THE SEAMSTRESS AND THE WIND

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Translated by Rosalie Knecht
These last weeks, since before coming to Paris, I’ve been looking for a plot for the novel I want to write: a novel of successive adventures, full of anomalies and inventions. Until now nothing occurred to me, except the title, which I’ve had for years and which I cling to with blank obstinacy: *The Seamstress and the Wind.* The heroine has to be a seamstress, at a time when there were seamstresses . . . and the wind her antagonist, she sedentary, he a traveller, or the other way around: the art a traveller, the turbulence fixed. She the adventure, he the thread of the adventures . . . It could be anything, and in fact it must be anything, any whim, or all of them, if they begin transforming into one another . . . For once I want to allow myself every liberty, even the most improbable . . . Although the most improbable, I should admit, is that this plan will work. The gusts of the imagination do not carry one away except when one has not asked for it, or better: when one has asked for the opposite. And then there is the question of finding a good plot.
Anyway, last night, this morning, at dawn, still half asleep, or more asleep than I thought I was, a subject occurred to me — rich, complex, unexpected. Not all of it, just the beginning, but that was just what I needed, what I had been waiting for. The character was a man, which wasn’t a problem because I could make him the seamstress’s husband . . . However, when I woke up I had forgotten it. I only remembered that I had had it, and it was good, and now I didn’t have it. In those cases it’s not worth the trouble to wrack your brain, I know from experience, because nothing comes back, maybe because there is nothing, there never was anything, except the perfectly gratuitous sensation that there had been something . . . Still, the sensation is not complete; a vague little trace remains, in which I hope there is a loose end that I could pull and pull . . . although then, to go on with the metaphor, pulling on that strand would erase the embroidered figure and I would be left with a meaningless white thread between my fingers. It’s about . . . let me see if I can put it in a few sentences: A man has a very precise and detailed premonition of three or four events that will happen in the immediate future all linked together. Not events which will happen to him, but to three or four neighbours, out in the country. He enters a state of accelerated movement to make use of his information: speed is necessary because the efficacy of the trick is in arriving on time, at the point at which the events coincide . . . He runs from one house to another like a billiard ball bouncing on the pampas . . . I get this far. I see nothing more. Actually, the thing I see
least is the novelistic merit of this subject. I’m sure in the dream all that senseless agitation came wrapped in a precise and admirable mechanism, but now I don’t know what that was. The key to the code has been erased. Or is that what I should provide myself, with my deliberate work? If so, the dream doesn’t have the least use, and it leaves me as unequipped as before, or more so. But I resist giving it up, and in that resistance it occurs to me that there’s something else I could rescue from the ruins of forgetting, and that is forgetting itself. Taking control of forgetting is little more than a gesture, but it would be a gesture consistent with my theory of literature, at least with my disdain for memory as a writer’s instrument. Forgetting is richer, freer, more powerful . . . and at the root of the dream idea there must have been something of that, because those serial prophecies, so suspicious, lacking in content as they are, all seem to come to an end at a vertex of dissolution, of forgetting, of pure reality. A multiple, impersonal forgetting. I should note, in parentheses, that the kind of forgetting that erases dreams is very special, and very fitting for my purposes, because it’s based on doubt as to whether the thing we should be remembering actually exists; I suppose that in the majority of cases, if not in all of them, we only believe we’ve forgotten things when actually they had never happened. We haven’t forgotten anything. Forgetting is simply a sensation.
Forgetting becomes simply a sensation. It drops the object, as in a disappearance. It’s our whole life, that object of the past, that falls into the antigravity updraughts of adventure.

There’s been little adventure. None, in fact. I don’t remember any. And I don’t think it’s by chance, like when you stop to think and realise that in the whole past year you haven’t seen a single dwarf. My life must be shaped around that lack of adventure, which is lamentable because it would have been a good source of inspiration. But I’ve sought out that lack of adventure myself, and in the future I will do it on purpose. A few days ago, before I left, reflecting, I came to the conclusion that I will never travel again. I won’t go out looking for adventure. To tell the truth, I’ve never travelled. This trip, the same as the previous one (when I wrote El Llanto), can only come to nothing, a spiral of the imagination. If I now write, in the cafés of Paris, The Seamstress and the Wind, as I have proposed, it’s only to accelerate the process. What process? A process with no name, or form, or content. Or results. If it helps me
survive, it’s only the way some little riddle would have. I think that for a process to be sustained over time there must always be the intrigue of a point out of place. But nothing will be discovered in the end, or at the beginning either, because the decision has already been made: I will never travel again. Suddenly, I’m in a café in Paris, writing, giving expression to anachronistic decisions made in the very heart of the fear of adventure (in a café in my neighbourhood, Flores). A person can come to believe he has another life, in addition to his own, and logically he believes that he has it somewhere else, waiting for him. But you only have to test this theory once to see it doesn’t hold. One trip is enough (I made two). There’s only one life, and it is in its place. But still, something must have happened. If I’ve written, it’s been so I might interpolate forgetfulness between my life and myself. I was successful there. When a memory appears, it brings nothing with it, only a combination of itself and its negative after-effects. And the whirlwind. And me. In some ways the Seamstress and the Wind have to do with (and are the most appropriate to, and even, I would almost say, the only fitting things for) a strange quotation. I would prefer them to be the pure invention of my soul, now that my soul has been extracted from me. But they still aren’t, after all, nor could they be, because reality, or the past, contaminates them. I raise barriers, hoping they’re formidable, to impede the invasion, though I know the battle is already lost. I didn’t have an adventurous life because I didn’t want to weigh myself down with memories . . . ‘Perhaps it is an exclusively
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personal point of view, but I experience an irrepressible distrust when I hear it said that the imagination will take care of everything.

‘The imagination, this marvellous faculty, does nothing, if left uncontrolled, but lean on memory.

‘Memory makes things felt, heard and seen rise into the light, a bit the way a bolus of grass rises again in a ruminant. It may be chewed, but it is neither digested nor transformed.’ (Boulez)
It’s not random, I said. I have a biographical motive to back up this reasoning. My first experience, the first of those events that leave a mark, was a disappearance. I would have been eight or nine. I was playing in the street with my friend Omar, and it occurred to us to climb into the empty trailer of a truck parked in front of our houses (we were neighbours). The trailer was an enormous rectangle, the size of a room, that had three high wooden walls without a fourth, which was the back. It was perfectly empty and clean. We began to play at scaring each other, which is strange because it was in the middle of the day, we had no masks or disguises or anything else, and that space, of all those we could have picked, was the most geometric and visible. It was a purely psychological game of fantasy. I don’t know how such subtlety could have occurred to us, a couple of semi-savage children, but kids are like that. And the fear turned out to be more effective than we expected. On the first try, it was already excessive. Omar began. I sat on the floor, close to the back edge, and he went and
stood by the front wall. He said ‘Now’ and started walking towards me with heavy, slow steps, without making faces or gestures (it wasn’t necessary)... I felt such terror that I must have closed my eyes... When I opened them, Omar wasn’t there. I was paralysed, strangled, as in a nightmare; I wanted to move but couldn’t. It was as if a wind were pressing in on me from all sides at once. I felt deformed, twisted, both ears on the same side of my head, both eyes on the other, an arm coming out of my navel, the other from my back, the left foot coming out of the right thigh... Squatting, like an octodimensional toad... I had the impression, which I knew so well, of running desperately to escape a danger, a horror... to escape the crouching monster that I now was. All I could do was stay in the safest place.

All at once, I don’t know how, I found myself in the kitchen of my house, behind the table. My mother was standing at the counter with her back to me, looking out the window. She was not working, not making food or tidying things, which was very strange for a classic housewife who was always doing something; but her immobility was full of impatience. I knew because I had a telepathic connection with her. And she with me: she must have felt my presence, because she turned abruptly and saw me. She let out a yell like I’ve never heard from her and brought both hands to her head with a moan of anguish, almost a sob, something she’d never done before but which I knew was within her expressive capabilities. It was as if something impossible had happened, something unimaginable. By
the shouting she subjected me to when she was able to articulate again I found out that Omar had come, at noon, to say I’d hidden and wouldn’t reappear despite his calling me and his declarations that he wasn’t playing anymore, that he had to go. Such obstinacy was typical of me, but as the hours passed they started to get alarmed, mamá joined the search, and in the end papá intervened (this was the highest degree of alarm) and was still looking for me, with the help of Omar’s father and I don’t know which other neighbours, in a by-the-book search party through the immediate area, and she hadn’t been able to do anything, she hadn’t started making dinner, she hadn’t even had the heart to turn on the lights . . . I saw that, in fact, it was already very dark out – it was almost night. But I had been there the whole time! I didn’t say this to her because I was too emotional to speak. It wasn’t me, they were wrong . . . it was Omar who’d disappeared! It was his mother who had to be told, a search for him that had to be undertaken. And now, I thought in a spasm of desperation, it would be much more difficult because night was falling. I felt responsible for the lost time, whose irretrievable quality I understood for the first time.