

Sometimes you see bridges collapsing behind you, illusions migrating to distant lands, and you think you are falling for centuries and landing somewhere else...

Translated by Susan Ann White

Copyright © Elisabetta Benedetti 2006

ISBN: 978-1-4303-0874-4

Original title: *Il Treno* published by Lulu Press in August 2006

Cover by Elisabetta Benedetti

Published by Lulu Press in October 2006

*Elisabetta Benedetti*

*Train of Thought*



*The story contains excerpts of the author's early poems*

*www.elisabettabenedetti.com*



## Chapter 1

I'm leaving.

Don't ask me where I'm going. Don't ask me if I'm returning.

Maybe I'm escaping...

I only know there's a train waiting for me, and I'll cling to it like a castaway to a rubber dinghy, until the waves carry me far away.

Because, at times, human beings do not want to understand but just to go, to head anywhere there is another handwritten place-name on a map, to reach and make their own. It's like pointing a finger in the air at random, indicating a nameless star and making it an unexpected goal.

And, if among the many who will wonder where and why, there is someone who, with that subtle yearning aroused by the new, wants to follow my example, I will not ask them to accompany me.

I want to be my sole companion on this journey, to read each chapter of my exodus, page after page, hoping to find an answer that will ease the strange turmoil in my heart.

Because when you find yourself at a crossroads, all the roads that open up before your eyes are equally unknown, and you feel like the despicable traitor who deserts the destination marked out for him and seeks refuge in a new exile.

I'm someone who one day made a promise and took an oath, heedless of myself and that game called destiny.

Now I'm waiting to read the questionnaire that life will ask me to complete, and the main question that will betray my very essence as a man.

If the principal query is, how many times I have escaped, the answer can only be: a million times. If, instead, it is how many times I have returned, I can only answer: none. Now I am here, for all those who have not believed in their heart of hearts, deaf to the call of their own story. I know I have written and said the little about myself I thought necessary. If, now, I have decided to leave, it is because it was not enough.

I've gradually discovered that I'm a doctor able to diagnose my own illness, and I cannot ignore the symptoms. I know that, by turning the page, I could, unexpectedly, find myself at the end of this extraordinary illusion.

Reality is a coin, on one side truth, on the other falsehood. I want to toss this coin in the air to see on which side these years fall and what role I must play to overturn the meaning of things.

Meanwhile, I can no longer stay here faking calmness and stillness while the floor gives way beneath the weight of my certainties. Now



that promises are dying, struck to the heart, my mind is incapable of rationalizing reality and dividing it into equal parts.

Knowledge is disappearing, and theories are not even worth the paper they're written on. I shall throw to the wind handfuls of useless notions that suffocate the instinct without bringing me any comfort.

I want the journey to tell me what is right and what is wrong, what is fear and what is manipulated and corrupt emotion, where stops the human hand, and the mind that directs it.

I have nothing new with me, only an old photo of my cat, in a suitcase.

Yet I'd like to take the world along, closed in a box, then free it wherever I choose and see it run through the green fields of music.

As I head towards the station, everything around me is slow, a deadening slowness that makes me quicken my step. Again I would like to yield to an instinctive desire to bar the doors behind me, and I am not surprised by my being able to leave everything once again.

I hope not to be led astray by the scent of a thousand songs, and to follow the one path that is truly mine, as if it were the prophet of a perfect god who never leaves his creatures in doubt for too long.



## Chapter 2

The departure.

Here I am now at my train. It was already waiting for me, like a faithful friend in an endless winter.

I'm not the only one on this platform, yet I've never felt such isolation, a distance between myself and the crowd who seem to be pushing me with their hands, trying to repulse me.

But isn't anyone who leaves alone, really? Still present yet distant from those who remain, suspended in the limbo of an ideal compromise.

As I get on, I tell myself I'll choose an empty compartment, because then I won't have to deal with other faces or other flights. I'll mould the space with my gaze until I make it my own, furnishing it with these confused thoughts of mine, until it resembles me.

Solitude does not always bring forth the answers you're looking for, but it can give your mind a room where it can withdraw into itself and plumb the violet seas of consciousness.

The psyche is an apparently uncultivated terrain, but when you find the courage to wipe a little dust off the surface with your hand you never know how many layers there may be before you get to the bottom. They are accumulations of cathedrals that have crumbled and

been rebuilt, one on top of the other, and it is difficult to excavate the mound without everything collapsing on you.

The journey has not yet begun, yet I already feel the weight of it. Will it be short or long? I know this won't depend on kilometres or time.

Images are already beginning to flow lazily past my window. So wrapped up in myself, I feel like the only spectator enjoying the blissful silence of an empty theatre.

Cleaving the roads at this speed is like bursting into a thousand other lives and staying for no more than a second.

From here, I see everyday moments in the lives of men and women.

Am I the walk-on or are they?

Who knows how many will look at this train, seeking to glimpse just any figure, a shadow waving its hand...

The glass makes these places unknown. How many uncrossed streets I see from here, how many houses I've never lived in.

Am I from here or am I a stranger?

From my mobile look-out point, I see a new and almost foreign landscape that drives me away, fleeing behind me. And I let it run in the opposite direction, without turning, because I know I could never catch up with it.

And isn't turning round really a sign of nostalgia, the temptation to go back along the same road? No, I can't do it, because this train is now my will, and I must go wherever it leads me.

I don't know in how many stations it will stop, nor if my destination will be among them.

I only hope that when I spot it in the distance, I shall be able to recognize it.



## Chapter 3

First stop

Now the race is becoming less frantic.

Unhurriedly, the first station comes to meet me like an unknown relative opening his cold arms already from a distance. He is not guided by his heart, but the theatrical world of conventions.

On the platform, a few individuals are waiting for the doors to open to get on my train. They are not in a group but scattered like microcosms unto themselves that do not communicate with each other, each imprisoned by their portion of history. Why ever do they have to catch this train? How many other journeys, how many other retreats will now follow a path parallel to mine?

How many times have I realized I knew nothing about those who passed me by, about their ideals, about the winding ribbon of their past. I saw only shapes, outlines and shells, without glimpsing their real inner selves.

I would've liked to have stayed here, in my cosy silent corner, sustained only by my reflections, without anyone intruding, but I really knew right from the beginning that it wouldn't be like that.

A little boy enters the compartment. I didn't see him among the waiting passengers.

Can he be alone?

The blond curls are like the dawn that descends to awaken the ocean, a drop of light that heralds the birth of a new day. He stares candidly at me with big, pale eyes and sits opposite me. He is like a flower that time has not yet withered, a limpid sea that no one has had the time to sully.

I would like to be a painter, to capture on paper the naïveté of childhood emanating from his face, and take it with me everywhere, in my pocket, like an ancient memory. Perhaps this is the fervour one glimpses, at times, in the artist's gaze, and which spurs him to create.

Shall I ever be able to talk to him, to communicate with him? Maybe, to do this, I would have to become a little boy again myself.

But too much time has passed since then.

“Hello,” says my little companion.

Funny to think I was worried about starting a conversation! The world of adults is nothing but a constant search for polite remarks and ready-made formulas to bridge the void between ourselves and others.

But a little boy has no need to bridge abysses he doesn't perceive.

Unfortunately, for him there will also come a time when he sees nothing but walls around him.

“Hello,” I reply. “What's your name?”



“Angel.”

I’ve heard that the name we are given can condition our life, to the point of our resembling what it evokes.

If that is really so, then perhaps one day he will become the staunch defender of the weak, or the untiring man of the church who makes love his supreme mission.

Or, perhaps, the years will ravage his beautiful face and lead him elsewhere.

I have thought, more than once, that a person’s name should change with the seasons, reflecting periods of existence, mood swings and life’s ups and downs.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes. Can I stay in your *room*?”

What subtle intuitions children have!

In a couple of seconds he has understood that this anonymous compartment has become my second home, a place reserved just for me and my flurry of flimsy reflections.

What I constructed merely through thought, he was able to capture with his honest gaze.

“Of course.”

He smiles and looks away with those wide eyes that mirror a spring sky.

I, too, had that way of looking at others, with that mixture of astonishment and disarming willingness typical of those who are not yet familiar with the black holes into which life sometimes plunges you.

I quickly lost that candour in those filthy narrow streets where you get dirty just by passing through.

Now that I've lost my ingenuousness I would still like to be able to speak the language of innocence, and maybe this would be enough to change everything.

Certainly, the world of children is a tunnel with various exits, and those who don't suffer in their own head can be wounded by their earthly reality.

Travelling like I have travelled, in the visible and the nonvisible, I have seen night vomit darkness, pretending to be day. And children's eyes looking at me mutely with the dirtiness that has already begun to invade their mind, leaving childhood only a narrow crack and letting it escape through it.

If, ideally, childhood should be rose-tinted like the world of poets, I know there exists a dimension where age has neither sense nor colour. It is the limbo where the individual has an immature body but adult

perceptions. When drama is the norm and enters your flesh, it becomes the measure of all things.

I remember the little girl who worked all day in a stone quarry, believing that night was just a break between today and tomorrow. One evening someone asked her if she might not prefer to spend her day differently, perhaps learning to write. She said that it didn't seem useful to her. Then they asked her if she might not want to change and improve the quality of her life. She didn't understand what they meant by that, so someone explained to her that the human journey was a stairway you could either decide to climb or descend. She said that she had never seen anything other than the stone quarry, and that she felt privileged because work enabled her not to be slave to complete poverty. Then I understood that there are worlds on earth where life is lived on two levels, and no matter on which step you find yourself, you feel suspended between the lower step and the void.

I was deeply struck by the missionary who recounted how children in the depressed areas of the world were incapable of playing among themselves. When I asked him what he meant he said that it was as if they didn't know what relating to each other in that way signified. They had to be instructed, he said. As if playing was something that could be taught.

I have seen the lost childhood in those little kids who walk the streets accompanied only by a pack of dogs. They call them “children of an absent father”. They cannot recognize themselves when they see themselves reflected in other people’s eyes and keep going, turning their backs on anything they feel is too close. And who knows how many people have eyed their solitude, lurking in the dark to profane their minds.

I remember that young girl raised in an orphanage, who would leave the institution every day and roam the town... She was pleased to have so many *admirers*, as she called them. “The youngest is my age – the oldest, I don’t know, maybe about sixty,” she said one day, and I asked myself if society really did not know that it was producing wretched monsters who mingle with and lose themselves in the crowd with lucid coherence, waiting for a victim to fall.

“Look, look, how beautiful!!” my young companion suddenly exclaims, pointing through the window.

But I am unable to see. There is nothing unusual about the landscape for me.

“What?” I ask.

“The clouds!”

Who knows what I was expecting! I look up and see a dazzling sun illuminating a flock of small, odd-shaped clouds.

So this is what he calls *beautiful* and I couldn't even see.

But how many things am I no longer able to see? How many things pass close by me, brush past me and I'm hardly aware of it?

Perhaps I should reduce myself to his height, look at everything through the fresh eyes of childhood, to discover the world anew and realize that I can still be astonished.

For some time now, I've found it difficult to be amazed by anything. It is as if I had seen everything – I, who am aware I have seen almost nothing.

What could be more spectacular than nature? Yet, for years, I have not been able to grasp the meaning of its manifestations.

Humanity can no longer recognize pure beauty and throw itself in pursuit of it. It is content with poor imitations, maybe because they are more suited to the fake setting in which most daily activities take place.

Tomorrow, Angel too will probably not notice the clouds, will not talk to the stranger sitting opposite him, and will bury his instinctive enthusiasm beneath mounds of apathy.

Looking at him through his youthful eyes, I wonder if perhaps he too will one day experience the subtle pain that changes life and every desire.

I remember when it happened to me. It's not a vague memory, but nor is it clear. An echo has remained rather than an image. It was as if the ground opened up beneath me and every shred of my age was swallowed by the chasm.

It was like understanding and absorbing everything in a single moment, like drinking from the chalice of history and digesting its essence. It was a flash that, illuminating the still inactive areas of my brain, made me aware of what there was beyond my house and my young years.

In my harsh awakening from the sleep of childhood, the child died and the man was born.

Unfortunate is the man who perceives the evils of humankind and takes them upon himself. It is not always easy to close the doors of the mind and eliminate the images you see and the words you hear.

At times thought is so heavy it seems like a boulder smashing on top of you, leaving you devastated by the violence of its fall.

And the right-minded tell you that a fixed thought is a sickness, and if you think it in the morning and the evening you're lacking something.

And if you think about it six times, what does that mean? A hundred times? A thousand times, without understanding where it leads, without seeing a light at the top of the hill? Then what's *behind* that constant reflection?

Outside the window, the images are passing by lazily again.

The train continues on its way, bringing me alongside a beach that is now empty and devoid of bathers.

In the summer, as a child, I lived so near the sea that I could look at the beach from our terrace.

Now it's empty, just like it was in the early morning or on grey days with no sun.

And it seemed like a desert, where life had stopped for centuries, a postcard where everything was static and silent, and only the sea's voice could reach me. Late in the evening, the moon played among the dunes and currents, and waxed large as if full of promise.

When the weather was warm, the shoreline came alive and, already from a distance, one could hear the echo of a thousand voices that seemed to scatter then blend into one.

Then I wanted to be part of that chorus, to claim my strip of sea and sand, to let myself be enveloped by that noise.

Nothing else existed, apart from the sea that seemed immense, and the fine sand that was so hot it burned your feet.

When the tide went out, the beach lengthened as if by some strange alchemy. I liked to walk where the water had just receded and to collect the shells that it had left behind. I liked the waves when they never ceased, and were so high and powerful they could sweep you away.

Angel is also looking outside, almost spellbound, and his eyes appear to be dreaming of warm seasons and running barefoot.

“Do you like playing with sand?” I ask.

“Yes, I’m always building things...”

I smile. I used to do that too but, to tell the truth, I was never very good at it. I enjoyed making strange constructions with the sand, and channels where the water vanished as soon as it was poured in.

“What do you like to build?” I ask.

He smiles in his turn: “Castles, because they’re big and beautiful.”

One day I started piling up a huge amount of sand, then climbed to the top of that makeshift mountain to see what it was like to see life from up there.

Then Feeling struck me and I have never been able to get up again.

Alone I conceived a world that I did not yet know was impossible. And perhaps the mere fact of imagining it made it possible.



Did I choose the part of humanity that I would make the object of my affection? Did I choose to unite what history seemed to have divided?

I don't think anyone will ever be able to answer these questions.

When I really think about it, perhaps it isn't so strange that the seed of my torment began to sprout in a place such as that. Precisely there, where it seemed to be closed out, the world had barged its way in, forcing the locks of my soul, and rummaged and wrought havoc in every corner.

The next day, the beach was still there, but I didn't know I was already looking at it through different eyes because, meanwhile, another Self had been born. I didn't know that, although still there, I had already left it, and my mind was travelling elsewhere.

The past and my old, naïve values were ashes that the wind had now scattered, who knows where. I was no longer a little boy like Angel, and my eyes already had that faraway look of subtle anxiety that gnaws at you and unleashes sudden storms inside you, leaving you ravaged and destroyed.

How cruel impotence can be, especially when it plays with a young boy. It can torture the human spirit until it bleeds. At times I found myself thinking what value my life could ever have, so unrelenting, so overpowering was the oppression of uselessness I felt in every fibre. It's like finding yourself in a putrid swamp from which there is no escape. And the more you struggle to reach the surface, the deeper

you sink. Because you're so tiny and your voice is so weak, that your cries cannot be heard in the silence.

Now a memory surfaces: my former obsession with becoming *someone*, of one day having in my hands that power to make decisions that then I sorely lacked.

Now it is terribly clear to me that if I had succeeded I would now have been a rolling stone, a free agent with nothing in my way, scared only of my inability to be anywhere, anyhow. I would have been burned by every defeat and been scared by the dark aspects of every victory.

“I want to be president” is what I used to say then, and my aspirations, so unusual for a little boy, would leave people wide-eyed in astonishment. I smile when I think that later, when I began school, my diverse attitude seemed even more disconcerting in an environment that merely demanded ordinariness and obedience stemming from a lack of ideas.

How I regret the loss of that wonderful confidence which only comes with the rashness of youth, the blind faith in the strength of pure feeling that leads to self-denial, the good reason that justifies every action.

What I wouldn't give to feel again that enthusiasm in every inch of my being, to follow the path it indicates, without delay! In those days,

emotions were so healthy and strong, they were like a perpetual,  
inextinguishable blaze.

...

To you,  
chain that binds me  
to this ground,  
because to the earth I return,  
as from the earth  
I was born,  
to you,  
my rigid jailer,  
I say my dream  
will become fire,  
because fire  
fears not defeat...

...

Where has my light gone?

I feel as if I could search for it for centuries, and not even be able to trace its shadow.

It's sad to see our purest impulses plunging so deep into the valley of memory as to seem irretrievable and oblige us to believe them dead.

It is a blackout of the senses that erects barriers around the individual and prevents passions from seeing the end of the tunnel.

On the horizon, an aeroplane writes its message on the empty sky. Angel follows it with his gaze. "Have you ever flown?" he asks, interrupting my train of thought.

"Of course."

"What's it like?" he asks, curious.

"High."

Once, when I stared at the sharp line dividing sea and sky, I fought against the limits of my knowledge to define the outlines of new coasts. I wasn't sure what lay beyond. I thought there was just calm. Then, with maturity, the silence spreads and you are able to perceive the glimmering lights that illuminate the fragments of your memory.

These are blind reminiscences, incapable of seeing themselves reflected in puddles of rain, made useless and ineffectual by their impairment.

I have encountered dozens of vain memories along the way and they are still following me, in the clear certainty that they exist. I go through them and shatter them as if they were glass. They don't plunge into the void, but act astonished like someone who wakes up after sleeping for centuries in boxes of illusion.

Even then, I had projected myself so far into the future that it conditioned the minor choices that I was called on to make in everyday living. If there is anyone who has yearned so much for the future that he has harnessed the present and bent it to his will, it is me.

I saw the boundaries of my every action and of my various ages, and I wanted to cross them. But it was not the freedom of transgression I longed for, rather a maturity that would open all the gates of the world to make me part of it.

When I was like Angel, I did not carry inside me the painful burden of that awareness.

He is what I was *before*, in that brief part of the story of every serene youth, when life is a song and if you ask yourself what you will become one day, you're not anxious to reply.

The train stops at another station.

Angel gets up.

“Bye, I have to get off,” he tells me, and my heart aches as I say goodbye to him.

It is memory that leaves with him, a drop of the past so distant that it no longer seems mine.

It is the memory that hurts, the sudden thought of how I was and how much I’ve changed.

Putting my hand in my pocket, I find a piece of paper. I don’t know how it got there. It’s a little poem that my mother wrote down secretly while I made it up as I went along.

I was Angel’s age.

...

Love is just like that

and then

there’s someone in the town,

in fact there are only people.

My love is a madness

of the heart responding to the soul.

Love is alive for the whole town,  
because if love were to end  
the whole world would die.  
So love is all life  
when it exists.  
I love only the fountains,  
the roses, the daisies,  
the new blooms in the garden.  
I had never come  
to \*\*\*,  
but when I was born I was here,  
that's how I came to know it.  
This town was wonderful!  
But a love for clothes and things  
does not interest me.  
I'm happy with my love,  
because the world is all beautiful and clean.  
When I was born everything was beautiful and clean.  
I love everything  
and I never want to die

because my heart is made from Jesus' soul.

And I don't know how to sing any more,

because the world is so beautiful

that I can't sing any more

'cause love is madness.

But

I know how to live calmly

because my love is only a little madness.

Now that I am alone I realize there is a question I did not ask Angel, and still have inside. "Do you like life?" I would have liked to have asked him.

And I know his reply would not have disappointed me.



## Chapter 4

### Second stop

I've only been alone for a few moments, and already the absence of noises envelops and stuns me like a musical sound.

Whatever is the face of solitude? The fresh, confident face of independence and youth, or the aged, frail, haunted visage of the hermit, etched with the lines of segregation?

Some time ago, I was struck by the story of that poor individual who was imprisoned for years in his bathroom. I found it terrifying to know that while my reality consisted of streets and faces, his was made of walls and a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, which moved slightly with his every breath. A life spent watching his shadow on the floor, and creeping after it. Who knows if the mind, thus violated, invents a new world to survive or if it succumbs to the absence of memories and voices until it expires.

I've never suffered from solitude. At times I have sought it on purpose, I've yearned for it like the tired traveller dreams of a refreshing oasis. For me it has always been a sheltered place where I could loosen the knots of the strongest emotions, where I could reflect on the hundred facets of an encounter or a phrase.

A young man slips into my compartment. I can see I'm not destined to make this journey of mine alone.

“Good morning,” he says, in the formal tone of someone able to recognize a stranger. There is something unusual about his every gesture, his posture, as he sits opposite me; it is an attitude I can't define. It is as if he wanted to attract the gaze of others, but then to spurn it, shyly.

Perhaps he too is searching for something he feels he has lost on his journey, and he feels disorientated, uncertain and wounded by every scrutinizing glance.

“Good morning,” I reply.

“I hope you don't mind my sitting in your compartment?” he says with a smile, catching me unawares.

I smile back. “Of course not. What makes you think I would?”

He stares at me; his eyes enlivened by an honest, direct gaze seem accustomed to reading the mind of others.

“You seemed so engrossed when I came in, I thought you might not even have heard me. I usually don't like to break other people's silence, especially when I feel it is filled with thoughts.”

“My thoughts aren't that important...” I say deprecatingly.

“You think not? At times it may seem that way, but in every reflection there's a part of us that, even if it emerges with difficulty, exists, and may condition our future choices.”

“I think you’re right. Certain thoughts are like precious mosaics where the confusion of past experience seems to take on a meaning. And a journey like this can help them to arise...” I reply, surprised by this turn of conversation.

“Are you a habitual traveller?” he asks.

A habitual traveller... I really don’t think so. The traveller sometimes only captures a few images of his journey, and these are fragments of the landscape that please his eye and nothing else.

But when your heart is guiding you, it’s different.

You don’t even know what you’re looking for and, when you come back, you find your hands filled with masses of real emotions contained in infinite yet impalpable moments, which will remain engraved on your memory for ever...

...

Incredulous craving,

voiceless certainty.

Whatever city

was opening up

before me...

...

Listening

to the call of the streets,  
the magical odes  
written on the sky.

The mist

invading the morning  
freeing images...

...

The mute embrace

of the buildings,  
creatures that live  
in the trembling leaves.

Images

that still emanate  
distant atmospheres  
lost  
among the processions of eras...

...

Thus I see you again

foreign city,  
wind bounded by voices,  
suffused heartrending lament.

Thus I left you  
and thus, again, I breathe you in,  
like a dream fading  
into melody,  
like a void  
without light and poetry...

“No, no you’re not a true traveller, because you capture moments and not just figures.”

“No, I can’t call myself one,” I reply. “To tell the truth, I have not wandered the world much, I’ve only headed for those places that strongly attracted me.”

Silence steals up on us, like an indiscreet visitor who doesn’t ask permission to enter.

I look out of the window. Street after street appears, one after the other, and they seem to be chasing each other in a never-ending game.

I remember when, huddled over books, I would look at photos of faraway places and my gaze would be drawn to the roads that began but never ended. How much I would have liked – who knows why – to have followed them all the way, to have seen where they led.

Years later, I walked along those same roads, experiencing deep inside the fantastic feeling of finally bursting through the limits of those photos.

“So you felt drawn to leave...” My companion’s voice rouses me.

“Right. But it was not the fascination of something unknown. At times you travel just to find a part of yourself you thought was lost. And when you arrive at your destination, you realize that it was always inside you, although hidden.”

“Have you never been afraid of making a mistake and arriving in a place that was not in fact your true goal?”

“Yes, that has happened to me. It was the lacerating fear of discovering that I was a stranger, incapable of understanding and of making myself understood. Every time I arrived my heart fluttered so violently it threw all my certainties into disarray. Then, when my feet touched the ground, the anxiousness vanished as if by magic. And I felt that I had always lived there, although I had just arrived.”

I know that what I have just confided to my fellow traveller is not my biggest problem.

My real fear is that my life will become a non-stop race, from one end of the earth to the other, from one corner of my faith to the other, and I shall be permanently imprisoned by the chains of nostalgia that will prevent me from feeling that, like a ship, I have sailed into my port, anywhere.

I would like to have the privilege of experiencing the completeness of my being, that feeling of exclusive fullness that I lack. I would like to live without having to split my soul, and without seeing it rent like an abandoned terrain.

I remember, thousands of years ago, when I thought it was my mission to harness power and close it in a box buried in the centre of the world, forcing it to remain in a perpetual sleep. But power, and the desire to possess it, are fire in the craters left by history in its escape, and others cannot be prevented from falling under its spell, to the point of them wanting to be chained to it.

Now I know I have failed, I feel like a man born from the ruins of his own past, who tomorrow will forage among the debris and will perhaps be able to find a brush and paint a new secret garden in which to hide when evening falls.

“Have you ever experienced the lack of something, an emptiness that makes itself felt every second of your life, stealing your serenity?” I ask my companion.

He stares at me with a quiet smile on his face. “Do you want to know if I consider myself a happy man? In dreams, happiness is a permanent state that accompanies your everyday life like a willing bride. I, for years now, have been waiting for, longing for that eternal light that will spread my wings and render my being sublime. But I also fear it, because outside the dream world, people are not destined to experience eternal happiness, light is always followed by darkness, and the brighter the light, the blacker it is. I experience thousands of privations, but I know I shall never know complete serenity. So I accept the occasional joys that life offers, without asking for anything better.”

He stops and appears to reflect, his penetrating pupils staring at me through his half-closed lids.

Then he continues: “Of course, it is devastating to see how the horizon seems to change rapidly in front of you, and suddenly hurl you into a gloomy dimension. There, only a fleeting trace remains of past joy, now distant and hidden in the caverns of memory. Have you ever noticed that? It is as if the heights and depths in people’s lives were permanently linked, and followed each other without pause.”

That’s so true. How many times have I realized that serenity is only a glimmer, a sunny day before a storm.



Sometimes you see bridges collapsing behind you, illusions migrating to distant lands, and you think you are falling for centuries and landing somewhere else.

Afterwards, anything seems to have an exquisite perfume.

“I bet you’re a dreamer...” he says, smiling slyly. “What would you call your dreams?”

“Hallucinations,” I decide to tell him.

From the window I see chains of hills and a mirage of myself waving to me then vanishing.

“Dreams unfulfilled during the day can sometimes turn against us and generate nightmares with the complicity of the darkness. Has that ever happened to you?” he insists.

“Nightmares? Indeed, I’ve fallen prey to them more than once. I don’t often remember them when I wake up and they only come to mind the following evening, before I fall asleep.”

“And a recurring nightmare, something that does not resemble reality but is composed of unfathomable symbols?”

I hesitate for a moment. I certainly do remember one like that. I had it many years ago and I've never been able to fully understand it.

I was a little boy then and that dream, so dark and undecipherable, which repeated itself on three or maybe four nights, sometimes several months apart, succeeded in terrifying me. It seemed to be the dream of an adult who felt himself confined to the small mind of a child. Perhaps this was why it oppressed me so, as if it towered above me, dominating me.

“Yes, it happened to me during childhood, and it was not pleasant.”

“Do you still remember it well?”

“Exactly. Though it may seem strange, after so many seasons have passed, I can still recall clearly not only the images but especially the anxiety that accompanied and surrounded it, like an over-elaborate frame that kills a picture. How could I forget it? It was so powerful that I couldn't take the emotion, and had to wake myself up.”

“A kind of safety exit for your psyche...”

“But it wasn't enough, however. In the first few minutes that followed, the echo of the nightmare continued to assail me and I remained motionless, eyes wide open, in the dark, groping blindly for something to cling to.”

“What was your dominant feeling? Fear?”

“It wasn’t fear in the strict sense, but rather a strange feeling of guilt. A guilt feeling so strong not even a murderer could have experienced it.”

The young man’s keen eyes widen: “Whatever could you have been guilty of?”

“Of failure. I had failed in an immense and glorious task that had been assigned to me. Before me I saw barren ground, a desert with neither people nor houses. Suddenly, white skyscrapers appeared and rose up in seconds, and I realized that I had forgotten to make my contribution to those buildings. Not something material but abstract and vital, whose absence made them useless.”

“So you were like an architect who forgets to put in the foundations...”

“I think that’s exactly it. And an error of that kind cannot be remedied. What has been built has to be demolished and then reconstructed. What failure could be greater than that which obliges man to destroy what he himself has created? I felt the weight of my mistake acutely, as if it were a rock that crushed my soul and stopped my breath.”

I see countless thoughts flitting across my fellow traveller’s face.

“Haven’t you ever been able to interpret this nightmare?” he asks, and it is the question I was expecting.

“Not fully. The symbolism isn’t clear to me. There are times, however, when I think that it was a symptom, a premonition of the torment that would later seize me and lead me to look at creation with new eyes.”

Now that I am talking to the stranger opposite me without being ashamed of revealing myself, this possibility seems more than plausible.

I’ve never liked that opening up too much to others, confiding the truest part of ourselves to just anyone. Yet in certain situations it is useful to find a *someone* to whom you can talk about yourself, to whom you can reveal excerpts of life lived. At times, there is almost a need to meet this *someone*, just once, knowing that you’ll never meet them again.

“So yours is an inner torment?” he asks, in the tone of someone who no longer remembers he is just a stranger.

I’d like to tell him I suffer from a disturbed sensibility that obliges me to feel more than I want to. But I know my illness thrives on concrete facts and unacknowledged barriers.

Difficult to explain the frost that penetrates that vital part of you and crystallizes your world, transforming it into an ice sculpture.

And it happens every time you sense a conflict but you don’t know where it is, when you feel pain but you can’t localize it, say if it is in your body or beyond.

“Yes,” I reply. “It’s suffering with ancient roots, but which I still carry inside as if it were an extension of me. It follows me wherever I go and rains on every single one of my plans and illusions.”

“Have you ever rebelled, have you ever tried to drive it out?”

Perhaps. There are times when you’d like to kill your good side and wake up incapable of feeling anything.

And instead of radically shifting the limits of your capacity to believe and understand, you’d like to close the gate and throw the keys in a bottomless well so as not to regret it.

“You ask me if I’ve ever tried to liberate myself from it? To tell the truth, I don’t know. At no time do I think I really wanted to eliminate it. What I can say is that I’ve tried to curb it, to divert its power elsewhere, transforming every tear into a stream of poetry.”

...

You,  
unknown thoughts,  
which play  
the masters of my spirit,  
you  
who are starved of pity,

leave this nest of yours,  
for a moment at least,  
so that in the comfort of the night  
I may  
find peace...

“Are you an artist? What you are saying confirms what I’ve heard, that real art can only be born from suffering.”

I smile.

Writing is playing with your euphoria and pain, hurling images that others will gather and recompose to their liking.

It is immersing yourself in the mists of collective memory and extracting its essence; it is feeling distant but vigilant, appearing and then hiding behind the screens of fantasy. It is taking sips of reality, savouring the aftertaste.

“Creating is, in fact, a means of getting rid of it,” I reply. “But the more you create the more you feel the need to go on creating; thus a stream springs from your hands that feeds itself until it becomes a river. That of my Art seemed unstoppable...”

“It wasn’t the case?”

“No, it wasn’t. Without warning, the river in full spate stopped flowing. It has not dried up completely, but it is as if it had been checked by unknown mental restraints, by a strange reticence that, like a prolonged drought, has damned and reduced it to a trickle.”

Inspiration is a breath of wind that sometimes passes right by without acknowledging you. At other times, you can grab it by the tail and tame its instinct but, first, you must believe in it.

I start thinking about the time I composed my first truly felt work. It was no longer a stylistic exercise but a real desire to donate verses to a cause.

I recall the feeling of emptiness I experienced when it was finished. It was as if there had been a hole in my soul, as if I had poured a part of me into those words.

I remember the joy of writing to recount the soul of others and also little arguments which – sometimes – had hardly touched me. For some strange reason, the world is convinced that not everyone deserves to be depicted by a poet’s pen, as if enjoying a measure of supremacy on earth prevented some from being touched by suffering.

Thus, the chosen subjects of my art did not seem victim enough to merit a place in my verses.

But I sang the nights in which their fears came alive and dwarfed them, when death touched them, leaving an indelible mark on their faces.

“Do you know what an artist feels when he is able to express his emotions?” I say to my young companion. “It’s something indescribable. A masterpiece is the emptying out of his being but, also, its complete realization.”

He catches me off-guard: “Why did you kill your Poetry, then?”

This is one of those questions that prowl around your mind without surfacing, waiting for someone else to bring them to light.

Why did I kill it... I did, but I had never asked myself why. Perhaps because there was no need. I considered it a closed chapter of my life and didn’t think it should be reflected on.

But was it really like that?

You can remove an individual from the world of art, but you can’t remove Art from an individual’s life. When it’s there, it will remain for ever, even if disguised or camouflaged as something else.

“Because suddenly something changed,” I find myself replying: “All at once, the uselessness of those words on paper, completely devoid of that power I had hoped they would possess, became wholly, bleakly evident to me. Because Art doesn’t change the world. It’s the world that strikes Art to the heart, vilifies and humiliates it with hypocrisy and chains it to the walls of fiction. No, my friend, Poetry’s worth nothing. It’s only an illusion and, perhaps, for this very reason, doesn’t even deserve to exist.”



What is the sense of utopias? People use them to fool themselves and others, to project themselves into a fantastic era that does not exist.

“Do you think so?” he replies. “I believe, on the contrary, that we all need our share of illusions, whatever form they may take. And who can say how many things are really a mere illusion of the senses? Look out of the window. Does what you see really exist? Often I find myself thinking that perhaps we are all nothing but a fatuous and imaginary sham, that perhaps everything around me: other people, things, feelings, are only a creation of my mind, and that one day I’ll discover I’m only an entity trapped in a lost corner of the cosmos, striving to conquer my utter ineptitude but without ever succeeding.”

I look at the trees as the train speeds past them, taking bits of leaves with it.

In the distance a woman is walking, her hair blowing in the breeze. I remember that day, aeons ago, when I walked in the wake of my talent and, as I walked, thought how easy it would be to fall asleep out of habit and forget to wake up the next morning.

It’s sad when creativity deserts you and leaves you to drown alone in the dried-up well of your emotions. Even when the buildings collapsed, leaving behind only the remains of my certainties, my talent could not regenerate itself or transmute suffering.

According to the young man, then, everything that appears before my eyes could simply be an invention, the product of the mind of an individual who creates a space in which to play with his fantasy.

Looking at the world from this point of view, whoever is the protagonist?

Is it me perhaps, or am I merely a secondary element, a product of another's fantasy?

Then maybe I don't exist...

Who knows if I ever had a beginning or if I shall ever have an end – which will perhaps be a door through which to reach a new era of light?

I really hope I exist, I am here, and have my own story that is not the mere product of an abstraction.

It cannot be any other way.

I know I exist, because I have to admit to myself that one day someone came, bent over me and offered me the passion and depth of thought.

Because Art is given like a flower.

“Look at those houses over there, who can say if they really are as we see them and if tomorrow they will wake up and remember they are there,” he continues.

Now, with this new doubt about existing, I too want to wake up and remember my gift. I’ve looked inside me and everything is so deep that I could lose myself in my own words. I’d like my heart to help me think, as if the only rational part of me were, in fact, the most emotional.

But I wouldn’t like to be a sole protagonist, condemned to wander through my mind with only thought for company. I would simply like to be one of the protagonists, one of the elements of universal complexity.

Because communication, in whatever form, is the daughter of community, and a person without communication is reduced to a hermit or a madman.

“Do you think something of us remains when the earth is freed of our presence?” he asks.

What will remain? Maybe nothing. Maybe only a long evening in which thoughts dissolve like clouds, impossible to trace.

“I find it difficult to imagine. Only the memory of us, I guess.”

How many times have we already gone, while still alive. This is probably why I sometimes get nostalgic for narrow streets that are just a stone’s throw away.

“Do you want a part of you to remain?”

I smile. There and then, I could have said I'd like someone to clone my brain and preserve it through the centuries.

“Some fragments of my beliefs, of my illogical feelings that don't need to be explained,” I say instead.

Or, I find myself thinking, this useless minor suffering that causes age to lose its meaning, and leaves me feeling naïve and devoid of knowledge, with the naked heart of a child.

I shut my eyes and, for the first time, I see that my darkness is a mosaic. It is made of tesserae that, though adjacent, refuse to touch, and perhaps only I can see the trace of colour between each one. I have never been able to tolerate complete darkness. To make it bearable, I have always needed a source of light, no matter how tiny, to be able to get my bearings.

I hear the train brakes screeching and I know that I'll soon be saying goodbye to that *someone* who has accompanied me on a stretch of my journey.

The young man stands up. “I get off here. I imagine you will be continuing, however. I hope you find your station soon and perhaps you will, because what we are looking for is – usually – not far away.”

Yes, maybe that's so, I think while waving goodbye.

Or, at least, I really hope it is.

## Chapter 5

Last stop

Another station, more unknown faces which, through the glass misted by my own breath, seem distant, as if they belonged to a past era.

If only I wanted to, I could wipe the window clean with the back of my hand and reveal a new landscape, clearing my mental desk of all bad thoughts.

Many years ago a friend said to me: “Your feelings are straightforward, while mine are complicated.” And I had to laugh, knowing how wrong he was.

If he had been able to see the tangle of transparent wires from which my heart was suspended he never would have been able to unravel them. But I kept the secret sealed inside me.

An elderly man appears in the doorway of the compartment. His medium-length white beard and sober, almost clerical, dress make him look like the wise ascetic who tiptoes into your life and leaves well-marked paths in front of you, indicating the road to follow. Old age does not hurt everyone and for some it is the period when each piece of the puzzle falls into place, and their eyes shine with calm confidence.

I smile at that figure; the serenity that seems to emanate from him is disquieting but so reassuring, and I invite him to enter.

“Thank you,” he says, smiling back and sitting opposite me. “I don’t like travelling alone, so when I get on a train I always look for someone to talk to. When I saw you, I thought you might have a similar desire. Am I wrong?”

When I set off on this journey I sought complete solitude. I thought it was the only way, the best way to explore the caverns of my psyche and to find the entrance to the tunnel leading to the open. But my previous two companions had made me think again.

“You’re not wrong at all. I was watching the doorway because I, too, was looking for someone.”

“Aren’t we all? Society advocates individualistic ideals but really we’re all constantly trying to make contact with others, even when we think we’re rejecting them.”

How true! Man was created to share his life with others, that is his real nature.

“At my age, I have understood how important it is to grasp every opportunity to compare notes, to talk, to meet someone on your path and journey for a stretch together. Do you know that an encounter can change your life? It may last only a few moments but it stays with you, carving a niche in your soul and remaining there, forever.”

I have had such encounters along the way. So intense and real that I wonder if they actually took place. They are fleeting memories yet I still succumb to their sublime fascination.

Perhaps the elderly man sitting opposite me has experienced something similar in his life.

“Has it ever happened to you?” I ask.

He half shuts his eyes and it seems, for a second, that a past emotion is surfacing, transforming his expression. Yet he doesn’t seem to be searching for a memory, rather calling forth something that is always with him.

“Of course it’s happened to me. They were strange encounters, the kind that make you wonder if others could ever have them, or if, perhaps, you had to exist for them to take place.”

“What influence did they have on you?” I ask.

A smile spreads across his face: “They were so important to me that if everything were now to disappear, if, like a withered leaf, I were now to be carried away by death, it is precisely through thinking about them that I would be able to convince myself I had carried out, at least in part, the supreme task assigned to me as a human being.”

He breaks off and stares at me, as if to drive home the truth of his words. “Sometimes the most fascinating aspect of an encounter is knowing that one has something to give, even if only words,” he says

quietly – and I remember my hands dripping with words oozing pure feeling.

Please train, now that you're taking me who knows where, awaken, if you can, the slumbering part of me and track down my lost sleep even if it may kill me.

I want to get up and journey inside myself again, to stay and play with beauty and gently take it by the hand.

“Do you know something?” he continues. “In my wanderings I have certainly been impressed by successful men. But the things that have changed me are others. I have seen strangers, winners or losers, drown in the black sea of suffering. And when this happens you give so much that you feel your soul emerging from the confines of your body, and don't know if you will ever be able to make it re-enter. It's only thanks to these strangers that I know I existed in this century and I have left my modest mark on the wall of history.”

It is not the unflinching and indestructible heroes that you remember for ever.

It is the defeated everyday hero who stays in your mind, like an indelible figure that stains your spirit.



It is the man who is able to show the vulnerable face that only tears reveal, the one who makes you feel privileged to have discovered his best side.

It is the son lost in the fog who appears before you, seeking in you his spring, the one who makes the mist of every doubt in you dispel.

And, at once, you feel the master of your destiny, and capable of growing flowers in any desert.

What really takes hold of you is the euphoria of a preacher when the non-believer weakens and yields, which spurs him to shout the name of his own god even louder.

...

Cling to me,  
if the nightmare sweeps you  
into a tunnel of slime,  
ignoring you,  
splinter of a rough gem.

...

Hold me  
to banish the futility  
of my empty arms,

yearning to welcome  
your quiet sadness...

While we were talking, it started to rain outside.

Perhaps destiny is a raindrop on glass that we can wipe dry or leave to run down the surface.

Perhaps the trail left by the water recounts emotions through the many fragile rivulets, and the inadequate gestures we do not follow up.

I look at the old man and I wonder what vital force he draws on not to succumb to fear, I ask myself how he shuts out the sick music of hate that offends the ear.

Perhaps I should make an effort to remember that time when the most beautiful thing in life for me was to glimpse the light in my neighbour's eyes, and to know that I was the only one who could transform it into a lofty source of pure poetry. And to feel infinity vibrating in me, lifting me out of my miserable existence. That was living, for me. And I asked for nothing better.

“Two men, among all the others, were those defeated everyday heroes for me,” I tell the man who seems to speak the same language as my memory. “The first I met on a sunny morning, one of those mornings

that follow a day of bad weather, surprising the earth still wet with rain. Looking at that man in uniform, seeing his eyes the colour of the fresh leaves light up while I spoke, I discovered the value words spoken from the heart can have. I thanked God, that very moment, for having given me the gift of feeling and of speech. When I embraced the man, I felt his emotion and pain cutting through me like a knife, passing from his soul into mine. I knew nothing about his past, but the tears glistening unashamedly in his eyes, alone made him a man to be sculpted forever on the walls of my memory.”

...

Captain,  
touching your heart  
you have reawakened  
voices never silenced  
in the conflagration of memory,  
sending up clusters of stars  
and chimeras,  
supreme, vibrating light.

How sweet  
the silence between us

in our whirlwind embrace,

utopia of eternal music.

Perhaps I will never be able

to stop

holding you...

...

In your eyes I have found

those eyes sought

on the sailing ships of history

and in deserted streets...

...

I would like to help you escape

from every shadow

that insinuates itself

into your thinking.

Let me embrace

your weeping

and your euphoria,

like the faithful custodian

of your torments.

...

Captain

in a few moments frozen in eternity

you have bestowed on me

silent, swallowed tears

unspoken words buried

in the deathly sigh

of tired, mute gravestones.

Now,

let your tears fall

forgetting the rest.

I shall embrace you weeping

on my heart.

Without speaking.

The old man nods as if he has understood every aspect of that encounter, even those I can't express in words.

“It would help to convince people of the uselessness of fiction and coldness, and urge them to express their emotions without fear. Because toughness does not signify spiritual strength,” he declares. “But you said there were two men you remembered...”

“That’s right. I met the second one abroad. He was kneeling in front of a war memorial, speechless and racked by sobs, while groups of unsympathetic tourists passed by in astonishment behind him. I too had gone past, listening to my terrible fear of doing the wrong thing, of being rejected. A fear that always limits me, and one that perhaps I shall never completely overcome. But then I went back. I knelt down next to him and I started talking to him in his own language. I don’t remember a single thing I said, but I know I felt that the words flowed as they had never done before.”

When I returned from that trip I realized that, through him, I had seen the real side of the country. The face it has in its moments of distress, when winning is no longer so important, and when the pain caused by every sacrificed life becomes more acute; when the nation wakes up in the morning and presents its face devoid of any mask, careworn but rendered magnificent by each one of its expressive wrinkles.

...

In the sultriness of unrelenting summer,  
a shower of sun bathes

shining monuments,  
disturbing  
the ancient pulse of martyrs.

Alone  
a bowed man  
caressing the engraved plaque  
remembers  
dreams betrayed and killed.

How many dark dawns  
you have known,  
without a single light  
to cling to,  
wounded  
by evanescent mirages.

How many steps sacrificed  
in the leaden mud  
that obliterates and cancels.

A thousand times and more  
I have felt it  
on me,  
icy and burning,  
ruthless  
as the worst executioner.

Thus,  
in the gentle, weeping image  
of the lone, defeated hero,  
today,  
in July's hot embrace,  
triumphant or injured,  
victorious or defeated,  
\*\*\* is  
infinitely mine.

Now and forever.



Buy his fears and carry them away, I had asked the light breeze that seemed to be listening as I walked away from him, so that one day they won't drive him to make choices I cannot bear. If you don't do it, I'll seize them myself and hurl them into oblivion forever.

“You must have been glad of the opportunities you've had. Not everyone is lucky enough to see things from a certain point of view.”

“I was, in fact. But I would have been happier had those experiences not remained simply episodes to be framed like unique works.”

But that's what happened.

Reflecting on each one of them and others I cannot help thinking, yet again, how bizarre is my destiny, which several times has allowed me to reach other human beings only to push them away from me.

Or perhaps it was I who withdrew, out of fear that I was later forbidden to betray.

If loving without dividing is a crime, then innocence is not a part of me and I declare myself guilty of not having been able to suffocate the feeling that does not follow the logic of the balance of power.

“Who knows why I can get so close to you that I could brush the dust off your clothes with a touch of my hand, that I could read your soul,” I used to wonder, looking at people who, from time to time, appeared in front of me, “but I know that tomorrow I shall return to my impotent remoteness, and you will be so absent that I will not even be able to ask you why.”

I give form to distance, as if it could be touched.

Distance is a circle traced with a finger on the screen of life and wherever I go the same space separates me from the centre, as if I were walking on the perimeter.

Countless times I have sat next to someone and pretended to be a stranger who has no questions to ask.

Like that time someone opened the gates to let the sound of his fears reach me and then thanked me. And I knew that I would never leave.

Or like the time someone tried to explain to me that risking your life, and even losing it, is one of the rules of the game that cannot be changed.

“I’m not scared,” he said.

I am, I thought, and the smell of fear never leaves me.

It is fear now, more than anything else, that dominates me, the sound of that yesterday that was digging its way through to be reborn.

“Forgive me,” I thought, “if I am unable to accept the wounds I see on you, forgive this subtle pain of mine that attacks you with its silence. Forgive me if you belong to me today, tomorrow and always and if you generate images in me that perhaps do not resemble you.”

Contemplating that show of self-confidence which barely concealed shreds of weakness, I thought again: “I’d like to have the courage to tell you that the only choice I shall never be able to forgive you for is taking for an enemy, yet again, those who have always been inseparable from you in my heart of hearts. But I don’t know how you will be able to deal with the essence of this revelation. You, fount of power and pride, accustomed to feeling a winner.

If you ask me who I am, I’ll tell you that I’m a survivor of the world that you alone have created and shaped in your own image. And, even if you wanted to, you couldn’t save me from the thought of you that forces me to adjust my route and invent new islands on which to land.

I who, speechless in the face of the destruction that is born from and ends in you, still drown in my anxiety when I feel on me the hand of the devil who is caressing you, when I feel that something is happening, when I feel that the merry-go-round is turning at dizzying speed and everything is so still around me, that I am unable to clutch at anything.

It's wonderful to see new lights on the hill and the ignes fatui lend substance to my illusions, and I would like to believe that also tomorrow the door leading to your heart will be open, but I already know I shall find it barred and I shall bang on it with my fists in vain, until I my hands bleed.

Then I shall even be afraid of the cold determination I detect in your every action, perceive in your every word, spoken or simply intuited.

And you will be so different from the image of you I carry inside me that I shall no longer recognize you..."

...

Dark in me  
has returned that shadow  
lengthening  
beside you,  
cold and implacable.

Please  
chase away that shadow,  
so that it will no longer obscure you,  
recasting you in the diabolical role

of the stranger...

Your affection for me will then be impure, just as my love for you is unfaithful and imperfect.

Thus, if I declare myself guilty of using you as my sole inspiration, you too must admit that you became lost when power stretched out its cold hand and touched you anew.

If you can, tell me about the times when the world seemed to be dying around you, tell me about the time you looked at your face in the mirror and, discovering dark sides that were formerly invisible, were as scared of yourself as you would have been a long-feared enemy.

Suddenly, I become aware of my elderly companion's presence.

“According to you, what’s the use of being able to communicate with others only for a few moments, then not being able to stop them when you know they’re making a mistake?” I ask, almost talking to myself.

I remember, when looking at the shoulders of a person in front of me, that I thought I could see a rough wall, far behind us, as if we had climbed over it and it was now located behind and not between us.

And I experienced a feeling of serene confidence, the sweet relief that makes you think you've come through your longest night. But how many times that wall has returned, disguised as a sheet of thick glass, and I have crashed into it without even scratching the surface.

Its transparency was deceiving, it allowed me to see the people from whom I separated myself, and it was almost like having the illusion of walking next to someone, and only realizing later that you're following two different paths.

“What value, then, does the belief in our fellow human beings have, the obstinacy that leads people to go against the current, the trust in one's own impulses? Whatever value will my life have if I am always the wretched master of a few moments?” I ask again.

My travelling companion seems struck by my question. “You're asking yourself what value your life has? I can tell you that I have asked myself the same question countless times, and the answer has always been none at all. Because the implacable oppression deriving from my ineptitude, from the impossibility of changing the world, was too strong for me to alter all that I found intolerable. This feeling of nullity filled my soul and dragged me more and more violently towards the putrid swamps of self-rejection. But, luckily, the seed of life won every time, because the only thing that can, and always will, save man is believing firmly in what can only be born from him and only he can generate. When I think about all the little things that would not have

happened had I not existed, I know my life has not been useless. The important thing on the journey of life is to follow the dictates of the Self, all the way, without worrying if they produce momentous deeds or only modest episodes.”

Follow the dictates of the Self...

Besides, what would we be without our Self made of pure feeling? A shabby, bleak, abandoned building where the light fears to penetrate.

“How did you find your true Self?” The elderly man’s voice makes me jump.

Yes, how did it happen? At times I feel I know, while at others its birth is like an obscure event that I myself cannot explain.

“I encountered my real Self by chance one day, when I was a child,” I find myself replying. “I can’t tell you whether I was searching for it. It was like a passing stranger who scares yet beguiles you, capturing you with his disturbing, unfamiliar charm. And you follow him, even though you don’t know where he’s heading.”

“Did you recognize it at once?”

“No. At first it seemed like a flash of lightning, a summer storm. In actual fact, as I realized later, it was a blinding rent that split the brief period of my youth in two, an infinite chasm that swallowed up every

last remnant of my brief past.” I break off, because the words suddenly won’t come.

I think the palms of my hands bear the sign of this wound: the cut that slashes my life line.

That day, while reading a newspaper article, I had discovered that the beautiful, clean world I thought surrounded me was simply a figment of my imagination, and had never existed. Because human beings reject one another and seek all manner of different ways to harm each other; they shatter their dreams, showing no mercy.

...

That vast land  
divided between them,  
men bound by fraternal blood,  
tie severed  
by supreme hatred.

And Cain killed Abel,  
because thus it was written,  
because the fire of power  
was already consuming the veins of the future,



like sinister light through the centuries...

I know my interlocutor has the right to an explanation, so I start searching inside, managing to scrape up a few words:

“That day I saw, for the first time, that humanity had made divisiveness its standard. That rejection of the other, so presumptive and resolute, made me shudder. And I asked myself dozens of questions. If you only knew how many times in recent years I have found similarities between people that only feeling reveals. These appear clearly before your soul, as if they had been waiting for you in order to become manifest, and you cannot fake surprise, because you’ve always known they were there. Every time you’ve dared to hope.”

And the images, the eyes, the figures overlap; the stories are brought together in you.

And you would like to be the crossroads where these paths can finally meet and decide to continue together. And you would like to be that sea where millions of rivers converge and merge into clear, crystal water.

With poetry you shape the figures and render them sublime with little touches of the pen, constructing splendid, complex scenes to accompany them.

“But the reality that appears before you is so lurid and beset with suffering that the chronic uselessness of your wretched feelings is revealed to you in a flash,” I continue quietly.

The old man is perplexed. “No,” he says emphatically, shaking his head. “The pure feeling you nurture inside is never useless. It grows and transpires from your every action, and is spread all around you. It is a rose with no season for dying and, for every petal given, it acquires a hundred. It is your strength. The only strength you have.”

“But what good is that strength,” I reply, “when you realize you can’t use it to say ‘No!’, because no one can hear you?!”

I have seen and kept quiet because keeping quiet was the only acceptable thing.

Every time I have seen *them* plunge into mourning and insecurity, I have prayed to the god I believe in: “For each time *they* have killed and wounded, I ask your forgiveness.”

I remember the days when I prayed, kneeling in the darkness of my impotence. Addressing someone who could not hear me.

And first you blame this on your childhood, then your youth and so forth, until you understand that it will always be that way, and maturity will not change your being a voice in the silence.

“And you try to ignore what is happening,” I continue, “filling your mind with other thoughts, shutting your eyes in order not to see. But the night takes its revenge on you, and the cold, sweaty face of pain appears in the nightmare. And then you accept that complete and utter failure is perhaps what awaits you, and veracity of feeling and pure, honest impulse are good for nothing.”

...

Perhaps I shall arrive on foot  
at my painful destination,  
after an arduous, thankless journey.

But it will be late.

And I shall lie  
in the mud of history,  
next to forgotten corpses,

walking  
in the fields vilified  
by blood.

I shall weep  
in the inauspicious night,  
as I lie  
in the cavern of impotence.

Mud  
I shall breathe nothing but mud,  
I shall gather nothing but mud,  
in the open wounds of the expired earth.

The cry of the slime  
is all I shall hear,  
and the sigh of Death  
who will erect in my memory  
a tomb of mire.

...

And then

I,

creature doomed to Supreme Unhappiness,  
will be nothing but mud.

The old man smiles, and does not seem astonished by my words. “I, too, tried to repress something that was causing me pain and to dominate my thoughts like the horse-breaker tames his magnificent steed. But what is wild will only allow itself to be controlled until the reins are pulled so tight that the bit cuts into its flesh. Thus, what the daylight managed to repress, the night allowed to run free and transform itself into the anxiety of the nightmare.”

He breaks off and stares at me. “What are you running away from? Because you are running away, aren’t you?”

Yes, maybe I am.

Perhaps I want to do this every time I look at the burden I’ve taken upon myself and I’m scared of it.

Then I tell myself I've changed and pretend to believe it, hoping I won't recognize myself.

How many times I have wanted to escape from myself, from the cage of my weighty reflections and from that subtle, incomprehensible pain that rules my life at will.

How many times I have asked myself where this journey will end and who I actually am: the aware traveller or victim of this inexplicable frenzy.

“How do you know?” I ask.

He seems to relax, as if he were about to reveal an identity he truly feels is his.

“I know more than you think. I know you'd like to escape from the prison of your thought, the one where you have always lived and breathed, and seek refuge on new clouds, to build a house of dreams that are not yours.

To most people, escape seems the only way out, the definitive answer to every question, the final liberation from the sword hanging over each and every one of them.

You'd like to run out there, beyond the barriers of your goal, to lose yourself in an expanse of desert that opens the doors to an unknown path.

But I know about that little boy who walked on the beach where the water had just receded, and already had other horizons in his eyes.

And he let the foundations of that idea that would make him an adult grow and strengthen inside him, while the waves broke on the sandy shore.

I remember that little boy who wanted to attain earthly glory to realize his goal, but refused to use others to do it.

I recall that youth who made constancy his standard, and who was prepared to pay the price of every spoken or written word.

And I know about that young man, besieged by doubt; I know about the fear of failure that consumes him and tears his faith to shreds.

But I also know how many times life has given him more than he expected, making him feel that his goal was near; and how many times he has felt himself the master of his destiny and capable of winning every battle.

Look behind you.

You've received more than you've given.

And you're still asking if this is your road?

Now you think you want to fight your destiny and leave your Self behind, throwing it away as if it were garbage.

But a man can't escape from a destiny he has already embraced.

He's like a bird born in captivity, which feels a prisoner in its cage but, once free, realizes that it can't exist anywhere else."

He stops speaking for a moment and takes my hands.

"Do you remember that time you saw *them* talking nearby? It was the scene your eyes had always hungered for, and the surrounding images faded and then disappeared. Then *they* turned and smiled at you."

And I felt as if I had been blinded inside by the dazzling beauty that had overwhelmed me, creeping up on me like a long-awaited yet illusory surprise. It was like winning the lottery of life.

"There will be hordes of vandals who will want to win their place in hell by destroying the new accord," he continues and I can already see their shadows towering above me; but, suddenly, I'm acutely aware that I am here, more than yesterday, more than ever before.

Even though I'm the stranger, the stowaway of feeling who weaves his web and brushes past figures without ever revealing himself.

"Don't run away. If you give up now, the skyscrapers in your nightmare will end up collapsing. Because, without you, they are only



made of sand, like that you used to build those castles on the beach, which the sea devoured and dissolved in one fell swoop.

Take this, I'm giving you Art again.

Take it in your hands and use it all but without letting it go. Stop writing if the words do not seem adequate, but always remember that it exists and is watching you, waiting for the smallest sign, to appear.

Use it to speak of a long flight above the known and visible sky.

Like that time *they* smiled at you and you thought your soul had been illuminated. Like that time you saw *them* weep and you felt *they* had washed your heart away.

When it happens again, your doubts will be shattered like distorted mirrors.

Then you'll do crazy things like throwing your paltry certainties in the garbage, like putting on a uniform although you loathe war, like pretending to have abandoned the game when, instead, you have never been so alert.”

I have seen beyond beauty and beyond ugliness, beyond petty meanness, the thirst for omnipotence and errors committed and repeated, and now that I contemplate *them* in amazement, though from behind another wall, I can still recognize *them*. So why not tell the truth, all of it.

Because, if I did leave, it was only for a moment.

I want to continue to believe that it will take a lot to defeat me if I use the brightest part of me: virgin, incorruptible feeling, constructed stone by stone.

Because I'm not scared.

He knows it now, and continues with smiling eyes:

“Look at me, I am the little boy with cerulean eyes who was travelling alone and showed you the clouds.

I am the *someone* who asked you why you had killed the Art in you.

I was you that day you made a promise and took an oath, heedless of yourself and that game called destiny.

I am what you will be, in the future, when you find you are old but will finally experience the completeness of being you are now searching for, and think you will never find”.

The train suddenly brakes sharply again, and stops.

The old man doesn't move.

“I’m staying on the train,” he says, “but you must get off. Because this is YOUR station.”

Now that I am on the platform, I realize I’m back where I started.

All I have with me – still – is the photo of my cat, in a suitcase.

Maybe, I never left.

What I do know is that now I can begin again.

