

Aitana Alberti

Always in Green Ink (Notes for a book of memoirs)

Each morning you awaken with the dawn, you listen to the radio turned down very softly in order not to wake up your husband, you prepare a big pot of strong coffee, Cuban style, and you drink a large cup with very little milk and saccharin. In the garden the tropical plants, sowed in every sort of flowerpot, faintly shine beneath a lemon-tree and an orange tree. Your garden is your repose. Your garden, located at the edge of an avenue with a central walkway, like that other one, the first you ever had, in the distant south, until some municipal government decided to give way to progress and widened the street. Then the childhood promenade disappeared, and the enormous hardwood trees with their almost black trunks and small yellow flowers became a painful point of reference in the space of the initial memory, the most intense because from it all roads begin.

Havana's *Quinta Avenida*, with its potbellied palms and stone benches, favours a return to a remote past, and *Pleamar* (High Tide), my home, is also the first book of poetry written by my father in Argentina and the name of a domestic publishing house, of unique books made by hand by me with rare paper, dried flowers, stones, shells and sand, gathered lovingly on travels to places made special by the people that inhabited them or by the prestige they attained in the intimate geography that we each invent for ourselves with the passing of time. In this way the thick and dark sands of Isla Negra coexist with the leaves of a poplar-tree that would remind Falla in Alta Gracia of the black poplars of Machado, and a small green stone from the Paraguayan Lake Ipacarai with multicoloured freesias of Palermo Park in Buenos Aires, where we used to ride on bicycles, Gorita, Tonica and I, the three of us daughters of exile, conscious that that park should have been Retiro Park, in the heart of a city unknown to us but so much our own through the telling and retelling about it, yet without a large river and port with ships of every flag. In the Retiro I would see, or had seen already in the teary and intensely blue eyes of my grandmother [doña] Oliva, the last autumn sun cast its light on the windows of a palace from an oriental fable, and in the still pond pitch the small sailing boats crowded together at the shore, like wild geese resting from a very long migratory voyage. A secluded city, suitable for man —mother used to say—; not this infinitude of streets and more streets devoured by the *pampa* with such fury, that in order to finally leave the country the trains have to arm

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themselves with a saintly patience. A courageous city that one, in the years of the Civil War. How happy we were then! And we women used to see the glimmer in the eyes of those who would talk to us every day, because it is difficult not to mention paradise when one has lost it. ¿Paradise a war? Oh, mother, when I read your *Memoria de la melancolía* (*Memory of Melancholy*) I understood so many things, including that strange affirmation that one could find something resembling happiness amidst the bombs.

It is curious. I never thought until recently that such a modest garden as the one on Las Heras Street would suddenly take on such a significant role in this story. I should say, rather, at the end of this story, with this 'coda' or these extra verses into which life after sixty is transformed, when the beloved dead come together in the attics of dreams and in the mirror you watch as the tender and tired image of your mother irretrievably takes possession of your own.

Punta del Este and its sea, the long seaside summer holidays—in fact, all the summers seemed but one, given their awaited and repeated consummation of happiness—blazed always like the indelible metaphor of childhood. The ever vigilant eye of the lighthouse, the small seals, Mansa Beach, the inaccessible Brava Beach, the mystery of Gorriti Island and Isla de los Lobos, the Gallarda—our beautiful house among the pines—, my friend Annette Ugalde, the solitary woods and the dunes... A setting difficult to surpass. And yet, I find that this tiny garden at Pleamar brings to me daily the steps lost by the young girl I was in that distant place, in the shady enclosure of its *Porteño* rival.

Sitting beneath the shade of the lemon-tree I close my eyes. Voices come to me from I don't know where. Are they shadows that return or is it that to my years the past is more present than the present and the present is a dream yet to be?

She sees the photograph, out of focus, of Pablo Neruda standing before his 'ocean comrade.' Mother's lap is warm like Sunday bread. She presses herself against the soft woollen skirt and with one eye barely half-open she looks over the tremulous lines of the waves, the sailor's cap, the sleepy smile of an Araucanian idol. Ricardo Neftalí Reyes, she repeats several times with difficulty, for she does not wish to take her mouth away from her mother's body. Neftalí, Neftalí... what a strange name, mother. Well you can ask him yourself in a while why it was his name before and now he calls himself by another.

Old images, mere trifles, small things still living because my thoughts keep them tied to the present with fragile threads, so easy to weaken in any imperceptible ripple of the river of forgetfulness.

Pablo and Delia del Carril against the light in the garden of Los Guindos, in Santiago, from behind, each one wearing a black Araucanian poncho with white geometric designs. "*La Tata* touched my

shells and that's not right, Rafael." "I didn't touch them." Yes you did touch them, you even changed the position of several of them. I am the great sea shell wizard and I know everything." Tata, Tatita, these shells are very rare and expensive and you should respect the orders of the greatest southern malacologist." "Uncle Pablo has millions of them, and I can't hear the sea?"

Delia, by then alone in Paris, having escaped from the definitive infidelity of Pablo, hands me a book. Its title, *Manifestes*. Editions de la Revue Mondiale, 1925. "It's a gift for you," she says. It is a rustic, yellowish little book. The inscription: "To Delia del Carril, with the esteem of a long friendship. Vicente Huidobro."

Zenobia leaves a copy of the Losada edition of *Platero y yo* at my bedside. I have a high fever. A childhood illness has converted me into a suffering form covered with spots. No scratching, drinking cold water, kissing people secretly, like that small, cordial woman, who dares to stroke my sweaty brow with her hand. "To Aitana, your friend Juan Ramón." With time, the original jacket of the book was substituted by another drawn by my father: the purple profile of a little donkey surrounded by violet flowers. "Platero, in Moguer's sky" ...

Green ink (the ink always in green of Ricardo Neftalí Reyes). "For Aitana Alberti, whom I love since before she was born. Your Uncle Pablo. August 1958." It was for my seventeenth birthday. Now I open the book bound in red. Its pages of India paper retain intact the complete works (until then) of who was and is a presence. Nothing more and nothing less than that: a presence that only the forgetfulness of death will be able to erase.

The walls were covered by paintings, photographs, valuable archeological objects, amusing popular trinkets. Through the six windows, tall and narrow —two per room that together formed the drawing-room— the joy of the Roman sun entered with great extravagance. Mother searched for the umpteenth time for her great golden ring. The one she herself designed, which Belgiorno, the finest goldsmith in Buenos Aires, would mount with grey pearls bought at a mysterious little store from Peking. The two stars with a heart of a diamond and two authentic pearls from the Chinese Sea, that María Teresa would never remove from her left ring finger, had strayed. It was the beginning of the nightmare, but we didn't know it yet. Only now do I realize the extent of the subterfuges that María Teresa León's incredible intelligence put into motion to shield us from the advance of the shadows, until these devoured her completely, with diabolical calm, throughout thirteen years of agony. We had never heard of Alzheimer's disease and although my maternal grandmother, doña Oliva, so beloved by Rafael, was "featherbrained" —they are his words— in the final years of her life — when she took a vow of poverty and would give up her meagre

widow's pension to the nuns of a neighbouring school, and the little she saved she invested in inviting the patrons of a nearby bar to a cognac, inspiring in them profound respect that erect and slovenly old lady, with intense blue eyes, so enchanting and clever, whose husband, Colonel Angel León, had fought in the Cuban War, and she, a young lady from Burgos, had waited for him patiently, gathering the linen of her trousseau in the shade of the famous provincial cathedral, with the constant dread that any day a black-edged envelope and not the bearded and charming figure that would wrap her up in his arms to never leave her abandoned— it seemed impossible to us that this senile delirium could be repeated a thousand times over, because María Teresa León Goyri was the indestructible and sustaining bastion of the brief Alberti family: dad, mom and I, and the poet and the girl felt protected “under the wings of her close embrace”*, secure that that most beautiful woman, of total integrity and dignity, was immortal. One morning, after much insistence, the plumber finally arrived, assigned to unclog the washbasin in mother's washroom. And there, in the depths of the piping, was the ring. She took me to her room and distractedly removed from the shelf a small book bound in blue that I knew so well. She leafed through it quickly and, almost without looking at it, gave it to me. She was handing me the most important article of love that a young poet from Cadiz gave to her as a gift when they met. A copy of *Marinero en tierra* in which dad had glued the little cut-out heads of each of them together with an image sketched in Indian ink of “Our Lady of Beautiful Love” and in the silhouette of the sailor floating in a blue sea surrounded by simple fish. “Shipwreck and salvation of Rafael Alberti,” he wrote below in rose-coloured wax pencil. And she had gone on pasting small photographs, testimony to their happiness, and others of dear friends, all of them unaware of the relentless dangers of time.

Later, she placed the marvelous ring on my left ring finger. “Take these things with you and anything else you wish, my daughter. God only knows in whose hands they could end up.”

At the edge of the book there appears a tiny photograph of Federico surrounded by youngsters. They have printed “Huerta de San Vicente” over the poet's head. Laurita García Lorca came to Havana and filled our hands with fragile souvenirs of her grandparents' summer home, in what were then the outskirts of Granada. Laurita manages the *Casa-Museo* with moving dedication. This bookmark which indicates the advance in my reading reveals to me a Federico held for all eternity in an informal Cuban street scene. The three children, very young, possess the “Cuban colour” invented by Nicolás Guillén to classify in just manner the subtle range of skin tones that each day surprise me with a new shade. And Federico smiles at me and I would like to know which park the bench belongs to in which he was sitting one afternoon, the place he

would go to think about himself and dad, both so extraordinarily Andalusian, in the short life of one and the very long life of the other, and about how one of those lives would have been without the treacherous assassination, and the other if it had not succumbed to the sirens' song that threaten any traveller on the perilous seas of the frontier.

I would like to say that I was in Buenos Aires when Federico arrived and immediately dazzled the people of that city, lifting them to heights of suspense like a brilliant bullfighter in the square of his greatest achievements; yet that occurred eleven years before my birth and I was only able to hear certain stories according to some witnesses to the party that was the presence of Lorca in my city of the South. Here, in my tropical city, there's no one left to give an eyewitness account of his whirlwind passing through the Island, but there exists a veneration as far as the people are concerned, similar perhaps to that which someone so distinct as that *aficionado* of the bullfights with death, Ernest Hemingway, can arouse.

I was in Granada recently to pay homage to Nicolás Guillén and Rafael Alberti in their centenaries. A Cuban poet and two Cuban musicians accompanied me. The music of the lute and piano nourished the word, creating within the scene a magical circle. Cadiz and Cuba in Federico's Granada, looking for him at the Puerta de Elvira and in the village streets to the cathedral with Luis García Montero; pursuing him in the gardens and patios of the Alhambra while hounded by the first chills of the winter; looking as far as the eye could see across the landscape of the Vega and the incipient whiteness of the Sierra Nevada, taking possession of us with that multiplicity of images that he saw daily, of the angel and of the *duende* (devil), that made him appear to descend, on a par with the great singers of the *cante jondo* (Andalusian gypsy singing), from the very same "*Pharaoh's trunk*".

Rafael did not visit Granada in Federicos' lifetime. For trivial reasons, he never accepted his friend's invitations to spend the summer at Huerta de San Vicente. He made the trip in 1980, three years after his return to Spain, following "so many and such terrible things". How was he to think, when he was a carefree visitor at the Student Residence in Madrid, that they would kill the marvelous pianist, sketch artist and poet Federico García Lorca, his recent friend, like a rabid dog in an unknown ravine, close to the city he loved so well, suddenly turned into hovel, into a hostile and unrecognized place? How could anyone then suspect, Father, that thousands and thousands of Spaniards would have to cross the French border on foot through the shortcuts in the mountains or be poorly heaped in chance transport, to be confined and mistreated in real concentration camps by citizens of the *douce France*, on the shores of the innocent Mediterranean Sea of childhood vacations? How could anyone have guessed during the amusing afternoons

at the Resi, that thousands and thousands of Spaniards would have to learn languages as strange as Russian, Polish, Romanian, Czech, and even Chinese? How could those brilliant young people, each in his own way, that literary books group under the common denominator of the Group of 27, imagine themselves in other lands, exiled from their country and their bread, as living symbols of an infamy perpetrated against an entire nation?

For the young Rafael, Granada would always be available, at the end of a few hours on a train (of that train that departs from Atocha station, the last soil in Madrid tread upon by the assassinated poet), and his friend Federico García Lorca would wait for him perhaps with Concha, his older sister, then girlfriend of the one in 1936, eight days before the glorious military rising who would take up the post of socialist mayor of Granada and would be killed by the fascists against the mud walls of the cemetery. Perhaps Manolo Ángeles Ortiz, extraordinary painter and another brother to Federico, would also be there, and dad sees them pass by the train window, that has slowed its march as it enters the station, and they run ahead to reach it, laughing and waving their hands in signs of welcome. Meanwhile Dad takes his suitcase down from the luggage-rack. He brings his Granadian friends some copies of *Marinero en tierra*, just released from the presses of *El Adelantado* in Segovia. Federico's impatience has caused him to jump into the compartment and now embraces and jostles him as if her were a child.

Dad, you will go and meet that childhood that was so long-lasting that in a near future your friend will declare you having had it. You will see the Alhambra, the Generalife, the Albaycin, the Sacromonte, the Darro, the Genil, the tomb of the Catholic Monarchs and the Polinario Café. You will visit Fuentevaqueros and you will traverse the meadow at sunset, when still dense smoke rises from the earth and the dry plains (*secaderos*) of tobacco leaves recall certain Cuban landscapes.

In the garden of Las Heras Street shadows have been falling. One can no longer distinguish the scarlet flowers of the poinsettias, that my paternal grandmother in El Puerto de Santa María called the Easter tree. You have read me poems by Federico, among others one dedicated to Isabel, mother of my friend Lina, granddaughter of Manolo Ángeles Ortiz. You have told me about an imaginary Granada, that I will visit before you, remembering you in each step with tearfilled eyes, for there is still much, much time to go, before the 24th of February of 1980, when finally, by municipal order, they bestowed you the keys to Granada. Exactly thirty years.