MARTA MARÍN-DÒMINE

Flight Was The Most Precious Thing We Had

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To err

To err, to stray from a given path, to go from one place to another, haphazardly.

Erring, erratic, erroneous.

From the Latin *errare*, applied to people who take unpredictable paths, who roam. To everything which proceeds unthinkingly. An erratic rock, an erratic pain.

Whoever roams alone unsettles other people to a certain extent: that great sedentary majority which claims to have found a home and to have followed its destiny. And so that person will be regarded as someone who is inclined to make mistakes, which is why being errant is associated with error.

Contrary to those who think they have put down roots, whoever wanders aimlessly - *the errant one* - has no fear of mistakes or errors. Open to change, having chosen to be on the move, when she reaches a given place she doesn't take it over, but simply lives there. And when that person has stayed there long enough, having tired of the place or to avoid the occasionally irrepressible wish to take possession of it (she is allergic to the expression 'our home'), then that person abandons the place, with a lightness of spirit only possessed by those who have no sense of nostalgia. She is faithless to her birthplace, that wanderer, that vagabond, quicksilver-like, restless,

dissastisfied by landscapes, going through borders and airports, stations, beds and homes, lovers.

The idle, the lazy, and the mundane too, the pariahs, the pursued, the dreamers, the scatterbrained, almost all the crazy people, depend more on compasses than they do on calendars. Because space is in opposition to delimited, counted, distributed time. Whoever roams remembers the passing landscapes, whoever takes roots remembers the passing years.

It can happen, and does happen, that in the landscape of the errant one, a violent, cannibalistic moment of time can flare up. When time flays the landscape - and we are not referring to wounds such as ploughed furrows, nor morphological changes in the routes, nor traces of animals or ancient minerals, nor geological accidents such as caves or cliffs, nor the successive stages in which cities see their past demolished to make way for an ephemeral infinity – the landscape becomes a sketched surface, meaning that as soon as the violence done to beings both human and animal leaves a mark on the landscape, that is when a moment of time flares up that will first of all be a mere recollection and then will form part of memory. Time, then, is a letter which later generations will have to learn to interpret before it is swallowed up by oblivion; that is how time dissolves itself into space.

The recollections of the errant one, are at one with the senses: “Here she saw such and such a thing”, “there she smelt some other thing”, “over there she tasted that

other thing". Wanderers give shape to their recollections depending on the accidents of space; they know nothing of monuments or plaques. The recollections of a wanderer emerge through tectonic plates, each impregnated with all the others, fused and devoured by them. Overlapped. For a wanderer, recollections are not written out on flat surfaces where one can find lists of inscriptions, dates, deeds. Lacking possessions as she does, recollections, for her, are screened on thin air: all she has to do is look up, or if her recollections are painful, look at them out of the corner of her eye.

And the wanderer knows that she who roams, either because she has to or because she wishes to leave her fatherland and her loves behind, will be plunged into an uninscribed life, as if her body were weightless and occasionally invisible. Like everyone else, the wanderer will sometimes forget, but the wanderer herself is always forgotten. Being forgotten is the price she pays for her freedom. Only those wanderers who are forced to wander as a punishment — wearing a mark like that of Cain — will be remembered.

The wanderer looks for a resting place like water passing over cobbles, moving through openings and pipes. Each passageway, each Newfoundland. Her body sometimes heavy, sometimes weightless, her body, lived in without rules and regulations.

Whoever roams thus defies a physical law, the one which says that all bodies fall at the same speed. The

wanderer's body is always half-walking, half-falling: on the path to total oblivion.

As opposed to exile, errancy is perpetual motion. Exiles often search for a home, but whoever insists on being errant lives in open spaces: she uproots obstacles just as a bulldozer demolishes buildings. The exile can cease to be one, one day; the wanderer never ceases to be errant.

2

Ab-errations

Are exile, errancy, transmittable from one generation to the next? What marks do they leave on the bodies of those who actually live through such experiences? What traces, on those who come afterwards?

What do children remember of the echoes of the looks and murmurs exchanged by adults when they furtively try to say that which cannot be said in public? When adults speak in a language that, according to them, infants cannot understand?

When I was very small I noticed that despite your unrelenting good moods, your untiring optimism and your curious nature, revitalised, probably, by my birth — the virgin curiosity of an infant tends to rub off on adults — on the spot where you should have sprouted the wings of an archangel there was, instead, a pitchfork of snapped bones. When I was older I came to realise that those branches were something inconvenient which you bore on your back, a sign of your unease when trying to face up to a place, here, which had cut off your wings. The pain, probably even the anguish, of having to live in Barcelona, from which you would have liked to flee so as to cross the border to the north and wander, errant.

Time, however, passed at a pace marked by the dictator's finger, as if on the globe in Chaplin's film. You felt you were in exile without having gone anywhere. You would

tell me, one day when I was older and far from the city that stifled you, "they stole Barcelona from me", that's what you said. You wandered in your dreams because in dreams we are free, according to you, steeped as you were in the Existentialist and Oriental philosophies that kept you going. You also said that you flew in your dreams. I inherited that dream and when I was little, I also flew. When we told each other about our dreams we realised we were masters in the art of wheeling, gliding and flying over cities which, unlike Barcelona, allowed themselves to be loved. So I can say for sure that dreams are heritable.

You had learnt to take to the air over the space you lived in, without losing the love you felt for two territories: that of Gos, a tiny hamlet near Artesa de Segre where you spent the summers when you still lived in France — when I winged my way over it with Google I managed to count thirteen houses, and the Catalan Wikipedia says it has thirty-one inhabitants — and the village of Sant Llorenç de Morunys, where you were posted for those endless three years of military service imposed by the Franco regime, with a company of mountain troops. There you made contact with the *maquis*, the anti-Francoist guerillas, and helped by other insubordinate soldiers like yourself you helped them make their way across the mountains, risking a charge of high treason.

Afterwards you would fly over Béziers, the city of your childhood. *Ta ville à toi.* Your city. Such a great city it was to your childhood eyes that when you got back to Barcelona at the tail end of 1935, the latter's

neighbourhoods seemed poverty-stricken to you, its way of life small-minded for a twelve year old *garçon biterrois.* Soon, however, you learnt to love it, to love the Clot neighbourhood, to be a regular at the Martinenc Athenaeum, at the Anarchist associations which your father used to belong to. Almost immediately the war came, or the revolution as they they called it in your home, and then your voluntary enlistment at the Sabadell military airfield, and in February of 1939 came the painful parade into exile together with thousands of others who crossed Figueres, La Jonquera, El Voló on foot, only to end up in the internment camps — Argelès, Saint-Cyprien, you never called those places by their Catalan names, the way people do now when the subject crops up, which is a highly contemporary way of silencing the voices of those who bore witness.

You were never able to remember just how many months you spent in Saint-Cyprien. You do recall that members of the SERE, the Spanish Republican Emigration Service, asked you, a fifteen year old kid, if you wanted to go to the USSR or Mexico. Exhausted, unnerved, famished and homesick as you must have felt, the adventurous boy that you were requested to be sent back to Barcelona to be with his father and sister. There's no doubt that you would have liked to have remained in France; you knew that from Saint-Cyprien to Béziers there was, at most, a two day walk. But you were too young and too lonely. When you made the decision to return you didn't yet know that it would be you that would have to take charge of the family,

given that your father, who had been involved with the Anarchists, didn't dare to leave home to look for work. In 1939, that provincial, friendly, neighbourhood Barcelona, which had shown such solidarity, and whose combative working-class side you prized dearly, crude and cruel though it had sometimes been, had become a stagnant place in which you had to start from scratch and in which, under the raised arms of the Fascists, shadows hobbled rather than walked, like frightened dogs leaning into the walls. A place of pain for evermore.

I was born there when open shapes and spaces were starting to reappear, ten years after the end of the ration cards. And both of you placed wizard-like spells on me, as parents did to so many children born at the end of the 'Fifties, in an attempt to free us from malnutrition and the rickets, the principal illnesses of the war and the post-war period. You wanted us plump and satisfied. 'Rickets' formed part of the vocabulary of my first infancy, linked to the terrifying universe that opened up whenever you pronounced the words 'hunger' or, even worse, 'famine', both of them linked to your wartime experiences. I have to make an effort to place myself in that city permeated with animosity and fear, paradoxically grateful for the peace which had been imposed upon it.

You never wanted to visit the Town Hall or the Palace of the Catalan Government. Not even under democracy, when it was open to the public on the Day of the Rose. Impossible. You couldn't erase the memories of the Franco period from those walls. Those later,

institutionalised visits always struck you as being a bit lame, a hypocritical, or at least a forced gesture on the part of the post-Franco authorities — you never felt that any of those institutions represented you.

Your generation always remembered the humiliating order to 'speak the Christian language' — *habla en cristiano* — intended to eliminate the use of Catalan, as well as the little abuses of power exercised by functionaries who strutted around the city like thugs from a third rate movie. A Barcelona against which Andrea — the main character in Carmen Laforet's novel *Nada* — fought, trying to see a lively, luminous city where there was nothing but immense political and moral oppression.

In Barcelona you were always a wanderer, you and so many others who didn't have — as did Andrea — the resources of a bourgoisie that was in cahoots with the Franco regime. For them, the city started in the posh neighbourhood of Bonanova and ended on Aribau Street, just a few metres from the university. You belonged to the outskirts, you were one of the people who 'went down into Barcelona' for a stroll, to have fun or to work. When you were younger, in order not to lose yourself in a city that you felt was in the hands of priests and Francoists (what had happened, you asked yourself, to the workers' world, the hustle and bustle of the neighbourhoods, the popular athenaeums, the local theatres, those spaces that were yours and yours alone?), you mapped out a route which was always more or less the same, by way of a routine which allowed you to feel, in a calculated kind of way, that

you had a modicum of freedom - I would like to have rummaged about more in your memory, to have listened to you more carefully so that I could explain now what you felt then, during those sixteen, twenty, twenty-five years lived under a dictatorship, after you'd fought for a utopia. How did you manage to laugh, to make love, to think about having children? What shape and colour did the word 'future' have for you? I never dared to ask you what you felt on the day you realised that your youth and part of your adulthood had run their course under a dictatorship. Your defeat, both in the war and under the dictatorship, caused me pain, has always caused me pain, it's only now that I am making an attempt to face up to it. How come I still feel so much anger? I know that I will never make my peace with this country. For too many years I too have looked at it sideways on, like a hobbling, frightened dog sticking close to the wall.

I took a first step towards trying to imagine what I supposed you had lost, by means of a brief and highly precocious political militancy, still under the Franco regime. I was in the grip of a feeling of pure vengeance, like that of Joan of Arc, who you admired after your fashion. You knew that I was politically active but we didn't talk about it. As if we were two close comrades on a secret mission. During the harsh repression of the last years of the Franco regime, you helped me to burn the political pamphlets we found in our letterbox and which we decided had been put there in order to incriminate me.

I know there were plenty of laughs along the urban roadmap of your youth, as well as pleasure and loves and passions. Life pushes people forward. You were good-looking, you had friends — you were their leader — you broke hearts. You loved movies, and reading, and taking good care of your body. You'd always liked the Pre-Socratics and Naturist philosophies, a keenness which I imagine you inherited from your Anarchist family. The beaches at Marbella and Badalona, no matter how dirty they might have been, guaranteed you two things: they could make you feel strong and healthy, and they could lighten your soul. And from them you could see the horizon. You swam with your back to the city: an attempt at errancy. Later you took a liking to the Sant Sebastià baths, with their splendid swimming pool and huge trampoline. You took me there when I was little, let's go to the baths, you would say on odd Saturdays during the summer. I admired your slow crawl style and you told me that I did an excellent breaststroke.

When you were young you went out at the crack of dawn to take long strolls across the small mountain pass called the Forat del Vent, or along the Aigües road. Paths and tracks close to the city, on its edge, you avoided its breath because you didn't belong to that monster. You walked just beyond the city limits, so that you could see it from on high, or from the sea. And you also died on that periphery, in a rest home for geriatrics near Tibidabo, in the month of May, not long ago. And the care-givers brought you glycines. In the rest home it occurred to them

to put you at the same table with Floreal, another elderly Anarchist who had been in exile. A few weeks before you died you sang a tango for us; from time to time you smelt the glycines you were holding in your hand. I have a video of that.

The periphery served you as both a border area and lookout post. Places for strolling through while remaining on the qui-vive. Even so, that city was never yours. On one of the many days that I called you from Toronto, and during one of my frequent rants against the country, against Barcelona - with my anger directed against you, as if you were responsible for my unhappiness, you who had been unable to give me a better city — you told me that you understood me, that you had never felt comfortable in Barcelona. That they stole it from you a long time ago. My heart split in two, devastated.

So what you needed to do was cover up that past theft so that you could live in that same space. So that the space, though occupied, would become yours once more. Let them do as they wish, you must have told yourself, we'll learn to live here as subtenants. Our fear, you must have said, is also bad for us. Fear is often the sister of revenge: those in charge never know when their lackeys are going to serve them a poisoned dish.

When I was born, the city must have been a sweeter place for you to live in. Despite the losses, the death of your sisters, of your mother, buried in France, the disappearance of so many neighbours. A decade, the 'Fifties, was coming to an end. You had all learnt to talk in

murmurs, a language for the initiated so you could talk about that which could never be spoken aloud: the deaths in exile, the misfortune of those Anarchist neighbours who had died in Mauthausen ("nothing was ever heard of them again," you would say, and then came words that were incomprehensible to a little girl, "camps", "nazis"), uncle Manuel who couldn't return to Spain, the Lleida side of the family that was in exile in Argentina, your father who had lost his job and never dared to look for work again, out of fear of being shot.

Maybe the city really was a sweeter place for you when I was born. But even so you never did what other fathers did: take me out for stroll to the fountains on the *plaza España* or let me give vetch to the pigeons on the *plaza Cataluña.* You didn't even enter the church where I was taking my First Communion. You were the only father, obviously, who didn't go in. On that day it seemed to me that the good father that I knew had suddenly become a bad one, and I was afraid the Devil would carry you off. How many times, in later years, has that anecdote made me smile, because of what I eventually realised was your anti-clericalist audacity.

From time to time we would go for a walk in the nearby rural area called Les Planes and on muggy summer days you would take mother and me to the coast, either to Santa Cristina d'Oro or to spend the weekend with friends of yours in Calella de Palafrugell. On cold winter days — one had to fight the cold to strengthen both mind and body — we would go for hikes: Hostalric, Breda, Sant Llorenç

de Morunys, Camprodon, Besalú, the much-loved village of Rupit, where you and mother had married. When on holiday we went to France, where our chests could broaden out and breathe to their maximum capacity.

I went to the places you wouldn't take me to, with other members of the family. When we got to those large, ugly squares, I thought how lucky I was that someone was holding my hand because my heart was beating feebly, as if afraid that it'd be abandoned by my body, and my body grew weak, as if the world had suddenly decided to have nothing to do with me. I felt that the grown-ups who had taken me there were upset too, and that's why they did what everybody else did: buy a paper cone of dark, ugly vetch pods, pretend to be fond of those ever so dirty pigeons with their husky cooing fouled by saliva, and pray that the things wouldn't crash land on us, driven crazy by the ugliness of their surroundings. The squares, the ghastly big squares of Barcelona, the afternoon strolls with my mother or one of my uncles. The black stains on the walls, from grease, engine oil, chewing gum, from very little, from next to nothing. Yes, I sensed that the adults were as lost as I was; they sometimes walked with hung heads. Not my mother, she walked upright, wanting to take in a world that wasn't hers. My mother, who the Civil Guard once took to the *cuartelillo*, their local barracks, for a breach of public morals because she'd refused to pull up the strap of her swimsuit, which had slid half-way down her arm. She'd responded by pulling down the other strap.

You had to go and fetch her from the barracks, proud at what she'd done.

To rescue myself from the world of those adults who were both frightened and brave, I had only to close my eyes and take my hand away from whoever was holding it, and go back the way I'd come. To the garden at home, which looked as big as a forest to me. There, on summer evenings, between the lemon tree and the fig tree, with the pebbles crackling under my sandals and the geraniums and the velvety fuchsias, as red and purple as the twilight, you would settle in there to enjoy the coolness as the night drew on. Then, in bed, I would close my eyes, but this time it wasn't to run away from the pigeons and the dirty squares, but rather to enter even further into that evening moment of yours and to narrow the distance between the garden and my room. Yes, I would close my eyes, so as to better hear the sound of the ice cubes in your glasses, your voices, proof that I hadn't been left alone in the world. I also liked it when you said nothing, and then I would hear the voices of Charles Trenet, Adamo, Sacha Distel, Gilbert Becaud, Mireille Mathieu, and, above all, that of Aznavour. The summer nights were cut through by another language: they were lived in French. Just as nostalgia, hope and jokes were lived in French. Every time you said something in French to make me laugh, you would close your eyes, just like whenever you let a slab of chocolate melt on your tongue. To close one's eyes, leave everything behind. I learnt that lesson fast. One had to close one's eyes. But, before, one had to do a lot of

wandering, until one could find something sweet to melt between tongue and palate.

Errancy, like exile, hampers the foreseeable flow of things and time. The wanderer is forever in a kind of exile, even when she thinks she can say the word 'home' without feeling restless. She is kidding herself. Even if it's only out of tiredness or because she's not focussed. But she knows that she has to keep on moving. To continue being an aberration, learning to keep away from the beaten paths. To play the role of the erratum, that letter which appears all of a sudden, distorting the meaning of any given word.

3

Putting down roots as a form of punishment

Rochelle has invited me to stay at her family's country house, a hundred kilometres from Toronto. The Toronto Rubinsteins are a pretty big crowd, there might even be hundreds of them. Their wedding celebrations, bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs usually take up two or three of the big lounges at the Hyatt hotel. Rochelle told me there are more Rubinsteins in New York, Sao Paulo, Israel. There are none left in Hungary. Her father's mill was transferred to somebody else in 1944 and he was cheated out of it once and for all in 1945. Rochelle has never wanted to find out who ended up getting the flour mill. I've told her that she has a right to find out, that the mill is still hers, and although it might seem senseless to seek compensation, or even impossible given the current political situation in Hungary, I tell her that we could go there one of these days, even if just to film everything which has gone for good. I don't think anyone has yet filmed the empty spaces left in Europe in 1945. Nor the manner in which those devastated spaces were filled up, as if they were stuffed animals. This is probably the reason why, in Europe, when we refer to the past of the death camps and the war we talk of horror, and very rarely of vertigo. Horror makes us turn our faces away; only if one dares to look does one feel the vertigo of the past.

Rochelle's parents met in 1945, in an Italian transit camp where they spent days, months and years waiting

for a chance to get to the Americas. After a three year wait, when it seemed as if they had already managed to 'remake their lives', as people so casually say, they managed to board a ship to Canada. There they found the courage to open their eyes and face life, a life which had turned its back on them after Auschwitz and Mengele, whom Rochelle's mother had seen from close quarters. They once again opened their eyes little by little, learning to look again so that the light didn't hurt their eyes. Their memories returned to them in the form of images, hanging there like clippings in their memories, and they would once again face up to them, looking at them, as before, from the corners of their eyes.

Their entire family murdered, both on the father's and the mother's side, and whenever Rochelle tells me about it she looks up at the sky with a restrained gesture, which is not contemplative but measured, so as not to incite pity, strangely free of bitterness and with a slight tint of shame, as if she were afraid that she'd bother people, like someone walking on tiptoe. There is something about this gesture — the same gesture which I've seen made by other sons and daughters of Jewish survivors, in Toronto, Montreal, Paris and Brussels — that seems to be intended to hide an old pain, not necessarily that of their parents, but rather the more complex pain which is passed from the parents to their offspring. A pain which begins in infancy. It is a gesture which tries to be casual, a thought-out gesture, that of someone who has travelled far and has looked this pain in the face many times, and knows its

sharp edges and its nightmares, the sleepless nights, and now simply explains its cause, in a sentence, being careful not to shake it about much, given that this pain can still wake up and drag us all along with it, our children and our children's children.

Rochelle's family, the Rubinsteins and Schwartzes who were originally from Hungary, the ones who saved themselves from one of the last round-ups for the Final Solution in 1944, arrived in Toronto in 1948 after having passed through Grugliasco, near Turin, one of the hundreds of camps for displaced persons set up by the Allies when the war was over and designed to house supervivors temporarily, mainly those from the Nazi camps, who had ended up without a house or a country to which they could return. The father and mother arrived in Toronto with a one year old son. Rochelle was born two years later in that city on the banks of Lake Ontario, not very far from the country house where we were spending a long weekend.

As I write, I am sitting in front of a window which makes a perfect frame for the clear, cold lake of subterranean water which lies a hundred metres away, at the end of a gentle green slope. On one side of the lake, there is a platform made of boards placed on top of some pilasters which stick out from the water. Just like in American movies. One afternoon, when out swimming, I rubbed my foot up against one of the submerged pilasters and felt its slimy surface, the slug-like skin made by freshwater plants (you knew that I didn't like rivers, that I

found the pebbles unpleasant, no matter how pretty they looked, because I believed there were snakes lurking underneath them. I enjoy remembering how you helped me drink freshwater from rivers by cupping my hands, and how I drank like a thirsty puppy after one of our walks). A few metres beyond the lake there is a huge plane tree with a sign hanging from it that says RUBINSTEIN. The affirmation of possession: the house of ruby stone. A kind of revenge.

From the window where I am writing I can't see the sign, or the entrance, just this perfectly positioned framed image of the lake, the grass, and the gentle hills that spread out beyond the road. I make an effort to feel that this landscape belongs to me, but despite its calm beauty I don't feel at home. Landscape isn't universal. And I don't think music is, either. During our childhoods we impregnate ourselves with sounds and images, and we learn to make sense of the world on the basis of these first impressions, which act as a yardstick for the rest of our lives.

This landscape stretches out before my eyes like a spectacle showing me a vast, low horizon, with stunning sunsets. I feel small and lost, helplessly foreign. And also guilty that I can't be a part of this beauty that surrounds me, in this little room which Rochelle has offered me because she was sure, so she told me a couple of days ago, that I would work well here. When she said that, I thought it would be a good idea to get away from Toronto for a few days. Rochelle's presence would help me work, and, above

all, to hold my tears back. (I wanted to read your memoirs in one go, without being interrupted by crying. And not end up, as usual, by putting the pages back in their folder).

Since we got here the days have been overcast; a watery summer, which is quite normal in Ontario. I've learnt to love clouds to the extent that I like getting up and checking to see if maybe it'll rain today, so that we'll have a shadowless day during which we won't have to worry about closing the shutters or airing the rooms, so that we won't get drowsy after lunch and that we won't wake up with the doughy mouths you get from summer siestas. Clouds, what's more, allow me to see the landscape without having to narrow my eyes, without getting dazzled. They make trees and mountains lose their conspicuousness, so that they acquire a more human size, easier on the eyes, and at the same time one can make out the rythmic sounds are produced under the cloud banks, far from the strident noises stimulated by the sun. From time to time I take a break, obliging myself to bring Ghandi, Rochelle's dog, along with me for a walk. And so I find out just how fine the air is (as fine as that of the farmhouse in Gos that you describe in your memoirs, there where you used to spend the summer holidays away from Béziers).

There comes a moment during the walk when I feel a powerful need to return home, just like when I was little and I found myself in those big squares in Barcelona with my hands full of vetches, not knowing what to do. At the same time the malleability of the space we call 'home'

comes as a surprise. I, an ageing, third-rate Gretel, in the middle of a forest that is unfamiliar, full of dark spots and brown bears that will leap out and gobble up all three of us: me, Rochelle and an inconsequential dog that looks like a ball of wool. It's drizzling, and although I like the feel of the water wetting my sandals, I don't know what to do with the dog, which tugs and tugs at me because the stubborn thing wants to get to the road, or maybe further, where the path dissolves into a white patch and where we'll end up being swallowed up by the lake monsters, according to Native Canadian legends. The dog challenges me, stopping in the middle of the path and giving me a menacing stare. Now we've both come to a halt, the dog doesn't want to go on, and I don't want to go back. After a while the dog and I stand stock still looking at the horizon, which for me is a painful line that separates me from the continent from which I've come.

I sit down on a rock, and feel the dog, free from the tugs on the lead, sitting close to my legs. It's the light filtering through the clouds that has made us stop, and we're stuck in the middle of the landscape, like two isolated clods of earth encircled by that immense light that occupies the entire sky, darkening slowly, turning the space below it into an iridescent bubble that is green, blue, red, grey, black, half hell, half paradise.

Both of us, the dog and I, remain immobile, fascinated by the spectacle, astonished at our own smallness. We stay sitting for quite a while, hypnotised, silent, calm, our chests expanded by the almost unbearable

feeling of total freedom, when we have already taken our own shrinking for granted. (A feeling similar, perhaps, to that felt by your father, a builder who loved his profession because if he worked in the open air, he said, he could make sure that the walls he was building wouldn't imprison him. You told me that when your father worked in Algiers, the other workers admired him because he never used a plum bob. Amazed, they asked him how he was able to build walls that were so straight and he proudly told them that the only guide he needed was the line made by the horizon on the sea. About that handsome, brave, rebellious worker, you wrote:

My father was a builder. I don't really know why I felt such satisfaction every time when, without realising it, he repeated that he had loved his profession all his life. He often told me how, when asleep and dreaming, he had solved some of the problems that cropped up at work. Certain delicate bends in a staircase, the spaces between girders and a whole string of jobs that required skill and experience. When working on construction sites, he adored the open air. He said that it was then that he felt most free, with the sensation that nobody was bossing him about. He said he liked making walls, but not feeling shut up in them).

The dog and I feel overwhelmed by this huge American sky which is too much for us. We go back to the house when it's almost dark. I don't have to drag him along.

From time to time, on the way back, he stops and looks at me. We are closer now, having watched the sky together. But I don't want to get sentimental about him, and break into a run. The dog gets excited and follows me. We both want to get back into the house, and seek shelter from the world.

I sit down again to write. On the wall opposite the large window to the right, three beautiful human sized figures are hanging, made of organdie. Three feminine shapes, with sad expressions, their hands crossed over their pudenda. The ones at each end are wearing transparent clothing that expose ample, slightly fallen, maternal breasts to view. The one in the middle is wearing a pyjama with vertical stripes: black, white, black, white... These figures have been painted and sewn together by Rochelle, using her own body as a pattern contour. To draw them she lies on the floor or flattens herself against the wall, provided with tissue paper, and marks her outline with one of those pieces of chalk used by dressmakers, because her work is a mixture of drawing, painting and tailoring. Stretched out on the floor or against the wall, she briefly becomes a motionless body. Her figure shifts into strange, curious postures. Sometimes she looks like a dancer from Pina Bausch's company, curled up, or making a pleading gesture, or brazenly half-naked. The faces drawn by Rochelle tend to have sad expressions, but I notice that recently she's taken to drawing happy faces, and daring bodily shapes.

Rochelle walks into the room while I'm taking a break. I've been looking so intensely at the figures that my eyes, it would seem, are still shining, as she looks at me with some emotion, comes over to me and takes my hand. She's spent the day working at her studio next door, in the part of the building that used to be a stable. A print on gigantic silk cuttings of an image that looks like the blueprint for a city under construction. This is Auschwitz, photographed by the Allies on April 4th, 1944, from a Squadron 60 Mosquito photographic reconnaissance plane belonging to the South African air force, based in the city of Foggia, in southern Italy. The aim at the time was to locate the industrial complex of Monowitz, a camp annexed to Auschwitz which is where Primo Levi was deported, not far from the Birkenau extermination camp, where Rochelle's relatives were murdered. As reconnaissance photographers usually switched on their cameras a little before and a little after filming the target, for a few minutes they managed to get some pictures of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Which is how they spotted the smoke from the crematoria, thus confirming the dreadful, long held suspicions of the Allies.

Rochelle and I are working on subjects which have to do with our parents' past. That brought us together right from the start.

Before the catastrophe, Rochelle's mother worked as a seamstress in Hungary. When I met Mrs Judith Schwartz, who had become Judith Rubinstein in that Italian transit camp, she gave me her hand in the same way

Rochelle just has: gently, as if afraid the contact would be intrusive. At the time, my attention was caught by a kind of blue stain which appeared a little way up from her wrist. When I understood what it was, I felt something I hadn't felt before, a mixture of distress and shame. Judith, probably used to the disquiet caused by those tattooed numbers, told me, while looking at me with sad calmness, that the organdie figures hanging on the wall of the room where I am now writing, that back in Hungary, during those fateful days, the war in Spain was talked about a lot.