Diary of an Illegal Immigrant

Memoirs from Spain and Morocco

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Preface

"Iraqis, Moroccans, Algerians, Kurds, Pakistanis, gypsies, Indians. Infinite races wander this old continent looking for a way out. Each one has their own story, stories that are authentic films" (*Yawmiyat,* 53). These are the words of Rachid Nini in his autobiographical novel, *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant,* as he reflects on his experiences as an illegal immigrant in Spain. For this project I have translated the book, which was originally written in Arabic and later translated into Spanish. I used both versions to create an English translation that I think reflects the melancholy, and often sarcastic, voice of the author as he describes his life as an illegal. Nini comments on the interactions between Spanish and North African cultures, revealing the nature of xenophobia and cultural stereotypes. The book's pages are replete with insights and musings on the tribulations that characterize everyday life of an Arab in exile. There is irony in the book as Nini attempts to dispel these stereotypes that Spanish and North African cultures have of each other, meanwhile propagating stereotypes of his own of other European cultures. His memoirs beg to be read by a wider audience, as they depict not only the experience of a Moroccan immigrant in Spain but also the overall identity of an immigrant. To preface my translation of the work, I will give an overview of the author and the book, as well as a brief literary review on its main themes and social commentary. Finally, I will discuss the translation from both a personal and general perspective.

Diary of an Illegal Immigrant

Before discussing the book, it is necessary to provide some details about the author, as his education and personal background is central to understanding the book because he serves as both protagonist and narrator. Rachid Nini was born in Ben Slimane, Morocco in 1970 and spent many years studying to become a journalist. However, even with a university degree, Nini was unable to find anything but freelance work, and, after months of frustration, he began to feel like he did not belong in Morocco. Since childhood he had nurtured the idea of traveling across the Mediterranean after witnessing neighbors immigrating to France and coming home with newly luxurious lives (López). When the author received an invitation to participate in the World Amazigh Congress, an annual conference on human rights and the identity of the Berber people (Larbi), on the Canary Islands, he immediately took advantage of this fleeting opportunity to enter Spanish territory. Although his visa was only valid for a month, Nini went straight to Alicante with what little money he had and began searching for a way to make a living and a place to settle down. Nini describes these feelings: "When I entered that cold continent I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, or where I could put down some roots. So I let my destiny guide me, like a cardboard ship abandoned in a small stream" (*Yawmiyat*, 174-175). He lived in Spain for three years before finally feeling the desire to return to his homeland in 2000. "I had to go back," he writes, "like any migrating bird leaving the cold to return to the warmth" (*Yawmiyat*, 167). He left the country after just three years but he later married a Spanish woman and obtained Spanish citizenship, although he still lives in Rabat.

The author's three years living alongside Spaniards, Algerians, Argentines, and

gypsies affected him enough that he decided to chronicle his experiences during his time there. His desire "to paint a portrait of the events that others experience every day" (López) motivated him to scribble his thoughts on napkins and scraps of paper in bars and cafes. He regularly mailed or faxed his accounts to the Moroccan newspaper *Al Alam* to be published weekly (Mora) and later the chapters were compiled and published in book form in 1999. However, this first edition did not garner much attention until 2002 when it was translated into Spanish and published as part of the series "Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo" ("Editions of the East and the Mediterranean"). Since then a second edition has been released in Morocco, although the Arabic version of the book is not as widely read as its Spanish translation. The goal, as he saw it, was to enlighten other societies, especially Spanish society, about the reality of being an illegal immigrant because these other cultures only know "what they see on television. The clichés: rafts, drownings, fishing, and hashish. They don't know the people" (Mora). For Nini, the popular perception of immigration is misleading about the true nature of the immigrant identity.

Difficult to classify, the book represents a cross between autobiography and novel, and can best be described as a collection of memoirs. Like *For Bread Alone,* a series of vignettes from the Moroccan author's life (Mohammed Choukri), *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* traverses that boundary between genres (Lisenbee). His style of writing also adds to this ambiguity, as he chooses not to portray events chronologically, nor provide specific historical details. In contrast to the quasi-autobiographical aspect of the work, many of the proper nouns are left out, creating a sense of anonymity. None of the characters appears in more than a few chapters, and they are known only by their first

name and some identifier, such as "Ahmed the Algerian." There is no mention of the narrator's name, except on the cover of the book. This gives the reader the impression that it does not matter who says what or when the events take place; only the situations are important. Through this anonymity Nini, consciously or not, transforms his memoirs into a universal testament of the immigrant experience. It seems like this could be happening to any immigrant in any foreign place, struggling to make a life. *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* is a deep look into the immigrant identity and the experience of being an illegal in Spain, which I will refer to as a part of the Andalusian experience, as the term "Andalusian" reflects the overlap of North African and Spanish culture, both historical and contemporary.

I will give a brief overview of the historical context of the Iberian Peninsula because it is vital for understanding the interaction between the two cultures. North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula will forever be linked by the shared history of Al-Andalus, the historical term for the region ruled by the Moors (Arabs and Berbers from North Africa) from the 8th century to the 15th ("Andalus, al-"). The time of Al-Andalus is characterized by the many centuries of coexistence of different cultures and religions, and, later, by the battles that raged through the peninsula during the Middle Ages (Ray). Although the term "Al-Andalus" is now primarily used in historical contexts, the southernmost province of Spain still carries its name: Andalucía. Despite the initial overthrowing of the Moorish kings and the expulsions and killings that occurred for centuries afterward, the peninsula as it is today is inescapably tied to its Islamic counterpart, North Africa. With the increase in immigration, trade, and political relations between North African countries and southern Europe, it is clear that this tie is still as

strong as ever, although now present in an entirely different form.

Diary of an Illegal Immigrant confirms the existence of this continuing overlap of cultures and exchange of ideas, as it transcends the two cultures and represents various views of the Andalusian experience. The overlap appears in the place names of many of the cities and historical sites that Rachid Nini visits, especially in his visit to Toledo. He narrates,

> I sat down in one of the café terraces on Souqadawab. The *Arco de Sangre* stretches in front of me. I don't know the origin of its harsh name, the Arch of Blood, but I do at least know that in centuries past Souqadawab, where I'm seated, was a place to leave livestock before entering the city. Its name now, as it's written on the white marble plaque, is Zocodover (*Yawmiyat*, 149).

The juxtaposition of the names "Souqadawab," of Arabic origin, and "Zocodover," its Spanish name derived from the original Arabic, demonstrates the permanence of the Arabic names in many parts of Spain. This is also the case of Córdoba, Sevilla, and many other southern cities whose names are derived from their original Arabic titles (Quintana and Mora, 706-707). The same occurs in the case of the Spanish language, which has adapted many words from Arabic. For example, the name "Abu Abdullah" became "Boabdil", and *souq,* the Arabic word for market, became *zoco,* both of which are present in the book. More generally, it has been said that approximately 8% of Spanish words are of Arabic origin (Quintana and Mora, 705), among them the common words such as "Ojalá" (God willing or hopefully, from the Arabic *law sha'Allah*), "aceite" (olive oil,

from the Arabic *az-zeit*), and "álgebra" (algebra, from the Arabic *al-jabr*) (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española). Also, the increase in immigration from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula means that more and more North Africans are returning to inhabit the land over which they once ruled. This coexistence, peaceful or not, is the very soul of Al-Andalus, which has been hailed as a period of tolerance between Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike (Ray, 1-2). However, Rachid Nini does not view this coexistence in such a positive light and instead reveals the one aspect of the contemporary Andalusian experience through the eyes of an immigrant.

The Immigrant's Andalusian Experience and Misunderstanding "The Other"

Nini's memoirs seek to expose how the modern Andalusian experience has evolved into a much more complex clash of cultures and a great misunderstanding of "the other." At home and abroad, the author observes the superficial ways that both cultures view each other, and his memories highlight the North African's Andalusian experience. The central idea of "history" that is present in Spanish culture is that of the victors, or their Christian ancestors, which is reflected in their annual festivals that stereotypically depict these past events, resulting in a great historical misunderstanding. It is this misunderstanding that leads to xenophobia and racism towards Arabs in contemporary Spanish society. Similarly, Nini also exposes the way that North Africans idealize Europe, calling it "the Promised Land" and believing it to be "a land of plunder." In the end, his memoirs are a testament to the inaccuracy of both of these perceptions and it is clear that there is a huge misunderstanding of "the other." *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant*

seeks to dispel these false perceptions and help other cultures understand the true Andalusian experience, which is the hard life of an illegal immigrant spending long days in the field and being forced to sacrifice a portion of his identity in the process.

Throughout *Diary*, it is clear that the Spanish perception of history is the history of the victors. The Moorish perspective on the past thirteen centuries of the peninsula is hardly ever mentioned or considered, and everything is retold from the point of view of the triumphant Christians. When the author visits Toledo, he notices that all the souvenirs and merchandise sold to tourists is of Christian origin: "Shields, daggers, and swords of different shapes and styles, but no trace of any Arab weapon. All of the weapons on display are crusader weapons, pure and simple" (*Yawmiyat*, 150). He is unsurprised by this, and attributes it to the fact that, "In history, the defeated are only recognized by their absence" (*Yawmiyat*, 150). The only evidence of the Moorish defeat in 1492 is precisely the lack of evidence of their rule over the peninsula. This absence is present throughout Nini's narrative, as he describes, "They don't attempt to remind the new generations of what really happened when the Arabs were expelled from Al-Andalus. The Inquisition. The slaughter. The collective expulsion" (*Yawmiyat*, 31). Thus, important historical events are ignored, such as the brutal persecution and expulsion of the Moors, leaving Spanish society with a very superficial view of the history of their interactions with the Arab people, which is still evident in the modern day.

The historical celebrations that continue to happen every year in many Spanish towns reflect this shallow view of history. Many of these festivals retell the story of the conquest of Al-Andalus by the Catholic monarchy, but their depiction of these events is superficial and unrealistic. The story "*Moros* and Christians" that takes place in the

streets of Benidorm, a city known for its tourism, does not mention anything about the peninsula under Muslim rule. It describes the conquest of the peninsula as a pleasant series of battles, failing to elaborate on the horrible way that Arabs and Jews were killed, expelled from the region, or forced to change their identity completely to fit in with the new rulers. The depiction of the Moorish characters also exhibits many of the stereotypical qualities of Arabs: hairy, obese, and dark skinned. Nini describes them: "The leader of the *moros* was a fat horseman with a true beard, but he had his face painted black. The others wore false beards to seem like Arab warriors" (*Yawmiyat*, 31). Arabs are only represented by racist caricatures, or not represented at all. This skewed historical perception of North Africa engenders the racism and xenophobia that permeates contemporary Spanish society.

Nini believes that this one-sided retelling of history has created a "historical mental block" (Mora) among Spaniards against the reality of life as a North African on the Iberian Peninsula. This mental block is what preserves their ignorance of the other cultures and makes them unwilling to see beyond the stereotypes. While Nini is traveling around the country as a migrant worker, he writes, "In some of those remote villages where I went to work in the fields, the people barely knew anything about Moroccans. All that they knew dated back to ancient legends about the Moors that had occupied their land" (*Yawmiyat,* 64). Much of Spanish society is seemingly ignorant of Morocco and the rest of North Africa. Modern media is their main source of contemporary knowledge on Arabs, including films, literature and the news. Their impression is based on what newscasters and politicians tell them about the problems of immigration: crossing the Strait of Gibraltar on rafts, drug trafficking, thievery, etc. Nini describes, "In movies that

they show on TV they portray the Arab as an idiot that drools when he sees a woman, and sometimes a potbellied man with an evil look that poisons others' drinks" (*Yawmiyat,* 52). This negative representation of Arabs in contemporary pop culture and media, along with their historical naïveté has created a inaccurate idea of the Andalusian immigrant's experience.

This misunderstanding is mutual, however, as the North African view of the Andalusian experience is similarly mistaken. Like the author during his childhood, many North Africans have witnessed their neighbors, friends, and family members move away to Europe and return with lives much more luxurious than before they left. This cultivates the idea that Europe, and specifically Spain because of its historical significance for North Africans, is a land of plunder, as Nini calls it. He describes the thousands of Moroccans that "spend their days nourishing the foggy delusion of crossing the mysterious strait to the Promised Land" (*Yawmiyat*, 168). This is not limited to Moroccans, for the author's friend Mustafa "believes that Europe is a land of plunder for Algerians" (*Yawmiyat,* 44). This fictitious image of the prospects that Europe offers immigrants is the inspiration for countless North Africans' desire to arrive on the shores of the heavenly "Al-Andalus." However, Nini's experiences after he arrives dispel these stereotypes and ideas because the Andalusian experience, from the perspective of a North African immigrant in Spain, has nothing to do with treasure or the Promised Land.

What is the reality of the immigrant experience in Andalusia? In *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant*, it is the fear that comes with living without papers, the long hours of hard labor for a meager sum of money, and the sacrifice of identity that each immigrant must make when he crosses the border into a foreign land. As Nini reflects on his

decision to return home, he says "I got tired of always being cautious, and I want to leave my house without needing to feel that way. I want to fall asleep without having to check the lock and my papers under my pillow multiple times throughout the night" (*Yawmiyat*, 167). For him, and other immigrants in the same circumstances, his daily life is wracked by fear and paranoia, as well as working under unforgiveable conditions in the fields. Describing the fieldwork, he says, "In order to survive here you have to work like a superhuman mule….there are fields of oranges and tomatoes and estates of cherries, almonds, and olives where it's impossible to work without aging many years prematurely" (*Yawmiyat,* 177). An immigrant loses years of his life working under hard conditions in the fields and living in paranoia, but he loses much more than that when he first arrives to the country.

The most painful part of this aspect of the Andalusian experience is the loss of identity that an immigrant must inevitably undergo. Nini compares the journey of immigrants to that of Tariq Ibn Ziyad, the famous Berber *conquistador*[1] of Al-Andalus, who forced his armies to burn their ships upon arriving on the shore of the Iberian Peninsula so that no one could return to Africa. In the same way, immigrants burn their passports or throw them overboard as soon as they glimpse the other side of the Strait, getting rid of any form of identification and symbolizing their painful emotional sacrifice. Although an immigrant can return to his homeland, he will always have burned a portion of his identity, whether physically or not, when he left home and arrived to the foreign land. Abdelkader, one of the author's Arab friends in Spain, does not divulge his true identity, instead claiming to be a different nationality every time someone asks. He claims that "he's a traveling Arab League. He had barely arrived to Spain when he burned his

[1] The Spanish word for "conqueror"

passport. That's how he got rid of his nationality. And he's continued in that way. Merely a citizen of every Arab country all at once" (*Yawmiyat*, 54). The life of an illegal immigrant has made Abdelkader feel so removed from his native country that he declares himself just an Arab, and nothing else. Rachid Nini, Abdelkader, Ahmed the Algerian, among millions of other immigrants, are familiar with this painful uprooting, dissolution, and struggling for survival that happens unbeknownst to Spaniards in their own country and North Africans at home. *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* dispels their preconceptions and exposes what is, ultimately, the immigrant's Andalusian experience: the partial loss of identity that comes with exile.

Yawmīyāt muhājir sirrī and *Diario de un ilegal:* A Lesson in Translation

Diary of an Illegal Immigrant is an intimate glimpse at the experience of an illegal immigrant in Spain and it also provides a unique insight into both Moroccan and Spanish society. The book demands an English translation in order to share Nini's experience with the English-speaking world and beyond. More and more, English has become an international language and it is currently among the most effective media for spreading a message to any given group of multiethnic populations, especially in Europe (McArthur, 3-4). Many countries there have witnessed over the last few decades a huge increase in immigration, particularly from North Africa. Nini's memoirs are not just about one Moroccan making a living in Spain, but rather they are a reflection of the immigrant experience itself: the feelings of exile, estrangement from one's own country, and trying to survive in any way possible. There is a thriving immigrant culture whose thoughts and

struggles beg to be articulated and published to a wider audience. *Diary* is also an important book to be translated into English simply for Nini's shrewd and often witty observations of the two societies.

As a student of Arabic and Spanish, and having spent a semester in North Africa and a semester in southern Spain, the issues of immigration, the Andalusian experience and identity, and returning to the homeland after exile are all in the forefront of my mind. In Egypt my friends often spoke about their friends and family members who had left the country, often to study or work in a more prosperous region. In Spain I encountered a large population of immigrants from North Africa and witnessed their interaction, or lack thereof, with the native Spanish population. Reading *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* for the first time, the similarities between my observations and Rachid Nini's account were impossible to ignore. I observed firsthand the proud way that Spaniards refer to Arabs as "*los moros,"* their lack of knowledge of foreign languages, and the festivals that inaccurately portray the Christian conquest of the peninsula in 1492. As Nini notes, the Spanish at first seem racist and proud, but after a deeper look into their culture it becomes clear that it is due to a misrepresentation of their history. I noticed many of the same things that Nini narrates in *Diary*, and found in the words of Nini an appropriate articulation of my same observations from my time in Spain.

Admittedly I did not spend any time picking oranges in Oliva, or making pizza in Benidorm, nor did I ever find myself running from the police, and my experience was distinctly different from Nini's. However, this is precisely what drew me to the book, enticed me to leaf through its pages, and inspired me to try to translate it in the first place. I seek to be an impartial third party, an objective reader and aficionado of both the Arabic

and Spanish languages because I have never personally experienced either side of the immigration issue. The project is the ideal situation for a novice translator, especially considering that two versions of the book exist that can be used side-by-side. My first read-through of the book felt almost like a challenge was being murmured to me on each page. It is perfectly suited to my interests, and it was a project that I was eager to undertake.

This is not to say that it was always a project that was eagerly taken back up again during the past few months. Sufficient problems presented themselves throughout the translation process and the biggest issue was that Arabic is a far more difficult language for a native English speaker to learn and understand. Spanish, on the other hand, is more similar to English in structure and vocabulary, which made it far too tempting to simply resort to the Spanish version as the basis for translating. At first I depended primarily on the Spanish at first, and only consulted the Arabic for problematic passages. However, by the twenty-first chapter it was the exact opposite. As my confidence and comfort in Arabic increased, and I became more familiar with the style of the book, it felt incomplete to rely solely on the Spanish. Like a game of telephone, the meaning of each sentence had to undergo someone else's interpretation before being interpreted by me. Consulting the two versions side-by-side highlighted that, while the Spanish translation was often cleverly faithful to the original, there were, in fact, instances in which I would have made a different choice as a translator. Since I was eventually able to use primarily the Arabic, it was much easier to be faithful to the original and confident in my translation. At one point I realized that, after almost four years of studying the language, I can indeed read and understand Arabic! It was a triumphant moment in the experience

that reaffirmed the last four years.

Specifically, there were a few translation issues simply due to the differences in syntactical and grammatical structure between Arabic and any western European language. One of the beautiful aspects of the Arabic language is that you can create a new word from any root, as long as it follows one of the set patterns in the language. This is similar to creating an adjective from a noun in English by adding the suffix "-y" or "-ish." However, the flexibility of the Arabic language goes much further than that, allowing one to create any part of speech, and make it reflexive, passive, active, transitive, etc. This presents a difficulty in English because a translator is forced to find an English equivalent for an extremely complex idea in Arabic. For example, there is an Arabic word that literally means "the adjective for something that is fading in color." Sometimes there is already an English word equivalent, like in the case of "orientalism," which is "the act of seeking to understand the East" in Arabic. But in the first case, it is not that simple to come up with one single word in English that means "the adjective for something that is fading in color." One is forced to use a combination of modifiers, or come up with a new phrase altogether. In most cases I first brainstormed a few possibilities, then consulted the Spanish to see how the translators dealt with the issue, and was finally able to come up with something acceptable in English.

There were also a few notable instances that forced me to make a strategic decision about how to translate a word, or to keep it in the original language. I frequently used the strategy of "borrowing," identified by Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet as the use of a word from the source language (in this case Arabic and Spanish) in the target language (English) (López Guix, and Wilkinson, 236). For example, one of the most

common derogatory ways of referring to Arabs in Spanish society is to call them by their historical name, "*los moros"* (literally meaning "The Moors," but now carries a negative connotation). This term appears frequently in both versions of *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* (it appears in its transliterated form in the original Arabic) and I chose to keep the term "*moro*" in the English version to maintain the cultural reference in its original form. There is no similar way of referring to Arabs in English and its negative connotation needs to be conveyed so that it carries the same meaning. It was also important to keep many of the cultural references, such as names of food like *kibbeh* and the currencies of countries, like the peseta and the dirham. It would not be true to the novel if these words were replaced with either their English equivalent or a generic word like "coin" or "meat pancake." It also serves as a cultural reference, maintaining the foreign element of the book for its readers. Much of Nini's commentary revolves around Spanish and Moroccan societies so these cultural references in *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* are too vital to its understanding to be left out or altered.

Finally, there is the issue of the short, abrupt syntax that the author uses throughout the entire book. Nini employs this technique in many passages in *Diary* and many times he succeeds in creating a sardonic and melancholy tone in his observations of life as an illegal. According to Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, one of the original translators, this brief, halting style of writing can be attributed to the journal-like quality of the book, as if Nini has just scribbled down his thoughts before heading out to the fields or falling asleep at night. As these are rhetorical choices that the author made, I hesitated to make any changes to the punctuation or sentence structure of the writing. However, I also tried to play the role of a translator as outlined by Gregory Rabassa as: "The translator must be

modest, then, must be careful, cannot impose himself, and, yet, he must be adventurous and original, bound all the while to someone else's thought and words. His genius is secondhand in a sense, but he still has a chance to strut his stuff within the limits before him" ("Words Cannot Express…"). In the interest of producing a translation that is fluid and easy to read, I chose to combine many short phrases with commas and conjunctions like "and." For instance, the sentence "Sometimes looking through the pocketbook is like taking a short journey, although this requires a lot of imagination, which is always the hard part" (*Yawmiyat,* 152) was originally three distinct phrases but I combined them to make it read more gracefully. In the end, the English text is altogether less choppy and the syntax and use of commas still preserves the sense of it being a notebook of Nini's thoughts.

It was also necessary to use contractions like "don't" instead of "do not" and "can't" instead of "cannot" in order to be consistent with the same conversational style that characterizes much of what Nini writes. For example, in Chapter 7, Nini remarks that "What's inside is always the most important. People don't look into your depths because they seem mysterious, and therefore scary. People don't want to see it, but life is complicated. Much more complicated than it seems" (*Yawmiyat,* 55). This insightful observation about human nature seems like a conversation between the author and the reader, therefore I chose to add a conversational tone to the passage by using conjunctions and maintaining the second person point of view that Nini frequently uses. Since the job of a translator is not necessarily limited to or restricted by the format of the original text, it seemed best in this case to exercise a bit of poetic license in my version.

The last issue worth mentioning is the discrepancy between the Spanish and

Arabic versions was available to me. The only version of the Arabic original that I could procure was the first edition: 177 pages and 21 chapters. I was surprised to note, however, that the published Spanish translation was around 198 pages and 22 chapters. After much scrutiny and searching, I could not find the 14th chapter of the Spanish version anywhere in the Arabic. I discovered that the Spanish translation was based on a second edition of *Diary* that Nini had published in Morocco in 2004, but hadn't gained much popularity or recognition. It was virtually impossible to obtain using the resources at hand, especially since this realization occurred roughly two-thirds of the way through the process, when I only had one more chapter to translate. Thus, my translation is based on the first edition of the Arabic, lacking chapter 14 that can be found in the Spanish, but incorporating a few of the subtle changes that Nini made to the new edition. The result is a mixture of two editions and, even though ideally I would have used the most recent edition, the end product has the same ultimate effect on the reader.

When all is said and done, what I've truly enjoyed about this project is that it will always be something I can keep working on because a translation never feels completely finished. When choosing to translate the entire book as my thesis, rather than writing a comparative literary analysis on the two versions, I unconsciously opened up the opportunity for months, and possibly years, of labor on the project. I have come to realize that the job of a translator is never over, and a translator is rarely completely satisfied with the end result. Even the minute little details, like whether to use "boorish" or "gruff" when describing the attitude of one character, will continue to irk me. What I decide to be the perfect translation on Monday of any given week will appear absurd on Tuesday, and by Wednesday I'll eventually revert back to the first translation I came up with. This is a

project I can continue working on for a long time, until I am satisfied *enough* with the end product, or until I give up. For, as Rabassa writes, "The translator can never be sure of himself, he must never be. He must always be dissatisfied with what he does because ideally, platonically, there is a perfect solution, but he will never find it. So he must continue to approach, nearer and nearer, as near as he can, but, like Tantalus, at some practical point he must say ne plus ulta and sink back down as he considers his work done, if not finished (in all senses of the word)" ("No Two Snowflakes Are Alike"). I gladly accept the role of Tantalus, completely aware of the unachievable goal before me.

Note: All of the footnotes in the following text are my own.

Diary of an Illegal Immigrant

1.

Yesterday on television a raft crashed against the rocky coast. The seven corpses lay there like stranded boats. I was eating when the images passed before my eyes. Suddenly I felt like I was choking. Someone dragged the bodies toward the beach and covered them with canvas. They were wet, laying side by side.

Today they showed the images again and published them in the papers. How horrible! The reporter on television claimed that the government was asleep, and even I don't really know what I'm doing here.

Yesterday I dialed Bushra's number. Didn't recognize my voice. Asked me why I hadn't called her back. That bitch. Told her that I'd left Morocco and I was in Europe. She asked when I'd come back. Told her I'd settled in Spain. She said it's better that way. Much better. I told her that I didn't know why I'd dialed her number, that maybe I needed to hear a familiar voice. She said Spain is marvelous. Told her yes, marvelous, and that's why the Arabs couldn't stand its beauty and they all left. And look, now they regret it and are coming back! One by one. Drowned, most of the time. She laughed and told me to send her a bar of chocolate. That bitch.

Now there are four of us in the house. Another Algerian has come and brought Miguel. Miguel would start talking about Argentina as soon as he sat down. He said that a little while after he was born in the Basque Country he and his parents immigrated to Buenos Aires where they spent thirty years. Hunger made Spaniards flee to whatever country had food. It was as if Franco had polished off all the food himself. Miguel used

to talk about people that had disappeared during the eighties because of events that, from what I understood with my poor Spanish, had been very painful. Miguel's smile is timid. His many teeth are crooked so he purses his lips when he smiles. If people disappear it's a symptom that something—not usually something good—has happened . People disappear from every country in the world. Sometimes the events become dramatic when a regime, or even just a single person, begins to arrest and punish innocent citizens, or maybe their disappearance is by various means. I thought these things but never said them aloud to Miguel. I don't know why I was so reserved with my opinions. At night, with my head lying against the pillow, I used to say to myself that they were trivial opinions that were better left unsaid. What did it matter to me if people disappeared?! Miguel used to say that in Argentina the Jews had their hands in everything. He asked me if they were really sons of God. I told him that all I knew about Jews is that they let long ringlets grow from their ears and they wear black. And that they had hooked noses like mine, but what was certain was that God had no sons. Miguel didn't understand what I told him so he smiled that timid smile that hid his crooked teeth. It's true, having ugly teeth affects you to the point that you don't smile in front of others. You even avoid talking with them. It provokes a certain isolation that others might misinterpret but in reality it has only to do with having crooked teeth.

In the country there are so many mountains that I don't know where the sun rises. The four cardinal directions are lost in the midst of those elevations. At the crest of some of the hills you can see ancient demolished fortresses. Pointing at them, I told Merche: look, that's were we used to live in ancient times. Merche didn't understand why we had

to climb to the top of the mountain to find a place to live. We constructed these fortresses at the highest place in order to watch over you all because you lived in the plains, I told her. Merche knew nothing of history. She liked chocolate more than she liked contemplating destroyed fortresses.

Orange fields differ from each other by size and by the height of their trees. There are huge, tall trees that you have to climb like a monkey. Ahmed, the skinny Algerian, says that they're like tall buildings. And there are wonderful trees whose fruit you can pick without even moving from your spot. It was normal for one of us to lose his nerves and start talking loudly to the trees, insulting them. When you get mad, you can imagine that they are an actual person and you can yell at them angrily if you want. The leafy trees are always annoying because the oranges are at the top and sometimes scattered all over. After finishing with them you realize that you've wasted a good deal of time and swallowed dust and chemicals. Later on you realize you've spent too much time in the sun. Sweat begins to flow and your face is suddenly covered in thick layers of mud. I eventually developed a strange attachment to the trees. Those simple geometric fields remained stuck in my mind. Pleasantly stuck. But the memories of the complicated and disorderly fields are always associated with a curse. You can insult the trees however much you want; to them it means nothing.

Whenever I climb an orange tree I am reminded of all the times that I climbed up on a stage and grabbed a microphone to recite poems and I realize that life gives us infinite doses of irony. My poet friends talk about the body in their poems. They say it's a new style. Poets whose bodies are usually skinny and sickly. A body is to pile fifty boxes of oranges onto a truck. Every row is seven boxes high. Without time to even wipe your

forehead. That way you see your body perfectly, to see if you deserve one another. I think my body deserves me because it didn't abandon me when I needed it. Unlike poems and books that sometimes betray you until death.

As a child I had a square leather bag. A small, ancient bag, the type with worn edges like the ones in the movie *The Ogre* by Volker Schlondorff. Every morning I opened it and took out the old books. I cleaned them well, polished their covers and then organized them inside the bag. They were not important books, just books that I found in my grandfather's shop. Books on physics, reading, or records of accounting. I liked to organize them inside the bag, each day in a different way. I kept the bag under my bed and every night I dreamed of enormous libraries, flying through their rooms. Sometimes I dream that I can walk on water, and that I don't sink, like St. Peter, as if the water were a huge bed and I throw myself onto it and bounce around. When the snakes attack, I open my arms and take flight like a stork. My mother used to say that in dreams snakes are the enemies and dogs are the jealous. Dogs also attack me, black and fierce.

One day, because I needed money, I thought about selling my books. I brought my bag to the *souq*[2] and put them on the ground. At the end of the day I hadn't sold a single one. I returned them to their bag and put them back under my bed.

Since that day I haven't open it again to clean the books. I needed money and I thought that my books could do something for me but unfortunately they had betrayed me. So I abandoned them just like they had abandoned me and left them under the bed. From that moment on their destiny ceased to concern me.

When I was older I could sell my books whenever I needed money and, in fact, I saved some of them for this precise purpose. I can't desire a book without also thinking

[2] An Arab-style market

about selling it. And besides, I get rid of books that deceive me.

Merche doesn't climb trees, not because she can't but because we don't let her. The truth is that we don't do it for her well being, we do it for our monthly salary. If she fell to the ground they would throw us out on the street. This amuses her greatly, or at least it suits her, I'm not sure which. Every once in a while she throws herself to the ground, swearing that she cannot pick another orange. "If Paco comes, wake me up," she would say with alarm.

Merche used to be really scared of Paco and more than once I told her that Paco is not a god and is nothing to be afraid of. She said she knew that but that Paco guarantees work throughout the entire year. I realized that she'd always been afraid of everything: Paco, gypsies, time, rats, and she was even afraid of us. Once she told us that sometimes she imagines that we'll kill her, steal her car and then disappear. "*Moros*[3] are capable of anything," she said smiling. That day she watched carefully as we returned from the field. She seemed alert. She always seemed that way. She looked sideways at people as if predicting that something bad is going to happen. I told her we wouldn't kill her because we didn't need her car. "It was a joke," she said. In the field she turned around and lit a cigarette; her love for tobacco is incredible. Her morning cough when she takes out her lighter makes me look elsewhere, at the mountains or the fields, where the clouds join in the sky like huge hands. "You'll die from that tobacco," I tell her. "Yep, I'll die from it," she responds.

Christian, the Italian, is the only one who seems to enjoy nature. After rolling and

[3] The derogatory term used by Spaniards to refer to Arabs, referring to their ancestors, the Moors, who inhabited the peninsula for eight centuries.

smoking a joint he begins to talk about the end of the world, his favorite topic. He says that a long time ago he traveled to Morocco and that he spent three weeks there, smoking like he's never smoked before in his life. I asked which cities he'd visited and learned that he never left Ketama. I told him that Ketama is only one area of the Rif but he told me that for him Ketama is Morocco itself. Christian loves to light the fire and he always brings fillets to eat. As he blows on the fire he ties back his blonde hair so he doesn't burn it. He really likes his hair so he constantly moves his head about to separate the blonde curls as he talks. He is also a cheat because at work he rarely uses pruning shears and pulls the oranges off forcefully, which makes Paco mad. We've already gotten more than one firing threat from him because of Christian but Merche covered it up and blamed the broken boxes on the gypsies. They sometimes work for Paco alongside us but if the tree happens to be tall they'll leave the top half unfinished. If they don't like a field, they go to the bar. I don't know why they call us "cousins" and they are not like the gypsies I've heard described in the poems that I read at the university. They're grossly obese, more like refugees. Paco could never say anything to them because they come to work in large groups. Gypsies are only scared of one thing: Arabs.

2.

When Christian drank he used to say that life was wonderful. He would repeat it multiple times. Isidro wouldn't respond, even though he'd continue looking at him as if

seeing him for the first time. They had been drinking since five in the afternoon. José arrived and joined them. They don't have anything in common, they just share the exhaustion of spending the entire week with oranges. They share the price of this tiredness every Friday afternoon. Merche knows that they drink up the last *duro* in their pockets. So she brings them to her husband's bar every Friday afternoon after work to wait for Paco. When he arrives he gives her our pay and treats us to a round. As soon as he saw me sitting next to Ahmed the Algerian he whispered to Merche that he really liked how *moros* work because they are used to the hard life from a young age. Eventually Ahmed and I returned to Khaled's house. He left us the keys and disappeared. He used to say that the police were following him lately. He was scared. "I'll go to Italy, to some friends' house, or I'll go back to Morocco sometime," he would say sadly. At night we used to take down the thick curtains that covered the windows and cover ourselves with them. In the house there was nothing except beds without sheets. The wind howled outside like a hungry wolf. I didn't sleep the entire night. I was scared that the gypsies would come looking for Khaled, who had fled after selling a large quantity of hashish. He had taken all the money without sharing any with his partners. The gypsies don't forgive this sort of behavior. I don't know how Khaled will get out of this one. At six in the morning we leave the house and go to work.

Merche's father is quite a talker. Never closes that toothless mouth of his. José doesn't have any teeth either, nor does Christian. Before Merche picks us up in her big car, we have breakfast in Manolo's bar, a miserable drunk. Every morning Manolo puts on a boring video of a naked woman and man fucking. Every morning the same thing, with the same panting. Manolo thinks that this is the way to maintain his morning

clients. Merche doesn't feel uncomfortable in front of her father. On the contrary, she drinks her coffee with whiskey and smokes. Her voice mixes with the panting of the naked woman in the video. When all the men arrive we get into the car and leave for the fields.

I think what Paco meant is that he likes how *moros* work because they accept workdays of long hours, without demands, and at ridiculous pays. But he preferred to be polite and say that he likes *moros* because they are accustomed to the hard life from a young age, even though he didn't specify what he meant by "hard."

Macarena doesn't know that I'm an immigrant without papers. All she knows is that I came here to continue my studies. That's all she knows. At least, that's what I wanted her to know. Just a student. I told her that I needed to find a job and she said with a smile that I would lose track of time at work and I would forget my studies. "I work, and you study and write," she added.

This morning a thick snow fell over the fields. The oranges were covered with a frost that made it impossible to cut them without freezing over yourself. The men know it well so they prefer to play cards in Merche's bar, waiting for the sun to come out. You can only work in the warmth. Last night Christian broke a toe and doesn't know how. He also lost his pruning shears. The shears crushed me on my first day of work. I'd never handled pruning shears before. I had handled insignificant books or notes that, now, from the tops of these trees, seem detestable. Ahmed the Algerian wounded three fingers. Every time he yells out I know that he messed up a cut and it went through his hand. Working with speed requires small sacrifices like that. Ahmed is a graduate in Chemistry

from the University of Oran. He can't go to see his parents because he has no papers. For five years he hasn't thought once about returning to Algeria. Says that if he returns he'll find a police car waiting for him at the airport. Twenty-four months of military service await him. According to him the army is great stupidity. Says that he doesn't like weapons and doesn't want to learn to shoot them, that it's his right. He never tires of repeating the story of Jamal, the long-haired Algerian. When Jamal's grandmother died he accompanied her body to Oran so that she could be buried there. They buried her and Jamal enlisted in the army, as was his obligation. Jamal said that it wasn't quite military service, that it had to do with searching for members of the Islamic Salvation Front in the mountains. He will never forget the day that they threw a man out of a helicopter for associating with the organization. "The man recited, 'There is no god but God and Mohammed is his prophet.' And while he recited his profession of faith we cried 'hale-hop' and threw him out into space. When we threw him out, we looked at one another and couldn't contain our tears." Jamal assured us that they didn't do anything more than follow orders. The regime considers the solution to be relentlessly pursuing the armed elements and killing every last one of them. That's why Ahmed hates the army. He says he doesn't have any problems with it or with FIS or with the Islamic Jihad or with the regime. He simply does not want to kill anyone.

Macarena doesn't know that I've gone to Oliva to work. All she knows is that I'm in Alicante, in the university, to be more precise. Told her I'd stay at a friend's house, I'd see some professors, attend some classes, buy some books and come back. That afternoon in the Harley Davidson bar, where the enormous motorcycles were lined up at the door

like metallic beasts, Macarena looked at me. Still smiling, she told me that everything that I'd told her was a lie. I couldn't help myself and I laughed. Don't know why I laughed. Told her that sometimes a lie is a necessary ingredient, without which life would be a bland meal. She told me that, in spite of everything, she still wanted to share the meal with me. That she would like it if the three of us lived together. Me, her and that bitch Ethel who barks when she sees me. I told her that I wouldn't tolerate living in a house with animals.

That's how we began to frequent the American café. Even though that was not its real name, we decided to call it such because of the paintings of Red Indians on the walls, and because of the old slot machines at the entrance. Also because of the numerous antlers that were hung on the walls, as well as the abundant cow skins, black and white, that upholstered the counters. I recalled the cows that grazed peacefully along the road between Brussels and the border with France. Cows and more cows, like oranges, that appear endless in the fields. The first day of work I returned home dead. At night, when I closed my eyes, I would see oranges. And hear the incessant sound of the pruning shears. It took a long time before sleep overcame me. When I slept I also dreamed of oranges, and of boxes, even though I didn't hear the sound of the shears. Only thing I heard was the sound of the alarm at six in the morning.

Ahmed the Algerian says that he envies me for being Moroccan. I asked him to explain why and he told me that Moroccans are not obligated to serve in the military. I tell him that it's great, since it doesn't benefit anyone if civilians learn how to shoot a gun.

I have developed the hands of a farmer, with little scars and wrinkles on the tips

of my fingers. The snips have become something normal. As soon as my hand gets used to the toughness it becomes calloused. The same happens to the heart. It's enough just to break it a few times to make it start to callous, and to not beat for anyone. I feel like my heart is closed up with heavy locks. Nothing can get to it. All the things that were inside it are staying there forever, in stagnant waters.

All the love stories that I read as a child had to begin with intense gazes. I read in a book that the gaze is a poisonous arrow. When one of those arrows caught up to me, I couldn't sleep.

Sure enough, the arrow was poisoned. Many years would pass before I realized that I carried the arrow embedded in my back, much the same as the flags in the back of the vicious bull in the middle of the arena. I don't know. Every time I cut an orange from the tree and it fell to the ground, it reminded me of her. It reminded me of Bushra. Even though I knew that the oranges would not escape me, because I squatted down and picked them up to put them in the box, something deep ruptured inside me. It's like the feeling when an almond falls on its way to your mouth. Even though you have many more almonds in the bag, the loss of one almond spoils everything. It's truly sad. Women always have the perfect excuse to leave a man. One could be a chatterbox, or boorish, or lacking qualifications. Bushra didn't have any excuse, but she left me regardless. The arrows stuck into the flank of the bull shake around every time the animal moves in the plaza. The more he roars, the more pain he feels.

She left me to marry someone else and I felt that my life had ended. It was as if I had arrived at a dark tunnel and I had to enter it on my own. A long, dark tunnel like the ones that children dream about when they don't pee before sleeping. In the university we

used to chant slogans together in protest against the raising of the price of coffee in the cafeteria, against the scarcity of books in the shelves of the library, and against other foolishness. Bushra stood by my side like a quiet militant, with her nose that looked like a cherry and her thin smile.

An amateur militant, at least. In the university we hated the communists because they spoke nonstop in huddled circles. And when the police arrived they were the first ones to flee the scene. When calm returned, they came back to their circles, saying that the militant should be the last to die. We used to think that we were all combatants. That's why we didn't understand why someone had to die first.

Sometimes we would go to the bulletin boards and tear down the pictures of Lenin and Marx. I read in a book that Marx was neither a communist nor an atheist. Some students of the party were friends of mine. We'd published poems in the same newspapers, so we'd happened to share the young writers' section. This was enough to justify a vague friendship that would last through the university years. The communists that I knew were poets. I mean that they wrote poetry. This was the prototype of the militant in the university. They should wear worn out jeans and have several days' growth of hair on their face, and appear wary all the time. To complete the image, they had to publish a sad poem in the Party's newspaper.

My friends did not know to which student group I belonged so they never asked me to join their organizations. In the university communism was laughable, like a storm in a teacup. Even if Marx had been alive, he would've said that it was useless. The truth is that there is nothing more miserable than the revolution.

When students began their indefinite strikes, I went into the long, dark tunnel

alone. Bushra had left me without giving an explanation. The library remained open in spite of the strike. I began to go there on my own. I devoured many books during the strike. And I was against the world, against Marx, against the struggle. I don't remember how that school year ended.

3.

I like to listen to Celine Dion. Her voice ruthlessly dispels the silence in the house. From the balcony you can see a shining calm sea. There aren't even waves. The Mediterranean never loses its nerves. The CD's pile up over the bookshelf like a retreated army. Celine Dion seems happy in the photo on the album cover, like any woman recently arrived to the hair salon. Women always need to fix up their hair. Macarena dyes hers blonde. She says that she does it to hide the gray hairs that have shown up before their time. Macarena is not like Suzanne. Suzanne is very blonde, and walks briskly, like someone who is late for work. She used to laugh a lot at my French and tell me that she only understands English. I invited her to coffee but she held out her hand and, still laughing, showed me a ring whose metal I could not identify. Suzanne always leaves the hotel that she works at with a cigarette in her mouth. She told me that she's lived with her Spanish partner for five years. I told her that it doesn't matter, that I would wait, that I didn't have very good luck, but I would wait. She laughed outright. Yesterday I watched her through the window of the hotel. She was in the restaurant serving some old men. The breakfast was dreadful. They must have been Englishmen.

When I'm with Macarena I feel like I can look at police cars. Sometimes I do it in

revenge for all those moments that I haven't been able to. The moments that I've been alone, and probably on the lookout. When you're an illegal immigrant, without work, without money, you turn into a parrot. You have to learn many languages. In this continent the weak ones lose their native language. You have to learn to speak the language of the strong. It's the only thing that guarantees bread.

The Spaniards don't speak anything but Spanish. I thought that they were protective of their language. I even came to think that it was a matter of pride, even though now I think that it is due to the fact that they don't know how to speak other languages. The majority of Spanish youth prefer to start working as soon as possible rather than wear out the seats of their pants in the desks of the classrooms. Macarena says she's an independent woman, and that she doesn't need a man to take care of her. But sometimes she forgets and tells me that she needs me. You also have to put up with their indulgent looks that are directed at you. The most serious part of these looks is precisely that they are indulgent, indulgent to the point of aggression. Or ignorance. Abdelwahab says that Spaniards are racist. I don't know. He is so short and scruffy that he has the appearance of a dangerous thief, so he feels the weight of these stares. But he's really just a teddy bear. His sexual services are completely free. Abdelwahab hunts for his prey in the nightclubs of the English neighborhood. After three in the morning a drunk Englishman leaves his drunk companion. When he gets his prey he brings her to the beach. Sometimes he goes out to pick up old women at the bars. They tend to go out drinking alone. Their partners have gotten rid of them long ago. Abdelwahab pays attention to them. Every once in a while he convinces them to buy something that he sells at bars and restaurants every day. Cheap watches, dolls that dance the samba, lighters and

things like that. He sells things and drinks beer. Abdelwahab lives in a Renault Trafic but he comes home to shave and wash clothes in the washing machine and tells us a joke before leaving. He usually wears pants that are still damp. For him there's no such thing as a country called Morocco. He doesn't call his mother on the telephone either. His father brought him to Spain before the era of the visa and left him to fend for himself. His father is also a drunk. By day he sells carpets and by night he spends the money in the bars.

The flies can't live with the bumble bees in the middle of the garden. This is the way Abdelwahab explains the situation of Arabs here. Asthma has made his laugh a labored wheeze that sometimes ends with a long cough that brings tears out of his drowsy eyes. Above all I avoid taking the elevator with him, not just because of how badly he smells but also scared that the elevator will stop, someone will get on and think that all Moroccans smell like that. It is a foul odor that almost makes you sick. I think the reason for the smell is that he puts on clothes without letting them dry completely.

Juan and Manuel hang out practically every morning in the restaurant on the bottom floor of the building that I live in. Juan used to work as a photographer for a newspaper. Manuel is unemployed and separated from his wife. I don't know why, but as soon as Juan drinks three beers, he tells me that he went to Morocco in the sixties, and that the police arrested him in Casablanca for having long hair. He says they thought he was a communist, even though he'd never been one, just because he wore his hair long. That was it. So he returned to Spain with a shaved head and he decided never to go back to Morocco. He asked me how Morocco is now. I tell him that it's very corrupt. He says that Spain is the same. Juan thinks that the party in the government is taking advantage of

the ignorance of the Spaniards, or their good intentions. He thinks that Felipe González is a politician with intellectual charisma, but not José María Aznar. And that's why he touches his nose in front of the cameras and gestures strangely when he's on television. Manuel always seems worried, as if he's thinking of more important things. He has very bright eyes. He only has eyes for English women that come to the restaurant. "The ones who are in charge now in Spain are the sons of Franco, his rich sons, right Manual?" asks Juan. "The ones who are in charge are the women," responds Manuel, with a mischievous smile. Manuel has very thin lips. Macarena says that in her house her mother has the last word. But she gets mad when I tell her that women in Spain have it great.

Ahmed the Algerian and I are just leaving Khaled's house. We put the keys under the door and rented a flat in the first floor of a half-empty building. The owner of the flat is a teacher a preparatory school. She's really chatty. She invited us to her house to draw up the rental contract. More like to sign it since it was already prepared. Her house was large and cold, with many stools, some rickety. When she read my name she said it reminded her of the scoundrel Ali Baba and the forty thieves. I smiled and told her that I wasn't like that and that the only thing that's happened to me is that I've been lost. I said it to myself and heard the words reverberate inside me like huge rocks rolling down a slope. Ahmed the Algerian told her that he was studying chemistry and preparing his thesis in the University of Valencia. I told her that I studied journalism. The owner of the house remarked that what we did was great. We told her that yes, there was nothing more wonderful than being a student. Naturally it was a lie. There is a big difference between coming in search of knowledge and coming in search of modest work. But the owner had to believe that we were students because if not, she wouldn't let us live in her apartment.

Without papers you can only live in your shoes. You won't find any home other than that. That is clear.

The apartment that we rented seemed big. The three rooms look out on different streets. And it gets sun every day, but I haven't gotten used to my room. Maybe I'm not used to the house either. I don't like the large spaces; I feel dismembered, scattered. At night I sleep fully dressed, with jeans, socks and a sweatshirt. Since there are not many blankets in the house we brought the heavy curtains from Khaled's house and we cover ourselves with them. In the house there are ten chairs, six of which are around a square table in the kitchen. I thought that the square table would work for me to write. I've never really seen myself as a writer. Writers are people with terrible complexes. I read it once, I don't remember where. People like writers because they wear thick glasses that make them seem sensitive. I always thought that I would be a painter, but my problem with portraits ruined everything. I'm not good at painting the nose. So I spent all my childhood painting houses and trees. Houses and trees don't have noses. Someone often makes figures out of sand in the early morning on the beach. Sometimes he makes a castle with huge gates. Other times a crucified Jesus, and next to him is a drunken man reclining in a chair. The people stopped to take photos, and then they put a coin on the mat in front of the figures. The drunken man seems that way because the hand that hangs over the top of the chair ends in a bottle.

I've also never thought of myself as an intellectual. I have friends that are, but I never wanted to be one of them. Intellectuals are generally hypocrites. They would say anything for a measly invitation to attend a cultural event. And if the invitation included a stay in a hotel they would even offer up their ass. Miserable. They consider themselves

essential to the world. At least oranges don't need intellectuals; they grow all on their own. Christian, Isidro and Ahmed are more important to me than all the intellectuals. Because they cut oranges with which they fill boxes instead of filling the newspapers with lies.

It seemed to me that there were more chairs than furniture in the new flat. So many that they got in the way. The truth is that there was nothing but chairs and a few plates in the kitchen. There were no blankets in the bedrooms, or pillows or armchairs in the living room. Not even one rug. The most beautiful thing of the house was the large window that overlooked a four-way intersection. Small streets with the curbs of the sidewalks painted in a pale yellow color. Through the window I see the customers of the bar below, the bar El Cordobés. They play cards and drink beer all day long.

4.

For the second consecutive day we didn't work. At seven we left for the fields after drinking at Manolo's abysmal café, and we found the trees completely soaked. The sky was covered with clouds, and after an hour or so the rain was pouring down. In Merche's bar the men were joking around and playing cards. Merche was wolfing down chocolate and watching TV. "No one's drowned today, it seems like things are getting better," she said, laughing. "Calm down, tomorrow you'll see how wrong you were." People keep daring every day, by land or by sea, any way they can. What terrifies me is that I'll see the body of one of my friends on TV one day, floating in the water. That would be horrible.

Yesterday, on the way back through the mountains, Merche told me that a friend of hers had asked her for a box of oranges to bring back to her father who lives in Murcia. She stopped the car at the entrance of one of the fields and stole three boxes. She was talking to me the whole way about her little daughter, Sandra. She told me that a psychic told her that her daughter had clairvoyant powers and she could see things. Through the window I saw only trees. All the same, I told her that when her daughter grew up she would be a psychic. She let out a laugh and said that that would be really good, at least she'd have the future covered. She stopped herself as she said the word "future." For a moment I thought about mine, but I saw nothing. The future is a place without light, or dimly lit, so things seem hazy and out of focus. At least I know now that my future depends on the rains, on the morning fog, on the rising of the sun, on the trees, or on Fernando, the truck driver who comes with the empty boxes and leaves in the afternoon with the boxes full of oranges. It will probably clear up and the sun will come out. Fernando will also have to stop drinking and leave the bar before eight.

Christian has missed a few days of work. When Merche picked him up in the morning, he said that he'd gone to the Italian restaurant where he worked before but it was closed until summer. He'd started wearing dentures that were very white. Now he smiled more freely, without having to purse his lips. Fernando Pessoa. I don't know why I am always reminded of Fernando Pessoa when Fernando the truck driver arrives. And they have nothing to do with each other. Fernando drives a truck and doesn't wear small glasses like Pessoa. Besides, Fernando is a trucker and doesn't write poetry. What nonsense!

The weather report says that it's going to keep raining so I left Oliva and went to

Benidorm. There no one was working that day. There were mountains of chairs lined up in front of the cafes and the houses by where the parade would pass. The little girls wore dresses with incredible brocades. The old women, with their faces all made-up, were seated in chairs on the sidewalks and in the terraces of the cafes hours before the procession would come out. From afar came the strains of martial music. I stayed in the middle of the crowd. Even though I'm tall, the English block it all with their enormous bodies. The old Spanish women hold on tight to their bags and smile. The English aren't bothered by strangers, even if they steal from their women. Their eternal frigidness surprises me.

It's a story that is retold in the streets of this city every year. It's called *Moros* and Christians. The story is about a crusader king that arrives with his army, stops in front of the fortress of an Arab king and, speaking in verse, convinces him to abandon it. The Arab king leaves the fortress and returns to his land across the sea with his armies. Later, the crusader king enters the fortress. And all of this is in verse. At night on the beach there are mock duels between horsemen dressed in Arab clothing and knights dressed like crusaders. Each evening a knight defeats someone of the opposing side. On the last day of the festivities the crusader knight triumphs and the Arab man falls to the sand of the beach. The public applauds for a while before the Arab rider comes back to life to wave at everyone. And that's how the Arab horseman is brought to his defeat, which they reserve for the last day of the celebration. This way of telling the story to the foreigners strikes me as amusing. They don't attempt to remind the new generations of what really happened when the Arabs were expelled from Al-Andalus. The Inquisition. The slaughter. The collective expulsion. All these things don't work for attracting tourists. Quite the

contrary. It gives the celebration an unsuitable dramatic tone. It's better that the festival happens this way. The celebration of the expulsion of the Arabs, of the *moros*. There is no better way to delicately tell the story of the expulsion. All of the speeches are written in a pleasant poetry that oozes love and peace. The parade is incredible. Drums sound, girls and boys sing Mozarabic songs, the beautiful women wear Arab clothing, acting like Spanish slaves captured by the Arab men. These men move forward proudly, brandishing their twinkling swords. For an instant I felt vain. The leader of the *moros* was a fat horseman with a real beard, but he had his face painted black. The others wore false beards to seem like Arab warriors.

The leader brandished his forked sword and waved enthusiastically at the spectators. I was reminded of the sword of Ali, the companion of the Prophet, painted on a yellow card above the blackboard, cutting off the head of a monster with his forked sword. He rode a black horse and wore a helmet. The steps of the leader seemed more like those of a parade of someone entering into battle. He knows it and so he's not afraid. He smiles and keeps advancing.

Suddenly I felt that my presence in that scene was an extravagance greater even than the imaginary tournament on the beach. Also, I was fed up with being at that celebration that was teeming with police uniforms so I had to disappear. I returned home before it even finished, but I knew the ending well. The king of the crusaders would come with his army and recite some poetry. Then the Arab king would appear before him and from the fortress he would respond with some precious verses. A little later he would abandon the castle, head held high, without spilling a single drop of blood. I returned home exhausted. On the way, the image of the leader of the group of *moros* came to my

mind, the one with his face painted black. I don't know why I saw a resemblance to the face of Antara that was next to his poem in my third grade reading book. It was a satirical poem about a greedy king. I also recalled that story that I heard from the mouth of one of the storytellers at Bab El-Khamees in Salé. He said that Antara had not died in his bed like poets die nowadays, but he was murdered like a real gentleman. The storyteller seemed more certain of his version than the university professors of classical literature. He said that for Antara, reciting poetry was like breathing. One day, a misunderstanding arose between him and a blind man. Because of poetry, naturally. Apparently, the blind man had more confidence in himself than Antara had in his own language and he threatened to kill Antara. This man, who boasted of strength, shrugged his shoulders in the middle of the enormous desert and spurred on his horse that was black like his master, according to the storyteller. He added that he preferred to have a black horse because it helped him disappear in the middle of the desert during the night. The blind man understood Antara with complete clarity. He understood him down to his dark interior. But Antara was blind; he didn't see the threat of the blind man. He had taken it as a joke. The problem with Antara was that he was so gigantic that even the sound of his own piss could be heard leagues away. One day, after a pursuit that had lasted a lifetime, that unmistakable voice of all voices reached the ears of the blind man. The blind man smiled and took an arrow out of his quiver. Like a primitive hunter, he directed the arrow toward the giant's voice. He tensed the bow and released, letting the arrow find its target. And that is how the blind man lived and Antara died.

No one knows, with the exception of this storyteller, why Antara did not see the threat that lay in wait for him. Why he insisted on not seeing it. Why he was determined

not to see the features of the blind man while he hurled his threats. It's likely that the blind perceive their pain with clarity. I have never seen a blind man fall in the street. On the other hand, I have seen people with their eyes wide open stumble and fall in a ridiculous manner. It seems to me that Antara did not see his death because he didn't have eyes for anything other than Abla, the woman that he loved until death. Antara used all his sight in gazing at Abla. That's how we understand why he wanted to buy a black horse. Not only so that no one saw him at night but also because he did not want to see anyone either, including his own death. Love sometimes converts you into a blind man shooting an arrow. A blind man who is guided by a girl down a brightly lit street.

Even today I would not have known what to say to the police if they had stopped me in the street. The most veteran immigrants advise not to take your passport out of the house so no one will know your nationality. Abdelwahab says that they stop him more than once every day and frisk him from head to toe. Sometimes they confiscate his merchandise. I told him that if I were a policeman I would do the same because his appearance is suspicious. Nevertheless, he says that his looks are very popular with the old women. They feel bad for him or something, I don't know. He says that recently things are much better in Spain. Three years ago they used to enter our hotel rooms and send anyone they could lay their hands on back to Tangier. I told him that I know my rights very well. In spite of being here illegally, I am not a criminal. I am not a problem that demands a solution. Just that. The last part I said to Abdelwahab for speculation. In reality, I probably was a criminal, or at least I had started becoming one.

5.

When the evangelists get tired of handing out pamphlets they go into the Viña del Mar cafeteria and order two coffees with milk. Throughout the day they stop the passersby and shove their multi-colored pamphlets into their faces. They walk along the street side by side. With their indulgent looks they give the impression that they were prepared to stop a catastrophe from happening. Paradise Road. That's the title of the pamphlets they give out. One of them must have been thirty years old. She had a pretty big nose. That's why she seemed to me more sensitive to the pain of the world; it's as if she made the pain her own. In Benidorm, except for the cross planted at the top of the mountain silhouetted by a bright neon light, there is no sign of any religion. Paradise Road has lost its light. The evangelists' pamphlets hardly serve any purpose in the imminence of darkness. The Viña del Mar cafeteria is their favorite place. For them the road to paradise goes through those two cups of coffee. Outside the café no one seems interested in following it. The road to the discotheques or the nightclubs is more luminous and doesn't require any pamphlet.

To have a big nose means that you can't hide it, unlike teeth. You have to live with it in a positive way. It's the only way of alleviating the torment. Now I realize that I haven't seen any funerals since I left Morocco. I remember the funeral processions passing through my small city at a slow pace, as if time had become stagnant in a tiny bottle on top of a bookshelf. Here the ambulances circle at terrifying speeds. People die in secret, maybe to save the others from the painful reminder of that natural end.

Working in orange fields does not require grand declarations. There are many like me that work like mules all day, and when the sun sets they go home, dead from tiredness. Five thousand pesetas a day is a respectable quantity; it turns you into beast.

Sometimes I stand on the balcony and look at the patrons of the bar El Cordobés playing cards and drinking. Suddenly that image vanishes and other blurred images take its place. Students making their way to class, professors looking tired and melancholy, the unpleasant employees that work in the Administration, the destitute. Wedding processions with women shaking their small butts on top of carts pulled by haggard donkeys. Many things pass before my eyes like a profound dream after a heavy dinner. Countless people and animals, numerous faces and features pass through my mind while I eat an endless breakfast in that narrow café where I can eat without paying when I'm broke. A narrow café on a long street. I don't know why but I always imagined that street like a skinny man buried in the ground. A skinny man buried in the ground as the people pass by above him.

Isidro, Christian, and José no longer work alongside us. Jose began stealing oranges with his fat girlfriend. Christian returned to his Italian restaurant in Denia to serve spaghetti to tourists. Paco fired Isidro for speaking to him disrespectfully. The truth is that he hadn't; he'd spoken to him like any normal person. And that bothered Paco, who came in his all-terrain vehicle and whose phone never stopped ringing. Paco bought fields of oranges and we harvest them. He spoke in Valenciano, with his lips pursed, making him seem angry. He asked Merche to get our Social Security numbers but he didn't know that we didn't have any, or that Spain didn't know that we were here in the

country. We told Merche that for now we didn't need Social Security because at any moment we would change jobs. Naturally it was just a lie. Merche liked to call our group *moros* and Christians, because in the end we were three Arabs, an Argentinian, and a Spaniard. I don't actually know if Miguel is Spanish or Argentinian because he himself doesn't know. He has a national ID card, but he says that he feels more Argentinian than anything else because he knows the geography of Argentina well. But it seems to me that this isn't enough to feel like you belong to a certain place. Geography is the mountains, the valleys, and the population figures, nothing more. But it doesn't matter, to him that's enough.

In the bakery where we buy our bread every morning I see the same old man sitting in a chair close to the oven. He has his feet stuffed in some wool socks. When we push open the glass door to enter he turns and watches us. He stays that way until we leave. No one realizes his presence but I always look at him every time I come in. He's always in the same place with the same desperate look. The bakery is warm and tempts me to stay a little longer. I don't know why, but it seems to me that the old man is waiting for something. A long, endless wait. Every day he sits in the chair and stretches out his legs. Once I finish work in the afternoons, I leave and go for a walk. I see the old women sitting behind their balconies with the wooden blinds raised so they can see outside. They only raise them a little bit so that they don't reveal their solitude. When a human being gets older, the wait becomes terrifying. The scariest part is the anticipation that something sudden will happen at any moment. My grandmother also waits. Since my father and grandfather died, she does nothing except wait. She always says that one of us should share the downstairs apartment with her, where she's lived since my grandfather died,

because she doesn't want to die in the night without us knowing and rot away in her room. That would make people talk badly about her after her death. When I was little and grandma Sofia got sick, she used to look at me with her eyes half-open and tell me that that was the last time I was going to see her and that soon she would die. But she never died. She would get out of bed in the middle of the night and go into to the small kitchen where she could reach everything. After a little while she would come out with a bowl of hot soup. Sofia's kitchen was never lacking herbs. She used to say that herbs and roots helped whet the appetite, and that they were better than the doctors' remedies. My grandmother hates doctors. She thinks that they're imposters. She used to whisper to me that she would die soon, and that I would be very sad. I stayed sitting at her side, as if protecting her from something I couldn't see. I became very sad and cried in silence. She didn't look at me because the light bothered her so I would shut it off by the switch above the bed. I listened to her in the darkness, murmuring names that I didn't recognize. She says that when she's sick she sees a man coming toward her with a shotgun in his hand. He gets closer, points it at her head, and shoots. That's the reason why she gets sick for periods that might be shorter or longer. When that strange person reappears, he points at her head and shoots again. Then she wakes up suddenly, gets up and goes into the kitchen. Sofia has always been a very good cook. She constantly repeats that the person who points the weapon at her will kill her someday. She's convinced. I ask her what the man is like, what he looks like. She says she has never seen him very well because he advances toward her in the midst of darkness, and that his arrival is accompanied by a sound that turns the images into ghosts. It's certain. Sometimes she mixes up my name with other people's that I don't know while she calls me with closed eyes, blindfolded by

a black handkerchief and pursing her lips in pain.

Since my grandpa died Sofia did not see the armed man again, but she began to dream about my father and grandfather who invite her to take a long walk. When she wakes she tells my mother the details of her dream. She says that she has seen them in long, white robes and that they were smiling the whole night. I think writers think about death more than other people. Because they're selfish. They want to do something against death so they make books as a last resort against it. But after they die they end up in a hole like everyone else. Even though they want to live many other lives through the characters that they create, they end up living just one life. And most of the time it's a bad one. Instead of peeking out of their balconies like the old ladies, writers resort to peeking out of their books. Because this action is less painful, they share it with people. People like to discover the writers' way of peeking out because they need lies to continue living. Stories, novels, and movies are contemporary lies that have transformed citizens into a crowd of mules revolving around the mill of everyday life. A crowd of readers and intellectuals, unfortunately.

6.

I don't know how to explain it, but every time I saw an English woman staggering along the street past midnight, my eyes would go straight to her purse. I knew how easy it was to rob the English. As soon as they get drunk they relinquish everything. The hard part was convincing myself that there was an old thief living inside me. A professional thief. When I wanted to read a book and didn't have the money to buy one, I stole it. I also stole many postcards and gave them to my friends as gifts. It seemed that I had made

the wrong choice in becoming a writer. I should have started studying to be a thief. I always sympathized with thieves. I looked for them around every corner, in movies, and in the *souqs*, as a child. They always fascinated me with their long, adept fingers. I doubt that a real thief lives inside me. In any case, I repress him. Although at times he overpowers me, or at least he persuades me. Even though his arguments are poor, I let him defeat me because I want to ridicule the stupid writer that lives within me. I don't want the writer to win. He's a liar. The thief robs but doesn't lie. That's the difference between the writer and the thief.

When I got to Spain most of my friends were thieves. Khaled, the one that got me the job in the orange fields, used to steal luxury cars and bring them back to Morocco. Sometimes he sold hashish or brought the merchandise from Algeciras to Alicante for the gypsies. Mustafa, who welcomed me into his house in a neighborhood in the outskirts of Paris, was also a dangerous thief. And Nureddine, his cousin, another great thief. In the two days that I spent in their house I discovered that all the furniture was stolen. Mustafa always uses his sheer bulk to keep up the doubtful pretense that he used to be the Judo champion of Oran. He has an inscrutable expression and a half-smile like those show-offs that like say that they're elegant. His favorite brand is Yves Saint-Laurent. His wardrobe is replete with clothing and perfumes of that brand. With his false French passport he can go all around Europe like a respectable French citizen. Mustafa doesn't smoke or drink and claims that he keeps up with his prayers. Although he doesn't provide the slightest amount of proof of his questionable faith.

The first time that he spoke about his father, he said that he was very content with the perfumes that Mustafa brought him from Paris. And he added that on one occasion,

from the room next to his, he heard his father say that God would reward Mustafa with the perfumes of Heaven in the same way that he'd rewarded his father with the perfumes of Earth.

Until now I haven't met anyone except thieves. I haven't met a single writer or journalist. Maybe it's better that way.

This morning, I don't know why, tiny details came to my mind from my departure. The folded clothing in the black leather bag. The money hidden in my sock like a traveling peasant. It was a melancholy morning. The seven o'clock train was so cold, like a goodbye hanging in the air, and Rabat, like usual, was an unfriendly city. I had no tears to shed when I said goodbye to my mother and siblings. My grandma was sleeping. I didn't want to wake her. My mom hugged me tightly and started to cry. I forced myself to smile. The black leather briefcase that had come with me the whole trip became the bag of an intellectual in Rabat. Its numerous pockets looked like it was hiding lots of secrets.

When I went to Rabat and ate breakfast in that café that seemed like a gallery of many paintings, I would put the briefcase next to me and read the newspapers. It was the perfect place to play the role of the engaged intellectual. That was where the failed television actors went, the hosts of mediocre programs, and the young poets looking for a cultural expert who would publish their poems in the newspaper. They all had one of those briefcases. The café was close to the cinema, the theater, and the bars. That's why it was known by the intellectuals, the police informers, and the whores. I always thought that my briefcase was the most handsome of them all because it was black leather.

Every once in a while I went by the café. You could hang out with a friend there, and everyone knew the telephone number. The place was also pretty. There was a permanent painting exhibit. Sometimes a bankrupt artist was forced to put his paintings up for sale at really good prices. The informers that frequented the café are also known by everyone. They didn't wear long raincoats like in the movies. Nor did they read the papers upside down. But everyone knew them, even more than the protagonists of the infamous TV series that almost always arrived with girls of bad reputation.

Two days before my departure I hung out with some friends to get some addresses that could have been useful if something happened or I needed some small financial assistance in any part of Europe. But the majority of them stood me up.

When I left, only the thieves stuck by my side. In those hard times you can put your trust in a thief but not in an intellectual.

Mustafa believes that Europe is a land of plunder for Algerians. Especially France. He says that even though he spends all his life stealing, it wouldn't make up for what France stole during the years it occupied Algeria. What's happening to Algeria right now is a belated consequence of colonialism, and France must pay for it. That's how Mustafa explains equality. In Paris I got lost more than once in the tunnels of the metro. Zuwawiya told me that my solution is to look for a Frenchwoman and marry her. This is the only solution in France. She told me also that the French are racists. They used to make her uneasy for years before they granted her citizenship. Her husband was a Frenchman who is now in jail. According to her, he can go to hell when he gets out. But he gave her a son and citizenship. Mustafa let Zuwawiya enter his house. He said that

they share a distant relative. When he got his luggage ready to travel to Spain to buy hashish, he left me his keys and told me not to open the door for anyone, especially not to her. But I felt sorry for her son and so I opened the door for them. She insisted that I had to look for a French woman to marry because the situation in France is very complicated. Before going to sleep in the next room, she told me that for a long time she slept in the telephone booths, in the tunnels of the metro, and underneath the bridges of the fetid River Seine.

Mustafa promised me that on his return he would get me a French passport for three thousand francs through some of his friends. That was the price in Paris. Zuwawiya also promised me that she'd get me a job with some Jews in a neighborhood of Paris. But she seemed more busy finding a house for her and her son Malik than finding me a job. Khaled told me jokingly that I have to marry Zuwawiya to become French. I look at the poor boy and smile. There is one phrase that Malik says perfectly: "Fuck your mother!" When he cries, you can hear his screams from the street. He is very afraid of Mustafa because he punishes him.

Mustafa told me that to get to know Paris well, I have to get used to going only by metro. It is the best way to discover that impenetrable jungle called Paris. For most of my life I had created an idea of Paris from the poems and texts by writers that had spoken of this city, immortalizing it. The Paris of poetry is not the Paris on earth. Poets usually lie outrageously. Their poems turn out comical. The tunnels of the metro seemed to me like interminable arteries of the bowels of a sleeping beast. I go down a level. I get on without knowing where I'm going. When the metro stops, I go down to the next level. I continue the journey this way until I have been on all the levels. And as I'm descending, I feel

claustrophobic, as if descending into a big tomb. The people move very quickly, like in a movie. I try not to ask anyone because I know in advance that the first passerby that I ask will raise his finger, gesturing in annoyance at the electronic panels hanging all over the station. In the coaches, everyone buries their heads in the pages of a book or a newspaper. I know most of them don't read. They do it to protect themselves from others. Books and newspaper serve to free them from others.

In Paris you can buy and sell anything. Clothes. Sex. Perfumes. Residency permits. Passports. Hashish. Expensive perfumes are sold at very reasonable prices. To me, this seems wonderful because it's an extravagance to pay two thousand francs for a flask of perfume, just for the foolish reason that it has a label like Yves Saint-Laurent.

Mustafa said that he would show me the Paris of the night, the one that poets cannot describe because they go to sleep early like chickens. There are bright lights in the shop windows and behind them sit naked women that beckon to the passersby and wink in a shameless manner. Most of them come from Eastern Europe: Russians, Poles, Czechs. Their frosty skin gives them away. The ice of communism melted in Europe to leave the ass of that Eastern bloc totally out in the air in front of the world. They light up the Eiffel Tower. It seems tall and absurd but we still stop beneath it and take pictures like tourists.

This is Paris. Lovers that stroll along the Champs-Élysées hand-in-hand. Security patrols armed to the teeth that walk with terrifying dogs through the tunnels of the metro and through the suburbs. It's the Arc de Triomphe, the Latin Quarter, and Châtelet where everything is clean and orderly. And a neigborhood of Paris that you can't cross without being surprised by the tremendous resemblance to the Yacoub Elmansur neighborhood of

Rabat.

I don't know why poets sing to the Seine, that dirty river that carries everything in its path until it reaches the ocean. On its banks crowd beggars, thieves, and those looking for a contaminated needle to stick into their skinny arms in search of an ecstasy in the city of lights. I remember the Bu Regreg River, the cleanest of all rivers. I remember when I rowed with my skinny body to bring Germans, English, and Italians who laughed and took pictures to the other shore. At night we lie down in the boat in the middle of the river. We throw our hooks into the water looking for the lazy mullet that lie on the bottom like an ancient treasure. We drink tea and gaze at the lights of Hassan Tower and the *alcazaba*[4] of the Udayas and the houses of the Jewish quarter submerged in sadness. In the distance shines the cemetery of Salé with its dead rocked by the rolling waves of the sea. The minarets of Bab El-Khamees, Bab Shaafa, and Souq Al-Ghazal, as if they were fingers raised in the darkness, relentlessly asking for their turn to speak in the night of the nation.

This murky Seine only serves to sweep up the bodies of the Arabs that are thrown out by the descendents of the Revolution. Those stupid fools who believe that shaving your head is enough to hate the world.

7.

As scheduled, I arrived at the night club at ten at night. Khaled was waiting for me at the door. He's been working as a bouncer for over a week now. His strong build

[4] Arabic, the walled-fortification of a city

and stature guarantee him work in the summer months. When I arrived, Khaled presented me to the head waiter. He told me that I would start working that night and he'd see if I was qualified for this type of work or not. Even though it wasn't complicated, he made it seem really important. We went down to the dance floor. The music was unbearable but at least there was air conditioning. From ten at night until eight in the morning I had to pick up the empty bottles and glasses that drunk people left on the tables, on the floor, or in the restrooms. I also had to sweep up the broken bottles and mop up the floor every time someone got sick and threw up the pizza that they'd wolfed down way too fast. The boss introduced me to a skinny guy with glasses that seemed to cover his whole face, and had to keep pushing them up with his finger while talking. He told me that he'd be my coworker and that he'd explain everything I had to do. We talked for a bit about schedules and he told me that if I wanted any drink I should ask the waitress. I told him that I didn't drink. Order a juice, he told me. An hour later he asked where I was from. I told him I was Moroccan. He was Kurdish. I asked him if he knew Salim Barakat. He answered that he didn't know who he was. I told him that I was preparing my doctoral thesis about a novel of his titled *Feathers.* He smiled and asked me what the novel was about. I told him that it had to do with the Kurdish tragedy and that it was translated into many languages. One of the waiters came up and asked me to go with him. I followed him. He told me to grab the broom and sweep up a colorfully lit area. It upset me. I don't like to receive orders from anyone. I cleaned the place nervously. I went around looking for an empty glass, or a forgotten bottle, or an ashtray crammed with cigarette butts. I found nothing, because they had all taken their glasses and crowded around the lit up space to watch a striptease. Some English women are here on vacation,

but if they find a job like that they prefer staying here rather than returning to their country, because they receive a respectable amount of money for a quick strip. A quick and easy strip, consisting of taking off clothing piece by piece. But Ahmed, Miguel, and I had to climb every tree in the field, tree by tree, to earn our pay. Here everyone gets by with whatever physical capacities they have. Khaled is tall and weighs more than one-hundred kilos which makes it easy to get a night job. The pretty girls work in hotels and travel agencies. The less pretty ones hand out publicity. Suzanne washes the floors of the hotel and smokes. Everyone does something to get by. Anything. The important thing is to move. You go to the supermarket and you can take your wallet out of your purse and buy what you want. That's Europe. The daily struggle for a better life. It doesn't have anything to do with sitting at the terrace of a café and spending all your time complaining and lamenting. Here complaining isn't worth anything. Because compassion means that you work, and never anything else.

After grabbing the broom, I cleaned the colorfully lit ring. I felt disgusted and despised myself for an infinite moment. The techno music that came out of the numerous speakers got on my nerves. It is impossible to tolerate it without taking some ecstasy. The regulars of the Bahamas discotheque dance with their eyes closed. Their rapid movements make you think that they've taken various pills throughout the night. I thought that Khaled would become rich thanks to them. I cleaned the floor of the glass and remains of the pizza that they vomited because of the abysmal whiskey that they serve at that hour of the night. Three in the morning. In a little bit Sticky Vicky will enter like a Hollywood star. In the cabarets of the English neighborhood she strips down to nothing. In every locale she strips for fifteen minutes, then she quickly puts on her scant

and sparkly clothing to head to the next one. She makes fifty dollars per session. “Sticky Vicky must be really rich,” repeated Abdelwahab. And he added that, if they wanted, he could show them his dick for much less than what that pig asks for. He said it again and bit his lips with rage, as if a great opportunity was escaping him. His twin Yusef explained to him that if it was just about taking your clothes off one by one then all the girls in Benidorm would strip, but that there are acts of seduction that the little devil does that make the drunks open not just their mouth but also their wallet. Sticky Vicky is very famous. Her naked photos are on the doors of all the cabarets. She might even be more famous than the representatives of the right-wing People’s Party, whose photos usually appear in the newspapers. Abdelwahab is convinced that the Irish woman who manages the bar where he goes to drink has fallen in love with him because her husband is just a tame, useless ox. He says that women prefer us Arabs because we’re more macho. It’s ridiculous. Here women think that we are sexual creatures with huge packages. In movies that they show on TV they portray the Arab as an idiot that drools when he sees a woman, and sometimes a potbellied man with an evil look that poisons others’ drinks. That’s why I’ve always thought that the cinema is the last place to go to understand The Other.

Iraqis, Moroccans, Algerians, Kurds, Pakistanis, gypsies, Indians. Infinite races wander this old continent looking for a way out. Each one has their own story, stories that are authentic films. When a Kurd tells you how he fled from the north of Iraq after some airplanes destroyed his town; or an Algerian describes how he served in the army for two years in the Sahara, shooting but unsure if his target was really his enemy, you forget your own personal story. And maybe you end up thinking it’s ordinary and insignificant compared to those stories. It’s like they divided up the land here. The majority of

Algerians dedicate themselves to robbing, because they consider working foolish. The gypsies go begging at bars and restaurants. They play the guitar, sing flamenco, and trick the tourists with games of chance. But they hide themselves at the perfect moment. The Pakistanis go out past midnight. The only thing they do is sell red roses to the drunks at the nightclubs. They have a calm appearance. They all dress in similar clothing: sneakers and carefully ironed pants, and long shirts usually of one color. They sell the roses without bullshit. On Fridays they go to pray at the mosque in Alicante. As for Moroccans, most of them prefer to hide out in the small towns, working in the fields. There, no one will bother to ask for paperwork. While you work in the field no one will bother you. Problems start when you go to the big cities. The skin usually gives you away. And you end up in the police court. Most of the Algerians that I've known here have been detained by the police, and they're all given an order to leave Spanish territory in a period of ten days. But none of them abandon this land. It's as if they've made it their own soil, where their true roots are. The police also know that they won't go back. So the first time that they detain them they register their name and don't bother them again. Abdelkader says, laughing, that when they detain him he gives distinct names and nationalities. Once, Iraqi; another time, Palestinian, etc. He says that he's a traveling Arab League. He had barely arrived to Spain when he burned his passport. That's how he got rid of his nationality. And he's continued in that way. Merely a citizen of every Arab country all at once, and each time he claims a different one.

Whenever I walk along the street sadness envelops me. You can spend all day walking without saying hello to anyone. Coming here means you must have made the

decision to live without roots, like a plant uprooted and transplanted into different soil. For me, roots are nothing more than the clamor of children in front of the house and the delightful quarrels of the neighbors in the neighborhood. It's the sound of the call to prayer every day. The family meetings around the table. The bread that my mother makes, that we eat saturated in the smell of firewood. This life does not suit me. Its speed is terrifying. Here, time is your true enemy that races tirelessly. That's why everyone has gotten older on this continent. It realize that I often think of going back. Every day the idea entices me. But I also think that the homeland can be portable. You just have to look for it deep inside you. And when you find it you can accept it and inhabit it once again. In short, it has to do with acceptance and carrying it inside you. What's inside is always the most important. People don't look into your depths because they seem mysterious, and therefore scary. People don't want to see it, but life is complicated. Much more complicated than it seems.

I like to sit down and write after I've put something on the stove, rice, for example, so I have to get up occasionally to go to the kitchen. That way I don't lose my patience with the pages. If I eat well, I write beautiful things. I know it. If I eat poorly, I write stupid things and I make plans to leave, I don't know where to. But I do know that this feeling subsides after a good meal so I don't go anywhere. Macarena suggested that I pitch in once in a while. Naturally she doesn't know that I'm broke. I hadn't told her that. Later she told me that she'd felt like going out with someone and had turned to the personals in the newspaper. And after eating dinner, she told me that here the custom is to split the bill. I didn't need this story to understand that I had become a burden. Bushra told me one day that I was very sensitive. All the girls that I've known have told me that.

I haven't called her on the phone for a week. I also avoid passing by the shop. She didn't call me either. I know she loves me, so she tries to irritate me. I like that women don't pay attention to me. I need that kind of rudeness. Maybe it serves to justify my personal defeats. Or maybe to feel like everyone mistreats me, even those that love me. Perhaps I exaggerate in placing the entire world on one side and me on the other. I have stayed alone, crying in silence. When I get tired I wash my face and I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I told that to my friend Muhsin, the young Iraqi who fled from Baghdad after his brother was detained and murdered in jail. He told me that the same feelings haunt him. Muhsin left the army because of what happened to his friend Razuki, who killed two Kurds in a skirmish.

"We happened to be in the same tank. I was in charge because I was the only one who had studied at the university level. Ali Ramadi drove it; Abdel Diwaniya was on the monitoring equipment; Razuki Nasseriya was the one that fired… We saw the obliterated car of Kurds go up in flames at the foot of the road, and I yelled, "I didn't give you the order to shoot!" "They attacked first," he said. I kept yelling, "But you know their bullets do nothing to the tank's armor plating!" "But one of them pointed an RPG out the window of the car… Didn't you see it?" We all went quiet because we saw it in the hot blood that rushed to the temples, in the powerful presence of death in the midst of smoke, in the echoing boom of the bullets, in the madness of the explosion… We stayed silent for a long time until the smell of gunpowder dissipated and the smoke of our civil war rose toward the sky, moving further and further away from the green ground, from the hills on the horizon that were showing the first sprouts of the coming spring, indifferent to our killing, to the mixing of the red of our blood with the red of the poppies… Ali stopped the

motor of the tank and we climbed up the turret. At our feet a trail of bodies extended along the road until meeting the green of the horizon and the blue of the sky. The death of those bodies whose spirits we did not know was not as painful as that of the two familiar Kurds… who became corpses with just the press of a finger, after having been human beings full of dreams. And they have sons and mothers.

"We looked at one another and turned back, toward where the minaret of Al-Hadba rose from the center of Mosul. We were sorry when we decided to leave this country but not sorry when we decided to leave this tank. But, have we really left it, or do we continue carrying it between our papers and our chests in exile? We took off the military uniforms, we put on colorful clothes that we had saved in our bags for days off and we ran toward the city. We spent two days traveling, saying farewell to each other and farewell to the country. We were tantalized by the magic in the eyes of the women of Mosul in the Sarij Khana neighborhood. We ate *kibbeh*[5] at Bab at-Tawb. We shined our shoes on Aleppo Street and passed through all the gates… Bab Al-Baidh, Bab Lakash, and then through Ras al-Jadda, Ras Tananir, al-Farooq neighborhood, the clock tower; we leafed through the books on al-Najafi street and took a nap in Dawasa Theater. And afternoon strolls through the prophets' tombs: Seth, St. George, and Jonah, the one who was swallowed by a whale…. We passed by the date-selling carts, and the flies were buzzing around, some landing on our noses, our ears, our unkempt hair. The shopkeeper offered us plates of dates and glasses of lebneh, a liquidy yogurt, telling us that dates are very good for newlyweds, and he smiled. But when we went to pay we didn't have anything more than one hundred dinar[6] bills that the shopkeeper couldn't give change for.

[5] An Arabic meat dish
[6] The Iraqi currency

An old woman stopped when she saw us and straightened herself up, leaning on her cane. Then she took out a bag of money from her Kurdish robes and gave it to the shopkeeper. I don't know why in that exact instant I said to Razuki, 'I wonder if she's the mother of one of those Kurds?' Then he turned around abruptly, bent over and puked."

Muhsin tries to live with those memories however he can, but he doesn't always achieve it. Like me, like Ahmed the Algerian, like Jamal, and like everyone else looking for salvation on the threshold of a new century.

8.

During the autumn, Benidorm turns into an old elephant graveyard. Once summer ends, another type of tourist arrives. People in search of peace of mind. Most of them come in wheelchairs. Fewer of them walk on their own feet, displaying legs lined with green veins, like worn-out pipes in a wall covered in moisture. The nighttime becomes less deafening than it was in August. All those youth in search of adventure have left. All those eccentrics that daze you with their charms, and the ones you don't know whether to hate or to tolerate. In Paris, some people like them came out with us to a protest in favor of illegal immigrants.

They say that they're marginalized, just like we are. That's why they support us. It's ridiculous. Karl loaned me a tape with old songs. Karl is English, very short, and sings in the cabaret of the bar on the ground floor of the building we live in. An hour before him, another Englishman gets up on stage. Really dumb. He covers Elvis Presley's

songs, without much skill. Karl says that he spent a lot of time in the mansions of Middle Eastern millionaires. And that Yasser Arafat liked him very much, welcomed him, and gave him a dagger. I told him that I didn't like that type of rich people. But I praised his cassette very much. I said it out of pure courtesy. The truth is that I don't like country music. It's boring and full of advice. It's terrible, because the truth is that I don't like anything at all these days. When you stop loving something, it means that you have discovered horrible things that you hadn't seen before. I didn't explain to Karl that the rich men in the mansions in which he sang also have mansions in other places where they bring in virgins for a handful of dollars, because it wouldn't have done any good to explain it to him. Karl sings country to make a living. That's all. The rest doesn't concern him. The other Englishman lives one floor down. He wears black leather pants because they make him seem like an acrobat, and the cowboy boots make his walk clash with his respectable hairstyle. The only thing he has in common with Elvis Presley is the hairstyle. If we meet in the elevator, we don't great each other. He gives me the impression that he's too sure of himself, like any failed artist.

When you're hungry everything else seems unimportant. You look at the ocean and find that it is nothing more than an absurd expanse of water. You look at the sun setting and it seems nothing but a disc fading behind the tall buildings. A pale and insignificant disc. I recalled those distant summer vacations when I felt like I had to lie. I'm not hungry, I would say to my aunt every time that I stopped eating while everyone else continued. But now I'm not lying. I really am hungry. I don't have even a single *duro*.

Khaled usually says that only idiots work abroad. I have to think of another way to live. Sell hashish, like him, or steal cars or purses off English women in the nightclubs.

Now I remember the amount of times that I left the house without eating breakfast. I went by the kiosk. I stole the newspaper *Al-Quds* (*Jerusalem*). I went to the café. I ate breakfast slowly, waiting for some friend to arrive. I wasn't always that lucky. The waiter understood my situation because he saw my name every once in a while in the newspapers. Maybe that's why he took my side. I think so. I used to leave without paying for breakfast. I left without looking at him, and he also avoided looking at me. We both tried to relieve the other from that discomfort, even though mine was more serious because I felt despicable. That situation could last for weeks.

Long weeks during which I sold many books. Novels by Milan Kundera, the complete works of Naguib Mahfouz. I also sold worthless poems to magazines whose names I don't remember. Poems that I wrote solely out of necessity. I never regretted it. Books had begun to bring me bad luck. I looked at them piled up in the bookcase, like an army of toy soldiers abandoned forever. So I've never liked to write stories because every time you want to write a new story you have to invent shameful lies. As time passed I realized that I lied in a shameful way, and that I had to stop. The truth is that I never liked those writers who thought that people were only a lost herd of lambs in whose name they had to speak. People don't need writers to raise their chickens or to quarrel with one another. I write to discover something inside me, something that embarrasses me to the bitter end. As soon as I feel I've discovered it, I will rid myself of this vice called writing.

In fact, writing is a bad habit. Instead of living your life, you choose to write about it. Or intentionally write about other lives that you've never lived, lives less

miserable than the one you're living. And then, all those hours that writing requires you to sit at a table, instead of using them to stroll along the street. It's sad, really.

Images of deaths in Algeria appear on TV almost every day. Mutilated bodies of women and children, some with their throats slit like lambs. The image of an older woman lying in a hospital bed sticks in my mind, a woman with a tattoo between her eyebrows. She was breathing with difficulty; she had her eyes closed and a tube in her nose. It was a fleeting image, but her panting has stayed with me forever. I recalled my father laid out on a white bed in the recovery room. We gazed at him though the window, not allowed to get any closer because he was unconscious. No one knows where consciousness goes when it leaves. On the street people give you looks that are hard to interpret at first. Some are upset and move away, making you feel like a walking hazard from which they need protection. Sometimes I understand this behavior of theirs. The image of out country on TV is nothing but an endless fleet of rafts and desperate youth that would prefer to die on the high sea rather than return to their country. This image, in addition to other miserable ones of dead bodies in Algeria, people uneasy about everything Arab, even though I believe that the Spanish are a peaceful people. They have a natural inclination toward peace. I think they're a lot like us. They all talk at the same time, but they listen to each other. On TV they express their discontent in a very natural manner, and most of the time with vulgar words. Or at least, that's what we would consider them, but to Spaniards they're just words for expressing yourself more easily. During the first months I had a lot of difficulty understanding their way of thinking. At first they seemed racist. I thought so just because no one understood me when I spoke

French. I finally understood that they only knew their native language. Not like us. We often turn to French because we think that it is the language of the elite, or that our language is unsuitable for us. So the French vocabulary pops up in our speech to a sickening degree. Also, how can you demand, you who comes from the other side of the sea, that a Spaniard speak French to you in their own country? They don't even have to speak to you at all.

That's how you arrive at strange explanations, like racism. The French consider Spaniards simple farmers because they're from the south. The Spanish think that the French are arrogant little peacocks. Rarely will a Spanish person agree to speak with you in French, even if they speak it with ease, which forces you to make an extra effort to learn Spanish. That's how you learn a new language.

Nowadays Spain is the least racist European country. I read that today in the newspaper. They published a study about how Spaniards perceive foreigners and gypsies. In some of those remote villages where I went to work in the fields, the people barely knew anything about Moroccans. All that they knew dated back to ancient legends about the Moors that had occupied their land, and those whom they had driven out in a horrible way. Legends passed from fathers to sons that tell a fantastic story full of fabrications.

Now all they know about Moroccans is that they're crazy because they set sail on rafts, fleeing something. They think every Moroccan that they see on the street arrived on a boat like in the olden days. I explain to some that Morocco is just like Spain except that Spain is in Europe and Morocco is in Africa. And between us a vast sea of time separates the two continents. I know that things are much more complicated than how I try to explain them but the cultural level of the inhabitants of the villages deep in the mountains

is not high enough to talk to them about the Compensation Fund, the Free Trade Area, or the unified currency. And anyway, how would a person look engaged in explanations like this, with his overalls covered in mud? Stupid, without a doubt. What I think needs to be studied is the integration of Moroccans into Spanish society. In reality we are a very complex people. Sometimes I don't even understand myself very well. With respect to the level of integration, Moroccans make the least effort to integrate themselves because they always think that their culture is better. So outside of their country they act as if they were actually at home. This attracts more looks than others. I try to explain to Abdelwahab that he's wrong when he insists on analyzing things according to the logic of a Moroccan citizen who is forced by the troubles of daily life to be alert from when he leaves the house until he falls back into bed at night. Because here there's no need to protect yourself from the greed of the taxi drivers, or from eavesdroppers while you chat with a friend over coffee, or from your coworkers, or I don't know… because here no one is planning to throw you into a dump. So the behavior of Abdelwahab and others is ridiculous.

You can talk about politics and hamburgers at the same time, and no one's going to write you up.

After spending a year here I am amazed at how much I have missed my miserable country. I miss the good people. I miss the intense sun and the winter that we frequently spent wearing the same old shoes. I miss the fat police that stare more at your wallet than your car's documents. And the insolent police that insult your mother before even knowing who you are. I miss the dilapidated ambulances, the shrillness of the sirens, and the drivers who looks like they're smiling, as if the smell of the bodies makes them

euphoric. I miss seeing two drivers chat while they hold up traffic. I miss the festival image of the donkey pulling a cart on which two plump women are dancing. And to see men at the end of their lives smoking cheap tobacco and sitting in silence, like spectators. I miss the boring television news and that boorish announcer. I miss the lies of politicians and intellectuals.

I miss poetry nights attended by broken-hearted men looking for female companions who were also lonely and usually ugly. I miss a lot of things. But what I miss the most was the surly waiter who looked at me angrily when I arrived at the café.

9.

I don't know why I decided to rob her. She seemed so drunk that she almost fell down at least once. The street was half empty and it was really late, almost three in the morning. I had to manage something that night if I didn't want to go a third day without eating. The dates that I stole from the supermarket kept me alive. And water, naturally, everywhere. Water with a weird taste. But I wanted to eat something more. I wanted to talk to my mother on the phone. Sit down at a terrace and order something. Answer some letters. The Englishwoman's purse awoke my appetite uncontrollably. I drew nearer to her and I heard her humming fragments of the song "Do You Miss Me Tonight" by Elvis Presley. I got closer until I was walking behind her. I didn't think anymore about it. I saw nothing but the purse. Strange, it was the first time in my life that I managed to concentrate like that. I grabbed the bag forcefully and left at a run. I pulled with such force that the woman nearly fell over. For an instant I felt like the entire world was running behind me, and that I had to run more and more.

Suddenly I turned. There was no one. I was running alone on a dark street, grasping the bag tightly. I stopped, opened it, took out its contents and threw the bag away. I should get rid of everything and keep only the money. If I had the bad luck of crossing paths with a police car, I would be forced to explain. I had seen the gypsies who rob tourists do it that way. I'd seen them from the balcony. Occasionally I would come down to look for the bags that they threw into the shrubs that grew behind the wall of the hotel, beautiful leather bags that I saved in the closet with my clothes, bags with many empty pockets. The gypsies don't wait for night to fall to rob someone. They do it in plain day and in front of the whole world. They steal bags that I save among my clothes like enigmatic memories.

I don't remember where I threw the bag, but I do remember the woman. When I turned back I saw her standing there. She didn't cry out or try to grab me; she stayed still, watching me while I disappeared into the darkness like a startled ghost. Luckily no police car passed by. I went slowly back home. When the door of the elevator shut, I took the papers out of my pocket. I looked for money among them but unfortunately I found nothing. All there was were documents, cards, and a passport. I put it all on the table, turned on the shower and let the water run over my back. I thought about what I had done. I wasn't regretting it, not at all, but I did feel a bit of anxiety. I opened the passport and looked long and hard at the picture of the woman, a pretty woman born in Leeds in 1953. She had to be a Libra, like me, because she had been born in mid-October. Leeds. I would have liked to continue my studies at the University of Leeds but I didn't have the money to pay tuition. I remember that an Arab professor answered me that he was willing to supervise my research, and he also advised me to improve my English and obtain

something to certify it. I wrote him a long letter explaining that I didn't have enough money to pay tuition, or to enroll myself in an academy in Rabat for three months and improve my pronunciation, but I really did want to carry on my studies. Besides, until that point no one had agreed to supervise my research. All the professors had given me ridiculous excuses. The majority preferred to supervise students that were working on projects about ancient problems with difficult solutions. Once I finalized the dissertation, I shredded it and forgot about it. I always do the same thing. If something sad happens to me and I want to tell it to someone, so I write it carefully on a white sheet of paper. I often write it in detail and with good style. When I finish saying everything that I want, I tear the paper into pieces and throw it into the garbage or out the window. Problem solved. I don't think about it again. In fact, I didn't want to continue my studies in Leeds. I lied. What I wanted was to leave the country at any cost. I had spent all my life at a desk. I also thought that there would be no worse punishment than prolonging that situation. If you get a doctorate in Morocco you can wipe your ass with it. That is what they give you, in a roundabout way. But, when all is said and done, that's what they want, that you wipe your ass with the degree you got for thinking that you were smarter than everyone and preferring to continue studying. Once you finish, you see that those who never go to class are those that decide your future in parliament, in city hall, or wherever. In short, you have become the dumbest of them all, and a degree isn't worth anything. Until you learn to make pizza. And it's terrible, because pizza sometimes ends up being more important than the doctorate. At least here, on this continent.

The woman was named J. Easton. The passport listed her as a nurse. I hate that profession. She must have spent her money drinking since only her identification

documents were in her bag. A drunk woman, stumbling along the street at three in the morning, couldn't be anything more than a ruined woman. And maybe single. I should have thought of that.

The English don't carry more money than they need for drinks and pizza. They leave the rest of it in the hotel room. When they get drunk and are left penniless, they go to sleep. She had eyes of a very intense blue. I spent a long time looking at them. I recalled Suzanne. Last week I ran into her when she was leaving the hotel. She made a sign at me with her hand. I told her that I was still waiting. She smiled and said, "See you later." "Later when, Suzanne?" I said to myself. Juan, who was sitting next to me in the terrace of the hotel said, "What are you waiting for, dude?" I told him that I had said that because I pronounced it very well, and because the English always say "see you later," even if you don't know them. They would say it out of respect, although in reality they don't plan on seeing you ever again. I don't know why they say that the English are a conservative people. Here, after one in the morning, not one of them can keep their balance on the street. They can't conserve anything, let alone their balance. Suzanne always leaves the hotel that she works in with a cigarette in her mouth. I don't like women that smoke. A woman has to maintain a hint of delicacy and gentleness; when they take a cigarette it's like something beautiful slowly burning. And what's worse, when she blows smoke out her nose she looks like a small dragon. And what am I going to do with all these papers that are worthless to me? It's obvious. I have to put it all in a big envelope and mail it to the police station and forget the matter. For a moment I thought about keeping the passport to sell it. But every time I looked at the eyes of the nurse, I was ashamed. I had stolen the purse with another aim so I had to at least be a

respectable thief, even though it seems like it isn't easy to be a respectable thief these days. In days of the past the brigand poets, the sa'aliks, robbed the caravans of the rich to redistribute the wealth among the poor. I mean, those that were poorer than they were because those poet-bandits were also poor. Urwa Ibn Al-Ward was always my favorite poet. I will always respect him. One day he pawned his sword to give milk to a destitute mother who was carrying a hungry baby in her arms. I wonder what Urwa would be if he was in Benidorm or Alicante? Without papers, without a job, without money. And on top of that, he would have to walk around here with his sword. Sometimes I talk nonsense.

Stealing books or newspapers doesn't give you anxiety. On the contrary, you feel an uncontrollable satisfaction overcoming you, as if you've been saved from the world of dreadful writers and newspapers that do nothing but lie. I will always consider it a right. I didn't keep the books at home. When I finished reading them, which rarely happened, I sold them or gave them to my friends. As for the newspapers, I intentionally left them on the table of the café and left empty-handed. I felt lighter. But to steal a purse is something very different. You feel like you steal and don't have morals. To steal is like becoming a member of a party. You have to do it with certain conviction. If not, you become a dirty opportunist, willing to say anything at any moment.

Walking along the street I imagine that the entire world saw me steal the bag and run away, and that everyone knows and hates me. When I was little, every time I did something stupid I closed my eyes. I thought that it made me disappear because I didn't see anyone, so no one saw me. Now that I'm older, I can't close my eyes because unfortunately, it isn't funny anymore.

This month I turned twenty-eight. It seems that I will begin my thirties without a

future. But, what is a future exactly? To have a house, a wife, and a job? To be politically active about something? To have children? Friends? Social standing? Travel around the world? Write books? I don't know. Last week, Macarena told me that I had to think seriously about my future. That she didn't know that things were so complicated. That the government, that is pretty right-wing, doesn't do anything for immigrants. That she didn't vote for Aznar because she's a communist. I always laugh at her communism. I don't believe it. Communism is over. Because people began to love banks more than Marx. They loved the money more than the membership cards. Also, Marx was already a bit ridiculous with that beard combed like a disemboweled cushion. Che Guevara himself doesn't do anything now other than adorn summertime shirts. Like Brian Adams. Spaniards don't know much about immigrants, the newer generations at least. The previous generations lived through the emigration during the civil war and during the regime of General Franco, so they know the hell that is emigration. They went to Mexico, Argentina, France, and Germany, and who knows where else. And now they are not ashamed of themselves when, upon seeing a person with Arab features, they say, "Ooooh, those *moros* have come back already!"

10.

Monday. Six in the morning. I've arrived in Madrid. It's not yet daybreak. The bus dropped us off at Estación Sur. The place seems safe. There's no trace of the patrols that usually lie in wait for foreigners who look suspicious or have many bags, or are just a different color of skin. In Madrid, like all European capitals, it's best not to take a taxi if

you don't know exactly where you are and the address of where you're going. And that's if you have an address! I got onto the bus that went to the city center. From the heart of the city you can go wherever you want. Finally a friend arrived and got me out of the maze. Luckily, his house was in the center, in one of the old neighborhoods of Madrid. The bus was comfortable, but I don't like to sleep while traveling. I can't stand the idea of what I'd look like, sleeping like a log in my seat. I picture myself, mouth open, head nodding around in all directions. I see some travelers in this state and I don't like it. I prefer to stay awake the whole time. I usually travel at night because at that time it's less likely that the police will get on board. And also, I prefer travelling at night because I like to think a little bit. In a bus you can't think about anything concrete, even though you can think about almost anything. I don't know why I recalled that distant day when I told my mom that I wanted to be a soldier. I remember that she threatened to throw me out of the house if I said it again. We don't have any soldiers in the family; we're all civilians. If I'd become a soldier I would have had a lot of time to write letters, my favorite hobby. When wars end, soldiers play cards in their barracks and gamble away their salaries. That's why the wives of some soldiers change their address without paying off those debts that my grandfather jotted down in an old notebook. I would have written letters, long letters to people I didn't know. I'm sure I would have received responses. I would have written that war is not a black sun that forces men to mature, like someone said. Black suns don't exist. There is only one sun that rises every morning. The heavy weaponry, the uniform, and the sandy beaches. Everlasting dunes of sand. And, every once in a while, bodies. That's all there is in war. When I grew up I knew I would never be a soldier, because there's nothing worse than war. Nor would I become a university professor, like my

mother always wanted. I decided to leave everything behind me and go away.

Muhsin also dropped everything and went away to Iraq. We used to sit around and talk a lot at night when he got back from work. Against his will, Muhsin had fought in the war against the Kurds. He said he had no choice but to walk through enemy gunfire because the rearguard would execute you if you deserted. In the morning he took me on a walk through downtown. We walked by the Puerta del Sol, then through the Plaza de España, and had coffee on Tetuoan street. He told me that there's a plaza where almost all the Moroccans gather, so that now it carries their name. The sellers of hashish and stolen goods like phones, clothing, watches, anything, go there. That's why the secret police prowls around the area. In Madrid the Algerians have given a bad name to Moroccans. Algerians prefer Alicante because the ships that come from Oran drop them off at the port there. Madrid scares them because of the constant searches on the street. Having dark skin is reason enough to stop you in front of everyone and search your pockets, and to throw you out if you don't have a residency permit. For an Algerian, there is no worse punishment in the world than to be deported to his country. After shooting bullets for the Iraqi army, Muhsin has now launched a quarterly journal in Madrid. With very little means and the help of his friend Abdelhadi he tried to do something in the middle of so much longing. With poems, stories, and letters, exile becomes less painful. In reality, I don't understand what happened to the Iraqis to make them that way. I remember that Iraqi professor that taught us English in high school. How refined he was. After the Gulf War he was lost in the world like just any other refugee. I told Muhsin that Baghdad has taken a beating. He responded that Iraq has always been that way. They never go more than ten years without entering into war. I remember the verse from Sayyab… *In Iraq, a*

year never passes without hunger. The next day Ahmed the Palestinian invited us to his house. He made a meal in our honor. Ahmed shares a small, two-room flat with another Palestinian friend and a Spaniard who works as a mechanic. An enormous dog comes up from the first floor to eat out of his hand. He told me that he's a Spanish dog and doesn't understand any other language. Ahmed is a political refugee who likes to make fun of everything, from the PLO to an ad for a brand of milk that shows a skinny, black African finding a can of milk in the middle of the desert. The skinny man smiles, grabs the can, and leaves contented. Then on the screen appear the words *Pascual Milk…. Milk of the Future*. He says that the ad is racist. After eating, Ahmed invites me to talk on the phone. He tells me that I can call all the way to Saigon and talk for as much time as I want. The offer surprised me, and he explained that he wasn't going to pay the phone bill anyway, and that they would probably cut the line off next week. He has a cell phone, and that's enough for someone to contact him at any moment.

He also called a Syrian friend of his who lives in Madrid and encouraged her to come visit him in the next few days to call her parents in Syria, and added that she could talk for as long as she wanted. His friend liked the idea. Naturally I called all my friends and family, and dialed a few numbers that I haven't called recently because I haven't had the money.

Ahmed says that it's his way of getting revenge on capitalism, on the Madrid Conference, and on all the forces against communism. The next morning I got up early. Without even eating breakfast I got into the first taxi that I found on the street. I got off in front of the Moroccan consulate in Madrid. I entered with the delusion that I would be the only morning visitor, but I stopped in surprise when I passed through to the waiting room.

The air conditioning didn't work and the room was drenched with stuffiness. I got into line to wait my turn. Since I arrived on this continent I've never had to form a line, not even once. And no one had stepped on me. My turn arrived and the worker asked me amicably what I wanted. I handed over my passport and a paper that explained what type of document I needed. She took the passport and the paper and told me to wait a moment. I left to wait outside the room. It was like entering a different time period. Or more like going back in time.

After a little while I heard my name. I approached the window where you pay for documents, greeted her, and leaned forward a bit so I could hear what the clerk was saying to me. She asked if I had a residency permit. I responded that I didn't have any more identification than my passport. She told me that the consulate couldn't issue me the document because I wasn't registered there. Great. I asked her what I had to do to register myself at their consulate. She answered that I needed to present a photocopy of my residency permit, a photocopy of my passport, and a photograph. For an instant I felt like I was unable to prove that I was a Moroccan citizen in the consulate of my own country. Great. Then I asked her what I should do if I only had a passport. She told me that I'd have to talk to the vice-consul and I'd have to wait because he wasn't in his office at that moment. I left the room again, astonished that those people weren't ashamed to deal with immigrants through such a small window, as if they were carrying something contagious. I couldn't wait. I climbed the stairs to the floor above and went into the first office. One of the office workers asked me what I wanted. I told him the issue. He apologized, saying that he was the bank representative and didn't have anything to do with those matters. Of course they have nothing to do with those matters, because the

only thing that matters to them is the money of the emigrants that lose their lives, dying to work. I went into a different office and explained to another worker what I wanted. He told me that I had to apply for the document in the Moroccan consulate in Barcelona since I lived in Alicante. I responded that now I lived in Madrid, trying to find out what chance I had in obtaining that document. He answered that registering at the consulate is absolutely mandatory. I went back down the stairs, pushed the office doors, and went in. The vice-consul was sitting at his desk. As soon as he saw me he shouted in my face that it was forbidden to enter. I couldn't comprehend how Moroccan emigrants were forbidden to enter the office of their vice-consul. He repeated it twice, yelling. I found it hard to digest his cries, but I didn't move from my spot. I told him that I just wanted to know what I had to do for His Excellence to receive me. Wasn't the office created fundamentally with this objective in mind, to receive people and solve their problems? The office worker came towards me and in a low voice told me that I had to leave the office, go back to the window, and speak through it. I felt my nerves tense. Finally, the clerk called me and asked for my passport. Then she took out a faded document, stamped it skillfully with the day's date, and stuck some stamps in the margin. I paid the fee and said to her, "What a reception!" I left there, outraged by everything. By the consulate, by the air conditioning, by the weather. It was raining outside. I returned home in silence. I thought that what had happened to me that morning was a curious paradox.

Those who were supposed to ask me for my residency card had never done it, and in my country's consulate my passport wasn't enough to corroborate my identity. I had observed that in the waiting room the majority of the people sitting in silence had a bad-tempered look. The same taciturn surliness that you can see in Casablanca in the bus

station or in any miserable place of the bureaucracy.

In the afternoon I recounted the scene to Muhsin. He told me that some of his Iraqi friends had asked for a visa in the Moroccan consulate to enter Morocco but that they were refused, the same refusal that Ahmed experienced when he asked for a visa to enter Syria. The same thing has always happened to Palestinians. They move across borders like smuggled goods. Muhsin comes back late from work so we've gotten used to talking as we fall sleep. The conversation flows between his bed and mine until sleep overtakes us. We talk about Iraq, about papers, about poetry. In the morning, when I get up, he's already gone. He's gone to work early. I remember Ahmed the Palestinian. And his sarcasm about the Pascual milk advertisement. I also remember that little black boy that adorned the cans of Brasilia coffee. A little black boy lifting up a cup filled with coffee. As a child, this image fascinated me in a curious way. His prominent muscles, his curly hair like grounds of coffee, his attractive smile…., I felt like breaking him free because I thought that he was pressed into the can of coffee. So I drew him on a white sheet of paper. But his smile wasn't as happy as on the can. I knew that he wasn't satisfied with the result. When my mother started buying Dubois coffee, I forgot about the little black boy. The new can didn't need anyone's muscles because it was cheaper than Brasilia. I was a child that drew everything. Now I'm a man who draws things in the sand, then the wave comes and erases it all.

11.

I found a job in a restaurant called Caesar's Pizza. I finally learned to make the

pizza dough with all the ingredients and put it in the oven. There are many types of pizza, contrary to what I thought before. In the restaurant we make Caesar Pizza, Roman Pizza, Royal, Capri, Combo, Hawaiian, Oriental, Golda. I don't know why whenever Alfonso asks me to make a Golda Pizza, it reminds me of Golda Meir and her image comes to my mind, with her enigmatic smile and her ugly face. I don't understand how Nixon could say that it was the most beautiful face that he'd seen in his life. I'm not good at mixing the dough and sometimes I leave it in the oven until the edges are burnt. The owner of the restaurant is named Jack but his friends call him Jacob because he's Jewish. He says that he spent his childhood in the Jewish quarter of Casablanca before leaving for France, and went from there to Canada, where he lived for thirty years. "There's no part of the world that I haven't been to," he told me smiling. Jacob runs the restaurant by himself and makes the food. Even though he doesn't see very well, he never messes up the measurements. His glasses are always fogged up with vapors and fried food. He told me he was going to give me a universal passport. He was talking about pizza. "If you learn to make pizza, you can find work in any part of the world. Even in Puerto Rico, if you want."

Jacob is the second Jew I've worked for. I'd done it before in Jesús' restaurant. Jacob was nice, not like that fat Jesús, who swallowed food like a buffalo and threw the leftovers onto the sidewalk of the restaurant. My pay was ridiculous but I could eat there. I didn't even have a *duro* and there was nothing left to do but accept work in those conditions. Jesus always looked for immigrants to come work for him. He knows that anyone who starts work will be gone after a couple weeks. If it's not the work inspectors or the police, it's the miserable salary that Jesus is not ashamed to pay you every week.

Pizza is like poetry. There are many types of pizza, like in poetry there are many types of meter. The difference is that if you learn poetry, you become a poet, which is unfortunately useless these days. But pizza can get you somewhere because it sells really well. Not like the poetry books that get faded away by the sun in the kiosks. Manuel says that the world is on the brink of consuming the trash that it has produced and has accumulated over the last hundred years in every corner of the globe. When the day comes when there is no one to clean the field, animals will eat it, mixed with excrement. That's how Manuel explains the catastrophes that happen in the world. He's worried about the rising temperature and climate change. To me, his skinny body seems like a high-precision thermometer that measures the temperature of the world. When I sit with him on the terrace of the restaurant, he shows me his arms and tells me that the sun would have killed him without the thick cream that he puts on every morning before leaving the house. He always has red spots on his arms and his neck looks like the neck of a chicken that's just come out of a fight. Manuel doesn't know if he has skin cancer, but he's really worried about the red spots. Sometimes he blames the tourists, saying that the seats that we sit on could be infected. He says he's seen people passing by with their limbs exposed and covered in pustules.

When I put plates in the dishwasher, I take advantage of the moment to leave the kitchen, breathe a bit of air and gaze at the ocean, waiting for that sound that it emits when it finishes shining the plates. I knew in detail what happened out there. I knew the time when that girl glides by on roller skates, the time when the skinny beggar arrives who spends his life comically imitating the people who pass by the terraces of the cafes. Some laugh and others are startled by his strange appearance. The tourists that relax in

the sun in the chairs of the café die of laughter. I know what time that huge Mexican passes by with his unfriendly demeanor and his moustache that covers half his face. He stops in front of the café and performs a dance that doesn't fit with his repulsive appearance, after wrapping his arm around the waist of the English girl who lures in the tourists by trying to advertise the shop's prices. Then he goes on his way, after raising his hand to say goodbye to the Englishman, who looks like Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*, and who repeats the same songs every morning without getting bored. As soon as I hear the sound of the dishwasher, I return to the kitchen, take out the plates, and organize them in the bar. I ended up having a strange relationship with that machine. I thought it knew my name and called out to me, just like Alfonso.

I don't know why the sun has become so harmful. Sometimes I get scared looking at the English that pass by half-naked, with their bodies covered with second-degree burns. Manuel asked me where we put the trash in Morocco. I told him I didn't know. Maybe they burn it or throw it in the ocean. As soon as I said it I remembered the mountains of trash that I had seen in the outskirts of Casablanca. Once burned, the air smells like trash and black trees cover the city. I recalled one time that I went to the Teacher Training Center for the entrance exams. It rained a lot that morning, a rain that splashed my white shirt with black spots. The drops that fell from the trees were also black. But it didn't matter, because I entered the lecture hall at nine o'clock and left at nine-thirty. I think that the question was about a quote from Al-Zamakhshari. I hate grammar and rhetoric. I have never been able to distinguish one poetic meter from another. Because I think that poetry is exactly that: not being able to distinguish between things. Jacob is a Jew committed to the teachings of his religion. He says that here he

doesn't eat meat because it isn't sanctified by the rabbi. He also told me that, if I wanted, I didn't have to touch the slices of ham if it bothered me. Jacob is strangely afraid. He jumps at hearing the telephone ring. And when he wants to light the gas oven, he can't do it because he hesitates when he holds out the match. He told me that if an elegant man with a briefcase in his hand comes into the restaurant, I should leave through the back door. And if he catches me in the kitchen, I have to tell him that I'm not working, I'm just looking for the bathroom and I got lost on the way. But to this day, no one has come in with an elegant suit and briefcase. Most of them come in swimsuits. Jesus hadn't warned me about people like that. Maybe because he didn't care. Abdelwahab says that Jesus knows important people, and that he deals drugs. And that he bought the restaurant as a cover. I think he bought the restaurant to get fatter. Since he weighs so much, his walk looks like a lazy crocodile slithering slowly.

Yesterday Alfonso put the empty glasses in the dishwasher, looked at me with a smile, and asked me if I knew Abu Abdullah. Boabdil[7], as he called him. I acted like I didn't know what he was talking about so I could hear his version. And like an exceptional student, he said that Boabdil was the last of the Arab kings that they expelled from Al-Andalus. King Fernando captured him, cut off both ears, and drove him back across the sea. I told him that maybe Abu Abdullah was alone, without Arab support to defend his kingdom. Alfonso responded smiling that the *moro* king had to leave Granada anyway because Queen Isabel and her husband King Fernando wanted to ascend to the throne, and that the *moros'* time in Spain had come to an end. I jokingly told him that now we're coming back. Surely now we're not soldiers of an army, nor do we have a leader who looks like Tariq Ibn Ziyad, but we are invading Al-Andalus again. Alfonso

[7] Spanish interpretation of the Arabic name Abu Abdullah

laughed and said that it's very different to come to a country in search of bread than as a *conquistador*[8]. The *conquistadors* don't invade a country just to bend over and pick up tomatoes. Certainly the *conquistadors* don't make pizza either, or climb trees to pick fruit, I said. We laughed together. Alfonso left to attend to a couple that had entered the restaurant. I put the dough on top of the marble and I began to knead it with all my might. I thought Alfonso was right. To be a *conquistador* is different. Our ancestors didn't knead dough in Al-Andalus. They spent many centuries creating a grandeur that doesn't deserve to be immortalized now by the Spaniards as a celebration of ignorance that does nothing but remind the new generations of the terrible defeat that happened to the *moros.* But Fernando had not cut off the ears of Abu Abdullah, like Alfonso had joked. At least the book *Leo Africanus*, by Amin Maaluf, doesn't recount this farce. Although I can't be sure, since I haven't finished it yet. I bring it with me only when I take the bus somewhere. I barely read when I'm not traveling. I need to see that the trees keep falling down behind to feel that I'm moving more and more forward. When I took the bus as a child I had the sensation that the telephone poles and trees were falling behind the bus as it moved forward. Today I'm still convinced that they do fall down. But on the trip back, the trees and telephone poles and everything are still in their spots. What fell down was something else I couldn't see, something that fell inside me and never went back to its spot.

When things went well in the restaurant and we served many people, Jacob smiled, showing his teeth that were yellow but not a single one was missing. Then he would start to sing brief fragments of prayers that I didn't understand, but they were beautiful. He said that when he was young he had participated in a singing competition in the Rialto Theater of Casablanca and that he won a prize of a bottle of Martini. When

[8] Popular Spanish term for an invader

Saturday rolls around, Jacob spends all day sitting in a chair. He doesn't do anything that he usually does on the rest of the days. He doesn't talk about anything to do with the restaurant. He says that Saturday is the day of rest, and since it's a sacred day, it shouldn't be soiled by things and trivialities of life.

Alfonso says that I have to concentrate really well on everything. On how to make food, how to prepare salad, how much time the pizza needs to be in the oven. He says this because he thinks I want to spend the rest of my life in a kitchen.

Certainly it's a good profession and it brings in money like no other, but I couldn't stand to picture myself in the kitchen. It's usually really hot and the air is thick and heavy because of the fryers. Ahmed, the Algerian, hadn't heard of Oliva. I called him and he told me that every day he watches the trees, waiting for the oranges to ripen. I told him to let me know when harvest time comes. I missed climbing the trees and filling the trailers with boxes. I missed gazing at the sun rising from behind the mountains and darkening in the afternoon as it sinks behind other mountains. To work in the depths of nature is an incredible thing. Finally you realize that the day begins and ends, and you receive this ending with satisfaction because you've followed it from the start. You finally understand that the day must have an ending. You yearn for it. It's not the same as when you work under a roof. You don't see how time passes. And when afternoon comes you complain and say to your companion that time has passed really slowly and the week has flown by. I sometimes think that if the working class had the privilege of gazing at the sun all day, they wouldn't complain about the weather. Even Marx ignored it, because a discovery like that can only come from working in the fields, which means that Marx, to have arrived at an idea like that, would've had to leave his office and go work in the fields to

work all day under the sun. But he didn't do that, and so he didn't come to any conclusion of that nature. Even if he had done it, his beard would have hindered his work. In the field we all put on hats because the branches get tangled up in your hair and so it slows down the work. Marx's beard is impossible for work in the fields. I don't know why Jacob tells me that my future is in America. He also told me that if I was thinking of going to Israel he could get me a job with one of his friends in Tel Aviv, and that I wouldn't regret it. Israel. Nothing like that has ever crossed my mind. "In Spain there's no place for Arabs or Jews," Jacob repeated. Other places came to mind. London. Boston. I don't know where I'll go. Sometimes I think about going back home. Then I think again and tell myself that that is a one-way road, that if I go back I won't be able to leave again easily. Here I've learned not to take one-way roads. You have to be like a rabbit: make a home and make two or three doors, if possible.

Even though Saturday is the day of rest for Jacob, he takes a swig between meditations. He drinks and contemplates the calm sea before him.

12.

Last week some Moroccan friends came to see me. They came from Lisbon, where they'd participated in an international youth festival as part of the World Fair. I don't know how they got my address, but they found me easily. It was a surprise. It filled me with happiness to be the host of that group. Finally I felt useful. I knew some of them since we were university students, where we threatened to take years off, fighting for things that now seem ridiculous since my exile. Some fought in parties of what is

considered "the Left." I've heard in the news that this Left has ascended to the government in Morocco. I don't know how they're going to resolve the problem of those fighters who left their parties and joined another fight against bread, time, and devastation on this melancholy continent. Here everyone repeats that José María Aznar is the only right-wing in all of Europe, and that he's got to take a rest and leave the place to the socialists. After the recent rise of the Left in Germany, the Spaniards have no choice but to hammer the last nail into the Right's coffin. But they already tested the socialist government of González and ended up saying that they're nothing more than a bunch of thieves. Recently, they even sent some of his leaders to jail in a belated settling of scores. Sometimes people look for a change. But the wolf knows how to hide his fangs under the skin of the lamb. It doesn't matter.

Every one of them in the group from Lisbon had made their plans. Some had decided to stay in Spain, others knew people in France or Germany. After a week of economic refuge in my apartment they scattered across the map before their visas expired, which made them stay where they were because the borders on this continent are watched day and night. Your appearance is enough to stop you, force you off the bus, and frisk you down to the last crevice of your body. Sometimes they ask you to follow them inside to a small room, take off all your clothes, and then pick up something that they drop on the ground. They ask you just so you have to bend over, so that no part of your body remains outside the reach of their scrutinizing gaze. They do it because some traffickers have put hashish in their ass, even though most of the time they're discovered by those terrifying dogs that smell Arabs from light years away.

When we crossed the Spanish border to enter French territory, I didn't know that

Cedric's car was full of hashish. There were four of us in the Opel. Cedric at the wheel, next to a young Moroccan from Uxda with a French passport, and Khaled and me in the back seat. When we crossed the French border, we saw Mustafa's car through the steamy window stopped on the shoulder and the dogs voraciously biting at the wheels. The smell of chocolate had alerted their suspicions. Mustafa was sitting on the ground, soaked because of the rain that had been falling all day and night. It was about three in the morning and the wind, which normally blows hard in Andorra, was stronger than ever. Jamal was also on the ground, with his hands behind his back. Mustafa was in a fit of rage, but his handcuffed hands kept him motionless. Only his cries and insults that he yelled in obscene French matched the whistling of the wind. Hadi was standing alone, in front of the border police car, with his hands up as if reciting a prayer. We stopped a second like the other cars that slowed down to look at the scene. I saw tears in the eyes of Jamal. I knew that he was innocent, because he was an educated young man that had no relation to the world of smuggling. Before getting into the car in Spain, I had coffee with him and he told me about his desire to see Paris. He said Spain didn't suit him. Mustafa had gotten him a fake French passport. Later on I would find out that Jamal had to spend about a month and a half in a French prison for having false papers. Mustafa went back to nervously insulting the cars that stopped to watch the scene, and his gaze landed on our Opel. Immediately he began to yell in Algerian dialect, without looking in our direction, that we should abandon the place quickly and get the merchandise to its owners. At that moment I understood that I could also go to jail arbitrarily, with murderers and all types of human waste. These possibilities passed at full speed through my mind like in a horror film. I looked at Khaled, demanding an explanation of what Mustafa had said. He replied

that it was only a matter of a few kilos of hashish in the engine of the car. He said it without looking away from the terrifying dogs that barked like wild beasts escaped from a trap. Cedric told me not to worry, that the capture of Mustafa's car covers up our car. For a moment I thought about getting out and looking for another way to continue. But the bad weather and my situation as an illegal immigrant, which prohibits me from entering into French territory, made me stay calm until we'd crossed the border.

As soon as the car pulled out and we got on the highway, the speedometer didn't drop below 160. We all agreed that the car would fly to get to Paris. As soon as we arrived at Mustafa's house in the suburbs, every one of us looked for a place to sleep. Cedric disconnected the phone before lying down on the sofa. I was the last to fall asleep. Those sad scenes came to my mind. The falling rain. Jamal and Mustafa in the middle of the puddle. The dogs barking. And the police, with their weapons pointed firmly. Mustafa was not afraid of the gun that they pointed at his head; he even moved and insulted them with disdain. He was furious like a Spanish bull stuck with *banderillas.*[9] But Jamal was broken, as if watching the destruction of a beautiful dream in front of him. All his time in Spain was spent dreaming of Paris and its colleges. He had studied at one of those colleges some years ago. The dying wish of his grandmother was that her body would be laid to rest in Oran, and that Jamal would take care of repatriating her body to a tomb in her homeland. As soon as he returned, he was placed in the army to spend two years of his life in mandatory service. He left his engineering classes for classes on killing and shooting at vague enemies that had been ordered to be taken care of by the Apache helicopters. When he finished his stint in the army he got a visa for Spain. There he stayed, longing for engineering and for Paris. And for all those that he'd seen die in the

[9] The flags that a bullfighter sticks into the flank of a bull to anger him.

mountains of Algeria while he pulled the trigger to bring down obscure enemies that the regime had seen as threatening.

One of the friends of the group of Moroccans told me in Barcelona that the Portuguese media had sided with the Moroccan youth. They suggested that they stay in Portugal in exchange for a symbolic monthly salary. But the young Moroccans had been cautious, as if they'd smelled with their political instinct, rather than their nose, that they were concocting something. And they rejected this kind offer that they would have never let slip by in their own country, claiming that they were very attached to their homeland in spite of how hard life was there.

This week I began a new job. I start at eight-thirty in the evening and leave at four-thirty in the morning. The café is on a narrow alley called Alameda, a precious alleyway that always reminds me of the alleys of Salé where the Colisee Theater is. That theater where, in addition to the movie, you would see many other amusing scenes among the audience: the old people that fall into an eternal sleep as soon as the lights go out that is only interrupted by the kids jumping over the seats to get to the exit once the credits start rolling. In the alley there are green trees all year and pretty benches scattered along the whole road. Wood benches that no one has ever thought to tear down. I love that alleyway. Not because it has an Arab name, that doesn't matter to me. I like it because it's narrow and shady. The work in that café requires physical effort. There are always boxes of Coca-Cola to bring up to the store on the second floor. The bags of ice are in huge freezers on the third. I also have to bring them down to the five bars in the café on the ground floor. At one in the morning it's impossible to get in because the customers are

packed in, dancing. Most of them are Spaniards who love popular songs, samba, flamenco, and revolutionary songs from Latin America. Songs about poor people in Mexico and Peru, autocratic regimes, shootings, and other things I couldn't understand because of the laughter and chatter of the drunken people. The place is decorated in a Mexican style, so it seems like an old highway bar. I don't know why those customers who are faithful to their drinks, dances, and places were called proletariat. Maybe because, to me, it represents the working class that spends every day of the week in grueling jobs, in factories, in construction, in packing warehouses, waiting for Friday and Saturday nights to arrive to explore, singing, dancing, and drinking until sunrise.

Even though I have no contract, I have a respectable salary. In eight days of working I earn the same as an elementary school teacher in Morocco does in one month. The people in charge of the café are young and don't care about the origin of species. Some don't even know where Morocco is on a map, which is better for them in some ways. To give work to someone without a contract exempts them from paying for Social Security. A Polish man works with me. I argued with him on the second day. He had thought that I was one of those animals that don't know anything except how to take orders. And because he'd been there longer he thought he was important. I told him that you don't need a title for lifting boxes, so he should put his philosophy to the side and share the tiredness with me. And since that day he has worked without comment. My hatred for Eastern Europe increased because of him. Now I'm convinced of one thing: if you agree to work like a donkey, everyone will demand that you keep doing it. In the end, no one will give you credit and they will criticize you more. If you reject the job and do it the way you want, everyone will respect you. And if you get mad, everyone will begin to

fear you and take your existence into consideration. It's like that in all fields, I think. He who gratefully agrees to carry others on his back cannot get mad if they don't want to get off.

Natalia really likes to look in the mirror from across the bar. She seems more concerned with her mop of hair than with the customers, who prefer to drink in that bar so they can talk to her. Natalia is intelligent. She says that customers are always like that. You have to smile at each one, and wink your eye here and there so that they stay glued to their seats. Natalia is a heartbreaker. She distracts the customers, and everyone adores her. I always say that she's a great actress. She smiles and says that life is a bad movie and full of failed actors. I don't know why she asked if it was true that in Morocco we trade women like merchandise. I jokingly told her yes, and that each one has their own harem. "Ohhh! That's terrible!" she said. I laughed and told her, "Natalia, I'll bring you to Morocco so you can see all that." She said it was a great idea. Yep, great. You'll be very happy taking photos of yourself with angry snakes in Jamaa el Fna, or with miserable monkeys trained to beg. You'll be astonished by all the young men who grease up their hair and wander around looking for a lost, lonely tourist in whom they see some vague future. Naturally I said this all to myself, because Natalia was still more caught up in her mane than in listening to my stories of the land of wonder. Natalia is one of the pretty girls who work in the bar. She studies tourism and constantly repeats that she's Catalonian.

Here the youth don't seem concerned with politics and its madness. They're apolitical creatures. They have a job, a salary, and free weekends. All that makes them reconcile with life. Not like us. Politics has ruined us. Even my grandma, who watches

over my future, has stopped talking about politics.

Joking around, I told one of my fugitive friends from the group from Lisbon that the real struggle has just begun for him. The struggle to live each day, to open your eyes every day you're still alive. To become a member of life, to be truly free. I mean, to achieve your own freedom, without needing connections, rallies, or applause from anyone. He kept looking at me for a while and didn't say anything. I noticed that he was thinking. But about what, no one can know what a fugitive thinks about.

13.

Pego is a small city that rests in the middle of mountainous foothills, so there's not much wind. Everything in it seems anchored in time. The trees don't move, and it's surprising how temperate the climate is. Rafael says that the northern winds don't reach there because the mountains are tall. This makes the winter climate merciful. I rented a new house with some friends, a beautiful house, this time with blankets. The owner is a wonderful woman, and so is her husband. When I held out my hand with the rent money, he told me to give it to his wife who was next to him. I'd heard that there was work in Pego, so I grabbed my stuff and went. When the tourists leave Benidorm, the opportunities diminish. After a week of searching, we finally found a house for forty thousand pesetas a month. The owner said that at that price we don't have to pay the water and electricity bills. The beds were comfortable, and the bathroom elegant and clean. The place invited you to spend a lot of time there. Luckily, one of us had a residency card, since it was mandatory for drawing up the contract with the agency.

In the morning on the first day we got up at five. We drank coffee and went to an orange-packaging factory. We asked if there was work. I went up to the office of one of the managers to let him know that there were three of us. He asked if I had a car. I told him no. He told me he was sorry, and returned to his office. We ordered coffee in the employee cafeteria and talked with some of them. They spoke Valenciano. They seemed unsociable. Here outsiders remain outsiders for some time until they show their good intentions, then they'll open up and laugh with you. Here everyone works in the field, so when someone offers you their hand you are not surprised by the roughness of their palm, and you are ashamed of the delicateness of yours. When I open the door to enter the house, I look at the painting hanging on the front wall, a painting done with obvious clumsiness. Three dogs running behind a house, and another dog trailing behind. There's also a gazelle on the top of a hill. The rest are green trees, distant mountains, clouds, and a river.

After the factory manager excused himself, we went out to the plaza and stayed there, waiting to see if luck would smile on us. But we had nothing but bad luck. All the workers left in their big cars and we stayed there, alone in the plaza. I became a little discouraged and began to curse anyone who came into my mind at that moment. At nine we left and went around Pego looking for the even smallest hint of a job opportunity. We had to find something because we'd spent everything we had on paying rent. The good thing about being an illegal immigrant is that you're not obligated to stay in a job for a long time, and that in one month alone you'll probably go through various professions and learn many useful things. And also useless things. One person takes you on to exploit you, another takes advantage of you, and another needs your services in a hurry. In the

end, they all give the same polite excuses. They pay you what they owe and get rid of you because you're no longer needed.

We scoured all the roads in Pego and went into each building site. Finally we found one that needed workers. The foreman asked where we lived and I gave him the address. As it turned out, he knew the owner of the house. I was delighted by the coincidence. He told us to come back the next day at seven-thirty in the morning so he could see how we worked. I said to myself, "We would even eat the cement, if that's what you wanted." And I laughed. My friend asked me why, and I told him that I was laughing at what was happening. I had studied to become one thing and look where I was, working as a builder. We laughed together and went back home to eat. At one a chirping sound was heard in the house. Someone called at the door. I got up to open it and I found the construction foreman, short and with his face spotted with red dots. He said that we had to be at the site at two to begin working. At 2:05 we were transporting iron beams from one place to another, and we did that until six. We came home half-dead. Breathing so much dust dries out your nose and throat. We worked like dogs because we were being tested. We didn't talk to him about salary, nor did he mention anything about paperwork. I surrendered to the tiredness and sleep overcame me.

During the next few days I would eat something once I got home and go out for a walk. Pego is tiny, like the palm of your hand. In the little plaza where the bus stops there is a life-size statue of a wild boar in white marble. The animal looks scared, with its mouth half-open and teeth bared. I usually go to a café on the same street that we live on, a café that looks like an art exhibit. It happened to be a photography exhibit. Photos of cafes in diverse countries. There was a Moroccan café, and many others from Tunisia,

Greece, Turkey, and Pego. But it didn't entertain me much. I drank something and went home to sleep. Here at least I can come and go freely. There are no police cars. In Pego there are no Arabs except us and Hamid. He arrived two years ago after crossing the sea in a raft with twenty other immigrants. They set sail from the area of Muley Busulam and, after more than twenty hours at sea, arrived at the coast of Cadiz where they dispersed like crawdads. Because of work and tiredness, I didn't have time to write letters or do anything anymore. Once I left Morocco I decided not to start writing again because it's clearly not a respectable profession. It yields more sorrows and enemies than it does benefits. Nevertheless, the rains were the reason that I went back to writing. When the weather was bad, we left the fields and sat in the nearest bar. There the men would drink and play cards while waiting for the rain to let up. I would grab a napkin and write down whatever came to mind. The rains stopped and I realized I was writing a journal. No one can choose what will happen during the day, but they can retell it. Diaries like this are the most enjoyable form of rewriting that abominable crime that is life, of recovering it selectively, of making the small things into events that are worth reflecting on. I hadn't had the opportunity before to reflect on that grey snot that drips from my nose when I clean up after work.

When I shower, the water runs black. But Rafael says that the dirtiness of work never stains. I don't know why I used to call Rafael the unknown soldier. Maybe because of his endless stories of his years of military service in Sidi Ifni. Almost every time we stop at nine to have lunch, he starts talking about the Agadir earthquake, the climate in Sidi Ifni, and many other details that are lost on us as we become absorbed in our food. The half hour of rest that they let us have is not enough to discuss the military history of

Spain with all its armaments, fleets, and soldiers. So we pretend to listen to his stories while each one of us eats and thinks about the hard work ahead of us. The bricks cut you if you carry them without gloves and, what's more, you have to carry them up many floors. Sacks of cement, mountains of sand, wood, iron beams covered in rust, and other minor tasks that have to be done between jobs, like digging in search of a leaking pipe. Yesterday I dug more than a meter and a half into the earth looking for the leak. I ran into a horrible toad sleeping in the depths of the damp ground. I poked him with the tip of the pickax to get him to leave. But he stayed there, looking at me with his sleepy eyes, as if cursing me for waking him up in this early autumnal season. But he finally moved of his own accord and dragged his body toward some nearby bushes. I hate frogs. I spent all day trying to get that horrible image out of my head. When I was a kid I closed my mouth every time I saw one, because when we were little we used to say that if a frog sees your teeth, they will inevitably fall out. It was a story, because we saw our teeth fall out, one after the other, frog or no frog.

Childhood is funny. Children think that they're destitute just because they don't have a bike. My father always told me that if I passed my classes at the end of the semester that he would buy me one. And I always passed with flying colors, but that didn't help me get a bike. I became very sad. In school I was a diligent student. I painted landscapes on cards and brought them to the teachers to hang on the walls of the classroom. This delighted me. When I left school I would pass by grandpa's shop because I was hungry. My grandpa always made tea for his friends. I would barely have passed through the door and he would leave my satchel on top of the sugar sacks, light the kerosene stove and put on the kettle after adding a bit of water so that there was more

than enough. My grandpa told me that tough bread is much better than soft because it strengthens the teeth. And I believed it. He used to have a lot of leftover bread from the store and it became as tough as wood. I would chew the bread and drink tea while watching the way my grandpa cleaned his dentures with a large handkerchief, without taking his eyes off me and smiling at me with his toothless mouth. It made me laugh. Once satisfied, I didn't go home. I stayed lying on top of a sack of straw. Sometimes I began to sweep the shop or organize the merchandise, even though the rats scared me. Big rats that went slowly in between the bars of soap and bottles of oil. The cats didn't hunt the rats. They licked themselves and slept in the sun. My grandpa said that they were lazy and worthless, but they kept him company when his friends would leave to go about their business.

When my grandfather got tired of sitting, he would get up and set a trap somewhere in the store. He had many traps of different shapes and sizes. Traps of wood for the small rats and iron traps for the big ones. But there came to be so many rats that he got tired of hunting them. He left them in a corner to rust. The cats also left.

I think that my first readings were in precisely that place, in my grandfather's shop on a sack of straw. I used to find old books that had been sold by weight and had ended up with their pages ripped out to wrap up sunflower seeds or yeast, books by unknown authors that I devoured without stopping. In addition to forgotten letters to addressees that had changed address. I spent many hours on straw sacks reading a great many books, notebooks and letters. Some of the letters were lost because of the rats. And so greetings, passions, and assignments of many soldiers were also gone with them. My grandfather was kind, even to the rats. He kept saying that the letters would keep coming,

because the war would last for a while. A long line of tanks passed in front of our house. I heard my mother say that they were going to the Sahara. Khaki-colored tanks. I left my wired toy and went running through the house. The women went out and shouted joyfully. Grandma Sofia told me that she'd seen tanks like those in the times of French colonization. They patrolled the streets making sure that doors of all the houses were open. If they found one closed, they would break it down and burst into the house, searching everywhere. The house had to be open. That's how you give the impression that you're obedient, that you don't have anything to hide, and that you aren't afraid of someone entering suddenly to search the place. Sofia said that the militants that went around in the tanks were Senegalese, meaning from Senegal. My grandfather hadn't been a fighter. He was a shopkeeper. He always said that if he'd fought, he would have died dozens of years ago. And that all those cowards who passed in front of his store in the celebrations of the medals on their chest were nothing more than traitors. That's why they stayed alive. Sofia thought that my grandfather was really afraid of dying and leaving her and my father alone. So he didn't get too involved in the Algerian War. He fought in another way.

It occurred to me that I could be the recipient of many letters, that letters could arrive for me. I looked for addresses in magazines, girls' addresses, naturally, and I began to write. When my father found out that letters were arriving for me from girls, he smiled and asked me what it was about. I told him they were friends, friends who wrote me letters.

I think that my relationship with writing began exactly in that early moment. Isak Dinesen, one of the important figures of Danish writing said, "Almighty God, as the

heavens are higher than the earth, so are thy short stories higher than our short stories" (39). It means that all the things we try to write are nothing more than vulgar variations of the rhythm of life. There is nothing more vile than to renounce life and be content with putting it into the pages of a book. Borges himself arrived at this truth when he said that he didn't desire eternity, but that he feared it. Because it would be horrible to know that you would keep on living, and terrifying for him to think about surviving. He was tired of his name, of himself, and of his fame. And he wanted to free himself from that heavy triviality.

Writing gives you an opportunity to tell and, afterwards, to listen to all that you have told. Sometimes you discover how mediocre you have been when trying to write something profound, as if you were demonstrating to others that you deserve their consideration. Thus is writing, it's very similar to those strange mirrors that stretch and shrink us in bizarre ways when we stand in front of them. There are those who see themselves as infinitely grand. And those who discover how insignificant they are. But everyone leaves that room of mirrors with our authentic dimensions, just like when we leave fiction for the real world. That prewritten world, a day without faults or presumptions and with a great complexity that makes the joke of what we write into an unbearable mockery.

14.

I ended up with a new name. Miguel called me Richard. It seemed easier to him than pronouncing my name. My friend also ended up with a different one. Everyone

called him Raoul. Sometimes they happened to call us by our new name and we didn't notice until after they'd repeated it a few times. Rafael says that, with time, we'll get used to our new names. On Saturdays we work from seven thirty in the morning until one in the afternoon. Just us. We'd told Alberto, the foreman of the site, that we would work Saturdays, Sundays, at night, during the day… it didn't matter. Alberto came at one thirty on the dot. He gave us our week's pay and said that on Monday we had to go to the office of the company lawyer to go over the contracts. My friend whispered that now began the worst part of the movie. I told him not to worry, that we were used to these kinds of scenarios.

We agreed not to waste any more time. We decided to get up early on Monday and go first to the orange storehouse to see if we'd have any luck and be able to say goodbye to the sacks of cement and rusty beams. But luck continued at her leisure, bad-tempered without reason. We went back to the house and made breakfast. Food was becoming scarce in the refrigerator. "And now what do we do?" said my friend. "We go to the lawyer's office," I responded. But without a work permit or social security card we wouldn't be able to sign any contract. "That's the lawyer's problem," I added, justifying nonsense with more nonsense. At ten on the dot we pushed open the door of the lawyer's office. There was Alberto. We told him the truth and he seemed wary.

He said that he was pleased by the way we work but he was afraid of the fines if a work inspector came by the site. The lawyer explained how things were from a legal point of view. I mean, he explained to Alberto that we were dangerous for his project. I told Alberto not to worry, that we would find other work, and that we didn't want to create more problems. The lawyer tried to explain the matter, playing to the interests of

both sides. We didn't have social security in case an accident occurred, and he couldn't employ us legally. But his position makes him put the interests of his client before ours. Lawyers are always tactful. That's how the matter ended, and we tried to take the conversation in other directions. I think we talked about polygamy and languages that they speak in some parts of Morocco. The lawyer wanted to confirm the information he'd heard from various sources while Alberto stared on blankly.

We trudged gloomily back home, as if staring down the barrel of an invisible rifle. "What do we do at home?" asked my friend nervously. I proposed that we go to the café to read the newspapers and maybe we would find some good news. About our country, about a new imminent law to organize papers, about any government anywhere in this miserable world. We went to café La Luna. Its name was written in a neon blue that shone dimly at night. The owner of the bar is a woman in her forties. From her chest hangs an enormous necklace of small silver pieces that form a crescent moon on which sits a fat man and a strange fish with an umbrella to protect it from imaginary rains. Sometimes the woman brushes the necklace with a swift movement from her hand. And it moves back and forth, letting out a peculiar sound when the fat man sitting on the moon bumps into the umbrella-fish. I told my friend that, without a doubt, the sound of the necklace attracts customers. He said it must, and that if not, how can you explain our presence here now, when we should be pushing a wheelbarrow full of cement, or at least climbing an orange tree? When things get complicated, there are some who become depressed and some who shrug it off. And there are some, like me, who are overcome with a vague feeling of elation. I always think that when things get so bad that they seem like the end of a black tunnel, it is a sarcastic indication that life puts human beings to the

test. So you have to take it all with a sense of humor. For those who have one, life tests us with seriousness. But the serious ones are always tested by a humor that they don't usually understand, so all they can do is keep trying again and again.

Something told me that Alberto would not get rid of our valuable services without a fight just because a wise attorney showed him a chapter of the criminal sanctions. At 1:45 the doorbell rang again. I opened the door and found Alberto. He told me he had an idea. Great, I said. We would only work from two in the afternoon to eight at night, since that's the idle time for the administration and there isn't a single work inspector outside of his house. I told him that was wonderful. After wolfing down some food we left and went to work. After two or three days, Alberto returned and said that we could also come in the morning if we wanted. So it went back to the way it was before, except that we did the work inside. We went out only if it was necessary and we ate under the stairs. This seemed better to me. At least I wasn't forced to put up with the stories of the ex-soldier, and my friend didn't feel nauseated from the ham sandwiches of the workers. Simon always ordered me to bring him yellow insulation sheets to put them between the walls. But I'm the one who gets them ready and puts them in, while he stands back until I finish. I hate those sheets. When they rub against your arms they irritate the skin. And when you cut them into pieces, according to the size of the wall, you feel like little, annoying bits are sticking to your nose and throat. "Richard, bring sheets so we can put them inside the wall," Simon would say, in the plural. But when I bring the sheets, he says, "Here, you put them in their spot," in the singular. I don't think he's very good at conjugating verbs. Or maybe it's me who doesn't understand the verbal changes in Spanish. In the afternoon I went to the café alone. I sat down to think. I felt like I was on another planet. The events

that usually overwhelmed me by their importance, or sometimes by their insignificance, seemed different now.

On the phone everyone says there's nothing to be happy about. The intellectuals signed their books. They signed them with a single inscription, changing only the name of the purchaser. The Left, who had frequently repeated that they were with the people, had ascended to power in the government. The newspapers are in the kiosks. The poets are on their old platforms, rereading their poems that are already published. Rain seems unlikely. Finally a list has been published, a list of freed people. A list of disappearances from the world. Families had called for the bodies of their children, so that the missing person could finally have a grave that bears his or her name. And I feel as if light years separate me from my planet. Last time I was in Benidorm I saw Gaddafi. On a satellite channel he said that he has never sided with the Arabs who do nothing more than consult the United States, and that the majority of Arab leaders want to isolate him. And the only thing left of Al-Andalus for the Arabs are the *moaxajas* poems. He promised to Libyans, as if by magic, a channel of water to the Niger River, tropical rains, and the tsetse fly. I opened the newspaper to the international pages. That day *El País* published something on Iraq, whose title was, "Saddam Hussein: A Dictator Who Knows What He's Doing." In one of the brief news articles Khatami said that Arafat was a conspirator. Yesterday, in the back seats of the bus from Oliva to Pego, I picked out some phrases with biting words: *moros perros*.[10] Here most people have at least one dog. After work in the afternoon they take them out for a walk. They prefer to walk in the company of other people's dogs. The dogs are well-behaved, unlike the humans. It's funny to watch them. They smell each other in the road. This gives their owners an excuse to strike up

[10] "Arab dogs," a strong insult in both Arabic and Spanish.

conversation in the hope that the dogs finish their animal greeting. Dogs don't worry about the world. They piss on tree trunks, on the wheels of cars. They shit on sidewalks and continue on their way, without batting an eyelid. I remembered the dog Ethel that attacked me and destroyed both sandals. If she tried to bite me, I couldn't do anything against her. Ethel had papers and a card that showed she kept up with her periodic visits to the veterinarian. I don't have any of that. The owner of the café has brushed the fat man sitting on the moon with a light movement of her hand, and has bumped the umbrella fish, and they've produced a beautiful sound that I would have liked to last longer until customers from all over the arrived to drink coffee at my side. Maybe that way my solitude would be more bearable.

15.

From one of the balconies of the building we work in I see the children playing on the patio of the school during recess. Children with clean clothes and durable shoes. Playing peacefully. They don't punch each other like we used to do when we left class like mindless little devils. Sometimes I like to stay a while on that balcony watching them and stop working for a few moments so I can go back in time and see myself going to school in the morning. I was in the group that came in at 7:30 and left at 10:30 so I often went without eating breakfast. I wasn't embarrassed by my pants with holes in the knees that I spent my free time mending because my friends also had pants with holes all over them, as if they'd escaped from an air raid that had only destroyed their pants.

On the way to school I would listen to the morning radio programs. The voice

came out of the receiver from the store of Embarek, the Berber, and from the pastry shop, where the donkeys slept next to their owners, accompanying my soft steps toward school. The songs were always the same, and Rachid Sabahi's wishing everyone a good day was the same every morning. Even the news seemed similar to me. Nothing important happened in those distant years of the seventies, with the exception of the consequences of the Yom Kippur War, the maps, the occupied territories, and the emerging new leaders as a result of a similar defeat. The Camp David Accords. Sadat. The south of Lebanon. The mortars. Menachem Begin. Hezbollah. The Deir Yassin massacre. The Tel al-Zaatar massacre. The death toll in the Sahara. Material and human losses. "Will there be a tomorrow? Will there be a meeting?" sings Umm Kulthum. Names, places, losses, wars, and numerous agreements happened on the radio every morning on my way to school. I wasn't very aware of what was happening. What I cared about was getting there before the guard shut the gate because the principal personally received those students who arrived late because they overslept or for any other reason. He would stand there, smiling, stupidly hiding his cane behind his back, which he said he'd taken from Heaven. He stayed there waiting for any unfortunate student whose steps betrayed him because of the cold or the rain. Or just because of hunger. So the worrying news about the Middle East heading toward some absurd destination that came out of Embarek's radio, the baker's radio, or my grandfather's old radio, didn't mean much to a mischievous boy like me. The fat principal's face scared me more than that of Menachem Begin, who looked like a lizard. So I never arrived late. The interpretation of the Qur'an by Mekki Naciri moved me to put the transistor under the pillow before going to sleep. When he would talk about the people and the fruit of Paradise, I wanted him to continue with his beautiful

explanations. I would imagine myself in the middle of immense banana plantations. Endless forests. But suddenly he would stop and promise to return the next day. So every morning I got up anticipating his heavenly stories. The few times that I arrived late to school I went back home to keep my father company. He accepted reluctantly, after long discussions between us about why the principal needed to carry a cane at such an early hour. The cane came from Heaven, my father would say. And I would respond indignantly that bananas also came from Heaven, and why didn't he carry a basket and give a banana to each student?

When I heard the footsteps of Alberto climbing the stairs, I returned quickly and began to mix sand with cement in rapid movements. People are like that. They like to be deceived. If you actually work, they think that you're pretending. And if you pretend, they are victims of a ruse. Last week Alberto mixed up the count of how many hours we'd worked and gave us more than our weekly salary. My friend convinced me to give back the extra amount, that way he would realize that we are not like the others. We're honorable, added my friend with a scoundrel's crooked smile. So be it, I told him, tomorrow morning we'll give him back his money. But our honor will not change, it will always be suspect. Yesterday Rafael didn't realize that I was listening when Salvador asked about me, saying, "Is the *moro* there? Tell him to bring me some bricks." I brought the bricks without Salvador asking me to because I was there. I wanted to tell him that my name isn't pronounced like that. But I stepped aside and said to myself that, when all is said and done, I was nothing more than a *moro.* Rafael didn't do anything more than call me by my authentic name, the name they call me when I'm not there. When Alberto

is there, they work slowly. But as soon as Alberto gets into his car to visit other sites, they light up a cigarette and smoke. Campoy sings passionately about hearts full of love. He sings because he's a gypsy. It's the first time that I've known a gypsy who works in construction. Most of them work in the fields. Mother, father, and children, and sometimes the grandmother. They work in a friendly way. They never stop singing. Their voices are lost in the mountains, and with them plenty of sighs, slaps of palms, and countless days of tiredness to earn a living. Gypsies are the most unsuccessful people. They've been here many years and haven't given up on the bonfires, living in cars, and stealing. All that they've given to humankind is flamenco. And all that the Spaniards have given is a land to live on and a lot of disdain.

Yesterday after eating, David and I could be found carrying wooden frames. Surprised, he asked me what I was doing there. I told him that, as he could see, I was working. He was speaking with me in incorrect Arabic mixed with broken French. Then, giving Alberto a pat on the shoulder, he said, "Take care of those two. We're from the same land." Alberto smiled and responded, "You don't have a land." David blushed. I moved away from them when I heard Alberto's evil response. Each time I was more convinced that David was a Moroccan Jew. He himself had told me that as a child he lived in Tangier and that he had left Morocco thirty years before. We went in to buy some shears for harvesting oranges on the afternoon of the first day of our arrival and David had bought barbed wire. We began to talk right away. That's how we met. When Alberto told David that he didn't have any land, he was referring to the legend of the Wandering Jew. But the Jew wasn't wandering anymore. His time had come to an end and the time of the Wandering Arab had begun. History was continuing on its natural course,

distributing calamities equally to both parties.

When the bell rang in school, the orphan students wouldn't go to their houses, they went into a wide dining hall. My orphan friends would come back to class after noon with mouth-watering sandwiches made out of bread rolls. Even though I wasn't an orphan, I would get into line and enter the dining hall with them. The slices of bread are still fresh in my mind. I can almost smell them now. The cook used to ask me about my father. I would lower my head and tell her that he'd died in the war. She would take pity on me and put a handful of dates on my plate, the kind with a ton of worms that you had to kill before you could eat them. My father didn't know that I would eat in the dining hall of the school, or that I had sent him to die in the war. The truth is that I wasn't the only one that passed himself off as an orphan. There were many kids that sent their fathers to the cemetery for a little bit of warm bread. The bread rolls were so good that you could have sent the whole family to the cemetery without any remorse.

There were many things that I didn't want to happen, but unfortunately they happened. I wanted to train a bird and it died. I wanted a bread loaf sandwich and I had to kill my father. I used to like to draw faces, but the nose never turned out well. I would have also liked to have blond hair, but in spite of all the time that I spent in the sun, it stayed dark. And when it grows out it gets curly. And many other things like that.

What makes us human beings is that we make mistakes. Every time we make a mistake, we become more human. This is what no one has taught us in school, so when we grow up we begin to regret the stupid things that we've done. And every time we regret, we become less human.

If I have time, I usually reread complete chapters of Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke.* Today I found an enlightening passage that says, "Yes, suddenly, I saw it clearly, most people willingly deceive themselves with a doubly false faith; they believe in eternal memory (Of men, things, deeds, peoples) and in rectification (of deed, errors, sins, injustice). Both are shams. The truth lies at the opposite end of the scale: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be rectified. All rectification (both vengeance and forgiveness) will be taken over by oblivion. No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten."

16.

I've tried to figure out why I was arguing with my father all night. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to. The dream was confusing. We argued without speaking, a silent dispute, like the ones that happen between people who've known each other for a long time. I opened the fridge, looking for something to eat. There are some tomatoes. My mother always said that my father had a hand full of holes. I didn't understand how someone could use their hand if it had holes in it. I spent a long time sitting on the terraced roof with my hand raised, looking for holes. I also looked on my father's hand for the holes my mothers spoke about, but his hand was intact. I never saw holes. And nevertheless my mother insisted that his hand had holes in it. My father didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to the matter. My mother used to exaggerate and always had the perfect excuse to blame a wasteful man like my father.

"Your hand has holes in it," I said to him, laughing.

My father didn't care what I said to him. I raised my hand and studied my palm. I saw lines that intersected, most resembling destinies that have become entangled. I asked my mother, "Mama, will I have holes in my hand too when I grow up?"

My father thought I looked the most like him. That's why he looked at me a lot and smiled.

It might have been the first night that I had a misunderstanding with him. The times before he would come toward me, covered in dust. He would smile without speaking and disappear. I'd heard that there are people that stay asleep and never wake up. They say that they agreed to accompany their relatives to the grave. Maybe that's why I quarreled with him. I was afraid of following him and dying also. My father returned to his grave alone, and I awoke with a heavy head. I realized that I hadn't eaten anything since the day before. I had no appetite. In any case, even if I did, there was nothing in the fridge except some tomatoes, big tomatoes with a weird taste.

I opened the balcony and gazed at the sea and asked myself why my father hadn't been a soldier. At least we would have received one of those awards that the State gives to the children of soldiers. A taxi license to take people from place to place, or something trivial like that. Maybe no one demanded that he be a soldier. That doesn't mean that he didn't have a cause worth defending. But he didn't learn to love his country, or hate it either. He never understood love for one's country. For him, it was just a place on the map, and no concern of his. He used to lounge in his work clothes on the terraced rooftop of the house. He didn't have a tie so he never buttoned up the collar of his shirt, revealing some long, white hairs that grew from his chest, the same ones that now grow from mine.

Sometimes it scares me how much I look like him. Even the bumps that sometimes appeared on some part of his body have shown up on mine. That's why he would gaze at me for a while, sometimes smiling.

I went back to the bed and lay down on my back. On the ceiling there were small spots of blood. I began to wonder why it hadn't occurred to anyone to emigrate like I did. Or like his generation, whose ears and teeth were checked by the French like a veterinarian checking livestock. Although this didn't prevent him from buying a car, one that was really old and beat up, but that worked from time to time. He used to wash it every morning. The wheels had a painting of a smiling fat man running. Below this was prominently written: "Michelin." I've always thought it's a Jewish name. Whenever the Jews are mentioned, my grandmother would say, "God forbid." She would say that they were very skilled at making allies in the south. My grandmother always told me that I was a Berber. That's why it was unsuitable that I play in the streets with the children of Arabs and share my bread with them. I can almost see those Jews from here, crossing the mountains on the backs of mules to solder the copper pots that the Berbers used to make. I can almost see their beards that pointed toward the ground and their long, cunning faces. My nose always reminded me of them. I noticed that there were many blood spots on the ceiling. "Maybe I'm of Jewish descent," I always said to my mother.

"God forbid," added my mother.

When I was twelve, one of my friends on the school playground told me I had a dog's face. I spent many years looking for this resemblance. At night, after lying down in bed, I stare at the ceiling and kill lots of mosquitoes. I fall asleep with a guilty conscience, like someone whose petty enemies have defeated him in battle.

Boredom consumes me hungrily. I don't do anything worthwhile. I write every once in a while. And I frequently lie down on the couch and think like an old mammoth. The television is my only comfort during the day. At night Macarena comes with me to the Moai café on the sea. There are no old people there. The hard rock music and strange decor could give them a heart attack, so they prefer to frequent the normal cafes and bars where the boring country music tickles their inept imaginations. I think I have really bad luck. That's why all this happens to me.

My passport isn't good for anything anymore except for going back to Morocco, and at the moment I don't want to go back. Inside I feel a desperation broken into pieces that need to be put back together. I still have a lot of time to wander around this continent. Nostalgia is my only enemy. But to this day I fight against it valiantly, like all those who fight against this filthy life. From the wide balcony I watch the passersby. Most of them are from cold European countries. Men and women in the autumn of their lives. Their gazes are all suspicious. Their abundant presence in a small city like this makes it look like a cage of respectable animals. At the end of the night, when the English women get drunk, anything is possible. The majority of them come looking for a lost youth, a night with a man, a silly keepsake that drives away the nightmares of the age that rushes toward its icy ending. Sometimes I feel sorry for them. This continent has taught them nothing but repression. No one benefits from repression except Sticky Vicky. Her show gets a lot of saliva flowing in the bars, but it's a cold saliva, like the timid applause after each number.

Yesterday a police car passed very slowly in front of me. I knew that my appearance had given me away. I saw that the car stopped a few meters ahead, and from

the white number written on certain parts of the car I knew that it was a police patrol in charge of immigrants. I spun around hastily and changed direction. Luckily there was passageway that came out on Ocean street. As soon as I arrived at the passageway, I ran like the wind. I ran as if they were dropping bombs. When I was certain that I'd gotten far enough away, I stopped because running barefoot like that wasn't safe. I returned home in silence and I don't know how I justified this behavior to myself.

In Alejandro's restaurant there are a lot of hams hanging from the ceiling. Every time I looked at them I would recall the lamb with its neck slit, hanging from the lemon tree in my distant childhood. The grass in the garden was a dazzling green, looked after and trimmed with care. The blood from the dead lamb dripped little by little. Drop by drop, like red tears. My mother and grandmother were in the guest room. They had gone to offer their condolences to a relative of my grandmother. The room was silent, as is the custom among Berbers. Tears fell from reddened eyes but no one expressed their pain. I stayed for a long time in front of the lamb hanging from the tree. A little girl arrived and stood by my side. I told her that a vein in the lamb's belly was pulsing, and that it was still alive. The girl laughed and told me to follow her. I did, and we stopped in front of a big coop with lots of white chickens. She looked at me sadly and said that their throats will be slit in the afternoon. She opened the door of the coop and we went in together. We played a little with the chickens and then left, leaving the door open. The chickens scattered throughout the garden like big snowflakes. The black cook, upon hearing the cackling, came quickly and threw us out of the garden. She grabbed the girl by the arm and pushed her inside, into the women's room. I stayed at the entrance. I didn't feel like going into the guest room, that gloomy room in which my mother and grandmother were

shedding quiet tears. I still remember the girl well. She was more or less my age. She told me that she was raising bunnies in the garden, and that they ate grass all day, and that they wouldn't be killed because she really loved them. When a person dies, the family slits the throat of some animal to give food to the people who come to offer their condolences. After the crying comes the meal, and after the meal they greet each other and talk about death, rain, everything.

The girl told me that she hadn't gone to the cemetery to watch them bury her father. Even though she knew he wouldn't come back, because they'd put a lot of dirt on top of him, her mother had told her that he was going to be sleeping for a while. She kept talking to me in the rich Berber language. I answered her in Arabic, and she understood me.

At dusk my mother grabbed me by the arm and we returned home. On the way I said to Sofia that when the dead wake up they wouldn't be able to leave the grave because there was a lot of dirt on top of them. She told me that they would not return to Earth because they were in Heaven. "In heaven there are lots of bananas," said Sofia. "I want to die so I can go to heaven," I told my mother. I also announced that I wanted to raise a rabbit on the roof. She told me that the cat would eat it. My brother raises pigeons on the roof. Sometimes he brings them to the market and sells them and then puts the money in a little box. One day he sold a really special pigeon and bought some sneakers from the brand Inter. I used to have some old Jeems shoes and I never raised any animal on the roof.

Jeems shoes were really cheap. That's why most of the kids wore them. They smelled terrible. When the summer months drew nearer the professors warned us not to

wear them to class so we would trade them for some plastic white sandals. One day a little bird fell from one of those nests in the cracks of the roof. I picked him up and put him in a jar. Its mother kept twittering and flying around my head. I gave him water, scattered breadcrumbs and grains of wheat around, but he didn't eat anything all day. He was silent the whole time, until he died. One morning I found him dried up like a small pile of straw, with his little feet in the air and his beak open like scissors. I took him out of the jar and dug a small hole in the old sand that the workers had forgotten in a corner of the terrace roof and I buried him. After two or three days I went back and rummaged around in the dirt looking for the bird. He had dried out more and hardened, but his eyes were still open. I don't know why I went back and dug in the sand looking for the bird. I thought that he would have turned into something else after dying. My mother always told me that I couldn't raise animals on the roof because I was naughty. When I was four I poured a bottle of black, slimy liquid onto a small cat. For two or three days the cat dragged itself around the house and then it stopped moving and died. Sofia used to tell this story and laugh.

But I will always remember the walk of the dying cat. Sofia used to use the black liquid for cleaning the bathroom and unclogging the pipes. I'd seen her do it. I only wanted to clean it. But I spent a good deal of my childhood carrying the death of the cat like a weight on my heart. My brother didn't like it when I got too close to his pigeons, because I spent most of my time strolling about the roof with a small bow and arrow made from a reed and with a kitchen knife between my teeth. Running and crying like an Indian and throwing the knife at the wooden frames. The pigeon would watch me with its shiny eyes, moving its head in different directions. When I came down from the roof my

mother would go up to say hello to her birds.

In Benidorm, if you know how to make pizza well, you immediately find work. No one cares about the last book you read. Here the foreigners eat all day, so the best thing to do is to learn to make pizza. The majority of the tourists are English. They eat pizza and drink beer and stroll about half-naked in the sun, their bodies covered in tattoos. Tattoos of birds or mythical dragons or crosses with a bunch of serpents coiled around them. If I work this summer, I'll buy myself a French passport and go to London. I might find a job there with some Arabic newspaper.

A black man and a white man are boxing on television. A tired-looking fat gypsy woman comes into the café and unenthusiastically offers roses to the customers. No one buys anything from her. She wears a man's watch. Today is St. Joseph's Day, or Father's Day. No one goes to work. The streets are filled with people. I feel lonely. Holidays have always depressed me. I have a lot of ideas that I want to write down but I won't do it because I usually forget what I wanted to say and end up writing other things. It's better that way. The boxers are still throwing punches to each other's faces. "Final round," says the announcer. Through the glass window the sea rolls lazily like usual. There is an anchored ship some three hundred meters from shore that gives off a weak light. On Father's Day children buy presents for their fathers. Ties, boxes of chocolates, telephones. I've never given my father anything. I think I remember giving him a watch but then later I took it back. The last gift that I remember from my father was his eyeglasses.

When they brought him home in a yellow wooden box, after spending two weeks

in the 20th of August Hospital, the women let out their long, high-pitched sounds of joy. Berber women are like that. They think that when a man dies in the middle of his life, he will be wedded in heaven. I don't remember exactly who carried the box, maybe my brother. They put him in the salon where there was a lot of light. It was springtime. I remember the men reciting the Qur'an while I sat, watching the box in silence. I was trying to look through it and see what my father's face was like. I don't know why, but I was sure that my father's body wasn't whole inside the box. In the public hospitals the bodies sometimes come out with some part missing, and the nurses are despicably unfriendly. Sofia didn't sew anything that morning. They said that in times like these you only sew the shroud.

The box was sealed with wax so that no one could open it. It should have gone from the morgue to the cemetery, but since my father was a government employee they let it come by the house so that we could see him for the last time. Although we actually didn't see him, we saw the box.

When they lowered my father into the grave, a translucent veil descended in front of me, the sun shining brightly through. Many tears fell from my eyes while I watched the yellow box disappear forever. I didn't cry all afternoon, as if all my tears had been shed in front of the grave and nothing was left while I received the people's condolences. My mother and grandmother were crying in silence. Berbers don't cry out or touch each other's faces. They cry in silence. The other women were crying also. The house was silent and somber.

I don't know why he gave me his glasses that morning. He had looked better than before. I shaved him and tried to move his bed closer to the balcony because he wanted to

see the sun, but the tubes connected to this body wouldn't allow it. The smell of the hospital was making me sick. I went out onto the balcony because I didn't want my father to see me cry and I looked down, where there was an abandoned garden full of bandages, empty bottles, and fat cats. Suddenly I felt the desire to leave. He died around one in the afternoon.

I spent the whole morning in Alejandro's bar. Juan came also and sat in front of the slot machine. He seems to be having some luck. Juan hates working. To me, he's the archetype of the lazy Spaniard who's willing to spend his whole life at the bar. Macarena says that people really like bars. It's a meeting place. There is one bar for every seventy inhabitants. I read it in some statistics in the newspaper. Juan never tires of saying that the European Union should do something for the North African countries and, in his opinion, that is the solution to stop emigration. I told him that I'd stopped talking about politics since I left Morocco. Politics is like a putrid, muddy puddle. It's ridiculous to get close to it with angel-white clothes, intending to stay clean. But Juan insists and says that we have to come up with a solution. "Personally, I can't," I tell him. Right now I'm looking for a job. That's my big project at the moment.

My mother used to put the milk over the fire and go gossip with my grandmother. When the milk spilled over it would leave a white trail that crept forward through the kitchen, soaking many shoes in its path. Then my mom would come back to the kitchen and boil some Brasilia coffee. The image of the little black boy on the packet raising his mug and smiling generously fascinated me strangely as a child. The prominent muscles,

the curly hair like grains of coffee… he must have smelled bad like the black maid that used to work in the house. My father always reprimanded her because she would steal money from his suit at night. My grandma said that she was Sudanese. Then she said that she wasn't human because the things that she did were not right. The insolent maid refused to understand that her hand needed to stay inside the washbasin and not inside my father's pocket. One day my father claimed that he would kill that bitch, as he called her. My grandma laughed at him. But he said that he was about to kill her. After a long punishment she admitted that she'd stolen a five-dirham bill and that she'd swallowed it with water so that they wouldn't discover it. My father didn't believe it. My mother left the house. My grandmother told us that she'd gone to her father's house and wouldn't come back.

When I walk past the church in the evening on my way home, I glance furtively through the little door that is open in the middle of the big door. The place is silent and there's no sign of priests, only the image of our lord Jesus on the wooden cross. The church has one big door with an iron bolt. If the little door is open you can see the inside of the church where the image of Jesus is hung everywhere, with tears eternally petrified on his cheek and with the bloody wound below his right ribs, like in all the pictures I'd seen before. I'm talking about the ones that I'd seen in the encyclopedias that adorned the bookshelves in my aunt's house in Casablanca.

When I was alone in her house or when they would take a nap after eating (which I hated with a passion), I wouldn't go near the volumes of encyclopedias. I was scared of their meticulously drawn pictures. Images of demons, angels, painful images of our lord Jesus, images of naked icons that represented women with white, opaque eyes. If there

was someone in the house I would approach the encyclopedias. I would flip the elegant pages trying to find out the reason why they had hung Jesus on that wooden cross. The open wound on his right rib is bleeding in all the pictures. He has his mouth open, as if sighing, and it looks more like a smile than a grimace of pain. Even now I don't know what to say to the police if they stop me in the street. My ID card is good for nothing except identifying my nationality, which gives me away in a sense. My nationality is Moroccan and my number in the lists of the Ministry of the Interior is 25517. My profession: collaborating journalist. Collaborating with whom? I don't exactly know. The term "collaborate" on my ID card always reminds me of those despicable people who collaborated with the Nazis. Today is my birthday. I have always considered this day like any other day. I've never felt the desire to blow out candles or share cake with friends, like any other person apparently satisfied with their life and forgiving of even the worst sins of their past.

Now I remember that long letter that I wrote to the editor of the newspaper where I used to work, a letter with carefully chosen expressions because I wanted my pain to be clearer. I wrote that I was the eldest son of my family and that I needed that position more than anything in the world. I wrote him many things and told him that my future depended on that job. What I meant was that my future was in his hands, in his skinny hands that were like carrots. I left the letter on his desk and waited a week, a month, then I forgot about it. The editor didn't like me. That was clear. My request vanished like a voice in an empty corridor. I told myself that it was better that way. There was no room for me in the newspaper or in any other place in that country. My mother constantly said that things would get better with time and that I only needed to be patient. But I saw that

things were already getting worse. The sons of bitches didn't make room for anyone. The scoundrels, pimps and politicians were contaminating everything they put their dirty hands on. And the intellectuals were guard dogs without teeth. They were just for show. The only thing they knew how to do was bark in the newspapers. He who speaks about poor people has respectable savings in the bank, and he who writes about morals sleeps with female students in exchange for managing their petty research projects. And he who babbles on about politics and power can't even control his own wife. I know those sons of bitches very well. "Collaborating journalist." What a laughable job.

During elementary school I devoured many books, among which were the newspaper editor's novels. I really liked his description of the emerging classism in Morocco. When I began to work for his newspaper as a collaborator I discovered that he really resembled one of the authoritarian characters in a book of his. We never got around to talking. Sometimes we would cross paths in the elevator. I didn't pay him any attention and carried on with my business. Some still kiss his hand like in the olden days. I only kiss one hand: Sofia's. Later I felt disgusted for having written that letter. I regretted having asked for help from a person who didn't deserve to be asked for anything.

That's why October 16th doesn't deserve any celebration. I just have to remember that letter to realize that my birthday is likened to that wretchedness that I can't forgive, or even forget. There are always those bourgeois who defend the poor. Because the poor, in their extreme stupidity, need the dignity and the courage of the bourgeois for their complaints to be heard. But this bourgeoisie that defends the poor, in addition to defending them, must also love them. I used to imagine the editor as a bourgeoisie who defended the poor. He spoke up for them, but he certainly did not love them. I think he

always made fun of them while blabbering on in his daily column about their problems with the despicable monthly wages, public buses teeming with thieves, and the wastefulness of watering hundreds of acres of grass on golf courses. I imagined his evil smile at the end of every month when he gets his fat paycheck. And how he stands like a prince next to his Mercedes 300, waiting for his driver to come open the door for him to get inside. And how he hits the white ball with his club from one place to another on the grass that's grown there, despite the daily criticisms in his editorial, looking for the bottomless pit that we're all headed towards in these foul times. I think human selfishness has no limit. The Divine Providence allows some of them to be *petit bourgeois* and intellectuals at the same time. But in his excessive selfishness he insists on playing the role of the downtrodden proletarian as well. And for some mysterious reason he succeeds in playing this role, but he's not just fooling the crowd, he's also fooling himself. For the rest of his life he is tortured by this ridiculous schizophrenia.

I've been trying to sleep for hours. Thousands of evil thoughts are running through my head. Among them is the idea of getting up and writing a long letter to the Ministry of the Interior in Madrid. A letter full of insults, and of course grammatical errors. I also thought about what I'm going to do tomorrow. An idea came to me: I'll go to the sea and swim out to the plastic floating platform. There I'll be apart from the city and the terra firma. I'll sit in the sun and gaze at the buildings.

Many weeks have passed and I haven't worked. Alejandro lets me have coffee for free and he has almost all the newspapers in his restaurant. I would spend the mornings reading. Sometimes I bring letters with me, and I answer them, and then put them in my bag until I get money for stamps. Alejandro is a good man. He would tell me that if I

wanted anything to eat I should just let him know. I thank him, trying to use educated phrases that I'd seen in dictionaries. Alejandro doesn't understand what I'm doing here. "We have the highest unemployment rate here out of all of Europe and the State washes its hands of us more and more each day," he says. I respond by saying that I'm waiting for a gleam of hope to appear in this horrible bad luck that plagues me. His discomfort increases, and he wipes his sweaty forehead with the edge of his white apron. Then he busies himself again with something in the fryer. "You *moros* are truly insane," he murmurs, smiling.

I left really early this morning to look for work. I left my phone number with every bar and café; that was the most they asked for. "We'll call you if we have anything," they said out of courtesy, because they wouldn't actually call me. When I got tired of wandering around, I went back to the restaurant to drink coffee and read the newspaper. Manuel arrived, left his bike parked at the door, ordered a San Miguel, his favorite beer, and began a lecture on the political situation in Spain. I didn't pay him much attention because I was looking job advertisements in the newspaper. I went back home and laconically answered some letters. I received a cultural magazine from Holland.

I didn't speak to my mom on the phone this afternoon. I didn't have the money to call. I'll call next week. Maybe.

I went towards you

alone

like the stream runs in the forest.

When I was faced with solitude

I began to talk to myself

to appear unalone.

When I was faced with regret

I bit my nails,

like a child confessing

and so I was lost until I met you,

alone and just as scared,

waiting to be forgiven

and for someone to point you toward me…

17.

I love the when the sun rises, surprising me as I'm eating my breakfast at the train station. The Estación del Norte in Barcelona is incredible, like all train stations in big cities. There are a lot of Asians sprawled on the seats and I can't tell if their eyes are open or closed. Hung on the walls are pictures of members of the ETA. The poster says that they're dangerous militants and requests anyone who sees them to report it immediately. But in the pictures it seems the exact opposite. There's even a woman smiling in one of them. I thought about the film *Killer's Kiss*, but couldn't remember the name of the director. Bus and train stations make time feel like it's flying. Groups of people come and go. Travelers looking like snails because of the bags on their backs. In the Rabat station I took a seat next to the window and watched the arrival and departure of the trains. I really

enjoyed that. I was fascinated by the sound of that feminine voice that accompanies each traveler to his train, reminding him about the gap between the platform and the train and not to forget anything inside the train compartments. Even though the coffee was always really bad, the movement of the trains makes me feel a repressed childlike joy. Just like you cannot swim in the same river twice, you cannot find yourself in the same train station twice. I don't know how to explain it, but the idea appealed to me.

Tuesday. Seven in the morning. The weather is nice and the streets are empty. I returned to the café in the station and ordered coffee with cream and sugar. I didn't sleep at all last night; I was forced to listen to the life story of the passenger who, just my luck, was sitting behind me. He kept smoking and swearing throughout the night until he got off in Tarragona at 5:30 in the morning. He told me that he was from Tétouan and that his mother died before he even got to see her, that his father was an alcoholic, and other things like that that any wretched person could tell you. From what I understood he was wanted by the criminal court in Morocco. That's why he was going to the border at Melilla and would then retrace his footsteps. Proudly, he said that he didn't look like a builder or a farmer because he didn't care to work for those Spaniards like a slave. So he's an adventurer who gambles with life every day. He means that he sells hashish. He cursed his luck and politics, using words that I wouldn't dare utter in Morocco. I know he's bolder only because he's here. The coward. I cursed him silently. Sometimes I ask myself what I'm doing in the midst of these lowlifes. At least I'm educated and have a university degree and my national ID card says I'm a collaborating journalist. Collaborating with whom? I don't know. My friends say that I have readers. It's actually

funny: to be a failure and have readers. Who's going to buy it? You'll have to write a book in order to explain it. And in the end, who's going to come and ask you, "Did that really happen to you?" And no one wants to believe that life is actually that bad, damn it!

Maybe he was a young man, angry at Morocco, so he gambled with his life every day. He was right when he said that the day he earns one hundred and fifty million pesetas will be the day he returns to Morocco. Then he'll be able to buy the court, with its chairs and judges, rather than losing his life someday on this cold continent.

Sunday. Nine in the evening. I found myself pacing the deck of the steamboat. It was already nighttime. The lights of Tangier were slowly growing distant. I put in the headphones of my Walkman and Fairuz began to whisper to me gently, "I should tell you all this story of mine… I had to bid you farewell and tell you this story of mine… We've sung songs but in the end we must always say goodbye…" Without a doubt, Latifa wanted to torture me when she gave me that tape. And Said was her accomplice when he pressed me to take it when I was reluctant. Who wouldn't cry while listening to Fairuz and watching the lights of Tangier fading into the distance? Maybe someone whose heart has rotted and will never beat again. Sprinkles of rain began to splash onto my face. I let them. Tears don't show up on a rain soaked face.

Wednesday. Sixty thirty. Estación Sur in Madrid. I feel like someone extracted a confession from me after long hours of torture. I can barely hold my own body up. It seems heavier than it should be. I haven't slept for forty-eight hours. The Asians have invaded all the seats here, too. The Arabs, with their alarmed looks, wander the corridors

of the station carrying their plastic bags, as if looking for a way out of a maze. “Why are they always like that?” I ask myself. I left Barcelona without time to take a picture as a keepsake. Doesn’t matter.

Seven fifteen. Suddenly I felt like I didn’t need to sleep anymore, like I could stay awake forever. That would be dreadful, undoubtedly. I sleep poorly these days. I think about the future a lot. I see that I’m growing older and I don’t have a stable job. You can’t live on writing alone in this world, especially if you’re writing in a language that no one understands. “Why do you write from right to left and not from left to write, like us?” How would you answer that, for example?

I think my neck hurts because I still haven’t found a suitable pillow. But there could be other reasons, like sleeping in a bad position. Even though I sleep in a bad position, my position while I’m awake is even worse. Dear lord, what do I do to get some rest?

Friday. Ten at night. The girl presented Buddha to us, and said that she didn’t like him because of his crooked teeth, like fish teeth. Smiling, she added that he looks evil, then pointed to another Buddha that was sitting on top of a tall-legged wooden table that was craftily engraved. “This, I like,” she said. “His large belly symbolizes fullness, and his big ears mean that he listens more than he speaks, just like his tightly pursed lips, as you can see.” She went on without pause, still smiling. I was looking at her the whole time, more than I looked at Buddha. The other guy seemed enraptured by her precise explanations about the origin and ancient symbols of the antiquities that were inside the house. “Your house is warm,” I said to her. “Yeah, we have an electric heater,” she

answered. We stopped in front of a cloth embroidered in Rabati style and she began her precious explanations. Suddenly the guy began to talk about his family tree, and they discovered that they come from the same ancient bloodline.

When he saw a picture of one of the well-known Moroccan rebels above the door, he pointed to it and said that he was their grandfather. He asked me about my heritage so I said that I'm Berber. He responded that he'd watched a program on the Arts channel that said we came from the jungles of the Caucasus. It seemed that the small size of my eyes confirmed it.

I was afraid that the conversation would transform into a heavy discussion about the origin of species so I settled the matter by saying that we're all Moroccans and we have one single identity. And of course I thought about my ID card.

It was clear that she was explaining more to him than she was to me, and I guessed that he was already familiar with the house. Her French is steady but when she speaks with me, she speaks in keen, exquisite Arabic. The house is a true museum. There is no piece not blessed by the majestic dust of history. The girl moved among the rare relics, like a statue escaped from a Hindu temple, that looked as if they had been scattered throughout the house and were unable to find anyone to return them to the forgotten past. I think there was a scent of incense permeating the house that came from a hidden burner. Despite my sharp senses, I failed to figure out its source.

Monday. Ten thirty in the morning. I am writing to you from Ramses café in Casablanca. Outside the traffic is flying by. The cars race each other heedlessly, like poems escaped from minds with terrifying imaginations. I thought of writing to you from

this very place. When I feel like drinking coffee with someone, I order a cup for myself and I sit and write a letter to him. That way I invite him to coffee and a quick conversation. I will send you my address as soon as I arrive. Right now I live in my shoes. They make a safe and wonderful abode.

18.

Toledo. Friday. One thirty in the afternoon. I sat down in one of the café terraces on Souqadawab. The Arco de Sangre stretches in front of me. I don't know the origin of its harsh name, the Arch of Blood, but I do at least know that in centuries past, Souqadawab, where I'm seated, was a place to leave your livestock before entering the city. Its name now, as it's written on the white marble plaque, is Zocodover. The Arco de Sangre seems like a great balcony that looks out over the outskirts of the city, from which you can see the river that skirts the city like a moat. A real river this time, not like the joke of a river that runs through Madrid like a stream of piss. Toledo looks like a city built for war. Its walls, alleyways, gates; everything warns of an imaginary invasion that could happen at any moment. But it seems like the army gents have put their weapons in the museums long ago, leaving the city submerged in eternal peace, abandoned forever.

When I got off the train yesterday I bumped into a warrior in a steel suit brandishing a large sword. He was standing menacingly inside the station as if giving the visitors an intimidating welcome. I noticed that in the numerous big bazaars inside the city they sell different military objects. Shields, daggers, and swords of different shapes and styles, but no trace of any Arab weapons. All of the weapons on display are crusader

weapons, pure and simple. This is normal. In history, the defeated are only recognized by their absence.

Chefchaouen. Friday. Seven at night. From my hotel window I gaze at Chaouen. It looked to me like a baby wrapped in blankets of light. At night the mountains look darker and smaller than during the daytime. What do mountains think about at night, I wondered. Maybe they breathe and grow. And houses, too. Next to room 119 where I was staying there were some Spanish guests looking out at the city with stoned eyes. "What a stunning view," said the tourist. "Do we jump from this height?" asked her friend, laughing. I wondered why our imagination always goes directly to suicide when we're at huge heights. Why not flying, for example? Perhaps because only gravity is powerful enough to match the enormity of space. And flying defies gravity. Gravity is to fall in the moment that you could have flown.

I left the room from the window like a thief and took the mountain road toward the lower end of the city. I passed by neglected graves of different sizes and said hello to the dead, and that morbid greeting echoed inside me, reminding me of how soon I would join them. I stopped to gaze for a while at the small graves that seemed to contain tiny dead people. I remembered when we used to go to the Christian cemeteries in the open fields surrounded by a small fence. The cemetery looked to us like a garden, and the dead people like soldiers sprawled out under the marble with their fashionable clothes and their pocket watches hanging from their carefully pressed coats. The marble slabs were the only things we cared about in that kingdom of the dead. We snatched them from the graves in a moment when the ancient caretaker was distracted from his watch over the

serene sleep of the dead. We jumped the fence, fleeing like startled birds, leaving many graves identity-less. I was really sad to leave so many graves without names, but my friends would reply that the Christians burned their dead, so their names weren't a big deal to them. Later on I would find out that the dead don't really need their names, because we know each other since birth. "Life has an appointment with death in a faraway hotel. Life is always running late, so death comes by himself at a later date." I wrote that idea one March morning.

March is a shitty month. I have thought so ever since I put my bags on platform number 15 on that cold Friday in October. A fast shuttle train had just left without me, on its way to Brussels. I had to sit and wait for the next trip. The Gare du Nord in Paris resembles a small labyrinth, and the French are a neurotic people. Just asking them a question makes you consider suicide. A skinny Czech girl name Katrina Adamova sat next to me on the train. Inevitably we would discuss Václav Havel, springtime in Prague, Milan Kundera, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* In order to explain where I was from, I had to stretch out a map in front of her and put my finger on Morocco. Adamova was amazed by how many things I knew about the Czech Republic. I told her that nothing important happens where I'm from, so we entertain ourselves by following what goes on in the world. The world is our last consolation; without it, we would die of boredom. Adamova laughed and I noticed that her nose was thin, like the nose of an English woman. We spent the whole time talking about many different things. And like foreigners in a distant country, we exchanged addresses. That's what travelers normally do. Traveling teaches you to view the globe as a pocketbook of many addresses. Each city is reduced to a certain street and number. Sometimes looking through the pocketbook

is like taking a short journey, although this requires a lot of imagination, which is always the hard part. The friendships that we make on trains are like friendships made with books. As soon as we finish them, we leave them somewhere in the bookshelf. But trains always keep whistling. Just like writers.

Souqadawab is full of visitors. University students. Tourists speaking many languages. There are ten trees bearing green fruit, small and round, but I don't know what kind, and thirteen streetlamps. The three lamps that stand in the middle of the plaza look like different sizes. It's a cloudy day, terrible for taking photos. This morning I contacted a man named Y. K. who runs an Arabic magazine in Madrid. I told him that I read through the magazine and I would like to meet with him. He welcomed me, saying I could visit anytime. On Saturday morning I left the metro station like a wretched rat. The Plaza de Castilla was full of people walking. Mr. Y.K. was meeting me in a four star hotel. I asked the receptionist about him and she said that his name wasn't in their register. After fifteen minutes I saw a large man lumbering toward me. We recognized each other by appearance, or by smell, I don't know. He brought me over to the hotel kiosk and bought a bunch of Arabic publications. I quickly understood that he was playing the role of an intellectual for me. I had a feeling I would be wasting my time with him. But after all, my time is not precious, especially not right now.

Y.K. thought that I could help him get some advertisements for his magazine. He said that the articles are not important to him because they're not what brings in the money. We talked for almost an hour and a half about many things, about his time working in Morocco as a correspondent for the newspaper *Al-Watan*, and how he left Morocco with a respectable amount of money, and his friendships with the wealthy Arabs

in Marbella. It was actually he who did the talking, as I sat there trying to figure out if he was Palestinian or some other Arab nationality.

In subway tunnels I feel like I've been transformed into a rat and I see the people, who also look like rats, passing quickly around me, startled rats fleeing from some unseen cat. It makes me laugh. Down below looks like a journey to the center of the earth, at least to a person like me who's spent his past life moving about above ground in the open air. The underground tunnels are the subconscious of the city, I thought at home. Cursing angrily, Muhsin says to Alaa that Palestinians are like that. They lost Jerusalem and they crawl around the world. Alaa responds that they didn't lose it but they sold it in pieces to the Jews and then squandered the profits in bars all over the world. Ahmed pretends to read *Occupied Palestine* but instead listens to the heated dialogue between his two friends, and between pages he sips his beer, without looking at them. Muhsin and Alaa keep debating, hoping to stir a reaction in him, until lunchtime arrives. Ahmed knows that the debate isn't serious, so he prefers to fall silent or give up.

"Why do you order the Jews to leave Jerusalem if they've already paid you the price of the land that you offered up for sale?" raves Muhsin.

"Look at this Palestinian, for example… He is subscribed to all the current magazines from Gaza and London. Sometimes he'll be reading the Fatah magazine and other times he'll be reading George Habash, and on top of all that he drinks beer…" admonishes Alaa, laughing spitefully.

I listen to them and wait for Ahmed's reaction. He takes off his glasses and tells me that he liked my poems. I thanked him with brief expressions that I use for that type of flattery.

"Don't listen to him," says Muhsin. "Tomorrow he'll change his mind and say that your poems are complete shit."

Ahmed laughs, exposing his teeth that are covered with a dark layer of black. "Tonight I'm going to see my German friend Ruth." And he raises his glass to our health then downs it in one gulp.

Monday morning. Café de Fleur. Paris. Dear H.B…. I finally read your beautiful things and said to myself, dear God, I wish that woman was mine. I wrote this prayer in clear writing and, instead of putting it under my pillow, I put it in an envelope and sent it to you, then sat down with a smile to wait for you. God doesn't answer my prayers. He has always provided me with wonderful enemies without which I would have nowhere to direct my wickedness. He has also given me loving friends. I'm sitting on the terrace. The coffee is good, but the price is steep. I invite you, then, to my friendship. It won't cost you anything except regular trips to the post office… I await you.

19.

Saturday evening. There were no empty seats left in the opera house. It was one of those cold evenings in Brussels. Many musicians had to enter the stage one after the other, proceeding from all four directions. The evening's program said that this would be the last one dedicated to spiritual music. After a Jew dressed in black sang melancholically, accompanied only by his cello, sister Marie Keyrouz entered in her long skirt and white scarf that covered half of her hair and her delicate demeanor that gave the

impression of complete piety if it weren't for our enthusiastic applause. "How the deer yearns for the water in the distant hills is how my spirit yearns for you, my Lord," echoed Marie's solemn voice whose vocal range was like the range of the earth itself. I love this hymn that seems more like a prayer. She was singing with her eyes closed and fingers clasped over her chest as if praying and I repeated the refrain after her. This was irritating my neighbors in the row in front of me, who began to search for polite excuses to turn around. Each time one of them turned toward me he smiled that dumb smile that every European uses before saying coolly, "The weather is nice today." I responded with the arrogant smile of being the only one in the opera house who could follow along with that little woman singing in Arabic in the middle of a completely European audience.

When we left for a short intermission, a middle aged Belgian woman approached me asking where the singer was from. I told her she was Lebanese and Christian. "Christian? Why doesn't she sing in French then?" she added, surprised. "Because she sings in Arabic," I answered coldly, as if her question was out of place. But she continued with her foolish queries and I realized that she herself was completely out of place. Maybe it would've been better if she'd stayed in front of the television tonight, singing and peeling potatoes. I remembered when the invitation arrived to attend one session of the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music. I went especially to listen to Marie Keyrouz. But when I arrived in the reception area, someone told me that there was no available accommodation and I had to take care of that on my own. I didn't think for very long; I returned to the train station and by the afternoon I was back home. Of course I wasn't the delegate from *Le Monde* or *El País* for whom they would have had a room waiting. That's how I understood that the festival wasn't for Moroccans so much as it was for

foreigners. But sister Marie Keyrouz was waiting for me on that Saturday evening in that amazing opera house. I imagined that she was singing for me alone because I was the only one who understood what she was saying. But at the end we all applauded resoundingly, so that the slender woman had to bow gratefully for a long time.

Rabat. Monday morning. I came to get my monthly salary from the newspaper. I have no income other than this miserable sum. My mother says that I need to ask the newspaper editor to promote me to an official journalist for the paper. I tell her not now, maybe later. I clench my teeth as I say it. My mother doesn't know that the editor doesn't like me and doesn't want to promote me in his newspaper. He always said that I created problems for the newspaper because of my writing. They want me to write in a more detached way, about their dull books, for example. Their books that earn awards from the State for having insignificant authors. But I never did it, although it's probably true that I did commit numerous idiocies and wrote things that weren't worth dog shit. The need for money sometimes pushed me to work with magazines and newspapers of questionable reputations. In order to survive, I sent some stories to the Gulf because journalism there is lucrative but underdeveloped, and they pay in dollars. Sometimes I would send the same story more than once, and I always got paid. I think that might be what they call a success story. Writing to live is not easy, unlike living to write. When you realize the difference between the two situations, you stop having problems with the mail.

Valencia. Friday evening. I find myself walking down that alleyway again. I have nothing to do there but I wander through it every time I feel anxious. I push my way

through until I reach the knoll overlooking the sea. To right is a Catholic church. The church's clock rings out every fifteen minutes, as if exposing time is it passes unabashedly. In the plaza some painters invite the passersby to sit next to them so that they can race to capture their features on paper. There are retailers displaying bohemian clothing, attracting no one's attention. Then there are tourists taking pictures as usual just to prove to their friends that they passed through here one day. You can easily notice that there is no sign of beggars. The elderly calmly await the end in their nursing homes. The State takes charge of the disabled, so you can keep your pity to yourself, because no one here in the plaza on a Friday is going to demand it from you.

Rabat, Casablanca. Back and forth. I hesitated a while at the newspaper offices. Newspapers speaking on behalf of right-wing parties, on behalf of moderate parties. Newspapers speaking on behalf of their editors only. Newspapers published from time to time then disappearing suddenly after their owners got a position somewhere else. I wasn't looking to work for a specific cause. I was looking for stable work. But nobody would take me. They only offered employment to chubby girls to proofread articles full of mistakes and then sent them to cover the news in hotels so that they could eat for free. Hopelessness hit me. I began to see everything for what it truly was. At the height of desperation, things appear extremely clear, unlike when you're stupidly optimistic, when things look perfectly laid out in front of you and there's a small exit somewhere. To me, the exit is to embark on a long journey through the world. I couldn't stand television, or being published on the last page, or the sixth floor of the newspaper where that petty clerk would ask me my name at the end of every month to look for that check that

contained my meager salary. I knew he did it to make me fully aware that my name meant nothing to him, even though he would read it almost every day in the newspaper. I don't know why he was so fond of torturing me in that brusque way. How I hated him.

Heidelberg. Five in the morning on a rainy day. The sky looks as if it is covered with a winter coat. The trees are a dazzling green, and in the café Rheinfels the people move about slowly, as if the ice had frozen their Aryan blood. I arrived in Heidelberg earlier than I'd planned. Luckily it was a rainy morning. I love this gloomy weather. I find it perfect for spending behind the window of some café, writing until midday. The days here are not like the ones in Spain. There is no morning, afternoon, or evening. You have to rely on the clock to know the time. The sun looks like an elderly woman dressed in a black dress, a woman plagued by chronic colds, and she has a big nose. German women have big noses and they move with great self-confidence. They're not like English women who look like they're being stalked by someone. Maybe it's just my imagination.

Saturday afternoon. The opera house once again. When sister Marie Keyrouz left the stage, a band of Dervishes came out. They entered one by one, each greeting the leader of the band. Then they began to spin in place. After a while they started to look to me like puppets, with their ample skirts that were lifted in the air like umbrellas. I felt dizzy so I left my spot and went outside. The temperature had dropped a lot. I thought about leaving Brussels the next day. I can't stand shivering.

Casablanca. August. Everyone was sleeping and I could start devouring stories. My appetite for reading used to be incredible so when I grew up I began to hate books. When I got tired I would take out the can of paint and get to work. The afternoon hours used to fly by until evening set in. I would leave and sit in front of the door to the building. Casablanca is a thick forest. I was scared of going too far away and getting lost. I painted many snow-capped mountains. The snow was a yellowish color because the white paint doesn't show up on white paper. Behind the mountains I put a sun with many rays, half hidden behind the peaks. At the bottom I drew a small house with a chimney. In front of the house was a field. A man was working in the middle of the field, following a horse pulling a plow. At the bottom of the page I put my name and signed a tiny signature that was just barely visible.

20.

On Monday morning I saw Fabien. I don't know how he got to Pego. He looked extremely skinny and his clothes looked like the clothes of a tourist covered in ancient dust. He was standing in front of the bar window facing the bus stop along the only route from Alicante to Valencia. From his vacant look I knew that he was reading the time schedule. When I saw him I turned my face away so he wouldn't see me. I met him about a year ago in Oliva. He was standing in front of the supermarket with his friend, the Ecuadorian. We called him that because we didn't know his name. Fabien was the one

who introduced himself to us and said that he was French and looking for work in the orange fields. I promised him I would speak with Merche about it. I knew that the fat broad would accept immediately because more men in her car meant more compensation for the gas. For us, it was the exact opposite: more men meant less weekly pay. But that didn't matter to that porker because our wages were decent, according to her and her alone. The next day I met Fabien in front of the supermarket and told him to be at José's bar early the next morning and to bring pruning shears. That's how Fabien began to work with us. Merche didn't like him much because he was French. He began to sit with us while we ate and chatted, so she didn't understand anything. We would laugh, and she would remain silent, cutting pieces of dried meat with a kitchen knife, nibbling on white cheese, and drinking Coca Cola in little sips. Fabien says that he spent his childhood surrounded by Arabs in the suburbs of Paris, so when he arrives in a foreign place and needs some help, he turns to the first Arab face he finds.

After two or three weeks, Merche began to get irritated. Fabien was uncontrollable at work, and called her fat. Of course, she didn't understand a single word of French so she would listen to him, smiling stupidly.

The old French woman who put him up in her home, along with the Ecuadorian, suffered an attack of senile dementia and so decided to throw them out of the house. The Ecuadorian went to the house of an acquaintance, and so Fabien gathered up his backpack and his tent with its many pegs and put everything under a table at José's bar and took on the appearance of a lost person. Naturally we invited him to the house so he didn't spend the night on the street. Him, the European citizen with French nationality, being given shelter by us, whose nationalities cause nothing but suspicion and fear, and

whose presence and lack of papers threatens expulsion by any contemptible member of the police on this miserable continent.

That's how Fabien started to live with us. We began to speak in French more than we spoke in Arabic. I don't know why he used to claim he was of Italian origin, and that he hated France with a passion and didn't ever want to go back. He showed me his photo album and pointed to a woman carrying a young girl in her arms, and said, "This is my daughter, Laura, and this is my ex-wife." He went on to explain that he came here to work and send the money back to his daughter. And also that he'd be put in jail if he did any more than that. But I noticed that he squandered his weekly salary drinking and he didn't buy food. One evening I was in the kitchen cooking lunch for the next day. Fabien came in, rubbing his hands like someone preparing to confess a secret, and said to me, "You know what? I'm hungry." Without looking at him, I said, "You know what? I'm not your mother." Coldly, just like that.

The way I talk scares me sometimes. I don't know how to change my appearance, or how all that blood rushes to my face. My grandmother says that I look a lot like my father. When he got angry at work he would send in his resignation and go home. And they rejected it every time because those fools needed his impeccable French to edit their reports everyday.

Fabien rolled a cigarette and smoked it without uttering a word. "Why don't you go back to your Republic where there's fraternity, liberty and equality?" I asked, without looking at him. "I'm going to sleep, sweet dreams," he answered, in broken voice as if showing me that I wounded his national pride.

Sweet dreams, he says. I remembered when he told me in the field that the dust

that coats the leaves of the trees bothers him so he doesn't climb them. "Climb on up, it doesn't look like it bothers you," I said jokingly. Even though there's no connection between all these details, I turned toward Ahmed, Fawaz, and Miguel and said to them, "Tomorrow that slob is leaving our house." And I hadn't seen him since that day until this Monday morning. Of course, I acted like I didn't know him and passed into the supermarket.

Altea. Seven in the morning. I stopped at the wharf, watched the fishing boats. The sea was so calm that it made you doubt that it was the sea and not a clean sidewalk on a long street. There were men stitching fishing nets on a faraway corner. One of them called to me and told me that I was wasting my time watching the boats because there wasn't much fish lately, and because most of them were headed toward Dénia to unload. After half an hour I found myself sitting inside one of the cafes facing the sea. The café was originally a bookstore so you drink your coffee surrounded by shelves and shelves of books and newspapers sold from different countries of the world. I bought a postcard and wrote a letter to one of my friends. Altea is not a big city. You can see all of it in one morning. The houses and alleyways seem familiar, as if you were walking through the citadel in Oudaia in Rabat. When I feel empty, I write a letter.

Sometimes I find that I've written a bunch of letters but haven't sent them. Letters often work as confessional booths. When letters stop arriving, I begin to question things: the address, the mailman, the doorman. I lose trust completely, as if something dangerous has just occurred.

Benidorm. One in the afternoon. I left Altea after leaving my phone number in the pocket book of the owner of the restaurant next to the café. She told me that she needed a server who spoke French and English, as well as Spanish, of course. This idiot needed a certified translator, not a server, I said to myself.

Sometimes the job search becomes amusing. I leafed through a book by Antonio Machado that I bought from the bookstore and I was amazed at how I'd finally convinced myself to buy a book.

Four in the afternoon. The mail arrived late. I flipped through the letters. Unfortunately, there was nothing new. I sat on the balcony and contemplated the sea and started to imagine myself moving boxes of fish from the boat to the cold warehouse. I don't like the image at all. I went back to the table and answered each letter with one response: "I'm not happy. Don't worry, I won't kill myself. It's possible that no one would realize that I was hanging from the ceiling of my room, so I'd go on looking like a fool forever."

21.

I had to go back. Like any migrating bird leaving the cold to return to the warmth.

Europe is cold, like the look you get from a new neighbor when you get in the elevator. Nostalgia is the immigrant's arch-nemesis. Nostalgia fights furiously against anything that resists it. And I am the defeated, the one who returns to his country, with strained muscles in my back and calloused fingers, capable of anything except writing. At

least I'm going home with sturdy shoes.

I got tired of always being cautious, and I want to leave my house without needing to feel that way. And to stroll with someone without police cars stopping behind me and without needing to explain myself or ask for permission for a short outing. I got tired of hiding myself all the time, like an insane person, and of running away anytime I needed to escape. I want to look around and see others who look like me, and to know that my appearance there among them doesn't shock anyone. I don't want to intimidate women, nor see children looking at me, mouths agape. I want to fall asleep without having to check the lock and my papers under my pillow multiple times throughout the night.

Many will say that this reckless person is committing another error by returning to his country while thousands of others spend their days nourishing the foggy delusion of crossing the mysterious strait to the Promised Land. But their jaws will drop even more when they learn that I left my homeland without needing to pay for anything other than a passport in order to leave. I didn't trust my life to a raft at the will of the Mediterranean to carry it stupidly toward the other side. Nor did I pay a fortune to get the magic seal that consulates stamp on the passports of those desiring to go to the other side of the world. Everything was easier as a collaborating journalist like myself. An amateur journalist looking for something unknown, testing his primitive instincts to render them sharper.

At the end of August 1997, an invitation arrived to participate in covering the World Amazigh Congress that was going to take place on the Canary Islands. Before this invitation I'd known nothing about the Amazigh issue. All I knew was that I was Berber, and that this wasn't too different from any other race because, in the end, we all belong to

the human race. I think.

The invitation was addressed to the editor of a newspaper that I had begun publishing in a bout of insanity. Addressed to me, I mean. I ran with it down to the Spanish consulate, my passport and the visa request. I had to spend two nights there just to get the right form because the consulate only designated a limited number of copies to be printed each day. I spoke with the Spanish guard that came out every once in a while to get a breath of air, which was more than to he came out to monitor the congregated people because they were kept under control by the Moroccan police merely by their vulgar language. And he answered me like a thunderbolt in a Spanish that dispelled any hope I had in possibly communicating with him. And that was enough for me to understand that we didn't speak the same language. I only asked him about the possibility of a special section for journalists somewhere in the consulate. But I think that everyone has to spend a night or two in the open air so they can revive their ideas a little, so they have time to ponder whether or not their desire to leave their native soil is rash.

My phone rang on a Thursday evening, more than a week after submitting my request, and a clerk told me in heavily accented French that I needed to go right away to the consulate with my passport and the visa number that she gave me along with the money. The next morning I entered the consulate much more easily than the first day. There was only one short line of people that had been contacted and asked to come with the visa fee and their number. There was also only one line of people waiting for the girl to process their request, but it was never-ending. And everyone in the line of hopeless people gazed at the fortunate ones with long, perplexed looks, as if searching in vain for the subtle difference between the two that meant that some requests accepted and others

rejected. But they couldn't figure it out, so they went back to looking from one another to the consulate building in confusion, grumbling about the long wait. Angry questions, sighs, and bits of chatter were exchanged in the narrow corridor between the two lines.

When my turn came to go inside, I found another line awaiting me in the lobby. Everyone had a number and had to listen attentively for it to be called. When my number was called, I moved toward the woman situated behind the glass, as if she was priceless treasure protected in a glass box, and handed her my passport. She told me that as soon as they received my request they tried twice to reach me by mail, but since I never showed up they had to call me. I told her that the mail is terrible these days, and that it was better that we'd spoken over the telephone. The truth is that it was my fault that the letters were lost because I hadn't been at home since I submitted the request. I'd tossed the envelope of papers into the consulate's mailbox and gone straight back to the Rose Marie beach campground where I was taking a short vacation with some friends, swimming in the waters where the seawater mixed with the warm water from the river, to the extent that when we wandered along the beach at sunset it was impossible not to think that you are wandering near a huge, blocked toilet. It was fitting that I should leave Morocco with red spots on my skin as intimate reminders of proletarian camping.

Perhaps that was why the letters got lost in the mail, because the mailman throws the letters toward the front of the house, and without some honest person there to pick up the mail it fell into the hands of the mischievous kids who played soccer in the so-called garden in front of our house that was planned by the city council but unfortunately never became more than a dry piece of wasteland surrounded by small metal fences. When I paid the visa fee the worker told me that I'd have to come back at one o'clock to pick up

my passport so that they could finish all the procedures necessary for the consulate to sign the visa, which would allow its bearer, in addition to entering Spanish soil, to enter the territory of all the countries that signed the Schengen agreement. This infamous agreement imposes the same shared consequences on each country that grants visas. So they all meet up and create many obstacles and inconveniences for anyone desiring a visa. A unified defense against all non-Europeans. Everyone else got their passport stamped while I remained there, waiting. Ridiculous doubts began to cross my mind about a higher power that prohibited participants in the World Amazigh Congress from leaving their national territory. But my doubts were dispelled when a well-dressed worker arrived and told me politely to follow him. I walked behind him until he stopped in front of an office, pushed open the door and told me to enter. I found Mr. J.C. smiling while flipping through the pages of my passport. As soon as I sat down he handed it to me, saying, "We've granted you a month, so don't worry." And he added that he only wanted to meet me and talk a little about the World Amazigh Congress that is going to happen on the Spanish island, nothing more. I told him that my knowledge about the Amazigh movement is very limited and that I only wanted to cover the congress if I could. Then he reached his hand into one of his desk drawers and took out a manual comprised of the names of all the newspapers currently in print in Morocco. Smiling, he added that the name of my newspaper doesn't appear among the newspapers in the manual. I told him that my newspaper had been published very recently, so there wasn't an opportunity to register it in the published manual for at least a year. To reassure him, I handed him the first, second, and third issue, and he said to me, laughing, "Okay, okay, that's enough."

I took a deep breath and said to myself that if he asked for the fourth issue I would

tell him that it was being printed. Actually, there wasn't any fourth issue. The newspaper, supposedly cultural, had stopped printing a few months before the invitation arrived. Someone had mixed up the Berber name for the pro-Amazigh newspaper, so they thought that "*Awal*" (*The Word)* was just another way of saying *Amazigh*. I think that the invitation was a result of that mix-up, and I accepted it, aware of the mistake but playing along with it.

That's how the meeting ended and I left the consulate with a big question in my mind: now what do I do? I had only enough money for a one-way journey to Spain. I was counting on a respectable number of dollars to come from magazines in the Gulf and the east as salary for some mediocre translations about the secret lives of Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, and for some poems whose names I don't remember anymore. But the checks were late and so I had to ask for financial support from my friends. Luckily I had friends other than intellectuals, people who don't approve of poetry and whose photos will never appear in the newspapers, but on whom I could depend more than any intellectual. When the loans arrived, I packed my bags and left early on a Thursday. Of course, I didn't go to the Canary Islands and so I didn't attend any sessions of the Amazigh conference. The amount that I had with me only allowed me a one-way trip. So I bought a ticket to Alicante, located in the middle of Valencia province, which was famous for tourism. When I was in Paris as a guest of respectable thieves, I read a small news article in *Le Monde* that said that the Congress ended with a lot of disagreements and divisions in opinion over the election of its new president. The Amazigh dream was wiped off the imaginary map, shepherding and driving its herds of goats without the direction of anyone.

I told myself that I had done well not to go to those floating islands, despite the insistence of Mr. J.C. that I visit them. He stressed that it was a valuable opportunity to shop because the souvenirs that they sell there are free from taxes. Surely Mr. J.C. didn't know that I wasn't intending to visit his island for as a tourist. Maybe he knows journalists well and knows that they'll fight over an invitation to visit a heavenly place like the Canary Islands. After the end of the conference everyone goes out shopping, returning home in the end with their impressions of the Congress in addition to lots of other stuff. And it's also certain that I myself didn't know why I was in such a hurry when I packed my bags brusquely and said goodbye to the family so that I could quickly find myself on the other side of the world. Europe truly is the other side of the world because as soon as you cross the Strait and you feel as if you've left one world and entered another era, with other people, other dreams, and completely different, and sometimes strange, problems. At first you feel a little dizzy, like when you stand up suddenly after sitting for a long time, and you decide to exchange your dirhams for the host country's money. How much worse is the homesickness every time you have to offer up your small fortune to exchange it! When I exchanged my dirhams for pesetas, depression hit me. And when I exchanged my pesetas for French francs, I was on the verge of crying. The bank employee in Andorra held out to me two bills in exchange for everything I had, which I had thought was a lot. But that laughable fortune of mine was not, in fact, useful for anything except sipping on two or three coffees in the terrace of one of the cafes on Chatelet-Les Halles. And Paris is truly scary. If you don't have what you need to get by, you quickly become a *clochard*,[11] lost among the metro stations. And no one will pay you any attention except the police. Or rather, their monstrous dogs who have a long and

[11] French, a tramp or hobo

strange history with the smell of an Arab.

When I entered that cold continent I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, or where I could put down some roots. So I let destiny guide me, like a cardboard ship abandoned in a small stream. Just like that, without a course. And maybe at the end of the tunnel a port appears. That was always my thought. You have to sit back and let things happen. In the midst of the feelings of loss and dissolution there is a secret passageway full of hardships that leads you toward the solution. It might seem slow but surely it ends somewhere.

That's how I was able to free myself from the intellectual delusions that almost overcame me before. Neither poetry nor stories could help me. Only my muscles were of use against the incredible expanse of fields, and against the morning weight of the boxes, and against the stubbornness of the rusty cement mixer.

And that's also how I became close friends with many types of people from different countries. Immigrants without papers, like me. Thieves stealing with respectable morals who were sometimes difficult to disbelieve. Smugglers driving empty cards from Italy and Spain to Morocco with forged sales contracts and usually a European driver. Hustlers specialized in marrying divorced women who look like they're rolling in alimony.

Drivers' license and passport forgers. Tycoons selling credit cards stolen from the pockets of English people late at night. Machos who offer their sexual services for a certain price to old men and women. Men selling packets of cocaine. People making a living any way they know how, to the extent that it became difficult to be an Arab in Europe without seeming like one of them. But staying here without papers implies that you might become a crook over time because you're deprived of work and residence, and thus, of citizenship. And nothing is guaranteed. You don't have the right to file a complaint against someone who exploits you, or robs you, or cheats you, because you're an illegal. You'll keep be an illegal unconditionally until the Office of Immigration

decides to make you a citizen, with a picture ID with your fingerprints and your Social Security number to visit the doctor just in case you survive the elements and don't die out like a prehistoric animal. Last week in Milan they found some Algerians inside a car. They found their bodies, I mean. Now I remember a lesson from history class in elementary school about the conquest of Al-Andalus. I was amazed at how Tariq Ibn Ziyad, a Berber after all, could set fire to the boats so that no one could return to Morocco, telling his soldiers that they were more lost than orphans at a banquet for thieves. The weird thing about that history class was that we only discussed Tariq at the moment of the conquest of Al-Andalus. But we don't know what happened to the Berber leader after the conquest. History is funny sometimes. Now I also understand why the immigrants burn their passports and papers and throw them into the sea when they see the lights of Al-Andalus bobbing in front of them. They do it so that no one goes back to the other side alive. Either death or plunder. And burning passports isn't that different from burning the ship home. It seems like this history lesson will keep repeating tragically throughout the centuries. But the truly funny thing of the whole tale is that there's no plunder there at all. In order to survive here you have to work like a superhuman mule. And there's no hidden treasure anywhere on the Peninsula either. At least, not that I could find in my wanderings. However, there are orange and tomato fields and cherry, almond, and olive plantations where it's impossible to work without aging many years prematurely. That's why the newscasters complain about the youth's reluctance to work in the fields and their preference for more comfortable work. Sometimes it's enough to hold out your palms to policemen if they ask you about your papers, assuring them that you slave away in the fields, so that they'll let you continue on your way. Your calloused fingers serve as an ID card for Arab immigrants on this peninsula, more than those blue cards—almost impossible to get—that grant you the right to work and live, written in a cheap ink that any misbehaving child could use to draw all over the walls.

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