm thinking about her and she is the only things that comes to my mind every time I see other people. She is like them but she does not resemble them. She is altogether different from them. So I imagine her, doing things like drinking her coffee alone, or doing the same things I do, watching people walking down the street. We share the view. At least in our imagination we are together. And suddenly all my scenarios turn dry.

Do you think you have lost it?

He says this to me while opening the window. I couldn't have lost it.

I am the devil. I do not create. I do not need time and resources to trick the limited nature of my mind. I mime and say cruel things about the world sleeping and dreaming at my feet. This is my faulty creation.

Maybe you think you lost it, he says, and that is why you have a hard moment imagining things, imagining her.

It is not only her, I think but am afraid to say it. This is my faulty creation: my clothed feet, gloved hands, covered face. I whisper in the ear of the world, go up up up, never down. Those tiny beings do not know that the higher they go, the longer the road is.

He turns and looks at me, I cannot return the look because I'm driving, and I know he is looking at me with these wicked eyes I have seen a lot of times.

I want to say to him, oh, take me, save me, this love is the fall downwards and not towards Lethe, but towards inverted redemption. The world should turn upside down so that my flight should be upwards. This love is giving me iron wings. Black wings.

I am a crow. Cried out of the family of birds that sing normally and beautifully, like birds do. I am not a bird. I'm a flying bad omen. I am the devil, I shall turn this world upside down for you. So that this flight will go upwards. The pace of love, going upstairs, no saints and no gate waiting at the end. Take this sip of poison. In my world if you die you actually are resurrected. Because I have turned this world upside down for you.

You'll see words written everywhere and you'll look at them and say I don't know what they mean. You'll say the world has turned mad. But it is actually you turning mad.

Stay with me. Hold me as we go through this nauseating darkness of memory. How shall I explain this loss of you to myself. Stealthily loss comes closer.

It's all about not losing your hope. Well, I have lost it when I realized that I cannot have you anymore. And you are back into your world and how can I live with that? I hope the colors won't ever come off, so that from time to time I might reach and grab you by the hand and you could come to me through the darkness of this memory I have of you. Forget the plague. Words glitter under the sun, smiling with the teeth of wet ink. Take this poison away from me.

I went to see a doctor last week, he told me while we were waiting at the traffic lights.

About what?

That thing I showed you, the scar, and the apple-shaped heart.

I thought it disappeared. What did he say?

He says it's like a plague, an epidemic. He said that the past few weeks he was flooded with similar cases. There is no explanation for the scar, or the metamorphoses the heart suffers during the plague's incubation period.

Incubation period?

Yes. It's transmitted. But they don't know how for the moment.

When you first showed it to me you said that it was an accident, that you fell and you split your chest open. But then I thought. He lied, desperately trying to cover up things, and at the same time trying to give that *thing* a natural cause. Maybe even lying to himself. He avoided replying my question.

It's open again, he said. I can see the heart. I can see everything. And I'm scared, and afraid that it won't close back.

Things happen for a reason, I thought. Things open and close, like flowers. Desire for, embracing absent things, but still desire for. With each opening and closing desires are repeated, born and killed, but still we desire for. Flowers close during the night because each day desires are fulfilled and with the night comes the fear that desires get lost in the dark

and no memory shall ever be able to save them. And for a moment he resembles an open flower.

Have you seen her lately?

No. Yes. No. No. I haven't seen her lately.

There was this flicker in his eyes. But that flicker might as well come from the fear of the open wound. I always thought of him as a fearless man. That is why I loved him so much. Despite everything. So I imagined him, pushed him in the pit of my scenarios, mostly because of my egocentric tendencies.

I am not myself.

I pull the handle of this shy machinery called dreaming and my selves start going round the sun and back. As I pass from one to the other I can feel in my stomach the empty void between them. The solitude of creation and the wind that blows when one of those selves realizes that it has been chosen for the purpose of amusement.

I could hear the clock ticking. The night threw yellowish strikes over the ceiling of my room. I am not myself today. I left him this morning and know I find comfort in somebody else's arms. As I look at him, bare chested, sleeping with his face drowned in the pillow, I whisper to myself: they are like twins. So I touch him, rub his barely-moving belly just to make sure that he is not one of those demons that appear during the night to lure you into sleeping with them. And I felt the warmth of human beings, the muscles twitching, up and down. I withdrew my hand fearing that I might wake him. He slept soundly. I tried to go back to sleep but I couldn't. I thought of Him. The one I left this morning. I have abandoned him. Our love is falling apart.

But I couldn't be that far. I smoked two cigarettes on my way out. I added that to my daily list of things. One. I smoked two cigarettes on my way out. Two. I feel nothing, I am numb. Three. I stopped the elevator between floors to cry, hoping that somebody would hear me. Four. Nobody heard me. I wept and I wept until my weep turned into gibberish. Five. I do not allow myself to weep in the house. Six. He might hear me and ask questions. [...] Twenty-nine. He used the red towel today. Thirty. He never uses the red towel on Wednesday. [...] Fifty-four. I really like his blue boxers. He acts strangely when he wears them. Fifty-five. His perfume is like a blanket. Like a rope on which I hang my body. I cling to him as his

perfume clings to me. Like a mother's curse. Like a name, the devil's coin. The very coinage of my brain. I am far enough now. But I know that his scenarios will go deeper than the epidermis and when he'll touch me he'll follow the lines of those scenarios.

People can't see me here, in this other bed. I don't belong to it.

Sixty-three. He sang in the bathroom today. Sixty-four. Showered longer than usual. I took a peek through the keyhole. Memo to myself: hide the red towel. Take it out only on Wednesday.

He probably felt me looking through the keyhole. His gestures were suddenly more controlled. He said to himself: She is probably looking through the keyhole. She hid the red towel under the blue one. I have nothing to say about that. Really. I need to have some sleep. Alone. In the bathtub. I am afraid to love her. She might crumble. How can I not do that. Really.

126. This should stop. 127. I am afraid to love him. 128. He might crumble. 129. Our love is like looking through keyholes. 130. Like a secret. My hands are not long enough to touch him. His hands are not long enough to touch me. We are drawn apart from each other by contradictions. Two can become one. Two environments cannot be one.

I left the keys where she left them. On the table.

140. I left the keys where he left them. 141. On the table.

I look into the mirror.

167. I look into the mirror.

We are like twins.

189. We are like twins.

He moved as if he had heard my thoughts. The yellowish strikes start to fade as the morning comes closer. His skin rubbing against the pillow releases a wave of perfume and heat. I feel my guts crumble with pleasure. It's the same feeling you have when you hold a baby in your arms, and along with it the great promise of the years to come. But his sleep goes back to its profound saturnalia. I used to hate this. I cannot sleep when I hear another soul breathing beside me. Now as I sink deep into my thoughts I feel like his breathing is synchronized to mine. We breathe at unison. Though, at the same time, I feel tired as I try to catch up with his breath.

He has told me so many things today. Strange things. He told me that he wasn't in love with me. I love him, but I am not in love with him. He told me that he actually loved Him. He fed me with his honey breath just to keep my love for Him alive.

I love you, he said. I love you hoping that at least one tenth of my love would get to him through you.

I tie and untie this love.

Here, have my hands, use them to mold this love.

Say these things in my absence so the whole world shall know except me.

Another wave of perfume and heat, radiating from his hair. He turned over to face me completely.

Why did you leave him today? You left him without saying anything.

I couldn't stay there anymore.

Another wave of heat. My pores opened and closed to absorb this new wave. My guts growled with the pleasure of his breath running over my face and neck. He leaned over to kiss me on the corner of my mouth. How could I explain this to him? Could I say that things do not feel the same anymore? I could just stop. But I cannot. I won't be a coward in this bed. So I let the words out. Let them explode. Let them cling to my breath. I unbutton my shirt and pull it aside for him to see the scar. His eyes are fixed on me, expectancy filling his chest.

It's because of this, I say.

I stick the tips of my fingers in the long opening in my chest. As it opens I can feel the his warm breath over my breasts, scanning me.

For how long, he asked.

A few weeks ago, I replied.

He turned over to face the ceiling.

Have you told anyone about this?

No, you are the only one to know. I was planning to go to a doctor but I was too scared to do it. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. I made some research on it but everything I find is of no avail.

I had it too, he finally added. But it disappeared. The first day we met I felt like my chest emptied. Words were all consumed and I felt like every step I took was counted, my heart divided, pulled out and fed to the dogs. When I met Him I felt like my chest filled with joy.

Beauty unleashed, dancing like flames in eyes not yet used to it.

Symmetry imprinted on bodies not yet ready for this kind of vision. While thoughts filled with disgust smile playfully there, at the back of your head, gods and devils smiling and frowning at the same time.

I felt the urge of expressing my feelings concerning His beauty. But I could not, as I was filled with disgust. My steps multiplied by thoughts, you already know, ten steps are as fatiguing as hundreds are.

When I met Him my chest filled with joy. Like there was nothing in this world that I could not do. I saw cities and souls cling to his arm and he bore them like a soldier bears his spear and shield.

Waves of heat and perfume. The pleasure of it stirred a furious desire in me.

This is something I have never experienced while I was with Him. I could always feel like he was watching me during the night, while I was sleeping.

Our love like a cold blade of stainless-steel.

This love has fallen apart. I place my thoughts between the sheets.

I went to a healer, he finally added. I tried to find a solution.

What did the healer tell you, I asked hoping that the answer might help me in understanding this apparent disease. His face grimaced and a shadow quickly appeared and disappeared. It seemed like a flash of joy and immense sadness coalesced and consumed themselves rapidly.

He did not give me a direct answer, he added.

The healer had told him that crab apples do not ripen. That despite their apparent redness they are still bitter and almost impossible to eat. It's like bitterness flows through its veins. The other type of apples, those which we call normal, ripen out of desire.

Things open and close, like flowers. With each opening and closing desires are repeated, born and killed, but there is still a desire driving each opening and each closing.

One apple can ripen only once. Its ripeness comes out of that desire.

But crab apples do not ripen, he added again and again like that was the main thing to remember.

What do you think he meant by crab apples, I asked him but he did not reply. He had returned to his silent sleep.

To come back I descend into the painless and mute movement of matter. Wooden moments separated into splinters. Metal and friction, abrasion, atoms in heat. Sawdust. The mumble of wood reduced to tiny words. Sawdust of sawdust of sawdust. Humidity like a chain holding dust together. You push insignificant matter aside like you push unwanted words out of the way of your thoughts. Negligible weight that not even the lightest feathers can compare to it. And then you see it. The nucleus. Protons and neutrons listening like rabbits. Chewing secrets of matter. Electrons dancing in circles, laughing. Like nymphs they almost tell you that you have already trespassed your own madness. And water slows down, and along with it those instruments that measure time. Even the windows have veins through which silence flows like blood. Then you become yourself again.

I am my own self.

I stop here for a moment, my two bodies thrown against the sky. One wiped of all its sins, one sinful. One deleted, one in full youth. It's this doubleness that makes me furious, yes, the door can't be opened both ways, you are either in or out. I hold the door locked with my hands. I did use my mother's nail polish. She will look at me with one eye, the other one closed.

It's this doubleness I hate.

Why can't I be one for all of you, including me.

I always ask myself which of the two bodies I like most. I say that one, with my mouth half-opened, while the other half stands closed, stubbornly. At birth the priest that baptized me tied my mouth on that side. But does that body like me. The two bodies do not know as I speak too slow, feebly the words refuse to come out of my mouth. I use thoughts instead of words.

Unfortunately, thoughts cannot be heard.

Two bodies thrown against the earth. Gods have tricked me into pulling them down, like wallpapers. But I still prefer the other body, and not this one, the one you have given me. Its architecture is the symmetry of love.

Thoughts cannot be heard.

Still – volcano – body. I have seen this body differently.

This body no body. This body nobody.

This crab body. Carcass that shall never glow with ripeness.

So I place my hands like a collar around the base of my neck. My fingers seem displaced like the desperate hands of a beggar. I shall not beg for life though I know patience shall not do under these circumstances. Fruits with rough shells bake under the sun and they open not because the sun wanted to go in but rather because something wanted to come out. And you look at them and you know that whatever was inside is ready to be devoured and consumed. Either by human hands that will carefully peel off the hard shell, or by the cruel beaks of birds.

Unless the plant has lived its years and developed a sense of self-consciousness and self-defence and self-something and thorns. Unless it is beautiful and poisonous. Unless it bears wild fruit.

I am made out of dirt.

I am the small sour fruit of a small tree which has attractive flowers. Gods have laughed while creating me. They washed their hands and threw away their latex surgical gloves. One layer of skin was peeled off and I felt warmth. Chunks of my body seemed like growing out of their hands. Skin rubs against skin creating heat. Energy, abrasion, my body growing like a tree there, on their table.

Can I see the nothingness that you have used to mold me?

These gods ran away. They are hidden behind the curtains and under the tablecloth. As I let my feet go I can see the perfection they have imprinted onto my layers of skin. As I look up I can see the sun suddenly moving and in the movement I perceive the trembling swirl of a beauty that some might not see, some might not hear. Tiptoe. If I raise my hands I might become one with the curtains of color that fall from the sky. I can see autumn where there is spring. There is this continual falling around me. Leaves fall, fall in love, fall for it, fall into temptation. The temptation of the body in which I have fallen along the other men which see angels in every other man. Human Beings decimated by Angels and Angels decimated by Human Beings. If I close my eyes I can hear matter unfolding.

I sleep in the hands of gods, but not for protection. In their hands I'm like a Rubik cube. They mix the colors and then wait until you figure out how to grow into perfection and beauty. I am the enigma they refuse to acknowledge.

Don't wake me up, let me wake up into beauty and perfection. Let me find out the algorithm of my own Rubik cube. And then let me laugh, laugh my perfection out just to discover it again. I am Sisyphus running down the hill. Flying. Don't wake me up. I can see beauty growing. Let it grow.

My gods, in your hands, the cube is always displaced.

One patch of color missing, moved to other facets.

The lonely patch of color is always frowned upon. Because it is not in accordance to words written in books centuries ago.

Oh, the trees are twisting, their branches cracking.

Won't you silence this matter. This hum, I cannot hear my thoughts.

The trees have roots instead of branches. Even in spring these trees are bare. You say they bloom somewhere else, but I know that is not true. There are no other worlds. In this world trees should bloom. Gods have forbidden trees to bloom in here so they nurture hidden love, the cradle of what was one hades and hell.

You don't know, with our feet-hands we have reached the ceiling-the earth beneath our feet. In my world if you raise your hands you can reach the ground beneath. But my gods have not given me pointed wings. I have lost the functionality of my wings. I walk with disappointed wings on my back. Do you remember those paintings with angels. I try to imagine them because I have never seen them. There, in the corner of a church stands an archangel. An armored archangel.

You say, too bad he is with his feet on the ground. No, I say, it's not too bad, that way you can see me. Can you see the disappointed and useless wings. He cannot fly because he is with his feet on the ground. His wings have withered.

Love makes the engine of creation run.

Words make the engine of death run smooth. You cannot live without words because words bring you closer to death. That is why you cannot go back. Take back the words that come out of you. And though I trust time, I know ripeness shall never come because I have already said too many words.

So I raise my face like a wolf that smells a stir in the air. I can hear my gods talking, their words like shrieks. Shrieks do not count as words so

these gods stand frozen in a timeless language, death keeping its distance. Death smiling billions of words away. Shrieks cannot be heard, your temples have a sensitivity for them.

In order to write gods down you need to open your temples and stick your fingers into the holes for a better transmission. And though you think you can push gods closer to death by counting shrieks as words that will never work.

Stay silent and you'll die only once.

Unleash words and you shall die a thousand times. Live multiplied deaths. Suffer that pain over and over again.

I am Sisyphus running. Words stuck to my heels. They keep me grounded.

And the gods shriek louder. How dare I?

I shall not beg for life. I have words that will always keep me close to death.

I still have my life, give me something else. If ripeness is everything, give me that. Crack my chest open and pull this heart out, replace it with a green-apple-shaped heart. Then let it ripe. Let desire grow into it. Let it redden with passion. Let it show that it is capable of this most beautiful thing. Chemicals working together like the thoughts of gods.

How dare I? I am Sisyphus running down the hill. But the gods waved and pushed me away like a child refuses to play a game out of boredom. They showed me the way. In, in, in, inininininin, never out, neveroutneveroutneverout. You shall have this love over our dead bodies. When the bones shall close and eyes won't have sockets in which to linger, and the world turns upside-down, then you shall find peace in somebody else's arms. Diversity we do not agree. You have taken the forbidden sip. Cursed is the water because of you. In toil you shall drink of it all the days of your life and it will not quench your thirst as your thirst for love shall never be quenched. We shall adorn your path with thorns and thistles, and you shall feed with the remnants of other people's love and affection. By the sweat of your face you shall suffer for your soul will always be hungry. An only in death you shall find love, for you are love, and to love you shall return.

Gods made clothes out of this denial.

My guts were enclosed in perfection.

I wander in denial and perfection.

I beg you, take these words away. Empty me. Keep my memories but take these words away. I would like to find love here not there, not there, not there. Stumble upon love, not return to it.

Stumble, not return.

But gods have turned their back on me.

CHAPTER SIX

I'm young and lost. Twenty-two years ago I was born on a rainy Sunday, and that's all I can remember. It is because I've lost my memory. I found my head tied with a white bandage, my body secluded into a room filled with white sheets and the smell of chloroform. Every night I go to sleep with chloroformed nurses, have bits and pieces of chloroformed sleep, cardboard boxes with nightmares on which the word fragile is written. My nightmares are fragile because they stink. I never found out the source of that stench.

One of the nurses told me dead bodies smell like the burnt feathers of an angel's wing.

Where could I find one of these angels, I asked the nurse, but she did not reply. The next day she told me, you want to see angels, keep onto your life with those teeth.

What about the hands, aren't they for holding onto something?

I have two hands, but what shall I do with them, memories don't reach out of the darkness with their cancerous pseudopod. I have even stopped trying because darkness is like nausea.

No, she said, hands are not for that.

Nobody came to visit me today, though I know that tomorrow will be the same scenario: mothers and fathers will come to my bed, and caress my forehead and say nice things to me, but at the same time they will be far away while doing that, their mouths tied, their eyes covered with their hands. They can't see me now because I got lost into the yellow paper of letters, my visage distorted in words, tears and sorrows turned into verbs, and nouns and adjectives. How shall I say this to you? I don't remember what happened to me yesterday.

It is the war they say, but I don't trust their words because I myself got lost into words.

Another mother came in today, and I said hello, who are you, and she said I am your mother.

Another father came in today, and I said hello, and he said hello son. I didn't trust him because old men use the word 'son' loosely.

Another man said he was my brother, but I couldn't trust him either, maybe we were brothers just like that, linguistically.

Then nobody came anymore and I tried once more to thrust my palms forward hoping to grasp just for one second one of those memories left in the dark.

When you are under the water you can't get a hold of the sky, the clouds. So you breathe hoping that one morning you'll wake up a fish.

You see, I'm afraid that is not possible. I remember words but I can't remember those moments in which certain words were uttered. Then I would know that mother and father once pertained to the words we associate with those human beings that had participated in pulling this rotten bloodline open for multiplicity.

A very young doctor came in today. He was very handsome. He checked my lungs to see if there was something wrong. The young doctor said there was nothing wrong. I asked him, what are lungs for, and he said lungs are for breathing.

The nurse told me that last night I had one of my fragile nightmares again because I was thrusting my hands forward in my sleep. I said to her that I wanted to get my memories back.

She said, memories don't have hands.

Why do we have hands, nurse?

Not to have wings, she said.

Then the next day there was another stream of mothers and fathers and brothers. The handsome doctor told me that their presence there might help my memories grow hands.

That is not possible, I said. Memories do not have hands. And besides, they are all made out of words.

You see, memories do not cling to words. Memories are not like words, they don't get stuck to the stream of air that comes out of your lungs. You see, words are stupid, they think that getting out is a form of redemption. They don't know that the instant they go through the mouth they evaporate into thin air. There are cemeteries of words out there. It's like human beings just came back from a war with the gods.

This endless waiting for memories to come. It's like waiting for things that will never happen. Like when you ... when you ... something, like waiting for something that will never happen. Like in one of my

nightmares in which I find myself frozen, unable to move, objects and places refusing their movement towards my open palms.

Oh, the soothing smell of chloroform. The sheets of my bed seem like marble. I am in a marble tomb. I sleep covered in marble. I cannot move my limbs. My muscles seem to have forgotten movement itself. The only moving thing in here is time. Slowly consuming itself and at the same time making the paint on the walls decay. Time spreads like mildew.

Sometimes people refuse to talk to me. Where am I? And they fold their hands and look at me with a pity that I refuse to accept. Then they leave in silence. Unsaid words sleeping like ferrets on their necks. Then I turn my eyes towards the window and watch the trees as they speak with their sleep-deprived branches. I sense their desperate yet morbid calling. Totally different from the language of the rain. Rain wants to say too many things at once so that the message is difficult to make out. But I have time, I still have time. At least, I think so. When you don't remember things, in your mind, time is suddenly longer, slimmer. Loss of memory means rebirth.

I try to get up. I push my elbows against the mattress.

My head is heavy as if nothing is yet lost. As if memories are still there somewhere, hiding in the folds of my brain. Sometimes when I close my eyes I can see an ocean of things. Disparate things, dismembered objects, windows and chairs that have lost their utility. Maybe one day I'll take those objects one by one and put them together. I'll have to cross the ocean to find some of the missing parts. It will take years until one of the chairs shall be placed in the appropriate moment.

That chair means too much to be left behind. Dismembered.

But then I'll know where that chair has been, who sat on it.

Whoever you are, if you are reading this, know that I love you.

If you sat in this chair, please, know that I love you.

The ocean unfolds in its magnitude and beauty. New objects come to the surface. I can see the hand pushing that object towards the surface. A window floats, an open window like the open wings of a drowned butterfly. I take it and kiss the cold surface of the glass.

Whoever you are, if you have watched the rain through this window, know that I love you. I close the window and let my fingers linger on the wooden frame. For one moment I can see the sun coming through

the glass. If only the sun could bear our memories along its rays. If only the sun could pierce the immovable joints of our skull. Throw some light over this ocean of dismembered dolls. Set into motion this photosynthesis of lost memories. Then I open the window waiting to feel something. But even here, where doctors promised me my memory, I feel like this feeling I expect is, oh, on the other side of the ocean and the muscles of my brain are too atrophied to keep on swimming.

And I force myself until fever comes along a throbbing pain at the back of the skull. The nurse comes to check on me and I can see in her eyes there is something wrong. She takes the bandage away and replaces it with a new one. A new comfort. Hopefully, my brain will sense the difference and try harder next time.

I take three pills in the evening.

Then the windows of the marble sheets room grow more luminous. Like they want to get out of the wall, their black margins burning silently with a white smoke. They burn like the green branches of willow. Then the words turn painful and every noise coming from the hall is like a small incision into your eardrum.

After I take my pills the nurses disappear and the night seems divided into the night I have and the one I don't. I sleep and then I wake up and another night feels like it has just began. Then the nurse comes and gives me another pill.

What's the time, I ask the nurse.

Does that really matter, she replies.

Here time is like matter. It's so difficult to move in this solidity.

The second time I wake up things get heavy, the ceiling pushing against my retinas, my skin like a crust. The windows seem incandescent moving along the wall. So incandescent that they hurt. So my bones try once more to close, push these doors aside so that I can see. Wasted morning energies.

How are you feeling today, the young doctor asked me.

Tiny incisions invaded my eardrums.

The same, I say. An ocean of possibilities, chairs and tables, spoons, and teeth, and nails, and hands, shoes, socks. All in one place, sleeping. My mind refuses to start its photosynthesis back again. My fever has been fluctuating despite the antibiotics that have been pumped into

me day and night. Despite the comfort of the new, clean bandages rolled around my temples.

Nobody came to visit me today.

Then time starts drifting away again. Days divided by pills and two nights are felt like one. The nurse tells me I'm going to have some company soon. A guy is being moved into my room. I start investing hopes into this new guy. I need something to look forward too. The ocean of dismembered objects is heavy and cumbersome.

Other days divided by pills and nurses and the smell of chloroform.

One of the nurses brought me some paper-and-ink. I try to write something but my hand refuses to move. It has forgotten how to hold a fountain pen between its fingers. I force myself and the fever comes back. My body reacts to the approaching night with fever and incandescent windows. In the dreams that follow I'm embracing a body made out of ice. Stunning thirst. The thirst of being close to somebody.

Whoever you are, if you remember me, know that I love you.

The only thing left for me to do is to invent bodies, name them. Invest beauty into their soulless architecture. Unlike God I inspire beauty into my creation, not just breath, not just soul. But endless beauty: THE beauty. Not just the possibility of beauty.

So I start: My dear friend...

Then I stop. What shall I say to him, who is this friend. He has to be evil, diabolic, otherwise I wouldn't be standing here alone, with no memories to keep me company. I shall put halos of lies around him.

I start anew.

My dearest of all, absent friend.

I know you do not exist, but I have to tell you this. I'm sending you this letter because I do not know what else I should do. Because every morning I wake up with the thought that I have to send you this letter, that I have to use these words and tell you the things nesting into the folds of my brain. I've read hundreds of books about you and the way you lure people into liking you, loving you, and finally obsessing over you. One of those books specifically talked about the way in which you switch faces and genders because ultimately you do not have a face or a fixed gender.

You are a man when somebody needs a man, and a woman when somebody needs one, or both, when, at night, you cajole whores into

believing that you are their savior and have come to redeem their promiscuous souls. Or when you wake up adolescents by knocking at their window twenty minutes to four, when sleep is the sweetest.

It is when you take the appearance of an androgynous creature that you are most frightening. Painters have seen you a couple of times, I think, because there are many paintings in which I have seen your haunting figure.

A man, yet a woman.

A creature made out of muscles, yet bearing the softness and the vices female beauty provokes into innocent meat. Each time you come with such cherubic temptation, your words honeyed, mellifluous voice, and I cannot keep you away from me because only the thought of you makes me riant. You are breathtakingly beautiful because you display the beauty that I have never seen, embody the things that I will never have, and at first I did believe you when you said you were a part of another world. This world could not have fashioned a thing like you. But then I thought you were a thing of this world because I've seen you change faces, manipulate boys and girls into making love to you.

I've seen the kisses your lips have recorded along the way, smelled all the smells that have crept into your skin until now, saw the flickering images on your retina, felt the vibrating passion in your words. I've realized yesterday that you have your own world and I will never be a part of it.

Your world is made out of sleepless nights and dreams dreamt with the loudness of music, colorful dresses and black suits, distant smiles received from unknown people and Beauty sitting at the next table smoking.

You live in places where true beauty comes out to play. You said I should come with you, visit the others, see the world, send distant smiles. But I cannot be a part of your world, you see, that's not my thing. I do not have the words you have because I have nothing to talk about except those awfully real things like the uncomfortable chair and the possibly unwashed mug. I do not need your mercy, I can do it by myself. So do stay away from me! Still, you come with such angelic temptation, honeyed words and mellifluous voice.

I stop and reread everything.

Whoever you are, if you are reading this, know that I love you.

I'm good at conceiving scenarios. Stubbornly, memories continue to remain silent. I seal the envelope and mentally dispatch it to my absent friend though I know that it will only get lost in that ocean of things. Like a message in a bottle.

Days and nights divided by pills and nurses and the smell of chloroform and somewhere the hope that will come with the new guy.

If I put my hands on my face it becomes so small that my fingers don't even know it anymore, so they nibble its flesh as if to determine whether there is something knowable in it. I don't know how I actually look, I reach this conclusion by myself. There have been no mirrors around though I could sometimes easily discern myself in the look of the nurses and the young doctor. So I called a nurse to come and check on me accusing a throbbing pain at the back of my skull.

She slowly removes the bandage. I can see the windows turning incandescent again but I try to keep up with the things happening around me. A difficult task for a person who has been continually drugged. I can see myself as I follow her eyes. I know she is going to perceive this gesture as something of a weird manner of acting but I don't care. I need to see myself. To ask for a mirror is a too overt mark of vanity. But still, maybe I don't want to see myself like that, clear, in the open, uncovered by the restless eye of a mirror. So I try to keep up with the nurse's moving eyes until I can make out, bit by bit, the contours of my face. I actually look good, though my face is still half emerged in the shadow of the nurse's dark eye.

Is there something wrong, she asked me.

No, I reply, there is nothing wrong, just this terrible pain.

She replaces the bandage and for a few good hours I can feel a certain relief from that numbing pain. Deep down I know that half of this relief is actually the result of me seeing myself and getting an idea about the limits of my being.

I am not empty space.

I am a small void imprinting reflections onto other people's eyes.

I am not having an imaginary affair with life.

Bone upon bone, flesh upon flesh, the outcome of a mighty burst.

When is the new guy coming, I ask her.

I don't know for sure, she says, the doctor is still considering whether he can be brought here or not. His condition is still fragile.

His condition.

She leaves before replying. I am left alone with the question and this ocean of things. I try once more to pick an object, one particular object, one that would set into motion a whole string of memories. So that the room would be flooded with people that I know, that I have loved and shown affection to, spoke to, and listened to. But all I have is me.

Window by window time passes away without looking at me. I don't watch it anymore because it reminds me of the time I've passed alone, without any memories. Three hundred windows and the day is finished, five nurses, three doctors, at different window openings. Forty windows and the doctor is here. I can smell his aftershave. Then I have musky dreams. I lean against him when he checks my heart and lungs again.

What is the heart for, I ask the young doctor.

The heart is pumping blood into your system, he replies.

And it does that, just like that, without being rewarded, unconditionally?

I haven't thought about that. I guess the heart pumps blood just like that, as you say, unconditionally.

I lean against him as he presses the cold stethoscope against my back. Musk invades my pores. Breathe in, breathe out. Say something, what shall I say. I wish I could remember things.

You will, he says.

But I press my cheek against his shoulder and I feel tears coming down.

You will, he says again as if to remind me that it is in my power to do that. But that is not in my power. I am powerless when it comes to memories. Years of things to remember, strings of moments and feelings, one sleep to delete them. Some snap their fingers and things get lost.

Everything seems fine, the doctor adds. The fever is gone, the head wound is healing, we'll keep giving you antibiotics just to make sure. The only thing left is your memory.

And he leaves the room.

I could hear the words as they escaped through his lips, I knew their meaning. Then I heard something else. My body is healing. My brain

is healing. But there is no remembering. I hope I won't lose you, my absent friend. You are one of those new things. I need something to look forward to.

So I take another blank page and start writing a second letter to my absent friend. I build a house around my thoughts. I swim through the ocean of dismembered objects. I put doors and windows in place, carpets, tables and chairs. Human beings have no faces here, and no names.

Dear absent friend.

I do, it is true, it is as you say. I live by my artless art of fiction when I fictionalize you, because next time we meet I'll try, as much as I could, to live by the things already settled in words written during the morning, when the nurse comes to give me my medicines.

You see, mornings are not always about coffee, they're also about fiction and the sour taste of pills because since you do not exist what else can I do but seek you in the most absurd places, under the bed, on the bottom of my cup of medicines. On top of the fridge, I think it's the most obvious place. Then, when you sit with me at the table I know for sure you do not exist because there is only one cup, and one spoon, and only one croissant, half eaten. I try to eat the other half but I can't because I know your lips have touched it and if I were to feel your scent on it then I'll know for sure you do not exist. The presence of your scent will only turn you into that musky sensation on the top of my lips.

This morning I noticed something very strange: the croissant was missing and the cup of coffee was empty. I checked it twice to avoid one of my existential fears. I forgot to tell you about it, about this existential fear of mine. I'm afraid that at one moment somebody is going to come to me and say that I haven't done a thing that I already did, and I won't be sure whether I had done it or not. So then I'll be shocked because I'll lack the possibility of saying that I'm sure I did it, because I checked it twice.

When I switch the light off in order to go to bed I check every room twice to see if there aren't any burning candles even though I know there are no candles in the house. So the croissant was missing, and you were missing too. You weren't on top of the fridge. I even tried the bathroom to see if you haven't drowned into the toilet. I checked it twice. And I panicked because you did not leave any note on the fridge. I tried to fictionalize this disappearance but it didn't work, so I tried to fictionalize

you again but you appeared to have blue eyes and not yellow as you used to. I checked every corner of the house but you weren't there. Then, something even weirder happened. Somebody else got into the house and I tried to talk to him but he wouldn't listen. He looked right through me like I didn't exist. I noticed some similarities between you and him, the same hair, almost the same clothes, except the eyes. He had blue eyes, you have yellow eyes.

He even sat at your desk and started writing something which I couldn't understand, something about an absent friend with yellow eyes. So I left him alone and went to the bathroom to wash my face hoping that this illusion would soon vanish and you could come back. But as I looked into the mirror, as normal people usually do, I noticed that my eyes had suddenly changed, and they were yellow. Yes, I'm sure of it. I checked it. Twice.

I sign it and mentally dispatch it. Throw it in this ocean of things.

Whoever you are, if you are reading this, know that I love you.

I wish I could nest into your hands, feel the things I felt when I was still a functioning part of another whole, and take me back to the dark chamber where I could only hear the poetry of human language, the humming voice of parents holding hands. There, where reality was not that painful.

Who has that womb? To whom do I ascribe this humid heat I once felt?

The not-that-lone-solitude?

I am able to stay up today because the young doctor decreased the dosage of my painkillers. This cocktail of medicine has turned lighter. Since then each moment is feathery with margins of empowered muscles. So I go to the window and watch other people as they cross the front yard of the hospital. I can see the ocean in the distance, the sun bathing in it. When the nurse comes again I ask her whether it is possible for me to get out of my room, have some fresh air. She says not yet so I go back to bed mainly because I am furious and alone in this. Maybe there are no more people that have recently lost their memory.

As I fall asleep I feel like memories have never been mine. We actually appropriate memories, make them our when actually they are

performed by somebody else and we are just the subjects of that performance.

Divided nights. I wake up at one point during the night despite the fact that my medication has been changed. I should have turned to normal by now. But still, how could I refer to the normality of my existence when I don't remember my sleeping habits. Little by little I can feel even my own consciousness slipping away from me, forgetting that it has any ties with me. So I try to go to sleep by myself. I don't hear matter humming and the windows have stopped flapping.

Sleep, your skin grows in my hands.

Like orange peels into the hands of children.

Then every object I touch is softer, even the pillow, the sheets.

The every movement is like a whisper.

Sleep, in every object your skin grows.

Your fingers are like the legs of a table.

The smoke of your whisper is growing like a vine into my forehead.

Your hands curl around the sockets of my eyes.

Sleep, grapes grow into your hair.

Sleep, I can come closer to you now. The night divides itself into scenes of half-death. I get lost into words again, it's like taking a step back, but when you expect sleep to come, and you can hear its steps on the marble sheets, it goes back and waits for your eyes to long for the lightness of the vanishing fatigue. It is only when you wake up that you can divide your life between having slept and having a white night. So I close my ears and the doors of my thought. I can't hear sleep coming closer so I stumble upon it, and fall into it.

Maybe today is the day when the new guy comes. I ask the nurse but she refuses to answer. She leaves the room without saying anything.

Memories are still dormant, latent. I'm still nurtured into the nest of my severe amnesia. Is there a war outside this building?

I take another piece of paper. I need another past for myself.

So I take words down. Words like memories need to fall down from the clouds.

I don't remember who I was ten years ago, even though a friend told me once that all those memories could be easily recovered through hypnosis.

[exactly who is this friend of mine I do not quite recall, like a potion mixer and a fake alchemist I choose one face for him, take features from the few people I've seen these past few days]

I don't trust people who use hypnosis, I told him. There is a sort of perversity in the use of hypnosis. Then he told me that I don't need to know who I was ten years ago because that information is frivolous.

[I can see him smiling now, he has the smile of the young doctor, how can he say memories are frivolous]

Yes, I believe that is true, I was frivolous ten years ago. That information is lost in a series of sunny mornings and hot afternoons. Then there is autumn, school, winter and summer again.

[and nights divided, and loneliness, I become a semiconductor, capable of amplification when there is nothing to amplify but the ghosts of a chloroformed room, and the empty hopes of recovery]

Back to those sunny mornings, hot afternoons, and that ice-cream thirst. That cold pang in the middle of your forehead when you eat your ice-cream too fast. Pink girls and blue boys playing outside under the shadow of a red-roofed house. Shadows moving like skeletons on a white screen, limbs supported by wooden splints and strings.

[he says the past is not predictable anymore, for amnesiacs yesterday is tomorrow, and tomorrow resembles yesterday, they resemble to the point of confusion]

But what about me I asked this friend of mine. He said that there was no 'me' ten years ago. Yes, I was not there ten years ago. I was not there because I was somewhere else. And that 'somewhere else' was not mine, it belonged to somebody else.

[when you lose your memory you become a part of somebody else's memory, you have a role, a job, to fill in the blanks in somebody else's memory]

Even today I belong to somebody else, my friend tells me.

[you might say that this friend of mine is a very intelligent creature, there are many time when I believe this to be so]

Who do I belong to, I ask him. I couldn't tell, he replies.

[today, as it was ten years ago, my memories belong to somebody else, I fill in the blanks]

I finally get the permission to get out of my room so I take the coat the nurse has given me and step outside my white marble room. The hospital, or whatever this is, is labyrinthine. There are many corridors but I manage to find my way out. The courtyard is filled with people and nurses. I go and sit on one of the empty chairs that look upon the fountain quietly murmuring in the center of the yard. On the top of the fountain sits a white winged angel.

And I suddenly feel alone with all these unknown faces around. But then, one of these people might be the guy that is going to be moved into my room.

I wish this sun would recreate one of those moments of revelation. Like those in the park with the children laughing and everything moving in slow motion. Faces with golden lining and halos. But unknown people do not really have faces. They are actually voids of laughter and air. In your memory they have nothing to say, they're the supporting actors while you project your solitude and hide behind yourself. Because your body is indeed a mask.

Another nurse comes to check on me. Is everything fine, she asks.

Yes, everything is okay, I say.

They have trained you well, I say to myself.

She leaves and goes to another patient.

Trained not to get involved, smiling assuringly you put more masks on yourself, layer upon layer upon layer.

I stare at the flowing water which comes from the white marble feet of the angel and try to understand this fascination for movement hoping that while I predict the movement of water my brain shall work in the background and bring some memories back.

The ocean of dismembered objects.

Somebody comes and sits beside me, on the chair next to me. I smile to him and he smiles back and that's the end of our encounter. The water murmurs louder and I can see waves of dismembered things coming towards me.

A broken string of pearls. I take the pearls one by one and try to put them together at the same time trying to make out who might wear them. Whoever you are, if you wear this pair of pearls, know that I love you. I say this because affection may bring things back. It's like one of those machineries that just won't work and then you start saying things like 'I beg you, please work', 'do me a favor', as if things might hear and grant you that favor.

Another dismembered object, a wooden swallow, its wings spread like in a flight. Except that one of its wings is broken and the head is missing. The amorphous mass sits silently in its own crib. The murmur of the water comes back to me and as I lift my eyes I can see the angel like a shadow against the sunny sky. Somebody grabs my shoulder and shakes me a bit.

Are you all right, somebody asks me.

Yes, I say, and I'm suddenly seized by a drowsiness I cannot explain.

The sun is so powerful that it is a pain to open my eyes and I feel like my muscles are out of control. It is so cold I can't stop my teeth from clattering. I see somebody wearing the string of pearls, I can feel the perfume.

Nights divide and days come furiously.

I can hear the nurse as she calls somebody else to help her lift something.

My body transported. If I take my knees to my chest I will grow wings. I can feel them springing out, piercing the skin on my back. And I

fly. I want to smile as my feet no longer touch the earth. I am flying along the angel from the fountain. And I cannot stop shaking. My tongue feels huge.

Nights stand divided. Wings retract into the body.

When I wake up I find myself into my old room. The sky replaced by the grey ceiling with the metallic lamp attached to it. The nurse is beside me. I can feel something cold on my forehead. The young doctor is also there taking notes.

The fever is back, he says.

But I saw the string of pearls, and it was attached to somebody's neck, I say and feel like I've been talking for hours, my throat dried by the effort.

I feel like something has changed in my room but too look around would be a far greater effort than talking so I close my eyes to gather some strength.

Nights divide and conquer me. I do not gather strength but the seeds and flowers of sleep, swirling, falling, swooning. Sleep, your hands grow like vines around my body. Sleep is like a nightmare here, you cannot run because the body won't listen to you anymore.

When you lose your memory the world turns transparent. And you think how come things are that silent. Were things so talkative before? I don't remember that.

I wake up barely breathing.

There is somebody watching me at the other end of the room. I lift my head up to see the room in its entirety. Another bed was added. Now the room looked small and even more depressing than before.

Who are you, I ask him.

I'm a patient here, he says, and the looks outside through the half-open window.

His features coalesce with the light and the sounds coming from the courtyard. His blond hair seems one with the ray of sun protruding the dusty glass. He has that beauty only men could have. The silent beauty of wolves when they contemplate their prey. His shirt hangs loose on his shoulders though I can see the shape of his back through it. He has that air of a newly arrived person who is still trying to get accustomed to the new place.

What is your name, I ask him.

I don't remember, he says, I'm an amnesiac. I don't remember things.

So they put him in the same room with me just because we have the same condition. I wonder if this is supposed to help me or it's just hospital policy during difficult times like these in which I find myself.

Can you remember your name, he asks.

No, I'm an amnesiac, just like you.

I know, he says, I was just hoping that you at least recall your name. So that I myself would stand a chance in front of this condition.

No, no luck, I say and also hope that at least my name would come up in the next days. At least that.

When did you arrive here?

The day before yesterday, he replies.

I don't remember seeing you then, I say.

I did see you, I was in the room when they brought you convulsing like a mad man. I was already here, but you didn't see me.

Was that the day before yesterday, I ask him.

Yes, he replies.

I feel like it was a week ago.

It is common for amnesiacs to lose their sense of time.

But I am not a common amnesiac, I say to myself. I am myself despite my constant need to remind myself that. It is really difficult to refer to yourself when you don't have a name. Objects have names. Then objects are seized by this sudden drowsiness and they begin to swirl and I can see the wooden swallow trying to fly desperately beating its wings against each other. A hand is holding the wooden swallow against the sky. A hand with green scales like the tail of a lizard. The swallow is waving and I wave back as I follow it in its fall towards the ground. It is this drowsiness that makes me furious.

Nights start to divide.

Mitosis. I need to see the hand holding the wooden swallow. Whoever you are, if you can read this, if you can read this...

Cells divide, days divide, the muscle contracts pushing this sudden clarity out of the way. The ocean of things is frozen and I'm so cold that I tremble, and my teeth clench. My muscles hurt. I can hear the nurse

talking and giving orders to somebody and I can feel a slight comfort as her words run around the room. I can feel my wings growing back, their pointy ends going up like spears. But the swirl is always downwards and my feet don't let go of the earth.

Mitosis of the night. Listen, I can hear the cells crack under the weight of amnesia. Listen, I can hear the fever going up and whatever is left from my memory runs away, scattering, bits and pieces of love. Oh, my memories, how much I love you. Let us hold hands, you and I and try to make this terrible swirl go upwards.

I wake up and again I find the nurse and the doctor beside my bed. It is a cloudy day, the marble sheets are grey. Each object seems submerged in its own shadow. The world is two-dimensional. I am a part of the marble sheets, a part of the marble room. I quickly check my face to see if I wasn't transformed into a beetle during the night.

Can you remember what happened to you in the past few days, the young doctor asks me.

I try my best to grasp the few memories that are left behind this feverish flood. I can only remember that I was talking to him and then everything went blank.

Him? Who are you talking about, the nurse asks me.

The guy that was moved into my room, the other day, he said he had lost his memory too. We talked, he was so nice.

The young doctor looks at me and I can read the concern in his eyes. It means something went wrong again, and I can't remember things.

His bed was over there, I say and point to the corner of the room where, obviously, there is absolutely no bed.

Nobody was moved into your room, the nurse says. You've been out for almost five days. Don't you remember your walk into the courtyard? Your fever went up again. We thought we had lost you.

I can remember the courtyard, I say. And the sun. It was a beautiful day and there were a lot of people walking and talking. I sat by the fountain.

Then I realize that he was just an illusion, one of my feverish hallucinations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I am fully submerged under the water and objects float around me. I feel left out, like a ship has just sunk and everybody else died except me. There are so many objects floating around me that I don't really know which one I should grab onto. Mattresses, clothes, a door, a wooden trunk, a chair. So I try not to pick one specific object but grab onto them randomly.

A floating chair.

Whoever sat on it, if you are reading this, know that I love you.

No memory approaches. I can only hear the stillness of the water. I look around and as far as I can see there is only water and dismembered objects floating, their limbs like human hands crying for help as the waves push them up and then down. It's like they're saying pick me, pick me.

I grab onto the chair and I can feel my muscles relaxing. Hopefully it will save me from all that fatigue of moving continuously to stay on the surface. I press my cheek against it. The wood is damp and feels soft, and cold.

I took a chair from the kitchen. It was a sunny autumn Monday. So I took the chair and carried it in the backyard and placed it under the cooling shade of the vines. He was already there, waiting for me.

The vines were so rich that year.

He waited under the ripe grapes.

I stabilized the chair on the ground and mounted it and I reached for the biggest bunch of grapes. I gave it to him and he looked at it but did not eat it. I took another bunch and started devouring it. He didn't say anything but watched me eating the grapes.

Why aren't you eating it, I asked him.

Because this is not the way to eat grapes.

He went back into the kitchen, brought a green plastic basin, and poured some water into it. He washed the grapes and started eating them one by one. Then we stood on the front porch of the house and ate the grapes.

The chair starts sinking.

The cruelest thing to say right now: I do not remember these things. The chair and the grapes. My memory still refuses to come back.

There are layers of memory out there. But you have to start with the first layer. Once the first layer is set the others will come willfully. Once the first layer is set you can go on and on and on until it is physically impossible to go forward. You go on until you reach the nightmarish instance in which the mind will no longer be able to engulf everything and everything will seem condensed and airy at the same time. Until you cannot move because in a nightmare things have to happen. You have no will there. No will to escape. In a nightmare you get a glimpse of your creator's dreaming machine. Because He will dream you like He molded you. You will live in His dream of love. But in a dream like that things have to happen. They do. Until the body stops responding to the call of matter.

Once you have the first layer things will keep coming to you, like on a conveyor. Once you start this game you won't be able to stop. Until you won't be able to make the difference between a real memory and a fake one. You'll make up people but that doesn't matter right now. What matters right now is to have a memory.

One. The clock ticking. It's my mother's clock, she goes to work early in the morning or late into the night. I feel so sorry for her because she has to go to work every day without drawing any pleasures out of it. I wish I could work for her, instead of her.

Two. Water dripping. My brother's taking a shower. He smells good afterwards. I wish I'd knew how he smells to other people.

Three. My mother talking on the phone. Obligation. She calls her mother every Saturday evening because she feels like she's performing a sort of duty, so that her mother won't feel left out.

Four. The bus outside. I go to school every week-end. I go to my uncle's house by bus. I sometimes miss the bus as normal people do.

Five. The sound of the city. I dreamt of this sound every night when I was a child. I went to sleep with that sound. For me it's like a lullaby, it helps me sleep.

Made out of relations the world turns predictable.

Nights divide and conquer.

Mitosis. Memories are like cells, they are born and then they die.

It is in our blood. Through networks of veins we carry this desire for each other. A desire for relationships, relations between two consecutive or non-consecutive chemical elements. I carry a chemical valence that

makes me compatible with another element. The smoke of our lust escapes through our teeth. This desire to feel muscles twitching under naked hands and bare feet. To feel that we are also glorious architecture, not only flat epidermis and bone. And to feel rigid muscles softening under the breath or our love.

Boom! By the light of lightning, I shall seek thee, memory.

Seek me by the light of lightning; I shall hide in the sound and the echoes of thunder.

When you have lost your memory, everything else is so loud because along your memory you have also lost the ability to listen to matter. So everything is like a screeching sound as you move. Presences are no longer felt, what you feel is just the awkwardness of not knowing.

Mitosis. The night is divided by the day. Daylight is just a short pause from nightmares of lost memory.

My mother came in this morning. She doesn't look the same as I saw her last time. It's like her eyes have gone down into the depths of her skull.

How can this be, I ask myself, there is almost nothing where a mother was once. The place is emptied; she is just one of the fill-ins. Amnesia left an empty space where there was a mother. She desperately tries to make that empty space as if there is somebody occupying it. But there's no one there, I checked it twice.

She said I went to war and she was afraid that I might not come back. And she prayed every day for my soul.

You can continue praying, I said to myself. I haven't come back yet. I'm still at war, can't you see? I'm still fighting against the demons of my amnesia. I have fallen into the depths of oblivion and I might never come back.

She brought some of my things, they might help me get my memory back.

A red and black music box I got from my father on my fourteenth birthday. One of its plastic joints broke and the lid was loose but it was still functional. I open it and a metallic sound floods the room. I cannot remember the song but I feel like it is one of the most beautiful things that I have ever heard. A red light winks in the rhythm of the music. The music box is empty but it is beautiful as it is, red cloth padding its inside walls.

The golden roses growing in the corners give it a rococo look. It is supposed to be a jewelry box. But there are no jewels. The music is sometimes enough.

My favorite green cup. You always said it is your favorite cup though you kept admitting that there is nothing special about it. It is just a green cup. But it was the cup that you bought, she says and her eyes go even further into her skull. It is the first cup that you personally bought.

If I could only read the sequence of lips that have touched its margins then I would know the rest. This first layer is always missing. How can you go on when the first layer is missing. The missing part is always the most important part. The hands that from time to time had held the cup close to the lips. Those hands are not mine. There is a broken string between me and those hands, things don't add up. Just like in a puzzle the pieces do not match. My hands and those hands are two separate things, dissimilar, though they look just the same.

Mom, I'm afraid you've already lost me, I whisper.

Don't say that, she says and she starts crying, big tears rolling down her face. Please don't say that, please don't say that. Say that you said that just like that, without meaning it. Please, don't say that, I have not lost you yet. You will remember everything. Every damn thing that you did, every little thing, no matter how insignificant. Say that you are not yet lost, say that you said that just like that, say that you were actually joking, say that it is one of your japes. Say that I haven't lost you yet. Haven't-lost-you-yet! I-haven't-lost-you-yet! Haven'tlostyouyet.

I cannot comfort a mother who is no longer a mother, because I am a son who is no longer a son. So she leaves without the comfort that I should have given her. It looks like my father stopped trying because he no longer came after his last visit. So did my brother. I cannot blame them for quitting; I would have done the same.

The nurse comes, gives me my medication and then leaves.

The young doctor comes and checks the charts, checks my bandages, my lungs, my heart, writes something on the charts then leaves almost without saying anything.

I get back to the bag of things my mother had brought earlier. A miniature ocean of dismembered things. There is another box but it does not look like a music box because it is made out of wood and it is too light

to be one. It has sculpted margins, little triangles and circles symmetrically carved around the lid. Somebody filled in the little holes with a red pen. The lid is dirty from the fingers that touched it and I can even see some fingerprints on it. Inside I find some miniature toys, a porcelain squirrel, two cracked seashells, a pink comb, empty perfume bottles, a little doll, and some segments of paper cut from an old paper. I try to make out the purpose of those paper segments but they do not seem to follow the logic of a specific purpose.

There is also a picture in it. A blond guy sitting on the front steps of a house next to another guy. They're smiling at each other, their hands juxtaposed, one the shadow of the other, their smile radiant like finally there is some meaning in this world.

But there is no meaning in this world. So I wonder what are they smiling about. One the mirror image of the other, one smiling more beautiful than the other. The image is almost unclear as if the person who took it was in a great hurry, as if he or she was afraid that the moment would fade and disappear forever and decades would have to pass until such occasion comes again. A smile like planets aligning. The sun finally together with the moon.

I try to make out the rest of the picture but there are no more clues so I focus on their clothes. The blond guy is wearing a white shirt and a black tie. His trousers are also black. His shoes are shining. The other one, lighter in skin tone, is wearing a blue shirt and a red bow-tie, black trousers and shoes.

They are not facing the camera.

The blond guy is holding his right hand on his right knee keeping it close to his body while the other hand is used to support the weight of his body as he leans toward the other guy. The other guy is positioned almost the same, his left hand holding the left knee, his right hand propped against the white steps of the house.

It's like they're saying something, their words escaping through their teeth.

Let's look at the camera, I say.

No, he says. Don't look at the camera. At least I'm not going to look at the camera, I want to be caught just like that, instantly, without being ready.

I give him the biggest smile I've got. We are the valedictorians after all. We both got the highest grades in our group and our professors decided not to make a distinction between the two of us. So we both held a speech in front of all the students and the parents. That is why I got the bow-tie as opposed to a regular tie. Two set at least a difference between us.

Come on, guys, I can't wait here forever, my mom says.

She is holding the camera.

These shoes are killing me, I can't even keep my balance anymore.

Those shoes are new. They were bought for the occasion. They're red and shiny with a big bow on each of them. She is wearing her red favorite dress, she even went to a hairdresser explaining that she had to look special because valedictorian speeches happen once in a lifetime.

So I give him my best smile and he gives his. Our best smile. And without expecting it I hear the click of the camera. We've been taken somewhere else, who knows where. I've been taken here, in this room, and left without my memories. I don't know where he's been taken.

And I don't know if this is a real memory of just an illusion, or of my brain's way of effacing my continuous taunting. I guess I will never know, I'll never be able to make the difference between real memories and fake ones.

There is another picture in the box, at the bottom, under the newspaper pieces. It is a portrait of a dark-haired guy in his early twenties. It was taken outside, somewhere on a field. The sun makes his face look like a mask of gold. But the smile is gone. It is as if the sun had locked his expression into this eternal state of solitude and sorrow. Like there is no turning back from the things that had happened already and you stand helpless in front of such force. The portrait resembles one of those paintings from which you cannot fully grasp the meaning. One of those paintings in which you hear two simultaneous voices speaking to you at the same time. The voice of the painter and the voice of the represented figure.

Here there's the voice of the photographer and the voice of the subject. His voice translucent, transfixed into pure light.

So I part my lips because I want the picture to be good. The camera is so silent that I barely manage not to burst into a terrible laughter. But I am in full control of my emotion.

Is that good, I ask him.

Yes, you just need to relax your face.

I close my eyes for a moment and try to relax every muscle in my body including my face. The sun is really helping me to calm down. It is a pleasant setting sun. Then I open my eyes, part my lips, and look at the camera with that look of silent amazement which comes over me when I'm amazed by what humans are capable of. Transporting images into the future. Suddenly everything moves in slow motion. I feel like I have done something terrible. Like I said something to the world that I shouldn't have said. But I look at him, holding the camera and I think that it was the right thing to do. The right thing for everyone.

The camera clicks. A red light goes on and off and I'm out.

Pushed onto paper. But the picture will never be capable of saying what I'm thinking. So my knowledge will be hidden to whomever looks at this picture. They won't see his hands holding me. Setting the frame. Dislocating the space for me.

How did it go, I ask him.

Really well, he says and comes closer.

He now becomes a real person as opposed to the shadow that he has been while handling the camera. Closer and the features appear clear, in perfect order. In a desirable order. His golden hair seems one with the rays of sun.

But I can't really see if it was him or not. It looks like I'm really making this up. So I go through the other objects in the box but none of them have the same effect on me as the two pictures. I have tried those bodies on, like I put on clothes, but I really don't know if it was me or somebody else. That is the most unhappy thing in the world. When you have lost yourself, not knowing who you actually are, waiting for foreign objects to bring your memory back.

Mitosis. Nights divide and conquer.

Faster than the speed of darkness.

In the morning the nurse tells me that my bandage is to be removed today because the wound is completely healed and there is no

need for protection anymore. The young doctor also comes to give me the good news. He tells me that the wound was no bigger than his right fist. It is as if somebody actually had his hand inserted into my skull.

He surely had something to take; I say to myself and smile to the young doctor and the nurse. She starts by releasing the pressure of the bandages. One by one she removes the metallic hooks that held the ends together. I can feel the pressure residing like a defeated cat. I could finally see my hair if there's any left.

Layer by layer the pressure resides. I am slightly light headed and I feel naked as if my clothes had been taken away. The young doctor looks at the wound and says that it is completely closed and cured. But then he is silent and I sense that something has gone wrong again.

Is everything fine, I ask the doctor.

Hm? Yes, everything is fine, the doctor replies. It's just that the wound is gone. There is no sign of it.

Well, you just said that, I add.

There is not even a scar, the nurse says.

What do you mean not even a scar, I ask.

Even the hair has regenerated and grown over the place where the wound should have been. There is absolutely nothing left to see, the doctor says.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing, I ask him.

Considering the situation it is actually excellent, the doctor says.

Too bad for my memory. Maybe I will never have it back, though I must admit that the miraculous healing of my head wound gave me a sparkle of hope. Maybe I'll wake up one day with my memory fully restored and I'll be able to remember things. And the ocean will be silent again and not a mass of dismembered objects floating chaotically around.

We'll keep your antibiotic treatment for three more days just to make sure. In a week or two, after we're finished with all the tests, you'll be able to go back home and work on your memory recovery. I'm afraid there is nothing more we can do here. It's up to you and your brain from then on.

That is such a nice picture, the nurse says.

What picture, I ask but at the same time I realize what she is talking about.

You look so handsome in it. Cute, she says and she gives me one of those big motherish smiles only nurses could give.

I don't even know if that's actually me or somebody else, I add.

Well, he looks just like you. There's no doubt about it. He has the same hair, the same eyes. Everything about him is so beautiful. She takes the picture and looks at it again, with even more attention. Then she looks at me, and at the picture again.

Yes, she says, he's definitely you. There's no doubt about it.

I have a look at it. He does resemble the shadows I have seen in the nurse's eyes. He might be me but I feel like I'm no longer him, though we look alike.

Anyway, the young doctor says, from now on you'll have full permission to wander through the surrounding areas of the hospital.

Thank you, doctor, I say and the young doctor leaves the room with a huge smile on his face.

This is definitely something I rejoice in. From now on I will be able to walk around the front yard as long as I want without being continuously monitored by one of the nurses.

Can I go now, I ask the nurse and she says I can do that.

I take a wrapper and go outside. Surprisingly, I can find my way out pretty fast despite the labyrinthine structure of the hospital. I peek through the open doors as I pass by them and see other people in beds just like mine. Some of them are watching vacantly outside, others are talking, smiling, singing, crying, reading.

There is a pleasant sun outside. Patients and nurses walk around the courtyard either with their hands in their pockets or gesticulating as they talk to each other. Why this constant need to use the arms for talking?

I look for my favorite spot and sit in the same chair I sat last time I went out into the front yard. The murmur of the water is quieting so I sit down without taking my eyes from the angel sitting graciously atop the flowing water, his hands raised in a sign of furious blessing as if we, those that stand under its eyes, have made something terribly wrong and now we refuse its blessing. The angel is almost frowning, the muscles of its arms tightened, veins visible, ready to burst.

She's very beautiful, isn't she, somebody says and I turn to see who it is.

A man, in his early twenties, sat beside me. I looked at him but he didn't take his eyes off the angel.

How do you know it is a 'she', I ask him.

Well, angels aren't supposed to be females, he replies.

Personally, I have always perceived angels as being asexual creatures. That is why I always refer to them with 'it', so I won't have to do a gender differentiation.

He doesn't take his eyes off the angel.

What is your name, I ask him.

I don't remember, he says.

You've lost your memory.

Yes, he replies, I lost my memory. I don't remember my name.

What about the names of other people, have you forgotten those too?

Yes, he says, I can't remember names.

If I close my eyes, the murmur of the water resembles the sound time makes when it passes away. If I focus on it time will go faster because I get lost in the sound. I feel like I'm forgetting myself, I'm forgetting amnesia. It is a form of revenge. Fight amnesia with amnesia. It won't bring my memories back, I already know that, but at least I'll make my amnesia furious. I go away with the water through the rusty pipes and into the marble of the fountain. It is a febrile state, like falling into the arms of sleep. The murmur is like a hum, distant, colorless, and swirling into spirals, ascending. Like a sort of whip in slow motion. Like the sleep you get when you put your head on the table and try to get a few minutes of detachment from whatever you are doing. The muscles twitch one by one but the hum is so distant and it comes in waves now. There is an airscrew moving behind my eyes, deep in the skull, there, where the image turns upside-down. The mind opens like a lotus flower, its many layers visible. But the heaviness of tissue is cumbersome when you have lost your memory. I cannot repair this dead tissue because it knows that memories will never come back. It is a self-destructive mechanism full of glitches I cannot resolve.

What about the picture, he asks me.

This voice, I say to myself, it is like the rays of sun penetrate through the thick branches of trees. But he is there, sitting on the chair next to me, more beautiful than ever, his blond hair radiating. I had to cover my eyes.

You left me, I say.

No, that is so not true, he replies, they had taken you away from me. They took you into their world and what was I supposed to do?

Did you take that picture? Were you holding the camera?

Yes, I did take the picture, he says. It was a beautiful day, wasn't it?

Yes, it was, I reply. Just like this one.

Words get lost, I think. Their vibrations turn into a soft movement until they disappear. They resemble the murmur of the water. Then the murmur is so loud that the words don't make sense anymore. We have to find a solution for this softening of vibrations, turn their soft sound back into powerful vibrations. Like hitting a wall with your foot or with a metallic cup. Carefully, not to make a hole through the wall. Because then the words will be too loud. The words get through no matter how thick the wall is. The thick wall will store the words into its layers of brick. So that whoever shall push his or her ear against the wall shall hear the words coming out. The procedure can be repeated a thousand times, innumerable times, until the wall crumbles, until you can take a brick out and smash it with your fingers. But when you lose your memory the wall is too thin and it has big holes in it so that the words get through as they are, naked, and you no longer need a metallic cup to make some noise, the words are noisy enough. Because of the thinness of the wall words shall go through it, return if they may, but never store into the brick layers of the wall. You may push your ear against the wall many times, in infinite ways but you shall never hear the words again unless there is somebody there to utter them once more. But as you may have already guessed there is no one there to do that, and even if there is somebody there, on the other side, the words will never come out right. Because a string of words never comes alone. It comes with feelings and names, and meta-meta something. When the wall is thick, the words refer to themselves. On the contrary, when the wall is thin the words always refer to you. To me, for instance. The words may say 'to me' but they actually

refer to a different type of me. Then the person on the other side of the wall has evil intentions. The other has always-evil intentions.

I push my ear against the wall. I do hear words but they are strings of sounds. If you wake up now you'll have the feeling that you have read a novel in your sleep or, with and extravagant luck, mother inspiration has offered you a novel so that you rush now to a piece of paper to write the words that have shown themselves in your sleep.

But how can I transcribe streams of sounds if my hands have never done such a preposterous thing before. To you, escaped from the claws of amnesia, the words will come in strings like children on a trip with their teacher, hand in hand, amazed by the recording capacity of your brain. To me, a common amnesiac, the strings of words will appear only as vibrations varying in pitches and rhythms. And my mind, incapable, shall take those strings of words and indelicately translate them into illogical chatter.

Hey, wake up, I think its time to get back.

I open my eyes to an inexplicable evening darkness. The guy in his early twenties standing beside me while I'm sleeping on a rough bench.

Where are we, I ask him.

In the front yard. You fell asleep at one point and I didn't know what to do, so I carried you and put you on this bench.

How much time have I been knocked out, I ask him.

A few hours, he says.

Where is he, where did he leave? As I ask him I can see the desperate look on his face.

Who are you talking about?

The blond guy I was talking to, beside the fountain, I say but at the same time I can see that this explanation makes no sense to him. There was a blond guy there, we talked, don't you remember?

You talked to nobody today except me, he says and gives me a big assuring smile. I think we should get back, the nurse is going to be angry, it is way past the night call. I thought that the air might do you good.

Thank you, I say and I get up. He places his hand under my shoulder and helps me get up. Where is your room? I'll take you, he says.

I don't really know, I'll figure it out when we get into the main hall of the hospital.

When I got there I felt like the place was so familiar that I didn't even have to think too much about getting back to my room. The nurse was already waiting for me and gives a desperate cry when she sees me.

What happened, she asks him.

Nothing bad, he replies, he just fell asleep on the bench, the sun did him good.

Yes, but the evening took that all away. You should have brought him earlier, I thought he was lost. Hopefully, he won't get a fever again.

I am carried into my room and into my bed. I feel like the cold of the evening has crept into my bones. I shudder at the thought that another night is coming.

Mitosis. Nights divide and conquer.

Strings of sounds and vibrations untranslatable like the steps taken by the poet while walking back from the poem to the world and from the world to the poem. The helplessness of amnesia is like that, knowing that poems come to you at night but not being able to push them against a sheet of paper. Memories come back sometimes assuming the shape of poems or short little stories. You say they are fictional but they're actually not. Amnesiacs are apoetical beings. They grow limbs but they don't grow words. Even a tree remembers things. That is why it is always better to tell something to a tree than to a real person. Scribble your name on a tree and it will remember you for a longer while than a real person does. Your name is always painful to them, that is why their memory of you is of mixed feeling, hate and love at the same time. Love for having them as witnesses of your name and hate for using such a sharp object to imprint memories. I wish I had my memories scribbled onto my brain. I would have had them now.

Who was that, I ask the nurse in the morning.

Whom are you talking about, she asks.

The guy that helped me yesterday. The young guy, I say.

He is one of our patients. He was brought two days after you were brought, she says.

What's his name, I ask.

We actually don't know, we have no information about him. No files, no records. He was found wandering around but when he was asked

what exactly he was doing he said he did not remember. He's one of the amnesiacs.

I presume I'm also one of those amnesiacs, I say.

Yes, she says, you and some others.

This 'other', I think, is like a name already. It has become a name. The amnesiacs, the other, the deleted, taken back to their roots and at the same time being denied those roots. The nameless named the other. The queer, hybrid minded looking for unknown things. I'm afraid I need to be saved despite the fact that I am the protagonist of my own story. The hero that never dies. There is always a happy ending. But amnesiacs do not have happy endings because first of all we have forgotten the actual meaning of a happy ending, for that matter we have even forgotten the meaning of happiness, though the definition of happiness remains there imprinted we lose those examples of happiness which we have encountered during our existence. How could you know what happiness is if you have not felt it on your skin? You don't know what 'cold' means if you haven't tried it on your skin. What is not lost is the actual place of those words in a sentence. You say you're cold but the origin of that word is unknown though you know what it means. Coldness is the word remembered by my epidermis, embedded in layers of skin and nerves. Sour is the word remembered by the body not by the brain. Love is the word embedded in the heart, you may say, but I disagree. Love is the word remembered everywhere in the body, including palms, lips, cheek, chin, chest, arms, back, feet, heels. It's not a travelling word because it does not need to travel, it is already there, everywhere. You are not aware of that word though you always say it. It's like you're saying your prayers and at the same time you think about something else. Love is a word that works as the body works, mechanically, fluids filling its veins, muscles stretching it, making it more like a fetus in a womb. Yes, but just like a fetus in a womb its view is limited. It cannot surpass the limits of the womb.

The word love is always a proper word.

There is a proper way of holding hands.

There is a proper way of talking.

There is a proper way to love. Like nobody has loved before. There is a proper way to speak though what I can speak is always larger than

that. Love stops at the womb, at the entrance. Love begins at the womb, exiting. Because when exiting there is no more visible chemistry functioning between two bodies. So love begins and it becomes the invisible chemistry working on strings of words though words may sometimes affect this link.

Words may fall heavily.

Love is the proper word.

Love is not the proper word.

Love may be the proper word.

In different contexts love may be the proper word. When you cannot hold hands in public. There must be no publicly displayed affection for us amnesiacs. Not unaffected by that I hide under the bed and into the closet.

And love turns into a sin.

And sin turns into love. And, please, what shall I do, die, forget?

Yes, forget, turn the clock back, there, at exiting the womb, when the world is not the world and the words are not yet words. Love is not yet love and after a while you shall know what to do and what not to do. Until love becomes this passive knowledge like the passive knowledge of death when you are young and don't expect it to come. So you live but you can't live the way you want to.

I cannot live the way I want to. So I live anyway. Because I was pushed back, back, back, where and when the seed is not yet divided by the will to grow because the earth is too arid and memories have not been yet wasted. Memories are yet to begin. Love is yet to be divided.

But love is already divided, even before it starts. Even before exiting the womb. Love divides in the colorless and silent spectacle of deoxyribonucleic acids. The tragic spectacle of a crippled code trying to give its best.

There, molecules have already fallen into place.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I think a week has passed. I count the nights because the days are always divided. The young doctor has been coming and going, taking tests and bringing results. All to no avail. There is no explanation for my loss of memory.

What about the other amnesiacs, I ask the doctor.

We don't know, there have been no cases of recovery yet. But we are working on it. There may still be hope.

When I meet the other guy he says that his parents are considering taking him back home because there seems to be no hope left for them.

But also for me, he says, there is no more hope left. I have tried, I am still trying but there has been no memory yet. I'm still in the darkness of my amnesia.

I have never had any hope of recovery, I tell him. I feel like I'm too far gone into this darkness.

I can do nothing to soothe this sorrow, he says.

I know, but thank you for actually thinking about it.

I myself could not offer something in return. Some things cannot be repaid, like this loss of memory. Everything is deleted, even the things that were waiting to be repaid. Now things are stuck into the air. Some objects do not move without the use of memory. They freeze, just like that, like a tape set on pause. My other life, my true life is now pausing in the midst of its descent towards death. But death will overlook that. It will act as if nothing has happened. And those things will stand frozen in the air until they'll turn into dust and disappear because the one who put them there is no longer aware of their presence. Presences are no longer felt.

I am so alone, I say and at the same I realize the actual state of my condition. My mother, broken, had lost her hope last time though she wanted to display the opposite thing. The absence of my father, who had come to my bed two times, marked everything but his trust in my yet inexistent recovery. I saw my brother only once since I was brought into this hospital. Most definitely, he shares the opinion of my father. One lost son is better than one that has lost his memory. Father usually work like

that when it comes to sons. Though I don't know my father that much I know all the other fathers in this world. Not to be constrained to choose between two probably equal brothers he prefers to think that one is lost and focuses all his fatherly attentions to this new son which takes the power of both. I believe it is a mode of reducing sibling rivalry to almost nothing.

You can come with me if you want, he says and places his hand over my shoulders. We'll try to go through this together. We'll make some memories together.

The young doctor had told me that he sent a letter to my parents in order to inform them on my future release but the hospital got no answer from them. They probably thought they should let this go hoping that I'll get lost into some jungle and there, submitted to the trials of savagery I'll miraculously become their son. Still, I tell him that I'll be waiting here at the hospital for three more days, to give my parents a chance to get to realize that they still have some hope for me. That memories can be built layer by layer, they can be brought back and though there is sometimes almost no sign of recognition I'll try my best to place those new memories where they should have been in the first place. I'll put all my childhood memories in the drawer with the other childhood memories, and those of adolescence into the respective drawer. Arrange my memories as socks and freshly ironed clothes. Write journals and then hide them. And after a while act surprised having found a journal from my early childhood. I would reinvent myself. But this would happen only when I'll be offered a second chance by them. I know, it's an unfair game, unfair to me. Maybe it is not my fault that I've lost my memory. Maybe there was no war, maybe it was just an amnesia epidemic and a lot of youngsters got affected. Maybe I did go to war against something more powerful than me. Maybe I got punished for that, I don't actually know. But I need that second chance.

Then I'll wait for you if you want, he says. I'll tell my parents to let me stay for a few more days so that the doctors will make sure that everything is fine with me. Then we can go.

I lean against him and he drags me closer to him as if to make me more comfortable.

It's fine, everything will be fine, he says.

And for one flash of moment I actually believe that everything will be fine, that there is nothing that can stay in the way of a new beginning. Nothing is more crystallized than the promise of somebody you don't know that things will mend and they'll eventually acquire that air of familiarity that I so long for. You see, there is this weakness that comes when you are most vulnerable and somebody else, despite the almost similar state of vulnerability, tells you that things will change somewhere in the future that things will change for the better. It's like you are at the end of the battle and there is one more strike which you have to perform and you suddenly feel pity for your future victim and consequently for yourself, right when you have stopped fighting against your conscience and you think that death has been tricked into believing you dead. Then, at the right moment something is broken and something is opened.

I'm going with you; I say and give him my best, biggest smile I got.

That's the spirit; he says and gives probably his best and biggest smile he's got. I have never seen him smiling like that. And right there he was the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen though I haven't seen much after my sudden inexplicable amnesia.

When I go back to my room I find the nurse waiting for me there and I tell her what he had just told me, about going to his parents, about trying to recover whatever memories might be out there. And though I try to use as many words to explain it to her she doesn't seem to share my unending joy. I know that nurses shouldn't get emotionally involved in their patients life but this is something great for me. She tries to explain that what I'm doing is wrong and that he is a man, and such things are not morally viable, even religiously viable, and he's got a family and who am I to interfere with his recovery. And she gets carried away and starts screaming that whatever I'm thinking is wrong, and we youngsters do not understand the order of things, and that God will punish us, if He hasn't already punished me and him.

I can hear the words, I can see her lips moving and I understand that she is actually trying to say something to me, something that I do not understand, but I can't make the general meaning of what she is trying to say. What order of things, I ask myself. But I can see that she is saying something against me and for one moment I look at her and think that she can't stay in my way. My knowledge of actual obstacles is scarce but deep

down I know that something went wrong before I lost my memory, and they know about it and I shall probably never find out.

It's like forgetting. Not understanding is like forgetting immediately. The words are barely out and they are already forgotten.

She leaves in a fit of anger still gesticulating, mumbling words that I can no longer hear and discern. I stand frozen in the air and I feel that this is no longer about my loss of memory but something else that went wrong.

Next the young doctor visits me and starts taking down things in his little notebook, writing furiously on his charts.

I'm afraid we can no longer help you, and we have done everything we could. Your parents have not responded to our call to come and pick you up. I'm afraid you'll have to do it on your own. We have failed.

Failed in what, I ask him. It isn't your fault I've lost my memory.

The young doctor seems for once lost looking at me with a desperate look I haven't seen before in him.

The Doctor: Yes... [*pause*] It isn't our fault.

Me: [*pause*] It's nobody's fault. [*emphatically*] I have done nothing to deserve this. I could spend the rest of my life rummaging for answers and never find them.

[The doctor stares at him then writes something on his charts. Thinks for a moment as if preparing a long speech]

The Doctor: But maybe it is your fault and you don't remember, maybe you don't have to remember that fault.

Me: What makes you think that.

The Doctor: [*pause*] For no reason. I apologize for that.

[The doctor exits]

The powerlessness of mitosis. Watch it close. Cells do not want to divide but they are forced to do that. Cells lack the will of division but they still divide. They hope to become one and that hope lingers until the last speck of body is not yet broken. It's like holding hands. Pull division with their fake hands but push it away with their fake feet. Desiring it but despising it. But they still do it, disgusted with themselves. Caught in the forbidden ecstatic of procreation, development, another mitosis and then death. They do not rejoice in this mitosis. It's like splitting souls. But what

is outside is always the most important aspect. We need to split though we want to be one. It's this doubleness I hate.

I go to sleep hoping that the night will divide this day and make this divided perspective bearable. I stop fighting it and try to enjoy the limitations of my memory and consequently this world.

Nights divide and conquer. Nights divide my thoughts into tiny pieces. I have to focus on one piece and that piece will divide into other pieces. Mitosis of thought that will soon invade me and not let me sleep. Until I imagine this long hall with a lot of doors on each side. Until I close the doors of my thought and everything is silent. Then I fall asleep.

When I wake up I find him there, waiting for me to wake up. I close my eyes and try to go back to sleep because I think that he may be one of the leftovers sleep has left on my retinas. Sleep comes with a shudder and I fall back into it.

The next time I wake up he is still there.

You know, I tell him, I first thought you are one of my morning hallucinations. Sometimes, I even consider myself an illusion, or the bad dream of a creator who was once left alone with a piece of meat.

It is so easy when you don't have a memory. Life has not yet taught you some of the essential things. Life has not shown you its entirety.

At the moment I live surrounded by words, names.

Love is a name for that, and you point at it like you would say 'that is a pen' and 'that is an apple'. 'Apple' is a name for that, and you point at it. 'Love' is a name for that, and then you point at it. It's so easy when you have lost your memory.

I am real, he says. The doctor was so furious today that he made me feel real for the first time since I've lost my memory.

[We amnesiacs have an excuse; our life is shorter as opposed to those with a complete memory of having already lived a full life]

What did the doctor tell you?

He said that all my tests were negative and that there is nothing more they could do to help me and that my parents were informed and that I will be released immediately without further help from the hospital.

Strangely enough he said the same thing to me. As if it was my fault my memory is gone.

It is not our fault, he says. This is a faulty creation. The gods have not foreseen this glitch into our system. Into their system since we were made according to their own appearance.

It is only the appearance, I say, the rest is just oblivion.

When you get too close to something that thing will burn you. So every time I get closer to you I burn. I will get burned if I get too close to my memories. So I can see that burnt side of my brain, where the memories sleep damaged. Amnesia is one of those latent illnesses. Amnesia is like a tiny slip of the hand, a twitch. I never wanted anything so much. The possibilities not unseen, latent love, latent beauty lingering in bodies unseen before.

He leaves with the promise to come back.

It is already dark, objects submerged into their own shadow.

Again this night will divide the day because days will never divide nights. I close the doors of my thought and the long hallway is silent once more. Memories sleep crippled beside me along with his promise that everything is going to be fine. But at the same time I am afraid because he said that as if there is no world out there. Like we are going to be alone. You see, we are alone actually. This world has forgotten us. The rest of the world suffers from amnesia while we are the only survivors. But then it means that we did something terribly wrong. Something went terribly wrong.

But I need to keep these thoughts behind closed doors. Sleep comes unexpectedly like every hour of death. I let my body fall into this half-death. My breath is one. One with the rest of the air. My breath will find a way as it always does through the infinite space occupied by air. Oxygen. One with the sleep, one with the marble sheets.

I am not myself. I do not control my body into this.

Breath divides.

I open my eyes and I see him there. Is it morning yet, I ask him and he says no, it's not morning yet. Then what are you doing here, I ask him, and he says I do not know, I cannot sleep. You on the other hand have no problem with that.

Am I hallucinating again, I ask him.

No, I'm real, he replies and presses his lips against my left temple.

What are we doing, I ask him.

Nothing, he says, just go back to sleep.

I close my eyes and try to get used to the two breaths going out at the same time. From time to time I stop breathing just to make sure that he is still there. When I hear his breath I start breathing again because I know he is still alive, he is still there. Sleep comes unexpectedly.

I wake up again after what seems to have been few minutes and I stretch my hand to see if he is still there.

I'm here, he says, go back to sleep.

I go to sleep and wake up again but it is already morning and he is no longer there. The pillow seems untouched and once again I fear that he was another hallucination, the symptom of a sick mind. The deepened expression of burned nerves and memories. From that darkness of the past he is a fake hand reaching out. The cancerous pseudopod of a evil intentioned memory. Or the hidden manifestation of a will which is outside me but is reaching into me. One of those feverish states a sick man feels when septicemia is in its terminal instant. Or the illusion of water when thirst is at its peak.

The doctor comes and tells me that he has just signed my discharge papers and that I need to leave the hospital this afternoon.

I sign my discharge papers and my skin starts resembling the paper sleeping under my hand wounded by the sharp tip of the pen, dirty with ink. I sign it and couldn't help thinking that I'd wish to become one with the rest of the things. To do that is to be forgotten by the world. An unmoving object is dead.

The doctor goes away leaving me with a copy of my discharge papers and I try to pack the few things I have. The wooden box, the music box, everything could be stored in boxes when you are an amnesiac. And each box contains a version of yourself. This is my childhood here. This is my adolescence.

I look at the wooden box and trace its margins with my fingers. I take the two pictures out of the box and I can hear them whispering.

Photo: I am your childhood and your adolescence.

Me: [*pause*] how can you have two great things imprinted on such a small piece of paper?

Photo: [*talking like some sort of scientist*] because, the photo tells me, everything is contained. Each memory is stored into another memory, like in a Russian doll. As you open one there is another one.

Me: Where is my childhood?

Photo: Here, in this smile.

[And the photo opens like the wings of a huge prey bird, radiating smile, he closes his eyes and he can see the two bodies becoming one, and the sun one with the face, and the landscape one with time, and time one with words, and words one with love]

Me: I can see it.

Photo: I am your old age.

Me: Where?

Photo: Here. Press your fingers against me.

[He presses his thumbs against the picture and the picture closes like the shadow of a flower which closes at night, the faces of the two bodies contract into folds of paper]

Photo: You are one with the paper.

[He notices that the smile does not disappear despite the fact that the paper is almost folded]

Photo: You are my goodbye as I am your goodbye.

Me: What will I have then?

[Pause]

Him: [*standing in the doorway*] Are you ready to leave?

Me: Yes, I have no more things to pack. Do you?

[Pause]

Him: I have no things. In fact, I'm not going to take anything with me. I need to leave these things behind.

[Pause]

Him: Maybe you should do that too.

Me: Maybe I should. I should forget everything. Everyone should forget, take this forbidden sip without being cursed with amnesia. The world does not need to lose its memory. The world need not turn upside-down.

[He stops and stares frozen in a half-movement his hands lifted halfway his chest as if holding onto something though empty handed]

Let's go, he says. So I leave.

Part Two

CHAPTER ONE

When one has no memories, well, I might just lose my sense of objectivity here. When I have no memories I build scenarios. It's the best thing to do. They take the edge off. And in the morning, hair starts growing out of my eyes.

I watch you as you escalate the pleasure oozing from the ends of your body, and I turn away. It is the poetry I don't want to hear, and the taste I wouldn't want to have on my tongue. So you drive me away, with your hand. It's like you're trying to keep the flies away. And I try to slip my hand under your shirt but you push it down. I'm the sort of disease you wouldn't want on your skin. The skin, it is already dead, I tell you, but you refuse to admit it. So in pleasure we meet. Like two endorphins dancing on a jerk-off fest. We meet only there, because it's the only place where my memory kept you alive. And I slid my hand into your boxers and try to caress you, and you look the other way like the screen of the computer is much more interesting than what I'm doing. I'm trying to love you. And you use that awkward smile against me as if I've said something dirty. It's not, I say, let me love you. I lift your shirt up and try to kiss your bellybutton. Only pleasure, you say, that's the middle-ground. But where we meet there's a wasteland, and it's so full of body, and so empty of everything else. Please, don't touch the dead cells, you scream, make them vibrate; they'll give you the warmth you need. But it feels like your warmth is not yours anymore, and you say you want to be here with me. Your body is edgy, so is mine, but if I lean too much against you you'll start pushing me again. Down, you say, down. So I sleep on the floor, because that is what I'd do for you and your dead cells, screaming out heat. The heat is no longer yours. My body is made out of endorphins. That is why you keep me fully dressed. You know, it is like a journal, this love of ours, made out of recording my attempts at touching you, the

untouchable body. You come back only when you feel alone, and you say that thing I hate so much: I cannot live without you.

And there is no fear of being rejected. It's the fear of not being loved, and to long for affection is a tedious road to be taken, unhealthy, obsessive and not passionate as some may say. I obsess over the things I do not have, and one of those things is affection. But just like the body finds its way between the sheets, thus I find my way to you in this night of thought. My skin has this thirst for you, and how shall I say this for you to hear, if not to say that, yes, I long for affection, like a dog in the morning after a difficult and sleepless night guarding the things that one day might have no value. I miss your hand on my back, is not that also normal, natural, within the bounds of common sense? Yet, what am I supposed to do when you have to sleep into another bed? But just like the body finds its way between the sheets, thus my thoughts crawl over to you. Yes, I totally agree with you, there is nothing to do here, between the sheets, there's just my desire of you, and the smell of sweat. Indeed, there are times when you come and you leave behind the heat, imprinted on the sheets and when I feel it, when I smell it, I can see machines working, and objects growing out of their metallic hands, and I can see how brick by brick houses are built, and birds like black spots drawn over the sky, and, yes, the disappointment, like death, creeping over the scenery, so invisible you could see its eyes.

There might be something wrong with me, I tell him, and he smiles.

Somewhere, something goes wrong, blood types make up a sort of meeting, and they smile because they know that every decision they take will affect future generations of sons and daughters. So, something goes wrong, the line breaks, and some parents fail at it thinking that there is nothing to be done, you can't change the past; might as well not try to change the future. I mean, who knows what might come out of it. So, once in a while something goes really wrong. Kids come out with a wrecked brain, dysfunctional bodies, diabetes, cancer, schizophrenia, that sort of thing, and they smile and say oh, at least we have each other and we love each other, you're perfect, you know, just forget it. You're morbidly obese, it's OK, what I can say is that we'll try to live with that. But the thing is,

obviously, they don't really get it. They're not the ones to live with it. I'm the one who has to live with it, and cry, and die so many times.

I feel intoxicated with this madness I have for you.

So he lights a cigarette. His lips curl around it, the firm grip of two yellowish fingers, and then he looks at me with a look that only a youngster can have. He's innocent, I know, but his smile says otherwise.

Do you like me, he asks.

I am afraid of my own body, I tell him. I was taught to be afraid of my own body. My mother tied my ankles to the bed during the night, so that my hips won't rub against each other. I slept in sessions. Every fifteen minutes I woke up, sweating, my sides aching with that numb pain solitude brings to old people. In the morning she came. I could hear her footsteps, and then the door would open, and she came, and she untied me, and I would squirm between the sheets smelling of urine and sweat, and I would drag my knees to my chest like friends hugging each other after a long time, and I would talk to them while the pain subsided from my back. And I hoped. I cried over my knees and hoped that wings would burst out of my back, and I would be transformed into this sexless archangel. A renegade of the body, neither male, nor female, split but in one piece, so that I could see my mother's face then, reddening with shame and my father throwing me out of the house saying I'm not his son anymore. I'd say I'd always wished to be a son but wasn't able to, because this body is filled with shame. And you taught me that. So I hug my knees. I can't hug those people I want to because this body won't leave me alone. You can't stop it mother. Tie my ankles to the bed. There's a slippery slope to pleasure.

I do like you, I say.

Don't tie my ankles to your bed. I want to feel good while I'm with you.

But this body you see, it won't let me. Count my ribs, do what you want, just don't think while doing it. A child's game, one, two, three, going down, four, five, then stop, I'm afraid you won't like me; you won't like the

rest of me. I'm already pushing against you as I try to count your ribs, one by one, with my mouth. One, two, three, I'm trying not to think, four, five, my ankles are taped to the bed, and my back aches, and wings burst out of your body and you fly.

Mother! Father! I need to tell you something.

I say between my teeth, sweating.

I slept with an angel last night.

And he was beautiful, and I was beautiful too.

There are no such things as monsters, they say, now go back to bed, they don't hide under your bed; they don't hide in the closet, go back to bed. How did he break loose? Go and tape him back to the bed. He slept with an angel all right, and the angel slept with him.

So I tape myself to the bed every night on my own, without my mother's help, so that the angel might return.

But then, it's time once again to go to war with yourself, the war that your ancestors wrote on your palms at night, while you were away. I know I need to seduce you into this, and that you'll have to seduce me into doing this thing we both see inappropriate. My love, tell me, if I forget about words will you make more sense to me? When I look at you I can see the words as they go down your neck like drops of sweat. Yes, they say, forget about words. You'll have to forget about everything. I am forgetting it now. I can see ideas vanishing at this right moment, not like the dust swept under the carpet, no, like breathing dust, stuffing it under your fingernails and sensing the smell of dirt in the morning. They vanish, they truly do. I come closer to you. I can smell my fear, the fear that you might be repulsed and push me away.

Come closer, he says.

As I stretch my leg I can feel the warmth of his body. His breath is not only louder but it now becomes movement. Love is also muscle and blood flow.

Closer, he says.

I can feel the hairs on his leg, and the heat, and the memory that sheets have kept of him. I slip my arm over his chest and put my head on his shoulder. I'm trying not to think, not to apologize, I'm buying my way into a category.

Why are you trembling? He asks.

I'm cold, I say.

Stay here, he says, with me.

He pushes me against him and I feel like this shaking is never going to stop.

It was this dark figure with a pair of ellipsoidal shapes at the top, its entire body covered with an elastic, latex-like cloak. Its extremities were long and thin, and they were four, two of them longer than the other two. And each of those extremities ended in five thinner extremities each bearing a hard shell. The latex-like cloak was warm and pierced by thin short hair. The creature took short breaths and sounds were getting out of its body.

Stay with me, the creature said, stay with me, he said. And he seemed so far away as if whole stadiums full of people stood between us. So I cried over his shoulder without him even knowing. I cried as the creature slept with its ellipsoidal shapes covered with the same latex-like cloak. I cried because I will never know him as he is, he shall always be this creature and little by little I myself will turn into a creature for him, my hands turned into claws, my skin into bitter handwriting, and my love into ink. Here it is, he shall say while spreading the sleepy sheets on the wall and the sleepy sheets shall be stained by ink and not blood. They won't know that ink never existed except in words, those words I wanted to say. The ink will wash away and travel through the city's sewers gathering dirt and unconsumed love.

And then at one point something will happen, something with children sleeping in the hands of men, the same hands where women have slept the condescending sleep of whores, and thoughts that nurtured pleasure itself like a baby in a cradle.

Hold me, I'd say.

And he looks at me like a man looks at his child and for a moment thinks that the child is not his and that mother had slept with other men who have pushed me into her. How strange you look father, how strange I must look to you. And for a moment he stopped in that gaze and he saw like in a mirror the dark figure wearing a pair of ellipsoidal shapes at the top of its head.

I'd say *hold me again* to break the gaze in which my lover frozen stands. At once the sheets feel damp and cold. Tell me, he says, do you remember those grapes? What grapes? I do not remember the grapes but I'm sure grapes are sweet in general and bittersweet when I eat them with you. No, he says, grapes are always sweet, even when we eat them together in the sunset. Try to remember them, the grapes, and the chair, and the backyard. I will try to remember. Remember the grapes that were-always-sweet-even-when-not-eaten-alone, with tears and sorrows absent, because the other one will always bring the sun into your life. Or the other one is always the sun and you are the moon wishing to burn into its flames. What did I do with the chair? We used it to reach for the grapes, and we did. The grapes were out of reach, and they were always sweet because... And he stops. Why were they always sweet I ask him? Because it was *you* back then, before you went at war with the gods. I'm afraid they are holier than us. Do you remember me?

I'll love you until you turn into one of those faceless things which serve the purpose of love and no other purpose. One of those things that come at night, that were never mine but were possessed by the lust of gods taking on human form to feel flesh, to make love to their own shadows.

I do not remember you.

The things I know will never be enough. I know night follows day, and you are somewhere in between those two mighty things, where night doesn't fall into its place. I know that the sea is freezing in the morning, you might already know, because the night bathes into it, watch closely

and you'll see its feet slowly descending from the sky pushing the sun down with its fingertips.

Stop, you're hurting me.

He took a deep breath. He had a strange voice when he whispered. I was so close that I could hear his tongue moving as he spoke, the lips touching each other in what seemed to be a verbalized confession under the form of a poem.

You're ill, my son. My father told me while we were outside and he was trying to explain the way in which the moon and the Earth move by drawing circles in the mud with a stick. You're sick to the bones, there's something in your blood and you won't tell me what. You do know that these were not his exact words. Father had a talent not telling things by their name. He used to say that I'm not allowed to do things, but never told me why. Here, he said, draw a circle in the mud. And I took that black stick and tried to draw a circle on the ground. I did my best, or so I thought. The circle came out imperfect, more like an egg. I thought it was perfect taking into consideration the quality of the support on which I drew it. He drew a circle next to mine and his was rounder, closer to perfection.

Look at that circle, he said, and then look at yours.

I compared the two circles and I had to admit there was a big difference between the two. His was better, obviously. And he told me that inside the circle he could see my illness. There, he said, that's a circle that won't be able to provide for all the other circles in this world. It is a circle of disgrace; all the other circles will laugh at it and won't take it seriously, because it's not perfect. The Earth did not stay still in those moments and I could swear that the next night, when I was alone, the Earth took on this new course, circling inside father's circle. My circle is ill, I told myself, the Earth and the moon will never take on that course because it's a faulty course.

My love for you is a faulty course. This love would only lead to a sort of end I cannot foresee. The world will laugh at this love. This love is not falling apart, because we want it, and because we want it so much it

will fall apart. Even if we hold hands, our hands won't be strong enough. Though we dream of it there will be nobody to shed a tear at our grave. There won't be people coming from the other circle saluting us and saying that they will go back home, to their own perfect circle and say to our parents that we have grown into fine men, that we have been brave accepting the less perfect circle. There's no such thing. The gods have smiled and are still smiling. Even though when you were little the priest told you that, in some strange way, laughter's like a devilish vice that makes people fat, despite the priest's laughter when nobody was looking.

Somewhere, something went very wrong.

It was like a slip of the tongue, a sudden twitch, a click.

And then centuries have turned that slip of the tongue into law.

They've turned it into order, and feet into miles, and miles into galaxies.

At night I feel like I want to grow another body.

There are no places to run to, yet so many places to hide into.

I like to watch people. Yet, I believe I don't watch them in a voyeuristic, awkward sense. I like to watch them as they walk, talk, and do all those things that make them human. I like to watch them as they kiss, hold hands, smile. And I imagine myself in their shoes. I think of holding hands, kissing, smiling, being watched from afar. But I feel like I've already lost into this battle, before it even began. By some unknown reason, or some unknown law, people turn their faces away, like there's a sudden recognition and they know me. But I don't know them, and what can I do but hide within my thoughts. And love them as I never loved you or me before. But to sacrifice the last drop of affection that I have saved for my deathbed, when at least one person shall gather beside my bed and be glad that finally there are no more souls to take care of. Gladly he shall put his palms over my eyes while one tear shall roll down his cheek. At last, the last drop of love is gone. At last the world has been emptied. And in that moment, I won't be able to say things to him, like how much I've loved him and, oh, how much I liked those summer days spent under the

shade of the garden. But, suddenly I shall smile and the physician shall say that it is normal, some people smile when they die. And my smile is just another smile produced at the sight of death. It is not. It is the smile produced by the angel that comes at last and says that my love has not been in vain. No, it was not. At least for me, this love was absolutely not in vain. Because I loved you for a reason and the reason was that reason which made the world move for the first time. It made it twitch. I loved you because there was hope for me, the hope that we shall walk this Earth together, followed by no such things as fear and hate. Like when Adam walked the Earth surrounded by animals. Do you remember those little Bibles for kids? Where Adam and Eve were naked yet covered their genitals with a hand. How afraid were we to look at them? We hid from the scorning eyes of the parents to watch Adam and Eve smiling.

There are so many objects around me. Yet, none of them reminds me of you. You've never sat in the black leather chair and you never told me the sensation you have on your back when you actually sit on it. You've never sat at my table, never stepped on the brown carpet that I have in my kitchen. I'm afraid there is no difference between you and them, the chairs and the carpet I mean; I haven't noticed the slightest difference. You never were useful in this sense. Once you disappeared nothing crumbled because there was absolutely nothing built around you. There were just impressions, sensations, and instances of thought. Like those you have when you're under the shower, those existential issues that come out for no reason.

You'll wonder if this has any sense and you'll want meaning, a story, a narrative with beginnings and ends, a love story in which people die or fall in love so that you could feel the life growing out of these pages. Would you be disappointed if I say that there is no such thing? Would you forget this entire thing I've been trying to explain to you? Or rather keep going until the end? I know I'm afraid to go all the way to the end. Would you like to know why? Because reaching the end would mean facing facts as they are, devilish and beautiful, angelic and ugly.

I can build you houses, have you meet beautiful people but these all would be faceless and they'll recall some general notions you already

have on houses and beautiful people. And what purpose is there in that? None, I'm afraid. What sense of satisfaction could you derive from that?

The truth, you say...

I'm exempted from that rule. It happened when I realized that people were just suspended angels with bare feet and intelligence to make up for their lack of wings. These things happen rarely, he says. Affection, he says. It happens rarely in these parts. In this category, he adds. We are, once you accept the fact, defined sexually, yet not by what you have between your legs but by what you think you have between your legs. I'm not turning this into an apology. You might think it's wrong but I'm afraid it's not. From then on you'll be defined sexually. Your shoes shall be defined sexually, along with the way you walk, talk, even the way your voice sounds. Yes, welcome to my world.

The worst thing has already happened to me, I have lost my imagination trying to find you though I do not think this has been in vain. Many are the instances in which I sat at a table and thought of you thus pushing you into a sort of shape, giving you a pair of eyes, and a pair of lips. I have even given you language, a name.

CHAPTER TWO

Today, I have given myself a name, a different one. So that people won't find out my whereabouts and with this pseudo-name, I, a half creature as I consider myself to be, descend with firm steps into the darkness of my being. I lead a pseudo-life. Anonymously, I walk the streets and the people don't realize that I'm right there under their noses. They keep on thinking that I'm a sort of illusion. They think I can't happen for another fifty years. But I do happen. I happen right now.

I'd say now:

I'd sell my soul to the devil that is how much I love you and I'd forget all of those things that have made me that have made this world work that still make this world spin forward I'd forget about physics and laws that would keep us apart keep us away from logic. So give my soul to the devil in exchange for beauty so that you could love me back as I do love you and all the things there are. Love will never fit into a shoe.

I will listen, like voiceless birds do. I will listen to what the water says when unknown things throw circles over the surface, disturbing its slumber. I will listen to the ponds that take shape after the rain. I'll get out into the light, just love me. But the days will crawl out of this paradise and I'll have to let you go, and what am I going to do without you? I need to let you know that this love is barefooted, empty though great, though marvelous, though the greatest of them all.

I tremble while we make love because I'm afraid life might take this moment away from us.

And it's taking it right now. Between us there will always be mountains of sorrow and illness, and things that need to be forgotten but won't go away, and tears and lumps that stick to your throat, and the urge to vomit every morning. Because if I say now that I love you people will change and I wouldn't want this love to change the things that this

blood-handed God has made for us, I wouldn't want to break the great architecture, the great mechanism for the sake of my happiness and for the sake of us, because, my god, we are not the only ones on this planet and, yes, some deserve it more than we do. So every morning I will wake up thinking of you and I'll cry between the sheets that you are not there beside me, and I'll have to hide my tears because people will start asking questions, and if I drink a glass of wine people will think that I'm celebrating and I'm not, and they'll ask me what's with the wine and I'll have no motives and I'll find myself in awkward situations. So I need to stay silent, hide myself within my flower and feel for you, my love, that almost happiness, the happiness that you've just forgotten while other things touched your skin. And as the day passes by I feel that people are starting to feel pity for me and I don't want that, I don't need their pity. I'll linger a bit more between these sheets and imagine that I also have you or just a similar body that makes me happy, that responds to my voice during the night. And this disease is keeping us apart, this disease growing into my guts. When in love we are hardwired to nurture tumors that, fortunately, don't have skulls tattooed on their forehead, but they smile whatsoever, like death does when at last, my god, absence prevails over presence and pain is transformed into pleasure. I'm so used to this absence that my brain, luckily, has managed to outsmart itself and perceive it as a presence. So I succumb to this path your body has left behind and search you, my love, between the pages of journals I wrote while we were together, in the newspapers, on napkins and towels, hotels, hallways, just waiting for you to appear behind the corner and tell me everything was not wrong and there was a chance but I was too weak to see it coming and so let it pass behind me. Here is the truth, I'm a man and, yes, I love another man. I used to watch him as he played sport in the schoolyard. It's because I'm afraid.

This morning, the silence within the dust resembles the silence that lingers within our forgotten love. I've dreamt this love of ours for so many times and none of those dreams had a sense of outlawing. For hours on end we would lose ourselves within the smell of sweat.

Why can't you just be normal, like all the other people? Your happiness depends here on how strong you are in relation to the others,

on how much climbing your muscles can bear. Mother doesn't know yet, but she suspects it. So you climb the closet in the morning. You are so wrong, my dear, you're not in the closet, you're riding it, like a horse. Forget about the metaphors, you are riding your closet, because you own it. Not like that Jesus thing, bearing the cross others have made for you. You can feel the power riding it. You control it. So mother doesn't know yet, but she suspects it, she had once seen your journal and read about those boys, kissing in the bathroom, behind closed doors. So in the morning she sees you riding your closet, beautifully, majestically, like a powerful woman that rides her boss in bed. And how powerful that woman can feel at times, when she's not alone in her perfect hotel room, crying, thinking that next time she going to hit him in the balls for not divorcing that stupid wife at home. So you ride your closet like that woman does, and your mother is so proud of you because she sees this perfect little man smiling, ready to go out in search for a future that would bring her only the satisfaction of being capable of making such a fine man, with a tie and a clean shirt. That woman, bless that woman, which might lay her eyes on this perfect man, so smart, so handsome. But, over there, yes, there, if you look closely, there is this little thing, a clue, a memory your mother carefully swept out of her way, yes, the flowers you loved, the things you said once and nobody listened, the shoes and the pants, the shirt and that pair of boxers. And everything else, and those things that make your life bearable, and make you live on the inside, closed within your flower. But she refuses to see that, she doesn't want to see that because she's assuming things are going well, she couldn't have made a boy like that. What on Earth is that supposed to mean? Your father on the other hand knows and he forgot because deep down he is so afraid. All men are afraid. That is why your father is at his second wife, second family, that's why he smiles every time he sees you because in you he sees the promise left behind by that forgotten memory. So he tries to make things better. Once he took you home by car, and he saw a girl on the street and he asked you what you make of her, and you said nothing because you know your father is afraid.

I fake it, or at least I try to do that in the hope that no one will ever notice. But when it comes to you I want to give myself away. Your mother

would like to know, imagine how hard it is for her not to know certain things about you. If you come to think of it any mother wouldn't feel at ease knowing her son is hiding something. Because she feels there's something wrong. If you're a homosexual I would like to know, mother says. It's all right mother, I will tell you, and you say it and try to hide as much as you can the fact that you are riding your closet. Why are you telling me this, mother? I've read your journal, son, you were talking about your first time with a man, and it seemed pretty intense. Mom, first of all, you cannot go around reading people's journals like that, they're private, and second of all, what you read is just a part of my latest literary creations, so you don't need to worry about anything. Does your father know? Mom, will you stop it, you're making me uncomfortable. I'm okay with it, you don't need to worry, mother says, and in her mind all kinds of free associations take place, potential partners who are actually old guys who can't get it up and who didn't have the courage to get out of the closet when they were young and they try to compensate that by going for the white or black fresh meat who look desperate enough to get their pants down. And then there's the issue of disease. How many partners did you have up to now? Two you would say, just to feel secure, not too many and yet at least one. But the truth is I haven't had any. Because I'm afraid, because it might hurt, because fathers are not yet used to telling you what you need to do in order to sleep with another man, because commercials show only pretty little girls playing with pretty little boys, and the happy family is always made out of a handsome father with ripped abs and a well-paid job in a huge corporation and a gorgeous female specimen doing three things at the same time, because all the paintings show happy families and you could only assume what the characters are thinking, you could only admire the silence that the artist has to use in order to say so many things, and, of course, because the world is like that and there's nothing you could do. So your mother would naturally assume that going to bed with another man actually means getting sick and not satisfying a natural inclination, a desire. Yes, all right, she would say, but deep down she feels sick to the bones. And there's that guy you like. And there's that guy I like. I like playing with words. And there's that guy I like, the one who sells flowers at the corner, and he's married and has a daughter, and I cannot do a thing about it. When love comes out like that, naturally,

things are much easier. Men riding closets tend to hide from unhindered eyesight. The only thing left to do is to assume things, because that's what we do best.

It hurts so badly when I wake up and you're not there.

Tesoro mio, ti voglio bene. Those are the words that I would tell you in case you were there, but you are not so, and I don't know why, I refrain from talking to myself.

My hands smell like dust. The water won't wash it away. I feel dirty.

You would say that's something normal, maybe it is, I can't argue against it. I am doing something the world is not yet used to. The world needs to forget. It needs to go the other way.

Yes, maybe it's true; you can be romantic with a girl, but not so romantic with a man. Things are different in that area, different view, and different things to do and to feel. It's like letting go. And as easy that may be I feel like it is impossible to really let go. Because I'm afraid, and yes, because I've told you some lies a few minutes ago. My father doesn't know nobody knows yet. I try to tell them but they just won't listen. And at one point you'd think that every physical discomfort that you get is just a punishment for a higher power, trying to tell you that you are indeed doing something wrong.

No, it can't happen to us. That is a terrible thing; it can't really happen to us. There's nothing that we could do because it just can't happen to us.

Are there any other feelings out there? Is there anything else except fear?

Love and then stop loving, start hating and you'll see that even iron will bend under the feathery force of the wind. Love, and then stop loving like there's something better right around the corner. Stop loving like there's something else coming your way. Something inevitable, something you cannot fight against. Cry as if happiness is somewhere out there, so close to you that you could feel its sweat. Happiness smells like God's dirty feet. I want to love you but I can't, because our love, or

whatever this is, whatever we have, is based on a lie and lies just won't do.

To love is to seek vengeance. The vengeance that might help you be at ease with yourself.

But it won't bring you peace. It would only stir the spirits.

That's the biggest lie, that the world is born normal, hard-wired to seek and promote normality. That love is as natural as breathing, as walking, as saying that the sky is blue. And the sky isn't blue. So you don't need to imagine us walking on the beach, watching the sun going down, because the sun won't go down or up if we are together. We'll need to hide. We'll need to be careful.

How quickly love can turn into hate when you open your defenses and start rationalizing things, trying to see them as they are supposed to be seen. There is no right thing to do, you say to me every morning, and I say I agree. I totally agree. But then, the next instant you begin your theory of seeing things as they are. Isn't this love of ours just a sort of weakness that we experience when we are too afraid to wake up alone in the morning? No, you say, it is not a weakness, how could I even think of that? I agree, but just because I like you and just because I'm afraid to wake up alone in the morning.

How did I end up with this over-rationalizing being? Things are not complicated at all. I will explain. Well, in fact, I won't explain, you'll realize it.

(7th of June)

Today I miss somebody. I don't remember who that is. But it hurts badly.

The mornings are so ugly in your absence, my love. I cannot imagine you anymore, images have blurred your presence and I miss you so much that everyone I see has something of you in them. Come back

and love me as you have never done before, as you love all the other people that are a part of your life.

I'm looking for you in this forbidden love of ours, my wings cut. We form an unhappy picture together, as if nature is working against us. Gods have turned their faces away from us.

So, we were quietly eating our ice-creams. He opened the door for me and I stepped into the car. Such a gentleman, I thought, and immediately dismissed the thought; it was serious but ironic at the same time. Men don't do that with other men, unless there's a hidden language of domination. He joined me in the car shortly after. As he went to the other side of the car, ice-cream in hand, his body left a trace of light over the evening sky. The sun was trying to run away from him, and as he crossed my field of vision I suddenly felt so alone as if the greatest dangers of all was about to sweep me away from the face of the Earth throwing me into this pitch dark abyss. He finally got in. The silence and the solitude broke for a few seconds and the rest of the world came all over me as the door opened and closed with a thump. Then the world perished again. The sun drew cruel shadows over his complexion as if trying to make him ugly, telling me to look away. Look for love into some other place except this one, the world outside was telling me trying to get in, knocking against the windows of the car. He was truly the most beautiful man that I had ever seen, and he was so close now, moving around me with the silence of the planets circling around the sun. And there was a thump, and a click, and the sound of a deep breath, and there was perfume, and air, and the sound of clothes, and the sun between us painfully piercing the pores of my face. You are so beautiful, he says, and I say nothing. I can hear the ice-cream melting in my hand. I swallow and my mouth feels dry. Thanks, I say, and at once the world outside starts moving, and the car, and the shadows on his face outlining a sort of battle, and seconds seem like hours as he gets closer and closer to me, and I don't move, fearing that my movement would make dust attack me, and take me away from him. And I can feel his breath now; I can feel it on my upper lip. I feel like grabbing him and pulling him closer but I'm still

afraid of movement. But I stand here frozen while his lips touched mine. *Dolce e deciso*. And suddenly the solitude vanished and now a void opened, greater, bigger. It was the fear of losing him. And our lips parted.

But the silence kept talking through us like kids trying to talk to each other through a wall. I could only hear his breath and my thumping heart. What shall we do? He said. You are so beautiful, I told him. We finished our ice-creams. The world kept talking and moving around us as if nothing had happened, like rain washing over the warm ash of a camp fire. We are after all two bodies. Flesh plus bone plus desire, and as I looked outside through the dark windows of the car the world stopped making sense. The sidewalks had no reason to be where they were, the trees were too silent for that time of the year, the people had only two feet, two hands, and a pair of eyes, and the sun, I have never seen something uglier and crueller than the sun. Yet HE was here beside me. I felt his hand as he was trying to find mine and the open void settled down, stopped screaming, like a baby being fed. And the world made sense again, and again, and the trees started talking. You are so beautiful I told him, and he said he believed me. And I believed him.

And I don't hate you, I hate the world. That is why every time I take a shower I feel like there's a lot of dirt on my skin that I need to clean, take down. Somewhere, something, someone planted this seed into the depths of my body and up until now it has grown into this huge tree that manages to hide me from the sun.

Tu sei il sole della mia vita. Non so cosa farei senza di te.

Every time you say that something breaks inside me. And I want to hear it again. And you say no, no more, imagine all the other people in this world that need a word of affection and don't get it, or they won't get it in the near future. Let's not waste our words of affection. These words are like water, or like food, they need to be preserved. So we stay silent for a while because our vocabulary is filled with words of affection and now you realize you've just said too many, and maybe there is nothing else left to say but "I adore you" and "I wouldn't want to lose you".

The world is so strange today, you say, why don't they just marry and get it over with. That's what I always thought when I was little, why write books about lost love, or sing songs about them when you could just marry them and be together for the rest of your life. But as you stare at the ceiling you begin to see it more clearly. The ceiling is a place of revelation, where thoughts meet and form ideas. Things are not that simple, you see, marriage wouldn't be the solution, I mean, it couldn't be the ultimate solution, marriages fail sometimes, things get nasty, you need to divide things. Marriage would be the failure of everything, of love itself. And you laugh heartily. What a stupid thing to say. We won't get married, love, right?

Because I live in a world of the unknown where no one tells me what is right and wrong, where the decision is always mine to take just because one guy couldn't keep his mouth shut. As simple as that our happiness vanished and we fell into a world filled with sweat.

We won't get married, we won't have kids, and two is already a crowd.

At times, when I hold you I feel like you are just a piece of meat between the palms of my hands. And I kiss your neck just to feel that you are alive. And as I get closer to you I can feel the heat of your body. And I know you are alive. Or, at least, somebody wants me to know that you are alive. So I keep checking your vitals. Within this love I feel like there's the need of constant checking, I need to see if you still love me, men change their minds quickly. Love like there's something better just around the corner.

I fall in love easily, just like that. It's how I fell in love with the flower guy, or the guy that works at the coffee shop. All of them are worthy of attention, all of them are variations of perfection. And you say I'm crazy, that could not possibly be true, not all of them are perfect, I just look at them differently. You turn around and I try to pull you back and you say I shouldn't touch you anymore and I ask you why, and you say because when you say that all of them are worthy of attention it's like you've slept with them, it's like your hands have touched all of them, and I don't want to be one of them, I'm not like the flower guy or the guy that

works at the coffee shop. I'm something different. Of course you are not like them, you are my little treasure. When you first saw me, did you think I was worthy of your attention? You were my little treasure, you were worthy of all my attention. And you still want to escape my touch. Why are you asking me that? Because I'm afraid, you say and you turn away again, because I'm afraid I might lose you, and it's so hard to find a guy like you.

I held his face with the palms of my hands and kissed him forcefully and he yielded back to my affection. That night as we slept together I could swear I saw fear sneaking around the covers, watching us with its yellow eyes.

I've imagined this for so many times that I don't even remember the original of this scenario, where it all started. What do you mean by that? I ask him and he smiles. He told me that many were the times in which he imagined sleeping with me, or just feeling my breath on his skin while he watched me sleeping, my body stolen into that half-death. Strangely enough, I told him with the same condescending smile, I did the same. Imagination precedes love just like reputation precedes notorious people. That's true, he says, before actually touching you I've imagined doing that for so many times. My body had grown this hidden desire to feel your skin rubbing against mine. I want you so much, I would say, and then succumb to the path that sane bodies follow in search of satisfaction. And every morning I wake up with you into my thoughts. Was there anything else? I ask him. Yes, there was everything else, and most of all, Fear. I nodded.

I myself was afraid. Afraid that my friends would find out and talk behind my back, and afraid that sooner or later I'll have to talk to my parents about this, about everything, about the fear that I was bound to succumb to every morning and every moment of the rest of my life. When you say it things change, you'll see, it's like saying "by the power invested in me I pronounce you man and wife", and then it's done, it's made, theirs is no way back but a tedious road to be taken in which hearts will be broken. It's an act of creation through which you recreate yourself from the things that the thoughts of the others have discarded, and thought unsuited, not applicable to you. From those thrown bits and pieces you

remake yourself. And it's not like letting go. Yet, I do not know these things because I haven't tried them on my skin.

How was it for you? I ask him.

It wasn't easy, but my folks are okay with it, at least that is what they are telling me over and over again, despite the fact that, you know, you cannot trust people's words. You can't take them for granted. When a man says he loves another man you have to ask yourself why, because things don't come that easy, you have to listen to the silence first, you have to do things, things that would make him believe you.

What have I done to make you believe?

Strangely enough, you did nothing. You just said some things. And I fell in love with your words. The reputation that preceded you was made out of words.

What would I be without these words if not the piece of body that everyone else sees in the morning moving ceaselessly toward fulfilling basic urges? What would I be without these words of mine if not a combination of bone and muscle? Give me the words and I'll be myself again.

(8th of June)

I didn't get your last letter. You probably wrote a lot of interesting things in it, old things turned into new ones, marriages, deaths, lost friendships and found ones, all those things which make up a life. So, thank you, I needed all that. But, now, how could I tell you that I met nobody on the way, since our lives revolve around meeting people? And that I have no friends here, that I know nobody, and that I stay silent my entire life here. A sort of crust covers my lips in the morning, and sometimes my eyes. So this letter must sound joyful, it must have great things in it, discoveries, culture shocks, culinary adventures, and smiles, and sex with unknown boys in public bathrooms. So that life would sound grand over here, yes, you might think. It is, life is grand on the other side of the line 'cause it takes a lot of courage to cross the line and call things

by their own name. Well, frankly, I can't call things by their own names because I need to hide in order to be happy. So, yes, I do tell you I am happy, as much as a human being can be, and have lots of friends, and good-night-kisses, and a cute dog. That I have coffee at the coffee-shop in the singles' area and that I have a personal hairdresser who thinks I'm some sort of rock star. And that I go to read books in fancy, bohemian coffee shops with fake artists and poets, and walk the streets at night and go to obscure clubs with alternative guys who look good only when they are naked, so that you may feel jealous because there are people who love me and because of that I feel secure. But, the truth is, I don't. There are no such people. But you need to know that I am happy 'cause when I'm happy you'll think that you can be happy too. That happiness is made for humans, and that it is not impossible to reach, that you can touch it. A possibility is better than nothing, don't you think?

So I tell you that my life is great except that from time to time I see saints and angels in other people, and in every smile the mysteriousness and beauty of nights spent together with love, and sweat.

Love, I am the beast in the tall grass. They say I'm a beast, born out of sin, just because I dare to feel things man shouldn't.

Born in that summer morning, we both stood outside in the tall grass without the fear of snakes. And the apples grew yellow and red, and the sky was of a constant blue, cloudless. I could see the sweat running down your forehead and I wanted to wipe it off, but the world wouldn't let me do it. At night, I would cry because I knew that later on, even yawning will have a dark significance. The body will grow big, and the mind will have to develop techniques to understand it. I wish I could say I love you, just because I do. But they say that at this particular moment this word, love, comes from a place of confusion. And if I tell the truth that truth will consume me, and it will take you away from me. And I don't want that. Let us remain and forget about the inevitable storm. Let us touch, but only in our minds, let us make love without the truth being present. You'll lie down, and I'll be right beside you and the sky will have a whole new meaning. Please smile, the sun is just right. What shall we do, you ask,

when grandfather or even father, shall find us sleeping in the tall grass, attached to each other in the fury of the evening? We'll only hear the sound of the steps cutting through the yellowish grass and the sun and the sky. We'll do nothing, I say. We'll wait in silence, so as to hear the wrath of those steps as they walk away, shoes filled with knowledge. We'll have, by then, nothing else but our love and our bodies attached to each other. By the time the steps have vanished our gods would have disappeared too. Father, how could it be? How come from a body like yours a beast like me could have risen? How could that architecture go wrong? As I go home, taking after father's steps I watch you sleeping covered in light. I know at home I'll find this silence multiplied by ten, sprinkled with anger. Why did you keep this away from us? I was afraid, father, I'm afraid of what might come, of what will come. I'm afraid it's nothing, and how could you live on nothing, how could you? Of all the people in this world, how could you, father?

You should be ashamed of yourself, I saw you, and you saw me, and you did nothing to hide it, you should be ashamed of yourself, son, nobody has done that in our family.

I say nothing because fear is standing right in front of me, naked, staring with its yellow eyes, smiling. Forgive me, father, I say to myself, because I've sinned, I've done things not against our nature. I feel things for him. And there shall be moments when you'll hate my guts.

And I take you, my love, by the hand.

Somewhere, inside the house father is sleeping, alone. Mother is working nights. They meet only in the morning when father's aftershave lingers on the white pillowcase. The lights are dimmed, and it is two in the morning, and I can't find my sleep. The bed seems to be curved in such a way the only thing I could do is stare at the cheap fan flying ceaselessly around the room. As it moves the light goes on and off. Finally, I say to myself, the talk is over. My neighbor's little kid has finally gone to sleep. Now I'm alone with my thoughts, and you, and the brassy NYC wallpaper I bought for two euros. I look around the room and everything seems in place. My desk sits silently, fully submerged into a bizarre game of shadow and light, nauseatingly keeping its mouth shut. It knows too

much, I whisper to myself. Once, using a short pencil, I wrote on it I want to have sex with you, then immediately wiped it. Then, I wrote I love you and I want to live with you. After that I found a picture of you. You were half naked and I touched it so many times the colors started to fade your face and body distorted by my fingerprints. I cut the picture in little pieces and threw it into the toilet. I had to flush twice until all the pieces were dragged into that whirlpool of water. I felt so guilty when I kissed you for the first time, not because it felt wrong, but because I wanted to do it again and again until my lips would go numb. Strangely enough, I felt like something was wrong as if our lips didn't fit one into the other. As if they resembled each other too well. And then we did it again, and for one moment I felt like father was too asleep to overhear us while we joined our lips in the silence of breathing. Father, forgive me, because I have sinned. And you took my shirt off and I took your shirt off, and you said I like how your body resembles mine. A mirror wouldn't do it any better. And I said no, and you said yes, we'll have to do this sooner or later. And this call was so alluring I couldn't resist, like the sinner for whom sin is no more than a drug. Be silent, I said, father is sleeping in the other room and I wouldn't want to explain this to him. He wouldn't understand it anyway. The smell of his aftershave might just be too strong for me.

Father knows every move I make, every thought I have at any time of the day.

That morning father asked me what was wrong with me, if I have any pains.

I said there is nothing wrong with me.

It seems you have a stone on your heart.

They used stones to kill people, people went down like birds, knelt in front of the crowd, and they kept on throwing the stones until the kneeling stopped seeming like the one done during a prayer. The man knelt and then died from the wounds and the pain. And the gods laughed.

There are so many stones to throw, Father, and yet none is intended for me. Whose fault is it, Father? It's his fault, he says, it's only his fault, I raised no such child. He twisted your mind until you felt

something for him, and what you feel comes from a place of confusion and despair. Have a drink; smokes a cigar just don't do that. I won't have you in bed with him.

The fault is always somebody else's. The mind is corrupted by somebody else. The truth is not just a sum of decisions taken in particular circumstances, the truth is the Truth, and the fault is somebody else's. Imagine my despair while trying to explain that I myself was the one that lured him into my passion, that he had nothing to do with it, that HE just exists, HE is just who he is. How could I lure him into my passion? How is that possible? Well, things just happen, Father, that's not my decision to take. Who is he?

Don't say it because words make things happen. Uttering his name would bring him back just like uttering the devil's name before going to bed. It might scare you to death.

I got off the plane and into the car and as I got out the car there he was, and I said to myself there's a guy I could love, and care for, and dedicate my entire range of emotions. How stupid of you to do, Father said, you think that of all the people you meet, you could love each and every man in this world. That is not true, I told Father, I don't love you as I love him. And Father grew suddenly sad. What happened next? Well, I got out of the car and he said hello, you are so beautiful, I've missed you so much. I told him, how strange this absence of mine, how can you tell me that I've missed you since we haven't seen each other before? I love this absence of yours, He told me, it gives me the shivers it is almost orgasmic. I smiled and told him I've missed you so much, my little treasure, and he smiled back. And then I held him into my arms and while he stood there I kissed him on the neck. You are a disgrace to the human race, Father said, how could you kiss another man that way, how could you when there is no promise for the future, how could you kiss a man that you haven't even met before? I said, Father, every decision that I've made has been flawless; I think I have the right to make at least one mistake. No mistakes, Father said, there is no room for mistakes, malady is waiting at the end of this road, and he gestured towards the empty table his trembling fingers pointing the emptiness defiantly sitting at the

top of everything. What is the malady, Father? The empty womb, the empty womb, mass suicide, and the death of everything we know. No, Father, you are wrong, it will be the death of everything we don't know, the death of Fear itself. You will forget, Father, and everything will be all right. I'll never be able to forget this; you're no son of mine.

I'll never be able to forget *you*.

My love, Father doesn't understand, he doesn't know that we talked while he was sleeping, that we kissed every morning, and when we met for the first time by the car we knew each other as well as we knew the palms of our hands. And that every night we both built this pressure ready to burst, nurtured this desire for each other's body. And that every time I felt my chest during the night I thought it was your hand searching for me between the sheets. He doesn't know that. He doesn't know that I've kissed you in secret so many times, fearing that somebody might see us. We talked and we stood silent, feeling each other close. What did you do next, did you sleep with him?

No, I did not sleep with him. We had dinner. I couldn't call it dinner, because it wasn't, it was an airport dinner, eating without fork or knife; we ate with our bare hands and smiled at each other. He stood close to me and every time I stretched my leg and touched him I said sorry, but in fact I wasn't sorry, I just wanted to see if he was real, if he wasn't one of my characters, a figment of my imagination. He was real, I was sure of it, so real that he was unreal. What were you thinking? Father asked. I was so happy; so happy you couldn't imagine it. I was happy that finally I had found somebody I could love. And I loved Him so much. Did he say something? He did, the first thing he asked me was whether I am capable of taking care of him, because he needs a lot of care. Of course, my little treasure, I told him, of course I can take care of you, I can be your man, and all the things I own are now yours. How can you trust somebody you've just met? Because, my little treasure, my entire life I thought I couldn't be happy, and that I'm simply incapable of being happy. That is so wrong, he said. Are you happy now? I am, I said, I am the happiest man on Earth. Are you happy? I am happy, I have a man now. You are my man. And as he told that I felt the pride a father feels for his son.

What's the next thing you did?

From this point on things get a bit blurry. I don't remember exactly. We went to my car and I opened the door for him and he sat comfortably, and then I fastened his seatbelt and kissed him on the cheek.

Is that the kiss you had been waiting for a while now?

No, that wasn't the kiss I wanted, it was on the other hand a sign that I had feelings for him and that he could feel safe with me, after all, he hadn't seen me before, so I felt like reassuring him that everything was okay and that there was no need to worry. Then I closed the door and went to the other side of the car, got in, and fastened my seatbelt. He told me I was very beautiful and that he liked me a lot. I told him I liked him a lot, and that it was very sweet of him to tell me that. As I did that I looked at his lips as if I was preparing myself for my first kiss. He noticed that and he smiled and his smile reminded me of the fact that he once told me that it's not nice to have your first kiss in an airport so I tried not to avoid looking at his lips from then on. It was very hard; he had these very thick lips. And the most beautiful smile that I had ever set eyes on.

That can't be, Father said, it's impossible, you've seen many smiles in your life, you're just saying that. Father, you still don't understand, it was the most beautiful smile in the universe because it was His, and there was nothing more beautiful than Him.

Is everything okay, I ask him, can we go now?

Yes, let's go, I still don't believe this is real.

It's real, let's go.

The car smoothly glided out of the parking lot and the concrete road opened in front of us, waiting like a huge snake. I put my hand on his hip and caressed him a bit so that he could feel me close to him. He looked so scared. To tell the truth I was scared too. Scared that sooner or later we had to make love and I did not know how to do it, scared that he might not like it.

And did you tell him that? Have you told him about your fears?

Yes, Father, I did, I told him everything, I thought, since this is maybe my only chance I should start as I should, by telling the truth. I told him that he would be my first one. He said okay, no need to worry, it's very simple, and there is no right way to do it. I was still afraid; he seemed so feeble yet so powerful when I held him into my arms.

How come?

He was my first one, but I wasn't the first one for him. He had somebody before he met me, a strange lover he had always told me, a lover who wanted everything yet nothing from him. He was a sort of bastard, or so I understood. Love and affection mixed with hate and repulsion. Once they went out, they just wanted to get away from everything, run away from the guilt of kissing and making love, and they went out in the dark and he got so scared of a shadow that appeared embedded in the texture of the night and he did nothing to help, he ran never looking back. What is love anyway? He said some things, ugly things to him, like go, do something. I might just love somebody else. And he fell in love with somebody else.

What is that?

I do not know, Father, I believe it is fear, paranoia. What is love anyway? Who am I?

I'm asking you who is he anyway; who does he think he is?

Father, when you lose your memory you'd naturally assume things are the way they are, real, unfettered, enough to make you happy. One morning I woke up and I believed him into being, and He became, He materialized, and I said to myself, there's somebody I could love and call mine, there's somebody I could call my little treasure.

Why would you do that, you of all the people in the world?

People, Father, people talking, people waiting for you to do something, people waiting for you to act, people waiting for you to sleep, people waiting for you to talk. It's the natural course of things, people need to fall in love and hurt over the bad things that happen.

Yet the course that you have chosen is not natural, Father said.

I felt a sudden fury coming out of me, and I thought I need to keep it in, suppress it by all means, I was afraid of this furious Father who might just eliminate me with a twitch of the finger.

Son, he said, you said that people are to blame, yet they are the ones who keep the bloodline going. I blame you, Son, because you have chosen to empty the future, to empty it into the present. Tell me, what did he say to you, tell me the exact words he used, and I'll tell you where things went wrong.

He said I should forget about the others, live my life, be happy, forget about the fear. That is what he said, Father, he said that I should forget.

Live the moment, Father said, isn't that the biggest mistake you could make?

No, I said, it's not the biggest mistake.

But it is, Father said. Live by my rules and you'll discover eternal happiness. I fill in the future while you try to render it empty.

In our efforts, Father, we have already made a deal with the Devil. We make the future our own.

Why does it have to be like this, Father? Why can't this love be legitimate?

He's sick, get rid of him, Father said. Get rid of him as soon as you can, there is rotten blood running through his veins. There's no future into this love of yours, he'll give birth to dead children. I can see the leaves withering, and water fading among the cold stones. Leave as soon as you can.

And for one moment I thought that maybe it is time to leave, time to leave Father behind and find Him, my love.

CHAPTER THREE

She said to me, would you like that, would you like to be like all the others, would you like to have that? I thought, my love, I haven't been blessed like you did, with beauty and looks, and all the rest, I haven't been blessed with an exceptional ear for the music that sets the world into rhythm, I haven't been blessed with the hand of a genius writer. She said you still don't know what you have. You'll probably realize it later. I knew she said that because somehow she felt the growing distance between us. It was like saying that I will surely realize it later but she won't be around to see that. And she wasn't around. I knew she won't be. And then we said goodbye because there was somebody else waiting for her at the entrance. She said we'll keep in touch, and we did, yet I was the only one trying to reach her. Anyways, she was too good to be true. She found loving arms somewhere else, and then somewhere else, and she never came back. She once told me she will always love me. Maybe she still loves me. She disappeared, just like that, to wake up in another man's warm bed. Why are beds warm? Today my bed is cold. The world is filled with cold beds, one sided beds, undisturbed on the other side, huge windows and closed doors. Today my bed resembles my cold, one-sided heart.

We haven't been blessed, my love, not like that. We have been blessed with fear.

Have you met him before? Have you seen him before? Father was furious now. No, I said, I had not seen him before, yet I felt like I knew him for ages. Don't you find that strange? Don't you think there had been a connection between the two of you? How come you saw him and instantly fell in love with him? The mind forgets but the heart never forgets.

The world is not as you thought of it, Father. There is no happiness among us unless we do what we want and our will is to find that happiness and consume it as soon as possible. Life does not follow intricate plots with mysterious people watching us, their eyes glistening in

the dark on badly lit streets. There are no faceless people unless we pathologically fall in love with them. We do not travel to foreign cities to have intricate relationships with strangers. Here, angels appear unless we want them to appear. The instant we hold between the fingers is as elusive as light.

Still, there is no reason for you to find love and affection into the arms of another man, that is against everything we have fought for, everything we believe in. The future will be empty because of you. Father kept talking saying that it is a vice against family values but as he talked this shadow crept over his shoulders covering him.

I don't need you, Father. And he fell silent.

I have come this far, I won't go back.

(The 29th of August)

Dear friend, thank you for your last letter. I didn't get it yet, but thanks anyway. I wonder. Why does it have to be like this? There are some laws, internal to the universe, which I simply cannot comprehend, let alone work/ function according to them. They say, one day, you'll reach a point when everything will be clear. Yet I fear that day may come too late, at a point when I won't be able to enjoy it. I do not wish to grow old and, a few seconds before I die, realize that everything has been in vain, and that everything stops there, in that realization, and that there is nothing else to look forward too. I couldn't imagine a world without love, as I couldn't imagine a world without beauty. So, I need to say this to you, dear friend, if you are indeed reading this and if you do have a sudden revelation while reading, please don't let that feeling go. You are special to me, and I wish you all the happiness the world could offer you. These words are not in vain. I know we pride ourselves with having one of the most sophisticated means of communication, language, but you need to know that words remain, and they will go deep, as deep as they can, and they will stay there for as long as our organic life shall permit. Words can fall in love, and you could fall in love with words too. They can seduce you, caress you, and make love to you at night and before dawn. That is

why I'm telling you this, dear friend, 'cause if they can love, they can also hate, they can also hurt you. But you already know these things, there's no need for me to tell you that. I'm actually telling you this because I've tried it on my own skin. I fell in love with your words, and every night I pull those words to my chest as if they are alive. Yet, maybe they are. I'm sure they are. I need them to be alive. Otherwise, I couldn't feel you as I do, breathing between the sheets.

Eyes on the prize, keep it safe, you are the only one who has to win in this contest, and the prize is the greatest there can be, happiness. I'm so used to the sounds you make when you sleep that every time I'm alone I can imagine the world being made again, and every movement the hand makes when molding the souls resembles the sound of your breath and the sound of the sheets, moving, pressed under the weight of your chest going up and down, the sound of the sheets touched by you, and the sound of embracing you, the sound doors make when you are not around, the sound of my heart startled by the sounds of solitude night makes when I'm alone. The weight of your body, my love, has never been more beautiful than this, than the weight of solitude. The weight of your body, my love, exceeds the weight of mornings. There has never been a more beautiful and more pleasant weight than that of your love. The feathery weight your warm body leaves behind on the mattress while you are still there like a lighthouse guiding me towards you.

And I don't fight against the thought of not loving you but against the thought of leaving you behind, and the things that were once imprinted on our flesh, the denial of difference and the unending sorrow that comes with it.

I'm one of the three lighthouse keepers.

We're the three lighthouse keepers leaving behind six months' worth of food and equipment without leaving a note, words would only stir the passion in those we desire to leave behind. There's no time to say goodbye, we have to disappear before sunshine, before the lights in the lighthouse have moved from one corner to the other, before we can hear

the light being switched off, before we begin to understand the movement of the waves and the sounds they make. There's no time to acknowledge the beauty of the morning, the waves have never been the same, and they'll never be the same. We're the three lighthouse keepers leaving behind six months' worth of food and equipment, warm beds, I'm pulling my trousers knowing that soon the warmth in our beds shall die along with the memory of sleep, and that there's no trail behind us. But before we even think of leaving I count nights one by one. Three more nights, two more nights, one more night, this is the last night we never had, our sleep like a web and the furious waves like the spider hunting for lost souls, and before I wake up I tremble, morning has set a city made out of nails at my feet over which I'll have to step, and as I look ahead I see the other two lighthouse keepers weeping silently, I'm so sorry one of them says, the waves have never been the same.

I keep you in my hands and I try to talk, say nice things to you, and you say you are happy, two more nights and we'll finally be together, at last, no more making plans, and I say the same, no more making plans, love, no more making plans, and I think I must be such a bastard because I say that knowing that you'll keep making plans but those plans won't involve me, they'll involve somebody else. But then, as I say that, I hope for a miracle to happen, I still hope the devil will listen to my prayers and save me from disappearing completely from the series of plans you've made for me, because every night I went out and sat on top of the lighthouse and prayed silently until the devil became the savior. I am one of the three lighthouse keepers leaving behind six months' worth of food and equipment, my bedside lamp and my reading shoes, I sail in the evening sky trying not to think of you, saying that I'm actually going out with the other two lighthouse keepers and you say how nice, how happy you are for me, three more nights like these and no more plans, and I say the same thing, no more plans, my love. And I call your name once more into the night, and while you say you're the happiest man on Earth I say the same thing, but in fact, the night has set a city of burning coals at my feet, my love, I'm afraid this is goodbye. We're the three lighthouse keepers leaving behind six months' worth of food and equipment, and I'm leaving you behind, no more plans, love.

I love you because somebody else hurt you, like a necrophiliac I tend to the wounds others have inflicted upon you, and so my life revolves around corpses, men and women fighting to survive past ruptures, barely breathing.

I don't want symmetry because symmetry would mean your absence, symmetry would mean empty balconies, no warm hand holding onto the cold railing, the other side of the bed neatly made and I the only one in disarray, standing alone on the right side of the bed, thinking of the right thing to do, drowning into my own pool of asymmetry, asking myself if I'm the only one dreaming of absent hands looking for me eagerly between the sheets as I sleep my back turned against the window. What if I could hear your heart beating without having to listen? Will there be a continuous, uninterrupted hum of asynchronous clocks, or one majestic rhythm?

And I've stood like an adopted child in your arms thinking that you might be my father, and strangely enough the smell of your skin resembled that of a father like a father should be, and I felt your breath, and your heartbeat, in between two worlds, mine and yours, and like a child I got lost among the leaves.

And I wake up with a body by my side. It's time to go back, I say to myself, back to those scenarios in which you were happy and in which, strangely enough, after all this learn-to-love-yourself tedious discourse, you find yourself beautiful, capable of loving any man on the face of the Earth, alone, with no friends, a pair of obscure parents and other unknown relatives, yet full of the energy that hereditary ties bring to a man like you. Money, that is, that's the positive energy coming from a rich father like yours, a lawyer, and you the black sheep, the one that had chosen the romantic career of a literary theorist. So I wake up with a body by my side, sleeping, and I could see the back of his head, his back, and a short foretaste of his black and white boxers, the ones he almost refused to put on after we did some fooling around. I'm the literary theorist here, the poet, the writer, the author, I should have said that in a more artistic way, but to find a half-naked man sleeping by your side is just not the most artistic of the situations in which you could find yourself. I'm not a real

person, I try to relive bits and pieces taken from the books I've read, that's why I know what to say in these conditions, under certain circumstances. So I put my palm on his back, feeling a contradiction growing inside me, I want to wake him up but I don't want to wake him up. If he wakes up I'll say I didn't want to do that, if he doesn't wake up I'll tell him during breakfast I touched him while he was still asleep. And he'll smile and I'll kiss him, and maybe put my hand on his thigh because he's my baby, and I feel like I love him while being totally unsure about it. And I kiss his back slowly, as if I want him to feel how every inch of my skin touches every inch of his skin and I close my eyes to imagine how the two skins meet and I see them meet, slowly, inch by inch, until the heat of my lips becomes one with the heat of his back. And I can feel how he's coming back to life, taken away by this strange touch of mine. I watched him as he turns over and feel the joy that that brings to me, the desire that intensifies with the smell of his flesh.

Good morning gorgeous, I say and smile the best way I could, and for a moment I can see how he sees me, the daughter of a big man, big from all points of view, the girl who was a house, who can do whatever she wants, so beautiful she could have every man she wants, and even more than that, control every man she wants. That's the power of the daughter of a big man like my father. I could walk as if my feet were planted in the sidewalk, powerful, independent. The hair on his chest seems repulsive at first but then there's that sudden streak of recognition which says he's the man, he's your man, deal with it, he's in your bed now. He's in my bed now, to me he is the most vulnerable man in the world, only in his boxers, skin exposed. That's the power I want, the power I need. Click, reverse and rewind. I am the son, the black sheep. He smiles and kisses me, how strange this kiss is. I could get used to it. So I kiss him back and I put my hand on his thigh. His thigh is warm with the warmth of living flesh. I feel repulsed by it, somebody said. I could vomit my guts out just by looking at it. This thing you do is wrong, somebody else said. So I stop and stare looking for a clue. Is there anything in this man that could make me love him so? Yes. No. I am the daughter of a big and powerful man. My father could destroy this boy in one day, crush him like a bug.

So, yes, I kiss him because that's how I feel I'm in control, he kisses me back because he knows he is under my control, oh, the power that women have over men. My love, what is it? Nothing, I say. Am I still your man? Yes, he says, you're my man. And at once my chest fills with joy and sorrow. I'm his man, I feel stronger, and I feel like I need to protect him, I am the son of a big and powerful man. I need to protect him from my father. Hide him, this boy is a shame. What's wrong with you? Nothing, I say, I'm just happy to see you, to find you here. You see, I say to myself, that's the thing, in this love of ours I have to live with the pleasure and the guilt at the same time, both present, the daughter and the son, legitimate and illegitimate love. Did you buy the muffins already? Not yet, I reply, it's still early. I didn't go out yet. He sits upright. I'm going to go back to sleep then. I don't usually wake up this early in the morning. I know, I say, go back to sleep. I'm in my shorts, bare-chested. I put myself back to bed close to him and I could feel his breath going in and out. The body, I say to myself, this beautiful body. Click, rewind, stop, while you go closer to the edge of sleep you start hearing things, as if the voices coming from the outside, the city coming to life, actually come from you, from the hollows of your own body. In sleep you become one with the noise. Sleep is the presence of noise, its yet unseen beauty, the other side of the cube. Sleep is the knowledge of noise. And the myth was created. That myth which tells you two bodies can live happily one next to the other while sleeping, making references to no other bodies. The myth which tells you there is no place in your heart for two. That the moment is now, the myth of unconditional love, the myth that the daughter of a big and powerful man could sleep beside this man here without feeling guilty, the myth that the son of a big and powerful man might sleep next to this man here without anyone else knowing it, feeling happy and guilty all at the same time.

And I go back to sleep thinking whether he is the next best thing, whether somehow my love for him is just my feeling of being lost in a world which no longer has meaning. My loss amplified ten thousand times, then turned into this body which is his body, half-naked, sleeping beside me. Why not go the other way? Why stay when I could just run away? Forget about everything, pretending nothing ever happened. It's good practice he once told me, others used to do the same thing. Yet there is

this thing which hurts even at the thought of it. I couldn't leave him, not right now.

In our sleep the story begins anew, as if nothing has happened, as if the sin has not yet been consummated, as if the two of us were the first ones to have ever touched the green grass of paradise. Isn't this wonderful, you say, to begin anew? True, my love, our bodies no longer seem displaced one close to the other. Now we know places we can go to, we no longer have to hide, this place and the rest of the world is ours. Now I can tell you what I want, he told me. What do you want, my love? I am torn between the things that I want and the things that I need. I want love, he said. I need love. I want affection, evenings spent together holding hands, I want to feel special, as if there's nobody else in this world. But there is no one here, I said. True, he said, make me feel as if there's nobody else. This world is not about fact, this world of ours is all about perception, I need the feeling of love, not love itself. Make me feel as if I'm loved. I will, I promised him. I am not in love, I told myself, I have to make him feel loved, make every touch count, every kiss, every thought. Forget about everything, my love, forget about him, and the wounds he has left behind, forget his smell, I'm going to watch as the sun goes around the room with you, I'll put my feet on the wall with you and chase the light, make you think that this world is made of gold, less precious than what I feel for you, more mundane than what I have in store for you. Make your skin shine, fair youth, your flesh turned into an alchemy of desire. And we shall stand frozen, the romanticism of the scene broken by the normality of our bodies next to each other, me wearing my favorite pair of boxers, blue and white, you in one of your striped shirts wearing a white pair of boxers, my love, there is nothing outside our skin but the changes that age brings to the flesh, there is nothing outside but the world, see just how little this world seems when there is nothing else for me but you. And there will be no edges, everything will seem blurred and undecipherable, ghosts of meaning everywhere, but just that kind of meaning you cannot pinpoint, that kind of meaning which is there but not there. Ghosts of meaning resembling the coming of sleep, water flowing over the perfect stone, the perfect world. And the path is so long there is no end in sight. And we seem to be

flowing, to open my eyes would be the greatest effort my body is capable of.

I come out of it as easily as I get into it. Just one breath and I'm out. The sun has moved just a bit. He turns over to face me yet I know that this is not him, he's somewhere else, lost probably, hanging by a thread that keeps him tied to this manifestation of flesh I find sleeping beside me. I wish I could hold him. The sheets seem so harsh on his skin. Shall I let you wander in this harsh world? Do they come to you like I come to you, carrying sweet words? I kiss him lightly on the corner of his mouth. It's so beautiful to wake up to you. Did you say that or am I hearing things? In this bed the world comes into place. What time is it? And I measure the words as if somehow this moment might vanish. It's still early, I tell him and he closes his eyes again. And I'm so afraid, my love, afraid that I've lost you, make this flesh move again, let it manifest life, let it manifest beauty. Don't go back to sleep, I tell him. I'm not sleeping, I'm just keeping my eyes closed. I kiss him on the eye. Will this make you stay awake? Yes, he says with his eyes still closed. I pull him closer, how he resembles a dead body, please wake up, I tell myself, and I pull his body over my chest just to feel that his flesh has weight, that he is not a ghost of meaning, my desire manifesting in extreme ways. I'm here, he says, and at once I feel his muscles twitching, his flesh gaining force as he pushes against me. The ocean is cold, your body is warm. He kisses me and I smile. My love, this is the best I can do for you now. Is there more? No. There is a ghost wandering around my veins and this ghost tells me this love of ours cannot be put into words. And yes, there is more. If I take my shoes off and touch the water with my toes I can feel it's coldness. Is pain visible? Yes. Is this love I have for you visible? Yes. There's not much you can do about it, he says and kisses me again. Who made this flesh for you, my love? But I can do so many things, tell you so many things at the same time denying the fact that language can tell lies. I'm going to make some breakfast, I tell him and he makes that sound men do when getting up is just too tiresome, not today, not tomorrow, some other day, there is no one waiting for me, there are no trains to miss, no buses. Nobody will tell our story anyway. I get up, stretch my limbs. I am the daughter of a powerful man, I am the son, the black sheep, sleeping with another man.

There is always another man, it has to be the other man, other than myself.

The neighbor's reddish tree. Once he complained about it. Was it the neighbor then? Yes, it was probably the neighbor. The apartment's windows were so big and clear that he was afraid somebody could see us. Nobody's going to come throwing stones, I told him. It's not that, he said, I'm not afraid of the stones, I'm afraid of their mercy and if there's one thing I hate that's mercy. I do not need their mercy; I can love whoever I want, be it a man or a woman, a 32 years old guy that could be my father. If there's one place where I want to be totally free, that would be Love. It's not the only place, my love. If there's one place where I am totally free that would be in your arms. I draw the curtains every night, afraid somebody might see us loving each other, touching, doing the things we're not supposed to do. Things like smiling to each other when we're not supposed to do that. It's autumn, that's why the tree is red. That bloody tree, as he refers to it. That tree sprinkled with the neighbor's bloody rage. The windows themselves seem to be talking, saying things, whispering. What a nice...behind you have, he says and laughs. How unromantic of you to say that, I say and the tree seems more reddish than ever. The neighbor's rage is augmenting, I could feel the heat of it, the neighbor looking in the mirror filled with rage, screaming at his image, I hate you fucking cocksuckers, I hate your pretty faces, I hate your fucking guts. Close your eyes, silence the rage. I turn around, good morning, it's a beautiful day, my love, you should get up. I'm getting up, give me five more minutes. I put my clothes back on, they have a faint smell of shower gel and perfume, and then there's something else, my sweat, my desires turned into liquid, myself, that of yesterday, things I had but no longer have. This skin has been all over you, you've felt it all over you, now you have to keep me, my love, could you taste the flesh of another man, I am the daughter of a powerful man, the son, the black sheep. This house is built around me, my love, this world, and I'm offering it to you. That's why this love must work. The neighbor's reddish tree has faded, its blood spilled, and there's no turning back. I open the doors, here I give you the sense of a story, my goal is to reach the kitchen, leave the bedroom behind, go past the bathroom door, and the living room, step on the

purple carpet in the hallway, it tickles, it's like grass, feed the dog, is this the sense of narrative you were waiting for? Love keeps me back a while. You see, that's the future right there, you've just seen it; you've seen the things I wouldn't want you to see. So I won't step on the purple carpet, I'll linger in the bathroom door, cuddle with the dog first before feeding it. I turn on the TV and watch the news, it's been twenty minutes now, and he's not up yet. I make myself some coffee, take the croissants out of the oven, pour the orange juice, sit at the big table alone, and keep an eye on the open door. I can only hear the neighbor's barking dog and the reddish tree defying me. I need to wake him up again, breakfast is ready. I no longer linger in the bathroom door and I step on the purple carpet, it really feels like grass. The bed is neatly made on one side, the side I never sleep on. And there is nobody there. The air feels damp and heavy. My side of the bed is slightly disturbed as if by a body that has quiet nights, no nightmares but also no dreams to remember in the morning. There's the neighbor's reddish tree but you're not in this story. The world is as you make it, Father, forgive me because I haven't sinned. I was always good at conceiving scenarios, Father, and I can do this without your help. I eat my breakfast as slowly as I can, imagining you eating beside me, smiling back at me while sipping your coffee. I cannot imagine this world without you. You should quit smoking, I tell him, it's bad for you. I know, he says, stop telling me that. A paradox that is, I think, judging the things that are bad or good for you, am I good for you? Or good enough, or bad enough. Today I hate the things that are capable of damaging you. What are they saying, he asks, the news, what are the people saying? About what? Oh, they're saying that the world is dying. Because of us, the two of us, because we don't believe in the future, and because we deny the existence of something else other than the present. They live together, I heard the old lady saying to the doorkeeper, he comes only to sleep here, and they hold hands. Good morning, I say. Good morning, and both of them smile, they know about me, they know those things I wouldn't want them to know. I smile back. Now I understand. I do not need their mercy. I can see their look, petrified, are you afraid of me? Have you seen the news, the old lady asks me, did you see it? Yes, I did, I can't talk to you right now, I've got some stuff to do. My goal is to get out of this building, face the air. Did you see his reaction, the old lady says to the porter, he didn't like it at all. The

door closes behind me. I let go of your hand, I am the daughter of a powerful man, I am the son, the black sheep, I shouldn't be seen with a man like you. What are your plans for today? Not much, he says, I'm going to check on my roommate, see what he's doing today, then I'm going to study a bit. What are you doing today? I'm going to try to live without you. Let the world seduce me with its beauty. I'm alone in this and I need to cope with that. Listen to the sound my shoes make when I walk on concrete, stare at people on the street, fill the void of not knowing them with dreams and hopes, happiness, companionship, successful relationships and all that kind of stuff. That guy's staring at us, she told him and he looked at me. There's this voyeuristic pleasure, you see, I feed off your happiness. I'm alone, you see. We don't care, look at us, we're happy, we're not miming happiness, we're actually happy. Get grip of yourself. I promise not to look up.

The pavement is gray.

And my shoes pierce the grayish pavement.

And I haven't seen any faces today.

And the pavement resembles the door you closed this morning.

And here and there the pavement has leaves growing on its skin.

The shoes reflect the leaf-stained pavement.

And my skin becomes a mirror.

And I can only see the pavement as I go to buy grapes.

Sometimes in the shower I find the leaves from the pavement.

And the leaves trickle down my spine.

My skin is gray.

Here and there my skin is leaf-stained.

And you told me I look like a tiger. A tiger is strong.

The stained skin of a tiger.

It's because of the pavement, I say. And you laugh.

How many doors have you closed today?

I haven't seen any faces today.

Last night you've told me I have gray eyes.

It's because of the pavement, I say. And you laugh. And you sleep.

I look into other people's homes, look at them as they watch television unable to see me, thinking they are alone. I light a cigarette and think of myself as an artist trying to understand the nature of human behavior. It's not that, I'm sure, I just like to invade their homes with my thoughts, laugh at their lack of knowledge, their daily ignorance, sitting comfortably in bulgy armchairs. Another reason might be that I miss you so much and looking at their faces I see a bit of you and rejoice. And so I walk the streets thinking that somehow I might meet you and we might talk a bit about the weather and about the simple things that make a life enjoyable. You'd wear your best clothes and I would smile and we would be so happy. That is how I spend my life without you, searching the streets, looking for you. Yet, I don't know why I'm not disappointed when I fail in finding you. Is it because I already know I won't find you.

The air. Where is the air? The powerlessness of lungs to take in all of this incandescence of cities visited during the night in your absence. The air has left to be replaced by this damned solitude. Your absence is the absence of air. The air is filled with burning coals, ice, pain, the chest is just too small, too human to deal with your absence. In every man's face there's a bit of you, there's a bit of your stubbornness, a bit of the things you keep away from me, the things you are afraid to admit. By looking at their faces I try to figure you out. Your absence is like the fear of cold. The fear of getting hurt is like your absence.

It's so cold without you. The leaves from the neighbor's reddish tree have fallen, the world has become more transparent. Maybe this way it will be easier to find you because you won't be able to hide. I might find you sleeping on the sidewalk, like one of those homeless guys, hungry for love, and you'll tell me, oh, you cannot even imagine the love I can give. And I would take you home and feed you and at one point discover this genius lingering inside you, sleeping, waiting to be drawn into the light of

reason. The world is as you make it. So I look into the eyes of every homeless guy I see. Let me love you, let me turn this world upside down for you. The road ends here. The front door is opened and I step inside the house, I can feel your perfume as I travel through the main hall like through a dark tunnel. I'm home, I say, and there's a strange stir in the air, I can feel the smell of your steps, the rhythmic approach like the rhythm of a piano playing, the moisture your feet leave on the pavement, and you, body made out of desire and flesh, the glorious architecture. You're back he says, did you bring the mushrooms. I did, I tell him, I brought the mushrooms, and I'm going to cook for you, something nice. I look forward to it, he says. You're perfect, can I even hope for more? I am the daughter of a powerful man, God himself, I am the son, the black sheep, working along a double standard. How was your day, I ask him. He doesn't reply and I suddenly realize a day has passed since this morning, it's already dark. A day without you, breathing in your absence, seems like all the other days, because my soul is broken beyond repair. Every day in your absence echoed throughout my veins. My lungs have turned black, there is something putrid in my chest. Is that even possible? Everything was fine, he says, just the usual, I just got in. He takes his shirt off lingering with his thin fingers on every button as if trying to turn me on in some subliminal way. The tie and the cuff-links, the belt, he moves so slowly as if dancing to a music I am not able to hear. He throws his shirt on the bed like the terrifying lover he is. Why am I a terrifying lover again, he asks. Because I'm afraid to lose you, I tell him. Do you trust me, he asks. Of course I do. But I don't in fact, in this love I could not simply deny the presence of mercy, I told him some things, that I couldn't live without him, that I love him, that I think of him all the time, and I'm afraid there is no turning back from those words, I cannot take back my words. But I don't tell him that, I just tell him I trust him and that's it. Yet, in this trust the idea that I might be the one not to be trusted is secretly implied. Bare-chested he takes his belt out and loosens his trousers pushes them down.

I do the same. I take my shirt off, take the belt out, loosen my jeans, there's this ritual of love, uncovering different parts of the body. If you'll have my body, own it, do whatever you want to it, then I trust you,

my love, and I hate you for that. If you can accept this body you can accept any other body in this world. I could feel your breath trembling, you are afraid. To tell you the truth I'm also afraid. You pull me closer, I can feel the heat of your body emanating like that of the sun. And I kiss you. I can't do it you say, not today, maybe later. I put my lips on the skin of your neck and linger there breathing heavily, if I could just consume your body like a drug, pull it inside me through my nose, inject you into my veins. I can feel the trail left behind by your perfume, wet wood, and you, the smell of flesh. I slide my arms under your armpits and pull you closer, I take another long breath, I'm a beast, not knowing what to do with you. I kiss the other side of your neck making you feel every movement I make as if time is the central protagonist here, not the kiss, not the endless desire. How strange, to hold a body like yours, I thought it would be more natural, now it just feels out of place. Sometimes when I wake up during the night and see you sleeping beside me I experience this feeling of being an alien to my own body, slowly sinking into the idea that what I have is not actually mine, these limbs which do not seem to be mine, and you, the weirdest thing to look at. What about those mushrooms? One more minute, I tell him, and even though I can't see his face I know he is smiling. Give me one more minute of your body, the one-minute-long pleasure of holding you, acknowledging your presence. I pull you even closer. I want to crush you. But there's a response, I could feel his muscles twitching, he's pulling me closer. I am the daughter. Do you love me? Yes, he says, more than you can imagine. I can imagine a lot of things, my love.

I take a t-shirt from the drawer, pull it over my shoulders, I am the son of a powerful man. I look good in this t-shirt. It suits me well. I look into the mirror and smile at the thought. I take my favorite short pants. His favorite short pants actually. He is now fully dressed waiting for me in the doorway. I've been waiting for this for a very long time, to see you like that in the doorway smiling back at me, wearing your white and blue shirt, bare-footed. I hold his hand and pull him after me into the kitchen. He steps on the purple carpet, I do the same, it feels good. I had a chat with a friend today, he says. About what? You know, the usual stuff. Yet? I told her about us. The ocean is cold and unknown. What did she say? She told

me she's totally okay with it, as long as I'm happy. Her boyfriend seemed a bit uncomfortable, I wonder what's his problem. You talked to her about it in the presence of her boyfriend? I don't see why not, he says, it's something normal. I drift away on the cold unknown ocean. I wonder when we'll be intelligent enough to perceive it as something normal. We love each other, don't we? Of course we do. What else could I say to you, if not that, yes, we love each other and there is nothing wrong with this love, except those things we imagine. I cut the mushrooms in half, one by one, then again, the shining blade of the knife sliding easily through the grayish flesh. It goes into the flesh and splits it, into the flesh and there is this sudden twitch of pain, rapid and strong, and blood gushing out, two, three drops, then a stream, then everything turns into this unending sound like cotton clothes rubbed against each other. Look what you've done, he screams, you cut yourself. I'm fine, I tell him, it's not deep. Why did you do that? I didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident. I take one of the paper towels and wrap it around my finger, the color red pierces through the immaculate white of the paper towel. It's just blood I tell him and I smile, there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with that, I say again, as if to reassure myself that I said it and that he heard it. I take a bandage from the drawer, wash the wound, put the bandage over it. It hurts less, it hurts more to see you in pain. I'm fine, I tell him, and I kiss him once, then again, and again. I'm real, my love, I'm alive, I did that just to show you I'm real, can you feel the flesh, can you feel the heat, can you feel the blood gushing out. Will you love me more, now that you know I'm real? He kissed me back, I can feel his teeth hard against my lips, pulling, biting. I'm real, I'm the son of a powerful man, the black sheep. He pulls my head closer, pushes his lips against mine. Don't you ever do that again, he says, you scared me to death. I won't do it again, I promise. Now you know that I'm real. The pain has subsided. I slice the rest of the mushrooms and cook them as he sets the table. He moves like a feline around the table, overly conscious of every movement he makes. I cannot imagine this world without you.

We sit at the table when everything is ready. This is delicious, he says and immediately kisses me. His shirt reveals a bit of his chest hair. A sudden desire bursts inside me, we could do it right here among the dirty

dishes, forget about everything, our flesh ripe with desire and lust. I slip my right hand under his shirt while he kisses me again. His skin is warm and soft, I move my hand along his spine, I could feel goose bumps growing under the epidermis. This is how his body responds, his skin has been taught to behave like schoolchildren do, behave, say nice things, and don't overreact. I can feel his heavy breathing under his kiss, it seems so inhumane, so mechanical, up and down, don't stop, until the epidermis is pierced and the pain disappears, till the pain becomes pleasure, and pleasure accumulates like the notes of a song, layer by layer you get closer to climax, the chorus, the disappointment, but there no space for disappointment here, your skin changes colors as lust travels through you, and I try your skin with my teeth, to see if it's real. It hurts, he says, now I know, you're real, your flesh means desire to me. Your glorious architecture means affection to me. You the sum of all my desires. I pull his shirt off. His chest goes up and down. My love, there is this uninterrupted rhythm that makes you look alive. I slide my hand across his chest. What is it, he asks. Nothing, I say. I can't trust flesh, I say to myself and kiss the base of his neck, then his chest, I can see how the world is built, brick by brick, pleasure by pleasure, muscle, blood, movement, erosion, lust, saliva, ecstasies, fluids, fear, body, law, and sorrow. Then the smell of sweat and shower gel. Do you feel me, I ask him, and he says yes, I feel you, don't stop doing it. The world falls in and out of place. Our love is a song sang backwards. The beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning, take me by the hand and love me as hard as you can.

We stand alone, two bodies like the sounds of a bell suspended in the air. I hold your head on my chest, you breathe slowly and heavily and I can feel the heat coming out of your mouth. Do you like this, I ask him, and he says yes, there is nothing else that he could like more than this. So I hold him closer, press his head against my chest, my love, just tell me what should I do, what can I do to show you how much I love you since this body of mine is so little a proof of that, since this body is nothing but flesh and glorious architecture. The bodies are multiplied, flesh after flesh, flesh into flesh, sprinkled, marred with their own physicality, muscle and bone, and how could you deny that, how could you say there is more when there is nothing more. Let us not confuse affection and love with lust

and the sinful desires that emerge into the flesh. Sinful, he says, what an interesting choice of words. Let's not use that word, shall we, I don't want to get religious right now, it's the wrong place to be religious here on the kitchen table. I'd hide this body if I could, for the sake of the others. Why would you do it for the sake of the others when you should do things for your sake, not this thing you're talking about, but all the other things, the nice things and the bad things, you should do them for yourself, and for me. I kiss his forehead. Yes, I would do them, just for you. Let's get out of here. And the illusion is lost, I've lost you, my love. The windows are so big and empty and I can see the neighbor's reddish tree, it's almost stripped naked of its reddish leaves I could see my neighbor walking around the house arguing with his wife and then I think what if he could see me just like I see him, standing alone, in my navy blue underwear on the kitchen table. He would probably think I'm an illusion, a ghost gone mad out of solitude, I bet he could see madness sitting at the kitchen table with me, I bet he could see its yellow eyes, and then he would call his wife, honey, come here, look at that. And then his wife would appear in the frame looking out, standing frozen at the sight, a man lying half naked on the kitchen table, what a surreal sight that is, and an unfortunate condition that is. The old lady would soon find out and then she's going to talk about it with the porter and there will be smiling, and pointing, and wondering, and I would go through all of these smiling back, thinking of you, trying to figure out what happened. You see, I'm the son of a big and powerful man, the black sheep, I shouldn't be with you, it's abominable just to think of it, just to imagine it. I stand upright and I put my feet on the chair and I put my face in my hands, if I could only change this flesh into something else, become the man you want me to be, strong and beautiful, brilliant. But I am and you're not here as if something I did long ago has come back to haunt me, as if there are these guardians standing at the gates of my thought, trying to keep you out while I call for you from the inside. What else is there to do?

There is a soft knock at the door. I wonder who it is. I watch as the neighbor keeps arguing with his wife and adolescent kid. Another knock, this time stronger. Just a minute I say as I run to the bedroom, take my shirt and my pants. I open the door. Hello there, the man says and it takes

me a few long seconds to realize who's the one standing in front of my door. I met him at a party, or so he says, I don't remember. I believe it was the only party I went to in my entire life. We kept in touch, smiled at each other when we met occasionally on the street, in the library and in other weird places. He looks lost not knowing what to do, how to react. I smile back and say hello there, come in, we haven't seen each other for a while now, come in, and I open the door as wide as I can. How are you doing, he asks me, and I say I'm fine, I've never been better, what else could I tell him, isn't that what people usually say? He's wearing a gray cardigan and a white shirt underneath it. You told me once, he says, that you'd like us to meet and have a chat and I was in the neighborhood so I thought I'd stop by. I know, there's absolutely no reason for coming here, yet you did it out of a momentary impulse to feel secure around somebody, to get a grip of reality because, I'll tell you, I'm real, more real than everything else, more real than the chair you're sitting on. He pulls his sleeves up and uncovers a pair of fleshy hands, visible veins, the arms of a man in his late twenties. Absolutely, it's so nice to see you, and there is this mercy growing in my throat, suffocating me, oh, I'd love you with all my heart, just give me the chance to do it, we could just do it right here. So, what have you been doing lately? Not much, I tell him, you know just the usual. The lump in my throat grows bigger, the conversation has been drawn to a close, I can feel it, there is nothing else I could say. It's so strange to talk to a man who has absolutely no past to remember, isn't it? How about you, I ask him. The same, nothing has changed in my life, he strokes his chin while talking as if there's something to hide, I've been working, trying to be happy, it's not the life I dreamed of, but it's all right, I cannot complain. He has these full lips, curved on the outside, he hasn't been shaving for at least three days. I feel the urge to reach out and touch his face and his lips, tell him how much I am capable of loving a man like him, but I hide the thought, hide the hand, the lump in my throat has grown to unimaginable proportions and I feel like throwing up. I manage to silence the impulse and pretend I'm listening to him, to the story of his life even though I know there is no story, and while I do that I feel his reluctance, his fear of telling me everything, a sort of embarrassment, as if he knows, or at least as if he felt my earlier impulse and now is afraid of showing his feelings, and there is this acceleration of movements, the more he moves

the more protected he feels, sitting comfortable on the chair, so close that I could smell his breath. So I keep looking into his eyes knowing this would make him uncomfortable, knowing this would make him go away. Who am I anyway? I'm sitting in between, he hasn't seen me with a girl, he hasn't seen me doing many things. Who is this guy anyway, he would say to the others, I just can't figure him out. So I start vomiting words all over him, talk to him as fast as I could, telling things, things he might not know and as such surprise him so much that he might feel disarmed, powerless in front of me.

So he stands silent in front of me, listening to me, pretending to listen, smiling, then caressing his chin. And I can only see splinters of him, what is left of him in between the words that keep coming out of my mouth. I think you're a great guy, he says and smiles like a stupid child. I stop talking and smile back to him, and for one second he seems so close that I could feel his face hair on my lips, brushing against me as I kiss him. You're really smart, he says. He's so far away that I can't even hear what he is saying. Why would he say something like this? And I give myself an explanation despite the fact that deep down I am perfectly aware it is a stupid explanation. He likes me, I tell myself. Are you afraid of me, I ask him. No, he replies, why would I be afraid of you? I don't know, I tell him, I thought you might be afraid of me and that's why you're so distant. I'm not afraid of you, he says. Then do something about it, I tell myself. He told me there had been an accident a while ago, he saw a little boy die, and for months he kept dreaming of that dying boy. I feel pity for him, mercy. Do something about it. The only thing I want is to reach out and touch his beautiful face and say that I'm sorry, that I care for him, and that there's nothing he could do about the dying boy, it's not his fault. Instead I just look at him and try to mime sadness. Where are you? There are so many things that I would like to tell you, my love. He goes on telling the story of the car accident and the dying boy as I drift further away from him. My love, I feel like I should tell you this, today I fell in love with another man, he's standing in front of me right now talking about death and fear and mistakes, and in between all of these I could see his soul, so little, so fragile, the soul of a boy afraid of his father but so brilliant and beautiful that he might just kill that father to become himself again. And

then there was something else, desire, the soulless body lingering behind, a devilish smile, and the greatest thing of all, the capacity to love beyond repair.

I descend into the silence of words, this silence which is between the two of us. What did you do for your birthday, he asks and for a moment I relive that day, smell the solitude of it. Nothing special, I say. I bought a cake, a big one, you weren't here, it was a good cake, I was so happy on that day. What I don't tell you is that I bought a big cake though I knew nobody would come because I didn't invite anyone. I ate a piece of the cake then let it rot, took pictures of it every morning, tasted the sourness of its decaying ingredients. I dreamed of sharing it with you. But now, as I talk to you, I love you and hate you at the same time because you weren't there. Yet as you're asking me about my birthday I feel your embarrassment as if the question feels out of place. Maybe it is out of place at this moment. This day lacks the coherence of the happy days in which we were together. He smiles, I would have wanted to have a piece of that cake, he says, I'm sorry I couldn't come. I need to keep this image, you know, I say to myself, that I'm the happiest man on earth. It's all right, I say, and think of what could have been. I was always good at that, my love, thinking of what could have been. I think of the strangeness of the situation. His face throws shadows in this half day and if you happen to look from the outside, like my neighbor would do in this case you could see the two of us talking in the semi-dark room, looking at each other. What on Earth could I be talking about with this man, full of tattoos, unshaven, strangely beautiful. How could you love me, my love, when everybody else is so much beautiful than me? How could you see everybody else as much more beautiful than you and at the same time be incapable of perceiving yourself as beautiful? It's such a dilemma for me. You're beautiful, I tell him and he freezes in this half-amazed state of a man that hasn't heard such words before in his entire life. There are so many things you don't know about me.

What you don't know is that I go to bed barefooted and when I step on the cold pavement I leave traces. What you fail to understand is that your feet leave the same traces and that they linger there for a few seconds, just like mine do. You don't know that I'm cold in the morning,

just like you are when you're afraid to leave your warm bed. You don't know I'm thirsty, that I eat things to stay alive. You don't know I breathe the way you do, that I have lungs. You don't know I like the sun and the stars, just like you do when you wake up in the morning and when you go to sleep. You don't know I can feel warmth just like you do, and you don't know I use words to say things to others, you don't know that I like to play games. You don't know that I think, and that at one point things make perfect sense to me, just like they do for you. You don't know I sleep, how I sleep, the way I breathe during the night, the things I dream of. You don't know that words can hurt me, just like they can hurt you. And you don't know that I can feel the edges of a book, the edges of a table, a chair, and a spoon. You don't know how come oranges remind me of Christmas. You don't know I can feel the smell of autumn even before it arrives. You don't know I fall in love with people I see on the streets, and you don't know I fall in love with characters I find in books. You don't know so many things, and still...I wonder whether *you* wonder there is still a piece of me in the things you already know about me.

What do you mean by that, he says. Do you find me beautiful? Yes, I tell him, but then stop. I would tell you the whole story but I can't, something will always stop me from doing that. There is this lump in my throat which stops me from doing it. A lump that has been sitting there for ages and no doctor could take it out except by convincing you that there is no such thing as lumps in one's throat. You'll need years and years of self-education in order to do that. I find you very beautiful, I tell him, and I think you shouldn't be afraid. Afraid of what, he asks. I don't know, the world maybe. Keep it outside, don't let it get you. I think you're very beautiful too, inside, you're very beautiful inside. Thank you, I say but then think that I might just invent a world in which everybody is blindfolded and they could only see that hidden inside beauty.

(The 5th of May)

Thank you for your last letter. I didn't get it yet, but thank you anyway. I wonder. Why does it have to be like this? There are some laws, internal to the universe, which I simply cannot comprehend, let alone

work/ function according to them. They say, one day, you'll reach a point when everything will be clear. Yet I fear that day may come too late, at a point when I won't be able to enjoy it. I do not wish to grow old and, a few seconds before I die, realize that everything has been in vain, and that everything stops there, in that realization, and that there is nothing else to look forward too. I couldn't imagine a world without love, as I couldn't imagine a world without beauty. So, I need to say this to you, dear friend. If you are indeed reading this and if you do have a sudden revelation while reading, don't let that feeling go. You are special to me, and I wish you all the happiness the world could offer you. These words are not in vain. I know we pride ourselves with having one of the most sophisticated means of communication, language, but you need to know that words remain, and they will go deep, as deep as they can, and they will stay there for as long as our organic life shall permit. Words can fall in love, and you could fall in love with words too. They can seduce you, caress you, make love to you at night and before dawn. That is why I'm telling you this, dear friend, 'cause if they can love, they can also hate, they can also hurt you. But you already know these things, there's no need for me to tell you that. I'm actually telling you this because I've tried it on my own skin. I fell in love with your words, and every night I pull those words to my chest as if they are alive. Yet, maybe they are. I'm sure they are. I need them to be alive. Otherwise, I couldn't feel you as I do, breathing between the sheets.

Why would he say that, why would he say I'm beautiful? The days and nights spent alone taught me not trust other people's words, they're just words after all. I gotta go, he says, I'm hungry, I just came back from work and I need to eat something. He shakes hands with me then takes his backpack and places it on his shoulder. I open the door for him. There is nothing more I could possibly tell him and somehow I know that the instant he sets foot outside this door he is going to forget about everything, about everything I said and that he's going to go back to his regular life. The one I'm not a part of.

Tomorrow, he's going to take his backpack back to work and and he goes through his daily chores he's going to remember that word, beautiful, ponder a bit upon the thought and then dismiss it as a pleasant thought

that doesn't deserve any amount of attention. What he won't know is that the word set into motion this mechanism and he's going to act as the most beautiful thing on the planet, and he's going to smile and look into people's eyes and those people will smile back because they themselves will notice that something has changed in him and that he truly is one of the most beautiful things on Earth. Beauty is a role you perform, my love, you can deny all the other roles, but not this one.

You need a certain tone to talk about this. Sit on a desk if you have to, in front of an imaginary sea of students, your feet swinging like those of a child licking a lollipop. You are the professor, that means you know things, you've spent more than fifteen hours a day reading stuff and trying to write about them, make them understandable for the unripe minds of future generations. Emphatically, you'll raise your voice and say that empires do fall, oh, they do, oh, a most unfortunate condition for any type of societal construct, actually, a most unfortunate condition for any type of pride there is. At this point, please notice that your students stand frozen looking at you, wondering whether you've gone mad or it is only a transitory moment of rebellion against everything, the state especially, politics and morality, and all those boring things that make a life complicated. Some of them will rejoice because, at last, they found a leader for their youthful hipsterism. Why do they fall, professor, why do empires fall? Because some of us get creative, you'll say after a dramatic pause, and while waiting for your students to write down this immense idea. There are norms, you'll say, norms to which some of us won't comply, or can't comply. Roles that some of us shall refuse to perform. Oh, how grand you'll sound, but only in your mind. Your students will laugh, though not in your presence, only then, when they'll see your humble figure haunting the dark corners of an obscure public library. Later, they'll say it was an attack against same-sex marriages that lead the world to infertility and empty wombs. Oh, look how the empire is crumbling! You'll die in the meantime, professor, and your students will never know what you meant. What a pity, and a most unfortunate condition that is.

We'll meet once more on the street, both changed the way people change with the passing of the time, and everything will seem so strange just because certain words were told once and words cannot be taken

back. He'll smile, and I'll smile the way people smile to each other showing their teeth and we'll talk about regular things, the weather, things we must do in order to survive. The moment we told each other we are beautiful shall be lost, and remembered with fear, because that's just not what we do despite the fact that maybe those were the words that we wanted to hear at that particular moment. Then I'll find out he has a girlfriend and he has to spend time with her as much as he can because that's what boyfriends do, and then after a few weeks I'll find out that he's again single because things didn't work out. And I'm supposed to say I'm sorry because that is what friends are supposed to do. And I'll say with all my heart and he won't know that I said it with all my heart. Falsity is inherent, we both have been educated to believe it to be so and act accordingly. He'll go home and think I didn't actually mean it and that I was just trying to be nice though that's not the truth and nothing but the truth. And in all of this, inside this pile of rubble and dust of souls I'll hear you, my love, and my desire for you would grow ten times greater.

I call you and with every ring I'll feel closer to you and with every ring my heart will beat faster and faster until I'll hear your voice and everything will become silent again not because they won't exist anymore but because I won't be able to hear them. Strangely enough your voice seems to come out of my heartbeat as if my heartbeat acquires the rhythm of an articulation of sounds, the cadence of a human voice. Maybe you are that, maybe your entire being is the embodiment of my desire that has become so great so as to become a ghost, the ghost of you. Maybe you are a succubus, the ghost of meaning running through my veins. Hey there, I tell you, how's it going? The first time we spoke you've told me my voice is sweet and that you'd like to listen to it for hours. Let it be the music of my heart, you told me. The second time we spoke you told me that the desire to hear me was so great that you couldn't stand the thought of not listening to me. So we spoke more and more often, and I would speak with the heart of a rabbit, afraid that somebody might hear us talking, might overhear the things that we tell to each other. And we would speak for hours until sleep swept over us and I would wake up in the morning with your voice in my ears. And you would fill in the silences which emerged every time I told you I adore you with all my heart, and

you would say things, things that happened to you during the day, people you've met, and all that. And I would just say, yes, and then what happened? And you'd go on and smile, and laugh. In your absence everything comes back to me, every word, and the bitterness grows suffocatingly big, just like the lump in my throat, and it hurts so much because I know you exist only inside the lust a body like mine could conceive. You are the ghost, my love.

My body grows ugly in your absence, it is petrified by the horror of your absence. As I look at the ceiling I feel this fear growing into me, the fear of death, disease, solitude. In your absence I imagine the moment of my death and I feel this pain growing like a fetus into my guts. The fear that my ancestors planted into my flesh. They're telling me I should forget about you, there is no place for you into my life, or at least there shouldn't be a place for you in there, anywhere.

Every time you go to sleep I feel like I've lost you to my ancestors, to my gods, and I'm afraid they might plant the same seed into your flesh and you'll grow weary of me. Every time you perform that ritual of going to bed, of taking off your clothes, uncovering each and every part of your skin, every time I see that the fear grows and with it that lump in my throat, and I feel like throwing up, and I feel like I'm caught into this whirlpool going down, and I'm out of breath. Stop this ritual, go back, undo, you shouldn't be doing this here, in front of me. I promise, my love, I promise I shall fight against this urge with all my flesh and desire that I have for you. In your sleep, your body is not yours anymore. I don't sleep because I'm afraid my ancestors, my gods, make come and take you during the night, claim your body, take away my desire for you. And during the night the only urge that I have is to protect you, hold you in my arms, feel you as close as these two bodies can be. And in the morning I would check your body, every limb, just to make sure nothing is missing, to make sure my gods left you in one piece, to make sure they have not marred the beauty that is yours. I want to make sure there is no repulsiveness growing on your skin.

Why me, you say in the morning. What is this life, my love, if not a series of days and nights spent with you and without you? There is

nothing else outside this except everything else, and everything else does not matter to me.

There is more to this story than a simple plot. By now, dear reader, you'll be wondering if there is a sense in all of this. Maybe there is, maybe there isn't.

Don't stop this movement, let it consume itself smoothly as it should, slowly, let it flow beautifully like the glorious flight of a bird, don't let it fade, because if it fades then everything will be lost, including you, my love, and I don't want to lose you, I don't even want to imagine that, I don't want to experience it even if it's for the sake of experience, let me stay here with you, five more minutes, five more minutes and I'll go, I'll leave my thoughts with you, I'll leave my love with you, let this presence of mine linger a bit more around you. The car speeds down the highway, I hold my hand on your thigh, trying to feel the fullness of it, the things that make it the thigh of a human being. You're there, and I want to make sure of that, I want to make sure that this is not just my lust gone mad, a hallucination which has occupied my mind for so long that I started to perceive it as a real thing. You're squeezing too hard, you say, it hurts. I'm sorry, I say, and try to relax my fingers, make you feel comfortable with me around you. I've missed you so much, I say, even though we haven't seen each other before this. You smile, I could feel the hesitation in you though I know it is a false hesitation, you've told me. Yes, you say, this is really strange, how can you miss something you haven't seen before?

That's true, how is that possible, since that which you miss has not occupied any space in your life then how can you even notice its disappearance?

But that does not matter now, I tell him, just give me a quick kiss. I lean over the chair and feel his wet lips on mine. That was so good, I tell him, could I have another one? Just be careful, he says, these kind of things can be dangerous while driving. Trust me, I tell him and lean over the chair again, this time with a smile, my eyes locked on the road. You reach out, your hand still timid, still the hand of a boy who's too afraid to touch somebody other than himself, your flesh prepared to draw back suddenly like a scared animal. I can feel the warmth of your skin on my

thigh, then the tightness, the pressure of your palm. A wave of tremors goes through my muscles. I take your hand in mine and kiss it as softly as I could then place it back gently on my thigh.

Don't stop this flight, the emptiness, the great pleasure of finding you beside me, available, there, in that place, the closest place on Earth in this distance that stands between our two bodies, here, inside, there is nothing outside. Let me hold you. And you let me hold you, smiling, finally acknowledging my presence. I'm here to stay, I tell him. I know, he says.

Among these few lines there is a mistake, a word you thought of as something insignificant. It's not. You'll try to find it but it's not there. My love, in this dialogue of ours we are both losing, it's a lost bet since this love of ours is just the glorious architecture of my mind. Observe the lack of details, observe how everything has been reduced to the essential, how there is nothing else outside, how there are no other people, how it never rains, how it is never sunny, how everything seems like a limbo. There are no other human beings except what goes through my mind, except who goes through my mind, except you. And I'm so afraid, my love, afraid that won't be able to hold this world together by ourselves. I'm afraid that I won't be strong enough to do it.

Could we at least try it, he says.

Yes, we can try it. Tell me what I have to do, and I'll do it, even if it's the most difficult thing in the world.

First, he says, act as if you love me.

I don't need to act in order to do that, I tell him, I'll just be myself, that will be enough.

No, he says, do as I tell you, act as if you love me, because then afterwards we'll try something else.

What do I need to do in order to complete this request of yours, I ask him.

You have to take me out, buy me presents, take showers with me, and bubble baths, wear my shirts as you go to sleep and when I'll ask why

you're doing that you'll tell me that you like to feel my scent during the night when you suddenly wake up out of a heavy dream. Hug me and kiss me when my friends are around, make sure I'm sitting comfortably when we're out, make space for me if I need more space, order for me, pay for me, keep your knee close to mine when we're sitting close to each other, hold my hand, try to keep physical contact with me whenever you have the chance, smile every time you look at me and use that sweet face of yours, hold my jacket, kiss me on the lips whenever we say goodbye, act as if you're the man when my father or my mother is present, protect me, let me fall asleep on your shoulder, let me cry on your shoulder every time I feel like it, take me wherever I want to go. Demonstrate that you love me by acting as if you love me.

I did all of these. Then went back to him on my knees.

What should I do now, I asked him.

You'll have to do everything else, he told me, don't take me out, don't buy me presents, don't take showers with me, don't wear my shirts, don't hug me and don't kiss me when my friends are around, don't make sure I'm sitting comfortably, don't make space for me, don't order for me, don't pay for me, don't keep your knee close to mine, don't hold my hand. Can you still love me? Do you still love me?

Of course I do. But how will you know?

I'll now. Even in their absence, I'll know that you love me. You see, in this love of ours you have to get used to this, you have to get used to presence and absence, to lying and telling the truth, to hiding it and showing it.

How will I be able to do that?

It's not without difficulty, he says, but you'll be able to do it, because you'll know, you'll know that presence is as good as absence, and absence is as good as presence, that lying is as truthful as telling the truth, and that hiding it from the others is as good as showing it. This love of ours plays a double game. We'll need to invent our own language, play with words, call things by other names, and in the meantime rage will

grow furiously like poisonous herbs do, rage against everything else and everyone else, and in this rage you'll find yourself so alone that you'll get used to it, consider it natural, a thing for you to keep and nurture. You'll find it funny, adorable, and in this rage you'll wake up every morning.

Call me Rage, in case you need a name for me. Call me Fear, call me yours.

I am my own Rage, I am my own Fear.

Rage has a thing for you, my love, Fear has a thing for both of us.

There's the fear of being caught, the fear of being blamed for this love of ours, the fear that there have been things unknown to us, refused to us just because of this love of ours, the fear of dying alone, the fear of waking up alone and realizing this has been only a dream, the fear that dreams may never come, the fear that a dream is just a dream and nothing more, the fear that you have found somebody else, the fear of the other body, the other man, the other woman, the fear of confusion, the fear of not having a clue, the fear that the war is already lost to both of us.

My name is Rage. Boiling Rage. My name is Rage Against Everything Else That Is Not You. My Rage is directed against those things which try to keep me away from you. My Rage is directed against the thoughts that make you appear putrid and lost, my rage is directed against those nights in which I have to go to bed alone, those mornings in which I find myself alone in bed, those mornings in which I have to drink my coffee alone. My Rage is directed against the bitterness of solitude.

My love, he says, rage is everywhere, Rage is here with me. I am Fear. Love me.

Rage and Fear got together and made love to each other. Unfortunately, neither Fear, nor Rage could have children, and so they were left alone with themselves. Their child could have been an abomination, and I myself would be lost for words trying to describe that child, just because my words couldn't measure the beauty of that child, the fairness, and the happiness that the child brought to both Rage and Fear. It was the most beautiful Abomination because it was born out of

love and other stories, which you surely know by now, say that everything that comes out of love is beautiful, or at least should be considered beautiful.

My name is Abomination. I have taken up many forms up until now except this form: that of a child born out of love. I was born out of Rage and out of Fear. Love me. Try to love me. Act as if you could love me. Be silent, pretend. Because if you act as if you love me then I'll know that deep down there is at least the desire to accept me for who I truly am, your beautiful Abomination.

I've lost my sense of direction. Father, I know that your fury will hold me back a while. You want me to forget. Undo the words, undo myself, go back to that state of innocence you threw me into a long time ago.

Dear friend,

Thank you, I'd say, for your last letter. I'm really glad for you and the things you have achieved. From your tone I understand that you are happy with everything at the moment, your new apartment, your new friend, she seems nice from what you've told me. I've been looking at that picture again, for hours on end; it's the one on the white boat, with your sister and your mother, and the bluest ocean I have ever set my eyes on. I do miss the old times. Do you remember those grapes? We used to eat them in the evening, when the sun was just good. I know you'll keep telling yourself that this can't be, that this is just a text, and it has nothing to do with real life. Well, if you are reading this then know that I do love you, that this text is me, forced, shriveled into words as I am right now, but this is really me, trying to fit this page just like I try to fit a category others have made for me. So this letter must have a degree of immediacy so that when you read it you'll feel like I'm standing right beside you and you're trying to keep up with my hand, or I'm trying to keep up with your moving eyes. So that we'll meet in this fatigue of language that gets me every time I try to write something for you. Really, you're the only person I'm writing for. Sometimes I fear there's nobody else out there and that I need to make you up out of the experiences I never had. Then I'll have to make you out of the cup of coffee I had in the morning, and the short

chats I have with my hairdresser, and those faces of those students and those people I see drowned into their thoughts, books, cups, hands held together. You'll turn out to be many things when you're actually one and you wear your cape with dignity. You know, that cape made out of the night and a garbage can, and the no-smoking sign. You look like a pineapple in it.

You've asked me about the angels and the saints. They're really beautiful; otherwise I wouldn't consider them angels and saints. One of them has these white wings, and (s)he sells flowers. I see him/her almost every morning. Then there's the saint I don't really know because I haven't really seen him/her, only his/her shoes lined up, drying in the sun.

Things are good here, I'm happy, but you probably know that. I'm searching for new ways of telling you that I'm actually happy. So you need to be happy too. You must be. I refuse to think otherwise. You must be patient, you must love, and care, and do, and pray, because people will want you and you'll live out of that want, and you'll want them. You are born out of others' wishes like you were born out of mine.

The song of beauty, you, and the rest, ugliness, bitterness, and everything else, you, and the happiness of seeing you every morning. When I see you I often want to die just because you are more beautiful than I am. And I like to hide. Don't tell me I have more because that is not true, and if my belief stands in its untruthfulness then it means that this has no purpose, nothing has a purpose, not even the fact that I love you. I can say that because I've got nothing to lose except you.

The good I am, or the good I am not. Despite the small, private success of a life as mine, I can be, and I am, defined as another mouth to be fed, and another soul to be nurtured. The cruel truth is that one always feels like a bad investment. Unwrapping and waving the white flag of ideologies of greatness does not mean that, financially speaking, the investment is secured. There is no hedge fund when it comes to a life. They, meaning parents, grandparents, friends, and relatives, might never recover, buy back, the things that they have spent for one's life. I'm afraid we are nature, and nature grows trees, and flowers, and apples, and nature can ruin and never be reborn, it can grow poison, it can do things.

How can I trust the hands of such an unstable, sickly, beastly, thorn-growing nature as mine, the nature of a human being, the nature of things. Such lives are spent by, lent to, a more general nature of things among which the human nature just might be the most beautiful and the most repulsive thing there is. No other thing can recall such powerfully contrasting, mind-blowing, oppositions. so ugly that it is beautiful. Like bodies, flesh and glorious architecture. Mouths to be fed, yet, like hopes, they sleep as soundly as ethereal creatures during the day. Dormant, the promise is embedded into the walls of cells, so thin, so full of power, so much like dust.

Then what am I supposed to do, he asks, why am I here? Why am I talking to you? The sudden pain that grows in the careful labyrinth of guts, within the heart which is somewhere in between lust and rationality, the heart, that heart, not the organ, the little pump, not that, as big as your right fist, not that, there is somewhere, don't know exactly whereabouts, another heart, the heart that we have carefully placed on a pedestal, lying around, doing the things that come into direct contradiction with the things that the brain does, against all odds, against everything else. What we fail to see is what it doesn't show, that the heart is not thinking anymore in terms of beauty. Then what am I supposed to do, he asks, again, and looks at me with the eyes I fell in love with.

What is there to do?

For those who need to be silent in order to live, be silent, pretend. It will be the longest moment of your life, like when you're sick and the pain and the fever won't go away. You feel like grass grows faster. Grass does grow under your bed, you just don't know it. Every morning your grandmother goes and cuts it with small scissors, those that are used to cut nails. Be silent, don't say the things they do not want to hear, there's always some conspiracy thing going on. Just say that you are happy even though what is happening around you is bound to make you unhappy. Silence will give you peace, silence will make you love, silence will help you bear your solitude with pride. Go find a burrow and shout your secret into it then cover it with mud. It will work for a few nights. you'll have the chance to sleep alone because your secret will be too busy getting out of

the burrow. What would you wish for your birthday, the burrow will ask. And I'll whisper: I wish to know somebody that could see, and not be blind like me. And the burrow will laugh. I tricked you into it, the burrow will say. Once you say your wish to me it will never happen. That's the thing with burrows, you see, you wouldn't want a secret to get out of the burrow. Just like that wishes will never get out of the burrow. It's wars and words you cannot take back. So be silent, pretend, because I've tried everything, and everything doesn't work.

He laughed and he cried, hugged me, kissed me, then put his head on my chest and sobbed. I hate this world so much, he told me, I can't stand it anymore, I want it to go away. I will make it go away, just let me love you. I'm yours, he said.

Explore the body, read the epidermis. I insert my hand under his shirt. The heat, this heat is so majestic, so aristocratic in its presence and manner, so silent. It makes you beautiful, so beautiful that it makes me devour you. The heat is music. The fragmented feet of music. With paws and hooves all over. You train your epidermis to listen to new rhythms. Before somebody else says what is this. Nothing this is just a run over the whole specter of illusion. Words uttered backwards. They do sound like a strange language you do not need to be taught. It is self-sufficient, obedient to the self and the selves of animals with paws and hooves all over. And for a moment lovers seem to be made out of stone. So rough, their love fragmented. Time is needed for stone to settle. They do not grow old, these lovers. They seem the same. Lean against me, body of stone. And the stones vibrate when paws and hooves run all over. Your epidermis is now trained not to shiver at the thought of me. You are now a trained photo. To stay silent like that, seated on the time you've forfeited back then. To forgive you, to give you some slack, so that you may look back from the picture and smile. Watch my present, and your future. Your fragile breath sacrificed for one second until the shutter was open and closed again. But the future will write on the back of the picture the word fragile. The fragile word not to be touched.

I've trained your epidermis not to shiver at the thought of me.

And I've lost my way back.

When the lines are broken and the words recall different meanings in the same situations, all one does is whine about the muteness of hands held together. What is there to understand than two hands tied with muteness. I suddenly want us to be silent, will my hand fuse on your belly. Shall I melt away from the heat of your body. Become one with your rough skin. Because I can feel the pores and the sense of despair. All hope is lost or absent. Come on, howl, I want to see drama, let that despair materialize, contrast with the secrecy of our hidden love. Two bodies like this should not be together, not in this life. You know sometimes, when I'm asleep, I fear that a pair of black wings shall pierce through the skin of my back and push you away because my gods would offer me those wings just to push you away. So tie me with the sheets, let my ugly grin contrast with the nothingness you hold into your empty womb like a cursed mother. I'm afraid it is too late, you say. My gods have already denied this love. They said you shall crawl with a deserted womb until you repent.

So I write a letter, my gods, and ask them why this cut, and they say, because if you look ahead, little by little, the world shall commit suicide. We leave you with the empty wombs. And I wonder when this wrath of bones will stop growing. The fruitless womb grows bones but no flesh. We'll have to use our own flesh to fill in the blanks. Connect the dots and this love shall be complete.

I cross my palms over you belly and my hands seem displaced. and you are scared. what shall we do, you ask. shh, nothing, I say. keep this displacement silent. they need a life. we don't. I won't melt away from the heat of your body. black wings won't grow from the blades of my back and push you away. love is not as inhumane as we think it is. shh, they need a life. we don't.

There is a secret in the flesh, unknown, but waiting to be discovered, waiting to be told as a story afterwards. The body will change its course, change its mind in the meantime, the human body is the beautiful flower gods use to tell their love stories. He loves me, he loves me not, one limb after the other, but in such a way that there is always one limb left after he loves me not. The body is pure intelligence. There is no mistake. It will work just fine. And if it won't work just fine it will work at least for one second, which will seem like an eternity, enough for you to

realize that you are alive, just enough to realize that flowing through your veins there is a sort of lust which may or may not be satisfied. The body is irony. The irony that for so many years has been called fate. The body will grow a third nipple but never a third eye. The body will develop fears, things that can be easily hidden away from view, covered by a piece of cloth. Rumor has it my parents wanted a girl instead of a boy, a boy instead of a girl. The body changed its mind in the meantime, developed a boy. Irony, that is. Don't you find it strange? Yet somewhere, somehow, the body retains the secret. Hidden away from view, covered by a piece of cloth, flesh and skin, muscle. Where is it? I can't really see it. It's like a halo, you'd say. The androgynous monster will hide itself inside the thought, behind gestures, behind sounds, and most of all, behind lust.

My love, you are the secret of my flesh.

My love, I am a ghost of meaning, a postmodern angel that is, crowned with a halo of secrets instead of virtue. Hallelujah, praise the flesh in all its glory.

There's enough space for disappointment. The space opened by a flicker of the eye. And there it is the flickering image of you, caught in between the sheets and the pillow. You don't even know if you're breathing or not. During the night, the body submerges into its secrets, the mechanism hidden away from view, covered by a piece of cloth: your skin-deep beauty.

Why can't you be normal, just like the other boys, just stop playing with dolls, they're not for you. Mom, there's a secret I've been planning to tell you since the day of my birth, since I've started growing into your body, since your secret in the flesh materialized, took shape.

Why can't I be normal, my love, why can't I forget about everything else and just love you? We're at this point where I can just reach out and touch you although the secret in the flesh scares me to death. Scare me to love. Scare me to forgetfulness. Reset the world, deny the mechanism.

CHAPTER FOUR

I've seen how the flesh gets scared of me, only at the thought of me. I've witnessed it in one of my invented memories. I touched this man's hand, and I could feel the flesh, the warmth, and the hand withdrew, quickly, like a snake, like the body of a snail does, hiding slowly under its protective shell. I got scared myself because in that indeterminate movement I've seen myself through the eyes of that man, and I appeared monstrous and alone, like a child who fears being abandoned. I've seen that frightening look that for a second made me seem invisible or made me want to think that I'm invisible or that I should be invisible just for that pair of eyes. I am the child and the child-molester, the victim and the perpetrator. How could I not be when every time I touch you I can feel the flesh that has grown into something that only your mind could fathom? Is it the same flesh, that of the child, that has grown dark, day by day, and thought by thought? Aren't you still that little boy you were years ago that still smells of breast milk? It is the same skin, the same glorious architecture.

The mind has made you furiously dark, laid one by one the brushstrokes of dementia, adulthood, over the scribbled smiling face of your innocence.

The mind grows too fast. The body has to keep up.

I try to understand where this guilty pleasure of yours comes from, derive its driving principles, and in the process understand myself, your lover. To find the spot where the mind refused the spectral image of an angel replacing it with that of an androgynous figure, relaxed and seemingly superficial, yet full of sexual frenzy.

There is no change, no crossing point, that's why there is no turning back.

I can't find your number, it seems to have disappeared and for a second I panic thinking that you might have been indeed a figment of my imagination. I finally find it under the letter M. It's that other name that I have given you this week. Hey, I can hear your voice at the other end of the line, trembling, filled with expectation. I'm just going to get my

luggage and I'll be there in about 15 minutes. You know how these things work, I tell him, but I only do that to fill the air that is suddenly too much for my lungs. I have taken my best shirt, even my best boxer shorts, my best socks, you know, just to make a first good impression on you. We'll see about the other impressions. The first one is the most important at this point. I'll be waiting, he says, and as he said that I suddenly felt that 15 minutes is going to take forever. I tell myself that patience is the key aspect now. I've been waiting for this for so many months.

I'm still waiting for it.

I finally take the luggage and I put my sunglasses on. I have a terrible headache, I tell him through the phone. We'll take care of that he says, you're on the other side of the wall. I could actually hear him.

Was it a flicker? A second there has just passed, consumed itself.

The doors open automatically. I could hear the mechanism working inside.

I step outside. The connection seems lost and I can't hear you anymore. I stop and look for your number again. There is no letter M in the alphabet. I look through the rest of my contact list, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents, unknown people. There is no letter M in the alphabet. One pearl is missing from the string. But I've just seen it.

There is no alphabet.

You're probably waiting at the car.

There is a young man waiting next to a colorless car. I have never told you the color of my car. Once I told you I had dreamed of you, or rather forced myself to dream of you and you were voiceless. Back then I didn't know the sound of your voice. Now I've become so familiar with it.

You're not under the letter M.

I wonder what name I have given you today.

Under the letter G there is the word *ghost*. For a second you looked like a ghost. That ghost which comes at night, intent, and full of meaning, full of lust. We kill the lust that grows between your bodies. We strangle it

with our bare hands until it breathes no more. The lust that comes to life when our bodies occupy the same space, at the same time, a slight distance required to make things work, the distance and the time that at one point will seem to extend towards infinity.

You are under the letter L, for *lust*, blocked into a category, my category.

There is the unnamable celestial body, of unknown descent living in a completely white inodorous land, no houses except words. There is the center of consciousness, diverse, totally different color. The body is stained, recorded in black and white, saturated. The body becomes a hypodermic syringe, youth itself, in the flesh. The body is the prerecorded obsession, the sound, no sound of any kind. There's no specificity there. There is the completely inodorous white land. There are hundreds of inhabitants led by a man who fell in love in the mirror, made love in the mirror until he was trapped inside. They all turned purple and then orange due to the light reflected by the mirror. The skin turned hard, like a crust, perfectly stretched, flawlessly attached.

The body is an open wound, a cut in the air made with a word.

The flesh is the presence of lust.

The body is a curve between two points, the longest way between one point and the other, the longest way between A and B. The ultimate measure of the body is loss. The earth plates are on the move and we're caught in between, innocent as we come, by nature. Time runs slower in this center of consciousness.

I wouldn't want to wake up because waking up means facing the inodorous white desert. I can't find *you* in that desert. There's a land of lines put together, laws attached and meanings, and you stop being human, there is only what you've become, an entity. There are the repetitive words said every morning, cut obliquely they are empty of meaning though desired to be full of meaning. Good morning, how are you, did you have a good night. The answer is always yes, though by saying yes, I intend to say so much more. Yes means yes and no. The people living in this inodorous white land will understand you, they know.

Human waste, with every touch we go to waste. One step taken towards love is one step taken towards becoming human waste.

We stood hand in hand, our feet into the sand, watching fascinated how the waves came and went. My father knows, he says, he knows that we're together. Did you tell him? Yes, I told him, and it's not the first time I did that, he seems to forget a lot.

I'm not afraid of that, I'm not afraid of your father, he'll eventually understand, what I'm afraid of though is what will come out of that understanding. Next time we'll meet and we'll have to shake hands and he'll have to look into my eyes. I don't know how I'm going to do that.

We'll just have to avoid that, he says, be silent, pretend, shake hands like normal people do, wear the armor of common courtesy. In that world we'll be invincible, in this world we'll tend to our fragile souls in need of each other.

I try to imagine what his father is thinking about this, I'm the guy who's fucking his son, three years older than him, taller, with long sideburns. Some may say I'm taking advantage of the situation I'm in. I fear the mercy that he might feel for me; I wouldn't want to have that.

Your skin, the sun has given it this dark hue, the sun is telling me to look somewhere else. His father told me to look somewhere else, told me his son is not for me that I don't deserve to have him. His mother smiled and said nothing. I looked down and told them I'm in love with their son. They said nothing, so I said it again. His father laughed but said nothing and I wanted to hold him, right there, hold him in my arms. The world was telling me to look somewhere else. There was this lump in my throat, I felt like throwing up.

I took him by the hand when we went out of the house. I looked back and the house was completely white, painful white. The windows were completely white, the trees framing the house were completely white, the sidewalk was white, everything was of a perfect white as if the house, his parents, time itself were mere drawings on a white sheet of paper. His eyes were completely white, perfectly white, inodorous white, tasteless white, a desert of whiteness at my feet. And in that whiteness I

felt so alone and I felt like running away as fast as I could. Something held me, with a strong hand, something held me close.

At one point you come to terms with yourself, with who you are, or at least try to. I did the same, or at least tried to do the same. The whiteness was on to obliterate us, both of us, reduce us to mere drawings on a white sheet of paper.

You were wearing this dark blue sweater and that pair of jeans you always said they were your favorite though at times I disliked them deeply. And you had had your new haircut which seemed desperate the first time I saw it, but I was in love with you so it was the most beautiful haircut in the whole wide world. And there was a smile on your face, like that of a child that for a moment has forgotten about everything. We were in the backyard of your father's house and you had found this rubber ball, and you were playing with it trying to imitate famous footballers. There was also that friend of yours, I don't remember her name, something with K, I guess. Look under the letter K, there might be something there. But there isn't of course, there is no letter K in the alphabet.

You were laughing and I fell in love with you again.

It was autumn. And the trees were not yet white, inodorous white, devoid of color. Back then the whiteness was yet lurking behind us never having the courage to attack us. It was the joy in your eyes that kept the whiteness away.

Or that time in the shopping mall when I could only think of you while watching all those men unpacking merchandise moving swiftly along the aisles as if there was something waiting for them when they got home. Is there anyone for them, at home, waiting for them to come back? A girlfriend, a boyfriend, a wife thinking of them, and I could see them doing things so that they could forget the absence. I went to the cashier and put the things I intended to buy on the conveyor and the woman looked at me and said something about a loyalty card and I said no. But everything happened just like that, without me actually acknowledging it. My replies were already there, prepared, ready to be delivered. And I was still thinking of you and nothing could distract me from doing that. We were in the car speeding on a highway leading nowhere the whiteness

surrounding us like it was winter though it wasn't winter, it was summer, it was supposed to be summer, and there was a white sun ahead of us neither smiling nor frowning at us, just like that, one of those emotionless suns, nothing special. But we weren't running away from the whiteness, by that time we were accustomed with that, it had become our daily routine to live submerged into this sea of whiteness. We were going to that place called home, though in fact it wasn't a home; it was the only place left in the world where the whiteness hadn't reached yet, the place where we weren't afraid to be ourselves. We were in the car speeding on a highway leading nowhere and you said you have to tell me something. Should I stop then, I asked you, and you said yes, I should stop, and I pulled over. It wasn't the place or the time to say it, you said while other cars went by us and the sound was at times too strong to bear. And you said you love me and I took your hand in my hands and kissed it passionately and I saw you smiling, and I said I love you too.

There is no whiteness here because the room is too dark and the house is hidden away from view. Nobody can see us here, not even ourselves.

For miles there is no house in sight, just the occasional illusions that lure us into believing we are not alone in this white desert. There are no lights, and the weeds have outgrown the path, outgrown those who might venture around the house. The house resembles a fortress, painted in scarlet, painful to the eye, and to those who look at it from the outside it will appear deformed. Not to us, those who live inside have seldom fallen in love with the asymmetrical walls, windows turned away from the sun, doors too small to enter, some of the locked from the outside. Actually, all of them are locked from the outside except one which is in the attic so that if somebody wants to get out he or she will have to commit suicide, every time, several times during one's lifetime. So we are very reluctant about going out. One morning I woke up with the feeling that we were the last two human beings on earth. No one yet ventured in these parts; the weeds have outgrown the adventurer.

Once our shadows touched for an instant, our faces projected against the curtains and an arrow flew right beside us, breaking the glass.

I felt the air disturbing around us. They're watching, I told myself. We hid away, under the bed and kissed, as silently as we could trying not to disturb the dust.

At night we could hear noises going around the house, noises resembling those of steps, people running, and whispering, saying things. We made love during the night just to keep away those whispers, and in between the times we made love we had nightmares. We dreamt of this white ocean which ate the shores little by little while we were there mesmerized by the sunset our feet moving like fingers on a piano keyboard, like two dancers in a black and white film. And the white water kept coming.

Rumor has it you're pregnant.

Last night I kissed your bellybutton and I then I listened to your guts.

All was silent, except for your breath.

What an unfamiliar place your body is.

We descend into the cellar to make love into the dark, descend into that foreign place, unknown, where no mother or father has ever went to sweep away the monsters, the place where we shall be undone, our souls cancelled, made empty. I wonder if I have ever told you that in the light of the cellar, seen from the top of the stairs your body seems so long, your belly sucked in, hidden under enormous ribs, almost monstrous, as if there's a creature behind you embracing you with its claws, you seem huge, crushed, the essence oozing out of you. When I see you that way there's this monstrous lust growing inside my guts, to fill the womb, to draw the desert in colors, knowing that the womb will never bear a child, neither boy nor girl, nothingness itself. And as I stand at the top of the stairs looking at you for a short instant you resemble a shadow of meaning (affection or lust?) your feet and hands out of proportion. Every time we make love I need to learn to care for that shadow though I know, I know very well you are not one with the shadow. So I will kill the shadow, become one with it, occupy the same space, be one with it.

There's the kiss and the first touch, frivolous in this flawed mechanism called making love, the spark which makes lust unbearable, thirsty for immediate satisfaction. Your bones grow huge under the skin, your forehead out of proportions seems like that of a hideous devil, and your muscles rigid like those of an animal pursued by its nemesis. I feel your collarbone with my lips and then with my tongue. Over the years my lips have learned how to feel the faint movement of blood under your skin, how to separate adrenaline from blood without dipping the tip of my tongue into the warm liquid keeping you alive. Over the years I've learned how to separate the expectancy of pleasure from happiness, know its inner workings. There's a huge gap between the two. I find your body hidden into that gap like the body of the child during the night when darkness takes monstrous proportions. Once I asked you about it. Why do you hide in there? Because we need to hide, you said and turned away. But there was happiness in those words, a sort of acknowledgement as if there was nothing else to do about it. And I was happy too. Like that time we were on the train and there was a man sitting in front of us and we couldn't say anything to each other, and we had to be silent, put on our masks. And we sent short messages to each other saying 'I love you', 'I miss you so much', 'I wish we were alone right now', 'I want to hold your hand', 'I want to kiss you' and so on and so forth. And the guy kept looking at us and we said we stood alone.

Like that time when we were in the park and we were together only when nobody was looking. Or that time we were on the train and we wanted to lock ourselves into the bathroom to have a short kiss.

There's that smile, that sequence of teeth.

Since we moved into this house every morning there is a package at our door. It seems impossible to receive such packages since we are so far away from human habitations. Even dogs are afraid to venture in these parts.

Every package contains a different item; every morning there is a different item inside.

At first we were afraid to open it. We thought there might be a bomb inside. Or some sort of poison that might get into our lungs, under

the skin. The first item we got was a plastic hand. It was scary because it looked real. There was real blood spattered all over it. But it wasn't real. It was just a mannequin's arm.

The next morning we got a head with real hair on it. The hair smelled like it was carefully washed. It had an indefinite color, neither blonde nor red, something in between. Then the short notes kept coming along with different body parts. Once there was a foot and a note telling us to run away. We don't want you on our land, the note said. We didn't pay attention to it. Usually people send you flowers, or boxes of chocolate. When the last piece of mannequin arrived we tried putting it together but some of the pieces did not fit. Some of them belonged to another mannequin, or so it seemed. One of the two hands appeared to belong to a female mannequin, and so was one of the two legs. We didn't pay too much attention to it, but the next day we got a note saying "now you see how we feel about you".

There's an instant when you look away. At least I think there is. Then, when I kiss you on the neck and my eyes are closed and I can't see what you're doing in the meantime. In that instant I have a sort of idealized version of you. Like that time when I can't see you in the dark. I imagine you are asleep, lost among the ghosts of your body.

How do you feel about us? I wonder. This is a statement and not a question, because we already know the answer. It is the answer we've all been waiting for.

Why have you brought me here?

I wanted you to see. I wanted you to see the life that I'm not able to do away with, identify the inertia that I've fallen into, having breakfast, lunch and dinner always at the same hour with the same people.

He took out a box full of photos, all kinds of people, figures, smiles started to talk at the same time. This used to be my mother. This used to be my father. This used to be my sister. This used to be my brother. This used to be my lover.

This is my lover.

This used to be my lover.

This used to be my lover. All of them used to be my lovers. Some of them still are. I'm still seeing this one. This is one of his gifts: a ring.

This one fell in love with me. Can you see the perfection?

There was a sort of perfection behind every face as there was a sort of perfection behind the life that he was currently living. I personally agreed with the fact that it's a great thing to have breakfast, lunch and dinner with one and the same person.

I used to date this one. He fell in love with me but I told him not to do that because my heart has already been taken by somebody else. I'm telling you the same thing. Don't fall in love with me. My heart is already taken.

By whom?

By the person I'm having breakfast, lunch, and dinner with.

I told him I understand the situation and promised him that I'm not going to fall in love with him. I was going to say that if it happens I won't tell him, and if I tell him I'll also ask him not to love me back. I haven't told him that yet. I'm still waiting for something to happen.

And days went by. I kept my heart on lock-down. Refrained myself from seeming too sweet, too close to what is generally called affection. I locked the door, closed the windows, drew the curtains, and tried, as much as I could, to associate his warmth with that of the sun coming in through the curtains.

I think it was you who told me once that there is more than one empty slot inside a man's heart. At that time I dismissed the thought as foolish, but now, as I saw you with him, as I saw you kissing him and then kissing me when he was not around, and thought that it might be true. There is more than one empty slot inside a man's heart. It was true even for the both of us, two runaways, secluded into a huge house on a hill, far from the maddening crowd, two afraid of the things unsaid, or, at least, the things that are probably never going to be said.

I'm okay with it, you said. I'm perfectly fine with what we have.

I felt so humiliated by the thought. We had nothing except for the house, and the beautifully painted walls, the furniture, that stream of mothers and fathers coming to dinner once in a while to maintain the illusion of a family that suddenly stopped at us. There is nothing behind us. The bloodline is broken. Nobody said it, but I heard it. The endless possibilities stop at us.

I got out of the house once because I felt alone in your company. There was no sound of any kind out there except for whispers, words brought by the wind. You told me they don't know me yet so they might stare at me for no reason. Yet, there was nobody out there. I went down the hill finding my way through the thick jungle of weeds that have overgrown the path. I heard creatures moving through the tall grass and the movement they made resembled whispering, hundreds of voices talking in unison. There was a smaller hill hiding the rest of the valley from view.

There were times when I wanted to believe there was nothing out there, nothing except us, because of our love. I wanted to love you and nobody else except you. This time I tried to see you as one of them, one of the others, a face in the crowd, and there was only one face, your face, in a sea of faceless faces.

There is one place on your body where your skin resembles the rough hills of the desert that I found just outside our door.

Run. Leave everything behind. Forget.

Step by step, I'm trying to run away from you. They know too much now, and I can't undo it. Words cannot be taken back. I try to imagine you sitting alone, tied to your stupid boxes of pictures, your ex relationships, all those faces inevitably tied to you and your empty body. Hopefully, I'll find my way back to the city, that world in which our love was born.

I love you, says one of your text messages. Don't you forget that.

I love you too, and I hit the send button.

I try to maintain the illusion that I'm still close, that I'll come back to you as soon as the sun comes down in the evening. When you'll realize that I'm not coming back I'll be too far away from you and that cursed

house on top of the hill. I'll go back to my unhappy life. That life which seemed so empty while you were away.

Where to, the guy asked me. He had a tattoo on his neck, a black panther with an enormous tail which descended to places I couldn't yet see or imagine. I can give you a ride to town, he said. I pulled the door wide open and got in without taking my eyes off the black panther and the enormously long tail. There was a strong odor in the car, of sweat and car freshener. It felt like I was invading this guy's space but it was my only chance to get back to town.

Where you coming from? I look at him for an instant without replying as if the question is meaningless at this point. I said, where you coming from? How strange words seem coming from the mouth of somebody I haven't met before.

That house, up the hill, all red and solitary. Up there, do you know it?

Don't know it, but I heard people talking, saying things about it.

What kind of things? I was afraid this moment would come.

I don't know, about those fucked-up people living there, ugly things. Heard they're some sort of demons or something. Strange things happen out there, they say, it's a fucked-up place. So I heard, don't know, you know.

The panther's tail resembles a noose. It looks like a hook.

How long is that tail?

Huh?

Panther's tail. How long is it? Where does it go?

It went down the arm, the elbow, and ended on his wrist. A very unusual panther one might say though for him, the long tail was just a symbol. I never found out what it stood for. This fragile man, I thought, standing there, on the driver's seat, so fragile yet so strong, a body built out of the things it knows and lacks the knowledge of. I did not need to know the rest of him because everything was already out there, written on his skin, outlined by the panther's tail, it's obscure smile. I could love you,

I thought despite my better judgment, alienation running through my veins. Where are you, my fear?

Do you have any other tattoos?

Eight of them, he replied. All over my body. This is another one.

I've got you under my skin, the tattoo said.

Who was it for? A lover I suppose.

Someone special, he replied and as he said it an indefinite number of faces and smiles went through my mind, all of them beautiful, their beauty extended to the limits of my perception of beauty. Eyes the color of hazel on an endless road.

In what dreamless state are you, my love? My body is missing by your side. I'm on somebody else's side now. The panther's tail grew longer. It almost reached out like a shadow on a wall, a threat that gained corporeality as the car drew closer and closer to a city that rose higher on the horizon, filled with possibilities like a closed box. I got lost for a second thinking how our life together has been up to this point as if you were right there, shyly listening to our conversation letting the wind from the open window run through your hair. Here I am, running from you, recording every word, every face on my way to a place where there is no you. How pathetic that sounds knowing that you were everything for me, how insecure and joyful we seem holding hands and kissing at night, in your car, in a parking lot usually frequented by people like us, desperately seeking for a place to be ourselves, watching people from a distance paying attention to every movement of light that comes to reach our eyes. There was that time when you parked your car in the parking lot of a recovery center. There's nobody here, you said, we're safe, nobody should bother us. I said nothing because I was in love with you. We said we stood alone. In fact, there were other people there but I chose to ignore them somehow knowing that they wouldn't care. You, on the other hand, were so afraid that I could feel your muscles tighten with every sound that reached our ears. It felt like a thing no one did, and I was proud of that. It felt like discovering the nest of a pretty bird thinking that somehow the bird's intelligence does not go as far as forming an awareness of human presence.

What were you doing in that place anyway? Do you live there?

I used to live there, yes, I replied.

He didn't say anything, just looked out and scanned the horizon for a few seconds.

Do you happen to know the other people living there?

I know of only one of them, a friend of mine. Are there others?

A bunch of them, or so I heard. But they don't live there at the same time, they seem to switch places every once in a while. One of them is permanent. The others keep coming and going.

Then, after a few days you realize there is something wrong because the nest is getting cold. Pieces start falling out of it.

I know nothing of that, I replied. I don't know anyone except my friend.

And the bird is gone, as if pieces of your skin, particles invisible to the eye have infected the nest with the sickness of your pleasure-seeking voyeurism.

Do you have somebody in the city? I ask him and realize that my question is altogether redundant and ridiculous at this point.

Yes, I do. I've got my mum, dad, and my brother. Had a sister but she died.

I'm sorry to hear that. What happened?

A sudden twitch of the hand and the car made a quick jump and regained its course. A sudden awareness sprang up in him, like a panther, filled with intent and malice. There was a long silence and I thought that, again, I had fallen into one of those moments of the day in which I cannot stop talking.

She disappeared. My sister, she disappeared.

Did you try to find her? They must have, I thought.

No, he said and stopped as if the answer was something that I would expect. We just like to think of her as dead. We know nothing of her since she disappeared. It was her choice to disappear, I guess.

How strange it is when people disappear. They disappear just like that, and what remains are just opinions, thoughts, invisible particles left on a pillowcase, a smile next to a birthday cake. I could see her already, his sister, her eyes cruel, scrutinizing the gap that opened in front of her feet. Yet, in this case where was the gap? People who disappear have this aura of mystery around them, and that aura is somehow filled with an intention that is always obscure, hidden to the eye, and just because it is obscure it is always exotic. It seems displaced, out of this world, as if they have understood something which we, the rest, have not. They have seen something in the dust that words leave behind once they have been uttered. They move around on wooden legs and speak a strange language, frightful because they're different yet comforting because they are a part of the things that we see every day.

There is a curious game of power between those who disappear and those who are left behind. The losers are always those who disappear. Yet those who stay behind are just underestimating things. They never know how much victory stands in the taken steps of the one that walks away.

But I won't explain this to him; I can't say it to this man curved around the wheel staring helplessly outside as if the world is the only thing to blame. He wouldn't understand, I guess, or at least my explanation will seem feeble to him and I'm coming from the red house on the hill where mysterious things happen apparently, without my knowledge. Yet keeping my mind occupied with complex problems keeps me away from you. And each and every thing I see around me reminds me of you.

There's the city, he says and I desperately try to get my eyes used to the distance. The horizon blackens with threatening walls of concrete. The first thing that comes to my mind is that it looks like a fortress. The walls themselves seem to be saying in a high-pitched voice that some things will never get inside if there is enough will in the people wielding them as protection. And some things will never get out, I presume. For a moment I feel like running away from it, go back to that house of ours and live with the ignorance and bliss of young lovers who think that their love

is no match for any other love. This city is just too much for me right now. Yet, as my thoughts crawl back to you there is another feeling making its way inside my guts, the feeling that going back might ruin both of us. I'll sit patiently beside you in silence denying the fact that I tried to run away from you, leave you behind, and I'll count the time spent together by how many cigarettes I've had. I'll spend my day moving things around the house and then move them back in their initial position just to keep myself occupied. Dream of a forgotten state in which there is nothing in between our kisses except for other ways of showing love and affection, where there is no boredom, no household chores, but the sole encounter between our naked bodies.

Who is that, I ask and point to a man who appears to be surrounded by a group of tourists taking pictures. He's desperately waving them off but none of the tourists seems to take notice. Among them a sense of misunderstanding seems to be floating around, their faces yellow, shrank by the scorching heat. The man looks savage, his face loaded with a sort of stupidity and hate which could only come out of ignorance.

He's calling himself the Baptizer. He's here every day, no one knows why, and he's got a language of his own, keeps repeating the same word over and over again.

Where would you like to get off?

It doesn't matter where as long as it's inside the city walls.

The curbed highway stops almost abruptly as the car nears the city and we go through a series of narrow streets and I immediately realize that we're already inside the city the threatening walls now displaying a sort of pride as the sound of the busy city bounced off the red and yellow bricks. The houses were in perfect order; even shadows seemed to maintain this sort of order. Everything was in perfect shape.

I'll be stopping by the city center. Is that okay with you?

Yes, I replied almost terrified by this orderly state of things.

In a matter of minutes the car came to a stop and I opened the door stepping carefully out on the sidewalk as if not to attract

unnecessary attention. I stood there for a moment paralyzed by fear. Nothing seems familiar here, I thought admitting that I had taken on this quest partly with the assurance that some sort of familiarity with the place would be revived as soon as I set my foot in it.

Fast-forward and back, to our home, or the home we have both imagined for ourselves. The people around me are moving at a strange pace, like puppets bereft of their strings. All of them remind me of you and as this thought comes to my mind I realize that I have left you stranded, thinking of me, stuck in that purgatory you call your home, or maybe I left you at the airport while you were in the smoking lounge trying to avoid eye contact with all the other passengers, respecting airport solitude. There must be a guy you like, already, for sure, as you try to forget me. I've transformed you into the thin line of smoke coming out of all the cigarettes I've consumed up until now. Every word you say is a ripple in the flawless dance of the smoke. Soon I'll be moving objects from one place to another so that I won't think of you anymore. I cross the street, nobody seems to notice me. Do you notice me? Shall I become one with the crowd, only my eyes visible in this conundrum of thoughts? I should find myself a hand to hold, stand out. There aren't many people holding hands at this time of the day. I find myself staring at the windows around me, at their perfect symmetry. A peculiar mood crosses my veins. I have dreamed about this city so many times and it still seems unfamiliar. I keep on walking waiting for something to happen until I find myself in a park that seems to have no boundaries. I sit on a bench silently aligned to the sidewalk. I've seen so many versions of you.

Part Three

Today is the day in which I'm going to tell you the truth. I woke up this morning with this fear building up inside my guts, the fear that you're going to do something bad to yourself, mutilate your love for the rest of your days. I keep doing this, postponing the day in which I'm going to tell you the truth, inventing reasons for not doing it. Just one more day and I'm going to do it. But every time I think of you, something tells me I shouldn't do it. Postpone it one more day and then you're going to do it. Because it feels so good, living in this limbo where everything we say to each other seems to be a line from a poem, the lyrics of a song playing only in our minds. Where every source of light has a sort of halo around it. Where there is nothing in between us loving each other. There are only the moments in which we kiss, hold hands, sleep one next to the other, hand in hand, body in body, everything else is invisible. The sound of a piano in between notes. You can hear it, a sort of beat in between notes but you are trained not to hear it because that is not a part of the song. So you ignore it because the other music is so much more beautiful and full of meaning. Today we're going to talk about the beats in between the notes. Make them meaningful in this discourse of love, our discourse of love. Make a song out of them. Train your ear to hear it, name it, yet don't give it a name that would make sense, any name is good, the one that comes first to your mind. The name that you used to give yourself when you were playing mom and dad in the garden in that house built out of the wooden skeleton of a table no longer in use and the blankets your mother uses to cover the freshly picked apples in autumn.

First, there is the song. Train your ear not to hear it. Do not fall for it, do not fall for the sweet melody because this is just an illusion, it taps into your wishes and desires, uses them and then turns them against you. Make yourself an armor, a chitin shell hard as rock. Here is the song.

I felt as if woken up from a bad dream. But it was one of those nightmares that I liked having. One of those nightmares in which you were there, sleeping beside me, lost like a child in the world of your own dreams. I hoped with all my heart that your dreams were better than

mine. Maybe they were. I never had the chance to ask you. I was too busy loving you. Or, at least too busy trying to love you. Some may say. I would never say a thing like that.

Now, this was my dream, my nightmare. An unknown city with hundreds of people surrounding me, trying to get in, and me, trying my best not to let them in. How furious the landscape seems. Tortured concrete, tall building with windows like the scales of huge fish swimming in the dense air of the city. I keep walking unaware of the direction I'm going in. I might as well find a place to clear my thoughts. Release this pressure that has been building up inside my ears. It feels as if I'm underground.

Once, you asked me how it feels to be in bed with you.

It felt exactly like this.

You don't get to have a voice in this one, I tell myself with a voice that lately has been echoing through the empty corridors of my mind. I like this voice. I imagine it to be the voice of a monster capable of killing your image, crushing it. Silence the voice. That time when you stood on top of me, and I could feel the hardness of your muscles push against me. As your lungs filled with air my body painfully retreated into the mattress and then it came up again. And I was trying to touch you but you kept pushing me back. And you told me to close my eyes. Close my mouth. Be silent. So I did everything you asked me to do. And then you left and told me not to move. You left for what seemed to be an eternity. And I stood there, stuck, not knowing what to do. It felt like one of those nightmares.

You don't get to have a voice in this one.

And my monster grows larger.

Or that time we were in that nice hotel room, and you took your clothes off and I couldn't. And you kept asking me to take them off. And I couldn't. Because everything I could think of was the way in which the receptionist looked at us. You said we only needed the room for two hours. And I couldn't look at her. I couldn't even look at you as you exchanged pleasantries with that fat woman. She must have been one of your acquaintances. Or maybe that was not the first time you went there. We

went upstairs and we couldn't find the room. It was hidden under the stairs.

I hear everything at once. Nothing has an order. I see the beginning and the end at the same time. There is no cause and effect in here. The effect is the cause. I knew you had somebody else from the very first moment. Yet, I kept on hoping that things will change and that you were going to leave him and be with me. Of course, you never did. I met him a couple of days later, and I knew. You were never going to leave him. I tried not to look at you, instead I watched how the buildings around us came and went, tried to think about what other people were doing at that time of the day.

My monster grows at the speed of thought. My mind keeps adding details to his chitin shell.

You don't get to have a voice in this one.

I keep revisiting all those place to which we went together. I don't get to have a voice in this one. I'm the child, my feet dangling because the chair is too high. The earth is moving under my pointed feet. It's almost like running except I'm not running from anyone. I'm being pushed. It's like I'm in a wheelchair and I'm unable to move, fascinated by the things that are shown to me, I'm unable to scream, or even say something.

You said he makes you feel good.

I stopped breathing for a moment, my body suspended in midair.

This is how it feels to have your heart broken. It happens when you forget how it feels not to have your heart broken. Somehow, we come to this world with our hearts already broken. And then we get used to it. So everything that happens is just a reminder of that broken heart.

My broken heart. If only I knew how much damage you've done to it.

If I could only have a look at it.

Somebody is staring at me so I change position. Kid, did no one tell you it's not nice to stare at people on the street. Respect the solitude of

your fellow passengers. Stare at the trees instead, at the windows that look like the scales of fish.

Or that time when you looked at me without saying nothing. And I could see your discomfort growing. I wonder if it really was discomfort or something else. I wished we could hold hands more often. We only did it in the car when nobody was looking. We never did it in traffic. Every time we were approached by another car you would withdraw your hand quickly. Someone might see us. And I would recompose myself acting as if nothing had happened, my flesh longing for your touch.

This is me. How long have I been here?

Is everything all right, someone asks me. Do you need help?

No, I'm all right, I reply. Thank you for asking.

I sit on one of the benches closer to the river. The air is cold yet the sun is hot enough to give you this soothing sensation on your spirits. Not anymore. I used to know how that feels.

I used to know how that feels. Not anymore. Is there a language to express this at-once-ness? Describe how one second is inside the other to the point of confusion. This one, this second, this instant is the previous instant, and the previous instant is this one.

I used to know, not anymore, how that feels. Not, I used to know how that feels, anymore.

Until there is no differentiation in meaning. No boundaries between one word and the other, to the point of no words at all. No syntax, each and every meaning coming in at once. Like the waves. No, not like the waves. Like the ocean coming in at once. The ocean that retains everything, becomes history itself, refuses to let go of its past.

Is everything all right, someone asks me.

As I look up a group of people has surrounded me, staring at me like they would stare at a dying person. One of them has the courage to reach out and touch my hand and it feels like the whole group has only one hand, your hand, huge and distorted like the hand of a mutant. Strangely, it feels warm, something which I never felt when I was with

you. But the group is at once one with the air, and the bench, and the monstrous concrete. It is as if they are all talking at the same time, using one word, which is not a word at all. It's like an undefined sound, flooding my years, my eyes and mouth at the same time. The air I'm breathing is sound.

Is everything all right, someone asks me.

You don't get to have a voice in this one, I scream. They seem to be dancing. Explain to me, one of them says, explain to me the nature of your condition at this exact moment. What if your condition changed from one moment to the other? I wonder. When I say this exact moment, the other one says, I mean everything, from the beginning of your conscience to the end. But there is no end, I say. I would object, a third one appears out of nowhere. There is an end, just like there is a beginning. There is a piece of cloth coming out of his mouth. A fourth grabs the protruding end and starts pulling, more of it comes out. It seems endless.

We have it here, one of them says. They pull the cloth closer to a strange source of light that appears to be coming from nowhere and they examine the narrow piece of cloth. One of them bursts into a fit of nervous laughing. He's one of the amnesiacs, one of them screams in a high pitched voice. They all laugh. We know everything now. Look, it's written here, from the very beginning. Not one moment wasted, one of them screams in between laughter.

For a moment I thought one of them was actually you. And I've known you for so much time. I couldn't have been mistaken despite my seemingly altered perception. That smile, and everything else, I could have recognized them anywhere.

Do tell us, illuminate us. Tell us why you ran away. We can see why, but we want to hear you say it. Do tell us.

Their dance is a devilish outburst of energy. Their bodies contort, change shape, their voices like cold water. Fury overwhelms me and I try to get a grip of myself. Yet, just like in a dream, I find myself unable to move. Instead, I think of an answer to their question.

I ran away because I was afraid, I tell them and they don't seem to listen. Their dance is now almost impossible to watch. There is another burst of laughter.

We can't hear you, one of them smiles apologetically then goes on laughing.

I left because I was afraid, afraid that he might leave me for somebody else. Another burst of laughter, this time more powerful, almost terrifying. I'm afraid that's a wrong answer, they all speak at the same time. And a wrong answer needs to be assessed and corrected, as we all do. You said you wanted to see, and we're going to show you.

I was afraid, that's all, there's nothing to show. There's nothing else to add. Stop this nonsense.

Did you leave him because you were afraid or rather because you were afraid that one of your scenario might come true? Scenarios are bound to repeat ceaselessly. And you were afraid he was going to get bored with all that romantic scenery. You cannot ask somebody to love you without implying other things, you can't. Do you wish to know why?

Just leave me alone, I say and for a moment they seem to retreat into a vast whiteness. I feel my head burdened and painful. I try to tilt it but an acute pain seizes my entire body so I give up. And all this time all I can hear is a ceaseless buzzing like that of a city during rush hours. People and cars, coming and going united into this meaningless urban chatter.

Do you wish to know why?

All the others have left except one.

Yes. Will you let me go once you've finished?

I cannot promise you anything. But first. Have you noticed something? When you look around what do you see?

The other ones have left, I say, afraid that, again, this might be the wrong answer.

Yes, that too, he replies. But there is something else, something that you haven't bothered to notice while we went on with our dancing

and talking and laughing. Something insignificant, yet so significant. And if you don't care, then nobody else will care.

I'm at a loss, I reply. Nothing slipped by, I'm sure of it.

Wrong. What do you see when you look around? Tell me.

Everything, I say, nothing slips by, I'm sure of it.

Wrong again. Can you look at my face?

I focus my view on his face but I cannot make out his features, molten wax, and suddenly I'm afraid of this featureless man. It is as if a blind spot has suddenly appeared where his face was supposed to be, a black hole, the eye of the storm. His whole body appears to be out of focus, the type of ghost that appears in blurred photos and only the name remains. This is him, somebody would say looking at the blurred photos. This is surely him. No other body would have left such a trace on the eye of the camera. Here he is, waiting, and if you look closely you can make out a smile on his face, the plaid shirt, even the brown coat he was wearing when the picture was taken. Here he is, waiting, empty, waiting to be filled with meaning. The lines of his body like strings, humming, longing for the sensual touch of the musician.

By the look of your face, I'd say you figured it out.

He is no longer a body, a man, he is a gap in midair.

This man is a gap in the meaning of this whole story.

So I pour meaning into him. Liberate him. Offer him the guilt of existing under some sort of form.

Mitosis. Syncope. Body curving into shape. Skin. Dead tissue.

Sadly, the sentence had been carried out.

He stood there, his face of a grayish hue as if for a short minute his intellect was fully capable of acknowledging the weight of the world, the kind of weight nuns and priests think to be carrying while saying their prayers at night, in lonely wooden houses, in the middle of an imagined nowhere. Inhumanely, godly, out of sight, out of mind, his thoughts ran along the window panes, coming and going at the speed of intent. Any brush or any talented hand would have failed inherently to represent that

face, the type of face that comes out on the bottom of coffee mugs and in the ashes of a long time forgotten cigarette.

There was a father, he said, the kind of father who does things in the past and all that guilt is passed on to his kids and relatives, the type of guilt that oozes like oil thrown on the pavement. Slowly but full of intent. Do you wish to know what happens to the father? Almost nothing, he said, because the responsibility is no longer his. God knows that we've had kids only to lessen that sense of guilt which was never ours but which is engraved into our veins. You know, somebody has to carry on the guilt, that's the mystery behind bloodlines.

He stood there with the beauty of light filtered through the thin cloak of morning clouds.

You need to sort things out, I say and his face comes to life.

I miss you, he says and memories flood my mind.

Everything that's happening right now is only in your mind, my love.

You know, he says, I can hear what people think. I can hear what they say, make out the words, the meaning of what they are saying, but somehow I know that they are saying something else in between.

Isn't that what all of us do, ultimately?

Yes, and no, he says.

Vapors. Condensation.

Is this the reason why you left me?

One quick glance at my interlocutor and for some reason I know that it's him, the one I ran from with all my heart. And suddenly the gap is no longer a gap. But an autonomous thought. The thought of him standing right in front of me. It's not just one thought, it's a bundle of thoughts, thoughts stretched and tied together forcefully like in a child's play, forced into a human shape, the human shape I think I fell in love with.

What were you truly afraid of? There was no guilt, after all.

Of course I felt guilty, you said you were all mine, and then I thought, what about the rest of the world, they all deserve to have you just like I do. I deprived you of everybody else.

You deprived me of nothing, you were everybody else. We were the amnesiacs, remember? We left the hospital together, and we bought the red house to build another life together.

If this is a dream, then I'm unable to wake up. I gather all my forces and try to speak as loud as I can, to make him hear me.

Have you seen the way they looked at us? Watched us? As if we were some lab rats worthy of their mercy. The way they served you at the grocery store, you could literally see the disgust on their faces. I just couldn't go on like that. I just couldn't see you like that anymore. I had to make it stop. I could read in between the smiles and the exchange of pleasantries. Remember the way they looked at us when we went to that museum. I don't remember any of the paintings because I couldn't stop thinking about the way they looked at us. For an instant I thought that we were one of the attractions of the museum. A kid kept pointing at us as if we were some freaks. It was as if we were the last people on earth and we were incapable to perpetuate the species. It ruined me. And it was ruining you the exact same way it was ruining me. You just don't want to admit it. Remember that time we went out and my body was longing for your touch and all we could do was keep our knees together, touching slightly on the shoulder so as not to seem suspicious. Or that time we went to that restaurant and I would stretch my hand under the table to touch you and there was this lady sitting next to us, staring at us. But in that exact moment my only thought was to just maintain a sort of physical contact with you. I feared losing you. One flicker of the eye and you would be gone, just like in one of those dreams I have in the morning, terrifying because they tell the story of your disappearance. They ruined me. And everything else ruined me. You just don't want to admit it.

I admit it, he says. I knew it all along. But I thought we were the lucky ones.

We were the lucky ones until we started to receive all those body parts delivered on our doorstep. I understood how they felt about us. I understood how we felt about us.

The monster has grown monstrously big. Its chitin shell like an armor. Its teeth like diamonds. I would ask what you have been doing all this time on your own. How much time has it been? Three months? A year? It seems so long since I've last seen you. The monster is sharpening its teeth. Are you seeing somebody else? A nausea comes over me, the kind of nausea that comes after sleepless nights or too much time spent reading, sitting in an uncomfortable position. I never forget. The type of nausea that stops you from moving during a terrible nightmare. Or the type of breathtaking sensation that you have when you dream of falling and your body struggles for an instant. You were as real as that dream I made for both of us, one of my perfect scenarios. That is why you were never real, you were just one of those gaps of meaning.

Come back to me, he says. I need you. For a moment the gap is again filled with meaning. I can see the steps we sat on when we got out of the museum, and the smell of coffee in the morning, and I could hear the way you said hello every morning, and then I would watch you as you moved around the kitchen, and then I would give you a quick kiss on the shoulder. Or the way I would pull you into my arms when I sat on the couch, and cradle you there, breathing the heat of your body.

The monster is now screaming and it's like fire igniting air itself.

There are things you cannot stop yourself from doing. You feel this irresistible pull, an accumulation of feelings ready to burst. And all you do is try to postpone that ultimate burst, feed on anticipation. Or that time when we were both soaked from walking in the rain, and I dried your hair and changed your clothes. And you stood there like a child watching me, your eyes half closed. You said you felt the same drowsiness afterwards, when we sat in each other's arms, our bodies emptying themselves of the coldness of the rain. I would have held you like that forever. Because for a moment everything was forgotten. The world outside seemed distant, too distant to be taken seriously. I could even hear myself saying everything is all right, there is no need to be scared, no need to be afraid. And then I

kissed you, and our kiss seemed displaced, more delicious than the usual, and I could refrain myself from pushing my lips against yours. I guess it was the rain. Rain usually has that effect on people.

I can feel it right now. Its sweetness painful near the heart.

My monster roars, its tail whipping the air. You don't get to have a voice in this. I'm trying to suppress the wave of images that invades my retinas, my tongue, my nose my ears. There's that buzzing sound again. We could both hear it when we went out on the terrace of the red house. You said it was coming from the distant city. Yes, the city that now is not so distant anymore. I can feel it in my lungs, the smell of sweat, rust, and the sound of people walking by. I can taste blood in my mouth. Can it be your blood? My monster roars louder. It's smiling. The taste of blood has now become stronger. And you're silent, for a moment I can feel that you're gone. And the silence is so painful.

Is there anyone I could call?

I think we should call a medic or something, I hear a voice saying in the distance. He doesn't look good. He's bleeding.

I'm going to call, another voice in the distance.

I could get up, tell them I'm all right, there's no need to call a medic. I'm perfectly fine. I could get up right now, right now, if I could only stay here for a few more minutes, five more minutes and then I'm going to wake up, stand up, speak up, say something. My monster turned its back on me and I could hear him sobbing silently, like a child hidden in the closet. Now I'm going to stand up. I could get up, right now, any moment now. If I could just find you. Maybe this is just a dream and when I wake up you're going to be there waiting by the kitchen table wearing your favorite cardigan, and those reading glasses you always wear in the morning while reading your newspaper. In that instant I will be able to reassure myself that this is just a dream and rejoice. I feel my body moving into another direction, drifting. Maybe it's that moment in which you dream of falling and I'm going to wake up, any moment now. This sleep is so sweet and melodious.

What were they going to let me see? I wonder. I'm surrounded by a group of people. One of them has placed his hand on my chest, his face lowered, his ear close to my nose and mouth. He's still breathing he says. He can take a few more. With a quick move he turns his face and his eyes burn into mine, digging. You're a tough one, aren't you? Then that laughter again. My monster is nowhere to be seen. The crowd roars. They're laughing again. You're a tough one, aren't you? We're going to show you since you are so eager to see. They start moving at once, their bodies grotesque, thin and plump at the same time, with each flicker they become something else, now a man, now a woman, both, one of them is wearing an eye patch.

We want to make you feel the way we felt when you first met us, one of them says. Blinded, that is, left alone in the darkness.

One of them takes the piece of cloth and blindfolds me, yet I'm not completely blind. I can still see them, in a different shape, no longer flesh and bones but a system of connections, veins, strings, each string connected to a specific organ, like a constellation of tiny stars.

We are no longer human beings, one of them says, just like you were when you first met us. You were a bundle of personas, like an actor on a stage, full of possibility, and just like an actor you had some loose strings. Who is coughing now, the actor or the mask? Who is emptying himself of all that drama? The actor or the mask? We assumed it was the actor, but instead it was the mask. And the mask was sick, and we thought the actor was sick, and we cried and thought, poor actor, he's really sick. And you carried on doing it, pretending you were the actor, when instead you were the mask. And you liked it, because for a long time you believed that the actor had disappeared under the mask. The mask had taken hold of the actor. And after that summer we all looked for that voice, the only thing that the mask could not take hold of. It was a melodious voice, soothing like the song of mermaids on a cold night. We stood there numbed by that song, unable to think of something else that might betray the bitterness that stood behind, waiting. That summer you disappeared and we felt betrayed. And you, you kept thinking that one

morning the mask might actually become the actor, maintain the voice but change everything else.

I went out at midnight, I say and my throat contracts trying to stop me. I went out at midnight and prayed to the devil. I promised him my soul, and asked for the mask to be mine, forever. But there's something else, just let me explain.

We did let you explain, and we told the truth, but you kept denying it. You tricked us into believing that the mask was the actor, the actor was the mask, and we trusted you. We filled in the gap that you left behind with all our desires, our mistakes and our dreams. We believed you were the solution. A friend of ours told us, finally you found somebody who would appreciate you for who you are. And we believed, we trusted the mask.

You don't understand, desperation building up in my voice, just let me explain. Don't you see, it was all for you. Don't you see, I wanted to create the perfect being, meant just for you? Beauty and perfection, all in one place.

Well, isn't that convenient for all of us, you get to be perfect while we stay the same, ready to embrace you with all our love. Isn't that convenient, all of them scream like a lugubrious choir. You were in love with an idea rather than another human being. Instead you could have loved me. But you refused that. And you left.

Don't you get it? I would have sold my soul just for being able to love you. Isn't that the ultimate sacrifice that I could have done for you?

Instead you could have loved me and kept your soul, you pathetic maggot. You trample, seduced by abstract things, things that are too big for you to embrace, things from which you cannot go back, undo the steps you've taken up to that point. And you live by untold things. This is the damage that you've done to us.

He's back, my love.

This is the damage you've done to me. You wanted to see, so here it is.

He takes the cloth from my eyes with a furious movement and as he comes into focus I can see that he is wearing no shirt and that his chest is split in half by this huge scar going down from the base of his neck to his navel. His fingers are not fingers anymore, they look like the metallic fingers of tweezers. With one quick movement he opens the wound and there, in the center, where the heart should be, stands a sort of round green fruit, connected through a series of wires with the rest of the body.

Now you know, this is the damage that you've done to me. Stuck in this limbo, in between cities, bound to float in this thick malaise you call conscience. This is where you throw your garbage, not the people you care for. We stand invented. There's a sort of joy at the beginning of all things, explosions, chemical reactions, mitosis, condensation, until one body is born, a scenario is created, and you, creator, start living in that scenario, in that house, as if everything is real, denying the fact there are loose ends to it. I wonder, have you even acknowledged the imperfection of your own world. Have you even noticed how you never eat in there, inside your head, how all the other people have no faces, how days are limited to mornings and nights, how the city in which you live has no streets and people have no names? What about all those other things? What about the color of my eyes? My name? Do you even remember my name? Creator, almighty, instead of loving those that truly love you, you, of all beings, have fallen in love with your least creation, figments of your imagination, feeble bodies haunting your mind.

Just hang in there, we're on our way to the hospital, another voice calls me out of this nauseating numbness. I could wake up, right now, any moment now, right now. Every time I try to find the will to wake up I feel it slipping through my fingers. Just five more minutes, if I could just wake up, just five more minutes and I'll wake up. I can feel a hand pressing on my chest, and an indefinite object pushing against my face. It's like I'm floating, my body is drifting towards an unknown place.

You retreated into your ivory tower, embracing your solitude and calling it courage, wasting your energies in this creation that is now turning against you. The creation dissecting the creator. Tell me, do you

still imagine yourself a saint, your face frozen into one of those grotesque paintings you seen on the walls of old churches? Does your hand still linger in that uncomfortable position, its fingers pointing to a type of writing painters and thinkers have attributed to you all this time? You know you cannot claim the rights on your creation because your creation is now claiming its rights on you. Creator, allow me, one of them steps forward.

Just breathe, another voice echoes. You're safe now. You're in good hands now. A man, wearing a blue surgical mask seems to be floating on top of me and slowly, like in a dream, there is a sort of relief, as if pain itself is running away, distancing itself from my nerve endings. The buzzing is gone to be replaced by this invading smoke, blurring the distance between one thought and the other. The distance between one gender and the other, one and two, three and four, you and me, you and the others, an unending fall out of categories, a walk into nowhere, arid land, bromidic continuation of patterns, the sound of speed, dry and dusty, empty and flat, flat line, frigid, infructuous, wombless womb, barren, ho-hum, hum-drum, insipid, lifeless limbo, lusterless bodies, monotonous moth-eaten mundane, the end is nullity, the none motional nonexistence, oblivion, soporific repetition, universal hypnosis, stop, the sound of atoms moving, and you, smiling, barren womb, your skin like the surface of the desert. Something is telling me to run, as fast as I can, yet I feel a strong desire to stay to avoid returning to the pain waiting outside. And you take a bow.

Creator, allow me, and you step forward, toward that entity which is supposed to be me.

I feel lightheaded, if I have a head that is. You make another step. Yet your attention is directed to something else, something close to me, but separated from me. There is a sort of body by my side, white and lifeless, almost glowing, so that at a closer look you could see the organs, the heart pumping blood into the veins.

Creator, you say, do you ever think about yourself? Your limits? Do you ever think about those? You say, and you smile one of your annoying

smile, the ones you take out when you think you are right. But you are talking to the lifeless body even though you are addressing me.

Behold, you say, the creator in all His glory, in all His perfection. You take another bow and your body convulses as if in a savage dance, and you burst into a child-like laughter, full of joy, ready to confront the sorrows that will result out of this game. Behold, your hand stuck to each other like those of a prisoner, behold His beauty, the beauty that was never seen as blasphemy, behold the hands and the feet of the Creator, the skin, oh, the skin, such smooth skin, and the lips, ho-hum, humdrum, the lips of the Creator that have kissed the human with such passion that the human fell in love with those lips.

Your body is now convulsing violently, you're laughing and crying at the same time. For a second you stop and in that short moment I can see through you, at once you look young and old as if all of your sorrows came at one overwhelming you, hitting you right at the top of your head. And with that you resume your dance.

Behold the Creator, the careless curator, and the dictator, the vindicator, and the celestial equator, the center of all things.

With one swift move you cut open the chest of your creator's body, remove the many layers of his feeble armor, and mar the beauty of his perfection.

Today we're going to see what lies behind this Beauty, is Perfection still present?

Your body is convulsing again, there's a pleasure in this, I can feel it, I can feel its taste, it's heaven, for a moment I wished we had never played safe, I wished we held hands in public, kissed more often when almost nobody was looking, we would have said we were alone, it would have been perfect, baby. I could see your hands digging inside the body of your creator and for a moment you remind me of one of those dogs energetically searching for something in the dirt, filled with expectation and playfulness. The body is dirt now, bromidic continuation of patterns, one speck of dust resembling the other. Yours if filled with excitement right now, your atoms vibrating like those of a scientist that discovers a

pattern in his experiments. I can hear you humming a sort of tune, a brushstroke of dementia.

You burst into laughter again. This time it's a high pitched laughter, a sort of wailing. You're crying and laughing at the same time, your tears flowing ceaselessly. Your whole body concentrates on something inside the body of the creator. I can feel your hand searching for something inside my own guts, I can feel my insides emptying and filling, emptying, my love, my barren womb. Your laughter is deafening, it feels like a chorus is singing some sort of lugubrious symphony.

Oh, oh, oh, what do we have here? Oh?

You fall silent. You've found something that you didn't expect because you turn your back on me as if to hide it. Your shoulders have fallen in a gesture of silent desperation. I wish I could just hold you, kill the monsters that come out in this night of thought.

I feel like a gap is opening inside my chest and the pain is pulling me outside again. There is too much blood coming out. Why is there so much blood? I wonder. Where is the blood coming from? It's coming from your hands, your hands are all dirty with blood and in one of your palms you seem to be hiding something, something that fits perfectly inside your right palm. You let it fall on the floor. And you run away disappearing behind a curtain of darkness.

There comes a time when you cannot undo what you've already seen. At that time forever becomes a minute because the things you see are so meaningful that they complete all those meanings you've met during your entire life. All those reasons become obvious so that every 'why' becomes futile. The reason why there are rainy days when you don't necessarily need them, the reason why one of those people you met one day was not supposed to end up with you even though your intuition made it clear that you were supposed to end up together ultimately, the reason why we speed up through the many events that we may stumble upon while living thinking that the best is yet to come, that something better is just around the corner, or the reason why we feel like good people get to suffer and bad ones get to live happily ever after, despite what fairy tales say.

This is where the song ends. You can go back and listen to it again. But that would be useless. Here is the song translated into another language. Train your ear to separate the two sounds, note and beat, keep the pattern in mind. And if you, at one point, feel like flying remember that there is a rock tied to your ankles, pulling you down. There is a heavy rock tied to my ankles and it's pulling me down. I am Sisyphus. I am the rock tied to your ankle.

I felt at once naked and lonely. Standing at my feet was a sort of heart, but it was more like a dried apple, its skin like the skin of old people, too tired to revive itself. It kept moving like the gills of a fish that has just been taken out of the water.

I am the heartless Creator, too heartless to take care of my own creation until the very end of their precarious lives. I've invested them with the talent, the beauty, and the perfection that any creator would want for his offspring but then I left them, not to go away to some unknown place, but to invent others, trying at the same time not to make the same mistake twice so that the story of my relationships with my creations is not a story about beginnings and endings but a story of beginnings only. No wonder you, my love, the ultimate creation, the one capable of loving the creator himself, rebelled against me. Here is the heart of the Creator himself, dry like putrid fruit.

I know I cannot go back to you. Somehow the fact that I left was further proof of my lack of heart, or of my incapacity to love somebody. How could I, since I don't have a heart?

There are always ways to get out of problem, compromises that render less difficult situations in which one feels like there's no way out. I could have stared that woman back, that woman at the hotel reception, imagine myself feeling pity for her, we could have held hands more often. We could have done it. We could have kissed in public. I wonder. Did you wish all that? Would you have done it?

The pain is dragging me back. Silence is replaced once more by that buzzing sound. Everything is coming back now, the heaviness inside my body, the division, mitosis, multiplicity, cause and effect, result, responsibility, the world where everything should make sense but

ultimately nothing makes sense. Time is accelerating. I can hear it. Time is a sequence of beeps, time is a sequence of heartbeats even in the absence of a heart. There are other hearts that measure time in the absence of one's heart. This time, in here, is a series of heartbeats, repetitive heartbeats that become repetitive once they are consumed, rendered repetitive by what happens in between them because what happens in between them is not repetitive, the world only spins forward. An irregularity in the heartbeat is a step closer to complete silence. If only thoughts could make a sort of sound, a sound of any kind just to keep the silence out while the body fall within itself like a house of cards. The world is measured in heartbeats. Just a few more heartbeats and I'll be there. With every beep I'm one step closer to you. How many heartbeats are there in an hour? This room is 45 beats long. It is big enough to host two people. This room has only one window. The light coming from the window is painful. The pain extends itself up to an infinite number of heartbeats. Even though it has to have an end, this pain is infinite, the pain that I have to endure in your absence. The pain forms itself at the back of the skull and from there it radiates, it oozes like oil on the floor, like the echo of everything, the echo of the city as it was heard from...from...from. The word is there but I cannot take a hold of it. There was a house, and you were in it. Was it really you or was it only a myth? I wonder. Even wondering is painful. It's like running in winter on an endless field and your lungs start to ache, and your eyes start to ache, and everything starts to ache, and your body is a sort of accumulation of pain and the promise of relief as soon as the field ends, and there you should stop for a second and maybe look back. But looking back would only remind you of that pain so you keep on going, there is more relief just behind this hill, just behind this mountain, an oasis. I stop. I know this wondering will only take me back to you, to a sort of you.

This is me, I'm back to my old self knowing that you are really gone.

The windows, these waves of light, contain within themselves an oasis, a moment of relief. Sleep. Everything comes divided, and the next moment everything is one, the past, the present and the future all in one, overlapping, sound and music overlapped, sickness and health,

movement, inertia, and the absence of movement. I can hear my own voice, high pitched and full of pain, a skeleton is tied to the ceiling, I am out of the womb, crying my first cry, and it is not a cry of help it is a furious cry, strangled by fury, short and full of meaning, like the sounds of a broken music box with a ballerina on top, and the music stops and the ballerina keeps on moving, and the ballerina is furious because some higher force stopped the music and she is bound to keep on moving. It's not a skeleton, it's a sort of toy, a wooden toy with a red cap that doctors use to distract children while they give them injections. But it has the face of a skeleton. It has a string for every limb and for a moment I imagine myself guiding that wooden toy, making it dance, but it is so difficult because my movements feel slow, uncoordinated. And all of those kids came back from the playground and were surrounding us taking turns in guiding the wooden doll. And then we went into that small forest behind the house and talked about that woman from the library who had occasional sex with lots of men. One of them told me that he saw her. A man came into the library, and it was a cold winter evening and there was a log in the fireplace, and the other children were going back home from the playground. And they watched her from the window and that man was on top of her. And then they went into the library asking for a book that wasn't even there, and the man was there, but they had stopped doing it because they heard the children coming in. I said I didn't believe them because the library woman was a nice woman, and she liked children and she just couldn't have sex in the library because people don't have sex in libraries, they go home and make love in their beds. The husband comes home and brings lots of money, and the woman goes to bed and the husband sits on top of her and then they make love, and then they have babies or not. I always played the part of the baby while the older guys pretended to have sex. There was this boy, tall and muscular who was always the father just because he was bigger than the other ones. He would take his pants off and would lean against a tree with his dick out. Then we would take turns and lean against him with our pants down. And then we would pretend that we were making love. And everybody else would watch while one of us would go on top of the hill to see if anyone was coming our way. And the big tall guy would grab me and pull me

against him and I could hear his heavy breathing and the laughter of the others. He always got to be the husband because none of us was worthy of that role. And I would always stay behind while the others left because I felt protected and wanted by this fictional husband so tall and muscular and so much older than me and the others. He would smile and somehow avoid looking straight into my eyes as if there was something there that would scare him away. He would bring me money in the form of green leaves and then he would ask me to lie down on my stomach, with my face in the grass and be silent. He pulled my pants down. It felt cold. The ground was dirty and cold. And then I would feel the heat of his body invading me. And he pushed against me, and I said I loved him because he was my husband and wives were supposed to love their husbands. When we were in the presence of the others he would mock me, make fun of me, but then when the moment came he turned into somebody else, the lovable and affectionate breadwinner husband, and his voice would come out in a strange way as if he was out of breath. He kissed my neck and whispered things into my ear, things I could not comprehend at that time, it was all just a game, I was the wife and he was the husband, nothing serious. We played along. Pretend my name is Jim, I would say. And he would say, I really like you Jim, you're a fine man, pretend my name is Paul. I like you too, Paul, you're a cool guy. I might marry you one day, Paul said. Buy a house somewhere nice, adopt some kids, and be happy together. I might say yes to that, Jim said. Paul leaned over and kissed Jim on his lips. Later, Jim would recall that kiss saying it was very sweet not because it was actually sweet, but because it was his first kiss, and first kisses are supposed to be sweet. He would say this despite the fact that at that particular time he felt like Paul was hesitating even in the way he kissed, not to mention all the other things they did together. Yet, caught in that moment, Jim felt happy, as if nothing else was important, including Paul's slight hesitation. It was all just a game and Jim was more than happy to play along. All Jim wanted was to feel Paul's heavy breathing on the back of his neck, his muscular movement as he pushed against him. In Jim's mind all of those things were signs of affection and that was enough. But Paul had other things in mind. More important things to attend to, that is.

My sky is a ceiling painted in white. Things are once again divided, placed into categories, one thought is visibly distinct from the other. At least in my mind everything is distinct. The present is once again distinct from the past and the future. That ocean of dismembered objects, my ocean, the one that nurtured me with motherly affection for all this time, has now turned into a stream. Things come one after the other not all at once. They can be placed in chronological order according to the number of heartbeats that occur in between them. There is a chair and a window three heartbeats after. If I close my eyes I can see all of them and as such count the number of heartbeats that is in between them. Some of them are really strange because when I try to get closer to them I hear a second heartbeat which is never in sync with the heartbeat that I hear inside my head, so I run away from them as fast as I can because I'm afraid there's somebody else hidden in there. There are times when my heartbeat slows down. That is when sleep comes. Yet, I'm not afraid of nightmares, I'm afraid that you might come back and I no longer have the means to suppress the force with which you come. Because you would be able to use all of my recovered memories and turn them against me. Sleep is when everything stops. It is the result of repetition, a loop in the system, a faulty slip.

Of course we do not exclude the possibility that Paul might have been happy too, experiencing some sort of ecstasy which he did not manage to fully express, or at least as much as Jim would have desired it to be expressed. Paul was a tall muscular guy with full lips and black hair and his trousers were almost always dirty with some sort of paint as if he was repainting houses every day. He smelled like wood, we grass, and lust, Jim would add because in Jim's mind Paul took on hyperbolic proportions. When they went together to the grocery store Jim would stand always behind Paul, waiting, while Paul did all the talking. He felt protected by this hesitant man. Once, Jim went to Paul's house to see how things were. At that time of the day Paul was working in his workshop all sweaty and Jim...Jim just stood there, without being able to say or do something. Paul was completely absorbed in his work his hands moving swiftly on the submissive wood, caressing it like a father caresses his children to encourage them. And that was the day in which Jim fell in love

with Paul. And Paul knew nothing about it because his mind was lost and the only thought that went through his mind was that at the end of the day he would see Jim and they would make love in the grass, hidden from view by the vegetation savagely growing during the summer.

Then the heartbeats come back, and with those, the memory of past heartbeats. Sometimes, when I was a child I would have trouble sleeping because of my heartbeat. I put my ear on the pillow and listen, it was like my body convulsed with every heartbeat, it was like my head made a series of short movements and you can hear even those when you are alone and no sound disturbs your slumber. Sometimes I got very angry because I couldn't sleep and thought that there might be something wrong and my heart could just stop. It did stop, every time I fell asleep. But then it would come back, slowly, or more rapidly if something woke me up. At that time every sound coming from the outside was the sound of gargoyles walking at night, like cats on the fence. I'm not alone here, somebody comes once in a while to check up on me, see if I have a fever or something. I wonder who that is. I hope it's not you. I wouldn't like to see you anymore because we've said goodbye a couple of times before but we just kept on going, me thinking that things might change for the better between us. Things never changed and with every day that passed you went farther away from me. I could just count the days, one, two, a week, a month, maybe two months, maybe five months since I last saw you in that parking lot, the first and the last time we kissed.

They found this sort of clearing that had low bushes, their branches intertwined so that if you went under nobody could see you from the outside. Under the bushes the grass grew thin and soft, yellowish throughout the year. They crept under the bushes and sat there in each other's arms. Jim would talk and Paul would dream. 'Sometimes I think you were made for me', Paul said. 'You're like everything I appreciate in a person, you're beautiful, and smart, all of those things that I'm not.' 'Let's not exaggerate', Jim said. 'I think you're beautiful too, and smart, and when you work you are so absorbed that I could watch you for hours on end without saying anything.' And Paul just stood there watching how Jim's eyes searched for something in the air while he was talking. 'When did you see me work? I don't remember you watching me while I'm at

work'. Jim told Paul about that day and Paul said nothing. 'I think I love you a little', Jim said. Paul hesitated for a moment. 'I'm glad you do', Paul said and then stopped and quickly turned his face towards the ceiling of leaves. Jim fell silent and said nothing else. Paul pulled his pants off and started to kiss Jim's neck, and Jim could feel Paul hardening, his heavy breathing close to his ear. And Jim stood silent and submissive in Paul's thick arms and tried to imagine him working in his workshop, his hands moving swiftly. It was a different Paul, Jim thought. He fell in love with that Paul. This one, well, this one was a slightly different Paul, the type of Paul girls fell in love with, even older women. Jim liked that, feeling Paul on top of him hearing him say wow every time they kissed. 'Wow', and Paul would stop and look at Jim with a sort of amazement in his eyes, and then they would kiss again with greater passion. Jim liked the way Paul pulled him against his body kissing him on the neck. There was a sort of rush going on inside. And time consumed faster. Jim knew this, because there were more heartbeats in between them, in between their half-naked bodies. They met under the bushes every day except on Sunday, when Paul went to church and then slept for the rest of the day.

After that, I never saw you again. Well, maybe once, I couldn't call it a date because you were sleeping. I presume you found somebody else in the meantime and you just had to push me into another category, at the back of your mind. I think it was last night. I've said goodbye last night and you just said okay, bye. That's why I presume you found somebody else. Because you would have said something else. Or, at least, so I thought at that time. You were some sort of accomplishment for me, a goal that had been reached, and I felt victorious in some stupid sort of way. Like that time I bought you that gift from that cheap gift shop. I never had the chance to give it to you because you disappeared. There are times when you actually think you've met the right person at the right time. I was too ready to love you.

It was called "the trail of the frogs", that place they met every evening. Yet there weren't many frogs around while they stood there, Jim's head on Paul's shoulder. Except in the morning, when Jim would go and see what changes the night brought to their bed of grass and leaves. Paul's body left no trace. It was as if he was made of air or as if he didn't

even exist. Yet, when the sun was close to setting Paul came in his dirty trousers and with his shirt smelling of sweat and wood. The crawled under the bushes and closed the entrance with a branch full of green leaves. They had to use another branch every day because the leaves withered and they risked being seen by somebody. Paul took his shirt off and Jim kissed his shoulders and his chest slowly while Paul talked about his day and the different chores he had to do for his father and grandmother. And then, after all the stories were done, Paul grabbed Jim by the chin and kissed him intensely as if he had held that kiss trapped inside for the entire day. As if he had been thinking about that kiss all day long.

Another day has passed since I last saw you but your memory is still clear in my mind, different from all the other images, distinct, painful. Things look worse in retrospect. Like that time we were in the car and we were looking for a place to hide, and my lips were throbbing, longing for your kiss, and we went into this narrow street surrounded by dark houses and there was nobody there, and I was a bit afraid that you might do something to me, hurt me in some way, kill me and push my lifeless body out of the car and just go away. That thought did cross my mind, like a smile that crosses one's face when one should not even be smiling. Yet nothing happened and the street brought us back to our initial meeting place. We went to the empty parking lot of that hospital and all the cars seemed to lingering there the eyes of all passengers turned against us like the eyes of an ugly god. We learned to ignore them and kissed again and we felt like in a film, were I was the protagonist and you were Mr. Right. I wonder what kind of guy takes his first date in the empty parking lot of a hospital where people were supposed to be visiting their malfunctioning beloved. Even better, you took me to that cheap Chinese restaurant and you said I need to eat as much as I could because you like to see me eat. I asked you why, and you said that I'm no longer myself when I eat. My sense of deduction tell me that you might have fallen in love with that other me, the one that came out while I was eating. Is he more beautiful than me? It's my time to mock you.

'What are we going to do? It's cold, and this is only the beginning. It's going to get colder day by day'. The summer was about to end. 'I'm going to bring a blanket with me, and we'll leave it here', Paul said. He did

brink a blanket the next day. It was dirty and it smelled of wood and motor oil and Jim thought that even the ground was better than that, yet he did not object. Instead he pulled Paul closer to him and kissed his neck while he went on about his work and his nagging grandmother who kept emphasizing the fact that Paul, a handsome man as he was, should get married as soon as possible with one of the girls that she indicated, naturally. 'Are you going to get married with one of those girls?' Jim stopped his adventurous conquest of Paul's neck. 'Maybe, one day,' Paul replied. 'I have to think about my future, and I'd like to have some kids, you know'. 'Of course', Jim replied, 'you need to have your future, nobody would want to take that away from you'. That afternoon Jim said nothing more, did nothing more. Paul kept on talking about the meaning of life and what one should do when confronted with specific situations. Jim felt lost. Because, in a way, he was deprived of his own future. It was as if it didn't matter anymore. Yet, he would have accepted even that just to be with Paul. They would call him no-future Jim, faceless Jim, the fruit that fell from the tree prematurely. That night Jim slept soundly, like a baby, because he knew that he had sold his soul to the devil for a very low price.

Of course you got over it. The moment I said goodbye you were already thinking about somebody else, you were probably even talking to somebody else while I was saying goodbye, trying to think of some other ways to forget about you. Think of somebody else, maybe. That might make my life bearable. Somebody whose smile I could think of in the morning. Waking up is so much easier when you have somebody on your mind. I think I can hear the bricks in the wall, moving, whispering. I could always do that, yet my senses got even particularly sharper after we've broken up. I was in my bed, phone in hand, telling you that we need to stop talking to each other because it makes no sense, you need to sort your things out, I need my time alone, we were in limbo anyway, five months had passed since we last kissed and you disappeared just like that, and I thought that you don't want me anymore, and you said it's not true, you do want me, it's just that you're always busy with work, and why are we even having this conversation, your mother might walk in and hear you talking to me on the phone and she might ask questions and that would be the end of all things, the others will find out and you won't be

able to do your job anymore because you're a sports teacher and parents might complain to the school board and they'll fire you. I don't get that, I told you, I don't really understand what you're saying right now. I did, in a way. Indirectly, you were telling me that your job is so much more important than what we have, and consequently, your job is much more important than me and that is why you need to let me go. But in that exact moment I said I didn't get your point, probably in an attempt to soften you a bit. Of course I wasn't confused, I think I am capable of understanding many things, and you are one of those things I could have understood. You denied me that opportunity, naturally, by saying that you have to let me go, and that you are sorry for hurting me in this way. What was I supposed to say? There was no way out anyway. I think I had accepted it well before it happened. I just needed to set things straight. Let my monster deal with it.

The next day, Paul did not come at all, and it wasn't a Sunday or a rainy day for that matter. Jim went to their hiding place, full of anticipation and longing, to find an empty spot. The dirty blanket was still there, neatly folded and hidden behind one of the thick bushes. Jim unfolded it and wrapped it around his body. He was like in a cocoon. The smell of wood and sweat still lingered somewhere between other smells, dew and grass, added during the night, when they weren't there to use the blanket for their amorous escapades. This is what you deserve, Jim. A voice in his head kept repeating that. Paul was probably working late, Jim thought to protect himself from the nausea that threatened to burst. He always does that, Jim thought, when he has something to finish he won't let stand there until the next day. Like that time when he was making that bed. He finished it at four in the morning, just because he couldn't go to bed knowing that the bed was unfinished. Maybe this was one of those days. The sun went lower and lower behind the horizon, and the shadows around Jim grew longer and indistinct, and a cold wind rushed through the bushes, and it smelled like autumn. It was just one of those days, Jim reassured himself again. A few minutes later, Jim stood up, folded the blanket and placed it behind the thick bush. The sun had disappeared and a set of cold stars had appeared on the sky. He's not coming, he thought. Yet as he walked away he kept on looking over his shoulder hoping that

Paul would eventually appear in his sagging jeans, his shirt smelling of sweat and wood. He did not appear, naturally, and Jim eventually gave up looking because his view no longer permitted him to do that. He went straight to bed because he felt that there was something in his throat, like a lump or something of that sort, and every time he thought about Paul not showing up that lump grew larger and he felt like throwing up. Sleep came late and the smell of wood kept lingering on his clothes.

I gave my first kiss in exchange of a dinner at a cheap restaurant, that's what it was. I've denied it before but I need to acknowledge it now. I can't even put it in words how embarrassed I'm right now. In my naïveté I believed in all those things that you told me in the car. And I kept telling you. This is never going to happen. I said that because I wanted to test you in a way, assess your reaction. You said that it was going to happen, not at that particular moment but later. I believed you and kept on believing until that night. It was a good thing that I never had the chance to give you that gift I had purchased for you. It would have been a waste of money. I still have that gift, somewhere, naturally. I'll give it to somebody else when I'll have the chance to do that. You need to go back to those kids at school, teach them how to do push-ups so that they won't run morbidly obese later. You need to teach them other things too. Treat other people with respect, because each and one of us is a desperate human being trying to fit in, desperately trying to breathe and find somebody else that might stick close to them. You need to teach them all of these things. Tell them that their first kiss is one of the most beautiful things in life and that they should treasure that for the rest of their lives. Tell them that people are not to be discarded like an old sweater that is no longer capable of offering the comfort you need. Tell them that things need to be repaired when they break. Tell them that they should never take their first date to the empty parking lot of a hospital. If you're not good at it then you should at least try to teach others how to do it. Because there shall be a day when you'll understand it too. I hope there will be. And you'll think of me.

'My grandmother says I'm bewitched'. Paul was already there, wrapped in the dirty blanket, half asleep. Jim knew he was there, he'd seen it from the distance. A freshly cut branch hid the entrance to their

bush house. 'What does she mean by that?' Jim had asked, afraid of the answer that Paul might offer in return. 'She says I'm acting in a strange way, I can't focus on my work, and I seem distracted all the time. She says that one of the girls from the village might have bewitched me with some sort of black weed'. Jim tucked himself under the blanket. 'And you believe in that sort of thing? I mean, you know those things don't exist. Or, at least, they don't exist anymore'. Jim took Paul face into his hands. At that time, Paul was the most handsome guy Jim had met in his entire life. Despite his exterior roughness displayed probably as a sign of masculinity, Paul's face betrayed a sensibility that you could rarely see in a man. 'Maybe she's right, I don't know, there's this girl in the village, she's a fine girl, and she's been married before, I wouldn't care, she's got a kid and....,' he stopped. 'I understand', Jim said. There was a tension building between them, and Jim, for the very first time since they first met, started to be afraid of this boy, a man already, so full of contradictions. Jim kissed him softly on the corner of his mouth. Paul did not respond in any way. 'I'm going to town tomorrow,' Paul said, 'I'm going to buy something for my dad, some tools'. He did not look at Jim while he said it. 'What time?' Jim wanted to know. 'Really early, you know I don't like crowded places'. In fact, Paul was afraid of people most of the times to the point of avoiding his neighbors as much as he could. 'All right', Jim said. Paul looked up at Jim, and smiled. 'Would you like to come with me, I could really use some company, you know how I am'. Indeed, Jim knew Paul too well to leave him on his own. 'Of course I'll go with you'. And then, both of them smiled.

Maybe I overreacted in a way, filled the void that you opened when I first met you with too many desires, and too many possibilities, gave you too much of my own future and received nothing in return. Well, maybe I did get something in return, a cheap dinner that is. I'm in a sort of hospital right now. People come and go. People I know. My college friend stopped by, he brought me biscuits. We talked, by which I mean, he talked most of the time, I didn't say anything, and nothing that is, not even a word. He kept talking about this new girlfriend of his, and about how nice she is, and with my mind's eye I could see her, her cat-like eyes, and red hair, but I just couldn't let myself imagine him kissing her. I wanted to tell him something, but then refrained myself from doing it, I couldn't find the

courage to do it. He was too caught up in his story. There's also this nurse the checks up on me quite often, too often maybe. She keeps encouraging me to talk but I have nothing to say so I might as well shut up, while this entire story unwinds itself in my veins like a medicine. Or a virus. Death itself. Then silence. I wish I were incapable of talking, the world wouldn't understand anyway and I'd have to talk to stones and walls. My bed is like a stone. My body is in a continuous talk with it. They exchange lines like in a play, like two characters in a book. The bed listens, it bends according to the body. Then at times, it turns so hard that the body is furious and starts moving without me doing anything. They put this plastic thing in my mouth during the night, and, at times even during the day. There is a sort of thing going through my brain, like a wave, and it closes all the open doors. Sometimes, when I can't sleep I think of a long and empty corridor with all its doors opened. And I imagine closing all the doors which are ultimately doors to my thoughts. One of the doors opens to you. A sort of space where you are enclosed. Mutilated by my other thoughts. There is another sort of mutilation. It happens every time they put that thing into my mouth and the waves start coming. But they're not soothing, the waves that is, like the warm waves of the sea, they're like waves of pain. And my body talks louder and the bed howl, and there are strings taking hold of me. And every time that happens I lose a small part of you, and every time I go to that room I find you crying and saying that you hate me and that I should stop them because they're going to kill you. And I believe you. Because I know that they are going to kill me too.

Jim's phone rang, louder, then louder. It was time to get up. Paul was already up probably, cleaning his tools, getting the workshop ready for the work he had to do in the afternoon. He usually did that, not to feel guilty about going to town and doing close to nothing that day. Jim was well aware of that. Paul wouldn't waste an opportunity to make himself feel bad about something, be it his work, be it their relationship. In Paul's head everything he did was a bad thing, a waste of time. Jim knew how self-destructive he was, how hateful he was in relation to himself. Jim could read Paul just the way he read his books, almost like a detective and as much as Paul tried to hid everything, devising for himself this over-protective ego that would be in control of everything. Paul did not like

to be out of control. Everything had to be in place. His workshop was a model of discipline. Nobody was allowed to go alone in the workshop. Paul felt that this would mar the balance that was inside. Should someone go in there without his consent he would be grumpy all day, feeling even a disturbance in the air and the atmosphere of the workshop. Jim eventually got up. That pain in his lower back did not go away last night. Must be the cold ground, and that stupid blanket. He went out. It was a cold morning, the trees now painted in yellow, brown and other variations of red. It almost made him go back to bed, thinking that Paul could go alone, he was a big boy, and he didn't need any help with the tools he had to buy from town. Yet, he had promised, and seeing him coming along the fence, in his dark cardigan and jeans, his pace slow but constant, made Jim's heart jump. A wave of emotions flooded him. There was this boy, the boy he had fallen in love with, all dressed-up, coming to pick him up. The morning was not so cold anymore and the trees themselves seemed beautiful with all of those colors, everything was no longer melancholic and on the verge of loss, everything was beautiful again just like the sun illuminates everything in the spring and nature seems to bow, opening itself up toward heaven. 'Aren't you ready yet?' Paul asked. 'Just give me a couple of minutes and I'll be ready', Jim said with unusual joy in his voice. 'We're going to miss the bus, hurry up, you know how these buses come and go'. Jim went back into the house and put a pair of jeans on, and then his favorite shirt and sweater, and a pair of shoes and everything was better now. Jim liked this spectacle, getting ready for Paul, the love of his heart. He stepped out locking the door behind him, put the keys in his pocket. 'I'm ready', he said, proudly walking towards the main gate where Paul was waiting in all his glory.

I remember that time we first spoke on the telephone. You had a really nice voice, the voice of an actor I would say. There were times when I couldn't hear you that well because you were in a train station and the trains were coming and going and there were people around. And I did ask you about the station, but you changed subject saying that there nobody knows you so you can talk freely without fearing recognition from a fellow passengers. You said I have a nice voice too and then you asked me to recite something and, of course, I chose Macbeth, I knew the lines by

heart. And you said there was this sort of foreign self that took over me while I was reciting. It's like you're a different person, you said. You imagined me in a room full of people where everybody was listening to me because my voice demanded attention. Then I asked you to recite something but you couldn't think of any text in particular so I asked you to recite of the Pavese's poems, something about death resembling you. And I listened to you and your voice was beautiful and the words were coming out in a certain way that with each utterance the text weaved new meanings, you became the poet writing the poem at that exact moment. The words sounded like they were unheard, a new vocabulary. Of course, it was because you were practically capable of anything. We kept talking for hours, I even went to bed while we were talking and at one point I told you that I needed some sleep and your voice came through the phone like a melody. Before I fell in love with you I fell in love with your voice. I imagined you whispering things in my ear. Eventually, you did that, and you promised me everything, except things like the sun or the moon. It was the right poem for you. That is why I felt like you were the poet himself and not someone reciting. Something tells me now that death did not resemble you, you were death, the death of my love.

The bus was early, and crowded, it often happened that you had to find other means of transportation because the bus was too full to accept other passengers. People tried to stay as close to the doors as they could because the driver would often get angry because of passengers that did not get off the bus as quickly as he saw fit for that kind of bus. They were like sheep. Afraid of taking a wrong step while on the bus they obeyed the infuriated driver. Paul got on and paid for his ticket. Jim had to stay behind and help an old lady carrying a big bag. When he finally got on, seats were no longer available so he had to stand. Paul was luckier, he got a seat next to a sleeping old man. The old man did not matter after all, the important thing was not to stand for the next forty minutes or so, the time it took to get to town. Paul never looked up. It was as if they didn't even know each other. He kept looking outside the window at the growing city bursting out of fields of wheat and corn. They didn't say a word to each other. The only eye contact they made was when they had to get off and Paul tilted his head towards the exit door. Jim felt like a stranger himself.

Unable to act as himself fear crept into his guts, fear of losing Paul. He was afraid that at one point he might be distracted by something and lose Paul in the crowd and never hear from him again. Then he would go back home and find Paul's workshop empty as if Paul didn't even exist. Wood does not keep the memory of people. But Paul was always there, wherever Jim turned he would find him there looking at him with a sort of fatherly affection. 'I know this guy who sells good tools, I always buy tools from him. My father says he's the best in the business'. 'Sure,' Jim said, 'we should go look for him. Do you have any idea where his shop is?' Of course Paul knew. He went to that place every three months since he was a child, when he used to go with his father, and sometimes his older brother. The shop was old and dusty and when they rang the bell a young boy came out and with him, the smell of carved wood and glue, and other substances used in the wood industry. The smell was even stronger inside and every corner was filled with sawdust and pieces of furniture in different stages of production, an unfinished chair, a table top that needed to be polished. Paul gave the young boy a list and he disappeared behind a curtain that separated the working space from a sort of office. Another man came out. 'How's your father doing these days?' The man asked. 'He's all right', Paul replied. 'I need some new things for my workshop,' Paul said, 'and I'm out of glue'. 'I'll take care of it, don't worry,' the man said. He disappeared behind the curtain. The young boy stayed behind. 'This is Jim,' Paul said. The boy came closer and shook hands with Jim. 'Pleasure to meet you', Jim said. The young boy smiled then turned his attention to Paul. They seemed to be old friends because they submerged into a discussion that was started probably years ago and kept on going till that day. Jim felt like one of those unfinished pieces of furniture, humiliated even, because he was immediately transformed into a non-presence. Paul and the young boy kept on talking undisturbed by his presence. Jim remembered the feeling he had had that morning. Maybe he should have stayed at home, alone in his bed, the sheets would have been better company. Once in a while the young boy would throw this threatening look upon Jim as if he was saying 'just don't touch anything, you don't belong here anyway'. Jim would have told him that he truly appreciates their work, how elegant their type of work was, just like

dancing, except that with every step you left a trace on the fibers of a log. Everything had to be measured, and calculated, every step was as important as the next one and the previous one. And when all those measurements came to life something even more important came out, talent. He remembers that day when he went to see Paul in his workshop. Paul made it look so easy. His muscular hands moved elegantly around the piece of wood, and that lifeless piece of wood came to life with every movement that Paul made. At that time, Paul was working on one of his famous beds. He sold them in the local market every Sunday. One bed every week. And that one bed was only complete on Saturday nights when Paul applied a last coat of paint. Jim had once touched one of Paul's masterpieces, tamed mass of wood, dark skinned, flowers and snakes carved into it, and when he touched it he could feel Paul's touch, powerful and elegant at the same time, his savage grandeur put into wood just like Jim would put things into words.

I still refuse to talk, because I feel like I have nothing to say to them. A priest visited me yesterday and told me about salvation, about turning back to Christ and His holy ways. He told me that I'm the prodigal son and now I've been found, and all I need is will to take control over my passions and desires, push the devil out. I'm one of the lost sheep. I'm not an animal, I wanted to say to him, but thought that I should maintain my silence. I'm not an animal, I said again to myself, but while you're at it, think of me as the black sheep, the kind of sheep that is not only lost but also of a different color. Even though you're the white sheep father you're still lost. Then he started praying for me. I thought of all those nights in which I prayed to the devil and begged him to have my soul in exchange of beauty and, as such, your love and affection. The devil never came, father, because he does not exist, I would have told him, but thought that silence is the best choice in such cases. He kept on praying until he grew weary probably, tired of waiting for my body to convulse and speak in strange voices coming from the depths of my guts. I would have opened my chest and show him that there's nobody else inside me except my tortured self, and the crab apple that my heart turned into over the years. He left at one point, obviously. But he promised to come another day. He hoped I would change my mind in the meantime. I did not look up as he

went away. I kept staring at my hands because they looked dirty. No, don't get me wrong, the nurses bathed me every other day, my hands were perfectly clean. I somehow felt they were dirty when, in fact, they probably weren't. They weren't, obviously. Yet I felt that the skin retained a sensation, the memory of a touch. That night, in the parking lot, I felt your hands for the first time. Your hands were skinny and for an instant while we were kissing I was afraid that I might break them somehow. You noticed my reluctance at touching you and told me that I shouldn't be afraid because you are unbreakable. Indeed you are, I mean, obviously, not in that sense. Your heart is unbreakable. You were built in such a way as to make others break their hearts for you. And then you retreat like a king, or, even better, like a child that is tired of the game and decides to play another game, or even go to sleep, thinking that when he comes back the toys will be in the exact same place, in the exact same position as he left them. That night, when I came home, I felt corrupted, deceived, as if I had just woken up in the middle of the night and realized that most of the decisions I had taken during the day were the unfortunate ones, felt as if every kiss was not just a kiss but a way to colonize my body, the flag of the conqueror, you the oppressor and I the oppressed.

Jim bought one of those beds, he sleeps in it every night, and it makes him think of Paul and his hands, and the way they hold onto each other inside that dirty blanket. In a way, he thought that Paul might stop by his house every once in a while so that they could sleep together for real, for the entire night maybe. Once Jim had even asked Paul to stop by his place, they would be alone anyway. Paul refused, obviously, because, he said, somebody might see him going into the house and then coming out of it the next morning and that might look suspicious and people will start talking about that, and he wouldn't like to assume that risk. 'You could go home really early in the morning', Jim had said, 'that way nobody would see you sneak out of the house'. Paul was adamant in his decision. They shouldn't spend nights together because it was not safe. He preferred the thick bushes and the worn out blanket that his grandmother might have used to cover the cows when it was too cold during the winter. And with the winter came the end of evenings spent together under the bushes dreaming of the day in which they'll be able to sleep in the same

bed and wake up next to each other every morning. He will never come. And the long winter will make him forget, out of sight, out of mind, that's how it works.

Somebody did walk by, it was inevitable, and it was a parking lot. It was a guy with a dog. He might have seen us. You started the car immediately. We had to find another place. I told you to relax because it was just a man walking on the street. You said that he might have recognized you. I almost hated you in that moment. You're so ugly when you're furious. You make a sort of face that is not very pleasant to look at.

They kept talking while Jim waited in one of the corners of the shop. The young boy was very passionate about something. He kept moving his arms while he was talking animated by a fluctuation of passion going on inside him. 'We're going extinct in this way', Jim couldn't help overhearing the young boy. 'They're monsters, animals, even animals know how to do it'. Paul kept nodding in agreement. 'I and the other boys are organizing something, a little surprise for the little bastards. Are you coming with?' The boy was asking. 'Sure, count me in', Paul said. 'Time to teach those little fuckers a lesson!' The old man appeared from behind the counter with a big box and he placed it on the counter. 'Here's everything you need', the man said, 'plus some extras, they might help you and your father.' Paul thanked him. On their way out Jim told the boy that it was a pleasure to meet him, in return the boy smiled and said nothing. For a moment Jim stood there, his hand in midair. The boy did not return the gesture. Paul had already gone.

It feels like my jaw is blocked by some sort of force that keeps my muscles in a continuous strain and it's beyond my will to release this tension. An exterior force is pushing me against the bed. A sort of relief comes after a few moments. But it is only momentary. The force retreats and then it comes again, even more powerful. My body digs into the mattress like a dog searching for a bone. In those moments the sky seems like a belly, caving in. It's like my lungs are strong enough to suck in all that air and make the sky cave in. I'm travelling from the center of the Earth upwards in a straight line, space caves in to make way. Take the pain of a broken heart, multiply it by ten. Make it physical. A spear rushing

through your sternum and stopping there. When you try to move it the whole world seems to want to move along it. If my torso tilts to one side the whole room seems to be tilting in the opposite direction. With every tilt you disappear. With every wave of energy your name is subjected to contortions just like any name written in the sand. Once, I saw you with horns and hooves. With every wave you turn into something else.

It was a rainy day, which meant that Jim would not see Paul that day. If Paul could only stop by, forget about his fears for one moment, one day at least, and Jim would be the happiest person on Earth. The hope of seeing him that day lingered still even though a part of his mind reassured him that Paul wouldn't come, because that's how Paul works. Jim wondered whether he went to see that boy from the shop, continue their passionate discussion about the "little fuckers" as they were called, whomever they were. But Paul was probably home, working on one of his beds. His hands moving elegantly along the submissive piece of wood, trying out his new tools, testing their performance. The radio was probably on, and it would go on and on about the weather and all the other things that make up a life. And his grandmother would come and tell him about other girls that would marry him in the village. 'You know our neighbor's daughter', she would say and Paul would keep on working, 'she's a nice girl, she made this cake for her father's birthday and it was the best cake I ever tasted and I'm an old woman'. And Paul would stay silent as he always does. Sometimes Jim hated Paul for that, for his silence, a sort of fury built up inside his chest every time Paul was silent about things, when he could have said something, done something about it. And while his grandmother talked, the only thing that came out of Paul, or out of Paul's hands, were the pieces of wood that he cut away in order to obtain a piece of wood that would suit his needs. Paul was silent about everything, about the rain, and about the sky, and about their relationship, if that can be called a relationship. It was like he was doing it, feeling it, but he just wouldn't name it, refuse to name it, or simply deny its existence. Deep down, Jim believed that for Paul this was just something temporary, just for a couple of months, and after he could just go back to his old self, other self, or whatever that was. Sometimes, Jim could see it in his eyes, when Paul was on top of him and this flame ignited in his eyes, and

suddenly in that very instant he was a child, the one Jim could remember, playful, the Paul Jim fell in love with. But then, as soon as he was finished Paul would retreat once again into himself, into that cursed silence of his, like a child that has witnessed the death of a beloved and he would be furious because he cannot understand why people have to die, why certain things happen to certain people and so on and so forth. He would retreat to that place that Jim was pushed out of, day by day.

We were talking on the phone, and I told you that I might have fallen in love with you, and you said that you were happy to hear that. Of course, you never told me you shared the same feelings, you just went on talking about something else, how work was very difficult and how you are always tired because you sleep only three hours a night. And I said, poor you, I can imagine and tried to sympathize with what you were going through, and I thought, just give this man some space, he needs some rest. So I never said that I loved you, again. I completely avoided the subject. Talked about the sun and the sea, and the people I saw on the beach, and that girl, wrapped in a long shawl reading a book on the beach, and then sleeping the wind playing with her hair. And that couple I saw sleeping next to each other, his arms wrapped around her, her forehead and face buried in his chest. You said nothing about that. I thought they were beautiful. You kept going on and on about your work and how successful you were, and all that positive feed-back you've been getting from your peers, and your boss. I stopped talking, never mentioned the couple sleeping on the beach. It will happen, you said, we'll be doing the same thing, your arms wrapped around me and my face buried in your naked chest. I believed you and the moment you've said it my mind started working, putting words and images together like a machine. But then the waves came again and you turned into a wolf, your eyes yellow, your teeth of a perfect white they looked as if made out of plastic. Your voice was a howl and I could no longer understand what you were saying and I ran away, as fast as I could, never looking back. Now that I think of it, maybe you had no evil intentions as a wolf but rather I was too scared of your shape to leave room for rethinking. Because if you really turned into a werewolf or something like that I would have loved you anyway, everybody deserves a chance, the chance that has been denied

to me so many times. That's why I want to offer it to you, obviously, to make up for all those people that have turned their backs on me. Even though they should be the ones to make up for all of that. My mother came in today, I remember her now. While I was an amnesiac I could have never imagined such a mother. Her beauty seems to have lost something on the way, the eyes going deeper and deeper into the skull with every day that passes by, shadows appearing on her face like clouds on a blue sky. She's not getting old, I told myself, and she's getting lost. How could somebody lose their memory? How could I forget that girl with whom I went to buy grapes from the grocery store? She lived in that odd apartment, on top of a train station, and trains would come and go, and she would sleep, or at least, try to sleep. She said she got used to it. Trains no longer bothered her. She was probably one of those people that could peacefully sleep on a train during the night. I could never do that. I could only sleep for fifteen minutes then I would wake up, and go to sleep again. I was afraid that I might miss my stop and arrive in some god forsaken town and I won't have the money to go back and stay there for days, stuck. The guy in the grocery store asked the girl who I was. She said I was a foreigner and the guy believed her because he said no more about it. We went back to the car and ate the grapes without washing them, they looked clean enough anyway. It was very hot inside the car, I remember that perfectly, and the road was very dusty in the summer. Another wave comes. I can see my mother fainting and other people rushing to where she was sitting a minute ago. My body is having an intense conversation with the bed. I'm a fish on land. The air that you breathe in here is poisonous for me. You no longer have hands. Your hands are like claws, and you seem to grow wings. The waves destroy everything in their way. Some of my memories appear under a strange light, sometimes darker. Those things that before were surrounded by a halo of light are now surrounded by dark spots, here and there.

Until he was nowhere to be seen. Paul lived on an island, secluded from the rest of the world, hidden in a cocoon. Sometimes, there were things that managed to bring him out, but it rarely happened. Jim tried to do that every time they were together. The bushes were now getting thinner because of foliage loss. They had to go deeper inside until they

found this very tight place where they could barely move. Jim liked it because it was more intimate, they had to stay very close together. The ground was getting colder and the blanket was no longer effective, except during sunny afternoons when the sun was powerful enough to still give a bit of heat. Jim felt Paul's breath warm on his neck. It turned him on. It made him want Paul all the more. But Paul retreated into himself every time Jim tried to get closer. He went back to that secluded island. Jim too had an island for himself, one where he and Paul were together the whole time, even during the night, where Paul said he loved him and there were no grandmothers who would make lists of eligible young women. On this island there would be only Paul's workshop and a house for the two of them, and they would sleep in one of Paul's beds. And Jim would go to pick up Paul from his workshop and he would cook dinner and they would eat together and watch the sunset. 'We need to go', Paul said, pulling Jim out of his reverie, 'I think there's somebody watching us'. Jim looked around. 'Where?' Jim asked. 'Over there, behind that tree, I think he's been watching us for a while'. An indefinite shape seemed to be hiding behind a rotten tree. They stood up and hid the blanket behind one of the thick bushes. A sense of urgency came over them and they hurried to get outside, Paul leading the way, trembling, pushing furiously against the leaves, running almost as if he was afraid of being seen. He started to run, bumped into a tree, fell, then stood up and continued running without looking back. Jim stopped and called his name. But he never looked back and kept on running until he disappeared behind a corn field. Jim went no further. Where could he go now? The indefinite shape behind the tree was no longer there. Whomever that was, he or she is gone. He crawled back into their layer and wrapped himself into the dirty blanket. It now smelled of grass and dead leaves. Somewhere, hidden behind all these smells, there was Paul's smell, sweat and wood.

Help me to remember this. Even though I've recovered my memories I feel the need of help every time I want to remember something. I saw my father today, he looked old, older than I remembered him, and there was a sort of veil on his face, his harsh features softened by age. The harshness lingered in his eyes, and in the way he moved them from one object to the other in my hospital room. He said nothing. I

think I heard his heart, like a series of beeps and sounds, and every time he looked at me his heart rushed into rapid rhythm. There were two heartbeats between every word my mother uttered while they were in my room. The doctor was telling them that the treatment was going well, and that everything was going well. I wonder what treatment they were talking about. Is it a treatment that would make me get rid of you? I've never perceived you as a disease or something similar. Your memory remains like a stain on my memories. A desire is growing inside my guts. For a moment I miss you. But then the waves come and you take on different shapes. You are laughing again, laughing at my shoes, laughing at my face. These are the monsters that I've been planning to kill ever since I was a child. The monsters that got out from under the bed and took on human form. Wipe out the hell that is living here, on the surface of the earth. The waves have turned you in one of those monsters. Until now, it's like I've been watching you from a distance. Now I got closer, and I can see the imperfections, the skin that is about to peel off just like the skin of a snake, yellowish teeth like those of a dog, and your voice is almost grotesque, a voice made out of scar tissue, the sound of metal on metal, fingernails on a blackboard, the scream of a cat, broken wood, a broken record that goes on and on repeating the same line of a song. There is a sort of lump in my throat, yes, right there, a bit lower, that stops me from breathing or from saying anything. I feel like crying but I can't. An electric shock goes right through me and my body goes upwards turning into the letter "u". I am, once again, the belly button of the world. If my body goes down the sky will cave in. There is a big responsibility in that, I wouldn't want the sky to cave in. My body is suspended, turned upwards like a cup. I seem shorter that way, smaller. As small as my body in comparison with this electric shock that goes through me. Oh, the symmetry of light, the parallel lines between one eye and the other, the multiplicity of visions, and the light is so fast that it begins to break into pieces, and there is so much heat coming out of those broken lines, my skin is burning, my temples are burning and I cannot unclench my jaws. My jaws are tied together. The cloth with which my jaws are tied are made out of an invisible material. Invisible materials do exist. I now have the proof. I travel faster than the speed of light. I know that because as I look at it I

can see particles of light, like dust, floating aimlessly around me. Outside the world is moving and we are the only immobile things in this universe. Empty space is made out of empty space. Empty space is of high density, we move through it like a fly through honey. The pain comes immediately after strong, then, as I get used to it slows down like a chemical reaction. I will forget you, I have to forget you, maybe getting rid of you will make them stop, stop the waves from coming one after the other pushing my belly button against the sky. I won't be able to feel any more if this goes on. My nerves will be tense, their ends burnt like the end of a cigarette. Smoke is coming out of my fingers. My pores are opening and smoke is coming out. I am all black because of the smoke. I will forget you if they make it stop. Slowly, the memory of the pain will replace your memory. Instead of you, there's going to be a cloud of black smoke.

It was already dark. Jim woke up because he was cold. The blanket was too thin to protect him from the cold of the night. The moon was high which meant that he'd been sleeping there for a while. Of course, Paul did not come back, obviously. Jim had remained there hidden hoping that Paul might ultimately show up, take him in his arms and bring him home. Then he would kiss him good night and they would go to sleep together. Jim had seen it in his eyes. As he was running Jim had a glimpse of Paul expression. His eyes were full of pure fear like those of a dog that feels pain coming his way. Jim was afraid that Paul will never come back. He crawled out of their bed of bushes. The forest was silent except for the occasional sounds birds and wind made during the night. Jim felt fear rising inside him. He could barely see and despite his efforts to be as silent as possible he seemed to hit every branch and every rock that he found on his path. Every sound had a meaning and they only made his fear grow in power. He felt like stopping because his feet were growing weary with running. There is no limit to that pain because you never know when it is going to stop. You know it is going to stop when you stop and rest but you need to keep on going. Darkness is following. The path was the wrong one. Jim knew that it was the wrong path the instant he chose to take it but somehow he was afraid to go back. Somebody might be following him, he thought. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The forest was silent once again and he realized that he was the only one

making noises in the whole forest. He needed to go back, otherwise he would end up who knows where. He went back cursing himself for all that waste of energy. He could have been home by then, locked inside the house, tucked under the covers. If only Paul would come and take him home. He reached the bed of bushes and there was somebody there. It wasn't Paul. It had horns, and hooves.

The body is not a shell. It is not a protective shield. It doesn't protect anything because there is nothing to protect. The conscience is the conscience of the body, the body is the conscience, the conscience is the body, there's nothing in between. The soul is the body. The thought is part of the flesh, the flesh is thought, the mind is the matter. The conscience eats the body, not metaphorically, because the body is the conscience, there is nothing in between. It's like a prayer. I say it in my head every time I wake up in the morning to get a sense of what is happening to me. Naturally, I pray to get a sense of what is happening to me. Prayers go unanswered, obviously, because there is no one that could answer to a prayer except yourself. And then you don't know if it's the right answer or not, you'll just have to assume that the things you say to yourself are real, for you that is. Of course, those things are never true because in your mind your judgment is always apriorically biased. Before the thought is even formed you should assume it is wrong. That thought is not the result of experience, it does not come from experience, and it does not come as a result of studying the situation extensively. It only comes at the right moment, exactly when you need it. You came exactly when I needed you. Obviously, that's a wrong assumption. Looking back, I didn't need you that much, but I was so happy about finding you that I naturally assumed you were what I needed at that particular moment. The body changes its mind, your mind, just to make you feel better about one of your decisions. Of course, everything was perfect, you were perfect. This is it, I said to myself. I've finally found someone. You said the same thing, at least you told me that, and I believed you. Somewhere, inside my brain you're tied to pleasure and pain at the same time. I'm pushing you away and I'm pulling you back. The electric shocks push you away. And your image comes back distorted like in an old film. I still haven't said a word. Not even when my brother stopped by. He told me some things

about his life. He got married. He looked happy. There was a sort of disgust in his eyes. The distance between us grew larger every day. I remember us sitting, having dinner. You make me sick, he told me. I said nothing. I kept on eating without saying anything. I only watched the spoon as it dived into the hot soup. Nobody said anything, not even my mother. You make me sick, he said again, thinking that maybe I did not hear him right. The spoon dived into the soup again fishing out a meatball. All right, we got it, my mother said. It's true, my brother repeated, he makes me sick. I said nothing. I could have stood up and went away but something kept me there like I was tied to the chair. I never looked up from my plate. There's a lump in my throat. I open my mouth but nothing comes out except a sort of howl and I burst into tears. There's a gap in my chest opening wider and the whole world seems to be emptying itself in that gap. Me and my memories, my brother, my mother and father, our dinner, and your words like cubes of ice on warm skin. There is no air inside my lungs but the howl keeps coming out. It stops. My chest fills with air and the howl comes out again on a different tone, different note, the same meaning compressed inside it. The gap closes painfully. The electric shocks come again and for once they're liberating me. They make me forget about the gap. The howl no longer comes out. For a moment you're sheer pain, my love. Your image alone disturbs me. You are the headache, toothache, that limb that hurts, the eye that cannot see, the fury and the solitude of a blind man, the music that ears can't hear, and everything in between all those other things that make us happy. I promise to let you go if the electric shocks stop.

It looked terrifying in the moonlight, its back too wide to be human. It was wearing clothes, the sort of clothes nobody could wear today. Jim stood frozen, his limbs unresponsive. It started to talk, never turning to face Jim. 'I bet you were expecting somebody else', it said. It's a sort of man, Jim thought, unsure. It's him, Jim thought, the one hiding behind the tree while he and Paul were together hidden behind the bushes. 'Of course it was me, who else could it be in this forsaken place? I've been following you two for a while', he said, the shadow of a smile echoing throughout the woods. 'You've been thinking about me', he said, 'you of all people. Such a rational being.' Laughter, loud, strong, that of a man in his late

forties. 'I know you're afraid of me, but there's no need to be afraid, I mean you no harm. Rumor has it that you love this man, the one that ran away. Funny guy. Did you see his face while he was running?' Another fit of laughter. He walked around with the help of a cane. His face hidden behind the shadows of the night. 'Who are you?' Jim asked. 'That is of no consequence, I'm afraid', the man replied. 'I'm here to show you something. The only thing of consequence in this equation'. Jim stood there without doing anything, his limbs continued to be unresponsive, he forgot how to breathe. The man took a step towards the bushes, his cane pushing away the branches. He moved steadily, almost floating. The branches listened to him. They seemed to be getting out of his way. 'Are you coming or not?' the man asked. 'I don't have all day. Well, all night'. Jim finally managed to move and made a step forward following the path that the man was making. 'Here it is', the man said pointing to Paul's blanket with his cane. 'Your perfect little world, where you could live happily ever after'. Another fit of laughter. Jim felt anger boiling in his veins. Who was that man? What did he want? 'Now don't get ahead of yourself. Here' The man took the blanket from the ground and threw it in Jim's arms. But it was no longer only Paul's dirty blanket. There was something else inside. And it was moving and it was snorting like a dying animal would do. 'Here's your little precious thing. Your love has given birth to this. Now you'll have to take care of it'. Another fit of laughter. Jim was horrified. He unwrapped the blanket slowly fearing something that might jump out and bite him. Some sort of animal, some sort of joke. It wasn't like that. It was a baby, and not just any baby. Its limbs were deformed and so was its face. Its eyes were unevenly placed one next to the other and there was a huge scar on its chest that appeared to be still open and infected. 'What is this?' Jim asked, terrified by the answer that he might get from this uncanny man. 'This is your future', the man said, a big grin on his face, 'the present pushed to its last consequences, tomorrow seen today'. However, as soon as he said it something happened because the man's grin vanished and a sort of fear mixed with anger took its place. Jim wrapped the blanket tighter around the monstrous baby and a cry of pleasure came out of its mouth.

No shocks today, not yet, at least. My body feels strange, it's rough dialogue with the bed finished, brought to the margins of compromise, it feels like somehow I've managed to lose an incredible amount of weight, and I feel lighter now. My hands are the same, everything seems to be the same. A pleasant and comfortable heat is surrounding my body. Somebody's washed my hair. I can still smell the soap. And the sheets have been changed. Nobody came to visit me. I think of you and a dumb pain makes its way along my spine, then erupts inside my head. I promise to let you go. And the pain stops. It works like magic. The walls have ears. The windows are the eyes. There is a price to pay in order to forget you, obviously. I wonder what that price is. Even the beds have sensors probably. They know everything about the things that I do during the night, every movement, every breath I take. Everything is recorded and the doctor knows. He even knows what I've been thinking because every time I think of you he comes into my room and the electric shocks are next. And they annihilate you, and with you some other things also. When the waves come a window breaks inside our house. The house that we've built together, up upon that hill. Soon, we will be left out without any windows and one could not live in such a house whatever the circumstances. They were probably watching us while we were in the house too. They're everywhere. I miss waking up in the morning next to you. One heartbeat away I was awake, now I am asleep, and the sky threatens to cave in, my body dancing around the room. I can see the ears now, they're everywhere. They're like paintings on the walls. And the windows are blinking just like real eyes do. Horns are growing out of your forehead. Your beautiful forehead not marred by a wave of electricity that hits you right in your heart. You fall on your knees and open your arms. I think you're giving up. Here is the creation, giving up on its creation. Another wave come and your body falls with a heavy thump, then convulses like a snake whose head was cut off. Yet, something happens while your body is doing that. In between the waves of pain that crush your nerves you push your head up like a wolf would do when it wants to howl. And in between those movements, your head going up and down, something disturbing can be seen. Your wide grin. You even start laughing. Louder. Then louder. Behold the creation that defies the creator.

Jim woke up still haunted by the image of the mutilated child. You cannot unsee what you've just witnessed. He is in his bed. One of Paul's masterpieces, limited edition, made especially for Jim. It even had this extra thing attached to it, like a side table directly attached to the wooden skeleton of the bed. 'It's for your books', Paul said, 'you can also put a bedside lamp on it when you want to read before going to bed'. Jim thought it was sweet of him to do that. He still had to pay for the bed, but still, the bedside table was something Paul thought of, and Jim, in his naïveté, believed that maybe Paul thought of him too. Paul never got away with words easily. There was always something stopping him from saying or doing something. Paul did not come back last night, he did not call, typical of Paul. This big man, with a big heart (?), had a very tiny mouth. Words rarely came out. Jim was afraid of him because of that. He felt that there were always things that were left out, things that Paul was afraid to give voice to. Jim was angry, of course, because of what had happened the previous night. Yet somehow, what followed, the strange man and the mutilated baby wrapped in Paul's blanket, came to replace that anger with a sort of dark amazement, the type of amazement you feel in the presence of a beautiful insect. It is beautiful but it's still an insect. Paul was silent for another week, and then another, and those weeks turned into months. Jim had already given up, and he didn't have the courage to show up at Paul's house. What was his business there, anyway? They were just friends after all, nothing more. Jim felt broken hearted, naturally, as all people do. And when winter came the cold and the snow covered their tracks like the silence that fell in between them. The blanket was still there, hidden behind one of the thick bushes, covered by snow, ridiculous like a human heart thrown into the street. Jim started to hate it. Let it rot, he thought. It was of no help anyway. At night, Jim started to feel uncomfortable in his bed. It felt rough and cold.

The mind cannot go in circles. It is simply impossible. It starts with one thought, from which another thought derives, from which another thought derives ad infinitum. And so on and so forth. There is no circle. Even though you have the feeling that you're getting back to the same thought it is a false assumption. Even though the thought that you return to resembles somehow that thought you had at the beginning of the

sequence the resemblance is never complete, so the circle never closes. You are always outside the circle. Close to it, but never in it. I'm close to you, but never with you. That's my problem, you told me once; I can never be in the same place with the person I love. When I'm happy, he's sad, when he's sad I'm happy. Like that time we went to your graduation party. I still have a picture somewhere. If I close my eyes I can still see the picture. Your hand is wrapped around my neck in a boyish gesture of friendship. Nobody knew about us at that particular time in our lives. I seem completely lost, my hand hanging on your elbow. You're smiling, your face shining. Being shorter and smaller than you, your body engulfs mine. We're looking in different directions, each of us speaking to another person who does not appear in the picture. Your mood changes according to the people that you find yourself with. Of course, you denied it, all the time, you said that we were never too far from each other, and that we were the closest people on this earth. And that you missed me every day, no doubt about that. But what you don't know is that I felt your absence even when you were physically presence. It was as if something in your mind clicked and then you were lost, thinking of other things. You were like water running through my fingers. You changed faces every day. I should have waited before saying anything to you, I should have left my better judgment to win the battle that was going on inside my mind. Instead I told you that terrible sentence, I said that I loved you, or even worse, I said that I began to love you. Your mind clicked again, and what was I supposed to do? Deny what I had just said? That was, I guess, the beginning of the end. You stopped looking at me with the same eyes. I myself stopped looking at you with the same eyes, naturally they were the exact same eyes even before I've said those things to you. You somehow fell silent after that sentence came out of my mind. Of course, I've lived on with the illusion that we were still together, and I would call you during the morning to ask you about the weather. You acted as if nothing had happened. You kept on saying nice things to me. As days went by my faith in you grew bigger and bigger. And I imagined myself seeing you again just like I did that first time we met. There's a thin line between being and not being, being present and being absent. It can vibrate at the touch of just one word. And then the line is gone, it is no longer there.

A container needs to be filled when empty. The purpose of a container is to be filled with something, not just air. People can be containers too, Jim thought. What a stupid thing to come to one's mind. He immediately dismissed the idea as foolish. No sign of Paul. Winter had come in all its glory with record low temperatures. Sometimes, during the night, Jim could hear Paul working in his workshop, like the distant echo of a factory in which people worked day and night. Paul was one of those workers. He would forget about himself while working. He forgot about hunger, about cold, about having a break or even having some sleep. But it wasn't Paul. Jim was sure of that. Paul was somewhere else, otherwise he would have said something, and he would have done something to let Jim know. Just one word. Something that might offer Jim some sort of explanation. Jim would stop then, the moment he got the explanation, he would stop making all those scenarios in his head. And Jim would be, in a way, happy because then he wouldn't have to lie to himself by thinking that he understood Paul's absence. Of course he didn't understand Paul's absence. No one could understand that, except maybe Paul's grandmother. But Jim had promised himself once, when another heart was broken, that he will at least try to understand any given situation without thinking of the motives that led to that situation. A sort of white lie. And he did. He told everyone that he understood their situation even if he did not actually understand what was going on. Some may see it as a sort of weakness on his side. Jim did not see it like that. Jim saw it as a sign of power, a reason to be arrogant even, and a reason to be proud of oneself. Imagine that, a man capable of understanding each and every one. At night, Jim sometimes woke up with the feeling that he might be some sort of messiah, sent on earth to offer solace to those who needed a shoulder to cry on. He had many shoulders to offer. It went on since the day he was born, people would instantly fall in love with him, they would smile, and he would smile back at them saying that they were great, that they could do it because they were smart and beautiful. He promised to himself that he is going to offer a chance to whoever came to him. Yet, he never thought about giving a second chance. Just one chance, like in real life. In real life you don't second chances, the second chance is always an illusion, and the result is always reduced by fifty percent when confronted with the one

chance people usually got. But this was the mathematical flow of life that Jim pushed to its last consequences. He was prepared to make compromises, of course, to that rule of his. Because according to this rule Paul would not get a second chance, yet, deep down, Jim would have offered him that second chance the instant he walked in. There was a lie to justify that. He would do it out of love. And then there were other lies. One of them was his name. Another one was Paul's name. Next to the life that he was living, there was this other life: that of Jim and Paul. He refused to acknowledge it as his, or this other guy's he had an affair with, who, in fact is not a carpenter. Not even close.

There was, of course, the necessity of telling stories. Stories that told my story which, in fact was not entirely my story. It contained alien pieces, taken from other stories. All of the stories that you've told me were your stories, told in a different way, transported, pushed, translated into other stories that told of an inner turmoil not ready to come to the surface. They did surface, in fact, through stories that spoke about other people. I can understand why. The need for coded language was evident in your case since the very moment we started talking. You kept on telling them. The stories became explicit at one point. But that happened only because I started knowing you. There's one thing you showed me. Every instant I thought I was suffering because of you was actually an instant of complete and utter happiness. Other people felt the same thing at that exact moment. I just assumed I was the only one. I assumed I was the problem, the only problem, when in fact I was one of the many problems, excessively dramatizing the matter. I thought of telling my best friend about you. And also my high school teacher. She seemed eager to know about my affairs with the opposite sex. You're not the opposite sex though. I wanted to tell her about you. Never did, naturally, because I never had the chance. You left very soon. You were so eager to leave actually that you kept counting the kilometers as you were heading home. I thought of telling her that I was having an affair with a guy. She would smile, maybe laugh. Partly because I wouldn't use the word relationship. Affair had an alienating ring to it. It included both distance and closeness. It kept things clean enough, it sanitized whatever we had between the two of us. I was planning to use the same language with my best friend. I

never did, naturally, instead I told him stories about us, about the way we kissed and about the way we made love. I told them in such a way so as to deflect any suspicion. I think he fell for it. This is not my story, I would tell him, silently hoping that he might not hear. This is somebody else's story.

Desperately, like a child that still tries to believe that his toy is not broken, Jim hoped that Paul would come back, with the coming of the spring. Sometimes, Jim forgot about Paul, especially in the morning, when he had other things on his mind. One morning, for instance, there was this song going through his mind and he couldn't take it out. It kept going on and on somewhere in the depths of his brain. Every time Jim tried to think of Paul the song could be heard even louder until he stopped trying. However, it also happened that sometimes Jim would wake up and think of Paul, and the fact that he knew for sure that he was not going to come back. Because that's how Paul works, that's what Paul does in difficult situations, he turns silent or runs away from it. Stubborn man, Jim thought. The other days came and went, and slowly, but surely, Jim reached a conclusion. Paul is not coming back. What a relief to finally know that, Jim thought. So he started to replace every instance of Paul in his mind with other things. He went out, met other people. Once he met this other guy who had come with two other guys who claimed to be his friends. Jim felt the need to leave immediately, yet something inside his mind told him that it was necessary to stay if he wanted to forget Paul. Jim agreed to this voice in his head. He had to move on. So he stayed and spent a few hours with those guys. They had no money, so Jim had to pay for everything. They were barely out of high school. Everything felt wrong. Inventing a lame reason Jim went away and never saw them again, except once when he was on the bus, and he saw one of them walking on the sidewalk. He might have even seen Paul, had it not been for the fact that Paul's figure no longer appeared in his mind with the same clarity it did before, when they met almost every day. Somehow, Jim felt that there was a higher purpose to this. He had to let it go and try to find solace in his work, in other things, those things that would not keep him connected to his past, his affair with the silent and stubborn Paul. It was a wound that needed to be forgotten, ignore the scar, and convince yourself that you

understand. An illusion is better than nothing. Jim had grown to believe that even nothing is better than everything else. No attachments meant no worries, no possibilities to hurt himself and as such hurt the people that cared for him. And sometimes, when he went to bed, Jim cried.

I tried not to cry. At least, I think I wasn't capable of crying though I wanted to do it badly sometimes. Because sometimes everything seemed so unfair. My friend came back one day, and I wanted to tell him about you. I didn't, naturally, I didn't have the courage to do it again. I'll never have the courage to do it, I guess. He looked happier than the last time I saw him. Changed. I wanted to tell him that I found him changed in many ways, but I didn't, obviously, I had made a vow to myself that I shall not speak again because words are deceitful. We live by the things that we don't say. We live by the words that we don't hear or the words that are never said. He asked me in what way had he changed. I wanted to tell him that something was lost in this passage of his from unhappiness to happiness, something which I thought was his, a darker side, where he was still a little boy. He seemed more mature. It was maybe because his girlfriend was slightly older than him and he wanted to give her the feeling that he was mature too when in fact he was not. I liked him more when he was a little boy, because I could tell him things and he would pretend not to hear them and play along his game of hide and seek. Because it was always like that. He hid behind this enigma of his. You couldn't tell which his preferences were because he was different every day. Different clothes, different way of speaking, different attitude, different beard, different shoes, everything had to change from day to day. He went away. I hope that the next time he stops by he will still be able to recognize me. I believe there's something changing about me. I'm not sure what. I've realized that when he entered the room and had a good look at me. There was a question suspended on his face. He never said it, but I could see it, just like witches were sometimes capable to see death hanging like a pendulum above people that were meant to die in the next few days. He almost seemed disgusted and I wanted to scream but I refrained myself from doing it. I don't want him to see me like this. And, most of all, I don't need his pity. He was wondering maybe how this was possible. How could there be such emptiness where once had been something completely

different? I asked myself the same thing over and over again throughout my stay in the hospital. I haven't found an answer yet, and probably never will. I live by the things that I don't do.

In those instants everything came back in Jim's mind. How could he forget Paul? This man who had offered him everything and had left him with nothing but an aching heart. If there was a heart. He was no longer sure about that. Things came out foggy in his mind. Yet, how could he forget him when everything he did reminded him of Paul. He wondered, did Paul feel the same about his absence? Of course not, a voice in his head told him every time he thought about that. That old hag must have convinced him of those charms, and the bewitching, and that girl, living across the road, with her blonde curls, smelling of cow excrements, and smiling sheepishly every time Paul said something to her. There was Paul's future, in the chubby hands of that girl who probably knew nothing of making love and loving somebody. Here was he, complicated, complex, handsome, sophisticated, elegant, and there was that girl as stupid and as useless as a bench badly placed in a suburban park. It was that old hag, Jim was almost sure of it. Jim thought of going there to have a talk with Paul but he just didn't have the courage to do it. He was afraid that he was going to meet Paul's father, and he was a difficult guy, full of prejudices and sly as a fox. Jim felt uncomfortable in his presence simply because he would ask all the inappropriate questions, and Jim was afraid that he might just give the wrong answer, or at least an answer that would make him uncomfortable and as such hint at the fact that he might not be telling the truth. And in fact, Jim had to tell lies in his presence, and he felt bad about it. Not to mention the old hag whose mouth had the smell of a sewer and would be, almost always, drunk. Tensions within the family, Paul had once said, but Jim did not pay attention at that time, he was busy thinking about their future together, this future that is, and the future that he was trying on his own skin. The future that he feared so much. That future live cowardly in solitude, afraid of open space and people that may come to close to you on the bus, people that may look at you on the bus or on the train. Sometimes Jim was afraid of people. Probably because he was not so fond of people after all. Paul was the exception, of course, from all points of view. Jim opened himself to Paul, and Paul had looked inside

like a curious child. And he saw the most beautiful thing in the whole world, Jim's heart that is. And then a sort of cliché went through Paul's mind, and Paul could no longer be with Jim because, just because, Jim would have looked at him and said, hey, do you see this heart, it is beating just for you. And Paul couldn't stand that. He just couldn't. So he had to run, as fast as he could, so that Jim would not have the time to say it. And that time Jim called him, while he was running. He thought, naturally, he thought, he's going to say it now. And he couldn't live with the idea of having a second heart beating for him. So he ran.

We had learned to ignore each other. You were taking care of your things, I was taking care of my own things until we forgot about ourselves, about the two of us. Out of sight, out of mind, as they usually say. I am now pushing you out of my mind consciously, rationally, because every time I think of you I dream of falling from great heights. Not to mention the pain. It hurts everywhere, every inch of my body is painful. I'm not sure if it's really pain, or just the memory of pain. The difference is not very clear right now. Pain was when you hit me. And you hit me in so many ways. Words come out at a usual pace, at the speed of light, waves colliding, and propagation of sound, ripples in the water. I am the stone thrown into the water, disturbing its slumber. The sky moves along with it, the water opens a gap in the floor. I saw you once in the water, in a puddle, it had been raining the previous day, and I saw your reflection in a puddle. I don't remember if it was a reflection of you or a reflection of how I wanted you to be in that particular instant. I tend to believe it was not the former. I wanted you there in a different way. I wanted you to protect me from all of those people. One of them pushed me and I fell. There it is. That's the pain. It went like lightning through my ribs as his boot pushed against my sternum in one rapid blow. My body convulsed quickly like the body of a hedgehog when it feels threatened. I tried to cover my face. But the boot kept coming at me with fury until the pain was all over me. There was no sign that the guy would stop. Blow after blow relief seemed even farther away. Another series of blows came from the other side against my back and head. I started crying because the pain was everywhere. I begged them to stop and for a moment I thought they will stop. For a few seconds they did and that only made me acknowledge the damage that

they had done to me. Pain had gone as deep as the bone, as deep as the bone marrow, as deep as any emotion goes, as deep as the blood, the cells, matter itself. This pain is never going to get out of there. It will remain there for the rest of my days. And then I saw something. And there was no turning back. I saw beauty. It had yellow eyes, full of fury, just like yours, my beloved monster.

He took his best pair of pants, a pair of slim jeans that he had bought at a cheap store a while ago. They were worn out and the color started to fade in some place but Jim liked them a lot so he avoided buying a new pair. The shirt was blue, a shirt that made a lot of victims, he thought. One of his friends told him once that the shirt suited him well. Everything was perfect, Jim thought. Everything had to be right, it was an important evening and he would meet a lot of people and he had to be presentable. He had been invited at this discussion group organized by one of the many universities he attended. There would be a small party after, something to eat, some drinks, not much, but still, a good opportunity for socializing, meeting new people. The bow tie was the last touch and everything was perfect. Some new shoes and the world was all right again. The taxi had arrived already and was waiting in front of the main gate. When he finally arrived there was a bit of a crowd. All of them shirts and ties, and fancy shoes, and smiles, and everything needed to make up for a fabulous night. Nobody approached him, except for the occasional looks and smiles. Jim stood in one of the corners of the big room that had once probably been a gym. The discussions went smoothly, everybody seemed to be in a good mood. Probably everybody is just anxious about the drinks and the food after. Once the moderator announced the end of the discussion everybody rushed towards the main hall where drinks and cakes were served. A long line had already formed there and people were talking enthusiastically as they stood in line. The man standing in front of Jim had a grey coat and a plaid shirt. His hair was perfectly trimmed on his neck. Every time he moved his head his neck moved elegantly inside the collar. I hope you have somebody loving you, Jim thought. He always did that. Watching strangers as they moved around, in his mind telling them that they deserved to be loved, that they deserved to have somebody taking care of them. Everybody needs

someone. He turned towards Jim and gave him a quick look hoping maybe that Jim might not notice. But Jim did notice. He was good at this, noticing details, especially when it came to a look, a glimpse of somebody's soul. He turned again, acknowledging Jim rapidly with eyes that moved like those of a predator bird. 'It's a long line', the man said. He appeared to be in his late twenties. His face still retained something of his adolescence, something of those desperate years in which everything seems doable. Yet, there was something betraying that face. There comes a time, Jim thought, when that youthful thrust is abandoned to be replaced by the need to settle, to find somebody that would make that settling easier, palatable for somebody who had led a promiscuous life. 'Indeed it is', Jim replied. The man smiled and it was the most beautiful smile Jim had ever seen. Paul had a beautiful smile too but he rarely smiled. Jim smiled back. 'Pretend my name's a name, any name. Pleased to meet you'. They shook hands. 'Pretend my name's another name, any other name. Pleased to meet you too', Jim said.

All of them stopped because you came closer. It meant that I'm yours and they had to back off. Everybody did, in fact, they were your faithful dogs, I thought. I could no longer move, everything hurt. You were so close I could smell you and your breath and the dirt on your boots, and the smell of wood. I looked at you and you knelt beside me and leaned over me like you did whenever we made love. And you kissed me and you laughed and everybody started laughing and it hurt so badly. And then you spat on my face. 'You little shit'. Another blow right in my chest. It reminds me once more of the pain eating my flesh away. 'You fucking cock sucker!' The others are gone. You stayed behind, proof of your affection towards somebody as weak as I am right now? I doubt it. There is no present and no past. There's only the pain. Another blow comes quickly hitting me in the middle of the forehead. It leaves me blind for minutes on end. I no longer see you but I can feel your presence. There's no will, my body was deserted of any kind of will. I do not wish to go forward. I won't, I can't. There's another voice calling you, telling you that you must leave because there's somebody coming. I can hear your footsteps as you leave. I heard the fear in your steps. I had heard that voice before. I was sure of that. It was his voice. 'Time to teach those little fuckers a lesson!'

It was that voice. Pain is stronger than any voice. A voice under pain is easily remember. Inflict pain onto somebody and they will remember you for the rest of their lives. I will never forget that voice. And your warm saliva dripping on my face, that kiss you gave me. Pained and alone I stood there waiting for something to happen. I stood there, my mind empty, except for one thing. There was something that remained imprinted somewhere, at the back of my mind. I was waiting for the train and it was raining. My train hadn't arrived yet and I was on the platform sheltered by the concrete roof. On the opposite platform there were two boys, of the same age more or less. They were talking but I couldn't hear what they were saying so I limited myself at observing their movements. One of them seemed angry but the other one just stood there smiling at him, saying almost nothing except for some short answers. Their train was about to leave. I noticed that only one of them had to leave. The other had to stay behind. One of them got on the train but did not close the door and continued talking. The other one stayed on the platform and they both smiled and it was the most beautiful smile that I had ever seen. Then the other one got on and they were really close to each other, their faces almost touching, and they did nothing else. They just stood there looking at each other. And there was such nobility in the way they stood there on the steps of that train. The train started to move and the other one got off. The doors closed. I watched the other guy go away and I kept watching him until he disappeared around the corner. I kept thinking about them. They had become a place for an instant, a refuge, somewhere I could go back to.

'Was the discussion interesting enough for you?' Name asked Jim. 'I found it interesting enough', Jim replied, 'though some of the keynote speakers were not that great, some of them were really boring'. 'I agree', name replied. They had finally reached the bar and Name ordered two drinks, one for him and one for Jim. Name was short-haired. Everything about him seemed almost perfect, the way his hair was neatly cut, the way the collar of his shirt stood, held in place by the borders of his coat. When he smiled, his lips parted elegantly revealing a set of beautiful white teeth. 'I haven't seen you around the university, are you a student?' 'Used to be', Jim replied, 'I graduated a few years ago and I'm still on the mailing

list of the department, so I got an invitation to come here'. 'I see. Is the topic of any interest to you? Or you're here for the free drinks'. Not very elegant, Jim thought. 'Yes, I'm interested in the topic. I wrote a research paper on it some time ago'. I hope it's enough for you, Jim thought, he's one of those guys that thinks he could grab God by the foot. 'I see, but does it come out of a personal interest or is it just research?' 'Personal interest, I'm afraid'. Name seemed to relax for a moment. He looked even younger. 'Don't be afraid, there's nothing to be afraid of', he said. 'I have a personal interest in these matters too. I thought you were here for other things'. 'No,' Jim replied and thought of Paul for a fleeting moment. Where was he anyway?

That moment replayed in my mind for a number of times. It kept on going in circles and I kept wondering if the two guys would meet again. Will they kiss? There was clearly something between them. Even if there was nothing between them I still wanted them to be together. I wish we were like that right now. I'm dreaming inside of a dream. The pain has subsided but it has turned sharp. Nothing is happening and I keep thinking about the two guys in the train station. I wish I was there again. Take me there, take me back to that moment when you were waiting for me at the airport and I had to take you home. Take me back and make me feel the pleasure of that expectancy, I can taste that sweet anticipation on the tip of my tongue. I beg you, take me back.

Everyone was at their second drink by now, and the chatting and the flirting were working at full force. Jim and Name chose to sit on one of the red couches at the back wall. There was a fair distance between them and all the other people so that to permit them to have an intimate talk without being afraid of somebody eavesdropping and interfering in their talk. Jim was fairly comfortable by now and his first drink started to make its way to his brain, making him blush. 'You're a very nice guy', Name said, 'I like you, you're interesting'. Jim smiled the best he could. 'Thanks, I like you too'. And he did like him even though he felt a bit intoxicated. I can do this, he kept saying to himself. He did not lose Paul, Paul had lost him, and Paul had abandoned him. Fuck Paul and his old hag. Name came closer his perfume invading Jim's senses. He smelled of late nights and

tobacco, and of wood, and of all the fantasies and desires Jim had had till that very moment.

I wanted to make love to you all the time. Somehow it felt right because you were the peak of my fantasies. You said the same thing about me and, obviously, I believed you. Did you notice that things look beautiful and perfect only when projected into the future? Once you experience something that turns out to be perfect in the present that perfection will diminish with the passing of time. You're going to say I'm wrong, and that the perfection I'm talking about, on the contrary, will flourish with the passing of time. Remember your first kiss, you'd say. It will seem even more beautiful when you're about to die for instance. I gave my first kiss in the parking lot of a hospital. It won't get any better than that. I hope you hear this and realize the damage that you've done to me. I hope you'll realize that your arrogance and self-disdain stole something from me, and it was one of the most important things that a human being can have. I hope you'll see it one day just like I saw it, in the middle of the day, when the sun is up and the sky is clear, and you can see every detail, remember every detail from that day forth. When I woke up I was in a sort of hospital. And I couldn't speak. I couldn't say a word. Not one word. I don't know what time it is. I don't remember what time is. Have I been dreaming about time? Is there a notion of time in this room? The waves come again obliterating every trace of you and the pain you left behind.

People started leaving. Some still lingered close to the bar eating the remaining cakes. Jim and Name were still sitting on the red coach very close to each other. They were out of drinks but their conversation was still going on. Name lived alone in a very small suburban apartment. He said it wasn't much but he called it home and felt accordingly in it, and that was the most important thing. 'The important thing', Name went on saying, 'is to forget about everything else and just be happy'. 'I agree', Jim replied, 'but don't you find it too general? I mean, what about the specifics? What do you have to do in order to get to that happiness?' Name crossed his legs. A pensive gloom descended upon him. 'I guess you have to forget. Yes, you have to forget. Conflicts are not resolved in that way, naturally, but they are suspended. So I guess it is a sort of

solution'. Jim froze, his thoughts in midair. It felt like everything fell into place. Name was the right person at the right time. This is too good to be true, Jim thought. But it was good, so being true did not matter that much at that time. 'I have to go', Name said, 'I'm working tomorrow so I need to get a good night sleep'. 'Of course', Jim said, 'I understand'. There was a moment of silence and Jim and Name looked at each other for a while. 'Could I have your number, maybe we could meet some other time and continue this discussion? Or we could go to my place right now and continue our discussion there'. Oblivion had already started to make its way through Jim's veins. Jim refused to admit that it was the alcohol he just had. Maybe it wasn't the alcohol, maybe this was a genuine feeling that he was experiencing right now. So he had to make a choice between going home, sleeping in that cold bed Paul had made for Jim, his imperfect masterpiece, and going home with this guy, Name, who appeared to be at that time the reply to all of his questions. He had to forget and he was perfectly aware of the fact that he had to move on somehow. Paul won't come back. There wasn't a moment as clear as this one. So he chose Name. 'Let's go to your place, I promise I won't keep you up for long', Jim told name. Name smiles and chuckled. 'Of course, as you wish'. They both stood up at the same time. Jim had to fight the dizziness that suddenly came over him. 'Are you all right?' Name asked. 'Yes, I'm fine', Jim replied, 'I think I've a bit too much to drink tonight. It will come off once we're outside. I just need some fresh air'.

I'm thirsty. A voice in my head keeps repeating 'I don't know'. Like one of those songs that you wake up with in the morning going on and on in your head, and you can't stop it. There's nothing to look forward to today. I don't want to think about you, not anymore. I don't know, it's not me, I shouldn't be thinking about you. They've told me I should stop thinking about you. I don't know. It's not something I should do. I feel like it's something I shouldn't do. They tell me not to do it. I won't do it, I promised myself. There's only the thirst, its reality is so potent that it succeeds into making me forget about you. You're the other thirst, the rough. My monster, you're so beautiful. I can see it right now, frozen in midair. I thought I had lost you. The monster comes closer. He is even more beautiful that I thought of him before, now that he is closer. Its chitin

shell is flawless. My beautiful armor, my adrenaline, my love, he is holding me in his arms and I smile, and laugh like a child. There's lightning outside, and thunder, waves of electricity washing the vast empty fields of somebody else's mind. My mind is here, right now, in the arms of my beloved monster. Somehow my monster looks more human than you ever did, my love.

It was cold outside. The fresh air invaded Jim's lungs. He was right, the cold air would bring him to his feet. He was feeling much better, his senses turned on. It seemed that while they were discussing other matters inside it had been raining for a while and the streets were now wet. It stopped raining anyway and a strange smell of wet dust invaded the city. Everything was colored in black and yellow. Jim felt funny. They finally got inside the car. It was a sassy car, Jim thought. He could get used to it. Name seemed to be in a hurry. The car raced on the highway. Twenty minutes later they reached Name's place. Name's apartment was really small. Two people could barely live there. The kitchen was so small that you had to tell the other person standing inside that you had the intention to move into another direction. The main room had a small library, a TV set and a bed that could be transformed into a couch during the day. Everything seemed so small in the apartment. Jim stopped by the window and looked outside. 'You have a beautiful view', Jim said, 'the city looks brilliant from here. I've never seen it like this'. He could feel Name's hip touching his behind, and Name's breath warm on the back of his neck. Then he felt Name's lips slowly moving along the base of his neck. A tingling sensation came over him. Name's lips moved full of intent along his neck, then his jaw, the corner of his mouth, then the mouth, his teeth digging into his lips, then the tongue, thrusting forward meeting his, the salty taste of his mouth, Name's body pushing against him. You just have to let go, Jim thought. And he let go. Name moved slowly but with the confidence of somebody who knew how to do it. He unbuttoned his shirt and a new wave of perfume engulfed Jim. He took his shirt off too and their bodies touched for the first time. Jim was falling. And it was the first time and the last time.

I wonder why I did that. Somehow I remember only the things that make me feel bad about myself. There was that other guy I met. He was

the one who asked me out and so the next day we met and went for a coffee. He was quite nice, had a beautiful smile, and a sweater that said 'beautiful'. He liked to read books, trilogies mainly, and he kept staring at my hands. There was a sort of playfulness on his face, and he kept moving his tongue in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. Maybe he thought that he was sexy by doing that. Even the thought made me feel uncomfortable. Our whole date lasted for about four hours in which we talked nonsense and I spilled my coffee on my pants and shirt. Then we went for a walk and I didn't know what to say and I kept talking about useless things. And I felt bad about it. But I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay there thinking that he might like me in some way, seeing myself with him into a not so distant future. At one point he even walked faster than me probably to avoid being seen with me. I just assumed he wanted to show me something. He never did, naturally. And when I said that I have to go he told me that we'll keep in touch and that we'll see each other again. We never did, naturally. I contacted him the following days and he kept saying that he was busy and that he had some important matters to attend to. I kept hoping that we will see each other again, kiss even, if that was permitted. He stopped replying to my messages and at one point he disappeared. I was no longer able to send him messages or even call him.

They were both sweaty. Jim felt embarrassed to lay naked next to this stranger, because that's what Name was in the end, a stranger. 'You need to go', Name said, 'I can't have you here for the whole night. And I need to get up really early in the morning'. Such an asshole, Jim thought. He pulled his boxers on, then his jeans and his shirt. He was ashamed of himself and he could feel Name watching him from behind, smiling maybe, thinking what a fool he'd been this whole night. Besides the shame, Jim felt stupid. He had fallen for it again, fallen for somebody whose interests were clear from the very beginning, but he was afraid to face them, afraid to see them at face value. People couldn't be like that, Jim thought, people could not simply go away without saying anything or acting as if nothing had happened, they just couldn't. He refused to believe it and acted accordingly. Yet, here he was, confronted with the truth of the situation. 'It was nice seeing you', Jim said. 'Sure it was nice

seeing you too, we'll keep in touch'. Jim got out as soon as he could. It was a long descent and the stairs smelled like urine and cooked food, and he could hear people yawning and quarrelling. It was even colder. A cold wind swept the suburbs of the city. There was nobody around and the only thing he could hear were the distant sounds of the city. There were no buses after midnight so he had to walk the whole distance back home.

I have always thought that it was my fault. I took the blame for everything that happened in my life. Even when it wasn't entirely my fault I would take all the blame on me. Typical of somebody who has lived his entire life in the shadow of somebody else. I took the blame for our break up. It has always been my fault. I was the faulty one, I was the one with the problems, the one with the inferiority complex, the defect, the dark spot on the immaculate page, the mistake. You kept denying it, saying that it was not my fault. I refused to believe you. I still do, somehow, but I guess that you see it now, my part of the guilt. I still haven't said a word. The doctor encourages me to try and say something, but the thing is that I can't. There's a lump in my throat and I'm afraid I'll throw up if I say one word. I guess there's also another reason. There comes a time at the end of the story when the storyteller has to fall silent so that his listeners might get a glimpse of what the story was about by looking inside his silence opening like a gap at his feet. There was always something demonic about telling stories, something of an exorcism by which the storyteller kills the demons lingering inside. Those demons cannot stand the end of the story but rejoice in the actual story, so they dread the end. The demons are seduced and then pushed into that gap opened by the silence of the storyteller at the end on the story.

There were puddles everywhere. The rain did not come back that night, but it was cold, and Jim had a long way ahead of him. His muscles were tense, from the cold, and at one point he had to stop and try to relax his muscles because his back started to ache and it made him feel uncomfortable. The coat he had taken was too thin. He had underestimated the cold outside. Besides, he didn't think that he would have to walk all this way back to the house where he would find Paul's cold bed. It's funny, he thought at that point, he was going to sleep in Paul's bed, which in fact wasn't Paul's bed because Paul did not own it. Jim

was the owner, he had the certificate for it, vintage bed, exclusively made for him. In that bed Paul and Jim were together in a way. Such a paradox, Jim thought, a stupid paradox nonetheless, and Paul wouldn't care about it, he would just say something stupid and then fall back into his silence. Some of the streets were badly lit and sometimes Jim had to run because he was afraid that somebody might be following him. Every sound was threatening, even the bark of a distant dog startled him. But then, there was a guy following him. At first he thought that he might be overreacting but then as he kept on going he noticed that the guy made the same turns and took the same streets as he did. The guy was wearing a long coat. It's not even fitted properly, Jim thought, the shoulders of the coat were too low. It was too big for him. Jim changed course to see if the guy was still following him. He disappeared and for a moment Jim was content that he was just overreacting. But then, as he returned to the main street after a while the guy reappeared. And then another guy joined him. They were talking when Jim returned to the main street. Their voices seemed familiar somehow, but Jim tried to concentrate more on what was going on with them and whether they were actually following him. One of them came closer. 'Sorry to bother you', he said to Jim, 'do you happen to have a lighter?' Jim stopped and before he had the chance to turn around a heavy blow hit the back of his head. He fell on his knees numbed by the blow. He couldn't see and his ears were flooded with a hissing sound. He tried to touch the back of his head with his right hand but he didn't manage because a second blow came and it hit him in the upper back projecting him against the pavement. He felt the coldness of the pavement, and the water that invaded his right ear, and nose. He fell in a puddle. 'Is it him?' One of the voices echoed. There was a moment of silence. One of them came closer to check up on him and pushed him on the other side to have a clear look at Jim's face. 'It's him, that's the one.' This other voice echoed. Another voice forwarded the message to somebody who was waiting at a bigger distance, watching maybe what was going on. Other steps came closer, lots of them. There might have been five, or even six people that gathered around Jim. And the blows kept coming. They wouldn't stop, one after the other, and Jim tried to cover his face the best he could. Most of the blows came in specific parts of the body, as if they

were trained to do it. The pain echoed throughout Jim's body. It then transformed into a voice. A voice so familiar that Jim could have recognized it anytime. It was the voice of a man who liked to be silent most of the time, say stupid things. It was Paul. It was Paul's voice. Everyone backed off and the blows stopped coming for a while. Jim kept moving slowly, rocking his body back and forth with short movements as if he was trying to fall asleep. He knew that it was not the end. There was more to come. Paul pushed him and Jim's body protested against the push pulling his knees close to the chest. Then Paul kneeled by him and kissed him and everybody else laughed. And the Paul spat on him. 'You little cocksucker!' A voice echoed. Jim was lost and between staying conscious and letting himself go Jim chose the latter. There was silence. Not Paul's silence. There was another silence that Jim was not yet acquainted with. It was a dark silence. Jim liked it because it made the pain subside until it became close to nothing. A dark spot in an ocean of dark spots. His was not the only pain there. There were others. And some of them belonged to Jim.

An ocean of dismembered pains. The pain that I feel is doubled by the presence of dismembered pains. Dismembered pains are those pains that do not reveal their source. A pain with no cause and effect. A pain with no reasons to exist except its own presence. It's the pain that I feel when I wake up in the morning and I can't trace back its origins, so I struggle with it every time it comes because I cannot tame it like I do with all those other pains. Like the pain of losing you. I am perfectly capable of taming that sort of pain simply because I know where it comes from. Usually I manage to convince myself that you are gone now and that it was my fault. It makes me feel better. The waves are rare these days. Somehow I feel that their work is now complete. They've managed to place you somewhere at the back of my mind where one of my dismembered pains still lingers. Maybe you are that dismembered pain. Somehow the waves have managed to cancel that distinction between you and the pain to the point of confusion. You are the pain, the pain is you. I can't make out the difference, and every time I try to do that my head starts to hurt and I suddenly feel the urgency to just move on to something else that has been bothering my mind lately. Which is nothing.

You'd say that nothing is nothing at this point. Well, let me break it down for you, nothing is always something, just because there is a name for it, which means it exists, and it can change reality. It has definitely changed my reality. Nothing is found in between words, in between the things that you said and the reaction that your words triggered. The priest came in today. He was clearly rejoice when the doctor told him that I was going on the right path, towards getting well. The doctor also told the priest that I was one the verge of completely getting rid of my vices. I don't know what he meant by that but I guess it was something bad because the priest was clearly ecstatic about it. His face showed a sense of victory. He started talking to me the minute he sat in the brown armchair used for visitors, placed beside my bed. He talked about the usual things, about my family and about the fact that I had to carry on the name of my father and so on and so forth. I wanted to tell him that I don't want all that. That I won't carry the name of my father because he can carry his name by himself, that the line stops here at this end, that I won't carry the name like a cross on my back and then have children and make them carry that name. The line must stop here. I didn't tell him anything, obviously, because he wouldn't listen anyway and I would waste my breath on this guy. And then my words will become material for him, material to build things with, and I don't want that. In this dialogue he will always be the winner. Certain discourses are much stronger than others. My discourse is the weakest in this dichotomy. I will say only my thing, just this one thing, and he will have the rest of the world as an ally. Why would I fight against the rest of the world when I'm an invisible man, or the man that should not be seen, acknowledged even for the sake and welfare of all the others that are different than me? My wellbeing is not important in this equation. How can I explain it to this man that keeps going on and on about the importance of the family and the honor of having a name that is not just any name but it is the name that generations have carried on until this very moment? Of course, I'm the one that is too young, the one that does not understand how the world goes. Things need to be explained to me because otherwise the world won't make sense, and the world has to make sense. There is no other way. This man refuses to acknowledge the fact that once he was exactly in this same situation, that time has given

him the courage to say certain things. Time is not like that, I wanted to tell him. Time only gives you the illusion of having understood. It reinforces the things you already know by letting itself slide along your veins. Fascinated by it you forget that the world also moves on, it can only spin forward, and while it does, you, like a moth, stand hypnotized by the momentary power time had given you over things and you imagine yourself in control of everything just because one tiny slice of knowledge has been offered to you without you giving anything in return. Divine power, you'd call it, because knowledge does not come from failed experiments but from no experiments at all. You are the result of a change of habits, my dear father, the pollution of blood, pollution transformed into purity, the purity that shall pollute other veins by other changes of habit. I said nothing of that to him, obviously. Once his speech was finished he left. And the waves came again. I felt nothing except my muscles twitching and my body convulsing and the usual sound that came out of my throat, a voice no longer a voice but the howl of an animal. Thorns began to grow on my back. And they were black and pierced through the sheets and the mattress of my hospital bed. The doctor said he had not seen something like that before, it was a singular case and it needed to be studied further. I said nothing of it because then I would break my vow of silence. The thorns grew longer every day like fingernails do. The skin on my back hardened and in my dreams, my monster became more human. Its chitin shell turned softer like skin. He even had a human voice. A voice that resembled my voice. Not the howls that came out of my mouth.

There is a skeleton on the table. The doctors and the nurses are skeletons themselves, they circle around the bed like planets around the sun, pushed by some sort of mechanism that cannot be seen by the naked eye. The skeletons that are supposed to be nurses and doctors wear white garments. One could clearly see the red symbol on their garments. One of them writes something on a board. Their voices are like little drums singing along a rhythm that makes the sound seem like streams of words. Broken ribs, the skull is fractured. The skeletons stop then move in the opposite direction around the bed. One of the skeletons is crying. Big tears come out the empty eye sockets. Who is that skeleton? Mother? The crying skeleton comes closer. Everything is going to be all right, the

skeleton says. They're going to take good care of you. Jim woke up because of the pain. It made his skin turn into burning coal. One of the skeletons came closer and did something to him because the pain subsided slowly until it became memory. The body is so fragile in the absence of bones. My body is so fragile without you, Jim thought and this thought kept repeating until it became one giant loop. It was hypnotizing. Until it all went dark. What is it? Is it a word? Or just a sound? Somebody moved inside the room. Or was it a word? Sometimes sounds can make up for words, images even, images can make up for music, and they turn into rhythm. The light from the windows is like music. It is painful to the ears. Paul? Was it Paul just now, moving along the line of light coming from the window like a speck of dust? Jim could only remember his face then, when he knelt beside him and kissed him on the cheek and everyone laughed. The body changes its mind. At one point you can find love and affection, and then something changes, and there's hate. How could these things coexist? I am the skeleton on the table. My name is Jim. This is my story. The story of how I lost Paul. He has no story in this narrative that you are reading right now. Paul was the lost sheep, but now the sheep has found its shepherd. The shepherd sent his dogs at night. And they came, and followed the lost sheep, and killed it. Almost killed it. They crushed it. And the shepherd was content that the flock was back into formation. Those who are different are crushed because the shepherd is so full of himself that he won't admit the presence of difference. And the lost sheep wandered alone not because it felt different but because it found beauty in other things. The shepherd commanded them to see beauty in the grass and only in the grass, no exceptions. Sometimes the sheep ate a dark colored grass and their eyes turned dark. It was called the grass of the hedgehog. It was used by thieves to open intricate locks at night. The black grass did not open their hearts.

You don't understand. At least I think so. The things that you've done to me, they'll stay there, and I'm going to do them to other people. I'll take them to the same parking lot where you took me that night and tell them the same stories that you've told me, seduce them with a future that is never going to happen just because I can. I did not have your past but I had your future for a couple of months. Yet from your perspective I

guess I was the past already when you went home that night. I'm stuck in between your past and your future, the two places that you're never going to visit again because you know I'm there. And you can't come back to me, there is no turning back, and I can't top that. Should you come and visit me you won't be able to recognize me. My skin has hardened and the thorns have grown long and smart covering my entire back. I find it difficult to walk because the thorns have grown in such a way that if I try to stand up they cut into my hips. So I have to crawl in order to move from one place to the other. My monster can no longer be called a monster. It has beautiful blond hair, and a smile.

The skeletons gained full bodies and their voice was now clearly articulated. Jim woke up. The pain was still there, somewhere at the back of his thoughts, his muscles numbed by the assault. The pain is unreal, Jim thought. At least, that kind of pain is no longer real. The one that you can feel going through your bones and muscles. That one is unreal. It takes place nowhere in your body. The only real pain is knowing that it was Paul. He was there, and there were the others, and Paul did nothing to stop them. He won't go back there, he can't, not in that bed. The skeletons are back, their voice transformed. Every word multiplied by ten, a hundred, and every sentence goes round the Earth and back. Then the pain subsides to be replaced by darkness, then light, then darkness as if he was going through a tunnel and the sun kept barging in through the window.

I remember him quite well, the blond guy, we studied together when we were kids. I used to copy from his notebooks all the difficult problems that I wasn't able to resolve. He said nothing about it. He gave me his notebooks with a sort of boyish pride. I gave him peanuts in return. Two peanuts for each problem and if the problem was complex I had to give him three peanuts. I hated him sometimes because he was arrogant and sometimes I loved him because he took care of me when he was in the mood of doing that. And I liked that. I like people taking care of me. The thorns on my back contract and they send pain through my ribs. I'm transported back to that moment when we moved to another city and we promised that we will keep seeing each other. He went to a better high school and that mattered a lot, for him at least. We talked on the phone

and I had asked him out and he accepted. The next day I returned home from school eager to meet him. We even set a meeting place. I waited for him there and he didn't show up on time. I kept waiting. And then I saw him, on the other side of the street. He didn't even look up to see if I was there, he kept staring at his feet as he walked by. I wanted to say something but I never did because I was too afraid to lose him. An illusion is always better than nothing, I told myself and went back home. I was hoping that he might call me back and tell me that he was sorry, that he forgot, invent whatever reason just to make things better. I called him again a few weeks later. He answered the phone and asked me who I was. I hang up, I did not have the courage to say that it was me and that he had forgotten about our meeting. My skin gets harder. I can feel the chitin surfacing like oil on water. My thorns grow longer and stronger with every passing day. He used to laugh behind my back. A howl escapes my lips. The doctor says that maybe it would be better for me to recover at home. The house and my parents might do me some good during my recovery. Can you recover from this? I wonder if there are thorns growing on my heart.

Somebody brought him flowers, his favorites. Jim wonders if it was Paul. It couldn't be Paul, not after what he's done. Somebody else then, his mother maybe, his grandparents. Somebody knew about his favorite flowers, so it must have been someone close to him. The pain is gone now, the only thing bothering him are the bandages and the fact that he hasn't been able to take a good shower. The nurses usually washed him and he felt embarrassed about it because they had to strip him naked and then use wet sponges to clean him as softly as their hand permitted. Jim had always been a shy person especially when it came to girls touching him or even smiling at him. But he had to endure all that embarrassment because there was no way out. Jim understood that, so he had to step over his boyish pride and let the nurses to their job. He wasn't capable of doing that himself. Any effort brought immense pain inside his lungs. It was nothing of course. Nothing compared to what he felt inside his heart. Maybe it was Paul. He hoped it was Paul. Maybe he came back to apologize and say all those things that he, Jim, wanted to hear. Just to make things right. Just to make him feel better. Help him go through all

this pain. To tell him that he loved him and that it was wrong to do all that, to deny the obvious, deny that he was in love with Jim. Because he must have been in love. Jim couldn't see it in another way. Paul was probably thinking about him, right now, feeling sorry for what he had done. He will come and apologize for the dirty blanket and about the fact that he ran away that day when that strange figure appeared behind the tree. He will come. Jim was sure.

You came back once, in my dream. My other body tried to compensate for your absence by imagining scenarios in which you were included so that I won't feel alone when you weren't around. The body is never perfectly capable of doing that. It's so much lost in the idea that the syntax and the details always come out wrong. And of course you came out wrong, yet my nerves were so tense and longing for you that I fully accepted it and embraced you with all my affection while I was dreaming. It felt good while I was inside the dream. It felt like hell when I woke up. That's how I feel every morning I wake up in this hospital. There's no need for me to see anymore because I know by heart every corner of my room, every object that would stop me from moving forward. I know I can walk blindfolded around the hospital. I tried it one night when everybody else was sleeping and the lights were out. Even the nurses were sleeping. There was a cup of coffee where the nurses were sleeping. I drank the coffee and went out exploring. I went into the garden. There was nobody there. I could hear the sounds of the distant city. The city where you and I once lived. The thorns on my back have adapted so they don't bother me that much anymore. This body got used to them. This is the body that lost its mind. The body that cut the rope holding body and mind together. I sat on one of the benches where all of the recovering patients sit during the day to relax and watch the day pass right by them and as such acknowledge their incapacity for action. I forgot about myself for a while and I think I fell asleep because out of nowhere you were there, in all your glory.

Was it Paul? Jim asked all of the nurses that came to his bed. What does Paul look like? He failed to give an accurate description because Paul's memory started to fade. One of the nurses must have thought that he had lost his mind on the way. He is tall and muscular, he told them, and

he has really dark hair. He's the most beautiful boy on Earth. The nurses laughed. They thought that Jim had a little boy at home or even a boy that had died in an unfortunate incident and considering the fact that Jim was again under physical pressure they thought the pain was coming out again. So they just smiled to him and stroked his hair like mothers would do when children don't understand something. He even asked the nurses to move his bed so that he could have a wider view of the front yard and the entrance. That way he would be able to see him when he comes. When he fell asleep he would be furious with himself because he was supposed to sleep. Every time he woke up he would ask the nurses if somebody visited him while he was asleep. Of course, no one came and the nurses kept telling him that there will be a day when Paul would just walk right in carrying balloons and cookies, and flowers, and everything will be all right. The idea grew into him like a foreign body does where once a scar had been. Every day was the day, that day when Paul would come back.

You came back. My first thought was to tell you all those things that I've been preparing for this exact moment. That moment in which I would manage to show you all the suffering that you had inflicted upon me. And then I would show you my scars and the thorns that have grown on my back and you would kneel and ask for forgiveness. I would forgive you, of course, because the moment I saw you I forgot about everything. 'What are you doing here?' He asked. 'I'm sick', I told him, 'I need some time to get back on my feet. I'll be fine eventually'. 'Of course you will, just don't let them give you those pills, you don't need them, they're just bad for you, they'll make you feel worse than you already are'. I had no knowledge of the pills that had been administered to me during my stay in the hospital. 'What pills are you talking about?' You fall into your silence again as if something inside you has caught your attention. 'Are you seeing somebody else?' Your attention is back on me. 'Of course I'm not seeing somebody else. I only want you. I have a surprise for you'. There was something I've been meaning to tell you but I forgot and the more I try to recall it the more it slips away into the back of my mind. You always do that. I'm so desperate about having you that I would forget about

everything and just move on as if nothing happened. 'What kind of surprise?' 'You'll see, you just have to trust me'.

Paul called him and they talked, they finally talked and Paul said that he was sorry, and that he's going to make it up for it when Jim will be out of the hospital. Jim thought he was dreaming because everything seemed too good to be true. But it was real, Paul had called him. He said it out loud when the nurses came to check up on him. They asked him a couple of questions and that made him feel weird because it seemed like they couldn't believe him. He got angry. Because they did not believe him, and he said nothing but the truth. Paul had called him, and his voice had calmed all the pains and had closed all the scars. It wasn't just a dream, it was true. He couldn't stop thinking about it. The idea that he and Paul were getting back together occupied his mind entirely. He forgot about the wounds and about how Paul had humiliated him and almost killed him. All that faded in sight of the possibility of seeing Paul again, being with him, making love to him. He almost told himself that all that pain was worth it that the pleasure is going to be so much greater next time they meet. Paul had told him that he would call back in a couple of hours and Jim was counting the minutes. A few hours is a very vague reference but he believed that Paul was as anxious to see him, to hear his voice, as he himself was. Yet with each minute fear crept in, first like a whisper then like a scream. What if he won't call? He should have asked him where he was, what he was doing. He should have said more, begged him maybe, beg him to come back, even say that it was all Jim's fault, that Paul had nothing to do with the fact that he was hospitalized with a few broken ribs, maybe he was wrong, maybe that wasn't Paul at all. Silently but surely, a sort of mechanism was put into motion in Jim's mind. It wasn't Paul at all, a group of hooligans had robbed him, took his most precious belongings and beat him to death. That was it that was all, there was nothing more to it. He should have called the police the minute he was able to do it. He will let the nurses know first thing in the morning. The phone rang and everything stopped for a moment. His thoughts froze in midair.

You took my hand and you carried me along a path I did not know before. It led to a sort of spinney in which a house could be seen even from a great distance because the lights were on inside it and the night

was quite dark. I was a bit afraid because I was still a patient of that cursed hospital and the nurses might notice my absence and come looking after me, and I didn't like the idea of being found wandering around in the woods with you. Yet feeling your hand squeezing mine was something I did not want to miss and so I kept holding on to you like a child would hold on to an older brother or sister. It was a beautiful house, not like the one we had on the hill. This one was small and it had big windows and a porch in which I could read novels on hot summer night when sleep refused to come easily. We went in. The yellow light had a very strange effect because everything seemed to have an uncanny air of familiarity, as if I had been there before and this was merely a comeback after a very long vacation. You asked me to sit on the couch and make myself comfortable. When I sat down I realized that I was still wearing the hospital gown and I felt strangely naked and out of place looking at the flowery upholstery that the chairs and the armchairs had. You disappeared for a moment. For a second I thought you were a figment of my imagination because everything around was so silent and so perfect and you were gone, even for a second. You came back wearing that shirt I like so much, and your perfume was just like I remembered it, musk and something else, something that I was never able to pinpoint, something dark and mysterious, like every man should have. 'How are they treating you?' The nurses and the doctors came back, lined up beside the front porch. They were all looking at me. I was alarmed because they were there looking at me. And I was with you, and they told me I should forget you. 'There are the shocks. They hurt me. But this doctor here told me that they will do me some good'. You look at the doctor and a fleeting sadness goes across your face like a shadow. 'Do you some good regarding what?' I was never informed about the specifics of my stay in the hospital. I just assumed I was sick. Because they told me so. And I don't question what the doctors and the nurses say. What is exactly my sickness? I'm suddenly very cold. I think I've been sleeping for a while. I fell asleep on the bench at one point, I imagine. I wonder who brought me back from that house with the front porch. It was you. I'm sure of it. I imagine myself in your arms being carried through the forest in the middle

of the night. I head back to my room. Everybody is still asleep. Even the nurses that should be awake at this time of the night.

It was him. Paul. It was Paul. Jim felt a lump in his throat when he heard Paul's voice. It was even more beautiful than he had imagined it, for so many times he had imagined it. He was at home working on one of his masterpieces. This one was for somebody special, he said. Jim imagined he was actually doing a bed for him. A bed for both of them actually, where they could sleep together and make love and wake up in the morning next to each other. And Jim would prepare some breakfast for Paul and they would have coffee together. And then they would say goodbye to each other. Paul would go to his workshop and work on his masterpieces while Jim would stay at home, clean the house, prepare some lunch and then some dinner. And when time came they would go to bed together and read books in bed before going to sleep, and make love. Paul kept talking his voice soft, softer than how Jim remembered it. And when Paul stopped talking other voices could be heard. As Jim listened, Paul's voice kept dividing and turning into other voices. At times, Jim thought that Paul's voice was actually a mixture of many other voices that spoke at the same time and some exterior force made them sound like Paul's voice. But Jim did not mind as long as it sounded like Paul's voice and presumably as long as there was a sort of Paul at the other end of the line. He said he'll stop by to say hello and bring some get-well-soon gifts. He doesn't know exactly when, but he will stop by for sure. Jim said it was all right. He could stop whenever he wanted as long as they met and talked about everything that had happened to them in the past days. That night, Jim talked in his sleep. The nurses told him. They told him that he was talking to somebody else. To a guy named Paul.

The next day I woke up tied to the bed as I was carried to another room, that room where the waves come. There is a sort of music to them. First, there is a sort of disturbance in the air and they come, one by one they slip under your skin and they play around like some kids that do not know what game they're playing because they can't decide which one is better. I try to suppress the tears and imagine myself apologizing to you. I saw you today. And all of those pains that had been numbed by your absence were revived right there, on the spot, in the middle of the street

where I was standing. You didn't say anything and because of that you said so much. I send the waves in your direction. They make me do it. The electricity flows towards you and all I could do is watch how your body convulses and falls to the floor and then stands up again like in a dance. I can see that you're in pain but my will is not strong enough in this room. The leather straps dig into my flesh as I try to save you. One of the nurses pushes me against the bed and another wave comes. All barriers go down.

Another day went by and Jim felt desperation building up inside him. He had asked each and every nurse about the tall and muscular guy that was supposed to visit him. Nobody saw him, not even the gatekeeper who sees each and every person going in and out of the hospital. Paul was late again, Jim thought. He used to do that every time they met under the bushes. Jim was the first to come. Paul would come only later blaming his work or his grandmother. Jim accepted everything as long as they had their moment together. But still, he did not come and every possible fear crept inside his guts and every pain that once had been forgotten came back in full force, torturing him. Even those that had nothing to do with Paul and their relationship. All of those memories in which he had suffered or felt afraid were once again relived one by one, each word heard in high volume, each physical pain multiplied by ten. The sky was caving in. Jim felt as if he was the loneliest person on earth. While his desperation increased time seemed to flow slower each second like a knife turning in his wounds. The night came and Jim prayed that sleep would come and take him away somewhere else, where all these pains would just disappear and no knowledge of them would be left behind. Yet sleep did not come because Jim's mind was so occupied with building up scenarios, trying to explain himself why Paul did not come, that there was no room left for sleep. He tried his old trick. Not counting sheep but imagining his mind as an endless corridor in which all the doors are opened. One by one he would close the doors and imagine that each door stood for one thought and one thought only. With every closed door his thoughts would close and eventually disappear. Yet now, the more he tried the less he managed to close all the doors. Some of them would open after they were closed. Behind every door there was Paul.

I'm sitting on the front steps of our house. Not the red house, the one on top of the hill. This other house, with the front porch and the flowery upholstery. The sun is setting and the light is just perfect. This hour is perfect because every object that I see around me appears to be charmed and even too beautiful to be real. I don't want to go back though. There's too much pain in there, inside the hospital where the nurses push my body against the mattress and it gets difficult to breathe. But most of all, I'm afraid that there will come a time when my imagination will not be able to create you anymore because the details relating to you though vivid and almost real will cause only pain. And I will know that that particular pain was induced by somebody else. My body would never reject you in that way despite all the harm that you've done to me. Even the air is perfect here. There's a sort of flower growing nearby and its perfume comes out only during evenings like these when the sun is down. This is our place. Far from the crowd, far from the city. Yet I still feel that we are making a sort of compromise. It's like we are returning from a place that disappointed us deeply. We're like Sisyphus descending from the mountain disappointed by the fact that once again the rock had fallen down and needs to be taken up again. But we're smiling while we're at it. And the sunset helps us. It's like some sort of therapy because I can feel that it does some good. I haven't seen you inside this scenery yet but somehow I know that you are there, somewhere inside the house. I also know that there's something behind the house, something I should not see. At least that is what you've told me. That I shouldn't go behind the house because the sight would be horrifying and my nerves could not stand the pressure. Like all forbidden things it makes me want to see it even more. I will go behind the house at one point just to prove to myself that I always tend to exaggerate when it comes to this kind of things.

Jim woke up. It was still dark. The phone was ringing. There was no number and no called id displayed. It's Paul, Jim immediately thought, it must be him, there's no doubt about it. He pressed the button and said hello his temples throbbing at the thought that it was Paul. At first, he didn't hear anything and he thought that maybe the connection had been lost. But then, as he stood listening a number of voices were heard. He couldn't make out what they were saying because they all spoke at once,

talking about different things, at least that is what Jim assumed. The voice kept on going for a while and he said hello again wondering whether they could hear him as he heard them. They stopped as if to listen what Jim had to say. Then resumed their chatter and in between them Jim could hear Paul's voice, crescent and soothing, until he finally could make out what he was saying. Jim wanted to say something but the voice did not stop despite the signals that he kept sending to warn his interlocutor that he intended to do that. It didn't seem like Paul at all. It was like he was listening to a robot with a prerecorded voice whose tone was monotonous and lacked the features that would make it even seem remotely human. It was more like a series of clicks that occurred at such a speed as to make it sound like language. Click and the message would start all over again. Our design was lost, it said, when we all got off the ark. Noah was tired of us so he pushed us even before the flood was gone. The flood waters had not yet subsided. His pigeon pet had not yet returned to the ark. He told his god that he had nothing to do with it, and that we had thrown ourselves overboard because we could no longer stand the thirst and the hunger. There was fear of mutiny among the animals. We were one with the animals and we sang strange songs. Noah was an example of tolerance and we liked that about him. We went to him, he didn't come to us. The other animals had pushed us overboard. One night we made love and they watched us and nobody said nothing. But the next day none of them had the courage to look at us. They all turned their faces towards the sun as if the sun was telling them something and we were excluded because we couldn't hear what the sun was saying. We felt excluded so we left, hid in the intricate labyrinth of the ark. That night, they came to us while we were sleeping and threw us overboard. Since then we've been dreaming about getting back together. And we did get back together. But they came back because they saw us making love again. And they showed us our baby, that deformity, our monster, the design that was lost. They are now coming after you. There was the click again. And the message started over. Jim listened to it three times just to make sure that there was no difference between the messages. There was no difference between them, even the voice was the same which further proved that it was a prerecorded message of some sort. Jim tried to call Paul's name a couple

of times but the voice didn't even stop. It kept on going, repeating the same message until Jim switched off his phone.

I'm back in my hospital room. I wonder who brought me back from the house. It means that the house is not very far away from the hospital. If it is then whoever has been carrying me back up until now has made consistent effort in order to do that. My limbs feel light as if I've lost weight all of a sudden. There's a strange comfort in that. The sheets leave a pleasant sensation on my skin. Yet I feel like there is something wrong. As I look at the ceiling I have the strange feeling that I've been here before or that I didn't even leave this place and all that's been happening in between was only a figment of my imagination. I never left with you the other time. That time we left the hospital together never happened. It couldn't have happened. You have been the cause of my illness and the result of a treatment. You've been the ghost of my treatment. The treatment failed because you're still there behind one of the doors that the medicine had tried to keep closed. You're my beautiful abomination.

Sleep came fast enough. Jim felt as if he had instantly fallen asleep. As if five minutes had passed since he talked to Paul, or that voice that was presumably Paul's. The sun was up now and the light flooded the room. Jim felt a throbbing pain at the back of his eyeballs when morning light swept over him. Yet what was more painful was the memory of what had happened the previous night. It was obvious to Jim that maybe Paul was playing some sort of game meant to scare him or trigger some sort of reaction, any reaction. It annoyed him slightly even though the idea of playing a game was not something he disagreed with. Some fun was needed around the hospital in those dull days when his daily routine implied taking a shower, eating, and taking some pills that tasted like the unhappiest moment of your entire life. What annoyed him was the complexity of the game. It was a riddle apparently, Jim thought. It had to be a riddle, or some sort of parable that involves deciphering the symbols and finally reaching the solution which, though at first complicated, finally turned out to be right under their noses. Yet, Paul wouldn't think of having this kind of fun. Besides working with wood his knowledge was quite short. Jim always thought that Paul was a bit of an ignorant because he showed no interest in other things other than wood and how to work with it. Once

Jim had suggested him a book and Paul said that he was going to read it at one point. Then he pretended that he hadn't even heard about it when Jim repeated the suggestion. Jim dropped it because he knew that with Paul there was no sense in going into that direction. His mind was surprisingly clear about that. About everything. The phone rang. It was Paul. He was sure about that because the caller's id was displayed clearly on the screen. Paul's voice come through the speakers immediately after Jim had pressed the button. It was his voice, smooth and pleasant, just like Jim remembered it. He started talking about the fact that he had a lot of orders lately and he's almost always in his shop working. He kept on talking as if he was afraid to let Jim say something. Jim said only a few words, and most of them were yes and no, and all right. He agreed to whatever Paul was saying because Paul had that effect on him. Of course, Paul had promised that he would come one day and visit him in the hospital or whatever that place was. And he would bring chocolate and some other gifts that he had already bought from the city when he went to buy some things for the workshop. Jim didn't even have the chance to ask him about that prank call or whatever that was. They just said goodbye to each other and that was it. Paul hung up the phone. And Jim just stood there not knowing what to do or what to say. He had to be patient, he told himself, and Paul was someone who needed patience.

Crumpled paper. That's how my body feels like after the waves. They no longer have an effect on me, I guess. My body got used to them. This is cause for concern among the doctors and the nurses, I overheard them talking about it the other day. They said that a higher voltage might be needed to obtain some sort of effect. There's no talk about the thorns though. I wonder why that is. They're visible enough. I wanted to remind them of my thorns but I made a vow of silence to myself. Every time I want to say something words seem to be turning against me like boomerangs. I want to push them outside but somehow they manage to get back inside and launch themselves against the wall of my brain. My limbs have been growing limbs on the inside. I now have four hands and four legs. Two hands on the outside, and two hands on the inside. The same for the legs. I will grow a brain inside my brain. My other body shall move through the density of this body, the one that you held in your arms,

and it will breathe blood instead of air. The body inside my body is very different from the one that you see. Of course, it is more beautiful. You've had your say into this. That body is a faceless body. I left some room for creativity as I always do. You'll be able to fill in the blanks, put the face that you wanted me to have all along. Maybe it is the body that you always wanted me to have. I'm sure that it is the body that I always wanted me to have. The one that I almost sold my soul for. I would go outside at midnight and pray to the devil. I asked him to give me beauty in return of my soul. He never replied, naturally. I eventually gave up. My other body, growing inside my guts, is not as transparent as this one. It won't change its colors according to the environment I find myself in. At one point this body will fall off, the thorns will dry and they will fall off too, just like the rose dries and lets its petals fall on the ground. This body is not like the body of a rose. This body is more like that of a serpent. Its skin is made of scales. It will fall off at one point, when the time is ripe. You are the idea that occupies the mind, the idea that transforms itself into a physical state.

Like in a dream, Jim heard the phone ringing. It was still dark. The caller's id wasn't displayed and Jim hesitated picking up. But then he thought that he would hear Paul's voice and that was the most pleasant thing in the world. There was nobody at the other end at first. Then the many voices started talking again. But Paul's voice came immediately after and it was no longer repeating the same story. Why did you leave? Jim didn't say anything because he thought that the question wasn't addressed to him. He thought it was a prerecorded message again. The question was repeated on a different tone. Why did you leave? Because I thought I had lost you, Jim replied. You were the one that ran away. That time when we were hiding in the bushes and you said that there was somebody watching us. You were the one that ran away. Would you like to talk about it? Jim didn't reply. The question was repeated on a different tone. No, said Jim, I prefer not to talk about it. Then there was another voice. Why don't you want to talk about it? I would like to know. Who is this? Jim's voice came out in a strange way. Who is this? Nobody replied. The many voice started talking again. It was as if Jim eavesdropped on the conversations that were going on in the rest of the world. A conversation

came into focus. It wasn't a conversation between two people because Jim couldn't hear a second voice responding. It was probably another prerecorded message. Our design was lost, the voice went on as it came into focus, and the glitch in our DNA could not be replicated. A glitch in the present triggers a massive change in the future. Our design was lost. There was a long pause and Jim thought that the connection was lost. The voice came back. Until it was found by somebody. And it was found by the wrong person. He was a serpent and our design was engraved on his scales. He found our designs by mistake. One morning while he was wandering about a certain garden that everyone knows about. He went over them and they remained engraved on his skin. And the first two people from the famous garden saw it. But they ignored it because it did not make sense to them. Their design was inherently different from our design. The design was lost again when the serpent shed his skin. Then somebody stole the skin because the design looked familiar to him. He had been hiding in that famous garden that everybody knows about. Nobody knew about him. He watched the other two humans who were happy together and he was the only one who did not have somebody to love. He hid in the luxurious vegetation and cried every day because he had been cursed to live the rest of his days alone. Then one day he found the design beautifully written on the skin of the serpent. He hid the skin in the cave where he had been living. Every night he would look at it, stroke the lines with his fingers. It was the only thing that gave him hope. When he went to sleep he would wrap himself with the serpent's skin. The voice stopped talking and all the other voices came in. Jim hung up. He went to sleep.

Another patient was brought in my room this morning. The nurses say it's only a temporary solution because the hospital was again flooded with amnesiacs. This hospital is placed at the edge of the world. No wonder amnesiacs are brought here. This place will never help them in recovering their memories. Amnesiacs are brought here to be demolished and the doctors think that meanwhile their memories might just come out. He hasn't said a word up until now. I'm not talking either so we're good mates, I guess. The nurses might have concocted some sort of scenario here. Two guys not talking to each other, one of them almost recovered

the other one just brought in, terrified by the task at hand, finding a pattern in that endless ocean of objects collected from previous memories. He seems lost, at least when I look at him, and that doesn't happen pretty often. I don't want to invade his personal space. And he seems to be thinking the same because he keeps staring at his hands. Memories don't have hands, unfortunately, I wanted to tell him. I was already imagining his reaction. He would smile probably. And that's it. I wonder if he remembers how to speak. His amnesia might have hit only some parts of memory. Maybe that's why he maintains his silence. The nurses don't know his real name. When he was brought in the nurses did a background check and they found nothing about him. Eventually he was asked to give his name. Pretend my name is Jim, he said to the nurses. And so the nurses pretended that his name was Jim and called him Jim. He might be twenty-something. Late twenties anyway. He had lost that innocence that can be read on the skin of those in their early twenties. There was a strange maturity about him, in the way he sat on his bed and in the way he kept his hands. His movements were educated, trained, as if the things surrounding him were of such fragility that he was afraid to break them with a touch. I looked around me. Maybe things were after all fragile and only one touch might mar their beauty. I wonder what he thinks of my thorns and my appearance. I mustn't be very pleasant to look at. I don't care anyway.

Jim had been moved to another room of the hospital. Another guy was already inside. He was told that it was a temporary solution because of all those amnesiacs. A strange thing, Jim thought. It seemed as if there was an epidemic, there were more and more cases of amnesia. It was cause for concern, of course. He wasn't one of them, he hadn't lost his memory. He was only brought into the hospital because he was almost beaten to death by a pack of hooligans who had stolen his belongings and left him there hanging on the edges of life itself. The other guy seemed nice enough. He's been staring at him for a while now as if trying to make out what he was thinking. Jim felt uncomfortable but never said anything about it. That's how Jim worked. He would endure patiently any type of pain without saying anything. Just to avoid people hating him. He hated himself enough, he didn't need more hate coming from all directions. The

other guy was silent too which was a good thing. Jim wasn't very talkative either, especially when it came to strangers. There was nothing wrong with him except the fact that a sort of desperation could be read on his face, paranoia maybe. His movements were slow and there seemed to be no sense in them, as if he was doing things just for the sake of doing them. He moved his pillow for about five times since Jim came into the room. Paul hadn't called. He was playing his game again. A game of hide and seek. In a way Jim liked it. Because it made him miss Paul even more. And the happiness was even greater when he heard his voice. Darkness swept over the windows and sleep came like a purring cat, slowly but surely, full of intent, alluring like the songs of mermaids. Another day without Paul, Jim thought, but a day closer to the moment in which they will see each other again. Time passes quickly, Paul kept saying that every time they talked on the phone.

The body descends slowly, sinks into sleep. It's like an elevator ride, it catches speed until speed itself becomes a non-speed, a denial of speed. The body feels the descent but the doors are closed and the eyes can't detect any movement. Where non-speed begins that is where the absence of sleep ends. That is when you feel like falling. The body synchronizes with the downward movement of the elevator and it closes down. There is a voice that fills the room. I'm not sure if I've fallen asleep yet. It feels as if I've just closed my eyes and opened them again, minutes later. The voice is very strange like it is coming from an electronic device. It's coming from the other bed. The guy that the nurses call Jim is standing in an unusual position his body contorted in a strange way. His upper body seems to be cradling something while the insides of his feet are turned upwards. It looks painful. One day, the voice went on saying, one day he couldn't stand the solitude anymore and went to ask for help. He approached the only two people that lived in that famous garden. They smiled when he came closer and they told him that they will help him because he too was one of the creatures that god had created. He was very happy because finally the design would be once again revived and he would no longer live alone. He would have a mate like all the other creatures that lived in the garden. Then he told them about the design that was lost and that needed to be revived in order to be preserved. They

all went to the god that had created the famous garden and all the creatures that lived in it. And that god was happy to see all of them until the serpent's skin was shown. At that time their creator became furious. He took the design and burned it. All of them were scared because their god was so furious. And so, the design was lost. There's no need to look for it anymore. Stop searching for it. As soon as the voice stopped talking Jim's body resume its position in bed and fell into a deep sleep. His breath was almost inaudible. I wonder what was all that about. He kept repeating the word design, a design that was lost and then found, and then destroyed. For good apparently. But the story in itself was not strange, it was the way it was told that most disturbed me. Jim's figure contorted in that way like he was made of rubber.

Jim woke up in a pool of sweat. It must have been a rough night, he thought. Paul hadn't called but they called again, last night, Jim had heard them again. The story of the lost design kept on going in Jim's mind. Who was this man, beast, or whatever it might be, who had found the lost design and tried to revive it? But this wasn't what had struck Jim in that whole discourse about the designs and a certain god and the famous garden everybody knows about. What struck him was the fact that at the end of last night's storytelling the voice had told him that he should stop searching for it because it was destroyed and it cannot be revived. Whatever the design was Jim did not know anything about. Consequently he couldn't have been searching for it. One cannot search for something that one does not know. The very word, search, implies the presence of something, an object, that had been lost and now it needs to be found. Searching includes a purpose. While in Jim's case there was no purpose because he had absolutely no idea about the designs the story was talking about. Yet, the very fact that the voice explicitly told him that he should stop searching made him want to understand the matter even further. He felt like he had to understand the existence of these designs, he felt like he had a duty to perform. His thoughts were put on hold by his phone ringing. It was Paul, the caller's id was displayed. Jim let it ring twice so as not to seem too desperate. While he did that he hoped only that Paul will keep on calling. He pushed the green button. Paul's voice came through the speaker and it was just like Jim expected it to be, soothing and full of

love, like it had never been while they were together. Paul apologized again for not paying him a visit and he promised once again that he will stop by one of those days and bring him that promised chocolate. He had made another bed for the mayor's daughter who was getting married and she needed a bed as soon as possible. So he had to work day and night to finish that bed, and it was marvelous. The mayor's daughter was ecstatic about it. Even the mayor stopped by to check up on him. For a moment, Jim felt like the happiest man on earth, that is if hearing the voice of the one person you love the most is a unit of measure for one's happiness. Jim couldn't want for more. Sharing Paul's happiness was the epitome of his own happiness. Of course, the thought had crossed his mind, that it was too good to be true. The thought came and went, so Jim chose to ignore it and throw it behind one of the doors that stood at the back of his mind. In such happiness, Jim thought, one could not even imagine such nonsense. It wasn't too good to be true, that was reality. Paul came back to him, and that was the most important thing. And nothing could ruin that for him. Comparing the reality of Paul's indirect presence and the presence of that thought, Paul was the easiest choice because Paul was his childhood friend, his hopes and fears all in one person. Paul wasn't a human being in the true sense of the word, if there is a true sense for any word, he was rather a bundle of feelings poured into a human shape. He wasn't an animal either, Jim dismissed the idea immediately because of its ridiculousness. Paul wasn't pure instinct, there was a rationality even in the way he moved, the way his entire body moved, and the way his eyes moved. Everything seemed to be the result of a long train of thoughts. Even a simple smile. Then Paul's voice started to fade out as if Paul was slowly getting away from the phone. It even disappeared at one point and Jim thought that the connection was lost. But then came another voice and Jim couldn't make out what it was saying. There was a click and the connection was lost. Jim sank in his pillow.

I went to that house again last night. Actually, it would be inaccurate to say that I went there because I didn't go there by my own will. I remember going into the garden during the night as I always do and sitting on that bench behind the trees. Then I remember waking up in that house. The pillows on the couch were really soft. The kind my

grandmother used to have in her house, big and full of goose feathers. They were not very anatomical since practically half of your body ended up on the pillow because of its size. Still, they were comfortable enough, especially in the morning when I had to go to school and I always wanted five more minutes. These pillows were similar to those except for the fact that they felt like they were worn out and the stuffing was overused. But they were comfortable enough. I knew I was in that house because of the smell and the flowery upholstery. The sun was up already. It felt like the evening was close. I stood up, still wearing my hospital robe, and went to the door and see if you were on the porch. You weren't there, and for a moment the idea of going around the house and search for you crossed my mind. I was halfway there when I remembered that you told me not to go at the back of the house because there is something there that I should not. So I did not go further and ran back into the house. The woods surrounding the house felt strangely threatening. I think I had even heard a sort of howl, like those made by wolves in solitary places. I closed the door and quickly went into the main room. I sat on the couch and thought of looking around the room in the hope of finding something interesting to do in your absence. The sky was growing dark. It felt like one of those winter evenings when the day is getting shorter every day so you have to switch on the lights earlier during the day. I was wondering where you were when the front door fell to the ground. My heart was pounding and I ran outside to see who it was. There was nobody there except for the darkness that was now unwinding in full force. It was just moments away that the sun was up and shining and now it was completely dark. I ran back into the house because the howl was now closer and I feared that some animal might attack. The front door had disappeared so I ran back into the main room of the house and closed the door. I switched on the lights and sat on the couch. I had the uncanny feeling that somebody was watching me and I looked outside the window. There was nobody there. Fear started to creep into my guts. I could feel my heart beating in my throat. What was the meaning of that? The howling and the disappearance of the front door. It was like the house was being demolished piece by piece. Who knows what other parts of the house were now taken away by some invisible hands. Everything was silent. I

wrapped myself into the blanket that was on the couch. It was warm and the pillows reminded me of my childhood years, and I thought I might just close my eyes for a moment. The next thing I know is that I'm back in my hospital bed, sleeping. Somebody must have brought me back from the house.

Jim woke up because he felt that there was somebody in the room. Like in a dream he had heard the sound of steps approaching in the hallway, then the door opening slowly so as to not wake him up. Three nurses came in followed by one of the doctors he had seen checking up on the other guy in the room. They seemed to be carrying a body but as the lights from the lobby crossed the room Jim realized that it was actually the other guy that they were carrying. He was not moving. His body seemed lifeless. They put him back in bed while the doctor kept on writing something into his notebook. They were whispering something to each other but Jim couldn't make out what they were saying, except for a few words that recurred. They were talking about some sort of treatment that did not show any results and that it needed to be changed. A change in the strategy of the treatment. They tied him to the bed with leather belts. He wasn't dead after all, he was just in a deep trance, or so it seemed. Then they left and Jim remained there in silence watching that guy who was probably lost in his own world somewhere, in a reality different than the reality of the hospital, a reality that he himself wanted to escape as soon as possible. Because that meant getting back with Paul, and even entertaining the idea of sharing a bed with him, that particular bed, the one that Paul had made with his own hands. Sleep came back and it had Paul's voice, mellifluous and soothing, like a mermaid's call. Jim got lost. And it was only for a few moments because the phone rang. No caller id was displayed. It's that storyteller again, Jim thought his mind still numbed by sleep. He pressed the green button. Only one voice was heard clearly, and it wasn't Paul's voice. It was a woman's voice. Jim thought of his mother. It wasn't her, the voice was too low. Why won't you try? The voice said. Why won't you just try and forget about that design? Let it rot where it has been thrown, leave it there and the rest of the world shall be thankful to you. Let the world flourish, multiply, go to the ends of the earth and back. Undo your love, unsee all of those things that you've

seen. Undo your childhood. Erase the design out of your mind. Go back, there is no future for you. Look at the sky and the stars instead. Aren't they beautiful? Eat dirt, find your love somewhere and if you can't find it somewhere else then stop searching for it. It means that you are not made for it. The design you were built for it was a faulty design. Accept the faulty design because the faulty design is you destiny. You destiny is written in your voice, in the way you walk, in the way you talk, in the way you feel for the others. Live within the faulty design until a cure is found. If we could align all of you up against a wall and demolish you we would, we have the power, but that would only change us, and the way we perceive each other. We are not prepared to accept something like that because our design is perfect. Our destiny is written in the design that we follow. Since your design is the faulty one it is your design that is supposed to vanish for the sake of the rest of mankind. You are not like us as we are not like you. We will come for you. The voice stopped but the connection was still on because Jim could hear noises coming through the speaker. Then the connection went off.

Waiting feels like going backwards, in the wrong direction. I cannot move against it there is some sort of gravity which is holding me down. I cannot raise my arms and fight against it. I cannot run. I'm in the limbo of my mind where I've thrown all of those things that were deemed to be unnecessary, the things that no longer came actualized by necessity and they turned into concrete. That is why the mind turns heavy at one point. The limbo occupies more space than heaven or hell. There is something pressing against my abdomen and I cannot move. When I open my eyes and raise my head to see the rest of my body I can see that it is made of concrete and only my neck and head are free. My lungs are made of stone. I can barely breathe, my heart is sending little stones through my veins. I can rotate my arms but I cannot raise them. This is how the ending must feel like, being unable to run away from an approaching finish where all things stop and everything makes sense because there is no future to refer to, there is no hope for the better and as such anything goes. The past is so much better because in the past I could move. I could move and touch you, my salvation. I could just reach out and take you by the hand, at least in my mind. We are born free, our body made out of

flexible matter that could stretch and grow and desire things, yet, as we stretch that matter becomes less flexible with every passing day and they build this body of cement for us. And we wear it like a wedding dress. They all smile at the thought and wish you all the best because you've grown inside their expectations. They don't live with you anymore and they pretend that the concrete limbs that they've created for you are actually a part of you. And you live like a lost lover. The one who initially fell in love with someone but then you had to trade that someone for somebody else because everything was beautiful and perfect in your mind but your mind is different than all the other minds. So you had to give up. And some senseless voice in your mind told you that you can be happy otherwise, and that's the biggest mistake that you could've made. Because every second of the rest of your life you're going to be thinking about that someone you had to trade for somebody else. And one side of your heart is going to turn dark red, and then black, and it's going to be the one place in your heart where you'll refuse to go back until you see that someone again and you'll wonder why you did what you did. And for a second you go back to that place in your heart and you realize that everything that has been going on up until then was just you trying to live up to that first love. And it is never enough because when you were together something happened. Something happened even before that. Something had happened even before that, the doctor tells me, and we have to fight against that and not against you. You're just the result of something else. He asked me about my childhood and my relationship with my father. We were very close. Sometimes, when we watched TV I would put my head on his shoulder and watch TV from there. And when he came back from work most of the times he was drunk. And I would hide in the storage room where it was dark and cold. My grandfather would call him a pig and that single word hurt, and it hurt badly. My mother's lips would turn purple and when nobody saw her she would cry because my father had told her that there were no flowers and it was her birthday, and he was drunk. I hated him for that and I wanted to say something to my mother but I didn't know what to say. But back then things were easily forgotten. Is there something else? The doctor asked me after writing

something in his notebook. Is there something else that you think might have been traumatic in your life?

Jim was little back then, he couldn't remember his exact age, and he was too little to be aware of his age and the things that that age implied. It was a hot afternoon. His parents and grandparents were working in the attic, and he and his uncle were having their afternoon sleep. There was something in Jim's uncle eyes and Jim was fascinated. They started touching. Jim felt protected by his uncle's maturity, his masculinity, and that thing in his eyes that spelled lust and power. At that time his uncle was still young, he was about thirteen years older than Jim. Then Jim slipped his hand under his uncle's trousers to feel his cock and as he did that he felt his uncle's cock hardening under his touch. He kept on going until his uncle took it out and asked him to go up and down. He even showed Jim how to do it. Then they went to the other house because they were afraid that somebody might see them doing that kind of thing. They went into one of the back rooms so they could hear if someone came in and stop doing it before being seen. Jim's uncle pulled his trousers down. His cock was still hard when he did that and Jim started moving his hand up and down until his uncle's breathing became rapid and intense. Then his uncle asked him to stop and left. Jim went out. A storm was coming and his mother asked him to bring the animals into the shelter. Jim did nothing but stare at the heavy sky. The sky was divided in two. It looked like a belly that was cut in half. It looked like a deserted womb.

Then there was that friend of mine. We went to school together and I used to think he was my cousin. Later I found out that he wasn't in fact my cousin. We were related somehow, remotely, through grandmothers and grandfathers. We spent most summer afternoons together and once we were playing, and he was the father and I was the mother because I liked to dress up as a girl back then. He would come back from work and we would make love on the floor because the bed at that time seemed like a sacred space and we didn't dare to do that there. The bed was too visible somehow and we were embarrassed about ourselves and what we were pretending to be doing. I would pull my trousers down and he would climb on top of me. And he would move rhythmically until he got tired of it and we would play another game. The doctor took everything down. He

didn't say anything. I expected some sort of reaction but he remained unmoved by my narrative. The past is the gateway to somebody else's mind. Once it has been opened things start to come out one by one until the whole story is told. When that happens, and the storyteller has reached the end of his narrative he will find himself searching for words. When one word cannot be found, it means that what comes out after is just a lie. And then there was my brother's best friend. He doesn't have a name in this story, in case you were wondering what his name was. His skin was uncomfortably white and soft and his manners exceeded all expectations. He was so completely different from all the other boys in my brother's circle of friends and he was full of tenderness when we were alone. Once he stopped by my place because he wanted to talk to my brother but my brother wasn't around so we started saying all kinds of things to each other until he asked me if we could watch some porn together. He was nineteen so he was allowed to that. I, on the other hand, was only sixteen. I had never watched porn before but being with an older guy made me think that it was some sort of initiation that I had to perform at one point. I had heard from the older kids that an older guy was needed to explain to you how things worked in that area. So I thought that he was my older guy so I accepted. He wore white underwear and with a soothing voice told me to take my clothes off. I obeyed him and did whatever he asked me to do. I was trembling. It was painful at first when he got in, then as he started moving inside me the pain turned into something else. It was as if I was burning down there. I could feel his breath on the back of my neck and his heaviness pushing against my body. I asked him to stop for a few moments because I was afraid that something might happen down there. He stopped but then he asked me if he could go on because he was really turned on by it. So he went on and his breath accelerated until his movements became longer and wider and he stopped, out of breath. He stood up and pulled his underwear and trousers. Then he told me that he had to go because my brother could get back in the meantime and he wouldn't want him to be suspicious. I didn't see him too often and when we did meet he didn't say a word about what happened. I told myself that I understood him, he had to maintain appearances like I had to do, and besides we were just two boys who were

playing with each other's body, there was nothing wrong in that. I met him again years later. He was married and unhappy. I never asked why he was unhappy, I just knew that he was. His wife refused to have children for whatever reason she herself invented. It is true what they say, the doctor said while still writing in his black notebook, childhood offers explanations for whatever the adult thinks and does. I wanted to say that it is not true, but that was no longer a part of my past so my mouth just refused to articulate the sounds. The past is a gateway to one's present language capacities.

There was someone else. Jim remembered him perfectly but his mind refused to acknowledge the fact to the point that he could not even say it to himself. It was an abomination, his mind kept repeating this sentence. That was it, he was aware that was it, the explanation of everything, the element that set everything in motion, the moment in the past that changed everything that followed it. But he couldn't say it. His mind concocted this sort of chemical halo around it which not only protected it from being divulged but also corrupted it so that every time Jim went there its roughness was slightly diminished to make it more palatable. A drop of saving grace, he guessed, an innocent excuse. So everything was thrown away into that limbo of the mind never to be recovered except in those moments when everything else crumbled and in all those moments in which Jim felt like asking why. Why is this happening to me? Why am I doing this? That sort of questions. It was the missing part of the page, the one that contained the most important fragment that would illuminate the whole text. Yet, in Jim's mind the fragments was simply suspended, it refused to reveal itself. Every time he tried to say it he would imagine the faces of all those people that knew him and record every emotional reaction that materialized on them. That was the thing that stopped him. What are they going to say about it? They would blame me, and they would judge me, and eventually they would kill me, crucify my body on an upside down cross, burn my tongue and crush my limbs. Terror crept in his guts and strangely enough that terror was mixed with another emotion, playfully juggling with that episode at the back of his mind. It was embarrassment. The embarrassment of a kid who was too little to know anything and who thought that the world in which

he lived was a world that knew no repercussions and that whatever he did changed nothing in the undisturbed grandeur of the flow of life.

The doctor told me that my medication is going to be changed and that they're going to try out a different type of therapy that targets different parts of my brain and as such, different parts of my memory. It's like an imaginary surgery, the doctor said, we cut out the piece that is sick and only the healthy part will remain, and everything will be as good as new. I will go back to being normal. I can still hear his words, I'm going to get back to normal, yet I'm not sure what this normality implies because I've never been acquainted with it. I don't know if there was something which pushed me out of this normality that my doctor is talking about. I don't know if I should be happy or sad because somehow it is impossible right now to foresee the results of this action. Will this help me get rid of you? And if so, where will you go? From experience I know that in the mind nothing gets lost, everything is reused in dreams and memories, everything is there, stored in a sort of super-computer and every time you need something voluntarily or involuntarily it comes out, you just need something to push it out, like a bookmark, every memory has a kind of bookmark, and you can find it only when you know what you are looking for. You're probably going to be lost somewhere in between two memories that are unlikely to be recalled, like the memory of repetitive things. The memory of opening and closing doors. Can you still remember how many doors have you closed? Or how many doors have you opened? Can you remember every doorknob that you touched in your past? The mind does not have to remember all doorknobs because one or two doorknobs are always enough. That's where your memory will be, lost in between the memory of all those doorknobs and doors I've touched before the moment I met you. My entire life seemed to have been a preparation for that moment in which I first laid my eyes on you. That time, at the airport when the gates opened and I got out and I saw you waiting for me there on one of those uncomfortable airport benches. You were wearing a white shirt and a pair of white trousers and you wore your newly bought perfume, the one that you bought for the occasion, and I put my brown leather bag on the floor so I could have a good look at you, and then I hugged you and I whispered in your ear that I've missed you a lot and that

you look beautiful. You said the same thing to me but everything had to look normal because for all those other people we had to be just two buddies seeing each other after a long time. Nobody looked at us. The only thing that surprised me was that you were so little compared to how I had imagined you. I met you online, on a free dating site and the only way I could estimate your size was by looking at the pictures. But when I hugged you I felt like you were perfect because my body refused to let go. Then I told you that I needed to go and pick up my car from the parking lot and you said that you wanted to come with me. We both went and I was really happy about that because I really wanted you to see my car and the present that I had bought for you from my hometown. You liked the car, you said it was a very elegant car. Then I asked you to help me with something because I needed you to get away from the glove compartment so that I could put my present there. You hadn't noticed my trick. We drove out of the parking lot and I kissed your hand for the first time and you blushed and smiled. While we were on the highway I asked you if you wanted something to eat because I was famished and tired from the flight. You said that you were hungry too. And then I asked you to look in the glove compartment. You opened it and the present fell in your lap. The black box contained an expensive watch that I had picked up just for you. It was your favorite color. You said you liked it and you put it on. It suited you well. Then I told you about the trick that I had played on you and we both laughed and I called you my little treasure. And you smiled like a child. I reached out and touched your face and I wanted so much to kiss you. But you told me that I had to wait till we got home. Kissing someone in a car is unromantic, you told me. I knew I had to be patient, you can't rush this kind of thing. The doctor said there's going to be a change in the treatment, new kind of pills, and, if needed, a sort of vaccine that would correct this variation that occurs in the mind. The other patient will be subjected to the same type of treatment.

He stopped calling altogether. The phone stood there, forgotten. Jim started to think that it might have been a figment of his imagination and now something changed and so Paul had disappeared entirely. Paul's number wasn't even there. Somebody must have erased him number out of the contact list. It must have been one of the nurses, Jim was sure of it,

the fat one, the one that smiles every time she comes into his room. Or maybe it was the other guy, the one tied to the bed, what a lunatic he must be since he needs to be tied to the bed. Jim thought there was some intelligence in his eyes, and something else, something that he was able to recognize in whomever he met on the street. A sort of suffering that was carefully hidden behind smiles and the freckles that these emotions left on his face. He saw him smile a couple of times, in his sleep, and it was the smile of somebody who had given up, or for whom there was a battle that was lost. These kind of people, Jim thought, were forged in the smoldering fires of a life that pushed people against the ground until they became one with the ground, until their flesh resembled that of freshly plowed ground, until they smelled like the ground, and that smell penetrated their lungs so deeply that everything tasted like the ground. Yet he maintained a kind of dignity to himself, and the dignity could be seen in the way he smiled in his sleep. That dreamful world was the only thing that life couldn't take from him. Jim could see how happy he was in that other world that his mind had carefully weaved out of the pains of daily life like a spider that remakes its web every time it is broken.

I'm in that house again, our house, the one hidden from view by the luxurious vegetation of a forest that is still unknown to me. I never went to see what lies beyond the house. You told me not to go there because there are some things in life that one should not see. I feel like a newborn Adam being forbidden to even desire to see what hides behind the house that you've built for the two of us. For the moment I'll keep my promise not to go there despite the urgent thought that keeps telling me that I should go and check it out. Maybe it will make me understand somehow what is happening to me. The cure, the vaccine that the doctor promised me, maybe that's what you don't want me to see. You're afraid that it might ruin what we have. I must let you know though that the vaccine promises to kill my past and since you are a part of my present you shall get out of it unharmed. At least, you should get out of it unharmed. That's what the doctor said. We need to get rid of the past. I'm on the couch. The pillows are just amazing, not like the one I have in the hospital. Have I told you that they remind me of my childhood? The door is still missing. It is as if there never was a door, even the carpet at the

entrance has disappeared. In the house everything remained unchanged. When I saw that the door was still missing I was afraid that somebody might have got in and stole some of our things. I checked everything, nothing is missing. The blanket that you leave for me here every evening is so soft and pleasant to touch, I can't stop caressing it. It tickles the insides of my fingers. It's a pleasant feeling, similar to the sensation I get when I run my fingers through your hair. I wish I could do that more often, but you're always away. When I come back to the house you're never there. Dinner is waiting for me on the table, and the water is boiling in the kettle. Just in time for some tea. There's only one cup. I could've sworn that there were two cups yesterday. One of the windows breaks and I run to see what happened. There's nobody there and the window is missing. It is as if there never was a window. There's just the forest and the sounds that come out of it, and the wind, and the smell of green leaves. I call out your name. Insert your name here, name and surname, date of birth, and everything else. Your name echoed turning back against me. When I went back into the kitchen a whole wall was missing the pipes coming from the sink hanging out in midair. I ran back to the main room which was still in one piece. I sat on the couch and covered myself with the blanket. And waited. I heard hurried footsteps on the porch. The door opened and a terrified version of you appeared. Your clothes were dirty and there was dried blood on your face. You fell on your knees at my feet and you started to cry and tell things that I couldn't make out. I told you to stop and repeat whatever you were saying. Then I realized that some of your teeth were missing and that made your words sound weird and meaningless. You told me that they were looking for you because you ran away from their hiding place. They tortured you because you refused to cooperate. They were coming for me too. You told me that I should go away as fast as I could because there was no time to waste because they were coming after me. I told you to calm down because there was nobody coming for either of us. I took your face between my hands and caressed your cheeks and for a moment you seemed to calm down, but every sound that came from the woods scared you and turned you into a sort of human animal that responded to its instincts but at the same time that rationalized everything that was going on around us. I took you to the bathroom and

cleaned the dried blood from your face. There was another face under all that dried blood. It was you, the face that I fell in love with, and with every patch of clean skin you became yourself again. I gave you some clean clothes and tucked you into bed. We went to sleep together. I fell asleep with my head on your chest. And I was lost again.

He was smiling again. Jim woke up. The phone had disappeared. Somebody took it away. He was angry, he wanted to scream, but then he thought that screaming in the middle of the night might not be such a good idea. There were other patients sleeping and they might hate him afterwards and Jim didn't like it when other people hated him. He thought that he might resolve this problem in the morning without making such a fuss about it. But then he might miss one of Paul's calls and Paul might think that he is no longer interested in him and that was the last thing Jim wanted, to lose any hope of getting back together with Paul. He had to get that phone back. He started screaming. He kept asking about his phone. The nurses told him that there was no phone. He didn't have a phone. All his belongings were put in a plastic bag and stored into a storage room. He needed to see the bag. He needed to see what was inside the bag, just to be sure that he wasn't losing his mind. The nurses told him that he had to wait until morning because there was nobody in the storage room at that hour. He kept screaming and pushing the nurses away as they tried to calm him down. He needed to see that bag, he needed to see what was inside that fucking plastic bag. He need to know what had happened to his phone. One of the nurses went away. A few minutes later she came back carrying a yellow plastic bag. There was a name written on it. Insert your name here, name and surname, date of birth, place of birth if you think that is of any consequence in the story. The plastic bag contained an empty notebook, a pen, and a tiny bottle of perfume that was almost finished. Nothing else. Jim looked at the three objects and then at the nurses and kept repeating the movement. He started laughing but the nurses weren't laughing, they weren't even smiling.

Our body is made out of plastic, we are two dolls, our skin perfect. There is a little boy taking care of us. He tucked us into bed and he covered our inert bodies with a dirty handkerchief. Actually it's not a handkerchief, it's a piece of cloth that his mother uses to clean the

furniture every Saturday. It smells like dust and detergent. The detergent smells of lavender and orchids, and of sea, if the sea ever had this kind of smell. He imagines that it's comfortable for us. He placed a big pillow under our plastic bodies. He used to sing us to sleep. But that happened only when we were still new, our plastic still soft for the touch. Now we are in a constant state of sleep. He imagines that we are actually sleeping, that our eyes are closed when in fact they are not. Our eyes were not made to close, our manufacturer overlooked this aspect. We have two drops of paint instead of eyes. We see the world only in two colors, black and white. He knows that there is something wrong with us, we shouldn't be sleeping together, in the same bed. Once his mother had told him that but he thought that his mother was just teasing him. He did that all the time with his older brother. He and his brother slept in the same bed because there weren't enough rooms for all of them. They didn't sleep in their parents' room for some reason, they only slept in their grandparents' room which was always overheated and that made the air unbreathable and sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night and he would uncover himself because he was all sweaty and the bed was too small for the both of them especially because his older brother was taller than him. And sometimes his older brother used to talk in his sleep and say all kinds of things, and he would listen to him and then in the morning he would tell his mother what he had heard. And in the summer the bed was sometimes very cold so their mother told them to stay close so that the sheets would acquire some heat from their bodies. So his older brother pulled him into his arms and they stood like that until they fell asleep. So he put us close to each other like he would do with his older brother during the summer. There was nothing wrong with that. He used to do that with one of his best friends. They pretended to be lovers and they even made love a couple of times. His mother had told him many times that boys should not play with dolls. It was forbidden. His mother told him that he was going to lose his penis if he continued to play with dolls. So every time he played with the two dolls he would quickly hide in the bathroom to check if his penis was still there and it was still there. He wondered what happened to all of those boys that played with dolls. Did they lose their penises? But then, if he'd lose his penis he'd never have the courage to

tell his mother, or his father, or even his grandparents or older brother. It was just too embarrassing. Yet, it was still there so there was nothing to worry about at that particular point. He went on playing with us. It was time to eat and have some tea. Of course he didn't know about the five o'clock tea, don't be ridiculous in assuming that. Even though we were made of plastic we needed to eat because that is what adults do, they care about eating. He brought bread crumbs from the kitchen and he fed us with them, he would stuff them down the small opening that stood for our mouths. It wouldn't go in so he pushed harder and harder until our faces bended under his thumbs. It was painful. Our faces would remain like that over the night and in the morning they were back as they were before. The food was forced down our throats even though we were not anatomically made for that. Our body rejected it just like a human body that rejects food or a type of medicine.

They had given him sedatives. The nurses said it was a nervous breakdown and he needed to be calmed down. He looked lost, his body still numbed and unresponsive except for the eyelids that moved slowly like in slow motion going up and down, up and down, up and down. The only thing that went through his mind was Paul. There was one sentence that kept repeating itself. It's not like we're in love, he said. The man was brilliant, Jim thought. He invented a sentence that could work as a full stop. Because it was a full stop to everything and to everything else. It also meant a lot of things. It meant that they had no future together and there was no meaning in whatever they were doing together. It also meant nothing. At first, Jim thought that it really meant nothing, that's why he overlooked the sentence considering the fact that it was said sometimes at the beginning of their relationship so he thought that Paul was, in fact, joking. He was gone now, so he wasn't joking after all. You can't run away from the past Jim thought. All of this is happening because of that one thing that he did in the past. And it was the most innocent thing in the world. He didn't know. He didn't know it was wrong. The past is like a big whale swallowing everything in its way. A white shark. Every tooth stands for a moment in the past. And every wound that it produces when it bites into the skin is a wound to be carried into the future. First as a wound and then as a scar. First as an emotion, then as a thought. Somebody should

have told him that it was wrong, he didn't know. It wasn't written in the books that he read as a child. Somebody should have explained to him that pleasure is something not to be trusted. It was always about that. Knowing things and acting accordingly. He liked to be told what to do in specific situations because then he would know what to do, what people expected of him. Only then he could go over their expectations. He was too little, too unripe to know that he was wrong. That is why he had to be forgiven.

He played with dolls all the time even though he was a boy. Boys play with cars and robots, girls play with dolls, boys wear blue, and girls wear pink, his mom used to tell him, and he obeyed because that was the way of the world. Somehow all mothers know the way of the world. He used to put on his mother's dresses and if there wasn't one he would make dresses out of curtains and tablecloths. And he would put on a show in front of the mirror. He would sing, dance, and imagine himself performing in front of a huge audience that would applaud him at the end. He even used his mother's lipstick and makeup to make the show more real. He even performed the part of a woman in one of the school plays that he himself directed. When he was called on stage, he did not think it was going to be so difficult. But when he got on stage all of them started laughing and he could see all of their faces. And he wanted to run because he felt ridiculous and stupid. Yet something kept him there. His body was numbed by embarrassment and so he stood there thinking only of his teacher's disappointment. He looked at her at one point and she smiled and raised her arm as if to tell him that he ought to move a bit more. Everybody applauded at the end and he quickly went away. Once he even went out with his mother's high-heeled shoes and the kids laughed at him. It never occurred to him why they were laughing. Only later, his mother told him something about the shoes. Those shoes are not for boys, she said. Stop eating she said, you'll become morbidly obese. Your eyes will be disappear at one point because of all that fat surrounding them, a guy told him when he went to the shop. He wanted to become like one of his dolls, insentient, made out of plastic, the result of some manufacturer's fantasy of a young and handsome boy that would respond to the fantasies of all those mothers and little girls out there. The blue-eyed straw-colored hair

Adonis that descends from among the stars and steals the heart of adolescent girls who think that love is other-worldly and it has nothing to do with being human. Love is always given by somebody else. So we invented little angels that shoot arrows and make people fall in love with each other. And we kept waiting on windowsills and balconies for those little angels to come and shoot their arrows at us. Imagine them saying that they've been looking for us and that the quest has now ended and what follows is a life during which everything will go as planned because we've been chosen and when we're chosen there's nothing we could do about it. Those who have chosen us couldn't be wrong. When in fact they couldn't have been more wrong than that. If you don't look for it you'll never find it. Or you'll find it when it's too late and there is no turning back.

He was confused, the new pills made him feel like that. Ideas came out blurred and mixed up. People resembled the paintings of Picasso. Ideas appeared disjointed. One idea had the limb of another idea. There was no chronological order between events. Jim wondered whether Paul was from the future or just a ghost from the past. Maybe Paul really was from the future. Jim liked that, the prospect of meeting Paul in the following days, weeks, years, it didn't matter as long as Paul was a part of the future and not one from the past. The doctor had told him that the vaccine was not ready yet, they were still testing it, and besides, his body was not yet ready to receive it. He had to go through all these procedures that would permit the body to adapt to a new state. He had to take some pills first and these pills would make his body more responsive to the vaccine. The body had to be sensitized first. He signed the papers, agreed to all procedures that had to be taken. There was no way back anyway. He had to take that demon out of him because it had only caused pain and suffering. He had to kill it. He felt that it was a duty that he had to perform for the sake of his mental health despite the fact that it also felt wrong. The treatment had all kinds of loose ends and he was afraid that he might be ruined in the end. And then there really won't be a way back. Does this mean there was a way back? Without Paul there was no way back, Jim was sure of that.

My older son's pubic hair is growing, a drunk father once said. His parents were having lunch with another couple. It was a special holiday or something when good food was prepared and served. He and his brother weren't allowed to sit at the table and they weren't allowed to touch the food either because it was only for the guests. His brother went out, he had more important things to do. Most people went out because there was even an amusement park brought in from other places. He stayed behind because he was afraid that the other children might laugh at him. He would go upstairs and sit on the floor and just listen to what was happening around him. And he heard his father talking about his brother's pubes. He noticed that himself because he and his brother used to take bath together. That went on until his brother specifically asked to take bath separately saying that the bathtub was too small for both of them. The bathtub was large enough, he thought, it was his brother that started to feel uncomfortable about it. When his brother took his bath alone he would keep the bathroom occupied for almost two hours. That's when their taste in clothes divided. His brother would buy tight shirts while he bought loose shirts to hide how he was beneath because all the other children would stare at him, and point at him, and laugh, and he couldn't stand that. Better to be covered completely than show a patch of your skin. His older brother had grown fond of himself. He started spending a lot of time in front of the mirror measuring his face and trying out different outfits. There were also other boys stopping by and they did the same. They also talked a lot about girls and sometimes he would overhear them talking and other times they asked him about his preference for girls. He used to tell them that he didn't know about that. They told him that there will come a time when he will know and understand. So he said he was going to wait and see. Sometimes they would gather around the TV and they would watch porn for hours on end. One of them was supposed to sit just behind the door so that if anyone came in he would be able to let the others know that an adult had entered the house. And then they would watch cartoons because they were too turned on and they need something to chill them out. He just couldn't understand them. There was a sort of innocence about them and at the same time they acted like

adults. It was this contradiction that he could not understand. At night he would ask his brother if he could touch his penis. And his brother said yes.

Jim woke up. He did not remember though the moment in which he went to sleep. He no longer knew the difference between being asleep and being awake. At times being awake felt like dreaming, the doctors and the nurses dancing and singing as they came to check up on him and give him the pills. They all resembled one another and they held hands just like the paper figures he used to make on Christmas day when he was little and he didn't have anything else on his mind. They would ask him about something from his past and he would mumble and say all kinds of things and while he did that he gradually realized that his past was slowly disappearing, one by one, memories would fall into a black hole and resurface like tiny stars that had almost no meaning in that immense stain of oblivion. Faces lost in thick fog. He would mistake his mother for his aunt in some of his memories and sometimes felt like there was another side of him that was somewhere out there and he wasn't able to control it because somehow it managed to get away from him. And there was no umbilical cord to keep them connected. Or maybe he was the one that got away and the original was somewhere else looking for him. Yet he couldn't go back along this thought, he couldn't trace the origins of this thought. It was as if the more he got away from an idea the more it was likely that he would forget it completely and irrevocably. He thought that the best way to avoid this was to stop his mind from giving birth to new ideas, prevent it from going in circles. Only one thing remained. That memory that he wasn't allowed to reveal and which stood like a lump in his throat. His mind created like a web of meaningless associations around it, to protect it, to keep it away from any other thought that would threaten the integrity of that memory. He had told his doctor about it. The doctor didn't say anything, he just wrote it down in his black notebook and then moved on to the other patient who was still tied to his bed. They said that the other patient was now a threat to the safety of the other patients so he needed to be restrained and kept under surveillance day and night. He hadn't moved a bit. He was no longer eating and when he was awake he kept staring at the ceiling. The next day the doctor came again and assured Jim that with that new treatment they would be able to penetrate

that web of meaningless associations that his mind created around that particular memory. The doctors who were following his case closely think that the memory, so carefully hidden in between the folds of his brain, was the cause of all those problems. Once they manage to get inside they would be able to cut it into several pieces and then demolish. Divide and conquer, the doctor said. Divide and conquer, Jim repeated to himself. The vaccine was to be administered the very next day.

When I woke up you were still there, sleeping, and I couldn't take my eyes off you because you were always even more beautiful in your sleep. I went out because I didn't want to wake you up. Yet, when I got out of the main room I realized that the rest of the house was gone. The kitchen was gone, the bathroom was gone. Even the porch was gone. There was only the main room. From the outside it looked like a box. A heavy sound came from the inside so I ran back inside to see what it was. When I got in you were standing on top of the bed. The northern wall had disappeared too. I could see the forest. Soon everything will disappear, I said to myself. We could no longer stay there, it seemed. We had to move somewhere else again this time having no belongings except ourselves and the clothes that we had on ourselves. You told me that they are after us and that we had to leave immediately. I told you that we could still stay. We still had three walls and the bed and everything else. You started crying and you told me that you were tired of all that. You suggested we go into some sort of desert and never return. I did agree with you. We moved from place to place thinking that people might accept us at one point. I felt exhausted too. I suggested we stay until the last bit of the house is taken away from us. You were sobbing and you hid your face into one of the pillows. I sat by you and told you to close your eyes. I told you to let go because the rest of the world was like that, there was no need to turn desperate about it. You closed your eyes and I pulled the blanket over us, covered even our heads with it. Then we heard another heavy sound, and another one, and then another one until there was complete silence. You were still crying when I removed the blanket which was in fact a big burdock leaf and saw that the house was no longer there. Everything was gone, even the bed, the pillows, the furniture. There was nothing left. I stood up and looked around. I detected something very strange

happening in the distance. There was a sort of white stripe that went along the horizon and cut everything in its path. The upper parts of the trees dangled in midair, and where the white stripe had passed, one could see the rows of an empty page waiting for words and meaning to conquer its whiteness. The white stripe had been hiding behind the house.

The water tasted differently. Jim could feel it. It tasted like rust and chlorine. It had not been like that before, and he drank water daily when the nurses came dancing to bring him the pills. His arm hurt. The vaccine was administered during the morning when the nightshift ended. The smell in the room was different. The sheets felt rough on his skin, and there was a sort of colored halo around the people that came into his room. The doctor's halo was colored in red, the nurses' halo was colored in green. He looked at the other guy, still restrained to his bed. He was colored in red too. The color was fading, it went on and off, sometimes it even disappeared for a few seconds, then it came back on. He stood up and went to the window to see what was happening outside. Patients were spread all over the front yard and it was like a Christmas tree. All men were colored in red while women were colored in green. They moved like electrical impulses in a system. The doctor did not say anything about side effects or changes of perception and when he asked him about it the doctor shrugged and said that there were no documented side effects. None of the other patients complained about it so it must have been something that he already had, a preexisting condition. Or it might have been something temporary. All he needed was to get some rest. He went back to bed, his mind empty of thoughts, and he tried to get some sleep. It came eventually, oblivion, darkness, his body reduced to an automatic machine, his chest going up and down, up and down, according to the rules set by the hands of some unknown god or a principle of nature. Yet then, as he regained consciousness he felt there was something wrong, because there was no difference between the consciousness of being awake and the oblivion of being lost in the murky darkness of sleep. He tried recalling other instances in which this difference occurred and he couldn't find any. Then as he carried on to ride this train of thought he realized that nothing ever came back from that ocean of memories. Everything was surrounded by dark waters and he felt out of breath

suddenly, a terrible pain and fear creeping into his guts. He couldn't relate that fear to any other fear because there was no other fear except the present one, naked, raw, like a human hand found on the sidewalk. He started to bang his head against the bed thinking that maybe all those memories would come back flooding the folds of his brain. The more he tried to recall something his desperation grew. For a moment he felt like the other patient. Tied to the bed, unable to move, unable to express something that would reveal the existence of a soul in that bundle of bone and muscle.

I started running when I saw the white stripe. I tried dragging you but you refused to move. For a moment I thought that you might be dead because you didn't move. Even your eyes were closed, yet you were still breathing. So I tried to carry you on my back but somehow your body turned so heavy that I couldn't make one more step forward. I fell on my knees. Cursed body, I screamed until I was out of breath. I stood there for a few moments on my knees crying. I looked over my shoulder. The white stripe was getting larger and larger with every passing minute. The trees were in the sky by now, the sun fell to the other side of the horizon. Cursed body, made of lead, save us, learn how to resist the destructive force that lies within us since our very conception, the rupture that is at first just a fissure the size of a single vein, resist the march forward for this one moment, when your mightiness is needed, let not the eyes see what harms the soul, let not your nerve endings perceive what harms the heart, let your antennas perceive that which brings happiness and wellbeing to the soul. Your body was gone. Where it had been the rows of that empty page could be seen. And the stain kept growing larger and larger. I started running again trying not to look back. Chunks of ground started falling inside the gap opened by that white plague. The air was full of roar, every falling tree was like a howl. It felt as if I wasn't running anymore and that only the ground beneath my feet moved. It was as if I was on a tow and the ground was slipping away falling into a large pit. If I could only fill that void with words.

Can you hear me? There was a light piercing through his eyelids. He wanted to say yes, but the words just wouldn't come out. He couldn't even move he was tied to the bed. Do you know where you are? It was the

voice of someone he didn't know, it lacked any form of sympathy. There was a sound. Like a long beep, then it stopped for a few seconds, then it came back again, then it stopped, and came back for the third time, on three different frequencies. What is your name? He couldn't remember it. He wanted to say something but his mouth refused to move. Do you remember Paul? Do you remember your fucking boyfriend Paul? The bed maker? Paul, dark, oblivion, stasis, stillness, inertia, loss, limbo, nothingness. Do you remember Paul? The name stood frozen in midair like a kite tied to a tree. Where was the kite runner? Then a sort of pain in the arm, like a puncture made by a needle. Then the pain extended like fire through his veins.

I stopped and turned to face the nothingness threatening to eat me alive. It was still growing. I felt like a two-dimensional object being thrown against the ground, like in a drawing made by a child in which mothers and fathers hold their hands, smiling, close to a house which was always yellow and which always had a red roof. The earth had opened like an oyster and what remained was an immense empty page spread out like the sky in summer. Somebody once told me that I shouldn't stare at an empty page because then I won't be able to write because I would feel threatened by the immensity of its emptiness, crushed under the necessity of giving it a story that would cure that emptiness. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. The white page was like a scream in the middle of a silent night. The cry of a woman being raped, the perpetrator hiding in the many folds of the night. It was so strong that I had to close my eyes again to make it stop. It did stop. I took another deep breath and opened my eyes. The scream was now ten times louder but I managed to control it. I screamed as loud as I could. Behold the creator, I said. The cry stopped and with it the silence was so complete that I could hear my heartbeats loud and clear. Behold the human that creates this world. The page contracted like the body of a snake whose head was suddenly cut off from the rest of its body. The words appeared on the page. Behold the other humans and the damage that they have inflicted upon my soul. The words appeared one by one as if written by an invisible hand.

The pain was everywhere, even in his bones, it spread like a thought. He heard that voice burst into laughter. Does that hurt? He

couldn't do anything. The nurses danced around him and he closed his eyes because the pain was excruciating. It was as if acid ran through his veins rather than blood. He tried taming it but every time he tried that it went even deeper penetrating even his thoughts turning them into ashes. The venom moved fast. Finally it had reached that side of him which was protected against any intrusion from the outside. That side which made him different from all those other people, that side that made him be himself.

I opened my chest by sticking my fingers into the scar that you made. Pulled the flesh and the bones aside. My movement was reflected onto the page by the very words that I am now giving to you, dear reader. Behold my heart, I screamed. This is the [heart]. These are my [feet] and [hands]. One by one, I sacrificed my limbs to my merciless god, the page. This is my beauty I said. My [beauty] appeared on the page. I smiled and that face smiled back at me from the page. All these words descended like a chain from the sky made out of paper. I had surrendered to them. They took me away. They were taking their revenge on me. The body is forgiveness. This body is a walking, breathing, living apology. The body is sacrifice. The body is made out of two words. Forgive me. Let us not pretend anymore. Let us not pretend my name is Jim anymore because the game has ended.

[The end]