

### You and me in the future

You and me, we are in the future. There are no more cars in the city. Only people. They walk with their eyes closed, without bumping into each other. Somehow, they've figured it out. You explain how, whispering in my ear: it is something they have set in the back of their neck. And I understand completely only because you say it to me like that, sighing so close. It's a sunny day, you say, but in a minute it is going to get cloudy. Also because of a new system, you tell me: they installed it two years ago. But I don't want to know, really. The only thing I want is to hear your whispered explanation, and to imagine how the words get stuck in your skin, in your neck, in your jaw. Should we find a bar?, you ask me, as if we were tourists in this city. But, isn't this city ours?, I say to you. Yes, it is, but it has been a long time since you last came. I think you are right; the city doesn't know me anymore, nor me it. Has it?, I ask but, again, I don't want to know. I don't care about knowing. I only want to sit down with you in a bar and listen to your voice explaining closely everything that's happened during these last two years.

Here?, you ask. And I see that the bar's walls are all painted white and that the wine glasses on the tables are four-sided. The place is indifferent to me, so I don't know why I say: Yes, it's the perfect bar. Then we sit down and look outside. It's starting to get cloudy, see? I look up in the sky and notice a white flat surface moving toward us, just like a curtain. Is this what the clouds look like now?, I ask. You say yes, but you seem far away. I can't hear you, I say, and I get much closer and everything makes more sense now. Yes, you say again, they haven't figured out the texture yet, they are kind of flat, the clouds, aren't they? Kind of?, I say, and you laugh and I can't believe there is something in me with that kind of effect on this planet.

We order some wine. The bottle they bring us is different from what I remember. Didn't we used to serve from the top?, I ask. And you explain: we did, but now they've changed the design. I can't imagine why they would do that, I don't get the difference. I don't know, you say, it's a trend bartenders made up. Oh, I mumble, and close my eyes for a minute. Inside, in the darkness of my eyelids, I read some numbers, projected there in blue lights. It's like a digital watch going backwards: a countdown, but I don't know for what. I open my eyes again and look at you. You see something in my face because you immediately ask me if I'm ok. I say I'm fine but it's not true. I don't know how I'm feeling. How long do we have left?, you ask. Two hours and twenty minutes, I answer, but I don't understand what I'm saying.

I put my hand on the table. I stare at it. And now yours gets closer and you touch my fingers with your fingers. This caress seems to me the only possible form of touching. I feel your skin and notice your perfect way of being older. But, where am I?, I ask. And you come even closer to my face. You smell my neck and only then I realize that I have a scent that is or was apparently mine. Shhh, you say, take it easy. You kiss me on the cheek and move away: and that is exactly the widest sadness that you could have caused me.

Grabbing the square crystal glass and drinking my wine, I hear a sweet, sweet song coming from the back of my head. I start singing in a very quiet voice. I hadn't realized that I knew the song by heart. The pronunciation bounces in my mouth. Then, I look outside once more. People pass by in a hurry, all of them looking inside their own eyes. It seems to me that you are connected with all of them: there is a sort of community, but I don't belong anymore. With the taste of the song still on my tongue, I look at you. You are so far away, not whispering in my ear. With your glass in your hand, you look outside and it's clear to me: you know something that I no longer know, all kinds of important things that you should tell me but you don't, and I feel thoroughly alone.

My song ends, my wine is almost gone. You stare at me as I finish my drink, your eyes stick to my fingers and my glass. What's the matter?, I ask. Nothing, you say, it's only that it has always amazed me how you grab your glass. What's wrong with it?, I don't get it, I say. And then you move your chair closer and closer and I think my fingers are about to open up and my glass just about to fall down. It's like this, you say in my ear: your delicate fingers, always perfectly organized around the glass. I see how your lips are moving while you talk: instead of listening, I look at what you are saying. At this point I get lost because I know your tongue is inside your mouth, and I imagine that it should be beside mine, or both of them side by side between your lips. How long has it been since we last kissed?, I ask. You say nothing and I really want to cry but I feel no liquids inside me.

Now you finish your glass and get up. Should we get going?, you say And I don't understand how much time went by until I close my eyes and read the blue countdown inside my eyelids: more than an hour has passed and there are only sixty minutes left to get to zero. We leave the bar and I look up. Now the cloud surface has taken over the whole sky in a darker colour: a grey fabric without any tint. Your hand is in my hand. You smile at me, and I want your smile inside my smile. I see you: you are here, in the middle of the street, among all these people, in our city. But I feel that you are not, not really. Or maybe it's me who's not. Maybe I've been removed. Are we still together?, I ask, and you smile again. Shhh, easy now, you say to me and grab me around the waist. You take your phone out of your pocket and touch something on the screen. After that I look up again and then at you once more: your mouth, your smile, your jaws on each side. I want to keep on looking at you forever, and I don't ask anything more because something inside me went loose.

Do you want to do something else?, you ask. I try to come out with an answer; an answer right out of my skin or out of my urge to be near you. But I can't articulate anything in that sense, and I say: whatever you want. Let's go for a walk, then, you say, and hold my hand. We are going down the street side by side, and you ask: Do you remember the first time we met? I do, but tell it to me again, in my ear: I say that as if someone else was talking for me. Then you hold me, and your lips get really close. It was a summer afternoon, you were so beautiful, there was something about you, something was pointing you out for me; we stared at each other and a sweet, sweet song started playing, and I knew we were going to be together. You stop talking and I look at your face. You are sad now. How come?, you say, how can it be that something so beautiful ends up so wrong, Jasmine?, you say, and I then know my name again. I don't know, Frederick, I say to you, and then I remember yours. You shake your head. Let's not talk about that, you say, and keep on telling me about our first kiss, about that first afternoon together, about a time we went to a park and laid in the grass. I smile and imagine the scenes: it's like being in an unknown place with a steam ghost.

We stand still in a corner, looking at each other. You hold my face in your hands. I feel so loose that I can't think or remember anything else. You come closer but there is something still infinitely remote in your mouth. As if you were never going to get to mine. I close my eyes and feel your lips in their temperature, your tongue in its water, your teeth in their friction. I want this to last forever, I want to stay in this corner with you until there is no more surface to cover the sky with. And while we kiss I see that the countdown inside my eyes is going faster and faster. I take a step back and open my eyes. No, I say, no, and I don't know why: no, it's going to end. It's all right, easy, you say, and hold me. I close my eyes again. There are only twenty minutes left to zero.

We keep on walking and arrive at a white glazed building. You stay the door with your foot. Framed in the door, I see a shiny sign that reads *Sempre*. The letters are engraved in a mirror, and I get to see my eyes: I didn't remember they were light brown. This way, I hear you say while you put your open hand in my back. We ride the elevator. There are screens with images from all the offices and apartments. You touch one with a woman dressed in a

white uniform and we start to go up. Where are we going?, I ask. We are nearly there, you say, and I feel that my knees are weakening by the second and I don't get how what you answered could be a response to my question.

The elevator opens. Behind a desk, I see the woman dressed in the white uniform. She smiles and says hello to you without even looking at me. In the wall behind her, there is another mirror that reads *Sempre*. I turn around looking for your face. There is something very important you are not telling me, isn't it?, I say. You don't answer and, instead, stroke my hair. How was it today?, the woman asks you. All fine, thank you, you say. And I feel again the thorough ways of my solitude. Shall we?, says the woman, and we start moving. I walk as if I had no legs: that's how loose I am. We enter a gleaming room. There are three little white boxes on a table, side by side. The first one has my name written on: *Jasmine*. And it is open. The other two are labeled *Anna*, *Caroline*, and are closed. I turn around and see your jaws. Your eyes are the only ones that should be allowed to exist, I manage to think. You hold my hand. Your fingers in my fingers. You come closer and kiss me in the cheek. Good bye, *Jasmine*, you say. I turn and see that the woman is getting something ready in a computer. I look at you again and something is dismantled inside me. Don't leave me like this, I say. Stay for a little while, *Frederick*, please. And with the words I am completely diluted. You turn around and leave and I remember that one time, I don't know how long ago, I felt you as far from me as you are now, packing your bags in a house that we used to share. I close my eyes. The countdown is almost at zero and I understand that I am about to know something very important. But I hear a click, a black surface appears and, in the end, everything fades.

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### **Moonlancholia**

There is no red.

There is a big round moon, white and grey, round as ever. Earlier today you read that the moon was going to be all red, but you don't see that color from your balcony. You only see your plants, all mixed together.

There is no red. There isn't any red.

There are no clouds in the sky, but you start to think that there is something going on. That something is wrong. You stayed up late to see the red moon, but now you are sleepy, and the moon is not changing color. You don't like this time of the night. It makes you think of a man from the past.

You look to the sky once more, but there is no red. There are no reds.

The moon's geometry is perfectly visible. A light, alone, pure, that shines. The dark plane around making a frame. You think that maybe it is better to go back inside now. You think about your bed, about the sheets and the blanket.

Not even something red. There is almost nothing that resembles red.

The moon is still round, and it couldn't take any other form. It's so round that it affects the clean stroke of every straight line in the universe. And it seems that somebody had invented that white that isn't entirely white: that is grey, that is nacre. Up there, the moon doesn't seem convincing to you. The plants move, and their leaves graze your ankles. You think again that it would be better to go back in. Your bed: you think of your bed. And of the man from the past. There is almost nothing that resembles red. No red at all.

It's so round that it doesn't get to be real. You can't calculate its perimeter because that moon doesn't even exist, you think. But you are looking at it, all white, not like they said in the news. It stretches into another dimension, not the first nor the second nor the third or the fourth. It's another one. You touch the windowpane in the door. You are going back to sleep.

This night is useless for you because there is no red. There is no type of red.

It's three in the morning. The dimension in which you are now is bent backwards and things, here, don't happen. No movement can be completed in this place, you think, but all of the sudden someone rings your doorbell. The sound reaches you very slowly, as if it had to cross a wooden sea, and it takes some time for you to realize: someone is ringing your doorbell. Now you really have to go in. You shut the balcony door behind you and see the moon through the windowpane: as white as a minute ago. A second goes by. Now you don't see the moon anymore. Now you are inside your apartment and someone has just rung your doorbell. You leave the lights out.

There is no kind of red. There are no red forms.

You walk down a hall that is too long to fit in your apartment's small space. Anyway, you think: that hall is there. You keep on walking and go to your kitchen. In the news, they had announced a red moon that's not happening, and you feel your steps belong to outer space.

There are no red forms there. There are no red tones or any light in the kitchen.

There is a figure lit up by its own iridescence. It's the man from the past. How long has it been?, you wonder, and now he glows like an hologram and rests on your refrigerator. He is eating something he must have taken from there. Food you don't remember buying. He eats with a mouth he doesn't actually have. He opens it, and you see drawings coming out through his teeth. There was nobody at the door, he says, it must had been someone who passed by and rang. You look at him, but you don't know with which eyes because the real ones shouldn't work for this.

There are no red tones, you say to yourself. Not one red.

He chews slowly, glows and says things that you don't understand. You hear word by word, separately: water, yesterday, I, when, you. But they don't make any sense all together. He repeats the words. And now you only hear the sound of each letter. Only that, lone articulations but without any sense. You want to stroke his chin, but your arm is not long enough. And you can't move.

There is not one red, and he phosphoresces.

The man from the past looks at you eyes filled with air. Once again, he repeats the same words, but once again you separate them in miniatures of sounds, y, o, u, i. You walk away through the hall, going backwards. You hear language formations, now faraway. W, a, t, e, r. One foot behind the other and again, all through the hall. You think of your bed, your room. But you don't know if you will be able to sleep in this place you ended up in.

Nothing is red. There is no red moon.

There is no geometry that admits the color red. Nor blue, nor green, nor yellow. Geometry is only in black and white. No grey, no brown, no purple. Black and white and that is it. Isn't it?, you think, and the hall is ending. You want to see again if what they announced in the news will start to happen.

There is no red moon, but you want to see it.  
There is no white moon.

You open the door and step out to the balcony. Its dark outside, and the buildings around seem empty. You look up. There is a moon that now starts to erase its own white tone. You don't know if it's the same as before or if someone replaced it while you were gone. You look down. When it's dark, the plants are not green or any other color.

There is no white moon now. No white things in the world.

You think about the hall and the kitchen and about the man from the past projected there, in the glare. You think of what he said. There was nobody at the door, it must have been someone who passed by and rang. After that you stopped understanding. A small arch begins to move forward on the moon, a darker one. It seems red to you. On the floor, all the plants seem to be one and the same. Leaf by leaf, all in a color that doesn't exist. You look up.

The small arch in the moon now seems red because there are no white things in the world. Not a touch of white.

You stroke a leaf. It seems to have stuck something to your hand, a substance so soft that you almost can't feel it at all. You look closer. There is nothing there, but you feel it: something very thin, as a cream made almost entirely with water. This exists, you think, and you also think about your bed and about the man from the past. Inside, there isn't any light coming from the kitchen. Up there, the arch in color moves forward on the moon. This is happening at last, you think.

Not a touch of white. No white over with in any tone.

You decide to go in but look to the moon first. The red is moving over the white, and now what they said in the news is becoming real. You close the balcony door behind you. This hall is too long, you think again, and keep walking. You look at your steps. You count them but the number doesn't stick to your head. The kitchen remains in the dark, and the man from the past is no longer there. He doesn't glow anymore.

The refrigerator is open and emits a yellow almost transparent reflection, with no tone of white over white. There will be no more white.

You close the refrigerator and turn up the lights. You clean the kitchen counter. There are some crumbs and you throw them in the trash. Some sounds are coming from your room: the same as before, words like bubbles, y, o, u, i. You turn the light off, walk down the hall and open your room's door. There is nobody there, but one of the drawers in your closet is open. You see it from far away, like a very distant planet, in another solar system.

There will be no more white. Not one more.

You get closer. The drawer is empty. The only thing there is a pair of socks. These aren't mine, you say to yourself. They are blue, all torn up: these are his socks, you think. But he is not there. Or now you can't see him. Or he is glowing at a different frequency. You open the bottom drawer: it's filled with your things, the ones that you always put in the other one. You close everything and leave without looking back.

Behind you there is no more white. Never white.

You check every room in the apartment. Nothing is glowing. No sounds, no dissembled sentences, no one calling. Now, there is only one dimension, and nothing more. Things, you say very low: they come and go. They beat in space. And you say it like that, but you could say it differently. You take a deep breath and go out to the balcony. The moon is entirely red. It seems that the plants reflect the color, everyone with its own leaves now, without getting mixed together. In another building someone turns on a light. Up in the sky, you see the red sphere. The moon, you think, never was completely white.

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## Julia

"This garden is an absolute mess."

August was right. The five-petaled flowers were each missing two. The blades of crabgrass that were supposed to be thick looked thin as lines, and the fountains had completely dried out. August was right; he surely was. But I had hired a gardener who specialized in destruction on purpose. "Is there any difference between order and disorder?" His rhetorical question convinced me, and I invited him to work at home. He told me that first of all we had to have a conversation, that he had a very peculiar gardening philosophy, that he didn't want to fall in any kind of misunderstanding with me. We sat in the gallery, one on each side of the table. "Cast iron", he said, "a merely correct decision for garden furniture". He went on: "A commonplace". "And you? What would you have suggested?" "Me? See that table? I would have cut off its legs, I would have leveled it with the floor." I liked him, but I thought he was overdoing it just to impress me. "No more, nor less", he said as if he were describing a formula. "That's my motto. If something has too much of itself, we cut it off; if it has too little, we supplement it". It didn't sound bad at all; it even sounded like a reasoned principle. He stopped talking and looked towards the garden. There were three cypresses, a weeping willow brushing a fountain, and a lemon tree. "See?" he continued. "The same thing happens over there; commonplaces again." Some pines for the romantic feeling of an enchanted forest; the willow as a bridge between plants and water; the lemon tree for creating charm of utilitarian beauty. "Do you realize?" I did. "What's your name?" I asked him. "Call me Maller."

“You can start whenever you like.” “You do realize all that is going to vanish, don’ you?” “Let it vanish. Maller, I’ve have enough of it.” And that’s how we closed our deal.

The following Thursday he started with the impatiens that grew in the flowerbeds all around the garden. “We have to eradicate the very idea of a plot”. He slurped the coffee I had prepared for him. “But this a process, and it takes time; we now have to take the first step”. He bent over and pointed at one of the flowers, as white as the rest of them. To me, white impatiens were always the most beautiful, the purest, always ready to go with any of my moods. He told me: “They have too many petals,” and plucked out carefully two of the five without cutting off the flower. Then he moved on to the next one. “You can go ahead if you want to,” he told me, “this will take a while.” I had nothing to go ahead to: I hadn’t had anything to attend to for a long time. So I settled in the cast iron chair and kept looking at him. He went from flower to flower, always plucking petals. He placed the ones he had just removed in a little transparent plastic box that he had left on the grass so he could easily reach it. As he was moving forward along the plot that skirted the entire garden, he also continued to move the box, which was filling up with white flakes. “White flowers are the worst,” he complained. “At least when they are tinged, their colors tend to affect the overall balance with a certain disorder. But these, all leveled and white... it’s too much.” He said it as if he were talking to himself, but it became clear that he intended his statements for me. So, at some point of that first afternoon, I went inside the house and looked for a writing pad. “A brand-new one”, I said to myself, and chose one with hard covers.

He didn’t say anything else that day. In my own way, I jotted down Maller’s precept as he was going around the garden, bent over. When he reached the starting point again, he stood up and made some revolving movements with his hips and waist. He talked again: “People think that a gardener’s work should remain invisible in the garden. I think it has to be the other way around: we have to erase any trace of the garden from the gardener”. And he shook off the dust and the dirt, stretched his neck and arms, and his neck again. He stretched it so much that I got to see the nape of it, turned frontward. It seemed to me as if his first vertebrae were scarring the skin. That man had needles inside, just like a rosebush. I couldn’t stop looking. He went back to his vertical axis and looked at me. “Here, for you: this was unnecessary.” He gave me the box. “We plucked out six hundred and forty-eight petals, two from every flower; a good day’s work.” I smiled at him and took the box. The lid was on it, and if I moved the box it didn’t make any sound. Petals are silent things. I had had three hundred and twenty-four flowers in my impatiens, and I wouldn’t had known it if it hadn’t been for Maller. We got to the living-room, and I opened the front door for him. “See you next Thursday,” he said, “I always arrive just on time”. “Have a nice weekend,” I answered. I smiled again, with my eyes half-closing slowly. Maller got in his car and left; I went back to the garden. In my writing pad, I wrote down the exact number of petals that he had subtracted and the general result of that first day. It had been a meticulous effort whose result remained almost invisible. Now the impatiens had three petals: that was all. They were still alive, as spread out as before, with its roots still stabbed into the soil. Its color still had that flat pale monochrome, but I couldn’t stop thinking that, in fact, the absolute quantity of white had considerably decreased. All that white had taken a part of its whiteness from itself. Surrounded by green leaves, the white glints still existed: they looked upwards as if they were looking for something, maybe for the sun, even though I already found myself in a melting dark. I went inside thinking again that now the total amount of white was less than earlier that same morning.

August arrived a few minutes after that. He was coming from the city, wearing a suit, just as serious as every Thursday. He didn’t find any pleasure in taking off the clothes he had to wear all day long; instead, he liked to have dinner wearing what he would have worn to dine in a restaurant, always with his hair flattened backwards, his forehead all clear and his

cheeks so flat that if light were to reach him from the side it would seem that he had put on some kind of make-up. He sat with me in the gallery, staring at the garden. His dark-green tie matched his gray suit in a very strange but easy way. For a moment, I saw he aimed to take it off, but he changed his mind quickly. "And what about this new gardener? He worked well, didn't he?" "Yes, very well, he seems to know what he's doing." "I can tell, yes." He stretched out his hand and almost caressed my fingertips. "Shall we eat?" "Of course," I said, and we went inside. I started to close the garden door behind and, as I was just about to close it completely, I imagined the blurry emotions in the heart of the impatiens' remaining petals.

From that Thursday to the next, my writing pad filled with ideas and predictions about the disorder that would eventually take over my garden. I already wanted to know how Maller would go ahead with his project. I drew three cut-off cypresses, torn out by their very roots, a lemon tree without any fruit, a razed plot, raked, even blown up in pieces. I traced a clean horizontal line in pencil and thought that this was what the grass was going to look like sooner or later: a surface of mere loose dirt. A list of phrases also accumulated in my head during that week, and I used them to go with the drawings. "Without trees there's no shade, without shade the sun kills everything". "Without lemon, no limoncello". "Without flowerbeds, no flowers to embellish anything". I had taken care of that garden from the beginning, for twenty-two years up to that moment. When August and I moved to the house, the garden was completely empty, a square ready to be organized and spruced up. From the beginning I thought about fountains and ponds; sculptures, a little grove, and flowers, lots of flowers. During the day, when August was gone, I remember writing down all these wishes; and the gardener from those days didn't cease to satisfy them. In the course of only one month, everything was ready, and it was then the moment to let time do its job on my garden, so that it would become a space for a vital yet organized nature, of inspiring, compacted, beauty. From the gallery I used to stare at every different kind of growth every morning. The trucks in the three cypresses grew thicker and thicker in a very fitful process. To me, every new centimeter in the pines meant that a whole year had passed. The abundance of all the rosebushes gathered in a corner signaled the cycle of every one of those years: time belonged to the cypresses and the flowers, not to me. The roses bloomed and died; the pines grew cones, first as tiny as fingernails, then rounded, and then completely scaled figures. Petals blossomed in every bud of every species: from the impatiens, which had conquered the entire plot, to the roses, in that corner, and to all the other pot varieties: I used to have primulas, pansies; I also had a little camellia that the first gardener wouldn't let grow; I had a poinsettias that almost formed a tree on one side; there were, clinging to the walls, two kinds of creepers, bougainvilles and ampelopsis. I even had a lady of the night, my lady of the night.

Every year, the single night that my lady of the night blossomed with its thirty flowers, I purposely stayed awake, watching from the gallery. The moon, up there, was always setting a pace that linked its light to each of the flowers; they unfurled almost at the same time, like fists loosening, fists made of hands with a thousand boneless fingers. I stared at their births during the first dark hours, and then focused on the progress: they were just like little cartilage daughters. The flowers moved very slowly in their blossoming, but the movement was precise, impossible to deny. If I looked away for just two, three seconds, four, and then looked again, the difference in the progress was already evident. They went on that way until they were completely open, the petals in a flat angle, all knit with each other. It seemed that the flowers would stay like that, still at least for one minute. It seemed also that the entire night was going to stop, that the thirty of them were going to stay in that same position forever, and that I, sitting as I was, on the chair, outside, close and distant at the same time, it seemed that I was going to pause with them, every part of my body connected in some odd way with each flower. My nose with the one on the back, my fingers with the nearest, my eyes with the ones that were ahead in the race. During one minute, every night of every one of

those years, it seemed to me that that was what was going to happen. But the truth was that the movement never stopped. For the flowers, blooming and fading was the same, the movement was continuous. It was me, all those nights, who wanted to see a gap between the opening and the closure. For them, everything was part of the same progress and they couldn't have said a thing, not even if they were blossoming or withering. Each moment was like a snapshot, all assembled one after the other. Again, it was me who wanted a difference. But there were none. And then, during the same night, I began to see them seal. It wasn't that the flowers were sealing for just a moment, for just a few hours, or until the next morning. They were sealing to die, my thirty pinkish white flowers. The projection started to go backwards, and the boneless hand now wanted to form a fist again. The flowers went back to the fist one petal finger after the other, but the fist always remained undone that second time. Invariably, the threads of every flower became weaker and weaker in the progress; they all had fainted within themselves. There was no structure left. Once dead, the ladies of the night were like pale flayed phantoms, with no other mystery that the one I had witnessed during that whole night.

My lady of the night was the only thing I was going to miss after the destruction. The rest might as well vanish: I didn't need the roses, or the pines or the soft grass or the flowerbeds. I entirely convinced myself the second Thursday. Maller arrived just on time, as he had said he would. It was seven o'clock in the morning when the bell rang. "Today we start with the grass," he said. To me it sounded just perfect; I didn't even want to keep calling it by its scientific name. I had memorized it. *Poaceae*, the old gardener used to tell me all the time, and I kept trying to remember the word. "Poaceae, right?" I asked Maller. "We don't care about any of that naming, it's just grass," he told me, and then said: "Let's look over there, all that green surface." We looked together. "What do you see? Is there too much or too little?" "Too much." "Then what?" "We have to take it out?" "Perfect, Julia." Too much, then take it off. Too little, then add. I had already learned and put into practice Maller's principle. "Now you can go, leave me to it if you want to." "But I don't have anything to do right now, can I watch?" "As you like." I was liking the idea of staring at him. I wanted to stare at him as he bent down very slowly and just with that same paused rhythm getting the palms of his hand to the floor; his firm, even hands. He balanced on one and the other handled a little scissor; two of his fingers were enough to manipulate it. Once again, he placed a transparent box in the center of the garden and that was where he put all the halves of every blade of grass as he progressed in his particular pruning. "Too thick, these blades: we'll remove one half and they'll look much better." He said it, some kind of phrase he was pronouncing. But I only got to jot down some scattered words on my writing pad and then went back to staring at his forearms: they were all turned over themselves, stretched in every one of his muscles, veins visible all around and carving the skin. I was trying to concentrate on the writing pad, to come back to the pages and the blades and the cutting and the words: "Takes off half grass," I had written down.

That same Thursday, half of the total grass ended in the box. Still in the soil, the other half remained there, flat, alive and still green but dimmer, simpler. The following Thursday Maller worked on the cypresses. He dug some holes in the floor, around each of the pines, and then burnt half their roots from below. The fourth Thursday, he blocked the fountain's drain and the water was dammed up, almost pink as months went by. Every week during a whole year he applied the same principle to everything in my garden: the rose bushes became sticks with two petals; the poinsettias no longer had any red leaves, the creepers became brown and green waves that went up and down though the walls, semi exhausted. I got used to taking graphical notes every Thursday, and my writing pad began to fill up with diagrams. I drew a poked bulb or a blade cut in half and then wrote something resembling a phrase: "That way, it doesn't grow anymore," "If we do that, we have less shadow." Every Thursday, I stored the remains of each species in transparent boxes of different sizes. I stored them in the basement

with numbered labels: name of the species, date, and a brief description of the procedure according to which Maller operated. "One. Impatiens. December 3th, 1987. Extraction of two petals." That little first box with the ochre flakes that once had been living white petals was right at hand, for the other boxes to see. "It is the first: let it set the example for the rest." I thought that same thing every time I saw it there, alone, single, in the central shelf. The year went by and, at the end, only one final procedure remained to be done, one last Thursday. Maller was going to do something with the lady of the night; that was for sure.

August only began to notice changes when we got to the sixth month: the deterioration of the cypresses had finally become evident. Some of their branches were as green and tight and perennial as before. But the rest, half of its green body, was gone; it had fallen off and now appeared to be nothing but dry pine needles. "May be it's some kind of botanical infection. What does the gardener say?" "He says it's normal, that once every twenty or thirty years, pines and all types of trees go through a period of total transformation. Cypresses, he says, are like humans: sometimes they enter a period of crisis." August looked down. "For real" I said, "I've been doing some research myself." "That's all right, Julia, but there must be something we can do to reverse the process." "That is exactly what we are working on with Maller." "Maller?" "Maller, the gardener." "That's his name? You've never mentioned it." "Really? That's weird. Maller, yeah."

Little by little, August got used to not asking me anything about the garden. Every Thursday, he came home and greeted me as always, every day tending to almost caress my fingertips. He look askance towards the garden and turned away. We had dinner together, inside, sitting at the living room table. I sometimes commented that I was making progress with my herbalist drawings, that I was even thinking about the possibility of taking some special course. He looked at me, always smiling from far away, sitting at the other end of the table. But somewhere in the hundred and twenty centimeters that his smile had to travel to reach me, it faded away. There was nothing left. Then I also looked down, every time, and we finished our meal as if we were having dinner alone. Every night, and every Thursday night, he left the table before me; he went to his room, and then I went to mine. We had a third one, for when we wanted to sleep together, but we hadn't used it for a long time. Sometimes, in the afternoons, looking up from the garden, I used to imagine how objects would linger in that third room, whether something would have changed since the last time I saw them; I wondered if maybe the color in the walls had changed, or if the light bulbs in the nightstands would explode if I were to turn them on.

We spent the second semester reinforcing the work we had done during the first. Every week, I added one more labeled box to the shelves in the basement: "Forty-one. Camellia. October 7th, 1988. Punctures in the flower buds". "Forty-seven. Pansies. November 16th, 1988. Removal of the pollen." Maller also looked over the flowers and pulled out some petals again. He divided the blades of grass in two, one part went to another transparent box and the other remained in the ground; he re-burnt the roots, only this time he applied the procedure to all the trees: the cypresses, the willow and the lemon tree. He injected syrup into the lemons: "Too acid"; sprayed bleached water onto the red roses: "Too red"; and a solution of red colorant onto the white ones: "Too white". Each Thursday, I looked at him moving though the day; I sat in the cast iron chair from early in the morning until the afternoon. I kept writing down his phrases, drawing the species that were slowly extinguishing in my garden. It may seem now that my drawings were objects of nostalgia, or an act of training, but the truth is that I drew all the species because I wanted them to begin existing in my writing pad and to stop existing there, in nature. Sometimes I also drew Maller. By noon, with the sun hitting at a perfectly vertical angle, I usually found myself tracing lines that mimicked the pattern of veins engraved in his arms. I looked at his veins and again at my writing pad and made the pencil move along the paper, fusing both worlds. When the drawing resulted in a very precise copy, I

couldn't stop thinking that my hand had made, on the surface of the paper, the exact same movement that it would have done on Maller's forearm. If he ever stood up and looked gravely at me for just a second, I quickly turned the page over and returned to my botanical efforts. Maller never smiled. Not a single time, not a single grin. Not even when I cut off one of the red roses, all marked with tiny bleached dots, and placed it in the living room's table. Not even the times that I invited him to have lunch with me in the gallery, and I mocked the old, fine projects that I had had with the previous gardener; not even when I was driven to tell him that I was always amused by August's face every Thursday night when he glanced at the garden.

The last Thursday, Maller arrived sixteen minutes later. "So that you start getting out of the habit of me," he said when I opened the door. His jaw's movement as he was pronouncing it: I couldn't stop looking. I stood right there, almost attached to his jaw, in the swinging up and down with every word that came out. He had just said something that could be hurtful, something that must have really hurt me. But I preferred not to say anything and kept listening, listening to that, just to get to see his jaw up and down and then up again, just to see him talk, moving his arms. "Please, come in," I said. "Are you ready?" "Not really," I answered. I had been thinking about my lady of the night for some weeks. Almost a year had passed from the last blooming night; the buds were again ready to blossom. It could happen that same night, or tomorrow, Friday night: I was thinking just that when Maller spoke again. He didn't want the blooming to occur this year. "This plant is already too abundant, with all those fleshy branches; we don't need any flowers." "Not event one?" "Not a single one, it has enough going on as it is, with all that felling of cactus; with the flowers it would be too much." "All right. Make it fast. I don't want to see". "It's better if you're not there". His jaw moved again, like a guillotine. "I will be in the living-room, let me know if there is something I can do." "Go ahead, Julia," he said; then added: "I will leave the remains in this box." And he showed it to me: it was just as transparent as all the rest.

Sitting at the end of the table where I always sat, I began to draw by heart the flowers of the lady of the night. The white strings, the stamens in a pale yellow, the opening and the closure. I also drew a moon, two moons, three. Ladies of the night should exist on every planet; they had to be something like a right for all types of nature, I thought, as I was finishing outlining the flowers' temporal arch, from the blooming till the final dismantlement. I had drawn them very little, and the entire progress took over two horizontal pages. Anyway, I thought, the flowers are already something from the past now. At that point, Maller would have already carried out his project. It was easy to do; it was a mere cutting off. By now, the flowers are no longer linked to the plant, I thought again. They would be paused inside the box, without any kind of progression, waiting for the rest to arrive, the ones that Maller was yet to cut. I imagined cylindrical petals as bandaged strips, as strands of pure matter, of diamonds. I imagined them like that: the flowers, all those flowers that my lady of the night could bear; I thought about their turning and their opening and their whole nights. I also thought of their scent: it didn't exist but I figured it had something of a dense sap. "Here you are." I had shut my eyes and I was opening them again. "There were thirty-two this year," said Maller, and left the transparent box on the other end of the table. "We're done, Julia". I wanted to say something, anything, but the initial word of the phrase I would have said got caught inside my brain, wrapped in the still living strips of my flowers, and it wouldn't let any other sound come out. I stood up and smiled softly, walking towards the front door. "It's all done now, Julia, the project is completed." I opened the door looking down. As I was staring at the floor tiles by the entrance, I recalled that Maller had gray eyes. I looked up: I wanted to see them before he left. Or to see his arms or the nape of his neck. I wanted once more and for the last time to look at something that belonged to him. But by the time I got my head to reach an upright position, Maller was already getting in his car.

I shut the door. August wouldn't arrive until seven in the afternoon. I sat again at the table, but closer to the box filled with the unblossomed flowers. I placed the palm of my right hand wide open on the cover, as if the flowers could read something in my fingerprints, something only they could understand. Thirty-two flowers. I would have been able to see them that same night, opened as full moons. I even would have counted them, would have arrived at that number by myself. Would they grow again in a year, as if nothing had happened? Maybe it was necessary for the cycle to repeat itself year after year that the flowers bloom and die in the plant; or maybe it was not. I couldn't know: I hadn't asked Maller that question. Anyway, there was no longer any difference. I grabbed the box and took it downstairs, to the basement. The ceiling light wasn't bright enough and the only thing that I got to see was the first little box of petals, still contained and spotless in the central shelf. The rest of the species that Maller had cut off throughout the year were lost in the ochre filter of an almost complete darkness. Upstairs, in the garden, the light would still be hitting bluntly, with the straightest rays of the summer. The garden might be filled with sun, but the grass was now half the grass, the flowers half the flowers, and the trees half the trees. I made some room and placed the last box just beside the first one. "Fifty-three. Lady of the night. December 1st, 1988. Total extraction".

### **Black Box**

Airplanes that disappear have a particular ontological quality. Some are made of atoms with weaker molecular bonds. Others, of chemical elements yet to be discovered. In any case, they all have a distinct density and another level of visibility. When they reappear, recovered at the bottom of the ocean or on a snowy mountain, their ontology changes again: once more, they look firm, concrete, almost the same as before.

People who travel in planes that disappear sometimes ask out loud what will happen to their cells when the plane finally vanishes. The flight attendants answer that everything will be all right, that no molecule will suffer any change, that inside the cockpit everything is in order. When planes that disappear reappear, people traveling in their seats come back to visibility and ask once again about their cells. Flight attendants don't answer and ask the same question about their arms. None of the pilots say anything even though their mouths are wide open.

In the exact moment that the disappearing planes disappear, a deep sound is heard in the air. It's the squeal of molecular bonds coming loose. When the human eye ceases to capture all planes that disappear, retinas are less loaded and visual saturation levels decrease worldwide. Passengers' eyeballs turn white and spin around, and from then on a plane that disappears can no longer be seen. Passengers' pupils don't stare at anything in particular. Flight attendants' eyes turn dull and stop blinking when a disappearing plane disappears.

A hole is cut out in the air and suddenly the plane that disappears is no longer there: neither flying over the deepest ocean, nor nearly touching the snows of the highest mountain. Or at least that is what seems to happen to the plane that disappears, were someone looking from far away. Inside the cockpit, when the plane that disappears disappears, pilots notice that their muscles are weakening. Their faces get blurry and their skin stretches. If they were able to look into some kind of reflecting surface, they wouldn't recognize themselves. That is because Pilot Number One and Pilot Number Two cease to have any features. Outside the cockpit, passengers want to hear something like a phrase, now that this plane that disappears is disappearing. Pilots see the transistor. It is right there, but they don't pick it up, and not a

piece of information gets to the passengers: pilots don't want to or pilots just can't speak at all. In that same moment, sounds turn void in the cockpit and something very small explodes: they hear it as a last rebound in an otherwise empty space. It's the synaptic connections dissolving, now that the plane that disappears is disappearing.

After the plane that disappears has already disappeared, pilots regain something that looks like a face. It could be said that it is almost the same face, except for two details that they would notice if they were confronting something like a mirror. The eyes are now shut, still. And their necks are three centimeters longer than before. They look forward. Everything is white outside the frontal window and the main controls don't twinkle in any color. While the plane that disappears remains vanished, passengers stare with bleached eyes at the space outside the windows but don't say a word. When they verify that everything around has turned flatly white, their eyes spin again. Fly attendants remain standing. Their arms are spread out pointing at the exits with wobbly fingers. While the plane that disappears remains disappeared, in their faces pupils stay fixed, straight.

When this particular plane that disappeared reappears, at the bottom of an ocean, an ocean so vast that no one could ever give it a name, pilots finally make the announcement. They now want to, or they now can speak as they used to. Sounds are audible again, but lower. Words come out of the mouth that is slowly opening in the face of Pilot Number One; words enter the microphone, travel through cables, reach the loudspeakers and then the passengers hear something that resembles a phrase. The information that this plane that disappeared has reappeared has now reached those who travel inside: up to this moment, no one could have known anything. But now things seem to be almost as always. Almost. Pilots regain their usual muscular tone and the frontal window pinkens. Pilot Number One turns his head and his neck slowly descends to its original size. He smiles to Pilot Number Two and the main controls twinkle in blue, blending with the pink water of the ocean, outside.

When the pilot's words reach the passenger's ears in a plane that disappeared and reappeared, flight attendants look down, their arms fall and the exits are now no longer pointed at. Pupils become transparent in their faces and their bodies loosen. While the plane that disappeared reappears, passengers register how all that white is turning pink outside the windows. Their eyeballs spin around once more and appear to have the usual color, though a few tones lighter. In this particular plane that disappeared and reappeared on the top of a snowy mountain, a mountain as cold as the twelve iciest mountains of any winter, passengers open their mouths and ease their lips. They stare at the flight attendants, who walk backwards, slowly approaching the cockpit. They stare at them and notice that their knuckles are loose and their knees semi-bent. Flight attendants touch the cockpit's door with their backs at the precise moment when the passengers' jaws soften up. Something like a steam sprouts through the tongues and the teeth. Pilot Number One and Pilot Number Two would be now ready to open the door and come out, except that they remain sat, staring all that pink outside, in the mountain, fusing together with the snow.

**484 mm<sup>3</sup>**

He had always been afraid of those stairs, even though he only realized it when his head hit the third step during a sharp-angled afternoon which made him lost the exact amount of blood that he was going to need three years after that. He was going to need that blood but he wasn't going to have it anymore.

At the moment that his forehead met the marble rim, the empty anxiety that he was going to feel three years later became definitely sentenced. The following thirty-six months rushed by and happened all at the same time, right there, accumulated in the sole instant of the frontal crash against the stairs. It was as if something had summoned them to converge on that February 4<sup>th</sup>, exactly at five-twenty-two in the afternoon. Something, perhaps a kind of bloody hallucination in the head of the man who, at that same moment, was leaving an impression of himself on the unshakeable, sharp marble surface. Eyelashes couldn't protect the lacrimal glands from the high salty blood content; lacrimal glands, then, burned.

The theatrical hallucination in the man's brain consisted of the presumption that there wouldn't be anything left after the crash against the step. More than a fantasy: it was horror put in images, a terror as a screen, and the pain began to project slowly over the diagonal mark that would seal his forehead from that afternoon on.

When an amount of lost blood is exact, it can never be recovered. It is then impossible to refill the empty capsule that will travel through the veins forever, like a bubble in an upside-down glass, like a breath of air in a walled swimming pool.

The amount of that February 4<sup>th</sup> had been too exact to even try to replace it with transfusions. In the operating room, they only cured the wound, a procedure that was merely peroxide, needles and surgical gauze. They didn't do anything to make the paleness go away, nor to bring back a hint of color to the chest, nor to recreate some of the old texture around the eyes. They said it would be impossible, that the amount of lost blood had been so precise that they would never be able to measure it exactly to make up for the leak.

Exactness was what defined that lost blood. And it also was going to define the patient three years from that afternoon when, searching for the cause of a trivial discomfort, the man would discover a tiny lack that seemed to be eternal, though it had been acquired on the third step of a marble staircase.

*All texts translated from the Spanish by the author.*