

# **THAT PLACE CALLED HOME**

Rethinking home elsewhere  
away from the parameters of sameness  
(Exegesis)

# **LE GRAND VOYAGE**

(Thesis)

**Catherine Garet**

**MCW**

**2009**

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Catherine Garet

ID: 9209790

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An exegesis submitted to  
Auckland University of Technology  
in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

2009

School of Communication Studies  
Primary Supervisor: John Cranna

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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I would like to acknowledge Linda Olsson for the interview she accepted to give in her home in Auckland (NZ) on 14 November 2008 for the purpose of this exegesis, the help and useful commentaries I received from Maria O'Connor, the thorough editing work of John Barnett as well as his useful insights, Desna Jury – a very special thank you for her strength, kindness and vision, the Master of Creative Writing team John Cranna and Rosser Johnson for their patience and teachings, for the talented 2008 MCW class – a wonderful adventure, and finally my most grateful thanks to Leonhard Emmerling for his constant support and belief in this endeavour, for surfing the waves with me.

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## Abstract

For most writers who deal with displacement, rewriting themselves, articulating and communicating their sense of estrangement is their lifetime work. For displacement forces one to leave behind the familiar and embrace the unknown. In this process of deconstruction, the concepts of home, belonging and identity are renegotiated and questioned constantly. *Le Grand Voyage* – the working title for the draft of a novel that is presented in conjunction with this exegesis – is a fictional work that is produced out of the implications of displacement, which inscribes itself in a series of explorations I started in 2001, cumulating with two video works *Frammento* in 2003 and *Footnotes* in 2004. *Le Grand Voyage* investigates further the concept of home by questioning the home/mother relationship.

This exegesis aims to contextualise the making of *Le Grand Voyage* by using another woman's narrative as the main point of reference: Linda Olsson's *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* (2005). Olsson's work – like mine – is conceived out of the effects of displacement, and the literary form and structure display symptoms that are characteristics to narratives of displacement. By putting the home/mother/daughter in context, the narrative displays home as a patriarchal construct showing how the idealisation of home/place is predicated on a gendering of home, whereby, as McDermott notes, 'home is constructed as a maternal, static and past, to which the (male) subjects longs to return' (2003: 265). The narrative's point of view is that of daughters but also that of mothers as daughters, and enables not only a feminist discussion of the notion of home but also of motherhood.

Therefore, the theoretical approach for this work has encompassed feminists' writings that have particularly focused their research on space, place and gender. In challenging the dominant form of gender constructions and relations, the first and second wave feminism have empowered many women to leave home in order to shape their own version of identity. I believe it is within the perspective of displacement, of being out of place, that many women continue to find the necessary distance to contest a particular reading of woman and

home that still prevails in academic literature and fiction. Thus, an important part of this exegesis concentrates on the critic of home. I want to argue in a feminist way that our ideas of home and belonging still reflect gendered assumptions and are therefore contestable. That displacement as a catalyst for loss, emotional grief and mourning becomes an enabling way for women to rethink home in terms of what was at play rather than in place and to do the 'memory work' that feminists ask women to do: to remember in order not to forget because 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change' (Greene, 1991: 298). Their attacks on the feminisation of place have opened up for me possibilities to think of home outside the parameters of sameness. They have also enabled me to understand the paradoxical position a displaced person is faced with: if displacement is favored and privileged why then do longings for home still persist for some? – a fact that is well illustrated in the actual resurgence of the preoccupation to belong.

The gain in displacement also involves the fact that distance forces one to look at the longing and nostalgia for what they really conceal. In the case of a woman and, motherless daughters, distance, as this exegesis demonstrates, enables the writer to unveil the longings as subversive and fraudulent, tricking women into thinking there was nothing better than the past: home sweet home, the safe, bounded nest where women could be women: could be the mother. With the 'memory work' they both learn to think away from the parameters of sameness and the past, outside the nostalgic stances of singularity, safety, boundaries and internalised histories, therefore outside of the maternal, the home/mother relationship.

'What is home?' is a difficult question to negotiate for a woman. This exegesis shows what is at stake when one asks the question and the responsibility of women when writing about home.

Catherine Garet

ID: 9209790

# LE GRAND VOYAGE

A Creative Writing Manuscript submitted to  
Auckland University of Technology  
in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

2009

School of Communication Studies

Primary Supervisor: John Cranna

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## **Abstract**

*Le Grand Voyage* is the story of Agnès, a French writer living in New Zealand whose increasing preoccupation with death, pushes her into a creative crisis. The sudden impotency she suffers propels her into thinking about the past she had escaped from by leaving her family home at a young age. For the first time in her life, she fully confronts herself with the pain she endured. Scenes of her childhood and youth, images of her family home, recollections of her grandmother and mother emerge as sequences in a long monologue. Until Sarah, her neighbour opens the door of her house.

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## Abstract

For most writers who deal with displacement, rewriting themselves, articulating and communicating their sense of estrangement is their lifetime work. For displacement forces one to leave behind the familiar and embrace the unknown. In this process of deconstruction, the concepts of home, belonging and identity are renegotiated and questioned constantly. *Le Grand Voyage* – the working title for the draft of a novel that is presented in conjunction with this exegesis – is a fictional work that is produced out of the implications of displacement, which inscribes itself in a series of explorations I started in 2001, cumulating with two video works *Frammento* in 2003 and *Footnotes* in 2004. *Le Grand Voyage* investigates further the concept of home by questioning the home/mother relationship.

This exegesis aims to contextualise the making of *Le Grand Voyage* by using another woman's narrative as the main point of reference: Linda Olsson's *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* (2005). Olsson's work – like mine – is conceived out of the effects of displacement, and the literary form and structure display symptoms that are characteristics to narratives of displacement. By putting the home/mother/daughter in context, the narrative displays home as a patriarchal construct showing how the idealisation of home/place is predicated on a gendering of home, whereby, as McDermott notes, 'home is constructed as a maternal, static and past, to which the (male) subjects longs to return' (2003: 265). The narrative's point of view is that of daughters but also that of mothers as daughters, and enables not only a feminist discussion of the notion of home but also of motherhood.

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home that still prevails in academic literature and fiction. Thus, an important part of this exegesis concentrates on the critic of home. I want to argue in a feminist way that our ideas of home and belonging still reflect gendered assumptions and are therefore contestable. That displacement as a catalyst for loss, emotional grief and mourning becomes an enabling way for women to rethink home in terms of what was at play rather than in place and to do the 'memory work' that feminists ask women to do: to remember in order not to forget because 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change' (Greene, 1991: 298). Their attacks on the feminisation of place have opened up for me possibilities to think of home outside the parameters of sameness. They have also enabled me to understand the paradoxical position a displaced person is faced with: if displacement is favored and privileged why then do longings for home still persist for some? – a fact that is well illustrated in the actual resurgence of the preoccupation to belong.

The gain in displacement also involves the fact that distance forces one to look at the longing and nostalgia for what they really conceal. In the case of a woman and, motherless daughters, distance, as this exegesis demonstrates, enables the writer to unveil the longings as subversive and fraudulent, tricking women into thinking there was nothing better than the past: home sweet home, the safe, bounded nest where women could be women: could be the mother. With the 'memory work' they both learn to think away from the parameters of sameness and the past, outside the nostalgic stances of singularity, safety, boundaries and internalised histories, therefore outside of the maternal, the home/mother relationship.

'What is home?' is a difficult question to negotiate for a woman. This exegesis shows what is at stake when one asks the question and the responsibility of women when writing about home.

# EXEGESIS

## A cautionary but necessary foreword

In this work I have aligned myself with recent debates that have pointed out the need to be linguistically responsible on the part of those who reflect on their life as they are shaped by globalisation especially in the use of terms such as 'displacement' and 'exile'. In particular, I think of the texts by Chris Abani: 'Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self', Rudolphus Teeuwen: 'Fading into Metaphor: Globalisation and the Disappearance of Exile' (which refers to Ian Buruma's 'The Romance of Exile') and Michael Hanne's editorial foreword to *Creativity in Exile*, (published in 2004 after the conference *The Poetics of Exile* that Michael Hanne organised with the University of Auckland in July 2003) in which these articles appear.

The idea that 'everyone is an exile' (Teeuwen, 2004: 284) has gained currency and is a notion Teeuwen deplores and resists. With Buruma, Teeuwen believes that postcolonial and postmodern critics such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, among other 'postcolonial intellectuals who are perfectly at home in their adopted North America or Western Europe' (2004: 291), have contributed to the shifting of the term from its original meaning to a 'metaphorical and literary state of exile' (2004: 292) that forgets and dilutes the real suffering in the experience of banishment, expulsion and definite exclusion from one's place of birth. 'And whereas actual exile is a prohibition of travelling back rather than an allowance to travel, metaphorical exile brings no travel restrictions at all' (2004: 292).

From the worst punishment that could be inflicted upon a person, the kind of psychic and social death Dante's expressed in his *Inferno* after his expulsion from Florence in the 1300s, to 'a mark of prestige when applied to Europeans fleeing Nazism and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe' (Hanne, 2004: 281), to a place of contestation for the intellectuals of the globalised world, the symbolic meaning of exile keeps evolving with time. The labour of making distinctions, of folding and unfolding definitions underneath the same appellation gives to some the possibility of claiming exile as a right while for



others exile is nothing else but a fate and a curse. Under the terms 'exile' and 'displacement' we explain the angst of the 'global soul' (Teeuwen, 2004: 290) lost in the corridors of airports, the life of expatriates struggling to adapt in a new country or the fate of the Afghans and Iraqis waiting in the 'Jungle of Calais'<sup>2</sup> for illegal transfer from France to England. Positions abound, extremes are aberrant but the words we use still remain the same. This is what Buruma and Teeuwen reminds us of with their call for linguistic responsibility. In using the same word to explain such extreme and different conditions, the slippage in meaning has already had unfortunate consequences in the way immigration policies are now written. The most recent example occurs in the changes in the United Nations Convention on Refugees, whereby, as Teeuwen notes the term 'refugee' reflecting a legal status and conferring the right of protection, is under pressure as the term 'refugee' is threatened by dissolution into the term 'migrant', 'a term without recognised legal status ... Migrant: a word that prays that those who come will go again' (2004: 293).

This exegesis is not a work that explains the exilic condition or speaks about the different positions the term encompasses, but since displacement is used in the context of exile and my position here in New Zealand is one of a migrant, then I have no other choice but to use the word 'displacement'. I think Teeuwen and Buruma make an important call to us migrant students who use these words so easily and read a plethora of texts that tend to glorify the effects of displacement, transforming it into a position of strength and contestation. I wish for other words to speak about my 'displacement' because in this exegesis I argue that 'displacement' offers a position of strength for women, which enables them to rethink the idea of home outside the patriarchal boundaries. In fact 'displacement' and 'exile' are terms feminist have often referred to express their own position of estrangement in a gendered, constructed world: the 'other' of the patriarchal hierarchy. Indeed I wish for other words and want to reaffirm that I understand exile not as a right but as a fate, not as condition we choose but as a condition that is imposed on one. Not dismissing the pain, loss and isolation I have undergone in embracing my new life in New Zealand, still my displacement falls into the category of 'metaphorical exile', in Teeuwen's terms, with no restrictions on travelling. Even if going back to France after twenty-three years of absence would seem fairly impossible emotionally, it is not impossible.

So a linguistic awareness is necessary when I look at other narratives of exile and use them as sources of inspiration to explain my work. On looking back now, most writers I have consulted in the past and which are here referred to, are all living in a 'metaphorical and literary state of exile'.

Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*<sup>3</sup> (1991) was a book I came across by chance ten years ago and the one that started me on a search that continues today. Hoffman's autobiography was such a sharp account of all the stages one goes through in the process of creating a new sense of self in a new place that it stayed on my bedside table for years. It became a source of inspiration for many of my texts and video works although our journeys as well as our types of displacement are very different. This account as well as her recent writings in *Letter of Transit* edited by Andre Aciman, makes clear what, in the words of Hanne, attracted so many writers 'to embrace the intellectual stance of the metaphorical exile' (2004: 5).

The attraction is the *double vision* that results from mental travelling and dislocation – geographical, of the place left behind and the new place, as well as temporal: an excess of memory constantly fracturing the present tense. This double vision is seen by most writers as a privileged perspective – to recall Edward Said (Teuuwen, 2004: 295) – since it enables one to see with the eyes of both an insider and outsider<sup>4</sup>. Finally there is the inevitable longing as an analgesic for the loss, but in the case of the 'metaphorical exile' it is a metaphorical longing: 'the longing of one suffering an existential fate for an exceptional fate' (Teuuwen, 2004: 296). Indeed, an existential fate with its justifiable pains but not the fate of the forced exile.

For Hanne, in this way, Hoffman becomes one of these writers who contribute to 'dilute the suffering it [exile] denotes by metaphorical continuation' (Teuuwen, 2004: 297). So it is with this awareness that I use the word 'displacement' for my own position and that of Linda Olsson – the fiction writer I have focused on in this exegesis – with the understanding that my displacement is only a replacement by choice that I can alter at anytime with free will. Until I find new words that show I do not share the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers although I identify metaphorically with some of their loss. Until I find new words

that take me out of a dialogue that uses exile to such a stretched extent that one can see it as a claim, as a right.

## Introduction

For most writers who are displaced, rewriting themselves, articulating and communicating their sense of estrangement is their lifetime work. For displacement forces one to leave behind the familiar and embrace the unknown. In this process of deconstruction, the concepts of home, belonging and identity are renegotiated and questioned constantly. *Le Grand Voyage* – the working title for the draft of a novel that is presented in conjunction with this exegesis – is a fictional work that is produced out of the implications of displacement, which inscribes itself in a series of explorations I started in 2001.

*Frammento* in 2003 – a video installation – engaged poetically with spatial and temporal fragmentation of identity experienced in homesickness through displacement, and pictured home as a definite place locked in time, whilst ‘What is home?’ was the question I asked in 2004 with *Footnotes*, a documentary-style video. Sixty random passersby on Karangahape Road in Auckland gave personal and intimate answers that posited home at the intersection between personal and social relations, and between place and time. The smell of freshly cut grass on Sunday morning, of a mother’s cooking, a particular light on the dining table, and childhood memories were often shared with intense emotion. These testimonies were mostly nostalgic views of home that reiterated the idea of nurturing and safety in the woman’s place where childhood memories crystallised themselves into a ‘mythic realm’<sup>5</sup>. Both works, *Frammento* and *Footnotes*, complicated the notion of home with one locked in the past, concealed forever, and the other, also holding on to the past, mythically remembered.

*Le Grand Voyage* investigates further the concept of home by questioning the home/mother relationship. We all have in memories emblematic scenes of the return home to ‘mama’ – particularly as this emblem is propagated through popular fictions and films. Who has not shed a tear when Forrest Gump, coming back home after the Vietnam War, says, ‘I’m home, Mama!’ and his mother, kissing him on the cheeks, says, ‘I know’, as if his return to his mama/home had been a given from the start. And what about Francesca in *The Bridges of Madison County*, based on Robert James Waller’s novel, who makes the

ultimate sacrifice for her home, husband and children when she decides to stay home rather than follow Robert, the love of her life. She tells Robert: 'When a woman makes a choice to marry and have children, in a way her life begins and in another way it stops. You just stop and stay steady so that your children can move on. Even as they grow up and leave, taking your life of details with them.' The stoic Francesca betraying a part of herself has made many women cry. Even if she represents the image of the 1960s, I think women of today still cry with Francesca because they can sense that women like her still lie dormant within themselves, with a view of their home, their role as the woman of the house, the mother of their children and the wife/lover of their husband still answering to a dominant concept of home.

Since first-wave feminist consciousness from the Suffrage movement was established in the UK at the turn of the twentieth century countless women scholars and writers have argued against or for the home-mother relationship. Those against have aligned homemaking and the domestic space with confinement and oppression, the home being a prison to escape from rather than a sanctuary. Indeed, in challenging the dominant form of gender constructions and relations, feminism has empowered many women to leave home in order to shape their own version of identity. I believe it is within the perspective of displacement, of being out of place, that many women continue to find the necessary distance to contest a particular reading of woman and home that still prevails in academic literature and fiction. Part two of this exegesis concentrates on the critic of home. I want to argue in a feminist way that our ideas of home and belonging still reflect gendered assumptions and are therefore contestable. That displacement as a catalyst for loss, emotional grief and mourning becomes an enabling way for women to rethink home in terms of what was at play rather than in place and to do the 'memory work' that feminists ask women to do: to remember in order not to forget because 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change' (Greene, 1991: 298). So, to this effect, my theoretical approach has encompassed feminists who have particularly focused their research on space, place and gender such as Doreen Massey, Gayle Greene, Caren Kaplan, Lynne Pearce, Sinead McDermott, Marianne Hirsch, and Roberta Rubinstein. Their attacks on the feminisation of place have opened up for me possibilities to think of home outside the parameters of sameness. They

have also enabled me to understand the paradoxical position a displaced person is faced with: if displacement is favored and privileged why then do longings for home still persist for some? – a fact that is well illustrated in the actual resurgence of the preoccupation to belong. Indeed longing to belong and searching for ‘that place called home’<sup>6</sup> is one of the most recurrent themes in recent literature, theory, symposiums, conferences, and bienniales – a paradox in these times that thrive on movement.<sup>7</sup>

Fiction in process is fragile! And *Le Grand Voyage* is far from being finished. Even if a first draft or part of it is submitted for this examination this year, this version will definitely be the first one of many that will see the story shape itself in ways I may not envisage right now. However the recurrent theme is the critique of home as the ideal place of nurturing, and the call for women to revise - I believe - their still outdated versions of themselves and of home so as to not repeat and recreate the home of their mothers. This home-mother relationship is the conceptual enquiry that runs throughout *Le Grand Voyage*. For the main character Agnès who is a writer, loss is experienced through displacement, old age and her sudden impotency to write. It is in this context that Agnès starts a search into the past, the ‘memory work’ that will give her the keys to understand her motivations for leaving home in the first place. Home, that is, a place to escape rather than stay, a place where mother and the other women before Agnès had difficulties in negotiating their lives and their personal desires within the patriarchal system that was framing their identity. Therefore this work is also a critique of the type of motherhood that somehow fails daughters. The pains felt in displacement open up the confrontation of the past and the possibility for change. Healing is the gain in displacement for Agnès and the hope this novel tries to convey.

In my research through fiction I have systematically read women’s narratives of displacement that have put home/mother/daughter and the effects of displacement in context. Writers like Eva Hoffman, Isabel Huggan, Doris Lessing, Kapka Kassabova and, recently, Basia Bonkowski have supported and inspired the making of *Le Grand Voyage*. Yet the most poignant revelation of this year has been reading Linda Olsson’s *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*. In fact, the friend who proofread last year’s first chapters of *Le Grand Voyage*

recommended it to me. She had found in these few chapters uncanny resemblances to Olsson's work in themes, concerns and literary structure. Hence I read Olsson's book; and meeting with Linda Olsson<sup>8</sup> on a few occasions and interviewing her for the purpose of his exegesis, I was convinced by the centrality of her work to mine. Therefore I decided to investigate Olsson's work intensely rather than diluting my research with the different examples I nominated previously. The rigorous analysis I conducted here reflects the position I took in my own work without revealing its content. That is, I believe that completely deflowering *Le Grand Voyage* before it is finished has the potential to kill it, and so I found more fitting to speak about Olsson's work rather than my own at this stage. So the reading I offer here can be seen 'as if' it was explaining my own work. This reliance on Olsson's work does not mean that *Le Grand Voyage* is a copy of hers or has been written under the influence of Olsson's work, but means that, for the purpose of this exegesis, Olsson's work perfectly and successfully addresses the many key issues I have tackled. It means that on reading this exegesis one will be able to pick up the contextual and conceptual threads I highlighted in Olsson's work and apply them to my own. Therefore only when appropriate will direct references to my own draft be made explicit but these will remain minimal as I am still in the process of writing.

Like mine, Olsson's is a work conceived out of the effects of displacement, and the literary form and structure display symptoms that are characteristics to narratives of displacement. Set in Olsson's native land, Sweden, the dramatic plot intertwines the two stories of Astrid and Veronika: two women of different generations with two very different concepts of home. Astrid never left her home, the place where she grew up in Sweden, and Veronika has always lived a life of transience. They both meet when Veronika decides to return to Sweden to heal after the loss she suffered with her partner's sudden death in New Zealand. The meeting of these two women enables them to unpack the past, to search memories, to do the feminist 'memory work' that enables them both to understand the long-lasting effect of a motherless childhood. The narrative displays home as a patriarchal construct showing how the idealisation of home/place is predicated on a gendering of home, whereby, as McDermott notes, 'home is constructed as a maternal, static and past, to which the (male) subjects longs to return' (2003: 265). The point of view is that of daughters but

also that of mothers as daughters, and enables not only a feminist discussion of the notion of home but also of motherhood. Finally, the two protagonists take on the role of surrogate mother for each other as a substitute for their personal loss. The novel shows what is at stake when thinking about what home is, and opens up possibilities of alternative ways of belonging.



## **Part 1: *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*: the work of displacement**

The sense of ourselves has always been located [...] in the idea of roots, the idea of coming from a place, the idea of inhabiting a kind of language which you have in common and the kind of social convention within which you live. And then what happens to the migrants is that they lose all three [...] and they find themselves in a new place, a new language. And so they have to reinvent a sense of self [...] (Rushdie, 1987: 63).

### **1. Displaced writers: Veronika Bergman, character and Linda Olsson, author**

After twenty-three years away from Sweden, with regular trips back to visit family and friends, four years travelling around the world and the nineteen years to settle comfortably in New Zealand, one could assume that Olsson has resolved her life of transience and resumed a life as a reformed displaced writer. But after reading *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, I was not surprised to hear her reply when I asked her: 'Where is home for you?'

'I don't feel at home here [Auckland], not at all. [...] I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to go back to where you came from. I can't do that so where can I go? [...] I think I belong in Europe. [...] When I go back [to Sweden] I feel like a tourist. I see the good things and I see the bad things clearly like being a tourist' (L. Olsson, personal communication, 14 November 2008).

The disengagement with both places, a feeling of in-betweenness, is what Veronika suffers from, and Olsson chooses to introduce this character to the reader in these terms from the very beginning of the book. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* starts with Veronika's arrival in the middle of a cold winter night in Sweden. This is presented to the reader as an arrival, not as a return to her natal country or even a return home. Veronika is too disoriented for naming any place 'home', and even if her name, Veronika Bergman, mentioned in the first chapter, is a clue to her Swedish origins, it is not until later in the novel, through the re-telling of the past, that it becomes evident the story involves a return of some kind. This is the journey Veronika must make to re-invest her emotional

self with a sense of belonging, and to discover, with Astrid's help, what constitutes the sense of home for her. Her journey will question whether or not place and origin have any relevance to the idea of home. For now it is another stop among the many she has made in her life, 'unpacking in unfamiliar places, making a home wherever a certain journey ended' (Olsson, 2005: 10), yet a different stop since it comes after the loss of her fiancé.

The idea of being at home nowhere and everywhere simultaneously is rendered throughout the novel with, on the one hand, some great understanding of places through detailed landscape descriptions and analyses of people, and appreciation of social behaviours particular to those places. This is a trait that demonstrates the trained eye of the displaced person who sees things through difference like an 'amateur anthropologist'<sup>9</sup> (Kreisler, 5 October 2000: interviewing Eva Hoffman), and is a position that, on the other hand, constantly reminds her of not belonging anywhere. In Japan, although she slips into a familiar routine in no time, she can't help but notice her alienation from her surroundings: 'Cocooned in conjoined bubbles, bobbing along in the crowd, but not belonging. Together in an alien world, but solitary' (Olsson, 2005: 203). The same for New Zealand where, although she manages to adjust comfortably in the first days of her arrival to the space and the generous atmosphere, she is also acutely aware of her foreignness: suddenly James looks different than when she met him in London because of the way he walks, 'as if each step he took landed on a spot perfectly fitted for it' (Olsson, 2005: 144).

And so it is with good reason that Olsson situates Veronika in a rented house in Sweden, that she isolates her from the community and makes her dependant on her only neighbour, the old village witch<sup>10</sup>. It is in this vacant place that keeps 'its distance' from her and makes her feel as 'an orphan tenant in an orphan house' (Olsson, 2005: 12) that healing will take place. It is in this empty space needing to be filled that Veronika will understand why she still feels like an orphan in this world at thirty years old – the empty space also mirrored by the empty pages of her book she cannot manage to write: both represent the potential for recovery and belonging. And indeed Sweden (place) and Astrid (the surrogate mother) will give her an opportunity to rewrite the past in the form of a novel and start anew. The last pages the reader reads are Veronika's news

of having finished her book entitled: *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*<sup>11</sup> (Olsson, 2005: 253) in memory of Astrid. A stratagem that blurs the boundaries between fiction/reality and author/character is confirmed when one remembers that Linda Olsson dedicated this book to Anna-Lisa, her grandmother. One could assume there is a certain emotional entanglement occurring in the development of Veronika's character that enables Olsson to pose her own questions as if they are Veronika's. Before I even read Olsson's book, I went to her website. The piece she wrote about her grandmother gave me a sense of urgency about reading her fiction as I too desired to dedicate my story to my grandmother, as a way of giving to women of that generation a chance for healing their long wait. It was in response to this piece that I got in touch with Olsson. After interviewing her I realised the coincidences that had to do with our similar backgrounds, upbringings and journeys – this was certainly the reason why I found the study of her work so relevant for my own work. The relationship Veronika cultivates through the process of writing is also symptomatic of the displaced writer. She wrestles with the negative effects of distance functioning as magnifier<sup>12</sup> where past memories are constantly erupting into the present. It is her decentred position that pushes her to revisit the past in order to find a coherent self. Inside her house, she looks out the window at the vast sky: at the outside, a non-place that reflects the complete disconnectedness between her body and place, 'suspended between two worlds, belonging to neither' (Olsson, 2005: 26). Later when we read the 'Author's notes'<sup>13</sup> on page 257 of her book, here again, we are confounded with the similarity of text between author and character. Olsson claims that loss generated through distance was the necessary ingredient for writing this novel, not only geographical distance but distance from her native language, a common thread in displaced testimonies.<sup>14</sup>

'Suspended between two worlds, belonging to neither' is what Andre Aciman in his editorial forward to *Letters of Transit* (1999: 13) refers to when speaking about the idea of double<sup>15</sup> or the double vision. This is the most pernicious symptom of displacement and is characteristic of the narratives of exile. It is as if one was looking at life through a double lens, constantly evaluating at the same time the two sides of a fold for their difference and similarities. In leaving behind a place, the immigrant compares the old life against the new one, the country of birth against the new place of residence, the two languages and sets

of values, and social conditions, frequently leading to a questioning of origin and a sense of self. As a result, most of these narratives structurally intertwine two spatial and two temporal paradigms: the place of origin versus the place of exile, the past versus the present. Hence a mirroring effect is often deployed to reveal the two spaces. One side of the story reflects the other, and the plot builds up through the gaps, setting a rhythmic cadence of back and forth between the two sides. It is on the dividing line that the writer stands. Edward Said calls this position a 'median state' (1994: 36); Eva Hoffman refers to it as a 'psychic split' (1999: 52); I call it a 'vantage point', from whence temporal, geographical and emotional spaces are translated in a language imbued with feelings of loss and longings. These feelings are the result of a state of lack the person is often forced into – a nostalgia we will see in the second part that needs to be contested in order to rethink home outside the parameters of a patriarchal system. On the other hand, a gain manifests too since distance sharpens one's sight, the writer being completely at one with neither side, which some see in a positive angle as a source of creativity. Part two of this exegesis demonstrates that distance can be empowering for women, enabling them to heal by transforming disabling fictions into enabling fictions.

Displacement is an impetus for creativity is what Veronika proves to us when she finishes her novel within the course of Olsson's novel. Here, to Astrid, she speaks about her first novel titled *Single, One Way, No Luggage*:

I think I wrote this book because I wanted to understand the process of travel. The reasons for travel. How journeys affect those who travel. What separates those who do from those who don't? [...] I have travelled almost all my life (Olsson, 2005: 50).

And also later:

Yes, you see, I went to New Zealand thinking I would pick up more or less where my last book finished. Thinking I would write a book about place, about home. About love, and how love can give a sense of belonging (Olsson, 2005: 162).

It is also the fate of Olsson to benefit from the exposures of displacement. A year after the publication of her first book, she published a second one: *Sonata*

*for Miriam* (2008), which is again a narrative created in response to the pressure of displacement and has similar themes to *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*. And, during the interview, Olsson told me that she is in the process of writing her third novel. Numerous displaced writers have questioned the relationship between creative/intellectual output and displacement and wondered if this output was a direct outcome of displacement or only a coincidence. I think of Doris Lessing for instance or Hélène Cixous, whose introductory chapter of 'My Algérie' is a celebration of her exile<sup>16</sup>, and, among the present figures on the New Zealand literary scene, Kapka Kassabova, who acknowledges that even if the idea of exile is painful, it can also be channeled in a positive way and become an impetus for creativity.<sup>17</sup>

The creative output is what Chris Abani denounces as having placed an undesired value on the situation of exile and displacement: 'Am I a writer because I am in exile, or a writer in exile?' For Abani, this question of creativity output and identity construction as the reward of exile underpins a misconception of creativity in exile: 'it is not an imaginary predicament, but a real constrictive aspect of the liminal limbo of exile.'<sup>18</sup> (Abani, 2004: 25) In this exegesis the displacement I speak about bears no resemblance to the one Abani evokes – as mentioned in the necessary foreward. This is why I still want to prove it is a gain rather than a loss. It is gain for Veronika, the writer, the woman, the daughter, as I would hope for Olsson, the writer, the woman, the mother, the daughter.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. Symptoms of displacement in the literary and dramatic structure**

With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing – or looking for – another behind it. Everything bears two faces (Aciman, 1999: 13).

### *The idea of the double: the mirroring effect*

As a consequence of seeing double, the novel takes the shape of a double helix, intertwining the events and actions around the axis of Veronika and Astrid's friendship, thus creating a mirroring effect in the narrative structure.

The reoccurring metaphor of the mirror is also a device to trigger new developments in the plot, whereby it creates a system of reflections on which action is dependent – what one side reflects of the other provokes action on the other side. The personal stories of the past intruding in the present are triggered by present situations. But they become guiding tales whereby either one of the characters can find the key to resolve the present and move on to the next rising point. This creates a gentle flow that does not impose resolution, judge events or force upon the characters authoritative answers but guides them with through the series of clues the reflections offer. This is a similar approach to therapy and no doubt the development of their relationship has a cathartic effect for both of them since, at the end of the novel, they both manage to rethink the concept of home in different terms.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of the double enables binary oppositions to emerge strongly inside a narrative. Here, as well as in *Le Grand Voyage*, they are at work against each other in the structure of the story: fixity versus mobility, sedentariness versus transience, young age versus old age, inside versus outside, as well as themes more central to the problematic of home such as location/dislocation, belonging/marginalisation, space/place, local/global, homeland/the other, alienation and identity. But there are also binaries that are gendered: men/women, women/the other, woman/mother, woman/lover, mother/daughter, father/daughter and especially woman/home – binaries that are important when thinking of the feminisation of space that feminist theories have critiqued.

### *The layering of voices*

We have two women characters. Astrid and Veronika, appearing as two sides of a coin: Astrid is old, near her death and exemplary for her sedentary state, while Veronika, on the other side, is in her thirties and caught in a cycle of transience. Both also represent different generations of women with differing views on matters of gender and female notions of home. The third voice in the novel is a third-person omniscient narrator who observes and describes the situation and its developments, giving the reader information about the thoughts and feeling of the characters. Chapters alternate between the two women's vivid and natural voices, either dialoguing with each other or being granted a chapter to tell their own stories in the first person. When this last happens

chapters are titled with the character's name, so we know who is speaking behind the 'I'.<sup>21</sup> Although this framing device helps the reader to distinguish the different points of view, the three voices at times seem to form the multi-faceted parts of one voice, as if the three voices were acting as the plurality of the author's self, mirroring a fractured self through displacement: each of them in unison searching, giving different perspectives and solutions to the different ways in which home is remembered, imagined, re-created for those who experience continuous displacement. And it is out of the character's individual responses that grow contesting notions of what is home. It is not surprising then that a house is at the centre of this novel; at times it has a voice of its own. But, again, the idea of the double splits the vision. There is never one answer to one question, and here we have two houses: one filled, one to be filled. The mirroring of these two houses in each other enables Olsson to display different possibilities in which place can be spoken about and bodies can develop inside particular places.<sup>22</sup>

The story is set against the vastness of landscape and takes part in isolation from the community that constrains the two characters in a tight milieu as in a chamber story, that is, a story akin to chamber music where simplicity and clearness of expression are achieved through a paring down of any superfluous notes. This is a strategy whereby a chamber situation enables focus on a sole character's interiority, which makes the resolution of scenes very intense as if the setting was metaphorical of the soul, reflecting the 'landscape of the soul'.<sup>23</sup> Here, each house reflects the emotional state of each woman and the changes they go through. At the end of the story, Astrid can declare that her house is in order, meaning her emotional life.<sup>24</sup> The field that separates the two houses is the symbolic threshold that, once crossed, sets in motion a series of developments until, at the end, when there is no longer the need to cross it, Astrid gives Veronika her home – a home. She is no more an orphan tenant, in an orphan house, as she felt when she arrived.<sup>25</sup>

#### *A fragmented narrative*<sup>26</sup>

Because displacement implies loss at the start, the process of reconstruction often calls upon personal memory in search of answers. 'An excess of memory' (Hoffman, 1999: 52) or 'memories perpetually on overload' (Aciman, 1999: 19)

is an obvious condition in the novel. Out of the thirty-seven chapters, thirteen are set in the past (Fig.1). In fact, without the past there would be no story but the past here is not a backstory. It is the story necessary for the present one to move forward. Past and present are completely indispensable for the understanding of the story and beneficial in enabling both characters to understand that home can be thought of differently. Here, the fragmentation that shies away from the straightforward and more common closed-narrative mode is essential to support the plot and motivations of the characters. Indeed, the path that separates both house is a threshold that separates them spatially but also temporarily for when one character visit the other, it becomes often the pretext to commemorate the past. While in each other's presence, they find the triggers that transport them back into the past.<sup>27</sup> An exilic memory does not operate in the same way as history explains events in term of linear and chronological sequentiality. Olsson is completely aware of this as a displaced writer. I suggest as a woman she would be also aware of this temporal fragmentation used as a device by other woman writers. As Gayle Greene (1991: 293) conveys in her work on feminist fiction and memory, the common thread in women's fiction is fragmented narratives: a very powerful tool in feminist terms.<sup>28</sup> Reference to the unreliable past, the persistence of memory and to the randomness of flashbacks are made constantly within the story. It is so important for Olsson that she even dedicates a full chapter (11) to allowing Veronika to speak about time and memory.

‘Time. I don’t understand it,’ Veronika said. ‘I think I have never grasped the essence of time. Memories seem to surface in no particular order, with no time attached. Yesterday can seem as distant as last year. [...] My life now consists of fragments,’ she said, ‘where some are so blinding in their intensity that they make everything else indistinguishable. What shall I do with these glittering shards? There is no pattern; I can’t make them fit’ (Olsson, 2005: 83–84).

This is a passage that inscribes itself with the same verve that other exilic writers deploy to relate memory as a painful burden: the ‘glittering shards’ of Veronika echoes with the ‘shards of a mirror’ in Salman Rushdie (Barat, 2004: 219).



Finally, the fact that the present tense becomes the chosen tense for the last six chapters of the novel as a consequence of a turning point in the storyline confirms a belief that once loss has been repaired the return to the past can be acknowledged as a moving forward – in the feminist sense. There is definitely in the composition of the novel an allocation of trauma as a major part of the storyline. Through a systematic movement of back and forth between present and past, the desire to speak about some kind of recovery from trauma manifests. Some chapters are surprisingly short, as if their sole purpose was to make a quick break into the past. One could consider these chapters as coma: the past as a coma giving access to the present. The evocativeness of some of the remembrances – the ‘I’ monologues – is so powerful that for the length of these chapters the reader literally loses track of time and space. The return to the present can be an abrupt fall. And yet, this fall is authentic to the experience that conditions displacement via nostalgia coupled with facing the past differently as a process of healing (from the original trauma).

### *The cyclic return*

Lastly, and also symptomatic of displaced narratives, is the loop back at the end of the story to its very beginning, as if the composition was mirroring a metaphorical return: the desire for the return home. The feminist perspective on place (Part two) will demonstrate that this desire has nothing to do with place as it was but with the realisation that a new place for women can be created outside of the maternal belonging, the home of our childhood. The cyclic return joins the two sides, the double made one that makes change obvious. So the storyline flows with the seasons: a timid beginning with a freezing March that announces death in the eyes of Astrid more than birth – indeed it is the death of an old life.<sup>29</sup> Springtime sees Astrid and Veronika’s friendship blossoming, then trauma is unraveled during Midsummer’s Eve, the shortest night of the year. The turning point takes place in the midst of summer on Veronika’s birthday – the day that Astrid decides to call her ‘birth’ day too as she recognises the day as signaling her new birth. Then follows a logical sequel, with the acknowledgement of recovery in autumn: a season that Astrid considers as the beginning not the end of the year: a time marking the death of the old.<sup>30</sup> This is what the novel celebrates: the end of a time for the generation of women Astrid represents. Veronika packs her bags and leaves on the first of November – a

year after she had arrived in Stockholm from New Zealand. In the last chapter Veronika spends with Astrid, on the day before her departure, they repeat the same walk they did at the beginning of their friendship, although this time the surroundings are experienced more positively with recovered sight. Finally the loop is made: Veronika takes possession of Astrid's house in March: 'It was March. Just like the first time.' But the March of her second arrival reveals a healed woman through less harsh surroundings. It is not a freezing cold winter night that welcomes her new arrival but an evening 'clear and mild [...] spring was early: there was no ice on the lake [...]' (Olsson, 2005: 239). This return makes a whole cycle from March to March, from death to rebirth, from departure to return, from fragmentation to wholeness, but also from child to maturity, whereby these two women had needed to face and heal the child within to enable a second birth.

For this birth to happen, for a new consciousness in a feminist sense to be gained, Veronika and Astrid need to go back into the past to understand how home has been conceptualised within the patriarchal system as a place that cannot be thought outside the maternal, safe and nurturing, which are in effect located in the past. Once they can see this concept for what it is, the characters can both make a 'home' on other terms than the traditional, by creating a sense of belonging elsewhere. Initially they have had to deconstruct a concept in order to successfully reconstruct home on their own terms.

## Part 2: On deconstructing 'that place called home'<sup>31</sup>

### 1. Criticising the feminisation of place/home: A feminist perspective

No, I'm from France.

'So far away!'

The answer is like a well-lived sentence, a stain that has spread over me since I left Paris.

'What a beautiful place! So much history, hey!'

'Why so far?' my father said with tears in his eyes when I was packing my boxes.

'Of all the places, dear! Why New Zealand? Don't you miss home?'

Oh! The dreaded questions!

(*Le Grand Voyage*, p.31)

There is not one week that goes by without me having to answer the question: Where are you from? Often followed by the usual: How long have you been here? – meaning away from 'home'. And probably followed by: Don't you miss your family? Why did you come here? And, finally: Where is home for you? After so many years of diligently retelling my stories, I am sometimes lost for words as to how I should answer in a few sentences the multiple ways in which I feel at home and not home in this world.

When it comes to home, place and location are often our first thoughts followed by thoughts of family ties and the community that keep us emotionally connected to that place. Hence the retelling of childhood memories or the evocation of anything that connects a place to specific and significant memories and traditions, rituals, olfactive traces and other sensuous triggers. The fact is that when we begin to speak about place or consider what it might be, we are presented with as many difficulties as Aristotle observed in ancient Greece.<sup>32</sup> But if for Aristotle the difficulties presented themselves because he had 'inherited nothing from previous thinkers', for us the challenge lies in finding which answer as to what place is to choose from the huge array of literature that covers this topic. In fact who has not tried to answer the question 'What is place'? What most people agree on, and what interests me for the purpose of this exegesis, is that 'place is socially constructed, and that this construction is about power' (Sarup, 1996: 4). From this angle, one cannot ignore issues of

gender, class and race in the construction of place, and consequently one understands the concept of home in a way contingent upon their definitions and on the way culture frames both place and the individual living inside it.

Indeed the question 'Where are you from?' asks me to rethink home – the place I had left behind once – in terms of the individual voices working with and against each other inside the walls of my house. Who they were and how they negotiated between personal desires and deeply embedded cultural beliefs of gender and class constructions were the keys to my education. In thinking through displacement, I have questioned the origins of departure, in just the same way Veronika does and Linda Olsson does through her protagonist. In the long archaeological digging through memory that displacement forces one to do, I came to understand the boundaries and models I wanted to escape, as Caren Kaplan in her article 'Deterritorializations' (1987/2001) suggests:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. What we gain is a reterritorialization; we reinhabit a world of our making (here "our" is expanded to a coalition of identities – neither universal nor particular). [...] Moving away from "home" to deconstruct the terms of social privilege and power, such a feminist practice favors the process of the move over the ultimate goal. The uncertainty of this situation is preferable [...] to the sensation of being homesick while at "home" (pp. 195–196).

The importance and growth of feminist theory has been considerable since its early beginnings at the turn of the 1900s, and the many views and positions feminists took made their discourse split into different strands. What most have agreed on – except for recent voices particular to the third-wave feminists, for example Judith Butler<sup>33</sup>, – is that gender is culturally constructed and not a biological given in comparison to sexual difference between male and female. Therefore gender inequality is the outcome of a system<sup>34</sup> that privileged one gender over the other and organised society consequent to that. Hence, for the feminist movement, oppression of women is a cultural phenomenon reflecting

male dominance – capitalism and patriarchy being articulated together to accommodate each other in different ways.

From this perspective, place and home represents a core issue for feminist discourses: home being the first place from which to critique and contest the patriarchal system. With ‘the personal is political’ as their main slogan, second-wave feminist activists politicised home and deconstructed ‘the myth of home as a place of safety by exposing the realities of domestic violence and patriarchal power structures within the home’ as McDermott notes in her essay ‘Maternal belongings and the “question of home”’ (2003: 266). These feminists exposed how gendering automatically associated place/home with the idea of nurturing – home being the mother/natal/woman’s place – which easily led to nationalistic discourses linking ‘authentic origins with ties of blood’ (McDermott, 2003: 264); and how, in the face of industrialisation, the mobility of women unsettled the patriarchal system as many women found in the big city an escape from domesticity (as was London for the *Mrs. Dalloway* of Virginia Woolf).

‘Keeping track of women’ is Doreen Massey’s description of the male’s desire to ‘fix place’ and stabilise ‘identity in place’ (1994: 11). Hence place becomes constructed as a static entity locked in the past, a time that is longed for, the site of nostalgia: the ‘lost mother’ for a male subject. One only needs to recall geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s introductory chapter on *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* (1977: 3): ‘Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home.’ Or philosopher Gaston Bachelard whose lyrical and philosophical prose in the *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994) described the house in terms of the maternal, the natural, the nurturing, the safe, the enclosed.<sup>35</sup> And Edward Relph, in *Place and Placeness*, who calls on notions of existential insideness when saying ‘places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world’ (1976: 141). A gendered narrative, in the words of McDermott or Massey, that has contributed to the ‘feminisation of place’ is problematically conceived since ‘it serves to idealise and universalise the comforts of home; it uses the figure of woman in a symbolic fashion while ignoring the material/discursive experiences of actual women; and it maps back

onto a nostalgic desire for the lost mother, which renders both mother and place as opaque, unknowable Others' (McDermott, 2003: 265).

A problematic issue at the core of recent discourse for geographer Doreen Massey who wonders in *Space, Place and Gender*<sup>36</sup> (1994) why, in this times of globalisation, postmodern criticism still persists with associations such as home and place with longing, nostalgia and stasis or as McDermott also deplores: why is theory still plagued with "retrograde" desires for safety and belonging, particularly in an era of widespread dislocations?' (2003: 263). Massey suggests that this persistence is in fact tactical and reflects the pervasiveness of a patriarchal system that is embedded in our thinking and is never fully deconstructed. So much so that Massey believes some recent post-colonial theories unfortunately are symptomatic of this discourse, and rather than fighting against these retrograde desires only contribute to reinforce them. Hence the resurgence of nationalism, regionalism and localism in recent years, with the belief in identity of place as the result of 'internalised history' (Massey, 1994: 169), which in turns confirms the need for boundaries, protectiveness, and asserting the local against the global. Instead, Massey calls for a much more open discussion whereby place and the identity of a place "derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside' and is 'for ever open to contestation, including that place called home' (Massey, 1994: 169).

But for this to happen would imply that the conceptualisation of place takes into consideration 'the changing geography of (changing) social relations [...] [meaning] both the geography (proximity, time-space distancing, etc.) and the content of the social relations themselves (full of the implications of sexism, or of the power relations of colonialism present or past, or of the relations of capital accumulation)' (Massey, 1994:167). Of course such a dialogue would necessitate a systematic consideration of new gender definitions and relations when thinking about place/home. Unfortunately feminism is still too often relegated to the denigrated compartment of the 'other' for such a dialogue to happen systematically.

My point being that, in order not to revert to a patriarchal rhetoric, the concept of home must be thought somewhere else, away from the parameters of sameness and past, away from the nostalgic stances of singularity, safety, boundaries and internalised histories, therefore outside of the maternal, the home/mother relationship. Home must be reframed by either 'adopting a position of "not being home"' as McDermott suggests when quoting Martin and Mohanty, feminists of the 80s, with the awareness that 'home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself' (2003: 266). Or, according to Massey, constantly 'open and porous' (1994: 4), as it always has been and always will be – a site of contestations aware of its shaping and reshaping itself through a constant flux of interrelations.<sup>37</sup>

### Part 3: On reconstructing 'that place called home'

In order to articulate the boundaries between homelessness and origin, between exile and belonging, one must untangle the filaments of one's own history. With distance the first trip that one makes is a trip into memory, a return to the territory of childhood (Kaplan, 1987/2001: 196).

#### 1. Remembering in order not to forget

In order to think of home outside of the patriarchal equations, to contest home in terms of the maternal, remembering is of utmost importance for feminists – *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* is a great example of this. Of course memory has always been the writers' best muse and source of inspiration for male and female writers but, in the context of feminism, the 'feminist memory'<sup>38</sup> (Greene, 1991: 297) has a particular angle: that of 'remembering in order not to forget' because 'forgetting is a major obstacle to change.'<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Massey insists on the past being re-constructed and quotes writer bell hooks in *Yearning* to this effect: '[O]ur struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting [...] a politicisation of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present' (1994: 171).

The feminist politicised memory asks for a vertical digging into the past: the 'project of literary archaeology' (Morrisson in Greene, 1991: 303) that examines, confronts and challenges what it sees. It does not look backwards with longing for an authentic self, a mythical story, a true story as nostalgia does, but instead it looks at the 'thing' itself: the past and the process of remembering the past. Therefore it looks at what was at play rather than in place, which is a very active way of seeing the past as Greene suggested when arguing against the rhetoric of nostalgia.<sup>40</sup> The past is here seen not as a time/space fixed in meanings equal to a series of endings but as continually connected to the present and thus evolving and reshaping itself in terms of the questions and needs of the present. In doing so, one realises that this process equates longing for the search of one truth – an authenticity that is a lure – since it soon becomes obvious that there is not one truth but versions of it depending on how one



perceives and interprets the moment.<sup>41</sup> Truth then emerges as 'a process in the patterning rather than in the patterns' (Greene, 1991: 309). Remembering then enables authorship, for, if the past is a construct, it can be reconstructed, transforming and liberating the present with it.

Fortunately or unfortunately, recent feminist theories have tried to recuperate 'nostalgia' as a feminist concept rather than continue to critique its masculinist lure. Perhaps I would suggest this is a consequence of already 'forgetting' too soon what Greene and other feminists in the 1980s were predicting women would do. Sinead McDermott in a 2002 article wonders if it is really possible to establish a distinction between memory and nostalgia.<sup>42</sup> She says: 'Is it really possible to mine the past or look at it as a source of change, without at some point engaging in nostalgic longings?' (2002, 391) and believes that if Greene manages to make the distinction, she also realises how difficult it is and how hard the work of feminist memory is to sustain in literary fiction without the odd slippages of nostalgic longings for some kind of truth. Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and Roberta Rubinstein in *Home Matters* (2001) suggest nostalgia conceived otherwise to its usual static concept of time warp. They believe it is impossible to get rid of the 'subversive longings', and assert the necessity for a nostalgia that 'puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps' (Boym, 2001, 41). This is the 'restorative' nostalgia as opposed to the usual 'reflective' one.<sup>43</sup> For these post-feminists, the purpose is still the same than it was for the second-wave feminists: a reconstruction of the past to transform the present. But I would suggest, as Greene feared already in 1991, that the recuperation of nostalgia as a necessary longing differing only through the definitions of terminology might engender the risk of regressing towards the old patriarchal framework that ties women in the role of the nurturer and home in terms of the ideal maternal place. Can we really avoid nostalgia when speaking about home?

Even if Greene at the end of her article says, 'Feminism is a re-membering, a re-assembling of our lost past and post parts of ourselves. We search for our mother's garden, in Alice Walker's terms, we search for our mothers – and this search (which is at times not easily distinguishable from nostalgia) figures prominently in contemporary women's fiction [...]' (1991, 300).

## 2. Exploding the myth of home as nurturing and safe place

Indeed remembering is of utmost importance for Astrid in *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*. She is locked in time and place: the house mirroring her emotional stagnation. Veronika notices, when she visits Astrid's house for the first time, that 'the impression was a little like a museum, a display of distant past' (Olsson, 2005: 65). To which Astrid replies later when looking on to the balcony of the double-bedroom where she used to sleep with her husband, and before that her mother with her father, 'Such a beautiful view. But, you know it has never given me the slightest pleasure' (Olsson, 2005: 65). The message is obvious right from the beginning: to reinstate life, which the 'memory work' of revising and repairing in the feminist manner allows Astrid to do. With the help of Veronika she unveils the secrets that suffocates her spirit and conceals her within her house, more so restricts her life to the four walls of her kitchen.

The parallels between body and place – body as place – is a recurring theme in her story. In fact the rendering of both is very beautiful and is skillfully done by Olsson. But I would suggest it is tactfully done in order to enable a feminist critic on home. It shows so well how domesticity is part of a woman's body, so much so that at times the house speaks of and/or for the female body. Astrid's relation to her house, and Veronika to any house she enters, is one of possessing and embodying.

In reinforcing the conventional motifs of the female body as fertile land to be conquered by men, Astrid's narrative also shows the devastating effects these have on herself and her mother. She is a bargaining tool for her father and is sold to a husband who in turn makes money out of selling land to the council. The way Astrid sees the surrounding landscape at the beginning and the end of the novel proves the successful transformation from alienating fictions into enabling ones. On her first walk with Veronika, the land and her body bears the scars of her father and husband's histories, considering both the land and her body as financial commodities for the future of men, reducing both to mere transactions in which women have no choice.<sup>44</sup>

The archaeological digging Astrid does from chapter to chapter participates in a successful feminist critique of home: Astrid's symbolic passage from one state to the other, from dispossession to repossession, from victim to healed woman and from death to birth exposes a cruel patriarchal system that turned women into objects. Astrid was her father's and her husband's prey. But we will see in Part four of this exegesis that the mothers' role for both Astrid and Veronika was just as much to be condemned. These 'mothers' were unfortunately lost in this patriarchal system, and in turn abandoned their daughters to men. Hence, we can see how the appearance of both body and place evolves throughout Astrid's recovery of the past: the changing relationship she demonstrates for her house, garden and then community down the road reflects itself in the care she gives to her dressing, her hair and her skin, enabling beauty and life to shine again through body/place.

Indeed Astrid's house is clearly patriarchal: it is the site of sexual violence towards women perpetrated by father and husband. Both mother and daughter were caught in this cycle of abuse, and both chose to end it in their own way – the only way they knew at the time, reflecting again how they were so caught in a patriarchal language. Because it is not in their power to hurt the perpetrators of abuse or stop the cycle of abuse with justice on their side, they hurt themselves. For these women abuse is transferred in the violence they generate against themselves or towards each other. Paradoxically this transfer becomes a tool of freedom for them: hurting their own bodies or hurting emotionally their daughters is the only way they able to find to free themselves away from the violence of men.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Astrid's mother Sara suicides and leaves her behind, a child of six years old, even more vulnerable than she was to the will of men. When Astrid gives birth to a daughter, she decides to suffocate her for fear she will have the same life as the other women before her.<sup>46</sup>

The dramatic tension that is sustained through each fragment where Astrid remembers her horrific past slowly explodes the myth of home as a safe, nurturing and 'maternal' place. There is no nostalgia in Astrid's voice. There is no nostalgia in recalling a home where women died and abandoned each other

in order to escape the fate of a patriarchal system. Motherhood in this context equates to abandonment, to loss, not nurturing, and therefore shies away from the culturally gendered association of home/mother/nature/nurture – a definite critique on Olsson's part. When Veronika meets Astrid, she is a dead woman who never leaves her kitchen. She literally disappears inside her baggy clothes, inside the dead walls of a museum that reflects a life in which she had no choice except to do what she thought she had to do within the constraints of her time. She imprisoned herself rather than escaping (or escaped by dying inside) the house of her father and husband.<sup>47</sup>

My husband married a farm. He married the land and the house. The fields with rye and potato and flax. The orchard and the meadows. The forest and the timber. And he married the family name. My father though he had negotiated a future for himself and for the farm. I married death (p.100).

Astrid's story is a harsh critique of home as a safe nurturing place, but Olsson remains very humanistic in her approach and tries to avoid blaming and condemning men altogether with no possibility of redemption for them. Even if Veronika's father's errant life still reinforces the patriarchal way of conceptualising space and place – it is synonymous to the binome father (space-mobility), the opposite version to the binome mother (place-fixity) that Astrid's story exemplifies – in Veronika's eyes, the nurturer is her father, not her mother. Even if he does remain absent in her presence because he is himself the product of a generation who did not equate men with mothering, her father still is the one Veronika goes to when her fiancé dies. Boyfriends are also seen as nurturers: Astrid's first boyfriend, Lars, keeps a baby owl alive although it has fallen out of the nest, and James – Veronika's fiancé – needs to go back to NZ to celebrate Christmas with his mum. He is also the one who cooks and wants children with Veronika. But these two motherly men die without giving any chance of hope to either Astrid or Veronika.

It is interesting to note how both protagonists – Astrid and Veronika – choose to position themselves after their mothers leave them. Astrid completely ignores her father because he becomes the abuser – the same reason that caused her

mother to leave. And so Astrid chooses solitude and sees herself and the house as one joined together in their destiny: death.

After I lost my mother there was just the two of us, my father and I. [...] Now I am pleased there is nobody else. Just the house and me (Olsson, 2005: 44).

For Veronika it is the contrary. She becomes her father's accomplice: the woman traveler.

All her life she had travelled in his company, her hand in her father's, on their way towards a new overseas posting. Since her mother left it had always been the two of them (Olsson, 2005: 11).

The woman traveler is a difficult position for Veronika to assume. She shows how contemporary women, even if they are freer than their mothers, still move instinctively between what they think is expected of themselves inside the patriarchal system and what their time gives them the freedom to become.<sup>48</sup> The disorientation experienced out of displacement, being a woman out of place, creates the inevitable longings inside Veronika for an ideal place, home. Again a challenge for her, since her mother's abandonment pushed her out of home in the first place. In Astrid's narrative, Astrid realises nostalgia is to be banned if she wants to find a concrete alternative to her desires. Longing for what? says Astrid: Domesticity? Violence? Without Astrid's story Veronika cannot move on, and without Veronika's story Astrid cannot move on. With the 'memory work' they both learn to think away from the parameters of sameness and the past, outside the nostalgic stances of singularity, safety, boundaries and internalised histories, therefore outside of the maternal, the home/mother relationship.<sup>49</sup>

## Part 4: Contesting motherhood and belonging somewhere else

### 1. Contesting motherhood

Veronika finishes her last year before her thirty-first birthday experiencing a series of deaths. The first death is a metaphorical displacement in the sense that she chooses to go to New Zealand to live with her fiancé: James. Nonetheless, underneath the happiness of a fulfilled love and the excitement of living in a new world, loss lingers. Then Veronika experiences a second death: her fiancé dies in a surfing accident at Karekare. Numbed by pain, lost in mourning, the disorientation she succumbs to is comparable to the painful effects of displacement when they first occur.<sup>50</sup> Everything is observed at a distance, with the eyes of an outsider. The intensity of pain is doubled through the double loss, and literally pushes Veronika outside of herself.<sup>51</sup> So much so that for Veronika who is pregnant when her fiancé dies, the only life she had left within her, the one growing inside her womb, leaves her too. More than a stranger to herself, her body's instinctive response to this double loss is to cause a third one, a third death: she miscarriages just after James's funeral. A distressing outcome, this is uncontestable, nevertheless I would like to suggest it is the most salutary outcome for this character. Not that she chooses to kill her own baby, but the only response her body knows instinctively is that when faced with abandonment, loss of love, it would rather kill a new source of love – life inside herself – than let it live. Here, even if Veronika's miscarriage is definitely not a willful act, it must be understood in parallel to Astrid's inconceivable gesture of suffocating her own daughter.

Although not stated openly by Olsson, the obvious implication is that motherless daughters make cruel choices for themselves as result of their abandonment.<sup>52</sup> In *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, both protagonists could be seen as 'murderers of their own babies'. Astrid's story of the baby owl fallen from a tree that she wants to kill, instinctively, but her boyfriend saves, and then the killing of her own daughter, another instinctive response to the potential of abuse she believes her husband is capable of, can be seen as key stories for Veronika to understand that her miscarriage was self-induced by her body's instinctive response to the situation. It seems this is what Astrid wants her to understand

so Veronika can go beyond the loss of James and beyond the longing for a home, heal herself, and see home not as the past place but as a new one defined on her own terms. Like Astrid, she needs to face herself, and see how the interpretations of the past are out-dated, clogging her perception of the present and stopping her from moving forward into a healed future. Veronika needs to face the very first death she felt as a child when her mother left her father. She needs to face her mother's abandonment and then heal the child within.

To remember her [mother] would have meant acknowledging the fact that she had abandoned me. I don't think I could have lived with that (Olsson, 2007: 38).

Astrid's recovery shows her the necessity to remember in order not to forget and then not to repeat the past. It shows her that it is a goal possible to be achieved. Both Astrid and Veronika had obliterated the possibility that the past had in reality different versions. But, principally, what they had forgotten is that, for both women, their mother's abandonment killed the child within them. To imply that with every loss Veronika re-enacts her mother's abandonment is perhaps too far-fetched. Although, when we understand from the story that it is because of the mother leaving them both that Veronika's father chooses a life of transience with his daughter, it is not wrong to conclude here that displacement is the outcome of abandonment/loss and not the contrary as is normally understood, that is as displacement provoking feelings of loss and abandonment. For Veronika, displacement clearly precedes displacement.<sup>53</sup> This is something she understands after the work of memory. Hence it is Veronika's displacement that pushes Astrid to enter, herself, into the mode of 'memory work'.

If the series of deaths pushes Veronika into a downward spiral and forces her into primal responses where she ends up in the arms of Astrid and in the country of her mother, it is not without purpose. And, indeed, going to Sweden also shows Veronika that it was never about place, but was about what was at play then, what was in need of revising and reconstructing in order to move forward and gain a new sense of belonging.

The question both characters ask is how do you reconstruct yourself as a daughter without questioning motherhood and/or the lack of it and its legacy for the daughter? In *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, it is through Astrid's story that Veronika gets to understand that travel enabled her to escape and to conceal somewhere in the lost corners of her memory her motherless childhood. She also realises that she had assumed foreignness first in her mother's home, and so her feelings of displacement were coincidental with her mother's abandonment.<sup>54</sup> And, finally, she understands that seeking displacement as a way of life was, in a perverted way, chosen both as a protection against loss as well as a re-enactment of loss. This can be seen as a stratagem to preserve desire and hope for an ideal mother rather than confront the actual one who cannot assume fully the role of motherhood. In fact, we understand in a conversation Veronika has one day with her father that she does not speak to her mother.<sup>55</sup> What Olsson really wants to say, and what I also want to argue through fiction is that nurturing is not a given for every women, and that universal mothering is a culturally imposed concept and is not biologically determined. There are some women who are just not meant to be mothers, and following the circumscribed duty of a patriarchal model can lead these women into wrong mothering. In her interview, Olsson acknowledges that both her novels are motherless fictions and that her third will probably be one too as it is a story about two sisters. Olsson made clear to me the necessity of speaking about this issue, which is in her opinion not spoken about enough when motherhood is concerned.<sup>56</sup> This is what Astrid manages to acknowledge with great pain: that killing her daughter was not just to protect her from potential male abuse but also to protect her from the fear of her own inadequacies in mothering a child; the fear, in Astrid's words, 'not loving her daughter enough' or with 'too much hatred inside' (Olsson, 2005: 161).

Making Veronika a writer gives the space for three generations of women to speak their rage at dysfunctional mothering. The story she writes shows how little choices the daughters have but to often accept in silence their mother's dysfunctional mothering as a proof of nurturing and love. Not accepting it would imply that the daughter knows better than the mother, and therefore that she has the potential of surpassing her mother's role while still under her care. It would mean opened rebellion between daughter/mother, which in turn would



cause the daughter to live with the guilt of hurting her foremost and only nurturer. Surpassing the mother would also mean that the daughter acknowledges the mother's failures, a hard task for a daughter to do. So she often prefers to keep silent to maintain the status quo and to maintain equilibrium in the hierarchy of mothering but with such a silence, daughters then have to acknowledge their own failures. Thus a circle of loyalty and dependency is handed down from mothers to daughters. These are the stories of Veronika and her mother and, probably before her, that of *her* mother. Certainly they are the stories of Astrid and Sara her mother, and probably Sara's mother too. Veronika and Astrid are typical examples of daughters whose mothers knew they had failed and couldn't forgive themselves, of 'daughters who blame themselves for needing more than the mother was able to provide, who saw and experienced the full extent of the older woman's crisis, and who cannot let themselves feel rage at their mother because they know how much she needs them to forgive her' (Chernin, 1991: 57). This is a legacy both Astrid and Veronika do not wish for their daughters. So both choose not to mother their own children and instead mother each other in the way they wished they had been nurtured, thus ending a cycle of repeats. It is a very strong stand both women took, but very courageous. In her interview, Olsson told me that Veronika's non-judgmental response to Astrid, when she heard of the killing of Sara, caused outrage in reviews by males. She also told me her male American publisher tried to make her change the mother's behaviour in her new book, *Sonata for Miriam*. In this novel the main character also abandons her daughter to her partner and decides to live alone, in another country. These reactions from readers and publishers show how the image of women as nurturer and mother is still so ingrained in our psyche and differs from the reality feminists managed to uncover in their critique of home. The gain here in Olsson's story is that Veronika's experience as a motherless daughter gives her a position of strength, of not judging or criticising Astrid when she hears the story: a gift that enables Astrid to move forward to full recovery. Indeed one could wonder, sometimes, how it is possible that women still fail to support each other in times of distress, especially when many hold secretly ambivalent feelings towards maternity. In fact our permissive society still throws harsh judgments on the women who want to speak openly against maternity and motherhood.

Through Astrid's 'memory work' the past meets the present, showing her (like Veronika) out-dated images of women as the product of a time and a generation, women who tricked themselves by never confronting what was at play in their childhood rather than in place. At the end Astrid finally manages to confront the child within her who held on to one incident for the rest of her life: seeing her mother leave the house to suicide herself. She realises that her longing for her mother as she remembered her was in fact a lure that made her believe home was the safe nest of a nurturing mother. Indeed she understands that her mother was not nurturing. Motherhood meant abandonment and nostalgia for a 'mother' but not her mother – a nostalgia that stopped her completely from moving forward in her life. The 'memory work' demonstrates successively that there was another side of the event. So her revelation becomes a model for Veronika and compels her to do the memory work simultaneously to Astrid, and not to do as Astrid did, to leave it a lifetime doing it.<sup>57</sup> In reconstructing their past in new ways, Astrid and Veronika both changed their present simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> They become then authors rather than the victims.

## **2. The surrogate mother**

In a number of narratives, the (usually female) central character finds herself at a significant crossroad between home and a problematic "elsewhere," a place/space that is figuratively located at the intersection of different geographies, cultures, languages, life stages, or spiritual conditions. At the imaginary intersection of time and place, the characters discover – as their authors narratively render – the multiple ways in which home matters (Rubinstein, 2001: 9).

Bammer has argued that home 'always exist[s] in the virtual space between loss and recuperation (Bammer, 1992: ix).

Of course the need to write about mothers or their absence, the need to locate in Sweden the 'work of memory' in the feminist way, and the desire for some kind of attachment and belonging shows Olsson's search to reestablish a bond with the idea of a 'mother' and a 'place' to belong to. It shows a desire on

Olsson's part for some kind of forgiveness enabling one to move forward and beyond. One can also see that the role Astrid and Veronika take as surrogate mothers for each other is also a desire on Olsson's behalf to reconnect with the ideal mother. In fact, when considering psychoanalysis and feminism, the relation to the mother is often in some ways or others reproduced between women. As Jane Gallop<sup>59</sup> notes when quoting Kristeva: '[T]o say "Mother, I prefer a woman to you" is naively to believe that one could define femininity with no reference to maternity. It is naively to believe that one could ever totally separate the daughter from the mother, could define femininity with no reference to maternity' (1982: 117).

But the harsh criticism of home in the context of a patriarchal system also demonstrates a rigorous attitude regarding never falling into the nostalgic longing for an ideal home, an ideal mother, or, more so, the need to find home and mother elsewhere. And so the mirroring game in the narrative between Astrid and Veronika's stories, between the past and the present, suggests the importance of reading them together. The mirroring game makes obvious and aberrant gaps in the text, and shows what is at stake when one evokes the notion of home. The gaps symbolise the necessity of moving away from the known. 'What is home?' requires moving away from familiar ground to re-image home in other ways or other places.

Olsson in her novel suggests that love is found in friendship, the gift women can give to each other, and affirms the importance of dialogue in order to fight the nostalgic idea of a return back, and the importance of always moving forward. This is why, right from the beginning, Olsson insists on the 'stop'. It is another stop for Veronika – not a return back home to Sweden.<sup>60</sup> It is a stop because a stop means a moving forward while a return is always a moving backward to stasis and the fixity of past.

By having the protagonist in the role of the writer of the story, Olsson also suggests the idea of belonging in the space of writing, which is a transient, personal and ephemeral space, and raises the possibility of the writer and author creating a text which bridges the gaps created by loss. This also gives to the writer the social responsibility of calling women to do the work of memory

themselves through the act of writing. Astrid gives to Veronika her mother's diary for her birthday present, a gift that clearly demonstrates that it is the task and duty of women writers to tell stories in order not to forget in a feminist sense.

Olsson's novel represents what Carolyn Steedman says to other women in *Stories*:

By fixing my father, and my mother's mothering, in time and politics [I] can help show the creation of gender in particular households and in particular familial situations at the same time as it demonstrates the position of men and the social reality represented by them in particular households. We need historical accounts of such relationships, not just a longing that they might be different (1987/1998: 250).

Hence Olsson's book finishes with Veronika's book being finished – a beautiful metaphor, a great stratagem where fiction and reality get blurred. Even if the title, *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*, reminds us of the lullabies mothers sing to their children before going to sleep, the reader knows at the end of the book that it is not nostalgia for lost mothers and lost places which fix identities and stable meanings in line with a patriarchal worldview. The book evokes an alternative mothering that empowers daughters to become authors of their life, and readdresses the issue of guilt and anger transferred between women, which is not the mothering that keeps daughters victims and perpetrators in the trail of their mothers' failures in negotiating between personal desires and sacrifice.

Olsson gives an alternative to traditional mothering in the form of friendship that enables both Astrid and Veronika to heal and reflect that it is still possible for women to have a sense of belonging through the maternal. The maternal removed from familial and biological connections, which cancels the nostalgia for the authentic original maternal belonging in the form of home/place/past. When Astrid dies, Veronika is given a choice. Astrid gives her home to Veronika with no obligation that she keeps it<sup>61</sup>. Indeed the reader is left unsure at the end as to what she will decide. When Veronika enters Astrid's empty house, her body shows signs that it remembers the place and therefore one could imagine

she might keep the house because of this intuitive attachment her body displays. I would suggest what her body remembers is a new place: her own place of belonging, a safety she owns elsewhere and she acquired through the love and healing both women's friendship gifted to each other.

## Conclusion

When Chris Abani wants to explain the consequences of displacement on someone's identity he compares it to the experience of death complicated 'by the addition of an unresolved tension or by the fact that we have often based our ideas of who we are in conflict or in opposition to the one lost'<sup>62</sup> (Abani, 2004: 26). Abani further explains that what makes singular this death and unresolved tension in the situation of the exile, is the fact that it takes place in an unfamiliar territory where the sense of belonging is unclear and often challenged by the new social surroundings – language, communication, customs and so on – making the work of resolution very difficult.

It is in this context we can read Olsson's work and *Le Grand Voyage*: knowing that displaced writers keep on digging the past out of the series of deaths displacement creates inside their identity. Where narratives of displacement written by women are particular for women is that each death they experience exposes facets of a system that they left behind or that they still try to fight against. So for each death a rebirth is urgent. This explains why displacement for the women who chose to remain outside of the land of their birth is a gain rather than a loss. Because in translating themselves in this new life, they have the distance it takes – a huge distance for Olsson and myself: the other side of the world – to do this 'memory work' that feminists revealed from the beginning of their activism as an urgent task for women if they wish to think home elsewhere, away from the parameters of sameness.

Indeed, remembering and the process of remembering are at stake for the survival of both Astrid and Veronika in *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* and in *Le Grand Voyage*. Both novels can be read as a feminist 'literary project of archaeology' whereby protagonists in their search for a truth realise, at the end that for change to operate on the present truth was not what mattered but the act of remembering itself. Indeed, for both women, the act of remembering enabled them to become the authors of their life: the writers of their past and present, in new and liberating ways. When Linda Olsson finishes her book with Veronika telling Astrid she has finished her book, she involves the reader as both testifying to the 'work of memory' and collaborating in this process of

reconstructing the past. Both writers/authors and protagonists express their intentions to call and wake up other women so as not to repeat a cycle by adopting the stance of 'not being home' in order not to become the home of our mothers. Displacement prolongs metaphorically and literally this possibility, and enables writers/authors and protagonists to go further in their work.

The gain in displacement also involves the fact that distance forces one to look at the longing and nostalgia for what they really conceal. In the case of a woman and, motherless daughters, distance, as this exegesis has demonstrated, enables the writer to unveil the longings as subversive and fraudulent, tricking women into thinking there was nothing better than the past: home sweet home, the safe, bounded nest where women could be women: could be the mother. Veronika's book is the death of a time and the celebration for women who have the courage to face the past and make the hard work of remembering so as not to forget where they came from. *Le Grand Voyage* hopes for a similar journey.

The gift of such a remembering is one of healing: a rebirth in killing the old. The gift also highlights the necessity of conversations between generations, of the continuing dialogue between women for change to be at work constantly: the necessity to voice the woman's voice. Change in *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* only happens because of the friendship that develops between the two characters on the opposite ends of life. In *Le Grand Voyage*, it is the confrontation of mother/daughter's past relationship that enables Agnès to find out the 'truth'. The truth Greene (1991) explains as 'a process in the patterning rather than the patterns', meaning there is no single authoritative view of events, thereby quoting Anna in Lessing's *Golden Notebooks* who finally accepts that 'the story of my life can never be more than "a record of how I saw myself at a certain point."' (GN, 473 in Greene, 309)

In the course of reading and analysing Olsson's novel and in the course of writing my own fragments towards *Le Grand Voyage*, I have gone through a major deconstructive and learning curve that enables me to be much more critical and notice at once some narrative pitfalls when speaking about home. I have come to see women's narratives of displacement with an awareness I

didn't have before embarking on this thesis project. The work of Doreen Massey has been very important to me in highlighting that for a woman it is of utmost importance to be constantly aware of the terminology and vocabulary she is using in order not to participate in a patriarchal rhetoric. If women favour displacement because it enables this great reworking of the past in a feminist way, caution needs to be taken. Indeed, one needs to be aware that looking at place as the container of past stories or 'internalised histories' as Massey (1991: 169) deplores, can participate in and reinforce a rhetoric that ties place with fixed notions of identity. This can contribute towards a wider dialogue that validates the need for boundaries and protectiveness and therefore asserts the local against the global as can be seen in some post-modern and post-colonialist theories. So caution is necessary when evoking, searching and doing the memory work. But I am afraid, as Gayle Greene and other feminists of the 1980s were afraid, that some women forget. And here I think this exegesis makes clear that my theoretical inspiration draws more from the feminists of the 1980s than the contemporary ones. For I also believe that a recuperation of nostalgia dooms women to repeat what was in place rather than at play – which is what they were trying to fight for in the first place.

'What is home?' is a difficult question to negotiate for a woman. Linda Olsson's *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* shows what is at stake when one asks the question. I hope this is what *Le Grand Voyage* will be able to reveal. But then, the title of this new work is indicative of an opening more than an ending. I hope it will be seen also as a series of questions that attempt to answer the question 'What is home?'



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Massey D. B. (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. The writer dedicates Chapter 7 to 'A Place Called Home?' At one point she says: 'A large component of the identity of that place called home derived (...)' (p.170) I was interested by the use of 'that' for the context of this exegesis as it gives the sense of pointing out, fingering the place with distance in order to look at it differently.

<sup>2</sup> Re: The 'Jungle' of Calais

CALAIS, France (AFP) by Emma Charlton – Tue. Sep 22, 12:54 pm ET  
French riot police rounded up scores of Afghan migrants Tuesday, many of them children, and bulldozed a makeshift camp called the "jungle" used as a base to sneak across the Channel to Britain.

Scuffles broke out between police and some 80 rights activists who set up a human chain around the camp dwellers in the northern port of Calais, but the migrants did not resist as they were led away one by one. Immigration Minister Eric Besson, who flew to Calais to oversee the operation, said 276 people, half of them minors, were detained in the two-hour raid that began at dawn and involved 500 officers. After the migrants were removed, bulldozers moved in to flatten shacks and tents that dotted the sandy scrubland on the edge of town. Besson hailed the operation as a major blow to smuggling networks.

Britain, which last year stopped 28,000 migrants trying to cross the 35 kilometres (22 miles) that separate it from France, hailed the crackdown as "decisive." But rights activists denounced it as a media stunt that would not stop migrants heading to Calais and instead would drive them further underground as they waited to climb onto boats or trucks taking the undersea tunnel to Britain. The UN refugee agency said the dismantling of the "jungle" did not address the problem of "irregular migration, nor does it solve the problems of the people concerned."

[....]

Nearly half the migrants identified themselves as minors and were to be taken to shelters, he said. The adults will be offered the chance to apply for asylum, money for a voluntary return home or a place in a shelter. For adults who refuse, France would "consider a forced return to the country of origin", based on an assessment of the security risks. From a peak of 700 mostly Afghans in the "jungle" in June, aid groups say two thirds had fled ahead of the operation, heading to Britain, Belgium, Holland, Norway or elsewhere. The remaining dwellers rose at dawn with the muezzin's call, performing morning ablutions before bracing for the raid. The men and boys huddled together behind banners that pleaded with the authorities for shelter, but were led away, some in tears. Eighteen-year-old Bilal Hazarbauz said: "Maybe they will deport me to Afghanistan.

"But where else can we go? This is our home, there is no other place."

[....] From Saint Malo in Brittany to the Belgian border, some 17 migrant camps and squats exist along the Channel coast, where hundreds of Iraqis, Afghans or Eritreans await their attempt at the British El Dorado, according to aid groups.

From [http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20090922/wl\\_afp/francebritainmigration](http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20090922/wl_afp/francebritainmigration)

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<sup>3</sup> In *Identity, Culture and the PostModern World*, Madam Sarup gives a great exposition of Hoffman's work. It was through reading Sarup that I discovered Hoffman. [here]

Hoffman's autobiography *Lost in Translation* is in three parts: Paradise, Exile, The New World.

The first part is about Eva's [Ewa's] childhood in Cracow, Poland. She writes about her Jewish parents' suffering during the war, her family and friends, her schooling. A fascinating evocation of a happy childhood, Eva's account describes her perceptions and memories in a vivid, sensuous manner. This first part ends with a description of her parents' disaffiliation and the emigration of her family, when she is thirteen, to Canada.

In the second part of the book, Eva focuses on her alienation and her problems with the English language. She remarks: 'The problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue.' Gradually, Polish becomes a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past. Eva finds that her Polish words don't apply to her new experiences ... and the English words don't hook on to anything. Her name changes from Ewa to Eva. She goes through an intense homesickness in which she lets go of everything she once knew. This part of the book is a thoughtful discussion about life in a new language (the subtitle of the book) and about anxieties concerning identity. Eva says: "This is a society [an American says] in which you are who you think you are. Nobody gives you your identity here, you have to reinvent your self everyday". He is right I suspect, but I can't figure out how this is done. You just say what you are and everyone believes you? But how do I choose from identity options available all around me?' (p.160).

In Part three, Eva gives an account of how she gradually begins to feel at home in 'The New World'. At first she shares with her American generation an acute sense of dislocation and the equally acute challenge of having to invent a place and an identity for herself without the traditional supports. Feelings of anomie, loneliness and emotional repression drive Eva to therapy. She is asked: Why do so many Americans go to psychiatrists? She replies, 'It's a problem of identity. Many of my American friends feel they don't have enough of it. They often feel worthless, or they don't know how to feel? ... Maybe it's because everyone is always on the move and undergoing enormous changes, so they lose track of who they've been and have to keep tabs on who they're becoming all the time' (p. 263).

At the end of the book, Eva acknowledges that she is being remade, fragment-by-fragment, like a patchwork quilt ... she is becoming a hybrid creature, a sort of resident alien (Sarup, 1996: 5–6).

<sup>4</sup> Teeuwen quotes Said, E. W. (1994), "rewards and, yes even privileges" (p. 44) in 'Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginal'. In Said, E. W. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (pp.35–47). London: Vintage-Random.

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<sup>5</sup> In describing displacement through exile, Eva Hoffman, an emigrant Jewish Polish writer, speaks about a psychic split whereby one lives a story in which one's past becomes radically different from the present. She talks of the past 'sequestered in the imagination as a mythic static realm'. This past becomes either idealised or demonised. 'Some people decide to abandon the past, never to look back. For others, the great lure is nostalgia – an excess of memory.' The place left behind is forever juxtaposed with the present like the two sides of a fold. 'With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double' (Hoffman, 1999: 52).

<sup>6</sup> In Massey, D. B. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. (p. 170)

<sup>7</sup> I think in particular of *Turbulent Times*, the last theme for the third Auckland triennial in 2007. The introduction in the catalogue questioned the notion of home in these turbulent times of globalisation and the artists were selected because their artpractice generally convey feelings of displacement, fragmentation and homelessness.

In 2003 the University of Auckland organised a conference entitled *Creativity in Exile*, with a remarkable contribution of over 200 academics, writers, and artists from forty-seven countries, who travelled long distances to take part in the discussion.

The 2008 Writers Festival in Auckland had sessions dedicated to the concept of home and writers' responses. I think in particular of the one 'Who do you think you are?' with Karlo Mila, Tusiata Avia and Kapka Kassabova, and chaired by Manying Ip, whose most recent publication is *Being Maori-Chinese: Mixed Identities*.

These are only local examples. International examples are numerous. One current example is the 2009 Venice Biennale, whose theme is *Making Worlds*, and whose artists are all trying to explain, demonstrate or evoke in their artworks ways of making a world for themselves in these turbulent times.

If we do a search on 'identity, home and memory' or 'home, displacement, exile', for example, in library catalogues or on databases such as Project Muse or ProQuest, to only name these two, the number of hits is quite phenomenal.

<sup>8</sup> Olsson (b.1948) left Sweden in 1986 to travel extensively until she finally settled in New Zealand with her husband around the same time I did: 1990/1991. Coincidentally, *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* was conceived when she did her Master in Creative Writing in 2004 (University of Auckland) and published the following year.

<sup>9</sup> Eva Hoffman spoke with Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies in an interview (5 October 2000) that was part of the Institute's "Conversations with History" series. In this interview, Eva Hoffman spoke about her last three books: *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*; *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town in the World of Polish Jewry*; and *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*.

Kreisler: 'So you had to become a navigator. In one place you compare yourself indirectly to an anthropologist, especially the fact that the goal of every anthropologist is to get into the minds of the people that are being studied.'

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Hoffman: 'Yes. Yes, I think every immigrant becomes a kind of amateur anthropologist – you do notice things about the culture or the world that you come into that people who grow up in it, who are very embedded in it, simply don't notice. I think we all know it from going to a foreign place. And at first you notice the surface things, the surface differences. And gradually you start noticing the deeper differences. And very gradually you start with understanding the inner life of the culture, the life of those both large and very intimate values. It was a surprisingly long process is what I can say.'

<sup>10</sup> 'Ah, so you are Astrid's new neighbour,' the woman replied. She smiled and rolled her eyes.' Astrid Mattson, the village witch. Doesn't like people. Keeps to herself. Not much of a neighbour, I'm afraid' (Olsson, 2005: 13).

<sup>11</sup> 'There was a sense of urgency to your story [Astrid's]. A matter of completing something that began long ago. Healing something that had been hurting for such a long time. So, here it is, your book, Astrid. I have called it *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs*' (Olsson, 2005: 253).

<sup>12</sup> 'Each time she would be instantly transported to another world, curiously more present and alive with each passing day, as if time and distance functioned as a magnifier' (Olsson, 2005: 67).

<sup>13</sup> 'I have written in my study, which overlooks the skyline of Auckland city, where the dramatic shifts in light constantly threaten to distract. Yet, the process of writing this book has taken me to the other side of the world; in fact, as far away as it is possible to travel without turning back again. My native country has filled my mind with unprecedented intensity. But this book could not have been written anywhere but here, in New Zealand. The distance was essential' (Olsson, 2005: 257).

<sup>14</sup> In the interview I conducted with Olsson after the publication of her second novel in 2008 (November 14) she says:  
'I don't think I could have been writing my first book in Swedish. When I write in Swedish, it is still an intuitive process while it is more an intellectual process when I write in English. I chose my words with my logic and intellect rather than with my heart. And then it is interesting to hear what people say about my English – a critic in America said that the plot was sober but when it comes to English, the language is so unusual.'

And later when explaining why it is easier for her to write in English rather than Swedish, Olsson said: 'I think that my English writing is more deliberate. That I choose my words more carefully when I write in English. This also means that I see more opportunities in the language. That I am conscious of the impact of each word. Writing in Swedish is more intuitive, I think. When my book was first released in New Zealand, several of the reviews mentioned that the language sounded "Scandinavian." I once read an article about research that proved that it is possible to discern the composer's native language from the music he or she writes. So, perhaps, in a similar manner, I write in Swedish even when I write in English. When my book was published in Sweden, I did not translate the book to Swedish myself. I made an attempt, but quickly realised that I was rewriting, rather than translating. For me, it felt as if the story I had written could

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not just be translated word by word, but that a Swedish version needed other, different expressions. I am enormously grateful that my translator was able to do what I could not.'

<sup>15</sup> 'Eventually, of course, one does stop being an exile. But even a "reformed" exile will continue to practice the one thing exiles do almost as a matter of instinct: compulsive retrospection. With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing – or looking for – another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile, the point being that exile, like love, is not just a condition of pain, it's a condition of deceit' (Aciman, 1999: 13).

<sup>16</sup> Even though Cixous does not write in the vein of a metaphorical exile, it is interesting to see how she also found her exilic condition an impetus for creativity. In *Algérie, Exile, and Hélène Cixous 1*, Lynn Penrod (2003: 135) notes:

'As Susan Rubin Suleiman points out in her introduction to *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (1998) the word exile itself varies both in meaning and connotation. But the word nonetheless universally designates "a state of being 'not home' (or of being 'everywhere at home,' the flip side of the same coin), which means, in most cases, at a distance from one's own native tongue". But, Suleiman goes on to ask, "[i]s this distance a falling away from some original wholeness and source of creativity, or is it on the contrary a spur to creativity? Is exile a cause for optimism (celebration, even) or its opposite?" and for Hélène Cixous, we might ask, does Algérie represent "home" or "not home"? Or both? Or neither?'

<sup>17</sup> In the DVD accompanying the *Exile and Creativity* book edited by Michael Hanne (2004), Kapka Kassabova says:

'I think being displaced regardless of what your circumstances are, being displaced is a very motivating thing in the sense that you go to places in your mind and then your emotions, which you wouldn't go to if you were living in your own country or only go there if you go through a loss – if someone dies perhaps – because displacement begins with loss. Hopefully you move on from there but that is really the starting point and everyone has to deal with that sooner or later, everyone who is displaced. That can be a driving force for a number of things. You see migrants that achieve things, you see Asian students, music students who win all the music competitions. They are migrants, they work harder than anyone else because they are driven. What are they driven by, probably by that loss, by having to and wanting to prove themselves that they are as good as everyone else and perhaps better. So in that sense it can be a hugely motivating factor if you channel it well but sometimes it is hard to. When you are lost in your sense of loss you can't channel that kind of emotional energy in a creative way and successful way. And sometimes it takes a long time and I think for me it took a few years. I think I was wallowing in my losses, in my sense of unhappiness for a while before I could do anything with it.'

<sup>18</sup> "Am I a writer because I am exile, or a writer in exile?" There is the assumption that exile can, might, or even should interrupt or enhance the creative flow. There is also the assumption that one's product must necessarily reflect the themes and locale prior to exile, or else, dwell on endlessly

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unraveling the nature and being of exile. This is not an imaginary predicament, but a real constrictive aspect of the liminal limbo of exile' (Abani, 2004: 25), in Hanne's *Creativity in Exile*.

<sup>19</sup> Agnès, the main character in *Le Grand Voyage*, is also introduced to the reader as a displaced character away from her country of origin France and living in New Zealand. She is a writer who analyses and criticises from her position of distance. She is a fiction writer but more so the writer of diaries, mementos and little notes – following in this way the traditional form in which women have been used to express themselves in literary terms: in the secret space of reflection. Metaphors for her transience are present throughout the story but one is particularly strong and a typical New Zealand encounter, when she is driving to the Coromandel. She is slowed down by a house on a truck, which throws her back to the memories of past homes.

<sup>20</sup> This is a structure that is also symptomatic in *Le Grand Voyage* as past and present: the stories of Agnès's mother Thérèse and Thérèse's mother Monette, intertwine with each other, revealing similarities and differences and enabling answers to the questions the present forces on Agnès.

<sup>21</sup> The end of each chapter prepares the jump into the next one, announcing in the dialogue between the two characters who will speak with the 'I' narrative. For example, at the end of Chapter four Astrid is talking to Veronika, 'Let me tell you about my mother,' the old woman said. 'About a day that has stayed with me all these years, clearer in my memory than yesterday.' And Chapter five starts with Astrid remembering a day with her mother: 'It was June, early summer and a day very much like today. [...] I had never heard her laugh in the house, only when we were away from home, just the two of us' (Olsson, 2005: 39–41).

<sup>22</sup> A similar situation in *Le Grand Voyage* exists whereby the mother and daughter's voices confront each in a rented bach in the Coromandel, positioning them both 'out of place', out of their known environment.

<sup>23</sup> A similar approach is taken in Ingmar Bergman's films. I think in particular of *Autumn Sonata*, in which the music contributes to the increasing claustrophobic environment that fills the parsonage where the three characters evolve. The film was made in 1978 in Norway. Coincidentally Bergman saw this time in his life as living in exile. He had left his beloved Sweden to escape the wrong and humiliating accusations made by the tax department.

Elsie Walker, in her analysis of the film, looks at the role of music in the film and notes: 'Virtually all the action takes place in a Norwegian parsonage but Bergman's setting is not merely representational: "one is liable", as Richard Combs (in his review for *The Listener*, 114: 2925, 5 September (1985), 31) says, "to translate [the setting] into something much more non-denominational, non-geographic and non-specific in one's mind." Combs sees Bergman's setting as a kind of "landscape of the soul". The metaphorical setting coupled with psychological 'realism', the enclosed, sometimes austere nature of the film, being an intense study of a few characters, reflects Strindberg's influence on

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Bergman.' In Walker, E. (?) 'An Incurable Music: Ingmar Bergman's 'Autumn Sonata'. *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*. Retrieved from <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=194&feature>

<sup>24</sup> "“And it is my favorite season, autumn. Some see it as the end of the year. Death. But to me, it has always felt like the beginning. Pure and clean, with a lack of distractions. Time to set your house in order and prepare for winter.” She sat down again, leaning back against the wall and turning the wine glass between her stained fingers. “And it is. My house is in order,” she said’ (Olsson, 2005: 226).

<sup>25</sup> ‘She was an orphan tenant in an orphan house’ (Olsson, 2005: 12).

<sup>26</sup> ‘The narrative structure of the exilic memory is very different then, from that of history. History recovers events by chronological narration, by explaining why certain things happened and why they did so at that particular moment in time. But for both these exilic narratives, Partition and the loss of home are things that can never be explained. They can only be experienced as monstrous, and embody the breakdown of all social values’ (Barat, 2004: 219).

<sup>27</sup> Examples of Veronika’s flashbacks:

‘Each time she would be instantly transported to another world, curiously more present and alive with each passing day, as if time and distance functioned as a magnifier. (...) It struck her that her memories seemed clear, alive, here in this unrelated environment. She watched her neighbour’s neglected garden slowly regaining life and preparing for summer, and the flax and budding pohutukawa of New Zealand intruded. Perhaps she had needed to get this far away in order to see clearly. To enable the memories to surface’ (Olsson, 2005: 67).

<sup>28</sup> ‘I am especially interested in works that thematise memory and reflect this concern narratively, metafictional works that relate memory and liberation to questions of narrative (Doris Lessing’s *The Summer Before the Dark* [1973], Margaret Drabble’s *The Middle Ground* [1980], Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* [1987]) and Kunstlerromance that envision writing as the means of revising the past (Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* [1974], Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* [1976])’ (Greene, 1991: 293).

<sup>29</sup> ‘They say that March is the hardest month. Deaths peak in March. And I read that children born in November have the best chance, their mothers sustained by the summer. We associate spring with life, when often it brings death’ (Olsson, 2005: 233).

<sup>30</sup> "“And it is my favorite season, Autumn. Some see it as the end of the year. Death. But to me, it has always felt like the beginning. Pure and clean, with a lack of distractions. Time to set your house in order and prepare for winter.” She sat down again, leaning back against the wall and turning the wine glass between her stained fingers. “And it is. My house is in order,” she said’ (Olsson, 2005: 226).

<sup>31</sup> In Massey, D. B. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. (p. 170)

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<sup>32</sup> 'The question, what is place? presents many difficulties. An examination of all the relevant facts seems to lead to different conclusions. Moreover, we have inherited nothing from previous thinkers, whether in the way of a statement of difficulties or of a solution' Aristotle, Book IV, *The Physics* (Millar, 2005: 11).

<sup>33</sup> In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) 'Judith Butler makes the powerful argument that neither gender nor sex is natural, nor are they categories of human identity. [...] "There is no gender identity," she writes, "behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Emerling, 2005: 115–116).

<sup>34</sup> In a society that still left the sole charge of early-child rearing to the woman, the construct of the world for a daughter was very different from that of a son. Particularly, as Doreen Massey points out in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), in relation to the issues of boundaries:

It is the boy's need, growing up in a society in which genders are constructed as highly differentiated, and as unequal, to differentiate himself from his mother, which encourages in him an emphasis, in the construction of a sense of identity, on counterposition and on boundary-drawing. Only by this means, it seems, can his identity be securely established. And, given the dominant place of masculine views in this society, it is this – defensive and potentially so vulnerable – way of establishing a sense of self which becomes generalised in social relations (p.170).

Differentiating against the opposite sex the female, generated 'a hostile and combative dualism at the heart of both the community men construct[ed] and the masculinist world view by means of which they underst[ood] their lives' (p.170). A set of binary oppositions between male and female follow from this dualism and are characteristic of the organisation of a patriarchal society.

Fighting against such a dualistic view has been at the core of the feminist movement since the first wave of feminist activism in the 50 and 60s. The set of culturally constructed binary oppositions, which follow from this dualism, they revealed as denigrating for women and forever confining the feminine in a position of fixity that is incompatible with change and movement. The dualistic view creates a pyramid from which binaries conjugate themselves and follow logically from each other. Starting at the top with the image of woman standing as a metaphor for nature – woman/nature and woman/mother – hence her body bounded in place as a source of nurture – mother/nurture, nature/nurture, nature/place, nurture/place, place/home, home/mother, home/woman – therefore unmediated by culture (since it is the attribute of men) and rather than 'place' as a site of his being 'space' is the response to his mobility: man/culture, culture/mobility, mobility/space, man/space. This masculinist world-view still permeates, according to Massey, 'our currently dominant notions of place and of home, and very specifically through notions of place as a source of belonging, identity and security.'

<sup>35</sup> 'If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. [...] Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It



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maintains him through the storms of heaven and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. [...] Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house. [...] This is the environment in which the protective beings live [...] the original fullness of the house's being [...]' (Bachelard, 1958/1994: 6–8).

<sup>36</sup> Doreen Massey argues that postmodern theorists have only contributed to reinforce the idea of stasis and nostalgia attached to place and home because in their efforts to speak about globalisation, migration and cultural shifts, time and space have been prioritised over the notion of place.

Massey argues that theorists like Jameson, Baudrillard, Harvey and others used the rhetoric of an elite, white, first world view of the world that contributed to exacerbating the effect of globalisation on society. In fact, she believes that the hype of their vocabulary has contributed to reinforce the current phenomenon that sees the feelings of disorientation, 'placelessness' and rootedness as the direct outcome of globalisation. She claims that their discourse was an answer to their own feeling of threat and that through increasing the idea of placelessness they were only trying to protect what they thought they had lost. In fact, for Massey, what they had lost was a lure in the first instance, since territories had been penetrated long before globalisation shrank borders and created 'proximity' with what they called the 'other'. The recent voices of that 'other' have demonstrated so through their own narratives – that their own borders have long been penetrated and that place and home had never been bounded through security and stasis.

So Massey does not deny the effect of globalisation, with shrinking of borders, compression of time-space and so on. She believes that instead of opening and thinking of place in a different ways, this dialogue has only reinforced the 'old' debate that privileges space with a sense of belonging, ties place with a fixed notion of identity, and only remembers 'Space with Being' out Heidegger's complete equation (p.168). In fact, Massey deplores the way in which many of these 'others' – minorities, indigenous groups – have used this rhetoric to voice their rights in this shifting new world. For her, here lies the problem: this conceptualisation of place was fraught right from the beginning and only reinforced the need for boundaries and protectiveness, asserting the local against the global. We can see how nationalism, regionalism and localism have emerged strongly in recent years as a result of this reading that still holds identity of place to be the result of 'internalised history' (p.169). Instead, she calls for a much more open discussion whereby place and the identity of a place "derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside' and is 'for ever open to contestation, including that place called home' (p.169).

This would imply that the conceptualisation of place takes into consideration 'the changing geography of (changing) social relations' (p.167), 'both the geography (proximity, time-space distancing, etc.) and the content of the social relations themselves (full of the implications of sexism, or of the power relations of colonialism present or past, or of the relations of capital accumulation)' (p.167). It would imply a dialogue that takes into consideration new gender definitions and relations when thinking about place, for it is still very

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often coded in terms of polarities of two genders with all the connotations those genders evoke. This would imply that the conceptualisation of space takes systematically into consideration the feminist viewpoints, which happens most of the time these days. Although dominant discourse still find ways to relegate feminists views back to the compartments of the dangerous 'other'.

<sup>37</sup> Or to quote the slogan Massey is known for, we need to think of place with 'a global sense of the local, a global sense of place' (1994: 156). In other words, as long as we keep on thinking about place/home as bounded, singular and the site of nostalgia in which identity is fixed in place. The outside, the other, will remain feared.

<sup>38</sup> Greene here does not say feminist memory as such but speaks about 'memory work' in the feminist context. She quotes elements from a work by the West German Frigga Haugs, *Female Sexualisation*, that makes clear the work of memory women must undertake. She says: '[T]his explains why consciousness raising was – and is – crucial in feminist efforts. Consciousness raising is a re-membering, a bringing to mind of repressed parts of the self and experience. [...] By "memory work," the excavation of "ideologised" consciousness, we retrieve "elements of a new image of [self]. On the basis of which [we] may possibly be able to construct alternatives for the future." As Jane Flax suggests, "new memory is "a powerful impulse toward political action"' (Greene, 1991: 300– 301).

<sup>39</sup> 'A character in Drabble's *The Middle Ground* recalls a sunny summer Sunday spent among friends ten years earlier, in a time before their lives flew apart. She says, 'In ten years will I look back upon myself sitting at this table and think, Ah, I was happy then? The answer is Yes, you will look back and think "I was happy then," because there is something about memory that edits unpleasant details – the anxiety, irritation, fatigue, boredom, impatience, and pain of daily existence – in favor of the big picture, which is always done over with a flattering brush. Nostalgia is an uncritical acceptance of this rewriting, a view of the past as a foreign country where "they do things differently," in the celebrated opening of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-between* – one of those nostalgic postwar British novels that laments a lost pre-war innocence' (Greene, 1991: 297).

<sup>40</sup> 'In a nostalgic mode, the referent is seen "as an authentic origin or center from which to disparage the degenerate present' . Textual feminists subvert 'nostalgic rhetoric' by mining the past to discover play rather than place' (Greene, 1991: 305).

<sup>41</sup> 'Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is, of all these texts, the most extensive exploration of questions of memory, narrative and liberation. Anna has vowed never to write fiction again, she is so appalled by the "lying nostalgia" (GN, 63) of her best-selling first novel *The Frontiers of War*. All her efforts "to write the truth" leave her "realising it's not true" (GN, 274): "How do I know that what I 'remember' was what was important? What I remember was chosen by Anna,

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of twenty years ago. I don't know what this Anna of now would choose"(GN, 137) (Greene, 1991: 309).

<sup>42</sup> Sinead Mc Dermott says: 'Angelika Bammer in her discussion of 'home' and 'homesickness' emphasises the need to 'resist the preformed ideological stand that causes us publicly to reject [home] as *unheimlich* (monstruous, spooky) while secretly (Heimlich) nursing our longing to return' (Bammer 1992, xi). Bammer continues: 'One of the most painful lessons that feminists have learned from the struggle for reproductive rights is that we cannot cede the language of emotion (longing, pain and fear) to those on the political Right while we try to make do with an abstract language of civil rights' (1992, xi). McDermott concludes: '[R]ather than outlaw nostalgia as an improper emotion, then I want to ask how it can be recuperated as a concept for feminist discourse' (McDermott, 2002: 392).

<sup>43</sup> "“Restorative nostalgia” puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Restorative manifests itself in total reconstructions of the past. “Reflective nostalgia” dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. Reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time' (Boym, 2001: 41).

<sup>44</sup> Astrid says: '[M]y father used to grow flax here. [...] But then he sold it. My husband did. He sold the land to the council' (p.36). And then during the wedding: 'Afterwards, I watched the backs of my father and my husband as they were signing the ledger. They looked like business partners, signing a successfully completed transaction. I was eighteen years old' (Olsson, 2005: 100).

<sup>45</sup> This is a phenomenon we can testify in traditions such as genital mutilations towards women in some African countries, or in the foot binding tradition in old Chinese culture for example. These are oppressive gestures first made by men towards women and that women recuperated for their own, and transferred later as a traditional gesture between mothers and daughters. The wearing of the Muslim veil that is announced by so many Muslim women as a mark of freedom is no more than the proof of a violence made towards them originally by men, and then assimilated by women as a tool of power against men. The conflict between Muslim women on this issue shows how far their memory has been controlled against their good.

<sup>46</sup> In *Le Grand Voyage*, the scenario differs but still reflects the handicapped will of women. Thérèse the dutiful wife and mother, stays at home to the cost of Agnès. Home is the site where women perpetuate violence as they rage their frustration against each other, eventually pushing Agnès to escape.

<sup>47</sup> In *Le Grand Voyage*, Thérèse hides too, but in a different way to Astrid. She believes that her excessive femininity is her only salvation. It comforts her, but keeps her slave to an image that does not represent whom she really is. It is also used as a tool of control, a protective shield.

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<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as McDermott suggests: 'The traveler woman may be seen as an example of what Janet Wolff has termed the 'woman out of place' – the woman who disturbs the social order because she is not housed and so breaks the home/woman connection by which women are positioned under patriarchy' (McDermott, 2003: 274).

<sup>49</sup> Agnès makes this work by herself in remembering her mother's voice, in remembering her grandmother and in looking at her childhood.

<sup>50</sup> For Agnès, after displacement, the second metaphorical death is her experience of impotence and paralysis when wanting to write. She considers it as another death: her last death. This forces her into a frantic panic to find a resolution to all the unanswered questions still occupying her.

<sup>51</sup> 'On the day of the funeral I walked up the aisle behind Erica and James's father, who had flown in from London, but I was somewhere else, somewhere where the light didn't reach. [...] I registered everything, yet it seemed to have nothing to do with me. [...] There were friends from school, friends from university, from work. There were relatives. They all seemed to belong, seemed to have a place in the fabric that had been James's life' (Olsson, 2005: 178–179).

<sup>52</sup> Agnès as a child, in *Le Grand Voyage* looks at her mother arguing with her father and suddenly makes the vow to herself that she will never mother a child.

<sup>53</sup> In *Pictures of Displaced Girlhood*, Marianne Hirsch, too, acknowledges displacement as preceding emigration. It is in this way she can critique Eva Hoffman's uses of nostalgia in *Lost in Translation*. Knowing of her previous displacement gives to this new displacement through emigration a position of strength. Hirsch says:

'For me displacement and bilingualism preceded emigration, they are the conditions into which I was born. Even as a child, in the midst of those first affections so eloquently celebrated in *Lost in Translation*, I was already divided. If displacement is indeed an "exile from older certitudes of meaning" as Mark Krupnik suggests in the epigraph to his essay, then I was already born into "the wilderness." As I recognise these differences between us, I see that I can read Hoffman only as a pre-text for my own narrative of cultural displacement' (Hirsch, 1994: 74).

<sup>54</sup> We could look at displacement for women as a necessary 'longing'. Displacement is the answer for them to make the desired home away from the parameters of sameness, outside of the parameters that confined the home they had been bought up into.

I have no tangible proof in the way of a quantitative survey that could evaluate this rationale with answers given by women on a large scale. So far it is my readings of fiction, autobiographies or semi-autobiographies combined with my personal experience that leads me to think that displacement for women who chose migration is a way for them to make a home away from the parameters of sameness.

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In her text about *Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment*, Anne-Marie Fortier (2003) implies that gays and lesbians do not become 'strangers' when they leave home because of wanting to assert their difference. On the contrary, it is because they were strangers in their home, in the place where they grew up that their longing for a 'home' – to find their home – makes them realise they need to leave this original place to find their real home. A similar argument is found in the feminist movement. Fortier says that in the context of homosexual identity 'becoming a "stranger" is not a result of leaving home but, rather, was the cause of leaving home' (p.119). The estrangement was right there at the source of origin, at the place of departure, and motivated a strong and for some a definite rupture with home: the home that is commonly understood as a source of security, a place where identity finds location and space to evolve in time. Fortier argues that with migration what is widely conceived is that the feeling of estrangement is the result of leaving home or a space that was felt as home, but, in the case of queer migration's narratives, the estrangement was located in the original home. Fortier says: '[T]he movement, here, is a movement away from being estranged, which has triggered the migration in the first place' (p.118). And therefore the solution is not a "return 'home', or a return to a past, but the movement into a new 'home'" (p.118). So the place of destination is the desired outcome at the end of the journey, and Fortier wonders if there is the possibility of arrival, if the journey can indeed be completed. Along with Sinfield, whom she quotes, Fortier thinks in the case of queer narratives that the arrival is always suspended, 'stuck at the moment of emergence', unable to reconcile between the projection of a desired home and the home as the subject knows it: a function of heterosexuality: not the ideal location for gays or lesbians to inhabit. 'Home remains widely sentimentalised as a space of comfort and seamless belonging, indeed fetishised through the movement away from the familial home toward an imagined other space to be called 'home' (p.119).

In her interview (DVD for *Creativity in Exile*, 2004) Kapka Kassabova said: *Probably most of my young life I felt I didn't belong in Bulgaria not simply because of all the things that were denied to us but I don't know, I think it is a personal thing. I think I never really belonged there or anywhere but it started with this sense of being born in the wrong place, wanting to be somewhere else. Of course I had no idea where I wanted to be, preferably in the West, but it wasn't a defined notion of where I wanted to be, I just knew I was in the wrong place. So I practiced escapism in every possible form. Through watching movies, through burying myself in books, French literature when I started to study French at the French College, these were I guess ways of dealing with that feeling of – you could call it internal exile.*

In her interview with me, Linda Olsson says on the idea of displacement before emigration:

*I think I always felt like that in Sweden when I grew up because where we lived I had a different childhood from the others. My mother was very eccentric, she had no friends. We weren't even supposed to greet the neighbours because she thought they were not good enough for her and I did ballet and no-one where I lived did ballet, I did it four days a week which meant I was never out playing with the other children and when I did: I was sort of separate, I had different clothes, I looked strange I think. And that all came through my mother who did not want to be ordinary, she did not want to be like our neighbours or anybody else. So I think I always felt different. My old school class had a reunion a few years ago and it was interesting to talk to some of my classmates and discuss how we saw each other. They also felt that I was different. Some thought*

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*that I was full of myself because of being different. I was never bullied, just left out in peace but I was always the teachers' favourite and I was very good at school. And it was a working class environment where I grew up although it was a time of change. I was the first person on both sides of my family to go to university and that only happened in the early sixties when they abolished fees at university and you could borrow money for your sustenance. But I never had many friends. I had some good friends but not that many. I was never part of the group: I am not a group person I think.*

My circumstances and the reasons why I left France are completely different from Kassabova's. They are closer to Olsson's. But with both, what interested me is how hearing about their understanding of not belonging at such a young age echoed with my own experience and I wondered then if Kassabova had felt a stranger right from the beginning because of estrangement in the relationship with her mother during the formative period of her identity formation. It is more obvious with Olsson that she learnt to be a foreigner in her own home as her mother herself felt she did not belong to the local community. Eva Hoffman whose writings are more geared towards academia wrote a novel in 2001 – the only one so far and not often mentioned in her writing career. *The Secret* solely concentrates on mother/daughter relationship and their conflict. The daughter in it expresses her sense of estrangement from early childhood and believes it is because of her mother's secret life.

Because displacement begins with loss, a motherless child knows of the first loss. What is strange is that by displacing oneself even further away, we re-enact the loss – so we live in an everyday way as a necessary part of our make-up but also make ourselves more foreign by not being completely part of anything anymore. After twenty or thirty years in a place, we are still strangers to that new place. Even if we try to forget about this foreignness, about the tone of our accent or the difference in the way our features make our faces look at odds with the rest of the people living in this new place, the community reminds us of these things, inevitably, at some point. Make one small criticism and people take offence and remind you that you do not know what you are speaking about because you are not from 'here'. Worse is when your own countrymen tell you that you do not know what you are speaking about because you do not live there (in the natal country) anymore. So there is a no-win situation, which explains why often displaced person often remain on the fringe, on the borders rather than in the centre in which they can never be. Being elsewhere is the position adopted by many but for some and in particular for the women I spoke about I believe they had held this position of being elsewhere already in their childhood homes.

So I'd like to suggest that women who chose migration have a journey that is similar to the departure that is symptomatic of the original estrangement at home. Their original sense of not belonging in the family circle or, more so, their estrangement from the bonds that tie them with their mother, is the reason why they leave home in search of their real home. The motherless daughter is a homeless child that looks outwards to find a sense of security that is usually found in the nurturing a mother provides in the relationship with her family and in the homely feeling she gives to the location where the child's identity can develop.

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<sup>55</sup> 'Then, suddenly, he looked at me and asked if I had talked to my mother recently. After an awkward pause I told him no. It struck me that he looked disappointed' (Olsson, 2005: 207).

<sup>56</sup> Is mother home?

Olsson says in her interview (November 14 2008): 'When I look at both books, I suddenly realised that all mothers are absent one way or another and in my new book, *Sonata for Miriam*, the main character goes back to see the woman who was the mother of his child and who refused to be a mother and so gave him the child to bring up. My American publisher was really struggling with this character: he wanted me to rewrite her and change her. And I say I can't do that, this is how she is. I think that the notion that all women become automatically a wonderful mother when they have a child is a total illusion. I think there are a lot of women that are not suited or not capable of being good mothers.

As for Astrid – I don't know how many times I have been asked to explain what she does – I think there's a multitude of reasons, there is not one clear-cut reason why she kills her child. I think someone very practical would say that she had a post-partum depression and that also she identifies with the child and that she doesn't want the child to grow up the way she did and possibly she identifies with her mother and refuses not to be here to protect the child because her mother wasn't [here to protect her]. And lastly there might be an element of revenge, because what she sees is a perfectly normal, loving father looking at his baby with love. And she can take that from him because on the wedding night he says everything that is here is mine now, and this is something she can actually take. I think that is also part of it.'

<sup>57</sup> 'Parents have such a formidable power. They can protect you from all the pain in the world. Or inflict the hardest pain of all. And as children we accept what we get. Perhaps we believe that anything is better than that which we all fear the most.' 'Loneliness. Abandonment,' she said. 'But once you accept the fact that you have always been alone, and will always be, then your perspective can begin to change. You can become aware of the small kindnesses, the little comforts. Be grateful for them. And with time you will understand that there is nothing to fear. And much to be grateful for.' She lifted her glass and drank the last mouthful. 'For me, the realisation took a lifetime. Don't let it take you that long, Veronika' (Olsson, 2005:197).

<sup>58</sup> Astrid said. 'I am afraid of facing myself.'[...] Such a long wait. I allowed life to slip away while I nurtured my hatred inside this house. Now I realise I made it my prison. I told myself I was safe here. I told myself I had to wait for the house to become my own. I chained myself to the house. Now I can see that all these years I have waited to be released, when, all the time, the only bonds were those I made myself.' She looked at Veronika and her eyes were filled with such grief that Veronika had to look away. 'And now the time has come. I must face the truth. [...] I know now that it didn't begin with my husband. It was inside me already when I married him.' She sat silent, her head resting against the chair. 'It began in this house' (Olsson, 2005: 106).

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<sup>59</sup> Jane Gallop says: 'According to Kristeva, the relation to the mother is always, in some way, reproduced between women. That is the ghost which parenthetically spoils Irigaray's idyll. To say "Mother, I prefer a woman to you" is naively to believe that one could define femininity with no reference to maternity. It is naively to believe that one could ever totally separate the daughter from the mother, could define femininity with no reference to maternity' (Gallop, 1982: 116–117).

<sup>60</sup> Agnès sees solitude as liberating and empowering. She never marries, never has children, nor seems to have friends around. This is the image she gives at the end of her life.

<sup>61</sup> From Astrid's letter to Veronika: 'I would like you to take the time to get to know the house. I somehow think that you can bring to it what you brought to me. Life. I also think that perhaps the house can give you what you seem to be searching for. A home. Then whether you choose to make it your home, or just your quiet refuge from time to time, it will give you a place to call home. A place to leave from, and to return to. Whatever you decide, Veronika, it must be for you. Not for me, or anybody' (Olsson, 2005: 251).

<sup>62</sup> 'We first begin to understand the confusion facing the exile with regards to identity when we lose someone in our lives to death. This is further complicated by the addition of an unresolved tension or by the fact that we have often based our ideas of who we are in conflict or in opposition to the one lost. So, for instance, a mother who loses a child faces a real crisis of identity. Who is she now? Is she still a mother? Does she have enough of the self prior to motherhood left over to reconstitute a new one? [...] Sad and tragic as all this is [...], it is still occurring within the familiar territory, within the context of a clear physical sense of belonging or entitlement to belonging' (Abani, 2004: 26).



CHAP	TENSE	TIME OF THE YEAR	LOCATION	CHARACTERS	ACTIONS	RELATIONSHIP
1	PRESENT	MARCH 1 <sup>st</sup> day Cold winter	VERONIKA'S RENTED HOUSE WALK TO VILLAGE	VERONIKA Omniscient voice	Arrives after a long drive	
2	PRESENT	MARCH 1 <sup>st</sup> day Cold winter	ASTRID'S HOUSE	ASTRID Omniscient voice	Astrid watches veronica arriving from her window	A watches V from her house
3	PRESENT	2 MONTHS HAVE PASSED APRIL	VERONIKA'S KITCHEN	ASTRID & VERONICA Omniscient voice Dialogue	Astrid goes to Veronika's home to feed her – 1 <sup>st</sup> meeting Feeding Not talking except A: 1 sentence	Veronika's house reflects death Draws Astrid into house
4	PRESENT	3 DAYS OF DAZE PASS	VERONIKA'S BEDROOM THEN WALK TO RIVER	VERONICA & ASTRID Omniscient voice Dialogue	Veronika sleeps, dreams, then goes with Astrid for a walk to the river	Talking Evoke both their mothers

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

5	PAST		RIVER LYING ON THE GRASS	ASTRID 'I'	Remembers the story about her mother The last day she saw her before she dies	
6	PRESENT	ANNUNCIATION 25 March	ASTRID'S KITCHEN	BOTH Omniscient voice Dialogue	Veronika goes to Astrid for waffles and coffee after more days of sleep and 4 <sup>th</sup> dream She speaks about travel, book	
7	PAST		Still in Astrid's Kitchen	ASTRID 'I'	Remembers the story when she left home for the 1 <sup>st</sup> and last time to go to her grandfather	
8	PRESENT	PENTECOST 7 <sup>TH</sup> DAY AFTER EASTER SPRING 27 May	VISIT ASTRID'S HOUSE	ASTRID & VERONICA Omniscient voice Dialogue	Astrid shows Veronika the house. We get to see the house in terms of its history: patriarchal place	Friendship is opening with Spring arriving

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

9	PRESENT	Beginning of evening	VERONIKA'S KITCHEN & LOUNGE Traditional Swedish music	BOTH Omniscient voice Dialogue	Veronika receives Astrid for dinner. Bottle of wild strawberry liquor –the wild strawberry patch she used to take care behind her house which sends her back in time to the first patch	Patience, kindness and a non judgmental approach define their relationship
10	PAST		Still in Veronika's	ASTRID 'I'	Astrid remembers Lars she met when she was 16 during late summer – clearance of forest, strawberry patch, owl KILL THE BABY OWL	
11	PRESENT	End of night	Still in Veronika's	VERONIKA 'I'	Veronika speaks about memory Shards, fragments and then mentions James 2 PAGES CHAPTER	
12	PAST		Still in Veronika's	VERONIKA 'I'	First time we hear so much about Veronika's life London and her meeting with James and his departure back to NZ	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

13	PRESENT	Dawn they separate 2 weeks pass before they see again	ASTRID'S KITCHEN	VERONIKA & ASTRID Dialogue Omniscient voice	Veronika founds Astrid in a daze in the kitchen stunned by the knowledge her husband is dying in the rest home	Astrid's house reflects death Draws Veronika to it
14	PAST		IN ASTRID'S GARDEN	ASTRID 'I'	Astrid tells about her wedding night and how she forged hatred for the house	
15	PRESENT		Still in Astrid's garden	ASTRID & VERONIKA Dialogue Omniscient voice	Astrid faces her grief and pain and realises it started before her husband 2 PAGES CHAPTER	
16	PAST		Still in Astrid's garden	ASTRID 'I'	Astrid's painful memory of abuse by her father	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

17	PRESENT	Midsummer's Eve: the longest day of the year – symbolical of ending and rebirth	RESTHOME ASTRID DOUBLE BEDROOM 1 <sup>ST</sup> Floor	Omniscient voice + dialogue between the two + nurse & doctor	Astrid & Veronika go to the rest home for Ander's last night. He dies and in the morning Veronika tucks Astrid into the big bed upstairs	CLOSENESS: get mistaken for daughter mother by nurse then Veronika gives a cuddle to Astrid when husband dies They lie in bed together in foetal position
18	PAST	Morning Mid summer's Eve	IN ASTRID'S BED	VERONIKA 'I'	Veronika speaks about Johan and home in Sweden How she left Johan and Sweeden to go to James in NZ	
19	PRESENT	Morning Mid summer's Eve	IN ASTRID'S BED	ASTRID & VERONIKA Dialogue Omniscient voice	It is when Veronika tells Astrid she cannot remember Johan's face that Astrid tells her about her daughter SARA 2 PAGES CHAPTER	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

20	PAST	End of Morning Mid summer's Eve	IN ASTRID'S BED	ASTRID 'I'	Astrid recalls the beautiful day when Sara was born, then the threat her husband posed for Sara. Stops just before she runs away from house to forest to kill her daughter	
21	PRESENT	Afternoon Mid summer's Eve	VILLAGE Then SEAT BY THE RIVER away from crowd	Omniscient voice + Dialogue between the two	They both walk arm in arm to the village by the river to feast Mid summer flowers Veronika says she came to Sweden to escape her dreams	Very strong closeness Astrid holds Veronika's hand
22	PAST	Afternoon Mid summer's Eve	SEAT BY THE RIVER away from crowd	VERONIKA 'I'	She speaks about life in NZ with James, about their happiness	
23	PRESENT	Evening Mid summer's Eve	CEMETERY Then ASTRID'S KITCHEN	Omniscient voice + Astrid and Veronika dialogue	Astrid shows Veronika family graves: men/Sara Then Back in Astrid's kitchen Music Brahms triggers memories	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

24	PAST	Night passes Shortest night of the year	ASTRID'S KITCHEN	ASTRID 'I'	Tells how she killed Sara	
25	PRESENT	Morning twilight Mid summer day	1 <sup>st</sup> ASTRID'S KITCHEN 2 <sup>nd</sup> ASTRID'S BEDROOM	Omniscient voice Astrid speaks to & with Veronika	Astrid lets her pain explode and cries in Veronika's arms Astrid reveals she never cried for the little girl inside her and Veronika says she never found the words to express her pains at James death	2 <sup>nd</sup> time Veronika cuddles Astrid "Oh my dearest Astrid."
26	PAST	Mid summer day THE NEW DAY	ASTRID'S BEDROOM	VERONIKA 'I'	Retell the traumatic death of James and recall the fact that she could have stop the accident	
27	PRESENT	WEEKEND PASS MEET MONDAY	RESTHOME Then LAKE	BOTH in dialogue Omniscient voice	Both organise the funeral arrangements, Veronika then swims in the lake. They make plan for her birthday for the following week	When she left Astrid after telling V kisses A on forehead and A caresses V's cheeks

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

28	PAST	MONDAY afternoon	LAKE	VERONIKA 'I'	After James funeral, Veronika has a miscarriage then she leaves NZ to go to her dad in Japan. James mum gives her a photo James as a child	
29	PRESENT	FUNERAL DAY FOUR MONTHS in Sweden for Veronika	CHURCH Then CEMETERY Sara's grave	Omniscient voice and dialogue between the two women & priest	They both go to church for the funeral, only three old women of the village, the priest and the 2 undertakers. On the coffin for the last benediction, Astrid leaves her wedding ring	Help each other, V lift A with hand Caring through gestures & touch
30	PRESENT	Saturday 6 July: her birthday 31 years old Morning	SHOPPING MALL RESTAURANT	Omniscient voice, dialogue between the two	Wild strawberries for birthday breakfast, they go to restaurant, V speaks about her dad, A buys a swimsuit and they laugh together - complicity LONG CHAPTER: 6 pages	Mother/daughter 2 <sup>nd</sup> time they get mistaken for daughter/mother They have fun with swimsuit
31	PAST	Saturday 6 July: V's birthday Lunch	RESTAURANT' S GARDEN	VERONIKA 'I'	Veronika goes to her father - he is the only 'home' she has but in fact as soon as she arrives she wonders why she came. 'Why was I here?' Stays for a month, then back to Stockholm LONG CHAPTER: 6 pages	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart



32	PRESENT	Saturday 6 July: V's birthday Afternoon	LAKE ASTRID'S KITCHEN	VERONIKA & ASTRID Dialogue Omniscient voice	They go for a swim after lunch Veronika leads Astrid and gently holds her. They finished the celebration with diner at Astrid's home and Astrid gives Veronika a gift: her mother's diary LONG CHAPTER: 5 pages	REBIRTH FOR BOTH An exchange of complete trust. Astrid in the hands of V is reborn
33	PRESENT	SUMMER HAS TURNED. 1 <sup>st</sup> saturday Mid-August and then Autumn	LIFE HAS TAKEN ON RHYTHM VERONIKA'S KITCHEN FOREST	VERONIKA & ASTRID Dialogue Omniscient voice	Book is taking shape She tells Astrid she misses her dad, she also wants to go back to NZ for a visit They go to the forest to harvest mushrooms and it turns into pilgrimage to the clearing. They see the grey owl LONG CHAPTER: 4 pages	Veronica feels at peace resting in the present Autumn the beginning. Astrid's house is in order
34	PRESENT	All Saints Day 1 <sup>st</sup> Saturday of November Day previous to her departure At night it starts snowing	VERONIKA'S KITCHEN UPSTAIRS in her bedroom Walk to the river ASTRID'S KITCHEN for last diner	VERONIKA & ASTRID Dialogue Omniscient voice	V understands for the 1 <sup>st</sup> time she has made this new place home. She is sad to leave but has to meet dad day after in Stockholm. In her bedroom starts reading Sara's diary Loop with beginning walk to the river. Then one last diner LONG CHAPTER 6 pages	V placed her lips on A's forehead and kissed her

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

35	PRESENT	MARCH But evening clear and mild Spring early	COUPLE'S HOUSE CEMETERY	VERONIKA Dialogue with couple have A's keys Omniscient voice Astrid's voice remembered	Then once in the house, she makes her way through the darkness, her body knowing the place. Seating at the table she opens the letter Astrid left for her.	
36	PRESENT	Same night	ASTRID'S KITCHEN 'In the kitchen where it all began'	ASTRID'S PAST VOICE LETTER	Letter is dated January 2004 Astrid thanks her and gifted her with her house	
37	PRESENT	Same night Until 'It was time to go tobed'	ASTRID'S KITCHEN 'In the kitchen where it all began'	VERONIKA 'I'	The book finishes with Veronika saying the book is finished Let me sing you gentle songs	

Figure 1. *Let Me Sing You Gentle Songs* - Story Chart

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For the purpose of this exegesis, extracts from an interview I conducted with Linda Olsson at her home in Auckland (NZ) on 14 November 2008, are cited.

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# LE GRAND VOYAGE

A Creative Writing Manuscript submitted to  
Auckland University of Technology  
in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

2009

School of Communication Studies

Primary Supervisor: John Cranna

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## **CREATIVE WRITING MANUSCRIPT**

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. H. G. A. R. E. L.', written in a cursive style with a large loop at the end.

Candidate's signature



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the Master of Creative Writing director John Cranna for giving me the chance to be on the MCW, for his patience and teachings, for the talented 2008 MCW class – a wonderful adventure, the thorough editing work of John Barnett as well as his useful suggestions, Desna Jury – a very special thank you for her strength, kindness and vision, and finally my most grateful thanks to Leonhard Emmerling for his constant support and belief in my work, for surfing the waves with me.

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## **Abstract**

*Le Grand Voyage* is the story of Agnès, a French writer living in New Zealand whose increasing preoccupation with death, pushes her into a creative crisis. The sudden impotency she suffers propels her into thinking about the past she had escaped from by leaving her family home at a young age. For the first time in her life, she fully confronts herself with the pain she endured. Scenes of her childhood and youth, images of her family home, recollections of her grandmother and mother emerge as sequences in a long monologue. Until Sarah, her neighbour opens the door of her house.



*Le grand voyage*

---

1.

I cannot write anymore:

How can I explain? It is like a paralysis.

I still want to write. I still have needs to express, and ideas to share. They still come.

Images.

By waves most of the time, all at once, in a rush.

Suddenly I feel the urge to put down my thoughts, so I go to my room.

It's a nice space. My own, away from the rest of the house, upstairs under the roof. I open the computer, wait for the new page of a document to appear and then, nothing.

I stay there and I cannot move.

I stare at the white light, my fingers over the keyboard. And nothing comes.

Instead I hear my breathing getting shallow, hardly noticeable. I gauge the weight of my arms: heavy, purposeless tools in need of guidance. I feel the heat at the bottom of my spine, stuck, immobile in the comfort of my chair. The tingling sensation taking over my thighs, my knees getting harder; my calves and feet falling slowly into a freezing numbness.

I could read these symptoms as the fate of old age with its unavoidable decrepitude of flesh, the breakdown of the bones, but the coldness I suffer from is of another nature.

Then I look away at the sky through the window, analyse the clouds' formations, the changing colours in the horizon and ... the sensation is dreadful!

I don't know what happens!

I forget, swallowed in a loophole.

I forget how long I stay there in the same position. Where I am and what I was supposed to do.

I just look.

I look at the arrangement of things around me: the wooden table against the window where newspapers, bills and scribbled notepads pile up on one side. The photos, pencils, nail polish and dictionaries; the rosary, shells, stones, staples and half-opened sweets crowding the other side. And in the midst of it all, the empty blank screen of my laptop that has fallen into sleep mode.

I look around.

The small sofa in one corner of the room, with its tired cushions and used brown covers, and the books everywhere on the floor, on the chairs and in the overcrowded bookshelves that run all along the white painted wall.

The papers I have stuck to the other wall for the story I am meant to write. Possible plans, tangible scenarios, outlines of my life with its peaks and downfalls. I look and I don't understand.

What is this distance between the things and I?

This stupefaction cuts me off and keeps me stranded apart from everything, away in some unknown island of my being. As if I was not part anymore of all the things that surround me. As if I was not with them. Or not the cause that makes them the way they are. As if the life I had organised was nothing more than a makeshift, a décor that can vanish in the blink of an eye.

... Then dizziness takes over and I am on the edge of this world!

I see it! The deceit I had always feared.

All in cardboard, a world made of papier-mâché that I can perforate with my fists. I tear it apart. Shred its web of lies and lands of promises.

I see it for what it is: the obscure night, the emptiness of it all.

The void.

The nothing.

The absolute solitude.

The infinite silence.

Death!

...

Sitting there, in the silence of this room, I wait.

Yes, I think a lot about death these days.

The implication of dying and the point of it all!

I mean, really!

What is the point?

I used to think that it mattered.

That I had something important to say. Something worth leaving behind me. I used to think that people would enjoy my books, my stories, my words even.

You know!

That it would help them somehow and inspire them to find some kind of answers for their own life.

Bursts of vitality!

Neglectful arrogance!

This is what I call these moments of creative madness!

I mean ...

What was I thinking of?

What I was striving for?

Is that so important that people read my work? Is that some kind of compensation to make me feel better? To make me feel that I did something with my life? That my voice was worth hearing?

...

It scares me!

My own mortality terrifies me.

The sheer intimacy of death revolts me.

The idea that it ends. That life stops like that, as if someone was turning off a switch!

One small click! Gone! Boom! ...

All that for nothing! For a breath that is no more.

A life disappears in an instant.

I cannot bear it!

The unknown!

The unknown gives me vertigo.

...

And its coldness!

Death, let me tell you: I loathed it on sight!

Its intransigence.

Its abruptness. The way it desiccates everything, destroys its pulse, debases the dignity of one's good intentions.

It never left me. Its ugly taste always around my space as a reminder that my life is a suspended sentence, a probation time I need to fill, a meantime to occupy. I know it was up to me to fill this time.

I remember one day in particular.

One day when I had the clear sensation that it was all so ridiculous.



It was such a cold day. One of those freezing mornings in the depth of winter. The kind of winters Paris has sometimes with minus eleven for days on end. It was early, I remember, because the train station was still enveloped in that last darkness just before dawn breaks. When the sky's black purple light is about to turn into a crisp joyous blue and the birds have gone quiet, ready for the rapture of daylight. Except that on that day, the sky remained a thick grey carpet confusing the passing of the hours into a single time.

I was going to Paris. To do something, I don't know what, probably to sign some papers at the lawyer. There were so many things to do after my mother's death. We had just buried her next to my father and to all the others that piled up inside the family grave in the cemetery of Deuil, not far from the house.

I was waiting for the train on the quay of La Barre Ormesson. Steam was coming out of my mouth in small puffs. I could hear the muffled footsteps of people coming to the station one by one, and the murmured discussions of the few who cared to speak to each other. With more people arriving, the noise level slowly rose until we were all there in a unison rumble, waiting in a uniformed mass, gesticulating in the cold to warm up our weak bodies. We were so close to each other. Some were tapping their feet on the ground, others rubbing their hands. Heads were turning, looking here and there, eyes crossing without really seeing each other. It was too early yet to really look into each other's eyes. Minds were busy, already calculating the details of the coming day, lost in the things of yesterday night and planning for the hopes of tomorrow. Ready to walk, to go to the next point, to carve their way within the madding crowd.

This is when it became obvious to me.

When I saw it ... that we were all caught in it, oblivious to our main destination.

The realisation was daunting.

Vertiginous.

A feeling of intense loneliness devoured me at once.

I remember the impact was such that I lost my balance as if I had been struck down by the shock. My shoulder touched slightly the woman next to me and she turned and looked at me with such disdain that I assume she had recognised my despair.

There in the cold, the waiting became suddenly ridiculous! And with it, the desires of my youth, the laughter of yesterdays, my wishes, dreams, and this

incomprehensible fervour to love everything and everyone around me. It all went. All at once on this quay, in this cold morning with all these people looking ahead, waiting for the train to take them on their way.

Like air ... like a last moan, so fast. ... Suddenly even being cold appeared as a pure *folie*, a crazy attempt to make some noise about life.

For what?

Can You tell me!

I mean ... all this energy we throw away with so much intensity!

What is this? The grand brouhaha that life is?

A necessary commotion to prove to ourselves that we are different? Single, original, special creatures. Different?

Tell me!

I was so convinced of its purpose.

I answered questions and I thought I knew the answers.

I wrote down my thoughts and looked at them with the certitude of being right.

It made so much sense then. It was so essential.

Why does it resemble nothing?

...

Death.

She haunted me under different shapes, mostly in the form of boredom or solitude as I was growing up, sometimes disguised in the clamor of being and always leaving me hollow after her roaring passage.

I think she has come back for me. Lately her insistence is such that I cannot be mistaken, but strangely this time I did not recognise her right away.

She came as an image.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she entered my mind and hasn't left it since.

At first, I thought she was the start of my novel. An *idée fixe* that needed to be unthreaded; in the same way others had revealed themselves to me in the past. So I welcomed her, looked at her and nourished her in the private moments we allowed to each other.

Every day I waited with anticipation for her first line. I was giving her the time she needed but she never made her grand entrance. Not even in the form of a word! Four years, I waited! Finally in the habit of our silent life, it occurred to me that I had misunderstood the messages this image was holding.

She was empty.

There was nothing creative in her apparition, only the pervasiveness of such importance as I had allowed into my mind. Clear in its definition, but in reality absent. A surface on which I was bumping my head. Any leads I took were dead ends, always bringing me back to the mystery of her still figure.

Whenever I called on the image, she was waiting for me, standing at the centre of a dark wooden corridor. It was lighted from a source I could not see on the right side. I imagined from the dimness that enveloped her that the scene was taking place late in the afternoon. The light was so soft that I guessed the sun was shining either through the white veil of a small window or through an opaque glass panel in the upper part of a door. A late summer afternoon, I thought.

Although the corridor never changed, the interpretation of its style took me to different countries. Sometimes I found it typical of the Italian villas from the old parts of Florence. Sometimes it belonged to a Protestant parish on the cold plains of Sweden. At others it seemed more suited to an old farm in the green pastures of Picardie, but, always, it had a feeling of *déjà-vu*, with the sense of belonging to a long history of generations. Women mostly, a history of women.

So she was sitting, unperturbed by my presence. Head bowed over a book placed on her knees and opened to a page she never turned. Her eyes were fixed on one sentence. I knew it instinctively – ‘And God gave women tears to cry’ – although the sentence always remained a puzzle for me. Was it a message I needed to interpret? Her message to me. I wanted it to be the start of the story I wanted so much to write. So I thought of all the women I knew and all the tears that had been shed. I thought of mine, of my mother’s and my grandmother’s. Sometimes I even cried in her presence, for no reason, simply because it felt good.

She never lifted her head to look at me.

She never told me anything.

She seemed to have no particular age, just maturity and assertiveness in her stance that kept her distant from me. She had a modest agreeable figure, of average height and size, and was wearing discreet attire that I always had difficulty in remembering. Sometimes I thought it was a dark-colored skirt, a pale-blue cardigan and a simple white cotton shirt. At other times she seemed

to wear a short black dress with a black woollen scarf falling on her shoulders. Obviously these were not the details she wanted me to focus on.

What remained the most mesmerising aspect of this image and what drew me back to revisit it constantly was its silence, her stillness and her waiting next to this door on her left side.

Double wooden doors always closed.

Very impressive, very tall and heavy, I concluded when I noticed the thick lead hinges on which they were holding. Beautiful old doors, the kind belonging to a medieval castle, mysterious items that constantly intrigued my curiosity. I thought they were doors that kept secrets in, stories to be told.

I wanted so much to write a story about her and what was behind these doors. But there was none, of course.

This image was a figment of my imagination closed to any interpretations. The doors never opened and I never saw what was in the room behind. Another woman, a child, her family, a lover perhaps, or nothing, an abandoned room? I never managed to decipher the clues of this image. The beauty of its light, the softness of the colours, the agency of things charmed me to believe in a field of possibilities, but in reality she was nothing more than a nature morte.

Except for one day, and that was the last time I saw her so clearly.

I heard a child laughing, a little girl outside the house. The sound came from the side window, and I imagined she was walking down the road. In fact, I saw her. She was with an older woman who was holding her hand. She must have been around seven or ten at the most, with long black curls bouncing around her head. The old woman was slow, back bent forward, white short hair. They were going up the road as if they had just left the house.

At once, this reminded me of the way my grandmother and I must have looked like whenever we used to go to the cemetery, but I brushed the thought away immediately. I needed something else, something more exciting to write about. But this was it! After this small approach to an opening line, the image disappeared out of my memory, as fast as she had made her appearance. I was furious. She had only triggered my memory.

Now when I try to see her, the image is vague. I think she must have been the dream of a second. She was water, nothing else but a black lake.

But SHE is here, waiting for me and SHE leaves me no peace.

...

So we were heading towards the cemetery, my grandmother and I.

Two or three days of each week we went there to visit her husband and all the others of her family. This ritual went on while I was under her care, as long as she could walk.

The cemetery was not far from her house, one straight road, with no detour.

We pulled the green gates, the large heavy doors that protect her house.

My hand is in her hand. On the archway, above our heads, her name is engraved in the stone: 'Villa Germaine'. I look at the street with pride and check if anyone sees us, but it is a quiet morning wrapped up in a pale grey sky. With autumn coming to its end, life hangs in-between, delaying for a while its inevitable fall in the cold of winter. Everything around us slowly sinks in silence as if wanting us to take notice of all the small details before the great stillness plants its claws inside them.

The key that locks the gates weighs awkwardly inside my grandmother's hand. Too large, too used, its rust grits and grunts in the keyhole, and the simple task of shutting the door becomes a concentrated effort that needs the full strength of her body and her two hands. I look at her in awe. She lets go of my hand and for a while it hangs in the air uncertain where to move next. I see her back, round and small against the tall doors. She pushes the doors and pushes them again. It seems to go on for some time before she mumbles some old things between her teeth and finally turns back to the street. Then she puts the set of keys back inside her basket, and the heads of the last white roses she had cut early this morning sway up and down as we start our slow walk towards the cemetery.

A few cars pass by, hardly noticeable, on their way up the road where life is busy with its usual weekly routine. It is the time when the children of St Mary's school are seating in rows of two, waiting patiently for Mlle Mercier to enter the classroom while reciting their tables of three. Soon she will pass next to each wooden desk and fill the pupils' flasks with enough blue ink to keep their fountain pens running for the rest of the week. It is also the time, on the other side of the road, for *l'abbé* Legrand to swap the white chasuble of his lonely morning masses for the heavy black robe of his daily duties. Already he has left Notre Dame to visit the first soul in the long list of those in need of redemption. Finally at *la boulangerie de l'église* next to the church, it is the time for Madame

René to push the glass entrance door. She glances inside, nods at the familiar faces, the regular audience of neighbourhood housewives she meets there every morning, inspects the fresh bread stacked in orderly rows and says in a boisterous exclamation: '*Enfin* Josette! Your baguettes are burnt again! Is your husband sleeping in the kiln these days?'

Heads suddenly turn around on every side. She has ignited a poultry fight and voices now rise in their usual high-pitched litany: the strident bickering over the prices of things, the way life goes. Every day they keep adding to the well-rehearsed complaints of yesterday. Behind the counter Josette thinks of her husband down in the kiln: 'Where is the world going, Mesdames?' she says with a burst of reproach, and she sells another burnt baguette. They open their purses, fingers fiddle for small change, and so they go until tomorrow. One by one, bread tucked up under the arms or inside their shopping bags, thinking about the things they can fix, order and clean. They hurry back home, back to the territory they know and feel they control.

The town where I was born has always known its way. Today, like yesterday, everything has its place and runs to the undisturbed rhythm of the church bells. When I hear them resounding, I think of all the people around me hearing them too. I try to imagine what they do, what they say to each other, and if they stop like I do, to count the rings. *Un, deux, trois* ... it's ten o'clock. My hand in my grandmother's hand, I adjust my steps to her own rhythm; away from the business of life we make the long journey towards the cemetery.

'Come on, *p'tite!*' she says.

The white façade of the Villa Germaine slowly fades away in the corner of my eyes. Fixed in the ground, while we move on, it stands there with the stubborn grace of daring time. With a glance behind me, I can still see the high windows of the top floor, mute openings behind laced curtains concealing the secret world of my imagination. There, I know a princess runs wild on her horse chasing cowboys, Indians and witches, protecting fiercely the silence of her castle. There, her crinoline flaps like wings when rushing up and down the flight of stairs or rests around her in a wave of frou-frou when she finally embraces her prince who lives in the attic. He is handsome. He was always handsome in her dreams. They hid together inside cartons full of plastic bags, get married cross-legged underneath tables, and count their children sleeping in shoeboxes.

They have named three already: Beatrice, Sophie and Mouchette. They won't have boys. Princesses don't like boys.

'Not so fast, *p'tite*.'

My grandmother's hand is fragile in mine. I want to hold it tight so it will not slip out of my grip. But I am scared I might hurt the protuberant bones that roll up and down underneath her skin. Mountains, craters, ravines that separate me from her and make the prospect of getting old an incomprehensible journey, a daunting calamity I want to fight with all my strength. I look at the purple stains, the thick veins, the papery skin, the split nails that twist their growth away from their sockets. And there, where skin and nails meet, where the soap didn't manage to go, I see the black soil of her garden, stuck in a thin line.

'Don't grow old,' she often says while rubbing her sore knuckles.

'No I won't,' I want to tell her. I know I won't.

She walks, her head down, back bent forward with a little hump on her right side in-between her shoulders. She is careful of where she puts her feet, and I look out for the holes in the footpaths, the paving out of place, the branches that have fallen from the trees or the yellow plastic cables that have popped out of the ground since men last worked on the telephone lines.

Her black boots are so tightly fastened that her skinny ankles appear like they will break at anytime. She wears the same grey wool coat she always wears when we leave the house. It is a sober cut of simple straight lines that fall shapelessly against her body and stop just underneath her knees. The hem of her black skirt plumps out the coat and she occasionally stops to swiftly re-adjust the skirt around her waist. She also checks a few times that her scarf still covers up her neck properly. It is lavender with pale-blue flowers like the blouse she has underneath her grey-blue knitted cardigan. The colours of mourning, the ones she always worn since her husband died fifteen years before this day. The ones I always saw her wearing.

At once the young couple photographed on their wedding day, a photo that she has placed on the dressing table in her bedroom, come back to my mind. I think of the tall man with long moustaches and how she is holding his arm so timidly. They are both standing on this exact same street we are now, but it was paved with cobblestones and Germaine was tall and slim then. Her pearl white silk dress was tied in the fashion of the time with a large belt just underneath her breast. From there, the fabric fell in loose waves around her ankles showing a

delicate pair of white satin shoes. She looked like a Roman maiden, fine ribbons securing a laced veil around her head and letting locks of auburn hair curl around her youthful smile. Long white gloves covered the arms that hold Maurice. He was twenty-two, she was twenty. It was 1919, when half of Europe was in mourning. I never met him. He died at sixty only three months before I was born.

We walk. My grandmother doesn't speak. She thinks of him, I hope. I imagine them together as they were without me in this world. She must believe she will meet him again. She still loves him; there is no doubt but will he be there to receive her. It sends a chill down my spine, and I think, Where would I be this very moment if Germaine had never met Maurice? ... Or if my mother had never met my father? ... And what will the man I will marry look like? What is he doing right this minute? Is he thinking about me, by some coincidence, even though he doesn't know me? Does it show on his face, right now?

We are walking towards the cemetery.

Houses stand tall one after one, on each side of the road. Old dark-stone houses hiding behind gates, walls of shrubs and trees. Private properties, people like hiding their lives from the view of others in this town, keeping their life for themselves and speculating about the lives of others. When we pass by Madame Drouot's house, she is out, sweeping the stairs of her *perron*.

'*Bonjour* Madame Drouot!' I shout across the gate. She waves to us, but my grandmother doesn't reply. Her nose is running and she is busy unfolding her pink handkerchief. Then, in a laborious effort, she lifts her head and blows her nose loudly towards the house. I look at Mme Drouot with embarrassment, but she is already back cleaning her stairs.

'*Ah la la! Bon sang de nez qui goutte toujours!*' My grandmother says with a smile. She wipes her nose and we resume our walk. Her eyes staring at the ground, she leans to the right and then to the left. I tiptoe in cadence with the same uncertainty. The Schneider's dog gives me a big fright. He always does, with his black curly fur, ready for us behind his tree trunk, white teeth shining ferociously to the sky. I squeeze my grandmother's hand and look up at the road. It is narrowing down towards its end. A few late leaves still drop out from the trees mostly barren. The air around is getting thick with dampness.

We have arrived.



My grandmother pushes the gates of the cemetery. They creak with a long howl that scares a couple of birds into a sudden flight. The sky has evolved with the morning ticking away. It is now one big shapeless cloud that refuses to move, straining our little steps in its merciless embrace.

We have entered.

I check the scene for any change, but it still looks the same as it did the last time we came here. The cemetery is oblivious to the colours of the sky, the time of the day, the passing seasons or the marks we leave when we cross its paths. It remains in order, in place, in peaceful rows of tombs that streak the landscape in long dark shadows. So many of them, tirelessly spreading so far away from us that I never bother going anywhere else but where my grandmother takes me.

Now she bends low down to reach for a water can and fills it up with water. I follow her every move. Basket in one hand, the water can in the other, she goes ahead me, shuffling with each footstep, walking down the white gravel that covers the path towards her family chapel. She must be thinking of him.

We are only a few steps away now, and the chapel is now apparent, on the right side of the middle lane, not far from the cemetery's entrance. 'A weird idea,' I always thought, 'to pile up the dead underneath such a small house'. Built in the shape of an old temple with the creamy calcareous stones of the area, it casts a lonesome shade over the flat stones more humbly parked around it.

In the distance, a few black silhouettes bow over tombs. Others navigate quietly along the alleys. If you are young or old, this place imposes a tranquil pace on any living soul. Here the air is empty. Memories take their flight. The signs that constitute my everyday vocabulary are inexistent. Even my grandmother becomes someone I don't recognise.

I twiddle with the buttons of my coat, toss a few pebbles with my shoes, walk around the graves, admire their floral arrangements, check the names, look at the loving messages families have left next to the portraits of the ones lying in the ground and, finally, find my favorite spot: the only one that always calls me back, the abandoned grave.

Its stark appearance, by contrast to my ancestors' tomb and the ones surrounding, never ceases to arouse my curiosity. Again I look for the name somewhere on the granite stone, but day after day the name plate disappears, eaten by invading layers of brown moss. The rusted cross leans to the side,

pointing one arm towards the anonymous soul. Not one thought for the memory of this corpse, no one to pay this tomb the gratitude of a single visit. Who lies there forgotten to this world?

When I turn back towards our family chapel, my grandmother is out of sight. Her basket sits unattended on the first step and the white roses have disappeared with the water can.

She has entered the chapel without a noise. The door is left ajar with only a small space for me to observe her shadow chasing the shafts of coloured lights from the stained-glass window. Along the sidewall, they make the golden letters for the names and dates engraved on the white marble tiles flicker like in a lottery game.

Now I hear the rambling noises she causes while cleaning the small space. They comfort me instantly in their ordinariness. The grinding sound heavy porcelain pots make when they are moved along and they scrape the marble altar; the sharp clicking of the secateurs when they cut the stalks of the white roses; the slow dripping of water filling the vases, and the rhythmical scratching the bristles make when the broom dusts the stone floor.

I listen again. And I recognise the sharp twist of a handle. She has now opened the stained-glass window. A whistling draft of cold air follows immediately and burns my eyes on its way out. Then there is nothing. She makes no more noise, nor does she seem to move anymore. She prays for them, I think, and looks at the names around her, caring about those underneath her feet. Except for the few crows nagging at each other in the distance and tormenting my confidence, the place is quiet. I wait. I stare at the door. I look around and see the barren tomb standing out in this oppressing landscape. There is safety in this peacefulness, but, with the cold creeping along my legs, I feel the pressing need to go back home. The clattering of my teeth resonates inside my ears like cold drops of water falling against a window. Yet inside her small chapel, my grandmother seems to have forgotten about life on the other side of the door. I give it a small knock. She answers with the swishing noise her skirt makes when it brushes against her nylon tights.

My toes are freezing. I glance one more time behind me. Will there still be enough room left in this chapel when my time is up? Who will decide my fate and care enough to refresh the flowers on my tomb?

*'Ne reste pas dans mes jambes!'* my grandmother says on opening the door.

She is right there in front of me, taller than before, I think. Her forehead is frowning, her sharp blue eyes squinting behind her glasses. She pushes me away from the door and points at the water can, for me to take it. Did she cry for him? She takes her basket, locks the door, gives me another short push on the back, down the stair, onto the path and then reaches for my hand.

'Not so fast, *p'tite!*'

...

What defines a moment of happiness?

Sometimes what I remember seems so uneventful, yet I hold onto it as proof there really was happiness.

I wanted to write about her, the maternal continent.

I wanted to travel the world to discover our islands of happiness.

My hand in my mother's hand.

She used to tickle the inside of my hand.

Going together to Paris was such an assurance of happiness. But in my memory it only happened once. It was our game en route to the train station.

Her way to share her excitement with me.

My hand in hers, her middle finger would plunge in the cup our two hands formed and wriggle it on the inside of my palm. I was laughing, even if it didn't tickle. She was laughing. Just the two of us going away happy, hand in hand.

All I wished for was that she laughed forever.

I could say: 'This was happiness!'

A demonstration of motherly love, a lie I learnt to play with her and I reproduced later when she needed to hold my hand.

Walking towards the train station, I wanted to write about her.

My mother told me once that as soon as I could walk, I was gone. She could never find me, I was always somewhere else but home. She said it made her furious. 'It was such an embarrassment,' she told me once on the phone. 'Did you have to do that?' She had to go to the neighbours, knock at their doors, enquire about my whereabouts, and eventually bring me back home crying while their benevolent smiles followed our backs.

I can't remember I was three. I think.

Later my father told me that if I could have gone to the moon, I would have.

'Far was never far enough away from your mother,' I remember him saying. He was crying.

I guess I ran. I learnt to run like the others, because of fear most probably!

Isn't it fear that makes us run everywhere, to snatch a small corner of this world in the middle of the herd that goes on and never stops?

Because of fear ... I ran.

I ran as fast as I could.

And now slowly scroll the garden of my memories in splashes of colors.

On each side of my eyes, I see the juicy yellow plums rolling in the grass, their skin still hot from a full day of sun, the fine soft hair covering the green almond shells in the almond tree, the red acid grapes of the gooseberries, pear branches creeping along the stone walls like distorted arteries, the parterre of raspberries and strawberries, clouds of bees around sweating dark figs, lilies of the valley crowning the foot of the oak tree, the white roses fading under a Sunday afternoon sun, generously bowing from the weight of their bloom and digging for me a scented path made only for queens. Now on my left comes the greenhouse with its intoxicating odors of dry mud, young shoots of secret species, small cactuses with menacing spines, broken pieces of pots on the dusty ground and packets of promising seeds on the wooden shelves. Next to it is the laundry embalmed with Persil powder and pungent smells of ammonia and bleaching liquids, its antique washing machine heavy and large like a pedestal praising progress in the centre of the old room, and the dryer, an instrument of torture by comparison, where clothes are slowly twisted in by cranking the handle with a strong hand. On the opposite side, what used to be the garage, now an empty dark place still extending whiffs of cold grease, no longer for the cars but to lubricate my grandmother's gardening tools. I glanced in furtively but did not go inside because I ran to see her.

I run.

I will run up the white stone stairs, shoo the cat on my way in and enter the kitchen.

Open the back door without making any noise.

And I will wait.

I wait in the silence of the corridor, close to the coat hanger where the black umbrella hides behind her worn-out jackets and a pair of muddy gumboots sits expectantly on the tiled floor.

I waited.

I wait, in the silence she makes, my heart beating in anticipation of seeing her again as she was, as she always is, ready for the remainder of her life to end.

Here in the kitchen, seating next to the table and still enveloped in the sweet and sour smells of vinegar for the preserved gherkins and boiled plums for the winter jams.

I will see her.

I see her, my grandmother.

Bending in full concentration over the minutiae of her needlework, fingers busy brushing off the green pickles, one by one, hands lifting the brass casserole to pour the hot fruits inside the sterilised pots.

The gestures of everyday,

I followed the autumn afternoon sun bathing the kitchen with its light, its gentle rays meandering in shiny paths along the faded yellow-painted walls.

There I will see these sparks of life caressing her thin white hair, guiding her skeleton hand through the cotton threads.

I will see.

I see her.

Underneath her blue apron, a carefully ironed lavender shirt, a dark-grey cotton skirt, flesh-coloured tights – the thick opaque ones for her varicose veins – and the woollen sleepers stretched in the shape of her rheumatoid feet.

In one of her pockets, I know, there is an handkerchief perfumed with the eau de cologne *Bien Être*, neatly folded, just in case.

In the doorframe, I remained.

Here I wait.

Until she notices I am here, I will remain still.

Then she lifted her head with no hurry, looked at me from behind her glasses, and I saw her dark-blue eyes squinting to recognise me,

And the corner of her mouth slowly moving, her face slowly glowing.

And she said, 'Where have you been all this time?'

To invite me into the silence of her death.

...

Who knows when the first thought of death enters one's mind?

At what age exactly does it start to nibble at each one of our breaths?

I was never able to remove the fear I caught inside my grandmother's eyes when she knew there was nothing more she could do except to be and wait for it.

Her three daughters were there, surrounding the small carcass she had become. Two of them were holding her hands and caressing her hair, the other wiping the foam dripping out of her mouth with each exhalation of air.

Her breathing was loud and tormented. Unbearable to listen to.

I was standing at the end of her bed, petrified.

My thoughts.

My attention.

All my life tended towards that moment, consumed in what seemed to go on forever then.

In reality, I cannot remember how long it went on for. The memory my childhood kept has removed the order of things and the actual length of each thing happening to me during that time.

I forgot the before. I forgot the after.

I remember only the intensity of her struggle.

They had put her in the lounge downstairs on a small one-person bed. It was easier to care for her that way, rather than running up and down the stairs from her bedroom to the kitchen. I remember at the time thinking how small the bed looked, and so unworthy of her for such a determining moment in her life. I thought of her wide double bed and her dark-blue bedroom that had a solemnity and coldness more appropriate for the occasion.

It was a huge room I had often been scared of as a child and where I rarely entered unaccompanied. It had two high-ceiling windows flanked on opposite walls, one opening to the front of the house, the other to the back where the garden spread for acres. Because she usually kept their thick curtains half-closed through out the day, the room was always filled with a dim light that helped it keep its mysteries to itself. It was a necessary measure, she said, to protect the drapes and textures covering the walls from fading away. And indeed the blue remained dark with overpowering intensity throughout my grandmother's life in that house.

For all the time I spent in her, I only saw my grandmother once sleeping in her bed. I must have woken up very early that day. I couldn't detect any of the usual sounds and coffee smells that were part of our morning customs, so I walked

towards her bedroom and noticed her door wide open. Light was coming through the stairway windows and was enough for me to see inside. I stood at the door frame and stared at my grandmother's bed. She was hardly noticeable, her head carving a riddle at the bottom of a thick square pillow, and her body a tiny small bulge on one side of the bed, while the other side on her left was empty, untouched and so wide in comparison. The bedding looked surprisingly tidy after a full night of sleep and I wondered if she ever moved once her eyes shut. The room hung in silence. The large dressing table opposite the wardrobe, the small padded bench seat next to one of the windows, the carpets on the floors, the golden chandelier in the centre of the ceiling and the large portrait of a naked baby on a fur skin hanging opposite her bed: all were lost into deep sleep that morning.

After her funeral I went back upstairs to cry in private, away from the family. I sat exactly where I had seen her sleeping and remembered the mounting anguish I felt that morning. Nothing was moving: not her body, not her head, nor the rest of the house, only the sunlight casting the branches of the trees as dancing shadows on the parquet in front of my feet. Certainly the first time I was touched with the uncertainties of life, the inconceivable fate that awaited her and after her, me.

She was my mother.

In the lounge where she lain on her last day, my aunts had shut the shutters and the curtains.

Well, I think they had. Or perhaps it was full daylight.

I cannot remember. It seemed that only one small light was coming from somewhere around her, painting her face with terrifying shadows of anxiety and rendering the silent movements of my aunts into a danse macabre.

I looked and waited. There was nothing else to do but to wait.

When her eyes locked into mine, when her head lifted up to reach for the last breath her body finally took and never expelled, an indelible knowing pierced my heart.

Sharp and instantaneous, I knew at once that she wanted me to see it.

In all its grandeur and its ugliness.

Her last gift for me. To keep with me until my death. To lock her inside me.

Fear.

Fear I saw first I think, but it was so much more than that.

It was strength too and determination.

It was willingness and abandon.

Anger, regret, sorrow and love. Yes! An urgency to love in that last moment, as if she had suddenly realised it was her last chance at it.

A shiver of consciousness!

To love maybe like she had never loved before. Or to love again as she had loved only once. To love maybe, as she could see then in the clarity of death what love really was.

Or was it the envy?

Her envy and jealousy in seeing me there standing in front of her? Ready to live, to let her go and move away from her eyesight, from her desperate grip.

*'Ne reste pas dans mes jambes,'* She always told me.

Where did she go, in that moment?

What did she think of, in that instant?

What did her eyes ask me that I never could answer?

After that, there was nothing left. She had sucked in everything around her. Everything I had known and shared of her life. We were left alone to reconstruct the pieces of ourselves. And her house became emptied of her, full of anonymity and strangeness.

Her house, still as we knew it when she could mind her own home, with everything as she had left it before she died. Yet her presence had vanished.

This air, this glow she had imbued each object with, each piece of furniture, even the dust in the corners or the water dripping from the tap. Death had turned her home into a vacant container that was showing off her life with an indecency that made me shudder. Never again would I see her going down the stairs with her old age slowness, painfully walking one step after another, sitting in the silence of the kitchen waiting for the hours to pass or walking in the paths of her garden to cut the fresh blossoms of white roses, check the parterres of lettuces, radishes and potatoes.

It had become someone else's home.

The familiar was now so foreign, so remote.

Eventually my mother and her siblings decided to sell my grandmother's house.

To sell the only home I had.



Her garden was too big, making the price for selling too high, so they cut her garden in three parcels. A neighbour took one piece and my parents the other; they built a wall and with it shut the door on my childhood.

They pulled out the last anchor that had kept me tied to this ground.

I had to run.

...

'Hold on, *p'tite*!

And she sang:

*'Bateau sur l'eau,*

*La rivière, la rivière.'*

I would ride her knees, hold her hands and abandon myself to the rocking of her body. Behind her glasses, her blue eyes were smiling inside mine. Small beams of joy I was sharing with her. She would sing the lullaby slowly at first, teasing my patience. I would hold my breath and listen to her voice stressing each word.

*'Bateau sur l'eau,*

*La rivière au bord de l'eau.'*

It was easy to memorise, four sentences repeated over and over, as I balanced my body back and forth. When she stretched her arms, I would lean with precariousness over the black and white tiles that covered the kitchen floor. I would laugh at the danger knowing that, straight away, she would pull me back close to her face. Whilst she marvelled at my excitement and joined me in laughter, her wide-open mouth would let me glimpse her rotten teeth. They were her wiggly teeth, the ones she used to move with her fingers just for me. They were our secret, little gems presiding with victory at the entrance of her mouth. The grand wonders of her age. I wanted so much to understand.

*'Bateau sur l'eau,*

*La rivière, la rivière.'*

Suddenly her pace would change. With her voice reaching deeper intensities, I would feel her grip tightening my hands. My heart would beat stronger as she rocked me faster and faster. As my bottom would start sliding left and right and then back and forth, I would lock my feet behind her calves and squeeze my knees against her bony thighs. I knew then, it wouldn't be long for the end of the song to come, the best part of the game.

*'Bateau sur l'eau,*

*La rivière au bord de l'eau.'*

'More Minette, more!' I would shout in laughter, gasping for air.

My eyes became heavy, intoxicated by the movement and the repetitive tune, and would finally let go of her gaze. My head would fall backward. I would see the white ceiling, the upside-down cupboards behind me passing by, and at last they would surrender, closing in defeat.

*'Bateau sur l'eau*

*La rivière et ... PLOUF dans l'eau!'*

Thrown in the air, loud and clear, and lasting as long as her breath permitted it: *'Plouf'* would bounce across the kitchen walls. At once, her legs would open in a huge crevasse where I would drop abruptly. And after checking I was all right, she would lift me back up in no time. Nestled into her arms, we would celebrate my fall in an embrace that mixed kisses and the retelling of the whole event. Her breath would warm up my neck and tickle my skin. Slowly, we would both regain our calm and then I would check her eyes for the assurance of another beginning. Hidden underneath her smile, I would find it and we would re-enter our frantic cadence all over again.

'Ok, that's it now!'

This time, she was leaning over me, her hands still holding mine with a firmness that appeared suddenly inadequate. I had my legs tangled up in between hers and my bottom was feeling the cold tiles. Her face had lost all the traces of the fun we had just shared. Her eyes had turned the colour they used to have during cold winters. I could see her skin, delicate and pale, and the veins pulsating underneath her cheeks; especially around her temples. The game was over.

'You're too heavy, *p'tite*.'

She looked bothered. I untangled myself in silence as if we had never played that silly game.

After that day, later on, she opened a box of dominos. A new game we played like real adults, facing each other in our respective seats at the kitchen table. It was a silent game, a reasonable one with long pauses for concentration. Whenever the other was taking too long to think, we would sip on a glass of water and look pensively around the room. It was very exciting at first, but then after she had taught me how to play, I sensed she didn't really like the game.

She would always do her embroidery or her knitting while waiting between each one of my moves. I liked the patterns the black and white blocks made when I placed them at random. Snakes, towers, arrows! The possibilities were fascinating, but I found counting boring. My progress with numbers was slow.

‘My turn, Minette?’

She would slowly lift her head away from her work. I could see her eyes above her glasses, sneaking a quick look at the domino I had just put with keen pride, shifting towards her blocks, and then going back to the material that was covering her knees.

‘Na!’

It would be time to reach for my drink and look at her. She seemed so far away.

‘Your turn, Minette!’

Eventually, when my drinking would become too noisy, she would free a reluctant hand from her wool and place a domino so quickly next to mine that I would frown at her in frustration.

‘Not fair ...’

But she would not see with her head already down focusing on her task. So, little by little, without speaking about it, neither she nor I went to the lounge to fetch the box of dominos. It remained tucked away with the other ‘adult’s’ games in the cupboard draw. And one day, we forgot completely about them. I was growing up.

...

The list goes on.

First there was my forefathers and foremothers, my grandfather, then my grandmother, my aunts and uncle, distant and close cousins, my father, my mother.

The stuff of everybody’s life!

The mortuary chronology!

My impotence?

It started sometimes around one of these deaths I think.

Or when I thought of death first. Yes, a slow process towards the definite paralysis.

Or was it after my father’s death? My mother’s death, perhaps?

Or the emptying of their houses: my grandmother's, my aunt's, throwing away what they had accumulated during their lives. Hesitating between what to keep and what to reject, what had a sentimental value or a financial attractiveness. The agony of choice one is left with to bring order to the other one's death!

Or did it start when I had to empty my parents' house, their home, and sell it.

I got rid of everything that was inside except for a few things. Nothing much really, photos, books mainly, and knickknacks.

You know, the kind of things that you can hold inside your hands and, when you look at them, they remind you instantly of a story. They bring you back there, with all their emotional entanglements, to that particular moment in time.

Take one example, for instance.

This small glass I hold in the cup of my hand.

Do you remember?

This fine piece of artistry with its golden leaves painted over so delicately in the upper part of its body.

It is a beautiful piece! See how the light shines through it, how the intricacies of the design mesmerise.

Yet I know that for anyone else it represents nothing more than a standard glass, one typical for Turkish coffee. However, for me, it is the living testimony of an event that took place between my mother Thérèse and the child I was then.

Thérèse, my mother.

A memory that still beams with its aura of doubt and incomprehension; a puzzle that has survived up until now with its so many questions unanswered. When I look at the glass now, beauty and ugliness collapse into one blurry picture, where tears and shouts emerge out of a stifled past, where hands pull a child's hair and eyes humiliate a crying girl with red hot cheeks.

The daughter.

Was there perverseness and wilfulness of attitude in many of the things this child did? Was she really the terrible girl Thérèse spoke about all the time?

'I tell you, she is hard work, this one.'

What did really happen on that beautiful afternoon I spent entertaining myself alone in the living room? Did I break on purpose one of the glasses that made up the series of six? A nice set of glasses, I must admit.

I don't understand the past.

Fixations, cut out pieces, they are stories swimming in an empty vast space. They do not make sense. Short and brief splashes of light inside the darkness of my mind, they float with no continuity. They resurface at random, like independent short stories that do not belong to a continuous story. Characters and places reappear again and again but often with a feeling of strangeness as if every time was a first time.

Sometimes I think I loose my memory.

I have to write.

Even if my mother could tell me, it would only be one of her versions.

Conveniently, she was losing her mind, she said.

Even if I could remember, it would only be one of *my* versions.

I don't want to remember. I think I remember too much.

So many useless details jamming up my memory. They burden my life and I want to burn this box full of old papers. Spelling mistakes, rubbed-out words, greasy stains, coffee marks, shiny lies. I cannot remove them.

I cannot write.

Whenever I put this glass against the light, the sparkles flash and remind me of the uncertainty of truth in the world my mother had created around us. Where everything had its place, where she had taken charge of all the words for us.

When I emptied her house, I decided to only keep one glass.

I must have been a bad girl. I threw the others in the rubbish trunk that stood outside on the street. I listened to them as they crashed one by one on top of all the other things I had already thrown, and thought of her.

I was a bad girl. How she would have hated me for breaking up the remaining treasures she had kept for such a long time. And I saw flowing streams of movements, faces, voices, gestures, exclamations, objects, parts of scenery, landscape, light and shade.

My memory of her.

I thought writing would make sense of these scratches I bear inside my soul.

Writing to clean things up, to dust the particles cumulating around these moments. I invented so many beginnings, so many endings, tied up the threads together to give me the illusion of coherence and meaning.

The only one I tricked was me.

I was stuck, never going further ahead than a series of beginnings.

Could life have only been a series of beginnings?

Rehearsing over and over the same sentence, the one thing we cannot manage to formulate?

The only sentence we are meant to live.

Silly really, the things I keep with me!

What I held onto. What I didn't want to let go of. Or what I chose to take in order never to forget. Was I so different from my mother and hers before?

I have them here around me now, where I am far away from this childhood and the land where it all took place.

The old broken plate that still smells of the crêpes my grandmother used to make for me at the time of carnival every year. A large bowl for the coffee of our morning breakfasts, a porcelain doll as big as my thumb she played with when she was a child, a few folded pieces of paper written to her dad with coloured crayons, a few letters to her fiancé when she was eighteen, and photos she had selected and filed for me in a wooden box.

And there, from my Aunt Léa, her travelling game of chess that remains shut because I don't know how to play chess, the Christmas cards I had written to her as a child – 'I love you, not!' – a few necklaces and rings that actually belonged to my grandmother, but which she had kept for me, and some of her personal letters I have never had the strength to read, in order not to destroy the image I had made of her.

There are also the rosary beads that Sister St John of Meda gave me with her pocket-size Bible and ... then the other things.

My mother's things,

My father's books.

These trails of odds and ends that follow me wherever I plant my house. They cluster around my rooms like emotional furniture. They make up for the geography of my past: my life in blocks of attachment.

Good things and bad things – all equal in their intensity.

Just as one looks at the walls of an old home to find any clues or signs of the lives that once used to grow inside. When I look at these things they trigger beams of light from the past, reignite moments of being but also make obvious those incoherent moments I cannot forget and sometimes cannot remember so well.

...

I was running around my grandmother's house. The air was fresh and fragrant from the morning dew, the garden embraced in the crystalline light of springtime, shimmering all around me in swift touches. I never thought anything of it. It was a morning made for happiness, and the walls of my grandmother's house were dripping with honey: clear liquid honey falling off the roof and slowly constellating the white walls of her house with bright warm golden stars.

If the walls of a house could speak!

It was a beautiful dream that I had a long time ago.

After my mother's death, when I came back to empty her house, gruelling shivers ran in waves along the walls. As my hand twisted the cold knob and slowly pushed the entrance door forward, I recognised the smells of familiarity still entrapped inside. I walked through the half-light darkness and listened to the old voices hammering the tympanic membranes of my memory.

'Where do you think you are?' she said.

I passed next to the door where my brother had found her all twisted in a little ball against the cupboard at the bottom of the staircase.

You must have lost your balance and rolled down the fifteen wooden stairs to break your neck on the last one. The doctors said you did not suffer because it broke on impact, but who knows what happened in that last week before your son Raphael found you there. One of your slippers stood alone on the fifth step where the staircase makes the sharp turn before continuing further down on the right. They were the sheepskin slippers I had bought you during the last holidays we had together. Once back in France, you complained to me on the phone their plastic soles were too heavy for your fragile ankles.

The thin ankles of my grandmother.

Raphael said the slipper was pointing in the opposite direction to where you had dropped. They found the other one underneath your back smudged with dry faeces. Your old blue robe and thin white gown had curled up around your waist revealing the bruised flesh of your broken legs. They lay inert against your loose belly in an incomprehensible knot. Like every morning, you still had your small socks on because your feet could never be warm enough inside your bed, and I imagined they would have seen your face like no one else had seen it but us, your family. Free of the brown paste make-up that always coated this transparent skin with hardly any wrinkles of which you were always so proud.

Still, we had spoken about it so many times. The staircase being so narrow and so steep for your arthritic bones, your damaged back and aching arms, but you always wanted to wait until later. Never old enough, you believed.

I pushed the kitchen door.

There they found your bowl of coffee half emptied, crumbs from the slice of the bread you just had eaten, the pot of jelly to help your chronic constipation and the TV running, the mute button on.

'This is not your home,' I remembered you shouting at me.

Was I eighteen, sixteen? I left home not long after. Her face distorted from the long argument we just had fought, her right hand waving incoherently around the room and her left fist strongly digging into the side of her hips.

In two footsteps I had crossed the kitchen and was already in the corridor. I saw the three doors leading to the bedrooms, the fourth one for the lounge and the last one for the bathroom. She couldn't stand all those doors, too many of them. She had seen it on the plans before they built the house and foreseen the difficulties they would have engendered.

I wasn't born yet, to see that. She told me about it later.

She hated the house.

...

'Who didn't shut their door?'

Her voice had emerged from somewhere deep inside the house and with it the lines of my exercise book vanished into an inkblot. I looked at the open window next to my desk and already regretted the pleasure of watching the curtains flying and tasting the gentle breeze brushing its warmth along my skin.

'I have had enough!' and her voice was coming closer, like thunder shattering the peaceful afternoon. My heart started pounding. It never got used to her raging fits. The knocking inside my brain was so loud in my ears that I was unable to decode the thoughts racing in all directions. My mind froze as it always did just before she was about to strike. I clutched my sweaty fists together, dug my nails sharply into my skin, but I could not remember. The more I was getting furious at myself the less could this brain recall the order of things. Had I left my door opened, I would have heard it slammed. I looked at the mirror and recognised the mask of fear, the ugly symptoms of escapism. I had to find



an excuse fast, a series of lies and pity smiles, to spare my face from her vicious slaps.

The voice banged at my door.

'Where are you both?' she yelled.

I found Raphael in the corridor, eyes popped wide open, rubbing his hands up and down the side of his trousers. He was so small. I looked at him with anger. He tried a timid smile. 'It was you, wasn't it?' But no voice escaped my sealed lips. It was safer not to speak. 'You stupid one!' I was fuming inside. I wanted revenge. She grabbed us both by the hair.

'You bloody idiots! I have had enough of you two!'

'It didn't hurt.' I thought to myself and sneered at her. I knew she could always pull stronger if she wanted to, but I would never concede defeat. I had promised myself. Raphael was another story: this chubby blond-haired boy with soft brown eyes. 'What a girl!' I looked at him, mouth shut and eyes burning with fury. He was already crying like a spineless little thing, cheeks all red and sniffing uncontrollably. 'Your turn will come,' I thought. He was a beautiful little boy.

'Is this so difficult to shut a bloody door?' She was looking at me. I played my dumb tricks and didn't cry. I would fight her to the end.

'I don't know, Mum. It wasn't me. I don't remember.'

So she banged our heads against the wall. 'Don't give me that shit. It's someone's door!', but I didn't feel anything. My brother was whimpering, 'No, Mum, no!' and I was mad at him for losing the battle so fast. She let go of her grip. At last, I could move the sweaty hair off my face to show her my dry eyes, and I turned my triumphal anger towards her.

Her eyes went distant suddenly. 'Look at these walls!' And her voice dragged a little inside the corridor. I thought of my father hiding as usual somewhere in his atelier downstairs, waiting for the end of the tempest. Her face came closer to mine and I smelt the last cigarette she had smoked before the door slammed.

'Who do you think is going to pay for all that?' Her smell made her seem even more revolting in that moment. How could this have happened: that she was my mother? My brother was staring at his feet and sobbing between each snivel. I tried to breathe through my mouth. She was my mother.

'Your poor father!' she said, and I was stunned by her fake anxiety. 'Don't you think he has enough on his plate?' she continued, but this was enough for me.

A concentrated noise was now humming in my ears. It was loud, loud enough for me not to hear her anymore. I retreated slightly backwards and leaned my back against my door. It was ajar. I felt it move a little and, in an instant, I had entered my bedroom. I slammed the door against her face. Then, in one move, I was already sitting on the floor, my back holding the pressure against her as she tried to open the door.

'Open that fucking door!' Oh! She was mad. My hands and feet had a strong grip on the carpet. My head was banging every time she thrust her body against the door.

'I have not finished speaking to you! Open that door!' I thought of my brother, probably relieved since the attention had slid away from him.

'If you don't open the door, I'll get your father!'

I started to sing a silly little tune, just a 'la la' song without words, to cover her voice. My father. I sang the song over and over, louder and louder, to forget her voice. He would not hit me, he never did. And after a while I heard the silence. Her voice had disappeared and the pushing had gone. I had won. I released the pressure of my back against the door and turned towards the mirror that was hanging from it. I looked straight into my eyes, deep inside their darkness and shivers ran up my back. It pained me to see that my face looked like hers after our arguments. She was my mother. I rubbed the tears that had begun to well in my eyes, passed my fingers still burning through the knots in my hair and noticed the white veil curtain next to my desk. It was flat now, not moving anymore. The wind had died down, another day had gone by. There was nothing much left I could do now. My homework, I would finish it sometime. I lay down on my bed and stared blankly at the ceiling and I saw them.

The tiny cracks, the small fissures that made my mother worried. I tried to count them like one counts sheep to rock oneself to sleep, but I was already too tired for that. Instead I followed their tracks and mused over their journeys. Some looked endless, going on forever with unknown beginnings and undefined endings. One even seemed to have crossed the entire house. Beginning in my brother's bedroom, carrying on traversing mine, and then vanishing from my eyesight into my parents' bedroom.

A long one. I imagined it running even further, disappearing into dark corners, splitting itself into many other lines, baby lines with their own journeys slowly cracking the inside of the whole house; ugly big veins growing underneath the

paint and splitting the plaster. Carrying inside their thick tissue our stories, our shouts, my hopes for other walls. The more I thought about them, the wider the fissures became. Suddenly I saw a space opening, a crevasse where I could fall – a void that was lying right below my bedroom floor. I was floating over a precipice that was threatening to swallow me at anytime. I could not bear so much pressure. I shivered with fear and pulled the covers over my head. Then, with stupor, I understood these cracks had been there all along and I had never noticed them. I had never seen their silent attack taking possession of our home. Suddenly, this place was nothing more than a container of an unknown dimension. Suddenly, I understood there was no security to find within it. I pulled the cover further up to make it cosy all around my body. I was warm. The ‘la la’ song came back to my mind as a sweet lullaby I could whisper in the dark. I closed my eyes.

It wasn't so bad after all.

...

I don't see any fissures here, no cracks in the ceiling nor any exterior signs of hidden misery.

Of course I thought about painting my house!

To restore, to repaint ...

I thought about it ... many times ... to take care of this old barrack of mine.

It must have been after her visit here, now that I think about it. I remember when she first saw the house, she thought it looked ‘unkept’.

My mother.

‘*C'est dommage!*’ you said, ‘Don't you have anyone to take care of your home?’

You had this faint affection in your voice that didn't expect an answer and, then, you put your arm on top of mine so I could help you go up the stairs.

It was your first day here. Sometime in January. You didn't even notice the sky, the expanse of the sight, the generosity that spread in its endless blues and the sweetness of clematis bush embalming all the air around this old home.

Of course, in these old wooden houses, it is difficult to notice the cracks!

The wood cracks ... It shrinks, expands, it swells and bends with the changes of temperature. It accommodates itself to the elements of time, the itineraries of the weather.

It is flexible!

But the stones!

The stones of our houses in France! They are there to stay, to endure and resist, to stand and fight against the maliciousness of time. Slowly, they rub their toughness, surface against surface, they grind their corners into fine dust.

They sink into each other's company with their bad habits.

They loose their elasticity, their adaptability, but they resist!

'Hard as a rock' isn't it what they say!

Old bones, like stones.

Here in these wooden houses you can't see the fissures, those long sinuous lines that dig inside the plaster when the stones stretch apart from each other and let go of their cement that crumbles into dry pips, unwanted residues. The stuff no one wants. Yet surely they must have cracks, setbacks and fissures they hid underneath coats of varnish, in these old wooden houses, in this land of opportunity.

'Yes, dear! How are you, dear?'

Nice! Very nice!

They are nice, cute houses out of storybooks and fairytales.

And so friendly, the people ... they are nice!

That is what I wanted: nice people in my life.

It is difficult to remain angry when nice people surround you.

The anger, it never left me.

I kept it stored on the other side of me. The side I was forgetting in the treachery of learning another language, another vocabulary for a brand new life I was hoping to live in a brand new country.

Hoping to live!

'So far away!'

No, I'm from France.

The answer is like a well-lived sentence, a stain that has spread over me since I left Paris.

'What a beautiful place! So much history, hey!'

'Why so far?' my father said with tears in his eyes when I was packing my boxes.

'Of all the places, dear! Why New Zealand? Don't you miss home?'

Oh! The dreaded questions!

I had never lost the hope that one day, together, we would be able to speak a language that did not use any subtext. That one day our words would flow clear for what they are, without the malice of our unnecessary accents, without these systematic subtitles dragging painfully underneath each of our sentences.

'Unkept.' Surely you wanted to say, 'Is this the way you live?', or did you mean, 'This is not as bad as I had thought, but I won't tell you because I would admit defeat.'

Defeat.

Trying to translate what you said with your words was torture. Your amused pleasantries were the sole thing that could stifle the tormented whispers of your unhappy heart?

Dear, I stopped counting the painful blows.

When you died they said, 'She had a good heart, but she was hard'. They said, 'She was selfish and only thought about herself,' and you said, 'We did so much for you and you were still unhappy! Then go! Go, if it is what you want.'

In me you are, and I cannot separate myself from you. Your love and dedication were exemplary, but it took me a lifetime to destroy what you had designed. In my search to forget you, I constantly remembered you. I could run to the other side of the world, I could learn a new language, a new vocabulary to express the life I wanted for myself, but I could not deny your presence growing in me as powerful as ever.

I did not want to write about you.

It was our last holiday together.

I never repainted my home. I thought of it, but how could I when I can't even be bothered to make myself a soup.

What for, anyway; no one comes anymore.

I know because I am home every day and the door is unlocked.

Of course, if you do not respond to any letters you don't receive any more letters. For fifteen years or was it twenty? I cannot remember the day you died. I have not answered a single letter, since. I think.

I don't want to remember you.

Yes but as they say, we need to communicate. We need to stay in touch.

I pay the bills, what more do you want? These days my feet are always cold. I need a lot of heating. Water bottles are enough for these old bones.

Opening the computer ... and writing!

Yes it would be good to write everyday to keep in touch.

With who? And the language? In which language?

They say, 'What is a New Zealand story?'

Do you need to be a New Zealander to write a New Zealand story? What is a story? And why don't you write in French? It would make much more sense, don't you think?'

I was a writer. I did, I wrote. I never published anything, but I wrote, in my spare time when there was no one else to speak with.

*The Flight of Memory.*

This was about my father. I will not write about him anymore, I have already said too much about this man that stayed silent most of his life. Who was he? That was his choice. You can't force someone to live their life if they don't want to. And *The Woman Lost in Time*. Nice title, isn't it? I didn't go too far with this one but I liked the title.

I wrote.

I wrote to save myself in another language. To listen to the stories I could not hear in my own language.

Your language? French! It already sounds like another excuse.

My native tongue, the maternal love, the one I was born into: my skin. The skin I put on whenever I hear the sounds of my memories.

Writing in my mother's tongue? With her words?

I could not write.

Because you need the other to really see yourself, who you are, if indeed you can. The other, endless curiosity, *n'est-ce pas?*

'Anyway don't expect to get published with this. A publisher wouldn't even look at it!' Yes, I didn't. I couldn't write in English. It was too late, my words had become knives I was cutting myself with. I couldn't carry on.

Absence of desire!

Impotence.

Was it habit that killed your desire, Mother?

Did habit kill the desire in your life with my father and then you became this angry woman that we were all forced to live with?

Writing about her. Enslaved by the chores that humiliated and bored you, you the proud and stubborn woman, yet so vulnerable that you could recite for years the same criticisms that were once dropped against you.

Between your fits of anger, you could sing operettas and clean the dishes. I thought this was the life of a woman. Happiness, I thought.

The newspaper! Yes, we need to communicate and read what happens in the world. To read the news! What news! The New Zealand news, the local stories from the local rag.

They say the New Zealanders are nice people. Nice!

Yes dear, you have to speak in English to understand the word: Nice.

It's like 'home'! There is no such word in French. We have so many words to speak about it but not this one: 'home'! I am home.

Shall we go home?

My home has become a mortuary chamber, a precarious dwelling.

Sometimes I think that if I fall asleep there will be no tomorrow.

...

I hated her house.

Home of my childhood, home of my first steps, home of my learning and home of my leaving. When I opened the front door, the air that had cushioned her fits of madness under years of avoidance escaped in vitriolic drafts and I saw the walls as they were, bruised with our shouts, scared by the salt of our running tears.

'This is your parents' home, do you understand?'

I left her home not long after that. My grandmother had died six months prior.

If I remember well, I was on the floor, then sitting on my knees, holding my head as you were pulling my hair through the golden metal lace that decorated the feet of my bed. I had liked my bed; it looked like the bed of a princess. You never liked my black long hair. You cut it as soon as it had grown to my hips and told me it was my father's fault because he never liked long hair. You had short red hair, a boyish cut that accentuated your fine features, your high cheeks bones and made your small green eyes slightly bigger.

'This is the essential difference between the two of you,' my father had said one day. 'Dark-haired women are more respected than redheads or blondes'. He had this habit of dropping weird comments, lame clichés, with a tone full of good intentions. It was so unlike his intelligence, but I suppose he was desperate for reasons to understand our differences and reconcile his daughter to her mother.

Nothing had ever mattered more but her happiness through our sufferings. He wanted peace in his life at all costs.

'Don't you think you've passed the age to blame your mother for all the wrong in your life?' He wanted from me forgiveness because he had forgiven my mother all his life. At the end, forgiveness did not stop his entrails from rotting inside. When finally his body decided not to swallow any more of her wrong doings, it was too late for his soul. He had relinquished his power to her will for too long.

'You know you can tell me what you think, it's just the two of us.' But he knew it never helped that I told him anything. He was her accomplice, with always an excuse handy to apologise for her irrational behaviour, leaving me the task of shaking the order he had no control over. At the end, it was no surprise if my father died in his own putrefaction, assailed with the thousands of regrets of never having done what was in his power to do. What else could he die of except out of the mess he had never managed to sort out in his life?

To survive after your death! Your heroism, your kindness and gentle ways! Your absence was in harmony with yourself.

'So, you mean my bedroom was never mine?' I asked her in disarray.

'This is not your house. Do you understand?' is all I kept hearing.

My parent's house,

You had always stood there as an anomaly, in the middle of crossroads, on Dead Springs Road. Awkwardly defining your presence against the buildings built around the same epoch you settled on your foundations. Their huge shadows stifled your growth for the rest of your existence and deprived you in perpetuity of any horizons. Packaged, prototyped and designed to fit in an assembly line, you were born of reused soil and raised with three other exact replicas, nice little homes, ready-made answers to a promise of happiness. In spite of your bleak surroundings, time shaped your own individuality through a labour of love and necessity. The hopes of a faithful family to make you theirs, distant and almost unique among the others, but they should have known that building a home on Dead Springs Road would have made the way to happiness a hazardous path.

In the past, springs used to run in my grandmother's garden where my parents built their home. My mother kept telling me she had chosen to stay on her mother's grounds to take care of her. But I remember my parents numerous



arguments and my mother often shouting at my father that if it had not been for the generosity of her parents they would have been homeless.

Adults are so difficult to understand when you are a child.

There is a photo of the well in the garden where my ancestors could fetch the fresh water from the springs. My grandfather is leaning against its old stone. He is young and tall, a hirsute mustache hiding his smile, small round glasses and a cap loosely fitted over his thick black hair. He has folded up the sleeves of his shirt, showing off his strong arms and large hands. His trousers are wide, a comfortable coarse woollen cloth attached high by a single belt he knotted around his waist. My mother and her younger sister are at his feet, smiling towards whomever was taking the photo. Pretty little girls in clean white dresses.

She said that eventually the springs died for no reasons. They destroyed the well and filled its hole with concrete. After marrying my father, it is on this spot she had her home built, on the dead springs in the garden of her past. Every morning that she opened her shutters and windows to this world, she saw, across the garden and behind the trees, the home of her childhood where her mother was slowly dying and, next to it, the home of her grandmother.

'Did you need to go so far away?' My father kept asking me when he realised I would never leave New Zealand again. My mother shrugged her shoulders. I was a bitch when I was gone. I was a bitch when I was back.

It took Raphael and I a week to empty your house. To throw out what you had accumulated through your lifetime in the huge bin we had had delivered to the footpath in front of the gates. The rest we sent to the Samaritans. Your sister had worked for them in the past and you had done the same with her clothes when she died.

You had kept everything. Our toys, our children's clothes, the first drawings, the broken pieces of our many Christmas crèches, old socks that needed sewing. And a lot of the clothes you had bought us that we had worn only a few times. My green coat, too beautiful to wear, my brother's suit for his confirmation, the knitted jumpers we didn't like, the pretty dresses when I only needed jeans, so many clothes, always the best but never what we wanted. Our childhood, our adolescence, you had mothballed our past in silk paper wrappings, in much the same way our grandmother had done with hers.

I recognised in your systematic order my need for perfection.

I saw in Raphael's compulsive hand cleaning your control of our world, your impatience when we could not perform as you wanted us to, the humiliation we bore with resignation.

The antiquarian came one afternoon to evaluate the furniture, the crockery, the silver cutlery, the crystal glasses and some of your jewelry we did not want to keep. We could not keep everything. At the end of the week he came back with his truck. It hadn't been as hard as I had imagined. I wanted my father's books and your art books. Raphael wanted his father's jazz collection and I shared with him some of your paintings.

We couldn't keep everything.

...

Her hands were busy with a piece of cloth, her index finger and thumb pushing the needle up and down, slowly drawing a flowery pattern. Questions about her past were burning my tongue. Hers suddenly pushed the wriggly teeth in irritation.

'*Merde!*' She said.

The thread had slipped out of the needle's eye as fast as the word out of her mouth. She would rarely say it unless she was angry. Like the time when the milk had boiled too much, spilled over the pot, and spoiled the white enamel cooker, she would shout it very loud and I would hear it from anywhere in the house. Whether I was sneaking around in the attic or hiding in one of the first-floor bedrooms, I would hear it as if I were next to her. Apart from the cellar: I never heard it from there.

'I will wait for you.'

Next to the door, in the narrow corridor, as soon as I saw my grandmother disappearing down the narrow staircase I would listen for any slight noise coming out of the dark hole. I would check behind my back in case someone was creeping in while I was waiting alone.

'Put that on the table.' Seeing her face coming back towards the light was always such a relief, but I never told her that. She would give me the bag of potatoes or the bottles of wine she had brought up from the cellar and we would go back to the kitchen and start preparing dinner. We had our rhythms, our simple ways.

'Hold tight, *p'tite*. Yes, here.'

I must have gone to the cellar one day and kept my fears sealed between my lips because I remember her muffled voice when she asked me to follow her.

I grabbed her right arm. Her other hand reached for the damp stone wall to steady herself. The top light from the corridor slowly faded away as we moved further down. With each new stairs, I saw her hand metamorphosed and ceased to be hers altogether. It became bigger and darker with huge bones as if it were *Barbe Bleue's* hand whenever he was about to kill one of his wives in his lonesome castle.

The dark always scared me.

'Hoop la! Not so fast, *p'tite*.'

The pace was laborious. She put one foot after the other, balancing her body side to side with each step she took, forcing mine to unwillingly brush the green moss that was covering the walls. Humidity would slowly envelop our shoulders. The air would thicken with the smell of wet dust and dry coal. By the end of the staircase, the light had diminished to a mere flicker turning our bodies into huge shadows leading our slow procession.

'Watch your feet!'

From there, there were many rooms departing into a meandering labyrinth running underneath the house. Rooms for the wines, potatoes and other supplies that needed to stay protected from daylight, rooms for the forgotten things or the things we would need one day, rooms for the coal stacked up to the ceiling, rooms for the cobwebs and spiders and other animals I preferred ignoring. Finally there was the mystery room, the one that disappeared behind the staircase into a dark tunnel with no door.

That day my grandmother stopped in front of it and looked at the walls as if she was searching for something. It was cold. She squeezed my hand and whispered to my ears that behind one of these stones there was a treasure box, but she couldn't remember which stone, so we needed to knock at all the stones to find a hollow sound. She had a way with mysteries. It seemed her house was marked by the adventures my ancestors had in it. Here and there, one could find proof of a far-away world that her voice would distill with enigmatic information.

'*Ou la la*, easy *p'tite*! This one belonged to Marie-Antoinette. I was rubbing a small beige and white cameo on the top lid of a wooden box.

'It's a tobacco box.' My grandmother opened the lid to show me the pink satin padding, the inside with a rose of white pearls gathering the fabric in its centre. On the outside, the design was fine with colourful woods weaving themselves in geometrical patterns.

'It came to us after the French Revolution.' She shut the box and put it back on her dressing table. 'a cook I think, working for the queen. He took it away with him when everybody was stealing everything at Versailles.' Another time that I was looking at the box she wondered if it wasn't a lady in waiting that had stolen it from the queen's bedroom. And I would run up to the attic, disguise myself with old dresses and there I was, the lady-in-waiting proceeding with dignity along the endless hallways of Versailles. There was no doubt, my grandmother stood as the descendant of a long line of adventurers. She had seen three wars, fought against the Germans when they had invaded her house; she could tell the history of her town and the genealogy of all its families, she was the queen of her castle.

*'Ne restes pas dans mes jambes!'* She would say. She walked always with so much pain, her body crippled with rheumatism and arthritis. I never managed to know if these family stories were real or fantasies to keep a child dreaming. My mother kept the tobacco box after my grandmother died, and, when she started to speak about Marie Antoinette, I didn't listen. I had my own mythologies. The rest did not interest me. The only value this box had was that it once belonged to my grandmother.

*'Merde,'* she said again.

The thread didn't want to cooperate. She was concentrating on the strenuous task of passing one end through the tiniest of holes. I stopped balancing my legs. The moment required that we both concentrate. With one hand she pushed her glasses closer to her eyes. She pressed the thread between her lips to moisten the tip one more time. Then she held it in front of her glasses that had already slipped again down to the end of her nose. The white thread looked ready for a second trial. She pushed it delicately through the small hole and this time it worked.

My grandmother had done this gesture so many times during her lifetime that a week before she died, when she lost her mind and her eyes became empty glass bowls, she still kept on doing it although there were no more needles or threads in her hands. She was so furious because from the world where she

now was, all she had left to do was to succeed with the recalcitrant thread. To pass it through the small hole. She was stuck, doing it again and again until her blood pressure was high, her cheeks were feverishly red and she would be put to rest like an ill-tempered child. We all waited for the end. There was nothing we could do anymore, only to be there around her and accompany her as we could. Her three daughters and me, inside her home.

...

Writing a true story

Risking the truth!

The right word: *le mot juste*.

It is a difficult undertaking.

For me, my mother has no history.

She just was and remained as she was.

*Une mère ne se quitte pas.*

Whenever I think of her, images submerge without any notion of time.

She was violent

She was beautiful

The fire of our home

My father's sunshine

She was excessive

A child with a contagious laughter

The queen of her kitchen

This glittering star that lit up everyman's eyes in a crazy daze

These scars in my heart

I never learnt her.

She was this woman whom I never knew outside of my life.

We lived together without meeting. She was already a memory, the day I was born. With our tensions and disorders, we were mother and daughter

Waves crashing in furious storms, many times we died on uncharted shores, and we held each other ... We lost each other.

You called me back again and again because you wanted love, my love. You thought I could have been your mother. This is how our heroic journey started with each other, our need to be mothered.

After my father died, my rage with you slowly diminished. His death made him grand. You became little. A sad woman I had to care for.

I understood I did not love you.

And hating her did not matter anymore.

But with your acute crises of despair, I managed to find the tenderness which jealousy had suffocated in both of us.

She was my mother and she died alone. I was not there to care for you nor was my brother. She fell in the staircase of her house. They said she died instantly, but who knows what you felt in the solitude of these last breaths. Each death is violent, there is no peaceful death.

My mother died on a Sunday afternoon.

I think I had to wake her up once on a Sunday afternoon.

Her head was buried in the white linen pillow, next to the other.

There she was, smaller perhaps, more fragile, more distant ... I could have loved you.

Her breathing was short, unrested, just enough to say, I'm alive!

It is your smell that put me off.

Your motherly smell! Sweet and sticky, heavy and pungent, I could not recognise it. It was your breath, your hair, your skin, the smell of me all over you.

Your skin looked thicker, your hair greasier, white roots beaming at the base of your scalp, your mouth half opened, bitter saliva dripping at the corner.

I think I had to wake you up that day.

Perhaps with a gentle pat on your elbow, or with a sharp squeeze of your hand to save me from kissing you.

I kissed your forehead on your death bed at the hospital. Your skin was soft and cold, I should have guessed. They had cleaned you, pushed your jaw back up and shut your eyes. I never heard the rattling sound of your last agony, never watched the sweat pearling your top lip, the purple veins on your neck slowly emptying themselves of air, the smell of death shrinking the room around you, and the last tear that would have stayed stuck in the corner of your eye.

She was covered with a thin white sheet up to her elbows, hiding her hands and the sex I never saw. Hairless probably and dry now, wrinkled labia that repulsed me.

Your feet had black nails.

Now that I had seen you, they could send you to the morgue. But then I had to think about the clothes they wanted you to wear before putting you in the box.

I could have given them this blue dress I loved so much on you. The afternoon after I woke you up, you put it on and I saw in your eyes the triumph of the blue. The house was still quiet with the satisfied sigh of that summer afternoon, and then I remember that a hot wind raised the curtains, lifted your dress. I saw the purple lilacs swaying in the garden and I left your room, the nuptial bed, with the silence of the vanquished.

In front of your corpse, now I was facing you. I sat a little longer, my ears filled with the sound of our lies. I did not speak at your funeral. I had no stories of the cute child you had been once, the terrible fears you survived during the Second World War, the flirtatious adolescent you had grown up into, the young adventurer who left France to live in London, the woman who became famous in her own right, who worked in fashion and cosmetics along side the big names in Paris, the one whose paintings were exhibited still after her death, the one who loved her husband, who was provided for and provided with, the one who became the mother of the two beautiful children she was so proud to show of.

Praise for a life. I cannot remember you to speak in too much lengths. So what could have I said in front of your assembly of supporters? I was surprised to see so many people crying at your death.

Perhaps your son remembered your caresses and soft kisses, this web of honey you had weaved about him. He was your baby, your last one, the man you thought would make you laugh and dance. He cried for you, your sweet Raphael. He had lost his mother. I didn't cry.

'She is hard, this one!' You said to my aunts and they looked at me with a knowing smile. I couldn't understand what was going on. So I was a bad girl!

After the funeral, after emptying your house, we promised each other to keep in touch, Raphael and I. But he died too a couple of years later. Unannounced, unforeseen, death what!

No children, no attachments, we never managed to build up intimacy with others.

The nurses gave me a large brown paper bag to pack up the clothes you had arrived with, and I told them they could put them back on you. You never really bothered with what our father wore inside his box. You said, 'To rot in the ground? Let's dress him in his old working suit.' And you chose the overused

checked vest and the wide black tie he had last worn in the early seventies. You put on his shiny black shoes for weddings and old blue flare-legged pants. He trusted you so much, how could you?

I took your jewelry, the jewelry my grandmother gave you: your diamond earrings, diamond rings, your golden necklace, your golden watch and the wedding band my father had put on your finger.

At the *état civil* when I had to report your death they asked me what it was about. I said, 'My mother died last Sunday. A sudden death.' The secretary looked at me with a sorrowful smile and then proceeded with more questions: your name, the place of your birth, your last address. Information she needed for your dossier. I signed my name, she stamped the form, my hand started to shake.

Thérèse Martin had died. Your name echoed between the walls of this stale office that had made of your death a pure formality. From birth to marriage, from widowhood to death, the official had closed your dossier with a final dot. It was already five; she asked me to leave and she shut the office.

There was no need to see you again. They had stored you back in the cold cell. I left the hospital morgue, walked through the streets of Paris and tried not to think of anything. I wanted to forget us, but the sadness of our failures, the rage I nurtured most of my life for the pair we had made, for the mother you could never be, came back with the violence of your death. As always, even in your last act, you had won and left me no voice to defend myself.

...

Imagine you at the hospital, your last days and me.

Caressing your forehead, refreshing the skin of your cheeks by pressing my hands still cold from the weather outside. Kissing you and telling you hundreds of little things, banalities as they crossed my imagination, to pass this last time bestowed upon us. How blessed you would have been that I was there to take care of you. To comfort you and explain how much you were loved. To remind you that you were not alone.

There would have been the daily walks to the hospital. The fear on crossing the corridor that leads towards the reanimation block. The anxiety of seeing you, being scared of you, and your agony progressing with each day, manoeuvring our attentions and emotions between the small margins of hope and the painful



writing of death on your facial lines. Every day I would have hesitated before entering your bedroom, wondering if your skeleton head would have been facing the entrance door or your mouth would have pointed aimlessly wide opened towards the ceiling.

Imagine.

The daily rows of doctors, my attentive listening, their soft-spoken explanations in a jargon I could not have understood. And the words I would not have registered. They would have spoken about hope while waiting to see how much your spirit would have endured before reaching its limits, how long your body could have lasted with the pumping of treatments that kept you alive.

Mute, drugged, anaesthetised, medicalised, your eyes already shut to this world, your body in the worst times would still have bent with convulsions from the distant pains the magic of medicine could not have reduced. Distress then would have forced grimaces and frowns upon your fragile papery skin. Anger would have had your teeth grinding the white valve where the oxygen tube was shooting through your throat to reach your lungs. I would not have known what your mind wanted from the lonely margins where we both stood; technology would have worked its mysteries. Soon you would have collapsed from the extreme fatigue, one more increment in the steep ascent towards the summit, your bones sinking further inside the mattress. I would have seen through one of your half-opened eyelid the green iris already gone milky.

Then again there would have been the other days. The days of peace for all parties, the ones where you would have rested with the grace of an Egyptian mummy. So emaciated, your thick hair missing in patches, and the skin stretched so tightly against your bones that your nose would have appeared as a protuberant dent, the last peak crevassing a bleached desert. I would have looked at this new face unable to remember the traces of the past. The work taking place inside your body would have already robbed you of this only image I knew of you.

Imagine the sounds of your last days.

The beeps, the bells, the rings, all the machines around you that would have spurted out relentlessly alarming signals in blue, yellow and red flashing lights. The constant coming and going of the nurses in white, the rushing of air whenever they would move around your bed, monitoring, checking, reporting, the turning of pages, the clicking of their pencils, and the strident pitch in their

voices when addressing you. As if you were deaf! And their soapy smiles when looking at me as if I was already mourning your memory.

And those terrifying white neon lights exposing dryly your cadaver like a piece of meat on the shelves of a cheap supermarket!

From the moment you would have entered this hospital life would have needed to be conquered from within your walls. Outside, the scenery would have slowly metamorphosed into the prison you sentenced me to with the coincidence of your death.

Imagine this!

To continue with the task of living if I had seen you inhaling your last breath and then die. The curse for the one who stays behind, forever locked together in the picture of your last sufferings! The rope you would have left hanging around my neck still pressing down on my voice! This power until the end with nothing more for me to say except that you died peacefully in my arms.

What a moral tale I could have told: the gift of forgiveness, the wiping out of all your deadly sins, the final act, a reign of falsehood opened in exchange for my surrendering!

It was probably better for all of us that you died suddenly, in one go.

I do not think I would have been able to do all this for you.

Time did not stop after your death. It continued, but with a different structure since, after you, there was me.

There were no more fights.

I wanted you out of my memory but a mother just is.

...

Images of her: she is forty. 'For a woman life starts at forty,' she used to say with a smile so mysterious that all I wished was for my fortieth to arrive soon. There is a photo taken during a trip in Egypt with my father, a close-up of them looking so incredibly happy, in a bus, with the rest of the group in the background, on the way to Karnak or the Pyramids of Giza probably, sun-tanned skin and eyes glowing with excitement, her mouth is wide open, her throat and neck, her décolleté, so intoxicating in its beauty. They seem in love, they are so young; she is beaming and their eyes are facing in the same direction.

Every Sunday morning in the small kitchen, cigarette in the corner of her mouth, she blanches the onions, roasts strips of bacon, throws in pieces of rabbit, *un bouquet garni*, and submerges the content of the pot with white wine; while it simmers she kneads the buttery dough for an apple pie, makes a compote for the base, and I follow her every move.

One Wednesday morning she comes to pick me up during the catechism. The class had just started, but it was urgent, the doctor had rung her up to tell her that my tests showed I had appendicitis and needed an operation now. She reached for my hand and looked at me with warmth. I was happy. Then, when the anaesthesia was on the wane, I felt her hand caressing my face and the other holding the leg that kept moving nervously from the pain. She was saying, 'Sleep darling, don't worry. I am here for you.'

Often I heard her saying to my father 'Don't you have anything to do?' as soon as he sat for a short break before starting the next task.

No matter where she was going, she always wore perfectly applied make-up in shades of green and earthy tones to go with her dark-red hair and small green eyes. Her dresses and suits, her shoes and handbags, all the items and accessories she chose were everyday coordinated and the mark of attention and consideration. Walking side by side, I was proud for a moment to be her daughter. She was so beautiful,

She is brushing my hair, we're inside the bathroom together, she in her large flesh-coloured underpants and white bra. We laugh. I touch her bra, the round soft breast inside her bra, and she pushes my hand at once, a sharp and brutal gesture without a word. Now she untangles the knots in my hair in a hurry as if we would be late for school; she pulls my long dark hair, I hold myself on the edge of the bathtub, tears roll down my cheeks; she announces that my hair will have to be cut short.

Me at fourteen, you at forty-two, two beautiful lost women locked in their own incomprehensible pains, you in the demands of your time, the necessities of your sex, the desire to be a good woman, me lost in your uncertainties, too young to understand what was happening, what I was meant to feel.

When I looked at her for too long she used to say, 'Do you want my photo?' and shrugged her shoulders,

Images of her: after my father's death, we walk together to the market, and I know standing next to me is an old woman whose regrets weigh heavily on her back. She bends more and more, her eyes checking the footpath with every step she makes, just as my grandmother did.

Love is a curse when death takes away the one you cherished, so there was love after all.

From now on, every time I ring her the timbre of her voice diminishes in clarity as if a recalcitrant mucus is veiling her vocal chords. She needs to meet more people and go out more often, but it is difficult to start a new life on your own when you have been used to sharing its daily routine with someone for so long, I used to think, Her time is coming soon, but these were empty words; we never really believe in the rapture of death. She used to say, 'I can't carry on anymore, it's not worth it, look at me with my back.' After my father's death, and after the deaths of all her siblings, old cousins, and her only friend Ella, all she wanted to do was die, but I thought that was nonsense. I thought her talk of suicide was another way to gain attention. Enquiring about her health seemed enough for both of us. We never spoke about death in concrete words, about her death and what she would want me to do for her when it came, if she had anything special in mind, any wishes. I didn't even know in which dress she wanted to be buried, if she wanted flowers and if she had friends I needed to contact.

For a while she did come back to her paintings and her watercolours, and I sent her numerous landscapes from New Zealand, dramatic views of the West Coast beaches and bewitching scenes of the Wanganui River, but she didn't exhibit as much as she used to, and left most of her works piling up in the dry storeroom that my dad had built for her in the garage. She said one day on the phone, 'I can't bring myself to paint again. What was I thinking of? What I was striving for? Is it so important that people see my work? Is that some kind of compensation to make me feel better? To make me feel that I did something with my life? That my voice was worth hearing?' I could not know she suffered from extreme anxiety around her own mortality.

Eventually she became heavy, with her make-up that turned into a thick brown crust, methodically applied every morning as a mask like a clown before taking the stage; with the size of her body she hid constantly inside the large plain shirts she had always despised on other women, with the repertory of her

conversations where the same old troubles were systematically regurgitated once I would ask her how she was.

And then there was that last summer. I wanted you to come to New Zealand; I always wanted you to come and you came. I had wished to take you out of your kitchen, your morning soaps on TV and afternoon detective stories, your garden and your setbacks with the young guys on the dole the city council kept sending to help you manage its maintenance, your neighbourhood that had become either too black or too Arab and that you accused of being responsible when social security reduced your pension by half. I asked you to come and you made this long trip and then prided yourself on your great sense of adventure: 'At 76 on the plane by myself!' And then you told me about this young gentleman who helped you during the whole trip and took care of you as if you had been his dearest mother. 'I wish your brother had been there to take a few lessons!' All I saw was the mother I had always known, the one who always knew how to use people when she needed them, and I kept my mouth shut. We exchanged the polite talks people have when they are not used to each other's company. 'If you didn't live so far away!' she often said on the phone.

After you died I often thought of this last summer we spent together and all the things I could have told you, all the questions I could have asked. Instead, you came here in New Zealand, you made this long trip and we had no arguments, though we bothered each other in our usual ways. I brushed her smart comments over my ears, we enjoyed the particularly hot summer that year blessed us with, and then she left.

Sometimes I imagined that your death would have caused me no pain. I had cried for my father, that was understandable, predictable even, but, for you, I could never have envisaged so many tears.

...

I wanted you to die.

Oh, Mother.

I had so much rage inside me.

I felt such a rage toward you!

When I was little and you used to go out to the theatre with Father, I used to wish you would both die in a car accident on your way home. It was so easy to see you both in that car: the pantomime in my deadly fantasies. I was moving

you with great dexterity: necks broken, mouths opened, bodies twisted in agony.

I was in control of your destiny.

A terribly sad accident that would kill you both on the spot.

I used to stay awake just to make sure you wouldn't come back home, hidden underneath my sheets, my heart pounding more wildly with the hours ticking late into the night. I would listen to the every sound of the house, hoping never to hear again the first crack the garage doors gave out whenever Father opened them.

I would put in place a credible scenario.

People would feel sorry for us children after your death. They would look at us with the kindness of strangers while we would dutifully mourn the tragic loss of our parents. Of course, we would cry, my brother and I. Then, being the little boy he was, they would take him away from my care. He would disappear out of my life and finally I would live as I wished to live.

Alone as if nothing else mattered.

In that waiting I was overjoyed with the anticipation of freedom. I used to turn around in my bed, over-excited, a smile on my face, dreaming of a world without you.

To not hear your voice anymore!

To not obey your rules, take in your anger, hear your frustrations with us all.

I knew we were the source of your unhappiness.

You told me so every time you asked me to sit in the kitchen and listen to the troubles of your soul.

I was helpless in front of your sorrows.

Didn't you realise I was only a child?

To not see the disdain in your eyes for me.

To not feel the shame to be only a daughter.

Mother, it's ironic ... because, I've cared for you so ... much!

Don't you see?

You made me feel guilty!

I was consumed with so much guilt.

You enchained me in your sick world,

And gave me no other choice but to love you.

And I held you in my arms,

I carried you on my back to love you and please you,  
I wanted you to love me so ...  
Didn't you know about the weight you burdened my consciousness with?  
I was only a child!  
I was the one needing your attention. I was the one in need of you.  
I looked around for your mean marks of favor and thought this was happiness.  
But a child is so vulnerable, Mother, so easily manipulated.  
Don't you understand that in the name of love you stifled my own growth?  
I lost myself the day I decided to become the one I thought you wanted me to be. I did not know then that no one would ever be worthy enough in your eyes.  
The battle was always lost from the beginning. My battle killed me.  
Do you remember that day I caught you crying alone in the kitchen?  
I did nothing.  
I looked at you.  
I saw the despair in your eyes.  
You wanted me to stay and I hesitated for a moment. The sky was barren outside and the light diffuse, adding desolation to my already miserable adolescent moods. I saw your tears running down your cheeks and I closed the door on you.  
Do you remember?  
In the second our eyes both met, did you feel it: our cruel history?  
I did not know what you were crying about and I did not want to care. In that instant I saw your desperate need to be loved by someone with the sudden anger you felt at yourself for showing it to me. You hated revealing your weaknesses, dwelling in the sweetness of your warm tears and yet you had to show them to me if you wanted me to love you. You did not need me in particular. You needed something that did not exist. You were always homesick for something else.  
Jealousy and envy were sharp nails in your eyes while I was twisting up and down the door handle in my hand. I hesitated. I always wanted to love you.  
You taught me the duty of a daughter. To remind you of what you always wanted to be but did not know what it was exactly. I was making obvious what you abandoned in yourself, and you hated me for that. I was the reminder of your lack, your own impotence and your inability to fulfill your own desires.  
Is this what we learnt from each other, Mother?

This constant battle to be loved by one another, yet our inability to love each other. This sick combination we made together: mother and daughter, confusion and destruction, everything possible and done in the name of love and solicitude.

You always were this other woman, unreachable, so distant, so preoccupied with yourself. You gifted me your injuries, your failures and your unhappiness as if the umbilical cord had never been cut. I took on board everything – your fears, your angers and frustrations – for my own.

I was your daughter.

It was all done in the name of love.

On that afternoon I left the house with feelings of relief, anger and guilt, of course. Shutting the door on your tears was such a small compensation to my entrapment, such a small and easy punishment to inflict upon you.

Did you think you could put me aside and forget about me when you needed your own space? And then bring me back in your life when you wanted help?

Was I no more than a toy you could play with when it suited you?

I couldn't lift you anymore,

Mother.

I could not bear your smiles, your perfumes, your jewelries, your charms and beauty or your tears.

You had crushed me so many times with your dead weight on my spine.

Why still hanging there?

Which pleasure do you seek in persisting inside my memories?

Do I need to kill myself to kill you?

When will you ever give the peace I deserve?

Don't you see?

You always knew the effect of your power on people.

You took advantage of your position and bounded us all with your ways and manners.

None of us dared to contradict your will for we feared your anger more than the wrath of God.

It was not the weakness of your nerves, it was the sickness of your mind.

Don't tell me you did not know what you were doing.

The perfect world you had trapped us in.

You are a sick spirit.



How could you think I was blind to your evil?  
Oh! How I wished for your death.  
How I wished for another mother.  
But you were my mother and I love you,  
You left me no choice but to forgive you always.  
This is when I started to die,  
With hate, anger and guilt eating my soul as they had eaten my father's guts?

...

Where are the warning lights?  
The flashing lights and loud voices in speakers waking me up with:  
'Attention, attention! You are falling asleep ...!  
You have entered the space of no return.  
You can look ahead, but it is coming: you are dying every second of your life.  
Keep on going, run with the others, pretend life is in front of you with its many  
roads still drawing the contours of your map, but look!  
Look carefully!  
Look closer because they are all dead ends.  
You will see nothing more than what you already know when you have reached  
the end of your map.  
Why weren't there any flashing lights when I last saw my father and he was still  
fine against the milky sky of Normandy, those last holidays we spent together?  
'You can speak to me, you know, I'm your father.' That is what he said looking  
at the sea and I remained silent. What was the use, we had tried so many  
times. He died six months after. It was our last private conversation.  
And my mother, to accept this rotten deal, to come to New Zealand, twenty-four  
hours on the plane at seventy-six! To spend her summer with a daughter never  
ready to let down her guard to ask her the simple questions that had always  
burnt her lips: Did you really love him? Were you happy? Which one of your  
children did you love the most? Did you have dreams for yourself? Do you have  
regrets? Are you scared of dying?  
The waste of time. We lose so much time and then we wonder why life goes by  
so fast.  
When is it that we die?

...

'It is so green, the landscape,' you said.

'So rich and generous,' I answered.

Yes! Too many greens, foliages and lush palms, trees, leaves, ferns, and moss  
It creeps, crawls, and grows.

Always opened, sweating in their juices, they are overgrowing, overtaking.

Taking over in front of me, so present, so decadent, so omnipresent.

The indecency of so much green, taking so much of this life!

My panorama, the view front my window, my sight explodes.

I see it outside and it keeps me out, out of it all. I do not belong in this world.

This is not my house. The antipodes with its abundance and proliferation of  
goodness pained me with its arrogance, and I burrowed my gaze into its  
opulence.

See me, see my hands stretching towards you, I wanted to touch your fierce  
beauty but I am not of one yours.

Where are you this place I called home?

I am losing ground, losing strength.

I don't like what I have become.

Is this what getting old is all about, removing yourself slowly from this world, a  
gentle escape, an apology for not wanting to participate in it anymore.

For two years before my father died nothing mattered. His voice had become a  
whisper as if he already knew he was taking the place of someone else. I  
thought if I blew air behind his skinny self he would fly away like a feather.

How do we know that we are not already dead?

Where are they the people I called friends?

'Let's catch up, let's meet up, let's touch base!' they repeat with frank allure.

The ones who looked in my eyes with fake smile,

So eager to serve themselves, so eager to be in this world.

One above everybody? One on top of each other.

We need each other to validate one another. We need the other to validate our  
importance in this world. We need to ask, to hear our own voices.

I said, 'I am the centre of the earth.'

I said, 'I visit Sydney, New York, Hong Kong and Berlin.'

I said hello to the Dalai Lama, to Helen Clark and Gary Hill.

I was a writer and they loved me.

They said, 'So in your last fiction, tell me who was this woman who killed herself?'

My hand started to shake, I looked at them and I lost faith in this world.

My hand could not carry on without faith.

For whom should I write? For you, my friends. For you who gave me praise?

For the ones who applauded my successes? For my mother who could not read my books? For this country already tired of my presence?

There is not one who speaks the truth.

'How are you, dear!'

Nice! I live in a world full of nice people.

We say, 'Life is beautiful!'

I will perforate this stupid cardboard world, this bubble of hideous smiles.

And I will wave goodbye to the carcasses who waited for me to leave this world.

Tic! Another tic on the mortuary inventory, on the chronological list.

Does it matter that there is not enough room for all of us?

Have you ever had a shaky hand that says no all the time?

A hand that says no more, and begs for a respite in this land of crows!

No? So let me finish and let me hear my voice since you are no more:

Why did you betray me trust?

I said, I want to be.

I said, I am.

And they laugh at my arrogance.

Only when one dies that we remember their name, that we celebrate their life as if they were unique and singular, as if nobody else had lived before.

So shall I die to be remembered, to receive at last a piece of this earth, and gain the place one deserves.

When you are young you believe in the future; when you are old you believe in nothing. You descend further until you reach the bottom and then there is nowhere else to go but where you are meant to finish.

The absurdity of life.

I will die suddenly like they all died before me. An unforeseen, unprepared, unplanned death. I will die of a broken heart, of a shortening of my breath, of a final dot on a piece of paper that will close my dossier.

'She was hard, this one.'

...

Web of regrets. There should be webs of regrets crisscrossing the soil of this earth.

I abandoned myself. Once.

I forgot when.

I carried on with life, filing my time with the determined certitude of a mission.

I made a prison of this freedom, placing aspirations, goals ...

The carrots to keep me running away from the inconceivable.

To live so as not to be forgotten, to tell them I am here before they send me back in the sheath of the belly of this earth, at the bottom of a cemetery.

I remember I forgot to ask you, when you came here to New Zealand, if there was still some room left inside our family chapel. For your younger sister. I don't know how many they were inside the deep hole that was built in the belly of the earth. Ten, twenty already stacked up individually on the shelves. The undertakers gathered all the bones together and dumped them all in one box. Then there was room. You went down like the others, head first, your box held by an undertaker already inside the hole.

Where will I be buried when they find me? In which soil will I rest?

Scared!

Oh yes! I have been scared.

Living in constant fear, I have wished for life, I have hoped to live, I have expected to live but ... To live!

'Life is beautiful!'

To inhale and expel and be thankful that it works every time!

This incredible determination it takes to fight death every day!

To escape death only by choosing it.

I ran, I ran, I ran ... scared, layers of fear coveting my pulse.

Will anyone tell me what was THIS all about?

To breathe?

And if today was the day? What should I do?

If it was now?

To write or ...

I carry on stroking the cat that has jumped on my knees, look at this computer with no words to fill its memory, feel my right hand shaking, my left arm hurting, the air sweet from the clematis outside running through the tip of my nostrils,

the sound of the bus shaking the walls of the house, the kids shouting in the distance. Or, should I prepare everything to make the journey easier, to welcome the one who will find me? Clean the house, empty the rubbish bins, pay the bills, unplug the phone, close all windows, water the plants, change the bed linen, feed the cat and leave the front door unlocked?

...

So now ...

Are they waiting for me?

Are they standing behind the door expecting me to open it?

And ... What will they say to me?

'Well! Look who's here!'

'What took you so long?'

What will I tell them?

Will I be happy to see them? In shock from the jump, numbed by the event?

'Nice to see you! Huh! ...'

'How is death going?'

I mean!

Who prepares us for the last ride?

There is no rehearsing, is there?

What are we meant to do? What are we meant to say?

How do we know when to open that door? Which door? Who said there was a door? Are we just meant to go with the flow? Go blind! Trust your instincts, as they say! Go into death as you have gone into life!

Let's see, shall we?

With what? The eyes of death?

So many deaths around me, yet no one helped me!

Is this a fair deal?

I look at the dead ones populating my photos and I wonder sometimes if they can see me. Right there, as I hold them inside my hand.

Are we staring at each other?

And do they know what I think when I look at them? Do they hear these mental discussions I have with them? Because I can't hear them!

I tell you, they are dead!

I get angry, I ask them why. I hate them, I love them, I miss them, I smile at them ... and I cry!

I cry for me!

They are so ... unbothered, unattached in their eternal gaze, their eyes lost in the nowhere they know.

Sometimes it occurs to me that perhaps they weren't even there in the first place.

When I stop thinking of them, they disappear. If I don't remember them, they don't exist. So where did they go, all these lost ones?

There is a photo my grandmother gave me before she died.

She is a young girl in the photo, perhaps ten or eleven maximum.

Next to her, on the left side of the photo, stands her little sister Andrée, who looks no older than five, and their nanny Frida in her working clothes. Behind them is my great grandmother, tall and severe, all in black, hands on her hips, head up, looking straight ahead, whereas the others seem less confident, slightly more shy under her dominance, uncertain as to where they should look while the photo is being taken.

They are waiting underneath the archway that leads to the house, the one that became my grandmother's home later on. On the archway is written her name. The photo does not show the house, but it is there in the background, down the gravel path they would have crossed to open the tall metal door. They have left it opened behind them; the footpath and cobblestone street lay in front of them, at their feet.

They seem to have gathered there just for the time of the photo. They look like they interrupted whatever they were doing: perhaps gardening or sweeping the staircase outside. Perhaps the girls were chasing each other on the grass or playing with their porcelain dolls. Whatever they were doing, it required them to protect their dresses because they are all wearing aprons and white blouses that they didn't bother to take off for the photo.

My grandmother and her sister have large straw hats with ribbons covering their heads. Their dresses drop at ankle height and reveal fine leather boots and black tights. They look elegant, their garments are delicate with laces, their features fine and, on a closer look, I can see pearls hanging on their young necks and other precious items on their fingers and wrists. One could say the chance of their birth gave them wealth and affluence. There is no information

about this photo, but, after searching among the others where dates and ages are written on the back, I can estimate this one was taken around the summer of 1910.

I keep on coming back to this particular photo because it intrigues me more than the others. Whenever I hold it I am struck by the poses locked inside the silver print. These four women, three of them my ancestors, seem to have opened the door to look at me. They seem to have stopped whatever they were doing for the only purpose of checking what I am doing.

And so we meet, from our respective camps; we look at each other with the same curiosity, unsure of what to do next. They stand on their threshold, neither inviting me in, nor pushing me away. Just holding me in their muted gaze for the time I look at them. What do they know that I don't, the four of them so close to each other?

Are they apologising for the secrets they took away with them or snarling at the ignorance of their descendants fighting their way through life?

Are they worried for me? Do they even care at the life that followed after them, at their blood they kept running through my veins?

And what about the debris of life they left behind in their trail, all those unresolved issues we inherited from them.

Women of my past? Did you dare ask questions? Did you try to understand why you ended up on this earth? The crime of birth.

Where are you all now?

I look at this photo and I cannot decipher what their faint smiles really hide from me. I see my grandmother, the slight tension and awkwardness in her posture, and I think of her telling me once,

'I remember running towards my mother and being so happy to see her. I held her hand tight to show her how much I loved her and she pushed my hand away. But I can't blame her; whenever I played I had sweaty hands and she didn't like that.'

She was showing me this photo when she told me this story. I was a child and I could not decrypt what the story really meant, but I can recall easily the dislike I felt instantly for my great-grandmother on hearing it. As if I knew this story for being my own. I think much later, when I was older, she said when looking again at the same photo in my presence, 'She always preferred my sister.'

Mother, daughter, one same story that repeats across the times.

Her dreams, their memories, our hopes and deceptions.

We are looking at each other, and what I see in all of them is what I do not want to see for myself.

Can I escape your sort, women of my past?

I will protect my entrance, I will not let you trespass my own home. You can stay where you are and wait for me if you want.

The whispers you breathe through my ears, I have stopped them.

You do not need me to survive you. I will not bear your descendants.

I am your daughter, but make it the last one of your line because after me there will be none.

And so we look at each other.

I think they knew that I would come.

They were waiting for me, for the last one who would abandon them.

Will you be there waiting for me?

...

My name is Agnès.

Agnès Martin.

We do not choose where we are born.

We do not choose the name our parents give us at birth.

And we live.

We say 'Yes'

We make this life ours and repeat our names as if they defined us

Is this 'I' that was?

'Agnès!'

The lamb of their whims and wishes?

...

'Agnès, do this, would do?'

And fetch this for me, darling; yes, other there, far-away.'

'Agnès, be kind, would you!'

Leave me alone, please, not now.

And stop breathing so hard.

Stop looking at me that way!

'Yes, Mother!'



'Of course, Mother!'

I am your daughter, the child of your organs. The one you gave your life to, the sacrifice you made in the name of motherhood. The memory of your past mothers and lost children. The mirror of your impossible love, of your unfulfilled dreams, the dutiful daughter that was never enough.

The one you wished to be.

...

'Agnès, don't upset your mother!'

'Be nice for once, come here!'

'Sit here, yes on my knees, and be lovely!'

'Yes, Father!'

'Of course, Father!'

I am your daughter, the other side of my mother, the remembrance of your mother, the memories of your past loves, the mirror of your impossible love, the dutiful daughter that was never enough for her mother.

The one I wished to be

...

My name is Agnès Martin.

It was my father's choice. My mother wanted to call me Caroline.

Caroline Martin. Could my life have been different?

I was a lonely child and liked it that way.

I am old and tired.

...

Agnès.

Did you know she was a martyr?

Agnès was killed in the third century. She wanted to remain a virgin, be the bride of Christ: the pure one. She was thirteen! She refused all the suitors the Romans had sent for her at the temple. So they decapitated her and later the Catholic Church declared her to be a Saint: the Lamb of God, the symbol of chastity!

With a name like this I was destined for solitude, don't you think?

...

Sometimes before I go to sleep I wander around my grandmother's house.

It is a ritual of mine.

I can remember everything.

Where the furniture was, what was hanging on the walls, their colours, the smells, the clocks and their different rings. I can remember how the light would fall on the parquet in the living room, which windows she would always open and how the fresh air would feel along my cheeks; how the white drapes would flow graciously with each gust of wind.

I can remember everything.

I open the door, I enter the house and I see it as it was. As if a part of me was still there, living these instants of happiness – I think.

I think this was happiness.

Pure delight in the solitude of this house.

I had the time of my childhood to be with her. She gave me pockets of love I can revisit whenever fear takes hold of my steps.

These days I walk a lot inside her home. I prefer dreaming there than facing the reality that awaits for me.

So when I shut my eyes, I follow.

...

The tassels of the blue velvet curtains in her bedroom. Their tuft of threads licking the tired wax that coated the wooden floor.

The hem of the carpet that spread underneath the wide table in the dining room, the legs of the chairs all waiting underneath in a cadenced order.

The cold grey marble of the fireplace in the music room, the powdery white dust that covered its top at the end of the week, the curves of its feet sweeping down along the sidewalls, languidly waiting for the whirlwind of ashes that would never come.

The steps of the staircase that led to the first floor, the cloth she held in her arthritic hands to dust them one by one, everyday. Her fingers, when they pinched her thighs on the side of her ankles, to pull back up the thick beige nylon whenever it wrinkled down at the base of her slippers.

The droplets of sugar forgotten on the kitchen table and melting under the white heat of a morning sun, the hazy aureoles left floating on the surface of my cold coffee, each time I dipped in the *tartines* thick with yellow butter.

The crumbs of bread my fingers kneaded gently following the intricacies of a winding thought that led nowhere and it didn't matter because it was Sunday morning, the morning of the day of rest and laziness.

The smell of lavender when she opened her handkerchief,

The taste of aniseed when she gave me a cachou,

The nooks and crannies,

The thick and thin strokes,

The waves her skin made, weathered by a life

She spent mostly inside this house.

Hours by myself.

I was there in the silence of her home, looking at everything that composed her world.

I can open her door at anytime and she is there waiting for me as I left her before she died.

...

They say that when a salmon knows it is about to die it goes back up stream to where it was born. Drawing on its last burst of energy it makes the long journey back home instinctively until it finds the familiar place where it can die out of exhaustion. It must have been the trip the old people used to speak about when one had died in the family. The children would ask in all their innocence, 'Where has Aunt Eva gone?' and they would say she had gone forever on a long long trip: *le grand voyage*.

...

I know what I will do when I die.

2.

The air smelt sweet the day Sarah Brentwood walked up to Mrs Martin's home. The large bush of white clematis was draping down the entrance's archway and filling the surroundings with its fruity fragrance. She had noticed the quietness of the house during the last couple of weeks and the newspapers progressively jamming the letterbox, but the cat meowing insistently at her own door was what really triggered her curiosity. When Sarah's daughter bought fresh eggs from her farm out in Hellensville, she decided it was time to pay the old lady a visit.

Except for its overall appearance, that was in great need of maintenance, her neighbour's house was very similar to hers and all the others standing close to each other along the hilly street. It was a white wooden villa with large bay windows on either side of the front door and a wide veranda running along the entire front of the house. The paint was peeling off, showing former coats of creamy yellow in some areas, and leaving bare wood in some others, turning grey under the sun and air. The picket fence could have also benefited from new layers of white as well as a straightening. One of its sides was bending dangerously onto the footpath, pushed down by the weight of leafy shrubs and bushes of red roses. At the right corner of the veranda, the cabbage tree was spreading wide. Sarah noticed that one of its trunks had carved its way well into the metal gutter. Next to the entrance, she recognised the modest two-seater bench where Mrs Martin usually sat after her afternoon stroll down to Grey Lynn Park. It seemed ages since she had seen her there.

A speck of worry suddenly tarnished her mood, but she hesitated an instant before knocking at the door. Their relationship had been distant, made of neighbourly courtesies and polite hellos. In fact she had never really been fond of Mrs Martin, finding her looks of haughty disdain out of character in this community full of kids and family life.

It had also been difficult to know how to speak and behave with her. Sarah never managed to assess her age, always puzzled by her appearance that kept presenting so many conflicting indices. If her hair was as white as a feather, her skin still looked quite fresh, as if it had never been weathered by the harshness of the time or the New Zealand sun. If sometimes her feet seemed to stumble on invisible rocks, her back kept straight as if a broom was holding her spine up,

giving to her walk a determined attitude with the occasional moments of weaknesses. Years had passed by without significant changes, and Sarah often wondered if the woman living next door was indeed an old lady or a woman who had prematurely aged. One thing she was sure about was that her right hand had the shakes. Whenever they exchanged their occasional chitchats, the woman would always hold the right hand with the other hand or hid it inside the pocket of her jacket.

Behind her kitchen windows, Sarah would often see her neighbour pruning her roses, sweeping dead leaves or just sitting there on the porch, some days for hours as if time did not matter to her. She was curious then as to what could keep her in one place for so long. 'Look at her!' she would say to her husband. 'We should really have her for a drink one of these days!' But Sarah knew Billy would not have her around. They were worlds apart. Mrs Martin always dressed impeccably, day after day, with the same plain black dress, polished black shoes, and a single strand of white pearls, as if she was off to somewhere chic, and he with his baggy tee-shirts and working overalls regardless of the weather. And Billy had no patience with accents anyway.

'She looks so lonely!' Sarah said with a faint alarm in her voice. Mrs Martin had been on the porch the whole morning that day. She had gone to pick up the mail and then sat on her bench and stared ahead without moving. 'Hasn't she got any family? Friends?' It had unnerved Sarah so much that she had pulled her kitchen blinds down for a few days after that.

'Who does she think she is not to need anyone!' Sarah broke her cup that day.

After a couple of knocks on the door with no answer, Sarah hesitated again. It was too early for her neighbour's afternoon walk and Sarah couldn't remember having seen her leaving the house. So she ventured a third knock, this time louder and longer, and when she realised this was unsuccessful, she called out and twisted the doorknob automatically. To her surprise, the door opened with no resistance. At once Sarah felt awkward, and her heart started racing fast through her veins. She called again, but the silence around her was so deep that her voice sounded nothing so much as unwelcomed. From where she stood, she could see everything. A large open room running all along the left side of the house, from street to garden in the back, and, on her right side, a couple of rooms with their doors shut, and a narrow staircase that ran to the

attic. At the end, a bathroom whose white tiled wall was made visible by the door left ajar.

The strict order and tidiness of the room disconcerted Sarah. The inside was such a stark contrast to the outside. She had never expected her neighbour's house to be so minimal in taste. It was as if no one had lived in it for some time or as if it had been emptied of all the unnecessary things that usually bring life and charm to a house. What was left seemed to have been placed with careful consideration, making the place rigid and unfriendly, like a show home for display. Sarah remembered Mrs Martin telling her once that she would not leave her house until her last breath. She advanced further inside the room, listening to whichever noise was accompanying her delicate footsteps. But, except for the few cars passing by and kids shouting and running up and down the street, the house was completely quiet.

A fireplace in warm terracotta bricks separated the room into two spaces. The lounge was close to the street. Two large cream sofas looked comfortable in the corner of the room; shelves full of books ran along the white wall; on the opposite wall was an antique cabinet that was shut, and in the centre of the room was a square coffee table with a leather-bound book with a piece of paper sticking out between its pages, placed next to a couple of pencils. Sarah left her basket of eggs next to them.

On the other side of the fireplace stood a Persian carpet, and an oval mahogany dining table with six chairs around it. An empty crystal vase on a lace mat lay in the centre of the table and, at the end of the room, the kitchen behind a bar was made from the same terracotta bricks as the fireplace. The floor was rimu, like in Sarah's house, but Sarah took note of the two skylight windows in the roof that let the midday sun flood the whole room with bright light.

She glanced at the two shut doors and called for Mrs Martin again. With still no answer she ventured upstairs. It was a small mezzanine and, in comparison to the rest of the house, it was a mess. Paintings on one wall, notes stuck on the other, books on the shelves, books on the floor, more papers with scribble notes, cups of coffee on piles of newspapers, dirty old sofas with tobacco scattered over the cushions, bottles of red wine next to a rosary, frames with old black and white photos, ribbons swirling around dry flowers, sweets half-eaten with ants digging into them. Sarah was astounded, as if she had discovered a dirty treasure hunt. It looked so unlike Mrs Martin's stern

image. She tiptoed around, not moving anything, and finally sat on the chair, where a red knitted cardigan was hanging on the back. It smelt of lavender. The rest of the room was musty, as in an old library or a cellar packed with boxes. On the table, in front of her, a laptop was opened, screen black; next to it a couple of pages that had been torn from a spiral book. The writing was elegant, leaning towards the right, with the slender curves the nib of a fountain pen would have drawn. Sarah turned her head towards the window. She looked at the sky. It was still bright and blue. It was often like that after a morning rain, as if water was cleaning away the impurities of the night. Sarah bowed her head above the written pages. She had always wanted to visit this house, and slowly gained confidence in the disorder that surrounded her. Strangely it reminded her of some place she thought she had seen before; and there was something familiar about the old photos of women with children around. Sarah started reading the first page:

*Beautiful morning.*

*It has just rained.*

*There is an old Chinese man on his bicycle. He has stopped. He is considering which way to go. He swings his bike and chooses the road that goes down.*

*He rides without pedaling, without effort – the weight of his body is apparent.*

*Between the trees, the sun is shining through, the road still wet from the rain.*

*There is no traffic.*

*He turns his head to check if the way is clear, and, still riding along with no effort, turns into another road and disappears out of my sight.*

At once Sarah felt like an impostor, a thief stealing someone else's life. And if Mrs Martin was on her way home? Sarah raised herself of the chair so abruptly that she knocked the computer mouse with her hand. The screen lit up instantly showing one line at the top of a document. Sarah stared at it, and the more she read it the less it made sense. Her limbs became cold. So she had known all the way long: this house had turned quiet for a reason. She started shivering uncontrollably and panting like a baby who has lost a mother. Why did

she wait for so long to knock at her neighbour's door? Nothing, she had done nothing. She hadn't even tried. She had turned a blind eye and left time passing with all its futile details, hoping things would change by themselves, hoping that her neighbour would sit again on her bench.

Sarah was empty, weak as if blood had been sucked out of her veins. She took her hand off the chair, off the red jumper there, and turned around. She looked at the notes on the wall, the illegible scribbles, these silent shouts of a life she would never know, and made her way back downstairs, painfully, feeling her bones aching every which one. There, in the corridor, next to the shut wooden doors, she saw the chair and sat. She bowed her head and looked at her hands. Hard-working hands that had fed four children, kept a house she was proud of, and given love to forty years of marriage. She had stayed put, faithful to her words. She was a woman and her home was her life. She remembered her grandmother's hands, long and slender with thick dark veins running under the thin skin, her mother's hands fast in her movements, her daughter's hands chubby, more like her husband's ones, that she loved kissing so tenderly. And she thought of the youngest of her granddaughters, the one who stays with her during the day while her mother works. The one who always followed her every move as if she was her mother.

She was her special one.

Time passed without Sarah noticing. The light coming through the panel window of the entrance door was now enveloping her in the golden embrace of the late afternoon. Outside she heard a child laughing and she guessed it was her granddaughter looking around for her.

She waited a little longer in the silence of Agnès's home, sitting on this chair next to these closed doors, and warm tears of gratitude ran down her cheeks.