

# Season of La Niña - a fictive memoir

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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), or 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 learning.

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## ABSTRACT

*Season of La Niña* is a fictive memoir about a New Zealand flamenco dancer's encounter with the gypsy flamenco sub-culture in Jerez de la Frontera, Andalucia, Spain. The text follows her struggle to learn the art form, her unique relationship with a gypsy mentor, her depression and the dissolution of her flamenco identity in the wake of a New Zealand tour. The exegesis considers how the text straddles the boundary of memoir and fiction, how it manages to express depression in prose, and how it meditates on, and aspires to enact in prose the essence of flamenco. It reflects on the writing process and the development of key methodologies used in the first draft stage of a creative text.

## INTRODUCTION

*“He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.”*

(Walter Benjamin 1932, pp. 400-401)

*Season of La Niña*, a fictive memoir, is the result of a nine month preliminary “excavation” (Benjamin, 1932, p. 400-401) into memory for creative insight. It is the attempt to capture the conflict between my life as a flamenco dancer and my on-going experiences with depression, firstly in Spain, and more recently in New Zealand where I carried out a long-envisaged tour. During the New Zealand tour, the stress that had built up over the years, culminated in suicidal ideations and a state of mental despair and physical exhaustion. I had toured in other places, but none had the decisive effect the New Zealand tour had in terms of dampening my passion for the art form and challenging my identity within it. The idea for *Season of La Niña* emerged after an author friend suggested I write about these experiences. I had been writing journals since childhood, partly as a means to cope with difficult life events, so the idea to write about flamenco seemed a natural and inspiring progression.

*Season of La Niña* involves a young New Zealand woman ‘Francisca’, later nick-named ‘Kika’ who is compelled to dance flamenco. Most sequences in this narrative are set in the two historic flamenco neighbourhoods of the town of Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. The narrative follows Kika’s journey through rites of passage in the art form and introduces a cast of contextual characters. Kika meets a gypsy dancer nick-named Rin who mentors her, helping her overcome the difficulties of the local context, as well as her own depressive tendencies. Their relationship is intense and ambiguous, but over time Rin becomes an antagonist working against Kika’s efforts to prepare a New Zealand tour. A metaphoric and symbolic ‘fall’ scene at the beginning of this narrative carries the text to the location of a second narrative in New Zealand. As such the story

begins at the end, or makes an interlocking of beginnings and ends, giving the text the form of a circle with a line (symbolized in the meridian line between Spain and New Zealand) slicing it roughly in two, in terms of narrative, protagonist identities, and time periods.

The second narrative is set in various North Island locations in New Zealand and involves an unnamed older female narrator-character who is the older Kika in the midst of an identity crisis. The narrative moves from an East Coast vineyard location to Auckland, where she attempts to dance again, but can't. She tries to avoid her past, but is haunted by a flamenco essence, and an unrealised artistic vision of a performance she never managed to produce. The narrative follows her struggle to conquer her mood issues and her fractured sense of self and belonging living apparently without flamenco. The end alludes to a possible re-conciliation with her old mentor Rin.

The two narratives converge in the last sequence which is based on the New Zealand tour.

The exegesis is divided into three sections, which reflect the three components of the flamenco trilogy; flamenco song (Cante), flamenco dance (Baile) and flamenco guitar (Toque). The common methodological strand running through these discussions (like the flamenco rhythm cycle - Compas) focuses on the development, strengths and limitations of multiple point of view and voice in a first draft.

Flamenco song (*cante*) is an expression of pain or protest at loss or displacement. In this section I explain the hybrid-genre of *Season of La Niña*, outlining why a combination of memoir and fiction or 'fictive memoir' has been a natural vehicle for me to explore the fracturing and loss of my identity as a flamenco dancer. I comment on works of similar concern or genre, and show how they have informed my methodologies including narrative structure and design, and the development of multiple points of view and voices. Unable to resume dancing after the tour I fell into a confused and disorientated kind of depression. I resolved to 'quit' flamenco, and began to avoid anything or anyone connected with it.

Flamenco dance (*baile*) responds to the emotion inherent behind the words of the song. The protagonist in my text responds to loss through dancing which in part exorcises her childhood grief. When she can no longer dance she is left only with complicated grief or depression. In this section of my exegesis, I highlight the problem of the word 'depression' and discuss the double challenge of writing engaging prose on it, with a protagonist based on myself. I discuss the writing process and its tendency to



encourage depressive moods, as well as its influence on point of view, voice, tone, mood, pace and structural cohesion of the text. Other writers offer hope in this area, and I show where I have been influenced by their model.

Four years passed during which I seemed unable to shift the hold my flamenco past had on me, but nor could I re-inhabit it as before. I tried to return to dance when I found no other occupation that suited, but it seemed inaccessible. But the dancing was not all of it: flamenco remained; indestructible, restless, lingering.

The function of flamenco guitar (*toque*) is to weave song and dance together, as this text aspires to integrate elements of my personal experience while seeking to convey the universal essence of flamenco. In section three of the exegesis I outline how I have experimented with certain methodologies in order to achieve this, such as the use of an omniscient voice, heightened language sequences, and metaphor. I have used my own voice as memoirist, to bring sequences together, attempting to sharpen and heighten the central conflicts.

At times over-analysis has worked against the creation of this text. John Banville says it's dangerous for a writer to get caught up in too much theory. (John Banville, 2008). Julian Barnes warns that being too self-conscious in the early stages of a draft is unhelpful (Julian Barnes, 2011). "Don't over-think it." Lloyd Jones (L. Jones, personal communication, June, 2012) advised when he reviewed a few of my pages. A draft that "sparkles" requires a "sealed container" of writer and work cooking under a "flame of passion." (M. Johnson, personal communication, September, 2012). How wise is it for a writer to interrupt their creative process to critically analyze their intentions and text early in its inception? Even the weight of a new, shiny, but heavy, toolbox of writing techniques and critical thought can bludgeon the tentative new plant of a narrative (Steven King, 2000; Dorothea Brande, 1934). This must be weighed against the long-term benefits of knowledge. Writing methodologies have offered me avenues with which to pursue a story I may otherwise have abandoned. However, the conundrum of the clash between the two vital processes of writing, the creative and the critical (Steven King, 2000; Dorothea Brande, 1934), obliged to sit so closely together in a nine-month window provides a backdrop to this reflective essay.

## ONE – SONG INITIATES

*“When you write you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a wood carver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow.”*

(Annie Dillard, 1989, p. 3)

As a work-in-progress, or work in-between stages of draft, the text does not embody the shape and clarity of a finished manuscript. It is just over half the length it will assume in another year and difficult to categorise firmly into a genre. Thomas Larson tells us “Function noses out form” (Thomas Larson, 2007, p.330). Even then categorization could be problematic. When J.M. Coetzee was asked by his publisher what genre his book *Boyhood* fit into, memoir or fiction, Coetzee queried if it could “hover between the two?” (Coetzee, as cited in Lannan, 2010, “J.M. Coetzee with Peter Sacks”). The publisher said it could, but he needed to direct the booksellers where to place it on their shelves. *Boyhood* whose protagonist, in Coetzee’s words “carries my name and my birthdate” (Lannan, 2010) can now be found on the fiction shelf in the United States and the autobiography one in the United Kingdom (2010). Like Kika, who encounters and absorbs aspects of the gypsy flamenco sub-culture yet never fully fits into it, “every text participates in one or several genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.” (Derrida, 1980, as cited in Gilmore, 1994, p. 1). At best, the text can be described as a hybrid of memoir and autobiographical fiction.

Sales and marketability issues are beyond the bounds of the text’s current priorities, I therefore side-step further discussion on distinctions between genres, and focus on the characteristics of the central genres the text draws on.

*“Writing memoir is a living entity, the mature transformations of an unfinished person and an unfinished life.”*

(Thomas Larson, 2007, p.165)

Before starting the text I was writing excerpts in a diary to understand how my flamenco career had ended, yet continued to corrupt my present. According to Ballesteros, I was already partly engaging in the process of autobiographical fiction where “a narrator-character ... starts in and through the writing process, an intimate analysis...searching for her lost or hidden identity, or reacts against oblivion, through the act of discourse.” (Ballesteros, as cited in Caporale-Bizzini, 1994, p. 93). I was attracted to the protagonists in novels like John Banville’s (2005) *The Sea*, Julian Barnes’s (2011) *The Sense of an Ending*, and Margaret Atwood’s (1989) *Cats Eye*, where a central character stands at a point in time, and, overwhelmed with nostalgia, is forced to look back to dislodge stuck grief, or shift a present state of depression in order to move forward. The older protagonist in my text, like Tony in *The Sense of an Ending* is nostalgic about a time during which she suffered more because then she was more alive. The title of the text, *Season of La Niña*, reflects a four-year stalemate between creative identities (for myself as dancer to writer), the span of time over which the present (New Zealand) narrative stretches and my cycle of ensuing depression. *La Niña* or ‘the girl’ refers to my identity in Spain or Kika, the protagonist in the Spanish narrative and the name of the fluctuating wet weather pattern in the Pacific between 2008-2012. Guided by the works mentioned above, all of which employ dual flashback narratives, and given the fractured nature of my career identity and childhood, it seemed logical to write the text in a dual narrative structure: one located in New Zealand and one in Spain.

*“You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.”*

(Margaret Atwood, 1989, p. 3)

In an attempt to authentically represent my psychological state, both at the time of my career as a dancer and looking back on it, the text emerged as memoir, in that it gave precedence to thematics over chronology (Cohen, 2012) or “a narrative essay, organised around a single theme, topic or situation which uses selective aspects of the life history, often combined with other material to explore it in depth.” (Cohen, 2012, p. 4). This resulted in the use of many flashback sequences, multiple time frames, and the emergence of different voices creating a montage-like narrative design, as opposed to a

classical one. Although this was the natural consequence of writing and re-collecting (Thomas Larson, 2007), it makes the text appear at times fragmented. Scenes are internally coherent, yet the reader is obliged to assemble their own overall order of events depending on where the narrative takes them emotionally and psychologically.

As in other memoirs on related subjects like Kapka Kassabova's (2011) *Twelve Minutes of Love*, Jason Webster's (2003) *Duende*, or Laurie Lee's (1969) *As I walked out one Midsummer Morning*, I employ the first person point of view and self as protagonist. When I came to write my experiences in Spain however, I struggled to get close to the self of my past, and the overall situation. The irony of "lost identity" came to the fore. (Ballesteros, as cited in Caporale-Bizzini, 1994). I seemed unable to sail back and inhabit the full ambient richness of Spain on the small dinghy of 'I'. "It was easier to believe (I) was someone else." (Season of La Niña, p. 150). Larson tells us that it is normal to see the remembered self as a character who has an independent life, although traditional memoirists tend to avoid this kind of casting self as character (Thomas Larson, 2007). My difficulty was partly due to the limitation of the first person point of view and its inability to convey any other perspective than that of the narrator of my present self. I realized I would need a wide-open point of view for the Spanish narrative, including possibly an omniscient one, the latter which I elaborate on in section three of this exegesis.

Third person limited point of view became the weapon of choice to *picar el toro* (stab the bull), as it were, and I could also use it to exposit on the historic aspects of flamenco reconstituting them throughout, thereby avoiding the didactic knowledge dumps that tend to disturb the narrative flow in Webster's (2003) memoir on flamenco and Kassabova's (2011) on tango. However, to counter the cool distanced tone of that point of view, third person subjective point of view would allow me to zoom in on myself, from another direction. This closer point of view helped me represent not just my own experience but perhaps speak in part for the experiences of other foreigners in the flamenco world, such as my peers.

This resulted in multiple points of view and voices emerging in the text, and to avoid them appearing random to a reader, I attempted to introduce them all in the first twenty pages. Further into the text, hopefully once the reader is used to these transitions, I 'bled in' the point of view from one narrative location to the other. On page 57 my first person narrator in New Zealand awakes into the Spanish siesta, into a scene which fore-shadows the entry of Rin into the Spanish narrative following, and on page 100 the

same occurs where a friend prompts a dance memory. My intention here has been to express the immediacy of the memories (Thomas Larson, 2007).

Important to note here is my inter-changing use of present and past tense. I have tried to use the past tense for the majority of the Spanish narrative except for when using the present tense in a filmic capacity to bring visual and tactile immediacy to a scene (such as dance scenes or flashbacks of dance scenes). I use the present tense for the majority of the New Zealand narrative except for when overtly recalling or speaking as the recalling memoirist. In chapter three, I use interchangeable present tense for fragmented childhood flashbacks. A clarifying and of these floating tenses will be necessary in future re-writes.

*“We don’t remember, we imagine.”*

(John Banville, 2012)

Driven to look for new directions in a life journey and so a life-story (Boynton & Malin, 2005) the text veered away from straight memoir, and more toward autobiographical fiction this time as “a genre or subgenre in which an author fictionalises portions of her life and presents it as a novel.” (Kuilan, as cited in Boynton & Malin, 2005, p. 88). In writing fiction I was able to leave the door open for a broader creativity in a way I deemed I hadn’t achieved or couldn’t attempt in flamenco’s traditional environment, as a New Zealand dancer. The books I enjoyed most (Barnes’s, Banville’s and Atwood’s novels) as well as Anne Michael’s (1996) *Fugitive Pieces* and Michael Ondaatje’s (1992) *The English Patient*, play with the edges of time and memory and inspired me to do more than just transcribe a colourful past, but create something new from it. Moreover, there was the problem of the slipperiness of memory, and I found myself re-casting and re-interpreting my life events (Kuilan, as cited in Boynton & Malin, 2005) as I looked back on them. Frye (1957) tells us that even autobiographies “are inspired by a creative, and therefore *fictional* [emphasis added] impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern.” (Frye, as cited in Hale, 2006, p. 97).

Unanchoring myself consciously from writing ‘fact’, I cast myself off in third person limited point of view “into a dimension rather than a time” (Season of La Niña, p. 57) for the Spain narrative. The cool eyes-wide-open nature of this point of view contrasted with the first person point of view and New Zealand narrator more embedded in her narrative and this contrast seemed to benefit the dual narrative structure. It was

refreshing to inhabit another perspective from that of the “talky foreigner” (Season of La Niña, p. 29) - the one I was trying to avoid from Webster’s (2003) and Kassabova’s (2011) memoirs, but I would not succeed in entirely avoiding this voice as I outline in section three of this exegesis. The third person limited perspective allowed me to simply record what I observed in the dubious waters of memory, examining each floating scene that arose. I waded through the real scene wreckage of my former life coming across shards of dramatic action and conflict. Not beholden to ‘fact’ yet still on the look-out for truth, I could decide whether to write them as they appeared, cobble them together, adjust them, or throw them back. In the third person limited point of view the writing process felt easier and seemed to offer the text more ease of momentum in terms of pace and plot, helping me avoid the tendency of solipsism of the first person and some of its resulting textual stagnation, although I would still struggle with this issue, as I highlight in section two.

In this draft I still feel compelled to wade through autobiographical debris but as I continue to write, that debris is becoming less. It seems a question of time, in months, rather than courage, or perhaps some of both, before I hit the ocean of fiction.

## **TWO – DANCE RESPONDS**

*“Never again psychology!”*

(Kafka, 1994, p.22)

The word depression is a difficult and almost meaningless term. It has “slithered innocuously through the language like a slug, leaving little trace of its intrinsic malevolence and preventing, by its very insipidity, a general awareness of (it’s) horrible intensity.” (Styron 2002, p 115, as cited in Bradley, 2009, p.6). The World Health Organization claims that by 2020 people will be affected by depression more than any other health problem. (“Depression looms as Global Crisis”, 2009). There seems a responsibility to shine a light on its various shades, in spite of the problematic nature it presents to prose. (Twyford-Moore, 2010; Smith, 2003). My psychology degree in 2010 was insufficient in revealing the myriad of states the term subsumes particularly the phenomena associated with a more chronic burning-out variety, and only confirmed the danger inherent in squashing humanity into a science. Kafka rejected all authority and cures so this text is in part, a meditation to his gong: the impossibility of being alive. (Smith, 2003).

However, writing a memoir about one's own garden variety of depression could be seen as self-indulgent, and the text tends at times toward sentimentality and solipsism. It might be smarter to write a self-help book, but that would contribute in this Age of Popular-Psychology to what novelist James Bradley (2009) calls the "social and psychiatric experiment" (p. 6) that society is engaged in "on an unprecedented scale, a project which – whether we see it or not – has, as its object, the elimination of emotional disorder." (p. 6) Bradley's grim musings resonate with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* when he says:

There might be a case to be made that the deep, slow creativity traditionally associated with psychic trauma and mood disorder is a form of creativity with little utility in a world of hyper-consumerism and short attention spans. Maybe the need for that kind of thinking and behaviour is less now, and we can do without it. Just as religion is dying, might not art and creativity be fading? (James Bradley, 2009, p. 6)

*"To write about depression in electric page-turner prose is disingenuous, untrue to the experience."*

(Sam Twyford-Moore, 2010, para. 2)

I have chosen to write about my own experience with depression as it is the only one I know. I have at times prioritized authenticity over the pace or cohesion of the text as a whole. The text does not always fulfill significant sequence in a narrative, as the novel might (Smith, 2003) but attempts to manage or present a flux of present and past selves in a "balancing act" as in memoir (Thomas Larson, 2007, p. 302). Moreover, Twyford-Moore says "Depression is anything but smooth" (Twyford-Moore, 2010, para 2). He suggests (2010) that a flat quality to prose honestly represents the flat state of depression. If depression at times manifests as a fragmented or stale state, a text might also convey these moods.

Other writers struggle with the balance of authentic representation of mood and audience or readership engagement (Twyford-Moore, 2010; Bradley, 2009). When I attended Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia* in which he attempts to portray a spectrum of dark moods, the cinema was empty. Von Trier gives viewers not just a perspective, but in-part, the physical experience of a depressed state. The menacing Wagnerian soundtrack, its head-achingly jilty camera-work, and the sluggish sense of waiting, inspired nausea in my cinema companion (at another viewing a second companion

insisted on leaving the cinema after forty minutes). It could be said that those who have never before experienced such depths of mood were unable to achieve a gritty empathy with the characters. This poses an interesting question; in writing (as in film) - how does one convey a state of stagnation and portray depressed protagonists without the prose itself stagnating? Von Trier's film was accused of this (French, 2011) and failed to resonate with an audience outside the intellectual film critic elite (Child, 2011). J.M. Coetzee's (2005) *Slow Man* avoids such trouble as Coetzee's prose is so translucent, he gives Paul's depression the purity and beauty of a transparent room. This has the startling effect of revealing the state so clearly, it almost overcomes itself. Benjamin used these words regarding Kafka's work too, saying he had the "purity and beauty of a failure" (Benjamin, 1938, as cited in Arendt, 1968, p. xx). A failure, albeit, whose prose hangs like a mirror through the halls of time.

The power of Coetzee's language (2005) opens a "window of hope" for me (Season of La Niña, p. 57) in writing about depression. Brilliant language (although in different styles), the wry black tones, and self-deprecating or cynical voices of the depressed narrator-characters also seem to deliver Margaret Atwood's (1989) *Cat's Eye* and John Banville's (2005) *The Sea* from fates of stagnation. I have been inspired by these voices. The protagonist in my text at times has a dry, humorous or dark tone veiling a social alienation and irritated depression.

"For a minute I see myself with a gun at my window, shooting as many ride-on mower men and leaf-blowers I can see. I may as well take down a few of those females too, those from my own demographic who have disappeared under wide infant buggies or into large black tanks." (Season of La Niña, p. 56).

The old flamenco singer in the iPod she refers to as "an old goat blaying, trapped in the machine." (Season of La Niña, p. 75) and the vineyard lady who reminds her unconsciously of her mother "always looks as though she has a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, even when she hasn't." (Season of La Niña, p. 33).

Coetzee (2005) introduces the character of Elizabeth Costello into the text of *Slow Man* to liven the depressed narrator Paul, as well as the text (Banville, 2005). In a similar spirit, I have introduced the character of Rin, whose personality and flamenco approach is meant as an active antidote to the self-condemnation and rumination in the protagonist.



Banville's (2005) and Atwood's (1989) narrators are both grieving, stuck and depressed, but the dual narratives in both stories work to maintain pace through the prose as a whole, one narrative being more active, countering the slower one. I have followed this model by working to establish a moving plot in the Spanish narrative and metaphoric echoes and backstory in the New Zealand one. In this way I have attempted to balance horizontal time in the former, with vertical time in the latter.

*“The writing of prose – essay, fiction and memoir, in particular – can be an incubator for depressive moods more than other forms, in that it invites long periods of seeming inactivity, obsessiveness, and over-analysis.”*

(Sam Twyford-Moore, 2010, p.2)

At first I thought fictionalizing the memoir would avoid the possibility of re-traumatization from past events but I soon learnt fiction offered no escape and I would have to emotionally re-journey into my past to extract succour for the text with no guarantee of retrieving anything of literary value but bitter fruit. I found myself more terrified of the open door of fiction than the stale pain of transcribing autobiographical scenes. If there are parts where the text fails to take “imaginative flight” (L. Jones, personal communication, June 2012) behind it, may lie the fear of someone once burnt by the nakedness of the stage, now running from the nakedness of fiction. As Banville says “In fiction one is presenting one's naked self. Fiction is an x-ray of the self.” (Banville, as cited in Breathnach, 2012, “John Banville Interviewed”). The page is like the stage, where audience or readers see through your skin to your entrails (Season of La Niña). In writing memoir too, one is “writing now...discovering now, and every discovery now must be felt.” (Larson, 2007, p.344). This sometimes makes the material “too hot to handle” (2007, p. 344). In future drafts I would do well to preserve a portion of the courage of my former self who without fear (*Sin Miedo*) leapt off the edge of herself (Season of the Niña).

Point of view and voice are also relevant to this discussion on writing process and mood. The third person limited point of view that I use in the Spain sequences, has the benefit of setting up a reader's view of the characters from the outside, and places the character in and against the landscape. This point of view acted initially as an emotional buffer, as with it came an objective, cool voice. It prevented me from being overwhelmed by my emotional past, yet helped me sail closer into it. But it still kept me too far from the emotional truth, leaving the text strangely brittle. I then had to use an

inter-play of third person subjective point of view and the first person point of view, to fully inhabit myself, as it were.

Inevitably I have re-dipped into periods of self-loathing moods which have interrupted the writing process over the nine months of this project. This has specifically interfered with the creative aspect, so vital at first draft stage (Steven King, 2000; Dillard, 1989). This may at times explain the self-obsessed mood arising in the text and its fragmented design. Giving the text a stronger pace and narrative spine will be a focus in my next draft. However, as Larson says "...telling the truth to ourselves and to others guarantees emotional anguish." (Thomas Larson, 2007, p.154). If this is so, then there is more to come - of both truth and anguish.

### THREE – GUITAR INTEGRATES SONG AND DANCE

*'Carmen Amaya is hail on a windowpane, a swallow's cry, a black cigar smoked by a dreamer, thunderous applause; when she and her family sweep into town, they cause ugliness, torpor and gloom to evaporate just as a swarm of insects strips the trees of their leaves.'*

(Jean Cocteau 1889-1963 as cited in "Carmen Amaya")

The genius dancer Carmen Amaya sweated for her life, releasing deadly toxins from her body that her defunct kidney failed to, toxins which eventually lead to her early death. In the same way, gypsy flamenco is an antidote to Kika's depression through its intense physical demands, its emphasis on unleashing "poison and pleasure" (Season of La Niña, p. 73); its spontaneity (juxtaposed against rumination), and its refusal to be victim; "The *golpe* must sound conclusive. Authoritative. Not suffering *anything*." (Season of La Niña, p. 58). But flamenco is a medication for Kika, not a cure, and medications have a shelf-life (Margaret Atwood, 1989) and side-affects. (James Bradley, 2010). Flamenco constantly requires an intense emotional response, a re-visiting of the raw edge of things, as does the process of raw first draft writing. Even the 'lighter' forms of the dance require, by traditional expectation, a lacing of the underlying grit of suffering. In this way flamenco, (which was recognized by UNESCO in 2010 as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity) depicts a universal spectrum of the emotional truth of humanity. (UNESCO, 2010).

*‘...the earthquakes, the blazing sun, the glaring earthiness and salt and all the other special qualities that stem from the half-open wound that characterizes the Gypsy aspect of the art...’*

(Castaño 2010, as cited in Zern, 2012)

It seemed important to choose a generous perspective to tell a story involving the universal essence of the art-form, one that respected its broad reach, and moved beyond first person point of view (the displaced European New Zealander or foreigner) as in Kassabova’s (2011) and Webster’s (2003) memoirs. The clippy tones of these memoirs tended toward stating and direct self-disclosure rather than revealing through text. Kassabova (2011) in her memoir on Argentinian Tango tells us from the onset that Tango is ‘introverted, brooding, physically controlled, musically complex and emotionally dark.’ (Kassabova, 2011, p. 2). This extinguished my desire to take the journey further into the text. Having taught flamenco around the world for some years, I no longer wanted to preach about it, or try to package it up, and resolved that a text on flamenco should not give “silly warnings” (Season of La Niña p. 36) of the dangers inherent in following the art, (as a text on tango might), but should attempt, through the subtleties of mimetic as opposed to diegetic language and voice to convey its unpredictable essence; from subtle to extreme to desolate.

Third person limited point of view and its cool tone fell short of these heights and depths I wished to convey as Salman Rushdie does in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred years of Solitude* (1970). For this I would need an omniscient point of view. As a possible goal for the following draft, I hope to flesh out a historic narrative of the flamenco-song families of Jerez (Castaño, 2007). “The truth of the *cante jondo* resides in ten or twelve Gypsy families living between Seville and Cadiz.” (Castaño, as cited in Zern, 2012) and increase my use of an omniscient voice which could serve to knit together these old families, and the new (the young foreigner, Kika) in a similar way Hamish Clayton achieved in melding the European and Maori through myth, in his debut novel *Wulf* (2011).

In this draft however, I use only small amounts of omniscient voice and it is more through the presence of the real, actual Spanish-Maori family on the East Coast of the North Island that the above sentiment of a cultural and generational hybridity is somewhat alluded to. The creative vision of a timeless, indestructible, itinerant

flamenco voice that sweeps across the world, (or seethes through the centre of the earth) spreading its spores, inhabiting the New Zealand landscape and its people is, at this stage, a half-formed, experimental idea. In order for it to be convincing and maintain suspension of disbelief I was told I would need a “Rushdie-like language, one that craftily combines prosaic detail with imaginative flight.” (L. Jones, personal communication, June 2012). I take a beginner’s stab at this, in a scene of Magic Realism on page 30, which attempts to convey the heightened emotional tumult of the flamenco *juerga* (Pohren, 2005), alluding to the gypsy persecutions, the historic birth of the art-form (Castaño, 2007), as well as the psychological burn-out of the protagonist.

“An old woman with two twigs of calf poking out from her hem, catches the last hair of each beat...The feet need the floor, but it has fallen through, exposing the finely dusted bones of a Moor. If you don’t know, imitate those gone before.” (Season of La Nina, pp. 30- 31).

This last rhyme, alludes to the layered architecture of Andalusia as well as the layered beginnings of the art form (Castaño, 2007) and more obviously to the learning of the dance. This is inspired by Rushdie;

“To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly .... How to ever smile again, if first you won’t cry?...” (Rushdie, 1988, p. 60).

Lorca’s writings also inspire this scene. I borrow his line which evokes the town of Jerez;

*“O city of the gypsies!  
Who could see you and not remember?”*

(Lorca, 1953, p. 49, as cited in Season of La Niña, p. 31)

To convey these multi-layered meanings in a jam-packed fantastical metaphor in ironic tone, I will need greater precision with language and more time cooking my subject in the “melting pot” (Season of La Niña, p. 5) under my “sealed container.” (M. Johnson, personal communication, September, 2012).

In other parts of the text I have used less ambitious metaphor, and simile to express a flamenco voice by drawing parallels between the New Zealand coastline, the sadness of the protagonist, and the face of the flamenco singer Agujetas:

“...the scourge of small grey jagged teeth sucking back or giving shape to pain, and a twisted mouth which seemed to channel the earth. In his face I saw my own death but couldn’t help myself falling toward it. He had a voice, where I had none. His dying face threw out a lifeline to my twenty year old heart - a sound, a cry. Through his cry, I could release my broken sounds, hammer them out through my body. But they would never be over. It was not a matter of crying once, crying hard. They stayed wedged in me like an oyster in a rock. They dripped through my life as water does at the back of cave. Like flamenco song, the history of a lasting tear. Not something to get out of my system. Rather they became it.” (Season of La Niña, p. 147)

I have experimented with heightened language, parataxis, and repetition in italicised dreamscape scenes evoking Kika’s swimming to shore after her ‘fall’ with the intent of fusing the raw power of the New Zealand landscape with the emotion of performance, Kika’s pending sense of disorientation and confused identity, and the more disturbing visceral aspects of Andalucia and raw flamenco. This introduces yet another, more expressionistic first person voice.

*“There is a silver foil sliver of moon on the tip of a wave. I am swimming against a tide alone all night. On the thick heavy curtain of the sea. In the morning I am exhausted but must keep swimming. The ocean has subsided to an uncertain ebb. I move a little, but not much, not far. I see a coastline, surely no more than a few kilometres away. An animal’s head, horns for cliffs. Dark hollows; a mouth from which something rushes forth and two nostrils, spilling blood. At times it grows bigger, or shrinks, or disappears completely. Around there is all land. Around there is all sea.”* (Season of La Niña, p. 148)

These are not polished examples of prose but rather “cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam” of memory and imagination (Benjamin, 1932, pp. 400-401).

*“the memoirist uses dramatic narrative and reflective analysis to bridge the details and the expanse of what he’s unleashed”*

(Thomas Larson, 2007, p.295)

Obliged to find a way to weave together the multiple voices due to the time-orientated nature of this project, I began writing half way through the project in an authorial memoir voice, the one I said I was seeking to avoid, in the second discussion. It is perilously close to the voice of the older first-person narrator but with a greater sense of looking back to understand. This voice is more myself as memoirist, at the time I am writing the text, rather than the post-tour first person narrator, even though some of the time frames are interchangeable. In the future, I intend to amalgamate these many aspects of first person voice (the everyday, the authorial, and the expressionistic) in the next draft to reduce the cacophony of self-voices and streamline the narrative. The authorial voice has, I hope for now, helped the reader adjust to the changing points of view and scenes, yet it has also opened up ambiguity as to whether the brief omniscient passages are really the authorial narrator taking on a guise. This guise being my unrealised artistic vision of the “flamenco-haka musical of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*” (Season of La Niña, p. 118).

## CONCLUSION

To bring an open end to these reflections; in flamenco, one must find one’s ‘seat’ before footwork and bodywork can find their place. As a reader, a flamenco dancer, and writer, a voice is what grabs me, and plants me in my seat. This text is a record of attempts at trying to find the right seat to take a journey. As the text is still in progress some of these reflections remain unresolved, however one possibility might be put forward; that the changing series of point of view positions and voices represent a period of confusion in identity, and opposing cultural forces pulling at a character from different directions. Writing all these in the form of a memoir has been a necessary stage of initial investigation for me as a writer, and if at times, the graunching of writer’s tools has flooded the creative cavern, it has at least left me with a map (the text) showing me where I might secure footing at the next scaffold or stage of draft. Experienced authors of memoir and fiction have inspired and guided my hand, particularly with the difficult, but worthwhile challenge of writing authentic and engaging prose about depression or depressed characters. At times, the perforations of my taping into memory may appear like the indentations of heels on a wooden floor; scattered, uneven, shallow – as my footwork was when I started dancing. Over time however, I hope to reach more

courageously into imagination and language, to find a new means of carrying forward an old Flamenco message.

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*I have lost myself many times in the sea,  
with my ears full of freshly cut flowers,  
with my tongue full of love and agony.  
Many times have I lost myself in the sea  
As I lose myself in the heart of a child.*

*There is none who on giving a kiss  
does not sense the smiles of faceless people,  
nor any who in touching a new-born child  
forgets the motionless skulls of horses.*

*For roses seek in the brow  
a hard landscape of bone  
and the hands of man have no other end  
than to imitate roots under earth.*

*As I lose myself in the heart of a child,  
I have lost myself many times in the sea.  
Not knowing the water I still go seeking  
a death full of light to consume me.*

‘Gazelle of the Flight’ Diván del Tamarit, 1931-1935, Federico Garcia Lorca.

## I Two Meridians

1.

To the western side of the town is a neighbourhood with six streets running through it, the long neck of a six-stringed guitar. At one end, the spires of the church of San Miguel. At the other is an uneven square, the right hand palm of the guitarist, La Plazuela. The neighbourhood takes both names. That's helpful to know here, in a town where names carry so much weight.

Around noon the air drifts in through the wide green doors of a white building in a narrow cobbled street of other white buildings. On their rooftops clothes are strung out against a blue sky. A foreign couple step up and through the doors into a dark narrow bar. There's a smell of fried fish mixed with cigarette ash.

*'Hola, buenos dias,'* says the foreign man.

The barman ignores him.

*'Dos finos, por favour.'*

A man standing at the bar waves a lazy finger and sways his head, from the barman, to the visitors.

*'Luciano.'*

After a minute the barman smacks two sherry glasses down.

*'Do fino.'*

The couple hover, apologetically. The foreign man takes several sips and empties his small glass.

*'Otro?'* says the barman, snatching up the glass.

*'Otro – dos!'*

*'Vale!'* the barman pours another. *'Alli'stda!'*

*'Gracia!'*

The men now share a camaraderie, two pig-hunters who've just decided how they will split the kill. The woman would like to sit, but there is no seating at the bar. She turns to the barman.

*'Aqui tienes classes?'*

*'Como? Classes?'*

*'Si, classes de baile, aqui, en la peña.'*

He is wiping the bench beneath the bar, then stops, looks at her. '*Ana-Maria Lope*'.

*Claro, la Maestra.*'

He says it loudly. He's a bit simple, or this is his way, or both. The other customer chips in. Ani has a lot of art. All the best artists bring their children in to her.

'*Mo buena*' he says, shaking his head.

She sips her fino, and it tastes better than before. It smells of dirt floors and crushed limestone of the town's bodegas.

There is a large common room adjoining the bar, so she wanders in. It is lined with green and blood-brown tile mosaic leading to a stage at the far end. The walls are swathed shrine-like in photographs of friends and families. In the cool, still, empty hall, she hears the soft echo of fiestas floating down through the years.

But none of the people on the walls turn up that day. Discrete time and its accompanying routines, like lunch, disintegrate. Her companion buys a few more drinks for whoever comes in. At some point Luciano produces a tray of fried pork rinds that make the men excited.

Much later the couple steps unsteadily out, into the glare of afternoon light.

The following day they walk the length of the neighbourhood. They have arrived during a long week-end, and the streets are empty. He is an American guitarist with good Spanish, twenty years her senior. He has been here many times. The first, he tells her, was in the seventies when Franco was still in power, the year she was born, in fact. After they met at the pension, he has keenly escorted her everywhere.

'This is one of the two flamenco neighbourhoods,' he says as they come to the square, La Plazuela. But there's nothing here to affirm that. A young woman with a savage-looking dog watches them pass. Back toward the centre of the neighbourhood a large bronze is erected. It is a local gypsy woman, he says, who became famous during her short life by flamenco-izing the classical Spanish *copla*. From a distance the diva looks roughly scoured out of rock, but as they draw close, sinews of arm muscles are visible, tendons of hands, a glower of pain on her face. Pigeon-droppings streak her grey. A bronze sheet is wrapped around her hips, half-slipping, exposing the dark shadow of her groin. Not the velveteen television image most knew, the American said, but the woman in her neighbourhood, remembering the trials of her people.

At the *peña* again, they recognize Luciano. He has a sidekick with him, a fantail of a man with sharp bright eyes, a toothless mouth and little brown hands that wear gold. 'Monea' immediately starts talking to them. Who are they? Where are they from? She

is *muy guapa*. He says she's beautiful as if he's talking about a relative, and the finos are on him for several rounds before they can respond in kind. Shortly, he breaks into raspy song in their faces, his dry knuckles knocking hard on the marble surface of the bar. In between one knuckle knock he raises his clenched fist slightly to release a middle finger whose top bone and nail then strike at a higher pitch. He plays with these two sounds. His palms seem curved in such a way that when he brings them together to hold rhythm for himself, the fingers of one fit into the rubbery crook of the other.

Again the day passes without affair. Just this man, his sounds, his drinks. But when they leave the light has softened, and they are half-running back to the pension. Her Spanish is not good enough to understand what has occurred. Her companion tells her Monea has invited them somewhere - a young nephew of Terremoto has been married today. *Terremoto* - earthquake - was a great gypsy singer. There is a massive reception under way on the edge of town.

She grabs a dress out of an unpacked bag. No time to shower, only to freshen and make it look as though they've made a real effort. A vein in her temple throbs with the running and the sherry.

Soon they are in a stranger's car with four men, speeding into the black sugar-cane outskirts of the town's night. Monea sits in the back with them, in a dark suit and crisp white shirt - their Master of Ceremonies. He is chirping non-stop, slipping into song from time to time.

'You sing so well.' But as soon as she says this, she knows it is wrong. How can she know what is singing well?

'*Franci'ca* - ' he says ' - *No soy nadie* - *nadie ma' qu'un afi - aficiona'o.*'

Without teeth, he smiles, two black polished eyes. '*Miro*' He points to them. '*E'cucho*' He points to his ears, makes a zip gesture across his mouth, fails to suppress his giggling.

He continues in raspy Andalu' 'I rest my head on the pillow at night, I sigh, I listen - ah the heavens!... *Chocolate - Agujeta - Antonio Mairena* ...' He rolls out the names like a red carpet for the great singers. The American nods soberly, half-drunk.

It is a warehouse in the middle of a field where the car is slowing. She thinks about leaving before arriving. The American is of no use to her. He has the glazed-over look of a sycophant. For a minute she imagines herself trapped for the entire night and morning in this field, miles from anywhere.

They step into the building, the floor of which is the soft muddy field itself. A large wedding party sits at long tables finishing the remains of a meal. Monea introduces

them to a small group and she strings an awkward greeting down a broken line, relations of the happy couple, no doubt. Within minutes, tables are being carried away overhead, teetering like floats. A repetition of something is audible, rising - fading - spreading. Small eruptions of rhythm are melding into one and a massive group is forming, four or five people deep. The whole structure thumps with a primal beat:

*Dak -a- dak DAK dak – dak - Dak -a- dak DAK dak - dak*

Pushed forward by Monea, she peers through a hole in a wall of bodies. No guitar. (Where is the American now?)

He! – Ay – He! – Ay. ‘*Ahora qu’estamo a gusto – a gusto!*’ - Now we’re in the mood, – we’re good! ‘*Vamo scuchar* – Lets’ listen. Come on – listen!’ Shut up - we’re listening aren’t we? Sssshhth. . .!’ A man in the midst with crystalline eyes and flushed red skin invites people into the centre of this life raft, life saver, with his verse of chanting song. ‘*Me gusta! Me gusta! . . .*’ An old woman with two twigs of calf poking out from her hem catches the last hair of each beat. ‘*Hecha te papa, hija!*’ - Throw in potatoes, daughter! ‘*Fuego!*’ The centre of the circle is a burning stew. Papa’ con choco’ - potatoes and squid, - a melting pot, and the *chiquilla* is a chick pea in the meat fat. Sweat drips onto the warm soft ground, which is now dark and gaping. ‘*Vamo’ya*’. Let’s go! Waves of palms rally in a rising shelf of rhythm.

The foreign girl stares, lost in a sea of families, her ears are full of freshly-cut grass, her tongue full of love and agony. But it’s just a wedding party of Andalusian gypsies celebrating the traditional way with singing and dancing - a ritual many a foreigner has chronicled.

So what?

Here’s what –

‘The door’s open! Close the door son! - *La puerta hijo –pa’escuchar!* - The door – the fucking door! To listen! Get out the door if you’re going - get out!’ SLAM! Whoosh! The whole damned bunch is falling through the centre of the giant *churro*, into a widening chasm. Thrown off the edge alive – into the chocolaty grave of the molten core itself. Earthy dancing is really earthy now. A hot spinning, a hype, a gravitation. ‘*Estamo con tigo!*’ - we’re with you – we’re with you!’ A boy with elbows and knees dances over to the white girl. A tall elegant woman slides past, hair teaming behind, all cockle-fanned palm. A man with a barrel body leans and sways, kicking. ‘*Coje’ me que me caygo!*’ Grab me – I’m falling!

The journey down a meridian through the centre of the earth is labyrinthine. It curves, obscuring the way. It provokes a see-sawing schism. The feet need the floor, but it has fallen through, exposing the finely dusted bones of a Moor - if you don't know, imitate those gone before. Catacombs of smiling faceless people - Byzantine, Jew, Arab...

*O city of the gypsies!*

*Who could see you and not remember?*

Who could see you and not steal you – take you home? But grasp them and they slip away, like ash. Other things too have started to vanish - friends, work, purpose. Scratch to hold onto that landscape of bone. An invisible wound bleeds dry tears. An absence yawns within. The ache of phantom body parts. Not even a heart that can pump blood will be left. Hold on – hold on!

Foam trips over itself, rushing back, leaving its lace skeleton on the sand.

\*

In the end there was nothing. Only a blown-out bulb in the bedroom, and the sound of the sea ricocheting up to my brother's house on the Island. 'You have to get out before Christmas,' he said. I called John. 'Come down' he said '- until you figure out what you want to do. If you want to work, there's work. If you don't, then rest until you know.'

A few summers have passed and I'm still in this prism. From behind the veil of a ranch slider I sit at my laptop and look out. Te Mata's chipped tooth crag peak in the centre of the long sky. Below it, a skirt tapestry of vines. At intervals, a sprinkler stirs, or a hawk glides over an edge.

That Spanish *whanau* up the coast are still sending me group emails. Descendants of Jose Manuel and his five wives. I delete them. No disrespect, but I'm not in the mood for that kind of fiesta. I donated my costumes and shoes to the girls, and my *Sevillanas* music - not that they need custom-made shoes with nails in the toes and heels. I can't get enthusiastic about a visit from their Segovian cousins, or their kiwi *feria* day with its horses, barbeque, Latin music. José, the old whaler was red-haired and from the North of Spain - another country from the South. Looking up from his grave, he'd be alarmed seeing his *mokopuna* dancing in polka dots with their frizzy hair and dark faces, the girls with my shoes, looking Andalusian, unlike his *Pakeha* family.

I'm further down the coast, and I'm spent from all that hoo-hah.



John sits at another computer across the lounge. Leaves from the battered rosebush, and a few feathers from the cat's kill yesterday have blown in onto the carpet. I see what he's doing as I turn off the laptop and stand up - playing patience.

'What are you doing?' I say.

'What do you think?'

'But why are you doing *that*?'

Truth is, he can't be thinking anything. Small task-focused things help you get through impossible change. I read this recently, although there the author was referring to coping with the death of a loved one.

He has come to take it seriously, this thing I have, as if it's a chronic illness, a kind of a cancer that flares up, or a viral infection. It's true, that's what it's like. Now I'm the sick person, or the child. Sometimes, I realise I'm neither of these things and start enjoying myself. He sees this and gets grumpy. Mood is a sticky business. But we still enjoy a simple activity, a meal, a drink. Something a rich Uncle might buy you as a special treat.

Now I understand the clutter of model ship-building equipment collecting dust in the garage from the time of his separation. They're left as they were the last evening he used them, a ship-wreck graveyard buried in cat fur from the half-wild cat that frequents here. I've messed around with stuff in the garage, but I've not touched those ships, one half-built, that will carry him away from the uselessness of an unaccompanied evening.

I stand up to go and get my book from the bedroom. The house is inundated with reading material. He once collected articles on anything related to my passing whims; psychology, philosophy, cooking with tomatoes. When I started writing he bought me a plethora of guide books "*I used to know that – English*" or "*Troublesome Words*". They sit on my shelf, and since first flicking through, I haven't opened them.

In the bedroom I jump at the addition of three black and white photographs framed on the wall. They haunt the space between his collection of amplifiers and hanging electric guitars. They're old promo shots, ones I gave him of myself four summers ago when I came to stay.

That summer I rattled around this place. When my interest drifted he bought me new toys to keep me interested, as you would a toddler. It was clothes first, shoes and things. Evening wear I could use to accompany him to wine events. But I agreed to work on the vineyard as I couldn't imagine sitting around the house.

Jan died that summer too. The vineyard lady. I was alone with her the day before. She had yellow leathery skin that could be fatally mistaken for a healthy outdoors look,

and her shoulders and back had curved over time, like the rivers here. She parked her blue jeep near our row leaving the doors flung open and the radio up. Her two mutts scattered, running between the rows, digging and flinging up dirt. She had the kind of face that always looked like it had a cigarette hanging out of it, even when it hadn't.

'Hey. Get outta' there!'

Her tone caught me by surprise more than the dogs.

'Did he catch a rabbit?' I asked.

'Nah, but they make the black holes bigger an' the rabbits get into the vine roots.'

I turfed questions over the row at her all afternoon between tense silences. I tried to unclasp spiralling tendrils from wires. When she finally went off to another vineyard, I snuck away early, back to the house.

It was one of the hottest and driest summers on record, the last warm breath of *El Niño*. I dropped off my tool belt and went out again, behind the house, down another side of the hill between vines. From there everything was visible including the jeep, and three dots; Jan's white t-shirt and the two mutts still stationed at one of the vineyards. I felt invisible, but I probably wasn't. I finished descending the hill and went along the sheep-smelling fennel-weed dirt road leading to the back of the Ngaruroro River.

A sheep had wandered away there and keeled over, part-mauled by dogs. It looked freshly dead. I paused to check its state of decay. The river was flowing on the far side, leaving a wide bed to cross. It was strewn with bone-bright logs of fossilized wood, rocks of oyster shell. A tiny flower pushed through a rough crack. At the water there was a pool that the gravel trucks had created beside the current. I took off my shoes and the gravel was hot on the softening calloused balls and heels of my feet. I peeled off clothes and jumped in. The on-going mental interrogation, where would I go - what would I do, subsided, as the velvet river soaked up all broken sounds.

... *Dak daka dak Dak* ... My mind lazes over the sun-scoured slopes now as I sit at the picnic table with my book. This summer is turning Indian, like that first one. *La Niña* over. Why don't I just stay here a few more days?

'It'll be nice out at the beach today, and tomorrow.' John comes out of the house with Sparkling and two glasses. The sharp afternoon sun slants behind him, highlighting his edgelessness.

'Yeah, I wish I could surf.'

'We can take the boards out, or get you a lesson if you like.'

I imagine him slopping about on a board. It clashes with the wiry illusion of a surfer's body dancing in my mind's eye.

‘Ok.’

‘I used to surf beaches in South Australia. Some of the best surf in the world there.’ He strains to swing a second leg over the seat through the twenty-two year gap between us. Recently I have noticed the wrestle to get out of the car, now a wince, and the other night I said twice I wanted the fish curry but when the waiter came he ordered me the haloumi.

He goes to freshen my glass.

‘Just a bit’ I say.

He pours for too long and I pull it away.

‘Don’t do that. I hate it when people do that!’ he says.

‘I said just a bit, and you always keep going!’

But this is the only method that alleviates my mood. Champagne jollies me along. That, and cold hard cash in my account.

The green vines mingle with the blue of the sky, and it all seems a bit juddery now, likely to topple. I watch a young farmer trail over the hill on a four-wheel drive, with a yapping dog beside him. They look unstuck, as though they’ll fall off the hill. John, by contrast, is a block of man, like the cows which are rectangles on the hill, fixed to its side, unaware of time, gravity, impossibilities. Their squareness is at right angles to the land, defying expectation.

It’s easy to confuse relief with desire. Back that first summer he would’ve thrown me over his shoulder, my hair dangling. Will I or won’t I? - will I or won’t I? But there comes a point when you no longer know what you fear or don’t fear – like or dislike. Fear has eaten all these possibilities. He would’ve walked to the ranch-slider off the bedroom. I would’ve caught the football photo on his dresser; square-jaws, firm thighs, the one from forty years ago. I would’ve searched for this in his grey beard and weathered limbs.

Now we just sit. Finish the bottle. Survey the vineyards that are no longer his.

2.

The American was eager to get the seat closest to the teacher - to accompany her singing, he said. But when they arrived the green doors were shut and locked. He seemed happy to stand waiting in the street, guitar slung over shoulder, but she suggested coffee at a corner bar. He had an *oloroso* sherry. Other men at the bar swilled brandy. The bar smelt of meat-fat drippings and coffee and there was the choking noise of milk being re-heated. When they returned, Luciano had unlocked the doors and turned on the light. He poured another *oloroso* for the American and disappeared into the gloom of the main hall. He must have unlocked the doors to the woman's dance room, because when he re-appeared he nodded to her and said '*a'ora sta abierto.*'

The teacher arrived. A small brown woman with a familiar preoccupied air, and feminine bones. Her dark brown eyes lit up the dim bar. She directed Luciano; '*Ha'me un cafelito con leche cuando puede, por favor,*' greeted them, and walked into the *peña*. The American grabbed his guitar and followed.

Ana Maria Lopez taught the classes at the back end of the *peña*, out a side door, and across a plant-infested patio. It was a stuffy room, filled with cigarette smoke by noon. Students drifted in, a mixture of foreign and local. As she saw them, one by one, the others sat in chairs around the room, or they were told to practice on the hard tile floor of the *peña* itself. The art of the *Buleria* was imparted by the woman in an organic manner, with her unique set of wisdoms. She showed them how to dance with the flamenco song – the *cante*. At times a rhythmic cheering erupted, led by her nasal tones, then the students chimed-in with this *jaleo*, half-chant offspring of song and rhythm.

'*Franci'ca, verdad?*'

'*Si.*' It was her name, more or less.

'And you danced before?'

She looked uncertainly at the American who had secured his seat. He answered for her.

'*Si, claro.*'

'*Anda, vamo'ya!*' Ani started the *compas*, the rhythm cycle, with her palms. The American guitarist joined her, and the emblematic rhythm of the town filled the room again, spilling in waves onto the patio where the plants quivered with the tattered vibrations of palms and feet.

All eyes on her. Even those from the crowd of black and white photographs on the walls, and others within the walls themselves. A storm-black gaze from one corner; a man with a slick of oiled hair, crooked head, and the swollen breast of a pigeon.

Opposite him, the warted face of a woman with her mouth stretched open, a ringing glotis in its centre. Song and rhythm - *cante* and *compas* hold up the room. She must react now. The guitar will weave the teacher's song and her movements together. Song – dance - guitar - in that hierarchy.

Stand up - no - sit down. Stand again. The teacher's eyes follow her without moving another muscle. The tiny vein swells in her temple and pulsates. She will wait for the song verse to stop - it will be safer. It ends. Step touch in a circle, arms rising. She knows that much. (She has seen this kind of flamenco hasn't she?) Her busy wrists circle and her fingers flick not completing the circle. Another song verse starts. Where will she put the three-beat-stamp-call? The song is resuming too fast. What about the bit of footwork? She treads on the song. She is a little off, or a lot. Quick – cover it up with delinquent charm – the characteristic exit the teacher demonstrates - a feigned look of fright - a quick duck - whole body dip - and low-lying run to her seat. A playful wicked impulse of the town she can emulate, being small, like the teacher. She sits back down with the others. The *compas* ends. The American has strummed hard to make her piece strong, or to make it fit.

'*Muy bien Franci'ca – airoso. Musho - musho aire,*' said Ani who shook her hands in the air in front of her. It was a gesture she'd seen Maori women do in action songs. The American nodded and said 'very good.'

Then Ani mimicked her sit-stand charade at the beginning, and waved a finger. Hesitation was forbidden. Don't give silly warnings. Also, she had 'lost the *compas*' in the middle and the woman made her stand up and walk into the centre again to repeat, but she couldn't understand, so she was taken out into the hall with another girl to practice.

To dance alone with the *cante*- extemporizing with what you know was not how flamenco should be danced, said Ani, it was how to dance *flamenco*. Every day they heard the twelve-beat *compas* of the *Buleria*; a rhythmic palindrome broken in two halves; six and a slight cadence up, six and a slight cadence down. Foreigners and locals dropped in and out, as in a real live *fiesta por Bulerias*. Some days the room was packed with on-lookers who stood at the door and blocked what natural light came in. A well-known singer would leave his *fino* half-drunk in the bar and come back to sing a round for each of them. Other days, only three or four of them showed up, so they got extra turns and chances. Only the people from the walls watched then, from behind a brume of smoke and filthy dust which rose into the air, disturbed from its resting place in the wooden floor by the nails in the balls and heels of their shoes.

Before class she went to the central market for breakfast. It was full of people moving in a jittery mass. She sat outdoors at a bar near the *churro* man, who swirled long slippery eels of dough around his vat. The old waiter ran between tables filling *café con leche* glasses with a jug of hot milk, and collecting *pesetas* from abandoned tables before the loitering junkie singers pocketed them. Each day she crossed the Plaza Angustias, where the African man setting up his belt-bag-and-watch stall hung another item on the frame, making the hanging scarves shake.

On the day your dance went well – everything was heightened. Bells rung from bars and patios, song flowed out of them (from some, there really was song). The light was soft, kind, the streets one big sunny celebration in your favour. The high soared as you were carried on shoulders through the streets. On the days you went wrong, the air became thick and suffocating. No matter how many drinks you had in the bar, nothing changed the fact you'd messed up. The town was hard, belligerent, the vernacular impenetrable - as *compas*, as Ani's praise. The sun stung, the fishmongers barked in the market and the women waddled and quacked like evil ducks - all conspiring, begrudging you. After class, local experts – *aficionados* and students - mingled in the bar to prolonged debate. Her comprehension improved. Even well-known artists could please no one.

'Pipa – from here above - ' a man made a cutting gesture at the stomach ' *La Gloria!* – but from here down – *no tiene' na* –' He tore off half the word 'nothing', and threw it away, a piece of fish gut thrown in the trash.

'La Carpio has a *compa* ' *que te caga* - you wouldn't believe her *compas* - it makes you crap yourself – but the woman exaggerates!'

'El Guito – *hombre*, now there's a *bailaor*, his line, his masculinity – but he's got nothing of our *gracia*, nothing of the unique charm of *Jere*'

One day Ani said 'That was Flamenco - *Flamenco – Flamenco!*' The next day she would leave the room returning half an hour later with a cigarette and a glass of *oloroso*. Or 'Today – Franci'ca...you danced the most *Jere* ' you have ever danced. Like *nosotro* ' – more *Jere* ' than *Jere* ' *de verdad*. And I'm not lying to you either.'

This kind of comment was good. It was worth carrying back to the mouldy apartment she had rented near the church of San Miguel. She tried to hold onto the words day after day, but they floated away from her. Flamenco was in a moment and that moment then was at the *peña* - in Ani's words.

'Estefania is too tall to dance with our flavour - Yorinda dances well, but she is *soh-sa* – bland - Watch Adella's head – *la cabeza d'ella!* They watched Adella but as they

clapped she fell so badly ‘out of compas’ the guitar stopped. Everything stopped, and she was told to repeat it, and when she failed for a third time she was sent out of the room. The compas was the key back in the door. Without it there was nothing. For each new person that entered the room Ani gave a commentary on the others. ‘Franci’ca.’ Her eyes went cold in their dark brown night. ‘Franci’ca has a thing-’. Ani sucked viscerally on the cigarette. Her mother had been a smoker too, and smoked exactly like Ani. ‘She has a problem. She dances *muy bien*. But, it’s never enough, because she always thinks she doesn’t.’

The *indirecta* caught, hooked her sharply. Will the woman watch her writhe with herself? How could she progress faster and please the woman? Here was no syllabus, no exam. You either started to get it or you didn’t. Then there was the *arte*. She could dance like the pre-pubescent gypsy girls in the evening classes. She had the facility.

At the next opportunity she attacks the space. It is artful to put the steps within the song, but it is a risk, because she can only go by ear. She knew risk. She had risked everything to get to this town. The slipping of a twenty dollar bill into her bag from the till of an illegal job. A pinch of a moment snuck into ten hours of leg-aching boredom. Hundreds of moments like that had made the complete fare to Spain.

Ani returned to her chair, sat down, lit another cigarette. She recognized the defiance in the teacher’s eye and awaited her fate but the woman said nothing and the room was on edge. The woman then turned to the American.

‘Gary, what do you think of *José Mercé*’s new album?’

He didn’t expect it.

‘Quite good, good enough.’

‘I think he’s very good, *José Mercé*. I admire him, what he’s done for Jerez, but personally, - I don’t like his singing. He enunciates too well.’

The students smiled, the tension released, and there were murmurs of agreement. She smiled too, a disappointed half-smile.

‘He’s very *Jere*’, of course, even though he’s up there, in *Madri*’, but he’s not very *flamenco*. *Agujeta*’ says you have to be - ’ At this, the American’s grin dropped off his face out of respect, because *Agujetas* was his idol. ‘ - *un poco malo* - to be flamenco.’ She lowered her voice and whipped the word ‘bad’ out and back.

‘Ani!’ Luciano’s voice travelled across the patio.

‘*Si!*’ She jumped.

The class laughed.

She left to meet a visitor. A short pale upright woman with a black-grey frizz of hair emerged half way across the patio, then they both receded into the shadow of the main hall. When Ani re-entered, the atmosphere charged again. Someone would have to get up soon and face another scathing critique.

So they began again, one by one, to worry, to dance, to return to their seat, upset or relieved. A moment later Ani asked a question. Everyone looked to her - the antipodean, but she didn't understand. The woman spoke slowly and directly at her.

'You go up to *Parrilla's* in the Plaza del Mercado on Thursday night, and tell him you dance '*por Alegrias*' or '*por Solea por Bulerias*'. Tell him you come from the *Pena Buleria*, and tell him *I* sent you.'

\*

I don't know why I didn't leave after that first summer. I should've gone when the vines started to wrap themselves in angry-coloured shawls. The thought tormented me and a random tendon in my left calf, having done nothing wrong, or having done nothing, started to ache. Some days I would sleep for several hours in the afternoons like an old woman. I would turn out the light to the sigh of a string from one of John's acoustic Fenders hanging from its prison on the wall.

*In the manner of dreams - there and not there - walking in file with them.*

*There are the old people standing in a half-circle emerged from the dark and into the half-light. There is breath or blowing, the dry sound of a conch over rain eased from a downpour which hammered on a thicket of sub-tropical leaf. It tapers off to the distinct drip of a solemn rhythm. A Siguiriya; Dak – Dak – Dak - - Dak - - Dak.*

*Only headwear is visible - sinuous black silhouettes like fine wrought-iron, curls, tendrils, korus, peaks. Frills swishing. This is no theatre. Where are they? Half outside, half in. Standing at the lip of a cave flood-lit from behind by an invisible moon. Or on a street with the high moon sneering behind a mask of black lace cloud. The shuffling procession of the condemned move along the Calle Justicia, across the Plaza del Mercado, on a broken stone path. There's the gilded image of a crucified Christ, a woven shutter, a cross. A haka pulses to the underlying beat of the Siguiriya rhythm. A large gitana advances, opens her mouth - 'AAAAEEE' – the sounds rushes past the*



*blackened crisps of her vocal cords, unshaped by throat or lips but by hands which wave entry to it.*

*Oily faces follow her thin back. They can smell her heart, could eat it while it still beats. She falters, falls out of the rhythm cycle, jarring against its wheel. A taunt from one of them: 'Olé La Pepa de Utrera!'*

*A hyena's squeal - a swerving - a dropping –*

A knock at the door.

I meet them at the ranchslider, a woman and what looks like her daughter. They're substituting for the cleaner.

'Hey don't worry about it, I'm here, I can do it today.'

They pause half-way across the stones.

'You sure?'

'Yep, no worries'.

They retreat down the hill. Save him the money. They never get into the corners anyway.

I move the dated furniture around shoving things I don't like into the garage like a new wife. Then I get a text from John.

'How are you feeling?'

'Down.' I text back.

'Stay home and relax.'

'Chin up' is his next text.

I've warned him not to send me cheer up texts. I go out and jog vigorously up the steep hill at the side of the property, startling the sheep and carefully avoiding the cows.

Back inside I turn on the TV. It's the tennis. Nadal and Djoković. I don't want Nadal to win. I feel defeat in his victory, gratified when he loses. Let his country stay in an economic downturn. May they all burn in hell, and get off my back. May the Arabs finally return and take the place back over.

Here there are only vineyard workers, winery workers, wine salespeople and wine collectors. After all this, there are only two things left; the vines and the weather. Between weather and alcohol, much can be avoided. A-void-dance. A curious word. People talk in a code of Chateaux Margot, cattle truck, elderflower, horse sweat. This is how I speak with the winemaker who never tells me his mother hung herself when he was ten. So I never tell him how I lost my mother.

That first summer, on John's behest, the boys in the winery moved a lot of stuff to make a space for me in the barrel room. They had seen me perform there a month earlier. Their mouths dropped open when they saw the Jose Manuel *whanau* pouring through the winery doors out of the dark East Coast night, laughing, clapping, and cheering us. They had flowers in their hair and were got up in the full regalia of their *feria*-wear.

So the boys dragged the old wine tablet out, the smoothest they could find, for me to come down and work on. 'How is that?' They grinned.

'Ah yeah, that's good.' I blushed. 'Thanks.'

Days passed and I didn't go down. But they didn't ask questions; didn't ask what the hell I was doing here now, hunched between rows.

Around that time, on a scorching day I took the iPod to work, and was thinning bunches with the cutters. Snip, snip, until my mind was green after green after green... *Dak daka dak Dak*, ... The blunt truth of the plants incorporated me when the winemaker approached.

'Where've you been, mate. Haven't seen you in the lab for a while.' He said it as a greeting, not a question.

'I struggle with my mind sometimes.'

He turned to the vines, checking for this – that, then threw the phrase out, a continuation of the listless gesture of his hands in the leaves.

'Come back up to the lab when you knock off if you like, we're opening some of the 06s.'

Before I could reply his mantis legs had already carried him soundlessly back down the row.

I picked up the rhythm again. The blithe blue sky, the pea green vines... *Dak daka dak Dak*... Then I caught something in the next canopy, black and knotted, the figure of an old man. A high-pitched bitter-edged wail. There were the familiar beats to it, branded into me, at times rising of their own accord like a useless appendage. A dribbling somewhere – his mouth? His fly was open and a thin erection peered out. I ripped out the earphones, tore at my shirt. It had trapped a wasp.

All quiet. Canopy empty. The vines tremored in the salty tail of a breeze.

3.

I have never been easy around children. John's two sons are no exception. I hardly see them now, all of us having moved out. But that summer they were with us every second weekend and I was forced to remember my age. John decided to take us to Wellington for New Year's. I was to visit a girlfriend while he and Mike hung out. The older one stayed back and went to a party, but eleven-year old Mike sat in the back as we drove.

'What's the name of that tree, Mikey? What's deciduous mean?' I too find myself implicated. Does it mean flowering all year round? Green even in snow? Introduced species? Then randomly 'What's the capital of Australia, Mikey?' He knows that one. I wouldn't have, at his age. 'How long does it take to drive to Wellington?' I am like a kid in a car with another kid and his father.

'Dad, can we stop at KFC?'

'In Dannevirke, mate.'

I haven't had KFC since the tour. John and I eat mainly in places that feature in the current top fifty. In the last few months I have had enough degustations, and hundred dollar bottles of wine to publish a gastronomic guide. Even my brother, an ex-chef, calls me for recommendations. The thought of KFC is, at a stretch, refreshing. As we pick through chunks of cold fat from a soggy box by the Dannevirke railway line, this notion is pretty well dashed. I would like to be at my friend's already. But I don't complain. We're travelling with a child, and I've travelled long distances with children before. You've got to be bigger than these things. Back in the car the stale smell of greasy cardboard lingers.

'We can go through Turakina, see your mother's old pub. Take a look at the beach,' says John.

'What about Mike – it's a long trip for him, don't you think?' Behind us, his face is closed, asleep. A few moments later John has taken the exit onto State Highway 3.

'We're just going through Turakina, Mike. It'll add an hour on, that's all.'

I turn around to get his approval. He has woken up and a tail of complaint is fleeing his face. He hasn't known me long and still wants to make a good impression.

We pass through Bulls and as we near Turakina the land is card-torn brown and flat save a few low-lying hills. Only the Ben Nevis stands out; a black and white Spanish-stucco style building named after a Scottish hill - still at odds with all around it. A spindly palm grows in one corner. It's a bit of a mongrel. Someone's strange dream constructed there. I haven't seen it since I was Mike's age. The spot hasn't changed; a

couple of hanger-on shops, a gas station, a school. John swings into the car park and wakes Mike up. There's a ringing in my ears as we get out under the indecisive grey sky. The road is the only thing moving. A sheep truck rattles past spraying scree in a dust-cloud.

The inside of the public bar seems to have shrunk, like the heads around the centre of the room where the pool table is anointed; mum's old Goldie prints. One guy is chatting to the barman. I see my brother's drooping eyes on him, and the charming gap between his front teeth.

There is a smell of bar cleaner and stale beer, and the acrid odour of men's toilets in the corner. There are the spacy tables. Pac-man is the thing. Ash littering the floor to vacuum up, sticky beer tables to wipe, and toilets to disinfect.

'Here, do the tables if you like.' My brother hands me a damp frayed bar towel and the spray. It makes the leaners with their black ashtrays come out shiny.

Some of them from up at the Pa came in at this time, trying to get an early start of it, but they are turned away, at least until opening.

'Sorry mate, naah-p – I've got to clean up from last night. Eleven o'clock – come back at eleven, mate.' My big brother is twenty-two and knows how to talk. He knows everything, fresh back from cheffing and an OE in London. He has brought back a ringletted English girlfriend and the works. Ringlets are the thing. On Function days he does the lounge-bar meals. Dessert is fresh fruit salad with real grapes and piped whipped cream. I whip the cream with a hand whisk.

'Not there, over the fucken' sink!'

Ok ok. I move the bowl over to the sink so the cream spots flecked the stainless steel rather than the table and floor. It is only me with him in the kitchen helping prep. At times it gets tense, close to service usually.

There is no one else in the bar except the one man, John, Mike and I. I want to ask the barman if I can see upstairs. 'My family used to own this place, would you mind if - ?' but I don't ask.

After cleaning the tables, I leave through the door into the lounge bar, grab a pie from the freezer out the back and stick it in the microwave. Mum is still sleeping, or perhaps she is awake but having quiet time. Part of her room has a glass frontage which shows

the scruffy back yard with the water tank, and beyond that there's a lane flooded with magpies. It leads to an old house by a railway line. But I don't go there yet.

John and I sit in the garden bar. Same picnic tables. New glass doors.

One morning I am up early. Downstairs everyone looks like they've been up all night. The garden-bar glass doors are smashed inside, shards of glass everywhere. There is blood on the spacies. Someone was rushed to Wanganui hospital with their throat cut by a broken bottle. Black Power try to shove their weight around here from time to time but even they can't deal to the Ratana boys.

In the beer garden the sun is trying to wrench its rays from the sticky cloud.

'We could have a game of pool?' I say.

When it's quiet, on an illegal Monday or Tuesday afternoon, I play pool with a couple of the pros. There is a miniature queue half- painted orange. I am pretty good and beat some of them. I think I have a good eye. I can tell when it gets busy though and I have to leave - everyone gets stressed.

'Hey that's a good one. Go on mate, you can do it! says John. Mike is playing a game on a new machine they have put in the bar – fish for a prize with metal claws. He is angling for a white lamb with a blue nose, but keeps dropping it.

At those times I escape upstairs to the carpeted majesty of the second floor. Up the staircase with the wide wooden handrail. There are six or eight rooms off this hall but they are all empty. No tourists, nothing to do here. I can't even hear the public bar humming. That's when I get my shoes, my ripped hole-y tights and set up the tape recorder.

Using the wooden banister which continued around the top of the stairs, I do a ballet barre. Plies are repetitive but they are something I can always return to. They have a grinding pain which makes me visible to myself, or, it makes me blind. Physical pain is not so much pain as release from it. Into the centre, I am out onto the stage in the broad wide hall. I practice pirouettes. In Senior Grade we are doing doubles for the first time. Over and over, making small adjustments. I fall back on landing. I adjust it forward –

*Go! -*

No - still thrown offside. It is my arm. Control my arm -

*Again - go!*

Back to imprinting muscles. The steps take effect under my efforts, and it feels worthwhile. I try triplets too – throw myself at them, just for fun. One day, or gradually over many days the turns turn me. I don't have to seek them as hard. I've found them and they come to me, holding me in their power. That day, I fly through open doors of rooms out windows beyond the front car park and over State Highway 3, where a few sheep audience dot the wings of hills.

'Got it!' says Mike. He comes over to us.

'Hey! Tell the man to unlock the machine and give it to you.' says John.

We take the Marton Road turn-off to Mrs. Davidson's ballet classes. It is a perilous junction. I am with mum in the car alone and we sit without talking for the most part.

'Have you got your tights?'

'Have you got your shoes?'

'Did you bring that prop she lent you?'

Her brow is knitted. Gold rings on the steering wheel. One of them was her engagement ring. A diamond supported between two deep sapphires. Diamond is my birthstone, sapphire hers. She drive in silence until we arrive at Mrs. Davidson's ballet studio.

'Jeanette, how are you?'

'Oh Carmen, you can just call me Jan.'

'Oh ok, fine - Jan!'

'There you are! You can run ahead and get changed if you like.' Mrs. Davidson uses a different voice for my mother than for me. I continue to dawdle down the muddy path along the side of her house, eavesdropping.

'So, Jeanette, did you give any more thought to the Palmerston Comps?'

'Well, I suppose we can give it one try and see how it goes.'

'That's fantastic news.'

I am inside Mrs Davidson's new studio that her husband had built. It is all light wood and plastic. A gust could pick it up and smash it across fields. A minute later she waddles in with a hot cup of coffee. Two ribbons of scent stream behind her; the warmth of coffee and the strain of sickly chemist-bought perfume. We are cold and clammy in leotard and tights. She places her cup and turns to face us with her broad chest and pallid blue eyes.

Eight am on a Sunday two weeks later and the theatre is crystal clear cold like a Manawatu field in the morning. I stand in a bejeweled silver tutu and watch my breath steam white into the black air. I am first on of the day, first of my group, first time onstage – a huge stage, first competition. I smile through terrified teeth into the chalky light. I dance this piece smiling as though in love. I win first of my group, first of the division. I will do this only one more time.

We leave the Ben Nevis. Back in the car Mike has a gift for me. They made ceramic self-portrait masks at school. He has cut his face in half by painting one half black. On the white side the eye is smudged grey.

‘That’s really cool. Thanks Mike.’

I place it on the dashboard and its two halves stare at me with one-eyed disfigurement.

We drive down to the beach. The settlement here is listless and ramshackle. There are streets of shacks with old paint-weathered dinghies outside and cheap lacy curtains flying out windows into the barren cutty-grass breeze. It is hot and we’re looking forward to a swim. But the beach is disjointed by driftwood and juxtaposing tides. A muddy gravelly ditch of a beach crammed with scrapping toddlers. The water is sliding and grinding gritty dirt jaws. Wind blasts sand and bits of foul debris into our sun-blind faces. Mike and I shiver a hug in our togs while John takes a photo.

I was younger than Mike, the first time I sensed what gypsies were, I could have been six when I sat in Jim and Ola’s lounge, our neighbours in Auckland, that room full of strange liqueurs and knick knacks from cruises to the Orient or the Mediterranean. There was the smell of old things in jars; sweet orange marmalade, toffee, olive oil cakes in tins. A shawl was strewn over a coffee table, a stiff miniature lacy fan sat beside a cheap sherry bottle on a cabinet. Amid the clutter something caught my eye – there – standing – was a plastic matador, or was it a dancer? Ola leaned decrepitley over me while we played a game of Ludo. It was that time of the afternoon when streams of people would be swelling into the Maestranza, Seville’s historic bullring. Sometime within the vicinity of these golden red afternoons we had a dress-up day at school. I can see the photo now, an elfin-like face squinting into the light. I am standing on a grassy fore-lawn, wearing my Tarantella character skirt and a peasant blouse. Mum has tied a pink and orange headscarf around my head. That was when I thought all gypsies wore headscarves.

## II The Pains of the Tablas

4.

The Plaza del Mercado was lined with towering palms, and littered at dusk with the activities of children and dogs. The neighbours sat out around a central fountain and stared as she passed. The nubile curves of adolescents or the reluctant weight of mothers slumped into benches made her conscious of her narrow hips. Perhaps they wondered at her heavy make-up, or the silk flower in her hair.

Parrilla's *tablao* bore a small bronze plaque at its entrance with the detailed work of a seated guitarist and the swirling lines of a dancer's skirt about him. The simplicity of the location filled her with fresh nerves. She felt the weight of history sitting on the shoulders of a nearby devastated façade, like a fat gargoyle observing her with a gluey eye.

As she entered the wooden beams of a converted old bodega loomed into view. A bar ran down one side, on which sat a leg of *jamon*, skewered to a platform for easy carving. The rustic restaurant was lit up and doing its best, as she was, to be important yet natural. She asked the barman for Juan Parrilla and he disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later the owner emerged from the gloom at the back and came toward her. A gypsy who moved as though his bones weighed on him. Behind thick-rimmed glasses his olive complexion had a greenish hue. Her words seemed sped-up by his slowness.

*'Hola Juan. Soy Franci'ca. Ani me ha manda'o.'*

A brief delay to his reply unsettled her, but he'd heard.

*'Franci'ca.'*

*'Ana Maria Lopez is my dance teacher. I'm here to dance.'*

Several years slipped from his face. *'Franci'ca. Manda'o por la parte d'Ana Maria Lope'.*

That's what she'd said.

*'You dance?'*

*'I dance, por Alegrias, Bulerias.'*

But now he was unravelling what small nerve she had entered with by virtue of the teacher's name.

*'Anda!'*



His mouth opened wide on the ‘A’ and snapped shut. She flinched. A fly caught and swallowed.

‘*Po - bamo a mirar lo vaile no?*’ They would look at her dances, a few transitions. He called over his shoulder as he went to get his guitar. ‘Put on your shoes then, *Franci’ca - Kika.*’

They climbed a set of stairs onto the wooden stage and he curled over the instrument, resting his chin on it. She looked down at her two black polished feet. Cold with nerves, she strained to recognize the familiar rhythm cycle for an accent to enter on. As she searched for it, it evaded her. His sound was antiquated, unfamiliar. She was instantly sweating under the make-up, panicked. He tried a couple more times then got up and walked offstage, waving her away. She would have to wait for the others, he said.

She sat at the bar and waited, trying not to think of the consequences if she couldn’t enter with his rhythm. Some moments passed before she thought she should get dressed, so she did, in the toilet marked *mujeres*. It would pay to be ready for anything. Now she looked like one of them, her hair slathered with a curling fluid, blow-dried hard to a crisp and half pulled back. Her dress was black, its *lunares* or polka dots were ivory moons. She placed the star of white flower in the traditional gypsy manner in the middle toward the top of her head.

The others arrived but before she could meet them all the lights were off, the canned music hushed, and she was walking with them in single file toward the stage. They alighted one by one out-numbering the guests.

The perspective was the strangest thing. They told her to sit on the outer seat of their semi-circle onstage. Half her body felt exposed to the cold shaky air of the audience, while the other, facing in toward them - the *cuadro*, was stripped back in another way. On this side she felt her tendons and arteries bared and a chill on her bones as if they were poking through her costume. She was caught like a sheep in a dock, seeing only the half-circle of wood in front. It appeared as steel. It was this sitting that stuck in her mind later as she cried herself to sleep. The sitting in the strange group; a half circle or a square – a *cuadro* – a painting up on a wall. The stage was high and built into the end of the building like a moving picture. The colours and lights were faded, yet also sharply real. A rusted blunt knife that can still cut. She could not have known how hard it would be just to sit there. But hard is not the word for it. Ungraspable. Wrong perhaps. Or wrong in the act of grasping. But there she sat, and entered, as one of them. Thoughts circled in her head as she lay into the early morning hours. In the end there had been a scraping to her efforts, like that of a drowning kitten.

She re-played her performance. In the vigorous opening number she scampers over the surface, approximating their *compas*. They cheer routinely. She can hear them hoping she will not be too absurd. Their Jerez *compas* is the key, and she more or less has it, plus a few other rough, yet typical gestures of the pueblo's dance. This way she gets through. There are yells, they seem encouraging at first. But perhaps she didn't hear them right? '*Olé Kika!*' The name is not hers, but it is now. The others mimic Parrilla and call her this new name. They are already comfortable with it. It is their way of joining her, this orphan, in their midst. As she progresses there are sniggers. Parrilla talks to himself loudly as if there is no public; 'You're pushing it there – you're well out there. What are you doing now?' His eyes bulge with mock surprise. The others laugh. 'That's inside out – you're doing that inside out, back to front.' He says. She continues, not understanding what he's saying. She is out of his *compas*, but she is 'in', – surely – she's doing the step as she's been taught it.

'Pa – she's doing it syncopated – see...' says his daughter, later.

'*Esta fuera* – it's out.' He says onstage, shaking his head. '*FUERA!*'

She is startled but cannot remedy anything for nerves.

At the end of the night, he said he would call. The next day, in the heat of a violent midday sun, as she was leaving the central market encumbered with swollen shopping bags, the call came. And so it went like this for a while. Her waiting. Him calling.

At first, mistakes onstage were forgotten rather than forgiven. You could almost be offered, in some ways, more chances than you deserved, or could bear. She beat her feet into the thick hard floor. It made a dull sound under her shoes, whereas for the others it made a tippy-tappy sound. The following day she was swollen-faced, sore. In the Plaza de Abastos for breakfast she smelt the fried oil of the *churro* vat, the burning of milk. Before she took one sip of coffee she was already nerve-bitten. Even before eating she felt a squirming in her belly, the re-flux of re-heated milk and tostada in her throat. Dread hung over her mobile phone each day as she anticipated his muddy voice at the end of it; '*Ven'te pa' ca, hoy.*' It would tell her to get herself up there that night. It became apparent she was not permanent, only passing through. After the call, the remaining meals of the day passed through her also, as though the animal in her was readying itself to run.

In class she was more confident. Her dance was no more sophisticated, but it was already changed, broken-in somewhere. She tried to notice the feeling with which she left the morning *peña* class, so that by some serendipity she might pre-ordain how she would dance that night. These thoughts made her more anxious. To have some

predictive ability would give relief, control, something known in the face of the alien, and apparently random. But another student, a kind, tall Australian with experience in Madrid told her ‘You never know how it’ll go, I’ve given up.’ He looked pained. ‘It doesn’t matter what you do, it’ll combine on the night, all the things, sometimes it comes out – sometimes it doesn’t. The point is, you can’t know.’

She must remain always in the present.

On those nights she crosses the plaza and steps in the door. Miguel, the sour barman, smiles when he sees her.

‘*Hola Kika, un finito?*’ He offers her the drink before she asks.

‘*Gracia.*’ She echoes their rough accents.

If the owner is around it is good manners to greet him, but his mood, like his playing, is unpredictable. If he is there with the instrument, tinkling away on it, this is a good sign, as it provides a kind of buffer from his leering. If he is without it -

‘*Kika, mi alma! Has engorda’o.*’ He commands she turn around, then lays heavy eyes on her. ‘That’s where the fat goes on *you*.’ He lurches off, leaving her winded. To say she is fatter is saying she is more like them; well-fed, happy, *guapa*, but something in his tone robs her of the complement.

She is always early, and on these hot nights the men have moved a long table out the side doors into the plaza for the cool. She sips her Fanta con Limon and listens to their conversations about flamenco. One night Luis, the singer, approaches her, takes her by the hand and silently guides her to the women’s table inside. Now she sits with them, the women, and attempts to understand their in-blood gossip, or contribute here and there in her broken idiom. But like a sparrow, she is only able to catch crumbs of it. She remains in a heightened state of alert for an emotional undercurrent and senses it, as the bird might sense a change in the weather pattern.

‘Ma, Dolores has bought the material for the dress today.’ Malena, Parrilla’s daughter says.

‘*A- thi?*’ Her mother’s nasal grunt in response. She has picked a nut from the bowl on the table and wedged it between her teeth, forcing her mouth half-closed to hold it in. But she is curious about the fabric of the cousin’s wedding dress.

‘*Si, ma. Que guapa - y ma -* I don’t have mine yet! That *gachi* hasn’t finished it yet!’ The dress-maker is not gypsy. The *gachi* sews slowly. Malena swerves.

‘Kika, I love how you’ve done your eyes.’

‘Me?’

‘The shadow.’

‘Mine?’

‘Yes, you Kika!’

‘Oh, it’s nothing... I can show you.’

‘Ok, you show me then Kika.’

The girl smiles widely, and winks a heavily made-up blue eye around the table. Tables are filling and Parrilla comes in from outside. ‘*Vestirse!*’ He flings the word at them to dress. They rise and scatter. His wife disappears into the kitchen. They cram themselves into a walk-in cupboard which serves as a make-shift dressing room. It is the size of a small elevator and has a mirror on one wall which they jostle for. Beneath it, a counter is cluttered with a mess of powder and lipstick. Kika has arrived early to avoid the anxiety of this pre-performance rush, but is compelled to return to the room with them. To not would be to set herself apart. She re-enters on some pre-text: straightening or attaching a flower, putting on shoes, removing a jacket from over her dress.

She is not naturally a night person, so it is strange to be dancing so late, but nerves and adrenaline get behind her like a fight. The opening number is the *Bulerias por fiesta* – the one they all dance a little to – the one she learns every morning in the classes. For that she could jump out - get through it like running out to jump a rope and running back. She remembers school sports days, quick sprints, or games– the skipping rope - ‘your turn.’ She sometimes gets a rough ‘*Olé!*’ Even from Parrilla; ‘*Olé Kika! Allah Allah!*’ He yells with a grunt in his voice. The others laugh and she feels them laughing at her. This seems to boost their morale and makes the show livelier and less predictable. She reminds them how difficult this is, when they have become well bored with it by now. They dance metronomic routines, and make the same poses and stances, the same runs of steps. But they have a well-oiled confidence and loud strength and speed. They watch her lightweight hungry courage, and it fills them with competitive edge. Her small improvements are always in the shadow of the applause of another’s great ‘performance’. She is helping them enjoy coming to work more.

After the first number comes the Sevillanas. It is slower and more structured, danced in pairs. Mistakes are seen more easily. She looks into her partner’s sarcastic eyes, pleading under a façade of bravura; ‘How - why, am I different - we’re doing the same. Tell me.’ Then come the chants between numbers. She mouths the words like a silent clown in her polka dots. ‘*Canta! Canta!*’ Parrilla yells, trying to thicken the sound on those nights the takings are thin, the place half-empty. She watches their mouths trying to pull to mind the foreign words, which are often not words, but ditties. She does this night after night, until she has the idea to write them down and learn them. She asks

them, one after the other, with a piece of paper, but they hold the pen like a five year old in a school test, scribble a word or two, then say they can't remember the rest. She is disappointed. It would boost her confidence to sing loud and accented with all her heart. Instead she can only enter in the refrains: '*Tero ta tero, tero...mi novio le gusta puchero... ta tero...*' She goes silent in the verse like a dull church congregation, mumbling, mouth moving. Parrilla lectures them afterwards '*Canta!* And if you don't know the words, then move your damn mouths!'

After the chants comes her solo, the *Alegrias*. The 'dance of joy' could never be such a death knell, a killing ground. Even the brighter tones of the instrument seem warped and darkened like a tape dying in a machine. It is hard to tell if he is purposefully playing it slow, to help or hinder her. It loses all its life like this. He regulates the speed at whim. 'All the things you can't control' the Australian had said. Her performances were like the lentil stew she made for a midday meal, hit and miss. Teeth of garlic, ripped off, thrown in whole. An onion in two halves. At night, tears. Give it all, throw in the potatoes - *hechar* as many *papas* as you liked, but it still might not come out well. The step might not transmit. The musicians were moody one night, spiteful the next. She grappled for a recipe but no one could determine any fixed quantity of anything, although afterwards they could always pinpoint something missing: lacking *compas*, lacking that *remate* after the first line of the second verse, or lacking confidence. The live cut of the edge of the night; that sharp step in Parrilla's front door. Only the worst Flamenco was ever set, pre-ordained, predictable. Every night she tried entering her solo a different way – sometimes walking slowly as though it was a tragic number, sometimes running in and waiting centre stage, sometimes starting to unfurl her arms moving about the stage in a way that Parrilla started playing a *falsestta* (in response to this lyrical movement) or Luis started singing thinking she had dropped the opening call and gone straight into the first verse. Then she would try and do the opening call and be struck after that with the second verse – instead of the first ... and it went on like that – the dance severed by them, or by her, inadvertently. Other times, it seemed they'd had enough. Parrilla yelled '*FUERA*' and she thought he wanted her out –offstage.( Later she realized he meant she was 'out' of time) She'd end abruptly, but as she did, he would call her back and yell 'again – the footwork section!' or 'again the *silencio!*' She came offstage humiliated. They told her after a few nights; 'Girl, just have an *orden*. *Un orden*'. That word at least, she understood. Gypsies telling her to have some order.

A few stakes in the ground. That's what she needed. Because every night was more terrifying than it should be. Stake it: an opening call. But he couldn't play it. It didn't seem to 'come off' the way the other's calls did. It did not bring the tension up... then she'd fall into the song verse, too fast, anxious. An old film on fast reel. Her stiff hips didn't ease into the curves of the *compas*. She assumed a mask of pain on her face - the 'flamenco expression'. This particularly amused them. This parody of pain, when the pain of making the parody was too strange for them to comprehend. The embarrassment or pity, were scraps for the audience. To them it must have been like the *corrida*, - the bullfight, unpleasant when it didn't go the way it was supposed to, which was often. Nearly always.

Why did he call her back? She managed to do more or less what he needed. She was cheap, (he paid her mille pesetas less than the others) and the tourists didn't know better. The thought that he was trying to help her seemed unbelievable, this idea of him helping a foreigner. She went back night after night as he gave the word, as incorrigible as a bull-calf. She held onto a thin thread of steely persistence.

'*La niña e' graciosa*' - 'the girl's charming.' A well-known *palmero* said one night to Miguel. 'Where'd you get her?'

'Australia.'

'*Tiene ma' ritmo que to*' - 'She's got more rhythm than all of them.'

The American guitarist came to watch that night, overheard this and relayed it to her. Some nights are flukes, godsend. Wherever they come from, they are few. Luis says 'you're starting to learn, tonight - you see the way you did the *escobilla* - the *contra-tiempo* - you're getting the hang of it - understanding.' Her desire was so strong it hurt. They started to see it. This girl. What was she doing here so far from her casa? What was wrong with her home? It was strange. But she was here, wanted this - what could they do? And then there was an '*olé*'. A different, quiet one. A genuine one.

But there is no guarantee Parrilla will call, and often he doesn't. Then it is relief and anti-climax combined. But the next day she feels as if a scab has been pulled off her wound - because fear has seeped in again - and class is as tremulous and unsure as it was two days ago - before the last performance at Parrilla's. She has slipped back. One night - two nights - three nights are not enough .... They are enough to burn, scald, but not enough to rise her up to the next stage. It is a kind of purgatory then, because when he calls again it is two weeks later, and she feels it is like the first day when she stood to the bitter chimes of the *Alegrias* introduction - as though for the first time - as though no ground has been covered. And indeed it seems none has - those other performing

moments have gone – unrecorded – she couldn't remember it, couldn't write it down - work on it coldly, analytically. The only place to go from here is to do it, as much as possible, but he is not opening the door that wide. She needs the money, but she would go and dance for free if he would agree, but that is not an option. When he calls her he is just looking for some kind of temporary service, and she fills in some gap they have up there.

### III Sin Miedo

5.

To John's disappointment I have left Hawkes Bay and headed North even though I keep a string to him. I am his beloved fighting hawk, complete with helmet and ankle chain.

In Auckland, I have found myself a room in a central suburb, and a torturous administration job. This suburb boasts the colours of a seagull. The sky and sea wash the houses and boats in their mercurial hue. Beneath an outward grace it's an agitated, hungry place. The view from my kitchen window faces west onto a sloping yard patrolled by two battle-scarred and bad-tempered cats. There's a ripped and tattered palm, a few mangy bamboos, and lemon trees without lemons. Today the garden looks dishevelled from a storm the night before.

I have risen in aching steps. First the edge of the bed, then the standing. Bathroom sink-toilet-splash of cold water; almost all one movement. The list of what must be done is immense;

1. Library
2. Alterations
3. Bank

No, just the library, but to get there I must avoid all noise; the main road, and the other residents who are constantly mowing, chopping, shovelling, hacking, filling. I'm hardly settling down, but who is the most unsettled? For a minute, I see myself with a gun at my window, shooting as many ride-on mower men and leaf-blowers I can see. I may as well take down a few of those females too, those from my own demographic who have disappeared under wide infant buggies or into large black tanks. The former hog the pavements, the latter the roads.

I haven't called work to tell them I'm not coming in. I can't bear to sit chained to a desk peppered with the skin peelings and nose hairs of other desk-sharers. The phone is silent. Funny that, I turned it off. But someone could still come to the door, or tap me on the shoulder later in the street. I'll wear the earplugs. I can make it, if I don't think. Momentum kicks in. and I push along, stepping a little ahead of the lethargy, loosening its gluey grip in my stride. Movement has always been helpful, but as the day progresses and the temperature rises I'm exhausted just from the simple walk. When I



open the door afterwards, I fall asleep on the bed. Sleeping in the afternoon is a habit I've been trying to break.

I awake into a dimension rather than a time, into the cool blue-grey light of a bedroom with its shutters closed and blinds down. The siesta is meant to offer a day-within-a-day, a shower, a coffee, and everything can start again. But as soon as I open my eyes I am let down by the sun. Things are not refreshed as they are by the night. There is a sense of being cheated out of an early morning window of hope, a second chance at a better mood.

Making a coffee is the first step in a sluggish choreography that will carry me from the bed back into the dance studio across the gaping hole of the afternoon. Defeating thoughts accompany every action, adding extra layers of resistance to them. In the blinding kitchen, the window exposes the cocaine-white rooftop patios of San Telmo at a distance, the newer homes of the displaced. They glint like diamonds in the stinging heat, not far from Rin's house. Would he be there now? The eccentric gypsy is probably watching the daytime soaps. Sitting in his low-ceiling ground floor flat, on a chair with a luxuriant fox-tail fur draped over it, a remote placed in the worn patch of its arm. The room is stuffed with his collection of exotic foreign trinkets and *objets d'art*. A massive Chinese vase obscures the entrance, a Japanese fountain trickles in a corner under the blasting Zarzuela on the television – he has changed the channel. This, amid the expected and traditional – the photographs, shawls, fans. He would never be out at this hour. The few times he'd been obliged to teach before six, he had come moody, without his normal humour and thin of patience as of blood, as though he'd been woken in the middle of the night.

Soon I move outside onto the pavement which is so bright that if it had voice it would scream. The heat from the heaving earth is close to the surface. It blankets everything, muffling sound. The front door thuds. I pass Antonio Agujetas, son of Agujetas Patriarch. A lone wolf skulking toward San Telmo. He looks eaten within, his skin exhausted of him. We pass each other without greeting, both consumed in the afternoon's yawning chasm. Like a delinquent I will feverishly dance over the threshold of siesta, stealing from this cultural sacrosanct. It is hard to tell where one craving begins and another ends. Half-way there the caffeine takes effect.

I unlock the door and move into the cool. The escape from the lethargic town into a world of my own control gives some energy. I can't wait for the moment when my brain is flooded with adrenaline as I will be freed from all thinking. I start to warm up and it's

a stiff barrier to pass, but then a routine re-establishes; stretches, and the beginning of sets of marking steps across the room. For awhile I will be a panting force, attacking the exercises in turns, with the axe-like determination of a single bloody mind. Now limbs will move through space with muscle memory. A flood of migrating glands, a flow of chemicals released as a familiar pattern cranks up; his footwork exercises from Farruco. Nails into wood - in reverse. The ball is a matt thud. The heel stretched as high as possible springs shut, a blade to the floor. The *golpe* (Flat) - full and stinging at every nerve-ending at the impact.

‘You should hear it in your head’ he says. ‘No! – not that the sound bounces back up. Control it, damn it!’

He has stormed into the room like an animal entering a ring. I quickly remember - the *golpe* must sound conclusive. Authoritative. Not suffering *anything*. It is only with Rin that I have learned how to hear the myriad of sound qualities in a single *golpe*. This is not how most foreigners learn and now I know this. I trust him. Other classes are crammed with steps and modern choreographies. Flamenco-lite he calls it. ‘*Flamenco-li*’, as in ‘*Coca-Cola -li*’.

Body poised, chest surging forward. A clump of middle upper back muscle is tensed at the top of my spine. A vessel for the force of music only. The body of a piano. The feet play keys.

Ball            -    Heel        –        FLAT        -        Ball    -    Heel        –        FLAT

It has a climbing persistence. Thoughts submit to sound. At times I’m sick of this repetition. I can like or dislike it, but I drink it up like medicine. I’m going around and around the room and he is beating the broken end of the stick on the floor, with beats I must follow behind with just the right amount of pause between. For a while he stops yelling and we echo each other - his stick – my feet - almost harmonious, I think...but I *think*.... How can he tell? Suddenly he is at my ear.

‘Where *are* you?! *Where* is your mind?! Why aren’t you *here*?!’ He steps back, screeches.

‘That HEEL – I told you – that left *heel* before ... that heel is weak - *debile*! MIND - your – HEEL!’

I prefer his anger to his exasperation. At other times he has gone quiet and moved to get his rings off the window sill, as if to leave. I have been quickly regretful, a touch panicked. He has complained that he’s wasting his precious afternoon for me, that he’s come out here from his cool house, in the heat, for me, and I’m ungrateful, unworthy. Not this time. Here he is angry. His anger gives me hope. Movement.

My mind is back in the heel. In the room. There is only the gypsy with his ranting, and the sounds we're exchanging. I will emerge renewed from this. For a while. Sometimes I still watch in the mirror adjudicating, until beat into submission by his voice, or when alone, by the thunderous memory of limbs.

6.

The rhythms of the town continued in the movements of people in the market, in the riddles and songs of fishmongers. Everyone prepared for the next important date: the *April feria*, *Semana Santa*, a cousin's wedding or baptism. They rushed to do errands before the heat reached its pinnacle ushering them in, submitting them to the silent siesta. Queues formed out of *pastelerías* into the street. The air trembled with activity. She was not the only foreigner of course. The others were noticeable by their skin, affected by the length of their stay but unlike the caramel pelts of the locals. They walked as though they knew the town, yet some detail belied this, an Asian eye, an Anglo nose. This was a big town that pretended to be a city. Even a gait with purpose was suspicious here, only those begging at café tables with crack-addled faces shared it. A friend pointed out her shabby back-pack, forever carrying the shoes and skirt. 'Look around...' He teased, '...do you see anyone with that kind of bag?'

She could not afford to keep the flat in San Miguel. Classes ate the majority of her money, and she would feed her flamenco before feeding herself. She took a temporary room in an ex-pat's house. Sebastian lived in the heart of Santiago and shared walls with a closed-doors *peña*. By virtue of two external patio windows giving into the club, he insinuated a territorial right of involvement in its activities. He tried to catch the men's art as if using a bucket for rain in a water shortage.

'They got upset because I had my recorder on the window sill. But we came to an agreement – we're going to record them professionally in exchange for our taping that week-end fiesta, - we'll use Yves' equipment...'

Her eyes drifted past the group to the outlying hills. She had joined them at a *venta* for lunch. The small roadside restaurant lay on the outskirts of the town where the fields

gave way to palomino grape vines, new and bright. It was becoming rare to witness spontaneous gatherings of the town's heavyweight artists. The English teacher was proud to be living in that neighbourhood. His tone was smug.

‘...every few days the kids are jamming in the plaza out there, at midday sometimes. Even Rin is dancing in the *Taverna*...’

Her pulse quickened. She knew that name. She'd seen him once - a two-inch blur of fury on a video screen. She helped herself to another olive. ‘What's he doing there? He wouldn't normally be working in the *tablaos* would he?’

‘The Taverna has some good people. They have to work somewhere in between gigs.’

That night the temperature dropped. The torrent of feet and palms had already started in the Taverna, across the Santiago square. Outside the ground contracted uncertainly as if pregnant with a malignant child. She lay on a narrow bed in a small room, her two bags, one full of costumes and shoes, slung on the floor beside her. Metres away his steps vibrated in her semi-conscious, an entity waiting for its chance to form.

The following night she went in. The tables were all taken by pastel-dressed horse breeders or sherry businessmen. They passed Rioja bottles rowdily between them and clinked forks and knives on plates. The sound echoed around the high ceilings of the room. Waiters nipped in and out of the kitchen with large trays of meaty-smelling canapés.

‘Rin?’ said the barman. ‘He's dancing soon. You'll have to wait.’ The man surely thought he knew her type: foreigner alone with work on offer. There might be a tantrum from the dancer if he turned her away. Already there was enmity with the *duenos* and the Guest-Artist over his nightly fee. He served her a fino without charge.

The show began but the gypsy did not come out immediately. The first part was short and cursory. Young dancers made hasty entrances and exits in a running parody before the main act like sea life scattering before a killer whale glides into its path.

Finally his shadow appeared at the corner of the stage, a brooding maelstrom. He was portly, for a dancer. He wore a dark suit and long black neck tie with small white *lunares*. His hair, a tone lighter than the suit, stood out against it. Although customary for male dancers to have long hair, his pony-tail defied the commercially acceptable length and trailed down past his waist. He was still at first, only loud alternating *pitos* sounded – porky fingers clicking at an uncanny speed, the sound intertwining with the

finer lace of the guitar. The young group was fully attentive to any move from him, trying to catch a *golpe*, a sudden shift, but there was no pattern to follow. In this sense his style was unusual to them. He followed no adolescent routine. His movements were definite, sparse, unpredictable. As the dance progressed she thought she glimpsed a vague insecurity in him. Not just the one that improvisation uncovers. But he seemed to vanquish it. He brought the rhythm to a head continuously and in a tumult of flesh, hair and scarf, exploded in a *paesco* – an organic release of the entire body - the rare feel-good hurt of the gypsy art. The tables roared. He did it again, and again. In between he did little, only marking on the spot with a gritty melancholy as the song soared trying to reach him. He was a thing out of the earth. A Caliban. The building muffled with applause. He left the stage as though he'd won a fight - jacket hitched up his back, shirt hanging over a belly, and strands of undone hair sticking to his sweaty round cheeks.

During the excitement a small gang of youths had entered like knives and dallied near the bar. He arrived to greet them with glistening skin. She saw the barman had relayed her message as he was making his way past them, to her. The obvious thing was to start with a compliment.

‘That was incredible.’ Her own accent jarred her ears.

‘Glad you liked it.’

His presence seemed to swallow her voice.

‘I’ve seen you dance once before in LA - that was – in a video.’

‘Ah, Los Angeles, *verdad*. I was there in ninety-five-’ He raised his chin, fanned his face with the end of his silk scarf ‘- that was a long time ago.’

‘I wanted to ask if you teach.’ Surely he’d lose interest now. ‘I was wondering how much you’d charge - for classes over a period, or - for one?’

‘You’re American aren’t you?’

‘New Zealand - near Australia.’

His mind seemed to flip through a million secret files, records, ancient archives. ‘We can talk about money later - I don’t accept money from *anyone*. I’m not a - no never mind that. The question is what idea you have. Many people have a mistaken idea - I’m not saying you do - of course not. I’m just saying many do.’

‘How long are you here?’

7.

She crossed the square on the way to meet him. The steeple of the Santiago church stretched into an expansive spring sky. He had not agreed to anything. She had taken his number and called him. Still no price had been mentioned. Nor even his real name. It seemed more like a trial than a lesson. She lied about having a practice room in mind, but soon found one. It was available at the time they needed it. The centre of town was busy but unusually, there were no queues for anything - coffee, cell-phone re-charge, bottles of water. At the *confiteria*, she bought an extra bottle, for him.

The studio was attached to an old house at the upper end of a sloping square. It faced the Cathedral of Jerez which sat on its haunches like a pre-historic beast sunning itself while birds pestered its eaves like flies. It was Mamen, at home with the child, who administered the key and organized the cheap rental. The room had a narrow roller-door that you had to unlock and shove up so that the clanging metal reverberated around the square, waking the neighbours if it was siesta. The floor made a dull matt sound, but was soft on the knees and good enough for the foreigners who used it. The gypsy padded it with the toe nails of his dance boots which he had worn there like normal shoes. He gave it a random *golpe*. The stamp released all the force of his short thick thighs.

‘It’ll have to do.’

‘But you know this floor is not a proper flamenco floor. It’s dead.’

Uncertain how to reply, she walked into the curtained-off dressing area.

‘Never mind – it’ll suit our purposes today.’ He said.

She re-emerged to see him emptying all the gold from his fingers onto the window sill and re-tying his hair. ‘Now, I don’t - ’ He grimaced at the insult of the sound, which boomed off the white-tiled walls and back at them. ‘I don’t want you to be scared or upset about what I’m going to ask you – it does not mean I’m going to pre-judge you – no - no - *no*.’

As he spoke he stood rooted to the earth, weight between his feet, sleeves pushed up his forearms. This was the first lesson. She didn’t want to be the dog that yapped, or growled, or even barked, but the huge still one with the silent energy about it. The most dangerous. The kind that didn’t need to make any noise to command respect from a *cuadro*.

‘We don’t have a singer or guitarist, and that’s a pity - but we have my *compas*, and that is *suficiente*.’ His plump hands were now stripped of gold. He had thick smooth

palms and long white fingernails. He looked about the room all of a sudden. He found a walk-in cupboard, entered it, and re-appeared clutching a broomstick with the head wrenched off. 'Of course, you're not a total beginner. You said you've danced with many people...' His face hardened '... you say you like something of my style – my *baile*. Well, so now you can show me. A bit of *Solea*, *Bulerias* - whatever you want.' She had told him too much, but she hadn't told him she had abandoned relationships to get here, stolen money - a lot of it, or worked illegally. She knew who she wanted to learn from, and it was him. Her feet felt light under her. She backed toward the centre of the room.

'You pretend I'm not here. No one is here, understand?'

A verse of something slow, contained. She would take four cycles of *compas* just to raise her arms.

'What is it then? *Solea*?' He had moved to a corner out of her line of vision.

'Sorry – *Solea*.' Her voice sounded strange, dislocated.

'I'll give you the *compas*, first.' He started using the stick then resorted to palms.

His claps were loud and insistent. The *compas* of *Solea* seemed longer than she had heard it before. It left no room for error. Like walking a narrow trail on a cliff face, the *compas* forbade doubt and haste at once. Already it revealed her fear of being still, every false move, anxious grasp. She moved too fast, arms above her head in two *compas*, instead of four – her body already marking out the diagonal. She must show him she had 'his idea'. The stresses continued, slow yet inevitable. Steps toward some end that never arrives. Between each seemed a vertical moment. An infinity. *Solea*, the mother of all *cantes*, lay under their feet, like a faultline. He arose to his feet only once, briefly, and walked in front of her doing the same marking she was doing she realized later. She insinuated what he did, behind the general moving shadow of his bulk.

As they left she realized she had forgotten to give him the water. He wouldn't accept it at first. She heaved the door back to its resting place while he unscrewed the plastic cap of the bottle. The white light outside had softened, its sting had gone.

He invited her for coffee at a bar bordering the centre of town and Santiago and insisted on ordering and paying inside. She waited at a table inhaling the congestion of the intersection. Still no price had been agreed on, although it was starting to feel redundant. Surely he would agree to something, or over coffee he would give her a soft let down. He arrived at the table and clanked his keys on it.

‘I don’t give classes to anyone. I had a father once hunting me at all hours of the night and begging, pleading me to teach his girl. He offered me a fortune, but she was a brat. I had to hide in my house! No no no. I’m very careful about who I spend my time with. That is time earned, not purchased, you understand?’

Several youths with greased hair flew past on motor-scooters tooting loudly and yelling something. He looked up, smiled, flicked his hair.

‘I’ve had people coming from all over the globe. South America, Hungary, Japan. One boy, who saw me dance in Madrid wanted to study with me for years, and came all the way down from Bilbao, in the north – from *Bilbao!*’ He accentuated loudly as if to make her understand the extremity of this distance. One by one he emptied and began stirring four bags of sugar into his coffee. The glass looked tiny against his large fat hand and manicured nails.

‘He couldn’t do anything, the boy, he was the clumsiest around. He barely had money for boots. I turned him into a *bailaor*. Jonatan Miro. He works in Madrid now. I told him when he tried out at the *tablaos*, to tell them he was from Jerez de la Frontera. They thought he was from Cadiz – well he had everything from here, but something special, something more, not like the dancers here who dance *por fiesta* - for parties and nothing else! Now he works overseas – always has a contract.’

Her ears hung on every word. She felt the eyes of people passing their table. They made an odd duo. She was a visitor everywhere and a permanent resident nowhere.

‘I am very serious, I am committed - ’

‘I will do *that* to you’. He flipped one of the empty sugar sachets inside out with a long finger nail. ‘*Pocito a poco*, of course.’

The object stuck in its new form, suspending his words in mid-air. A tiny breeze floated it along the table top. ‘There are very few *canastero* families left in this town. *No one* dances with *rabia* and *paseco* here - but *nosotro*.’

She remembered a class she had taken with the grandson of the great Farruco. The family still taught, carrying the torch of the great Patriarch into the twenty-first century. In the class the boy had done a turn like the old man, a metre from her. On the tip of the nails of his heel. A whip of air cut the back of her neck like a stiletto knife.

‘My mother sent me to Seville to Farruco when I was eleven.’ he said.



8.

A Bavarian dance student and Lord of the Rings fanatic put her onto the apartment in the Plaza Arroyo, two doors down from the dance studio. It was the top floor of a refurbished building, an unusual luxury after weeks in temporary rooms.

The classes with the gypsy began. It would not be worth it to him or her, he said, unless she took class three times a week, and for that the fee was high, but reasonable for the degree of one to one time. In class he was like an old-fashioned Zen Master with a stick metaphorically whacking her when her mind wandered, slipping out of clarity. He tolerated little comment from her, and no impatience to get to the next move. *Sin Miedo* – no fear, thought or worry for the future. The classes went on for hours, parameters of time, rent and price dissolving into each other.

‘We’ve gone for four hours instead of two, I’ll pay you the difference next time.’

‘No no Franci, that was my choice - you need your money, so far from your home.’

She booked the studio for them when the noise of the day was greatest and his voice and her feet could not compete with the exuberance of the town. When radios, the raucous banter of cleaning ladies and squeals of kids poured from the apartment block opposite, and the traffic hooted and gnawed its way out to the periphery along the clogged road near the square. The edges of the Siesta were the riskier times to dance, but no neighbour came to complain. People suffered each other’s intimacies. For some, flamenco noise was not a suffering, but a curiosity. Children loitered outside the studio doors when she was there alone. Once they came asking her if they could watch, if she could teach them. She smiled and shooed them out. Surely their parents making afternoon coffee, spied the gypsy’s Napoleonic stride up the square and in through the studio door to her, their foreign neighbour, waiting inside.

‘I don’t know how much further we can go without a proper room.’ So it started one afternoon. She could tell he’d come with his head loaded, brimming, as though he’d filled it with the content of the class all day and was ready to fire it off. He placed his rings and keys on the window-sill.

‘We’ll start with the *planta, vale*, but slowly, until you warm up.’

‘I’m already warm.’ She always came early, nervous, as though before a performance.

‘Then watch - put your weight on the ball of the foot and stretch out as you go covering the territory in a circle.’ He did it once or twice then stood back. She had

practiced this building block of technique many times. She had accomplished more complicated things already.

‘This way you have to work harder to achieve the sound and press your kidneys into it, your liver.’

*Planta*

‘And don’t take shortcuts – come right out here to the edge of the room. Didn’t you hear me say it? *A circle.*’

*Planta*

‘This is how the daughter of Farruco was taught - like this, this is how she got strong, that canastera.’

*Planta*

‘Eyes straight ahead. Don’t show it on your face. Relax your face!’

*Planta*

‘Push the kidneys into it!’

*Planta*

‘Louder!’

*Planta*

‘That’s not all your weight – I said *all* your weight.’

*Planta!*

‘Look-’

He jammed his ball into the floor, his thick body pressing into it, his hair shaking slightly with the impact, heel lifted in a high arc. She imitated.

‘Better. Again!’

A flutter made them stop. A pigeon with a small black neck tie of feathers alighted on the window sill. Its coat pulsated.

‘Same again!’

Again she made the planta.

‘Breast like a pigeon!’

As the sound became consistent he started to *jalear* – making the typical flamenco cheers, and pounding the stick. ‘*Asaa!*’

STICK - *Planta* – STICK – Heel – STICK – Flat – STICK – *Planta*...

In-between her base metronomic beats, he started his own series of gunshot footwork, replacing the sound of the stick. She turned to watch. ‘Continue!’ he yelled. ‘Watch out.’ If his ear sensed a timbre of incomplete sound he stopped. When she resumed the fuller sound, he started his patterns again. They became more complicated, pulling and

pushing with syncopation until another fracture of sound, or delay caught his ear. He was now dancing with her, jacket off, sleeves rolled up. She smelt the powder of his laundered shirt, the expensive cologne lacing his collar and the cheap shampoo from his freshly washed hair.

‘Watch the preparation now of the turns: *un - dos – tre*’ - *Vuelta!*’ - Turn! He flew around, his bulk invisible. The turn had to be in one beat, out of nowhere. She attempted it.

‘That’s not so bad -’ His shouting subsided ‘- but look-’. He crudely mimicked how he thought other dancers turned. ‘Use your arm to push you – it’s momentum, your head last to leave, first to arrive.’ But the technical pointers ended there. Otherwise he stood in the corner yelling or cheering as her efforts improved. ‘*Ale!* - *Alah!*’ He beat to three on the floor then thumped the stick and his foot on the turn. The thump was the turn. In the anticipation between the three and the thump she paused.

‘No –*No!* You can’t let me know!’

On each landing she scuffled for balance. He made one loud clap, craned his neck, ‘*No te mueva!*’ – Don’t move! And don’t look at me!’

She looked at her own red face in the mirror and willed herself still. After a time, he he was silent. She had done something well, or very bad, she was unsure which. She continued the combination in the emptiness of the studio in a wiry trance. The thing that ran under them— his ‘idea’, her fuse ran bright on its current.

‘If you continue like that -’ he moved toward his gear to end the class ‘- you will be capable of dancing muy, *muy bien.*’

\*

When I awake in the Auckland flat, it is the small hours of the morning – the *madrugada*. I stare up glassily at my Moorish lightshade fitted to the ceiling, like a cat surveying a tree with out of reach birds. Usually I note its colour, its pleasing lampish form, the sharpness of the point at its lower upside-down turret. There is something incongruous and magical about it, in the way of flying carpets or genies in bottles, that it can only fit in the air, not on the ground in that shape. It has the form of earthenware pots - the ones made for carrying oil or water that siphon to a duck-tail at the base. They have always beguiled me, those pots. How do they contain their liquid filling? Of what

*use* are they? They can apparently only be carried, hauled on someone's shoulder from here to there. I am annoyed at the incredulity of the impish lamp. Its lead-light fragility, its curvature brittle-ly harmonious. I have the urge to smash it. I notice this only after it has been re-playing in my mind for some time, like background music. With vicarious satisfaction I feel myself smashing it with a large stick, its clinking explosion, the shattering of colour – the more energetic and wicked the relish. But as I have not acted on it, the thing still remains, aloofly intact. Now I notice the shape everywhere, mocking me. In the old colonial mansions in this neighbourhood, in the catholic girls school with its springing arches and intricately caged wrought iron lights, in the nunnery at the back of the property.

The fact is, gypsies have stolen a good portion of my life. Even at this distance they come shuffling in, settling up their bloody little fires, leaving an ashen mess in their wake. All this, to what end?

9.

An *azotea* gave a looming view of the cathedral and its Moorish tower. She hung sweat-eaten dance clothes out to dry on this rooftop patio, or sat staring up at the white cut-outs of stars in the Alcazar ceiling of night. During Holy Week pink and gold processions inched their way through the town with swaying Christs to the termination of their journey on the doorstep of the cathedral.

Rosario was divorced and lived alone on the middle floor. She had entered the landlady's apartment once to collect receipt for a bill and was surprised to see another doughy woman in the lounge slumped in a chair with an elevated leg, a cigarette and a glass of spirits.

'This is Carmen.' Rosario said.

The woman eyed her from behind furls of smoke while Rosario went to find the receipt book. She waited for the usual greeting but it didn't come. Carmen grunted a parting word at her, as though obliging a dog a reluctant pat, one she would rather shove out.

Rin came and viewed her apartment after a week. He entered tentatively.

‘It’s very good, economical, all you need.’

He glanced around the room and spoke with uncharacteristic politeness.

‘*Quieres un café?*’ She offered.

‘No... don’t bother with that.’

‘But I have the coffee maker and I can heat the milk.’

‘Do you have sugar?’

‘Oh no.’

On a second visit he agreed to her making him the coffee. Either because she had bought a bag of sugar, or because he had arrived too early for class and there were few bars open. She heated the milk and poured it out into a glass. He fussed over putting in the sugar, and spooning out the floating skin.

‘*No me gusta la piel de la leche.*’

In future she made sure not a trace of milk skin remained in his glass.

The building was quiet at this time of day. They made awkward conversation over coffee. He asked her what they ate for breakfast or lunch in her country. On a third visit they coincided with Rosario on the stairs. She was arriving home from her work at the American naval base in nearby Rota.

‘This is Rin, my dance teacher.’

*Professor de baile.* How distant the phrase sounded. They had been in her apartment.

He was her reason for being here, for being.

‘Hola, Rin.’

It was the first she’d heard Rosario speak in Spanish. The woman had impeccable English and usually took the opportunity to practice on her. She watched them edge past one another with secret cupboards in their faces. Later she felt beguiled by codes, the cultural, the romantic, the sexual. Rosario and Carmen were partners. Why was it so shocking to find gay women in this town? There were gay women here as there are gay women everywhere. And Rin? Was he even *attracted* to women? The question begged. If so, what kind of woman would he like? A skinny white ratty foreigner like her? Or would he prefer a dark gorgeous gitana? She was alert to all manner of signals from him.

As the season warmed people’s lives melted into the streets. In return for making sounds of *taconeo* on the edges of Siesta, she tolerated blaring televisions and family rows in a steady stream from the apartment building opposite. At the window one night for a breath of air, she saw a man lying half-naked on his couch fingering himself in the

grey sheen of the late-night porn channel. So she closed the windows and blinds and turned up the fan to mitigate the heat.

In the studio it was dusty and claustrophobic. They were several weeks into classes. He had started to take on a specific voice when teaching, a screeching over his own palms and her feet. He would use it to scream commands, cheer, and sometimes he tried to sing.

‘*Carajo!*’ A giant cat’s spit. ‘If you can’t damn well do it the same way twice - if you don’t know what you’re doing - that’s why I said – before you did it right – did you listen?! Did you even hear what you did?! No!’

She had done the step already more than fifty times and couldn’t remember which particular nuance in which time it had been right.

‘Did you hear me say when you did it right?’

‘I-’

‘*Did* you hear me *say* it?’

Heat rose to her cheeks.

‘Yes’

‘Well then you’ll know how it’s meant to be! Come on, do it again - we haven’t got all lifetime!’

Again he started beating out the *compas* with the stick, then halted. She looked up. He was tipping the stick, his eyes crossing slightly as he examined its flayed tip. It was spiked from repeated impact with the floor, worked down and fractured under the stress. Its former life was over. He held it toward her and they exchanged a guilty smile. She wanted to break into a fit of hysterical laughter, but daredn’t. When they returned to the step however the mood had slipped from him. They had paused too long and lost momentum. A relief. Her toes were burning and her sweat turning cold.

‘Now we’ve spent a lot of time but never enough.’ He said.

Outside, she blew her nose black into a white tissue. The light was fading fast as they found a table at the Santiago bar.

‘For Princess Lea, a *caffe con leche*, and for me a *manchado*, *vale*? That is, a *manchado* short on the coffee – *not* on the milk, *vale*? Or I won’t sleep!’

He tut-tutted as he sat down. ‘That studio, *por dios*. Can’t you find a better one than that?’

‘Perhaps, but not one I can afford for so many hours.’

‘Well, you can’t hear the music of the feet, and it doesn’t have a bathroom or anything, - how much is it?’

‘Normally 3 euros an hour, but I get it for 2.50 – or I can pay her up front for the week. 36 for as much as I want, and I can go a bit overtime if no one’s after me.’ He looked out across the road while the man came and put down the coffees. He began stirring his milky one.

‘People just take advantage of the foreigners in this town.’

She was locking the roll down door one evening, having gone through all the exercises again, when Mamen arrived home with the shopping.

*‘Hola.’*

*‘Hola. Hows it going with Rin?’*

The name came out brutish, as the woman pushed, trying to un-wedge her front door.

‘Hard, you know,’ she said.

Mamen kept pushing. Her amber eyes held the anxiety of a cornered rodent.

‘Just so you know, the neighbours can hear the yelling sometimes. I’m just telling you so you know.’

She struggled with the door, the child’s pram, the groceries. The neighbour’s eyes and tone stopped her from offering assistance. The door gave way.

‘– and the broom – I needn’t tell you about the broom.’

There it was, the typical warning. She’d seen it on Malena, on Ani, on every female except Rosario. Pursed lip-direct eye. Raise of brow and shrug of shoulder, incline of head. All at once.

*‘Hasta luego.’*

The door shut.

10.

The Waitemata Harbour is a long cut moon-stone below an overcast sky. Its surface shifts in the light. From the city looking west on the horizon toward the Chelsea sugar factory, the cliffs are the only reference point. I awoke this morning to a leaden weight, but push it away wearily and cling to the bones of the day. I reluctantly accept it as one does the

weather. Hopefully it won't stay longer than a day. Turning from the kitchen window I catch the skirt sitting deflated on the wardrobe, floundering, ragged at the edges from the teeth of heels. Something expecting to be fed. I look back out the window, to the cliffs.

*Don't forget the things you hated. You were the outcast, remember?*

I cast out the anchor, make the coffee.

True - can't say I liked it. It wasn't, ever, a thing I did for fun. It was a thing I did as if cutting open my arm and mingling it with my blood. Even when the wound has healed over I hold it inside, a magnet that pulls. I squint out at the surface of the water. It is still in there, like a splinter. On the computer I see dates. The *feria* starts tomorrow; ten days of holiday for everyone; parties, mayhem, dresses, flamenco, spring madness. The year here is not punctured and aerated with these breathing holes to release poison and pleasure. Here it's getting cold. Spain is my other half. I touch the tips of my fingers to the soft protrusion of vein in my temple. One day it'll snap.

I call up the local studios and reserve a space for two hours. It'll be sixty bucks for the indulgence.

Last time I was offered a room for nothing, cachet of being a 'visiting' teacher. I watched the local flamenco teacher quivering with pride as she pulled us into the car park to show me where my workshop would be held.

'They're brand new beautiful spaces, for contemporary dance.'

It was a big deal, no doubt, for her to be given a nod of inclusion in the elite puffery of the New Zealand contemporary dance scene with its precious floors, its architecturally-designed spaces. I ask about the floors.

'Ok for flamenco shoes?'

'We'll have to duct tape them.'

We moved through a kidney-shaped foyer to one of the rooms. As soon as I saw it I knew it would be too pristine to concentrate. The light was sharp, blinding, disorientating. The back wall, opposite the floor-to-ceiling mirror, was all glass, giving onto a long green lawn. The whole set-up seemed designed to help lurching contemporary dancers feel as light as possible with their large bottoms and hoary athletic thighs. I would've preferred the sweat-imbued rat-holes in Madrid, the hard draughty patios of Jerez with their poor sound and light quality, their cocooning darkness where my adrenaline could work itself up, burn itself out.

I gave the workshop, but my energy slipped away through the glass. I was Ariel in the mirror, with a cluster of airy light creatures behind me. Nothing came into my head,



my mind white with the emptiness of the room and the landscape beyond. I regurgitated something that floated to the surface. Unoriginal material. The local teacher was visibly displeased. She'd never set foot in Spain but taught a couple dozen of New Zealanders flamenco every day. Of course she knew better than I the importance of things like steps. What else was there in this country for flamenco but one new step after another after another?

'Do I know you from somewhere?' The manager has entered the foyer where I sit waiting for someone to open the theatre, which I have booked instead of the studios. They can spare their specious rooms and I'll spare myself of them. The black theatre is for me with its rubber floor, black curtains, my black skirt. Black on black.

'Oh probably.'

'You're from my yoga class?'

'No, dancing, going back into the studio. Had a time off.'

'Oh come *in*.'

She ushers me through heavy black doors, walking with obscenely open hips like 'dancers' walk, waving her arms. 'Oh, it's *great*... Take your time, have fun with it! It'll be *fine*, just like getting back on the bike - just have fun – wonderful – use the space....' She stops and looks at me. We now stand half-way up the aisle. She fiddles with her trendy red spectacles and I see the fine grey hairs on her neck beneath her bob.

'I know what it's like after a time off, but it never goes away you know, it's always there.'

We both look out at the open-mouthed cave of the theatre. It's a small theatre, but her look is one of watching the Titanic pulling out into the ocean, without her on it. You can always tell when you're speaking with someone who has come to dance later in life. All is still intact, no sharp edges, no catastrophes. I swallow. Blink hard. The light is thankfully dim. She throws her arm out and strides onto the stage like a Shakespearean actor introducing the theatre onto its own stage.

'Here is the wonderful floor, and the lights – and you do have everything you need? Never mind that, I'm about to pound it, I think.

*'You think you're ready? Here then, lets see it. Now what?'*

Now what?

'– look – the roll-out mirror, the sound system, does this work for you?' She bends over to squint at the buttons.

'Thanks very much.' I say.

The room is a chalky black, the floors, the walls. I haul the mirror-on-wheels into place between myself and the empty audience. My figure rolls into view; the skirt, stretched over slightly fuller hips, the shoulders shrunk towards breasts, narrowed. Overall, the change is minimal here, with the shoes, the skirt I look myself, more or less, don't I? As I used to. There is a white graininess to the image. I pull a pose or two, half-heartedly to test how hard the crust is, under it I'll find the old curved, well-oiled me. Then more serious now, I curl a vine-like hand around and up. There's a stringy complaint from my arm - the stiff palm and fingers are bland, tasteless. A creak from the seating. Someone here? High up around the top of the room there's a walk-way for tech people and a door leading off it with a small dark glass window in it. Is that woman watching behind it? Nosy to see who I really am, if I'm an old pro after all? If so, she could nab me to teach classes here, couldn't she?

Music. I need music. I walk over and flick a switch on a black control board. A thump of compas comes out buzzing and reverberating in the thick matt air. I test it; up, down, back, forth - it's all the same, like food. But something odd - the cycles of rhythm are suspiciously mechanical. The music seems stiffened, arthritic in its digital casing. I'll have to make do. No, its cante I need. The loose, sprawling song - that's where it all started - That's where I'll get inside myself and out of this skin. So I jog it forward to Fernando de la Morena and move back in front of the mirror. Go back to the beginning. Enjoy - as the woman said. Don't be locked in memory. Let yourself 'create something'. I wince as I tell myself this tripe.

Spain emits from the stereo, bitter metal, encased. Fernando is an old goat, trapped in the machine, blaying. No, no, not him - I need something more modern. I must have moved on in these years. I go to the stereo and change to Miguel Poveda, younger, more dance-friendly. Poveda's whine fills the place. He too seems old, but in a dated way. Like the gypsy kings once were. What do the people working here think? They'll see I'm empty of it, lost it all, back to zero. I stop the stereo and put on the iPod earphones. Now they'll be thinking I'm doing some artful silent arm work - some serious creating. I make up a little exercise. It could be for beginners. I keep a watchful glazed eye in the mirror.

*Look at you. Truth is, you can't remember a fucking thing.*

True - not sure how much I'll remember, but some of it is coming...How many steps do you need for a verse anyway? One, two, if that ?

*You're brittle. Wooden. Always were, always will be.*

*Que brada* - broken turn.

On the incline, heel and toe.

Corkscrew twist.

Swerve at a corner.

Always did that one, over and over.

Written on the body that one.

*Try and create an illusion, but in the end you're a palo - a stick. You're anti-flamenco. Try and convince? You'll convince no one. Ever.*

Get rid of the mirror. Roll it out - away. I am being sucked in until there's nothing left out here. I spin around to face the thick black curtain and there's a sudden barren silence. Poveda is distant in the iPod. The space is shapeless, directionless. The beginner exercise I made up has been rubbed out. I swing back to the mirror.

*What did you expect? That you could just come back? Pick up from where you left off?*

I don't want to give up. I've rented this space for two whole hours. I bend over and take off my shoes. In my mind I hear the manager's voice again 'Just have fun with it...you'll see, it'll be al - ' but she is calling across a widening gulf. I imagine her in the wings with a sound and light man, waiting, watching me. This theatre is new but the curtain evokes the musty odour of old costumes.

I stand, cold, empty and barefoot, in a leotard that has wisps of mauve gauze attached to my arms. I start running up a slope toward the light - the sun rising over a ridge. Stringing steps together thinly with a cobweb-like weave but there is no ground. I am leaping all the hurdles of Davidson's genius choreography. Then the colours fade to white mist, steaming off the black ground, thickening to fog. Was I on the first leap of that diagonal, or the second? A moment's hesitation can mean certain death. Striesand's voice bleats '*Memories*' - it gallops ahead of me, fades as it warbles over the Manawatu plains. Mrs. Davidson's piece is sawn-off. I scan the ground, as if for a lost step. Then I half-walk, half-run offstage. Mum stands by the music man, her edges shining, diffused in the sidelights, worry in her forehead.

I'm a fool to have come here today. A fifth wall has grown in the theatre like a cancer. I put the shoes back on. Take them off. Look at the mobile, check the time. Barely an hour passed. I go back and try re-enacting what I was doing, the slow arms coming

up... I do it a few more times then stop. Take the shoes off, for good. Look at the mobile but through a blur can't see the time. I sit for a while.

I gather my gear and step out into the foyer then almost run out the front door. A shower is unleashing itself from the west. Beyond the car park, cars slash past on the wet road. A cool sun filters through old gums lining a high wire fence. I trail along it, slide down it until my bottom hits the asphalt.

## IV Rabia y Paesco

11.

She wandered through the fringe neighbourhoods with Federico. She had met the gypsy hanging around the various cafes and bars that sometimes featured flamenco. The night quickened leaching blue from the sky and rendering it charcoal. A manure-like smell from the sugarcane factory threatened to seep through the town. Now they were alone, away from peopled streets, she noticed how tall he was. He skulked along, her tall shadow.

‘*Prima*, I know where you’ll find Rin tonight, like every night, and just like I told you, I can take you there, show you what I’m saying about him.’

‘But I don’t want him to see me. He’ll think I’m spying on him, snooping about and that’ll be the end of the classes.’

‘I swear he won’t see you but you’ll hear his voice and know it’s him. You can go right up to the door *primita*, and he won’t know you’re there, I’m telling you.’

He called her ‘little cousin’. It was more intimate than *guapa*. Beautiful was an over-used word with sharp corners hidden in it, like the smudged outlines of the houses now flanking them. ‘Watch your company, *guapa*.’ Malena had warned her one night at the tablao.

‘Is it far?’

‘*Barrio Carmen*, past Santiago, that’s where he is right now, dealing, and will be all night. You’ll see I’m right.’

‘It’s his house?’

‘His mother’s.’

She was trespassing outside the respectable vicinity of classes and coffees. Rin was revealing his art to her, while holding something back. If she could just get that final piece of information then she might know more how to be with him, and be more like him. Less would separate her from *them*. Then she would please him more in the classes. What was it? Selling drugs, sex, a *gitana* girlfriend or betrothed?

‘Rin was in love with me once.’ He laughed coarsely.

‘*Como?*’

Federico had come out of rehabilitation or some kind of residential lock-up a few months ago. He spoke in a nasally slang.

‘The father of Rin is my mother’s second cousin.’

Now would be the time to turn back as they were near her apartment.

‘What if he sees me or finds out I’ve come all this way just to hunt him down  
What will he think?’

‘You tell him I brought you. You didn’t know he was here. You can stand back,  
I’ll show you from a distance where he is.’

‘How can I be sure it’s him there if I can’t see him?’

He stopped with her and turned, waiting. She could still see his eyes in the fading light, but they were irreverent, arresting, so she tried not to look as she enjoyed his complicity. He didn’t challenge her – didn’t ask why she would want to see the fat gypsy at this hour if she didn’t want to talk to him. They could dance back and forth in conversation, as long as she continued walking with him in the direction of that neighbourhood.

If Rin saw her here with Federico he’d lose respect for her and their growing friendship. He’d be offended, no longer share any extras - an end to the coffees. He could be outraged at Federico, maybe it’d even start a fight. Protecting the classes was more important. Still, she couldn’t stop herself walking there.

The delinquent’s shoes and bottoms of his jeans were badly scuffed but he wore a pressed shirt with a tiny floral print. He had shaved a new design into his jaw that sharpened him. His hair still wet from being washed, or greased with something, caught the street light they passed at intervals. He looked fresh, while at the same time something unclean crawled under his skin. But somewhere she trusted him. ‘*Soy un buen gitano eh*’ - I’m a good little gypsy - I keep my word.’ He always said when he saw her.

He did keep his word, because he told no one about that one time, not long after her arrival. Or if he had, thankfully none of it had found its way into the flamenco community whose doors would have been bolted harder on her, had it caught a whisper of gossip. It was on the *Fiesta de la Vendimia* - the grape harvest festival, in the doorway of the pension San Andreas. They had spent the night loitering around the streets with each other until four am in the *madrugada*. She felt drugged by the night, and the flamenco performances of the festival. They sat whispering, his finger tracing a line on her calf. Finally he kissed her and ran his lips down her neck. She felt his fingers which weren’t rough. It could have happened there. She made it inside just in time. Panted on the other side of the door. In the silence of the patio, the large plants examined her coolly. That was a gypsy’s kiss. It could swallow her, make a baby and steal it, without further contact.

But he'd been telling her all night about some French girl who had left him bereft. Federico was just a broken romantic. Still, she knew she would probably part with the ten euro note in her wallet sometime between now and the end of the night.

They passed Parrilla's tablao, and when they got to the *calle nueva* in Santiago she knew she wouldn't be turning back. The street was the historic flamenco womb of the city. Every line of song glorified its name, but there were no *juergas* drifting out of windows tonight. It was abandoned as an old film set. She had the impulse to steal the street sign, and might have, if it wasn't etched into the stone wall of the corner house.

'*La calle nueva*, eh...'

'My mother grew up in this street. I'm not a singer, guitarist, or dancer but I'm *flamenquito*, aren't I *prima*?'

'*Claro*.'

'My cousin told me he would teach me guitar. I'm going to learn and study guitar, or percussion - *palmas*. Guitar is too solitary. I don't want to be alone all day.' She doubted he'd apply himself to study anything. But if he did, he'd learn in a matter of months what had taken her several years.

'You should do it Federico, you should dance. You have something special, some artists who know much more than you don't have that.'

'Maybe I can get your prof Rin, to teach me, *eh prima*?'

'So, what if you do? No, Rin's not your style-'

'- not your *arte*'.

He smiled. They walked in silence for a moment.

'Rin is a big pimp.'

The sharp odour of rotting rubbish escaped from the corner at the end of the street as they came out onto a main artery.

'He paid me once to watch me *follar*. But he wanted me for himself, he wanted to sleep with me.'

The Spanish was suddenly awkward, the verb reflexive. Who sleeping with who - with him? - Rin? - someone else - himself?

'He paid me to sleep with this *niño*, so he could watch, but then he wouldn't give me the dough...'

Maybe she wasn't hearing right. Maybe Rin was in love with Federico. She could see why Rin might find Federico special, like her. He might find him charismatic, handsome, full of art.

'He is *feo prima*, Rin is ugly.'

They continued to walk, out of the historic town and into a suburban belt. Something like his shame hung between them in the ensuing silence. She handed him the ten euro note and waited behind the corner of a building while he walked into shadows across a small park and entered a doorway. He returned, his step buoyant, and accompanied her back into the centre relaying his interchange with a phantom Rin behind a door. Later she couldn't remember where or how they parted in the street, but this wasn't because she had anything to smoke.

'Now you're coming along well, *hombre*, of course there's always room to improve. The problem with every dancer nowadays is that they dance on top of the floor, not *into* it.'

Rin flicked his hair. The café at the intersection was busy with afternoon traffic.

'They're worth nothing, none of them. What you need now is the *tabla* to make you as strong as a bull from *Dome*'.

Jerez-bred Domecq bulls were known all over Spain for their fighting quality. She smiled, but not too keenly.

*Tablaos*, like Parrilla's, were training grounds for novices, and for professionals they were bread and oil between main jobs. Rin had danced in all the best *tablaos* of Madrid and Barcelona, he told her, the few that still employed professionals as guest artists. These dancers had the benefit of both race and dance study heritage behind them; gypsies from Seville's *pueblos* like Carmelilla Montoya, Juana Amaya, or from Granada, like Manolete. One dancer of this ilk had especially marked him when he came to dance in Barcelona as a tubby teenager. La Tolea's style fell into the lineage laid down by the late genius Carmen Amaya, a small wiry gypsy from the northern city's sea shanties. The volume and speed of her footwork pained the musicians. When they saw she had put on trousers for a number, he said they complained to each other and their palms instantly started to sweat. One day Kika had come across an old video of her performing, and saw a likeness to Rin. The woman's middle finger and thumb pinched above a black frizz of hair, she flicked her head manically on the *remates* that punctuated a line of song and devoured the stage from breadth to width, driving the tension up repeatedly and leaving a litany of full-body *paescos* in her wake. Each one pinched hard with a different nuance of exhilaration and pain. Kika replayed the tape constantly until it jammed and delayed in the machine, until the singer's voices warped. Performance meant dancing with singers.



‘Do you think we could get a singer to come into class every now and then, - I found it helpful at Ani’s because she sung - ’

‘Ana-Maria Lopez is not a singer! Or a dancer! She teaches everyone to do just a little routine - the one everyone knows!’ He made a parody of the typical gestures of the *Bulerias*, the dance the city knew so well. ‘Anyone worth anything who came out of that school - Rosario, Rocio, Mercedes, Juanito Tejero – I taught them *all*. I made them do exercises until they were crying that their feet bled - and that woman has a nerve to claim the glory for that.’ He was a whirlwind of agitation. He went to order them more coffee. They would keep talking then.

A few youths pulled up out of nowhere. They approached him as he walked back to the table. He pretended to be startled, then started preening his hair with his fingers. They greeted, almost flirted. She watched them notice the huge garish gold ring on his left hand. It was in the form of a copulating couple, man and woman. It played into the unspoken question in their faces. They asked what he’d been doing.

‘Now I’m busy with classes, with *Maria de la O* here ...’ He raised an eyebrow toward her, a glance of affection peppered with sarcasm. Maria de la O, being a heroine of the spanish *copla*, she could hardly take offence. He liked the genre of spanish music and often watched it on television in the heat of siesta. The youths barely registered her. There was no invitation for them to join the table. He seemed preoccupied by the sand her comments had thrown up. After a moment the entourage moved on.

‘I worked before, just a few times, at Parrilla’s *tablao*, last year.’

A flash of red rag. But his face contained his surprise.

‘*Muy bien*. And so?’

‘Ani sent me there, as a substitute.’

He squinted at the apparent scandal of it. An uncomfortable silence grew.

‘Juan Parrilla is an idiot. He never made it like his brother Manuel, and that’s all he has, that useless place. He insists on having bad people just so he can scalp all the money. They’re nothing more than a bunch of kids dancing there for after-school pocket money.’

A wild cat among the pigeons. That would be Rin at Parrilla’s. Their flamenco was softer-edged. Cream sherry as opposed to black Pedro Jimenez. There were only strands of *canastero* families in Jerez, he told her. Bloodlines. Many from which sprung the myriad of great singers in certain enclaves of the town; La Plazuela, Santiago. Once the families settled, their art sprouted like mushrooms on a lawn after rain. Their ancestors had trailed the Guadalquivir River Basin by the Royal Road joining Cadiz and Seville,

basket-weavers and sellers who sourced wicker on the banks, who carried a historical memory in them like salt in a wound.

‘Juan Parrilla is nobody. I am the only one you’ll find capable of always finding emotion - even where there is none. I look for it, in a grain of sound from the guitar - a piece of filigree, a word in a line of song, a memory, an image. I sting my own self to feel something – even when I’m with poor musicians, I dance to my own *compas* and bring them to *me*. You need to learn how to control the *compas* – not let others take you anywhere. Most dancers can’t do this. They go all over.’

She fidgeted with a half empty sugar bag on her coffee saucer. This was not something to be analysed. It was here, in front of her. She had to grab it now, with all her will or miss it. This was more important than technique.

‘I will make you work twice as hard in the studio than if you were onstage. You need to be dancing every day - every night if you want to get better, whether I’m there with you in the *sala* or not! You’re turning well, you’re getting stronger. You need to make sure you have that *Alegrias*, and a *Solea* – everything ready to go. It’s not the perfect place at all, not at all – but it’s better than nothing. We shouldn’t complain.’ Suddenly Parrilla’s place would do. He spoke as if she’d already secured a contract. Contracts were unheard of at a place like Parrilla’s, including verbal ones. The waiter came and picked up their coffee glasses, spilling the contents of the half packet on the table top. Parrilla had his people. It’d be lucky to get one night even filling in for someone again.

‘I’ll go and talk to Juan Parrilla, but it’s better if you go first.’

The intersection had emptied by the time they got into his car. When she got out, his brow furrowed as he peered up from inside the car. ‘*Guidaito por alli*’ – ‘Be careful out there. I know you’re not in your country, but if people see you with me, there won’t be any problem, because they know me and they know *my* people don’t stand for anything.’

12.

The streets were the width of a horse and cart. In the dulled bronze light the houses exhaled the heat of siesta. The dependable repetition of stone, like practiced steps, promised nothing.

*'You need the job more than those children who live well with their families. You tell it to Parrilla like this - You say you're alone here.'*

She would not plead with the owner to give her work, but Rin's insistent tone rung in her head.

*'You have your gastos – your rent, food - you have to look after yourself – so far from your home.'*

Parrilla would admire persistence to groveling even if he always met it with defeat. He would never give a foreigner a permanent position over a local girl. There would always be someone to take her place, in the snap of fingers. She'd have to be on-call to the family again, living on the edge of every night. She recognized Parrilla's rounded back in the middle of the restaurant. He was speaking with someone but the timing was good. They finished and arose as she approached. He turned and saw her right behind him.

*'Hombre!'* A friendly tone, a lack of time to form another response.

*'Como-esta?'* It was an intimate question to be asking the *gitano* - so much older, so foreign. But what else to say? She would have appreciated the formal address of *'usted'* but in Andalusia there was no such thing as safe distance.

*'Mu'ben.* And you, what? Here again?' He leaned, placing one hand on a table. *'You look well, fatter, true?'*

She was not heavier, although stronger perhaps. She asked after his wife, but this too felt wrong. He nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

*'How's your health?'* she said.

*'I had the operation on my stomach two weeks ago, and haven't been here since. They injected me, almost missed the vein-'* His *Andalu* was thick and viscous. *'- opened the stomach and took out part of the lower intestine.'* Words cut and rearranged.

*'I'm here in Jerez all year.'* A lie. She'd be here for as long as money lasted. *'If you need someone, I'm just around the corner, in the same neighbourhood.'*

*'Mu' bien.* Give Miguel your number.'

She would be last on the list, but first in his memory.

‘*Hola Kika.*’ Malena arrived holding her miniature poodle under one arm, and a handful of shopping bags in the other. Her dyed blonde curls were bundled on her head. Seeing his daughter arrive, Parrilla deliberated.

‘Just as well you’re here-’ said the *gitana* ‘-we’re short for dancers again, aren’t we *Pa?*’

‘For tourists, too.’ His bug eyes rolled large in their sockets, and he turned to amble off.

‘How’s it going Kika? Malena smiled plastically.

‘Well. And you?’

‘*Mu ben, gracia.*’ She shuffled past to unload herself and greet her mother.

Kika looked around at the wicker chairs, round tables. Old *cante* droned from the sound system. She called after Parrilla.

‘Juan, can I stay and watch the first set?’

‘*Claro*, ask Miguel to get you a drink.’

She waited at the bar.

The tourists, like another species, have wandered aimlessly and in circles about the centre all day, white-legged, floppy-hatted, and dazed. They are pink and angular now as they seat themselves, placing evening purses on table tops. For a minute, Kika fancies herself in their minds: Quaint, this old place in a neighbourhood with no other night life nearby. In the *plaza*, apart from one *confiteria* - closed at night, and a small bar, there are only private houses. This is a genuine family affair, the guide book said, as did the brochure in the foyer of the Hipotels Sherry Park Hotel. There’s no amplification as in Madrid, and it’s a bit scruffy. But this is the heart of it, yes - they’re lucky, because it seems they’ll get a private show tonight, almost all to themselves. As close as they’ll get to real flamenco, on someone’s patio, in the messy bosom of someone’s family. The *cuadro* walks to the stage in the dark. There is an echo from a tense string in Juan’s guitar as he raises it overhead of a seated foreigner. The creaks multiply as they climb the stairs and sit down. The lights come on exposing the night’s motley assembly: Parrilla on guitar, but the only other Parrilla up there is his daughter. There is a second singer, a young hair-lipped gitano with a baby face, and two dancers; a blonde girl, and an older pale woman with grey-flecked hair. The tourists will think this older woman a local, but Kika can tell she is foreign. When it is her turn, a certain tension piques the air. Unlike the younger girls, for better or worse, she follows no prescription and has a ghostly authenticity. Her *bracceo* is positioned antequely forward of her forehead. Her musical soft-footed style suits Parrilla’s twinkling guitar. The two

could be alone. The rest of the group is a generation behind, and more rhythmically driven - a jarring effect. She dances wildly alert, then with the strange abject vulnerability of a child. This is not often permitted in flamenco. Here a local might tell her apart from the Jerezanos. The group gives her more *jaleo* when she shows more aggression. Then she forces it and seems to flap in her black, white and purple dress, repeating a step over and over, a blackbird caught in a wire. There's a sarcastic remark. Parrilla scoffs her too for a moment. They want her to show a rage recognizable to them, but hers is a stony, haunting, minor-keyed storm.

On one side, the silhouetted profiles of foreigners. On the other, Miguel polishes glasses in the dark. Kika sits in between, the light from the stage throwing a tenuous glow down her front as the opening number surges forth. Now she shares with the performers fully that moment of anticipation. Their livelihood.

*What now? A theatre, a cave, a street? None of these. It's a cinema screen whose moonlight haze illuminates dancing motes, shoots sticky spores. On it, the foreign dancer's husband looms, the living-dying face of Agujetas, scarred down one side like a cliff-face blunted but unabated by the slow victory of time's tide. And the light is from the struggling fire of his people (one his jilted gitana wife – abandoned for the Jewish dancer). It's cold out, windy on this barren coast. His small grey teeth are rocks of a jagged cove sucking back or giving shape to pain. She dances, her silver black peppered hair lit by neon at the cafes they work in. She organizes everything - San Francisco – San Diego – Mexico. In one he smashes a glass front window in a rage. This is a draughty cinema, has someone left the door open? Agujetas mouth is an ashy circle - the remains of the fire, it shoots a live spark or two. He opens his throat, and churning, pregnant and restless, they tumble toward him with their broken sounds stuck in them – the cinema-goer, the younger flamenco bride – and the older Jewish woman who must run from him now. Both have his cursed child in them. The older woman gives birth to a deaf-mute, the younger -*

She could no longer place herself in the minds of the tourists who watched transfixed, trying to reconcile what they think flamenco is with what they are seeing. Soon they would cheer and clap at the ra-ra moments that Jerez flamenco was good at, the moments she now knew so well.

After the foreign woman danced, the hare-lipped boy smarted like sun off a wet rooftop. He was substituting too. But apart from them, the group was not lively. The repetition

had rubbed off the aliveness of desire. They had the faded spectre of a dusty nativity scene. She passed her number to Miguel, whispered *buena noche*, and slipped off the stool. From the stage her old colleagues noticed her leaving and she waved to them. Juan yelled over the music. '*Hasta luego Kika!*' She escaped into the plaza where the tall palms were fretted against the sky.

13.

She put triangles of manchego on white tostada. The dish of tomato was fresh and runny in this cafe. In some it was dry and tasted of tin. In thirty minutes she would begin the solitary hours of practice. Then it would be the hour to eat, everyone rushing. Then the silent, protracted afternoon. The bitter cheese cut through the tomato robbing it of sweetness. At two pm midday, she would stand in her apartment alone on the top floor, uncomfortably warm in the early insistent summer heat. Cut a sad onion, throw a few loose teeth of garlic, and a single knob of chorizo in with the lentils. A meal for three days. A *juerga* for one. So that's what Malena meant when she said once that she was *triste* – sad, that she had lost kilos. Company put on weight, heaped on happiness, apparently.

'There you have it', the barman placed her coffee down.

He smiled. The barman and his friend with the brandy, were her only company until class with Rin later. If he came. A couple of times he hadn't recently. It was his mother, he said. A tinge of salt in the air was obliterated by the exhaust of a passing car.

Her mobile rang. She swallowed a mouthful of bread whole.

'Kika?'

She knew.

'Soy Juan Parrilla. You can dance this night?'

'Si, claro, claro.'

'Up here at 7.30 then. *Adio.*'

She left half the *tostada*, half the coffee, and went to pay.

There were more people there than usual. Of course he had called her for extra padding. Padding to be ripped open before the horse itself is gutted, she thought. He sat with his guitar at a table in the back, with two other guitarists.

‘Kika, happy to see you.’ Or happy it was busy.

‘My son, Manuel.’ He nodded to the younger guitarist.

‘*Encanta ’o*’

‘You dance *por Solea* this night, ok?’

*Solea*? It was the *Alegrias* she’d been working on. Steps scrambled in her head; beginnings, ends, remates.

‘*Vale.*’

On her way to the dressing room she saw the hair-lipped *fiestero* from the other night. Now she remembered she had seen him at local *peña* recitals. She met his eye, greeted him briefly. She felt nervously alert like a bird caught in a room.

The older woman was first to enter the dressing room after her. ‘Ah, you’re Kika?’

‘You’re Tibu?’

The woman replied in *Andalu* but without the typical nasal undertone. She had a faint American accent. She set down her bag and started to undress.

‘I thought I was dancing *Alegrias*, and Juan’s asked me to do *Solea*. I suppose someone else is doing *Alegrias*?’

‘Oh? I’m hoping to do my *Taranto* tonight - with Manuel playing. He has some beautiful falsettas for *Taranto*. He plays in Madrid - he’s just been touring with Joaquin Cortes. We’re lucky to have him home on holiday for the summer.’ She replied all in Spanish. Now she compromised to their shared first language. ‘So, you’re from Australia?’

‘New Zealand.’

‘You study with Ani, right?’

‘Yes, I was.’

Tibu moved past her to exit. ‘Don’t worry about your *Alegrias*, you can use all the same steps if you do it up-tempo.’

The group assembled at the back. Tibu handed her a glass of Pedro Jimenez, quart full of the dark liquid.

‘Have a sip, it’ll take the edge off.’ Or bring the edge, she hoped.

The lights went out. They walked past crowded tables, up the stairs and sat. Their group was larger tonight, to counter-balance the full-house.

Manuel played the town's flamenco anthem, the *Bulerias*, just like his father. The signature long flourishes of the Parrilla's, and the same sparse falsettas. She suspected he could play it better, different, but he was conforming. There was an underlying fluid ease and power to his touch. Looking out, she saw Juan reclining on the back seats. His son was a stranger to her. What reason did he have to give her any grief? He was starting to play the opening of her number, intricately. Newest dancers, lowest in rank, were always first. He rested his cheek on the side of the guitar, face toward the singers, his ear to its heart.

Naked on this hard wood. It doesn't matter how much make-up she put on, or how *gitana-de-Jerez* the dress. She wore one of Malena's old dresses, sewn by the *gitana*'s mother, Juana Parrilla, who had sold it to Kika. It was midnight blue with small white *lunares*, and red trim on the sleeve. It had gathering which gave her hip and breast. She was X-ray naked. There were English tourists out the front, most of them - but there were also some locals tonight. They would see through her skin to her entrails, her heart, her adrenal glands. The shameful surge and rush of that chemical river of fear. She has to hide it, but how can she? Her face can't. She had seen most dancers use their faces a lot, even those at Parrilla's. Forced scowls, indented brows, teeth sometimes bared in a parody of pain. But you can't hide your race. Can't hide your fear. The audience is an all-seeing eye, although the *cuadro* sees more.

'You don't worry, we'll be there behind you carrying the *compas*, whatever happens.'

As if the only thing that counted in all this was their precious *compas*, that they might have to hold it up like a flame above a wave. They would keep it for her to get back on, when – if she fell out...wait for her place to come round again – jump back in. Carry on. Juan sat at the back watching. '*Aquí no baile' monta'o*'. There were to be no arranged dances here. He had said it many times but most of the girls did the same thing every night. Now when he wasn't onstage to butcher her dance, he still had. She had never danced *Solea* there before, it had always been off limits to her, last in rank. It was prized among forms here - this *cante jondo* – deep song, mother of all song. It was Rin's preferred dance.

Rin had called her late that afternoon, excusing himself from their class. He had to pick up his mother from a clinic in Cadiz.

'Parrilla has called me in to dance tonight.' she said.

'Ah, si?' A crackle down the line, a car rushing past somewhere in Cadiz.



‘You remember everything I’ve said. In the *Alegrias*, you don’t have to move fast. Take your time. *Be careful in everything* ... can you hear me?! My credit is going. I’m losing you ....*m’eschucha?!*

‘Yes, I hear you! -’

‘If I cut out, it’s because my credit is finished, *vale?* Listen to me, don’t let Parrilla take you round and round. You control the *compas* – you set your time, – and – ’ His voice had risen to a bloodthirsty pitch down the mouthpiece.

‘ – dance with a lot of *paesco* and a lot of rage!’ *Sin Miedo, vale?* -

He cut out there. He wouldn’t be there to watch then. Good. Better not, for both of them.

\*

Sometimes it feels as though life has taken a giant swerve. The dramatic change of view makes it seem like it’s come out of nowhere, this giant U. You were looking hard and fast at the road, and now you’ve spun and been plonked in the middle of fields - the horizon all the same. Where’s the road now? But it hasn’t been that sudden. The graunching to brake has surely been going on for some time. Now you can remember hearing it - the gradual squealing of tyres on bitumen, the charred rubber smell, the lack of suspension. There has been nothing between the flesh and the road for a while. Life has become a running raw skinning. But standing back you see what’s happened. Everything has just turned and toppled over. Only it’s hard to find or see exactly when or what started it. You can only find fragments of clues in the wreckage.

The Ben Nevis sits at the foot of the turn-off to Marton; the Marton-Bulls junction, they call it - if you’re coming from Wanganui. Once an LPG tanker lying on its side marked this spot. It was burning down the highway and crashed just where the road splits - to Marton. We were all ‘evacuated’, the entire town - a dozen or so, as though war had broken out. It was the eighties and there had been a lot of nuclear scaremongering talk about the place at the time. I was sent to stay at a girlfriend’s place further up the highway. I had nightmares about losing everything in a strange holocaust. I dreamt all of us were crawling along the railway line in the dead of night with nuclear ‘fall-out’ in the background. Flames licked above torn open hills behind us. Things just fell apart.

Mrs Davidson didn't have many people in her ballet class in Marton. I was a welcome addition - from the big city, a good school and with a string of good exam marks. Always Highly Commended and never Honours. She could stretch me up to that top award. She'd take me to it. There were only two other girls who were good enough to enter competitions, and they were three sisters. In the regional comp photos snapped by the local rag there is just me and that family.

Mum didn't believe in competition for dance. I didn't get the feeling I was missing out on anything. But here we were in Marton, where there aren't many chances to be a water-sprite or a sea-queen.

After I won the first competition, there was no stopping Mrs Davidson. But I had plenty of extra give back then. So one year I excelled with my practice in the upstairs hall and my exam marks stretched to Honours. The year after she got visibly upset in class.

Did I say the pallid blue eyes had a defiance in them? The kind that's martyr-ish, small-town-envious, a bit hick. Ducky Davidson, with her open chest, turned out walk, and D-sized coffee cups.

'Do it again.' She berates me every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday night in class. 'Back in the corner.'

Is it the left hand corner she means, the one of that last series? The one she's been grinding me on for the last five minutes?

'What are you doing *now*?!' She smiles with feigned disbelief and adult exasperation. 'No, - over there - the right - !'

I quickly move to the right corner burning pink with shame. So are my thighs with her making me do that attitude position in the jump. My feet are red. It's a barefoot choreography. But I barely get a chance to hear the fruity soppy music to it, which is Streisand's 'Memories'. She never plays it. I just have to know it somehow. The other girls - the family, and their worn out mum are watching in a corner of the studio which is unbearably light, even at this hour, which is dusk.

So she wants me to start again, but I'm disorientated with the whole thing - going into microscopic parts, then going out trying to remember beginnings, ends, shapes. The entire shape is a blur. But no, no, - she'll talk me through it in her condescending voice. I'm not ready, but I will still perform it. I have to just wing it. With the gauze mauve wings on my costume.

The next year I got a ‘pass’ on my exam. That’s about the same time mum became unwell, but I’m not sure which happened first, in the way of these things that accumulate, fluctuate, that over time, kill.

The Ben Nevis sold. My brother and his girlfriend moved to Wanganui. We moved into the house down the lane near the railway line. A spacious old villa with the original wallpaper intact, but the floorboards were rotting and precarious. I walked down its gallant hall running my hand along the textural velvet of twisted vines and leaves, the strange flowers with their bursting seed pods.

\*

No more time.

Standing . Listening. The guitar crying under Manuel’s hands. Enter.

*‘Don’t waste movement – not any movement - Don’t move a hair unless you mean it in your whole body.’*

Jesus is behind her, bleeding on the cross, breaking to be whole. This is the walk onstage, and it is the hardest. That’s why no one walks on this way. Just walks. Mainly they dance on; a flourish of arm, a series of footwork runs. If you have a beautiful body and face you can create a brief distraction; a strong curved arm, a large smooth hip, an arched feathered brow on a black almond eye. But she is not rounded, or round- faced. She is green-eyed, angular and Anglo-Saxon.

She walks.

*‘You are Francine. Don’t let anyone call you any other name – Kika – Paca – Paquita – Carmen. Don’t change your name.’*

*‘Ole Kika, la guapa!’* cried ‘Tibu La Tormenta’.

What was Tibu’s name in New York City? Susan? Mary?

*‘Ole Franci’* cried Luis.

It is time for the opening call inciting the singer to start the song. Her entire body pushes into it as though she might fall. It’s not out of time, but almost, and her intention is strong enough to override it. Luis releases the first verse, still offering his heart on the burnt-out platter of his voice, even if night-on-night drudgery threatens to steal it from him. There is nothing to add to that.

*‘Still. Listen.’*

But the remates... *the remates?* All the *Soleas* she'd heard in all the videos, all the pena recitals, - the tapes, surely she'd know by now... After activation, the song needs reaction – in the right places ... *where are the places?* If you listen, you won't have to ask. .

*'...you need to dance without program, that's why I'm giving you the turns – you put one here, one there – if you think about the next step you'll slip out of the one you're in – when the time comes for the remate – do it!' take anything – not the step - the paesco! Use your whole body! Nobody dances anymore with paesco!'*

She turns. The proportions of her body are helpful for the speed. A demonic energy. *'Olé la vuelta!'* someone yells. That turn feels good.

14.

*'I'm sure you wouldn't have bothered finding us a new studio if it didn't have everything we need - a window for air, a bathroom, a good floor that makes a flamenco sound, a stick...'* He was a pace behind her and panted slightly as they walked up a rise.

*'You could bring your own stick?'*

Kika glanced behind at him. He kept his eyes to the pavement, head inclined on a petulant angle, lips tight.

The new studio space was in the house of an American woman who rented a few rooms off a ramshackle internal patio. They followed her through to one of them where the crumbling walls were populated with *peña* recital posters of heavyweight singers. Sprinkled in between the old men were photos of Joana herself in her younger, leaner days; a pale leotarded blonde executing studied arabesques to a wistful camera in an airy North American studio.

Rin asked to see the other rooms but returned to the original. He trialed the floor with a set of syncopated *golpes*.

*'Well it's not ideal, that's evident.'*

‘There’s very good cushioning here.’ Joana had a high-pitched Spanish. ‘I had the man who constructed it make sure it had all the specifications -’

‘And do you have a bathroom for the renters, Joana?’

‘Not one here downstairs.’

‘You know you need to think out everything well when you rent studios to professionals.’

Joana looked at her. She looked at Rin’s feet.

‘Well, Rin, if you don’t like it – what can I do?’ the woman squeaked ‘This is all I have at the moment.’

Her voice grated.

‘*Esta bien*, Joana! I’m not demanding for the sake of it, I’m just telling you what you need to help you, that’s all.’

She left them alone.

‘That woman *por dios*, these people have no idea.’

‘Isn’t it better than Mamen’s?’ she said.

‘Well, it has air, at least we can breathe but look, the sound is poor – it reverberates. And this floor is uneven, look over this part it’s clear and over here it’s soft.’

He sighed, put his keys down and wandered out into the courtyard. She started to warm up on the hard clear part of the floor. He returned in a minute with another be-headed broom.

Her legs ached. It had to be the loading from the night before.

‘What are you dancing tonight?’

‘I don’t know, he doesn’t tell me.’

‘What do you prefer to dance?’

‘I like *Solea*, but the *Alegri* -’

‘*What* do you *prefer* to dance?!’ he screamed. His temper was short this afternoon. She bit the corner of her lip.

‘You have to know what you’re doing and do it. You *tell* Parrilla – I am dancing Alegrias tonight, and that’s it!’

Here it came. The demand for more fury than she had in her. In the end she had more sadness in her than fury. But there would be no faking it – tired or not.

‘I can’t do that. He tells everyone what they’ll do. I’m no one there, I’m not permanent. He can tell me to go, or not dance at all, if he wants.’

‘Parrilla’s an imbecile!’ He yelled ‘- and you control what you dance –not Parrilla,– it’s yours from beginning to end. Come on, do the *Alegrias*, for if you have to do that.

Start from the beginning, let's look at it. It's all the same - Flamenco – not a routine. Look at Carmen Amaya's *Alegrias* – rage and genius! Why any less venom than *Solea* or *Siguriya*?''

She scraped the toe of her right shoe in a small arc on the floor. The part where she stood was staccato and uncompromising. The flaking wall plaster itched at her dry throat. She swallowed the last of the water, now warm, from the bottle.

For almost half an hour he criticized her walk on. It was too fast, too slow, strange, exaggerated, unnatural, self-conscious... She started weeping to contain a fit of laughter until he screamed at her and threatened to leave. Often the class had the effect of unleashing a torrent of hysterics. A layer or barrier to pass to get down to a solid furnace of emotion he was satisfied was flamenco enough. A breaking of inhibitions perhaps, but she thought it was the absurdity of him squawking - the hilarity of it. He looked at her quizzically when he saw tears erupting with uncontrollable giggling, and said, as if to himself 'At times I don't understand you but I know I must wait, because you have your own strange ways about you.'

There was no faking it. He had an eye like a mother hawk that could recognize something of itself and reject it if it wasn't. He harassed her for any move that contained a hint of falseness. 'No, no, that's desperate.' It had to be definitive, not desperate. Rage, not nerves. Clarity, not doubt. He demanded it.

At the opening call her muscles were cold again as she tried to execute the opening piece of footwork.

'No no, you can't do that! It doesn't call for song, it apologizes for it. I've seen it enough. It's not working. Or you do my *llamada*, or you drag everyone through this!' Frustrated, he leapt up from the chair, all of him onto the wood. He grabbed the corner of his suit jacket with a strong fat hand and gripped it to his chest. He started so slow it was impossible to hear the regularity of *compas* underneath, then gradually increased in force and speed until in frenzy he yelled out his own three point call and three turns. His pony-tail loosened. He pulled out the band in a huff and sat down. 'Come on.'

They went through it several times, the last few improved. Although it was impossible to tell under his yelling and cheering whether her step buried beneath had any hope of standing alone. A few times he stood up off the chair and did it with her right there, on the soft part of the floor.

In the dusky light of the square the women no longer look up when Kika passed. She was made-up, but left her hair undone and without a flower. She had crossed the square

at this time every evening for over a week. Several runs at the *Alegrias* allowed a layer of confidence to grow like hard skin over a wound. No more polite *mierda*, Anglo-Saxon politesse.

There had been no sarcasm onstage during her dance since she returned. A nervous attention replaced it. It wasn't Malena's absence, because the *gitana* had come back from her days off, and after the first nerve-beaten night with her in the *cuadro*, she complemented her on her improvement. At the end of each night Juan told her to return the following. Every Friday and Saturday there were tour buses pulled into the small carpark by the *tablao*.

Onstage it was stuffy, even with the side doors open where a local or two often stood staring in. Fans flip-flapped on one side of the stage, coming into their own in the quieter moments of a number. Parrilla was also back onstage, hot and irritable, but his randomness seemed transferred to the audience. One night, in a lyrical section where the guitarist has a moment to shine with a burst of creative filigree, he hollered in front of a bewildered group of English tourists, across the room past Tibu's floating arms, directing Miguel to turn off the fans; '*Migue ! ... MIGUUEE ! Apaga lo ventiladore !*' At the final bow, the sun-burnt busload were on their feet applauding. Parrilla's eyes popped as he bent down and snapped the head off one of them. '*Ja – Ja – ere' un salmonete !*' For a moment she thought he said it in English, and glanced sideways at the tourist. But the fish-faced man was still clapping, grinning inanely.

At the end of a show one Friday she stood with Luis at the bar.

'How's it going with Rin?' he asked.

'Ok. Some things I can't do his way.'

'*Hombre*, Rin's way's not the only way. You're dancing damn well. Tonight you gave me goosebumps.'

'*Como?*'

'Just a little thing, reminded me of Tolea. I sung for her in Barcelona.'

She looked down at the ashy region under the bar to hide her joy. 'I watch her video, at the Foundation where you can rent all those videos. I saw your Uncle singing for her.'

'*Claro*, my uncle sung for all those people -'

Just then a second group of tourists spilled in the front door. '-Damn whore son of a bitch!' His Ducado almost slipped from his lip. 'Time to get up and do it all again!'

The girls herded into the cupboard to make-up their sweat-stained faces, and re-attach loose strings of hair. The men stubbed out their smokes and went to get their

guitars. The new audience sprawled over the front tables. Only they were lit, leaving the back of the room dim and shadowy.

The *compas* started again and they cranked out the opening songs. Nerves were not helpful in any way, she thought, not the tittering nerves of fear, or the fuel of adrenaline. One made you falter, the other infused the dance with a kind of hysteria. The first show always killed off a layer of nerves and bludgeoned limbs. But limbs would take it again, and underneath nerves lay raw ingredients. A few moment into the chants Luis hissed at her. ‘- Sssht... sssht...’ He was trying to alert her. Malena too, was mouthing something. She looked to the back of the room and got a fright. The familiar outline, as hulking and still as the first time she’d seen it on the edge of a stage. Long hair out cloaking his face, watching. A sleeping volcano. Her this time, on the edge of the stage.

When the lights came on they descended and fluttered about him. They asked after his mother, and repeated his name. Rin – this. Rin – that. He was polite but restrained. He had swapped the bohemian attire of the afternoon for a newer jacket and shirt. A massive gold sphinx-head joined one of the many chains around his neck. It sat loudly on his upper chest which had darkened in the heat-wave of the previous week. It was the complete *canastero-puro* image he liked to put before himself the few times they had gone out at night together. The romantic one be-fitting the tales of free-roaming *gitanos* chronicled by nineteenth century foreigners – his people descended from tribes of noble Egyptians, not dirty outcast Ragistani Indians. It was the Rin that swore he believed in the virgin marriage, the *boda* or ‘*bo’a*’ - complete with crone and *panuelo* testing the bride for an intact hymen while the party waited for the glory of the four pink *rosas* to appear staining its white surface. She stood alongside them, saying nothing, sensing his weight in the room.

‘I had better take Maria de la O home.’ He said. ‘Do you have everything? Your costumes? *Cositas?*’ A clucking aunt, or *novio*? She grabbed everything, said goodnight to them, and followed him out the door. The smell of the sugar-cane factory blurred the edges of the night air as they got into his car.

‘You’ll take a coffee, before I drop you home?’

‘*Claro*, if it’s not too late for you.’

‘For *me*? Of course not.’

He turned the car on and music blared. He turned it down.

‘Franci’ -

Her breath caught. He maneuvered the bulky car about the square.

‘- You did all you had to do. Everything but the *llamada*.’



‘Some of your *posturas* are *muy flamenca*, that one arm raised slowly, in my manner-’

‘- but I’m telling you -’ He pulled up in a wider boulevard, a newer area outside the centre, ‘- those people are an embarrassment.’

15.

In the cramped *confiteria* the following afternoon she bought two bottles of water; a medium for her, a *grande* for him. In the studio she started a solid footwork pattern around the room. The class was more serious than the *tablao*. She was forced to go beyond herself. He wouldn’t stay in the room for less. They were back in the local woman’s studio as Joana had cast them out.

A piece of the floor had broken, and the noise was too loud. She had implored, and the woman had shaken her head. ‘But all the yelling, you must know, it’s not normal.’ She also said her long-handled painter was missing. ‘Will you talk to him?’ So she was scared to face him herself.

But he had already arrived. He walked over and studied the floor where she indicated the crack, sleeves rolled up, bunch of keys clutched in the indignant grip of his fat brown hand.

‘Joana, I didn’t break this. It wasn’t like this when we left the other day -’. He looked at Kika ‘- was it?’

‘No Joana, there was no crack in it when we left.’

Tears welled in the woman’s eyes. She seemed easily overcome.

‘I understand you’re upset Joana, but you can’t expect it was our fault. I didn’t even dance the other day in here. Who was here after us?’

She shook her head.

‘*Who* was here after us? Joana I’m sorry – for you, but we can’t be accused of something we didn’t do, and we have to have class now, time is running away with us.’

He marched out and she followed him, watching his hair swing slightly as he walked.

His large back in its tailored jacket barely moved as he strode. Steam hissed off him. The door clobbered shut and they were left standing in the warm air of the quiet street.

Everything is gold and beige at this time of year. The colour of desert sand. The houses, the road, even the strips of fabric, the newest prints for *feria* dresses flapping from displays at *los Gitanillos*. There are stretches of dirt patch where curtain fabric is laid out in various stalls where people barter and chat, the dark-eyed stall-holders in acrylic scarves with gold dripping over their earlobes and wrists. The market is solid and regular as public holidays in the town, every Monday morning in the Feria grounds. Gypsies stopped living in caravans eons ago. Now there are houses and cars to maintain, furniture to buy, renovations to be done, obligations to keep.

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I have chosen the lemon-gold linen fabric for Jean to make the curtains for my room. It is something I would never have done before, a sign of setting up, grounding down. They are heavy and will split the room in two halves, keeping some cold out and warmth in, saving the electricity bill. In exchange she asks me if I can show her the second *copla* of Sevillanas as she's forgotten it.

Sevillanas, the flamenco-ized folk-dance of Seville, danced in couples through every *feria* in the country all Summer long. Full of passes, sweeps, inuendos. I'm sure I taught it to them on one of my workshops. I taught it to the Jose Manuel's so they could dance it in their East-Coast fiesta, although Jose's padres in Segovia possibly don't bother with Andalucian rituals.

Her question is unexpected, and stings at the level of skin. I cannot bear to check if I can remember, afraid I might not.

'Even your residual knowledge would be enough for me.' she says.

It is as though she has opened a door in my flat, exposing a cluttered cupboard, asked to borrow some piece of junk from it. Her choice of the word 'residual' makes me think of waste. And I sense the air around us. Words have suddenly dropped out somewhere, down through the floor. I look down, the imaginary gaping hole with disappointment or disgust, as if regarding a piece of inorganic sponge thrown up on the beach. Porous. Incomplete and insoluble, a piece of pollution. The knowledge-debris in me, useless yet

unable to be fully destroyed. What can I say to Jean? Can words get into the body? Mimic air? It is hard to remember - to go back to that place. That peculiar experience of him, but it is bleeding into my life.

‘When I saw you there was one thing that stuck out’ he says. ‘It’s your Sevillanas. You can’t dance flamenco and then dance Sevillanas like a folk dance. A flamenco dancer does everything flamenco.’

He strides into the studio, breaking up my footwork patterns. He does not pull up a chair as usual, but walks straight out onto the floor, his energy dangerous, shifting. I stand back to watch thinking he will demonstrate.

‘Come here.’

I walk to him.

‘We’ll do the first *copla*.’...

He raises his arms slowly, eyes glazed, head thrust up, into another world. I stand. I do nothing. What is there to do here? He is a thing unfolding in front of me. He continues, as if alone. I am embarrassed at the privacy of it. Like being inside and outside him at once. I am a thing he seeks, protects, yet also pushes away. Cold wind and hot air pass through each other. I am subsumed in his massive energy. To fight it or force my own form on it is to cut myself off. The only way is to be swept up, and pushed out from moment to moment, as we pass. In some moments we do the same movement. I recognize a familiar step. We are dancing the same dance after all, but then it disappears and I don’t know what he is doing. He is a wild thing around me. I try to follow, to search for what he has taught me – a watery version of himself – a lung from his side. Then I am embraced in his power and fly in that other world with him until I am pushed out again – cold air, and he is gone- off on his own. The strange thing is the silence. He doesn’t speak, or *jalear* - no commands or shouts of encouragement. He swirls around me, a silent potent gale.

Sevillanas. That is no folk dance. I can’t remember how many *coplas* we dance, for how long, or even if we go through all four to completion. I can’t remember what happens next.

Can’t remember the second *copla*. This is what I tell Jean.

## V Angustias

16.

On the rooftop patio a brisk autumn wind dried the costumes. She hand-washed them but the smell of cigarette smoke clung to the damp fabric. She left one dry, to wear in case Parrilla called her into work. The girls summoned her when they wanted a night off, but Parrilla hadn't himself since she had declined him the last time to attend a workshop in Seville.

The phone moved on the ground.

'Kika?'

'Si.'

'Soy La Sara. We're going to Stuttgart to work for three months. We need a dancer and Carmencita can't come – are you interested?'

The small frills on the pegged costumes flapped in the stiff wind.

'Who is going?'

'Javier – my boyfriend. He's a guitarist, Felipe his friend as percussionist. I'll be singing and you'd be our dancer.'

She turned to walk down the stone stairs back into the flat. She had worked with Sara at the *tablao*. The girl was without inhibitions and behaved like a diva in front of the tired gypsy family.

'Only me dancing? What would I have to do?'

'Just exactly what you do in Parrilla's! A little *Alegrias*, *Sevillanas*, *Tangos* and a little *Solea*. Four shorter sets at most. It's nothing! I'll fill it out with my *cantes*. But fast - we leave in two days.'

'Germany?'

'Si, Alemania.'

She had overstayed in Europe months already.

'Come and see me tonight at Parrillas, *anda*.' Already she had assumed the tone of an *impresaria*.

She called Rin and told him. He came to meet her at the *tablao*, not entering but sitting outside in the car with the base thumping muffled behind the windows. In the car he looked flushed. He pressed three hundred Euro into her hand.

‘This is for what you need until they pay you, some warm clothes, or food for the trip – whatever you need. I don’t want it back. It is a gift from me, vale?’

In Stuttgart the group passed through customs. Sara was dressed to match her suitcase, or the suitcase purchased to match her. Boyfriend Javier looked at least was ten years older than her.

‘So you’re our *bailaora* from Jerez?’ He winked at her and called her ‘*quilla*’ short for *chiquilla* - girl. An Andalcian familiarity. In another culture, she thought, Javi would be the type to shorten a name before being invited. Felipe had long hair, a long mouth and moustache. The men were from Malaga but physically they seemed unlikely friends; Javier had speedy eyes and a taut body and tan while Felipe was pudgy and had a chicken white complexion.

‘You’ll have to dance everything.’ Felipe said to her ‘*tanguillitos. rumbitas, fandangitos...*’

‘Sara told me I’d do what I do in the *tablao*. Flamenco, no?’

‘No – you’ll have to do the folk stuff, *los fandangitos* and the *rumbitas*.’

After balling out an Arab woman in front of her, a customs official soundlessly scanned her passport and stamped it without pause. She tried to examine his face in her memory later for a clue, but found nothing more than a pale-grey smudge blending into the streets they now passed. The air was thin and the houses stiff and tall. As they reached the centre the streets narrowed. Lights were struggling to illuminate the murky afternoon, and tawny brick gave a minimal semblance of cheer. They were dropped at the corner of a concrete building painted white on the ground level by the entrance, a pseudo-Arab arch. Nico, the manager, was absent, so they sat in a cubicle with drinks.

‘What a dive.’ said Javi. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the booth.

‘Is this where we’re performing?’ said Kika.

‘It’s cosy enough’ said Sara. ‘Where’s the stage?’

‘Over there with all that shit heaped on top of it’ said Javi.

The end of the room was being used as a makeshift extension of seating space with a couple of tables and general junk.

‘It’s big enough’ said Sara.

‘Not with all that shit on it.’ said Javi.

‘This guy says we’ll be doing seven sets.’ said Felipe.

‘Seven sets! Damn the bastard! Nico told us four, up to six when it’s busy.’ said Javi.

‘Well this guy says it’s seven on a normal night and eight or nine when it’s busy.’

‘Well, he can take his seven sets and shove it, my son!’ said Javi.

Felipe seemed mildly moved by this.

‘Really man?’ said Javi.

‘Claro, it’s a shame. It’s a lot but we’re here to work aren’t we?’ said Felipe, expressionless.

‘*Quilla*, you’ll definitely be doing *los fandangitos* and *tanguillitos* after all!’ His eyes were a black flicker in her direction, a tin lighter snapping open and on.

‘Does he really want us to do seven sets? Oh come on, you have to tell him we came with the idea of what he told us – the conditions of the contract and that’s that.’ Sara moaned, from lips of faded lipstick.

‘No – man – we have to do the seven sets but I’ll talk to him, we’ll see what happens.’ said Felipe.

The manager told them Nico would not be in tonight to greet them and gave them one key and directions to where they would stay. They walked down a main avenue which broke-off into a narrow street lined with red brick and neon which lead up a grade to a washed-out house.

‘Only one key?’ said Javi.

‘They’ll get another, for now it’s just the one.’ They would be stuck together, or worse, at his, Felipe’s, beck and whim.

Inside past a pokey kitchen and short hallway were only two bedrooms. A mistake surely. They looked at each other. There was one double room, the only one with a wardrobe. Javi and Sara would share that. Felipe claimed the other large room. She was left with what looked like a storage alcove, into which they had to drag a cot bed. It had a window which didn’t quite shut. It gave onto the dull grey street.

There was a reasonable-sized dressing room at the back of the restaurant, but without a mirror. It had to be shared with the men. Sara changed for every set, wearing different costumes for each.

‘Claro, give them something to look at *quilla*.’ she said. She struggled with the zip of a tight fitting bodice.

‘Do me up, *anda* – come on.’

She presented her naked back and the reluctant zip. Kika gripped it and wrenched it up with the whites of her knuckles showing. The folds of fat forcibly curled in and held tight in the stiff fabric. Kika had three costumes to use over the eight sets required. The stage was at the other end so they had to walk up through the throng to it. At the beginning of the evening it was quiet. Her *Alegrias* went almost unnoticed.

The audience was a blur of red, glowing lanterns and tack, like a Chinese market. It was not dark but she could see no one's face, yet sensed them on her. The first set went well. Javi's arm pumped during the footwork sections. She threw in complicated rhythms, knowing he had the smarts to follow them. The *cajon* player droned on, muddying everything. When they came off after the first two sets Javi was serious. Respectful almost.

'*Muy bien quilla*. But don't worry about going for too long though - here they only need a little bit, - don't forget you have another six sets after eh?' He winked.

'Lets go outside for a smoke' said Sara jabbing him.

In the beginning it seemed Javi was serious about making the dance numbers better. He told Felipe to be quiet in her footwork section. 'Just play *palmas* here *quillo*, and you and I will come out when she does to accentuate the climaxes ...'

Sara watched and listened. Her tolerance for how much time her *novio* was spending on another female's solo was reaching its brink. She might have complained to him. 'Don't go on for so long!' she snapped. In her *cante* solos, she got up and waltzed around the stage verse after verse. It certainly ate time.

The restaurant offered them dinner but only in between the last few sets, as by the time they finished the kitchen was closed. They bought take-out on the way back to the house and sat in the kitchen until five or six, laughing and talking loudly. She rarely sat with them. Too tired and worked up to eat, she fell into bed.

Days passed painfully slow.

'*Quilla*, come out here.' He yelled down the hall one day. 'We all need to have a little talk here, arrange things. This place is a fucking pigsty.' He reeled 'And you know why don't you?

She glanced at Sara who stood there with her cigarette smoldering between forefinger and index, her pretty mouth closed.

'That's because you women don't clean. 'Look at it - have you, even once since we arrived, picked up a broom and swept a bit here or there or picked up a cloth and wiped a damn plate? Sara and I get home at night and there's always a mountain of dishes. And do I complain? No, I just wipe every fucking dish.'

His body was tight with something that threatened to leap from him, like a wolf.

'But I don't make any dishes.'

'So - you're saying you never sit with us here? - never have any food of ours - ever?!'

‘Once, yes.’

He was angry, but it was a kind of show-anger, she thought.

‘This is what we’re doing from now on, because I’m sick the fuck of this! Sara – you – you clean this toilet and bathroom one day – and you-’ He pointed at her. ‘-you clean it next. And you both take turns like that and do the things women are supposed to do, fuck.’

‘I’m not your mother, not your sister, and I’m not in your house. *You* tell me how we’ll do it? *This* is how we’ll do it! - ’

They were stunned, fascinated with her foreign anger.

‘ - *you* do it one day – *you* do it the next - ’

She pointed at Felipe. His mouth was loose and stupid. The image of him doing his share of housework was too absurd to imagine.

‘– Sara will the next - and I will the next. I’ll do it on my day, or I won’t do it at all.’ She walked down the hall to the cramped room and shut the door. From the wrought red thickness of Javi’s neck, she thought him liable to follow, wrench open the door. Her hands tremored as she sat on the bed. She felt the wind from the faulty window. It was freezing sharp and slashed at her throat. Outside everything was white and grey. After a few minutes squeals of delight came from the neighbouring room. A few trees made brittle skeletons against the white sky. People moved soundlessly in the streets dressed in colours of doll-skin, with thick pale rubbery faces.

\*

At the public baths in Auckland, newly renovated and re-opened, I go and sit in the steam room. After a moment a white-haired man walks in wearing a bandana around his neck and a large piece of *pounamu* jade stone hanging from a thick black string. He takes a seat down the other side of the bench. He makes a few noises, sighs or groans. The steam swallows them so they’re not loud enough to be offensive. Inevitably, after a minute, he has to speak.

‘So what did you do here today?’

‘I’ve been in the new gym upstairs.’ I say. ‘And you?’

‘I’ve been doing those things one does just to keep oneself going – ’

‘Swimming?’ I assume he’d walked in from one of the main pools.



‘Ah, you know –I’m no longer doing these things to be an athlete-’ he snorts ‘- oh no, just doing the things you do to make the rest of life more enjoyable.’

‘Surviving.’ I say.

‘Ah, yes.’

He doesn’t seem the predatory type you sometimes find in these places. Someone’s grandpa, I want to place him as.

‘I just come to get rid of the aches and pains.’ I say ‘It’s incredible how early they start these days.’

‘Yes, I think it’s the change in lifestyle.’

‘You mean, the sedentary nature of people’s lives?’

‘Yes. Are you a mother?’ he says, glancing at me.

‘Oh, no.’

Have I put on more weight that I thought around my middle? ‘No, - I used to be a dancer actually, but now I just try to stay fit, funny - I never had these kinds of aches and pains while dancing, not until I stopped.’

‘Who were you with?’ He means which company. People often ask this question.

‘No one.’ I add. ‘Freelance.’

‘Oh, what kind of dancing?’

I’ve had this conversation so many times in various forms. I am now null and void. But if I mention my former self, which is truly null and void, people take an interest in me.

‘Flamenco.’ I say. ‘I was overseas for a time.’

‘Ohh- .’ Now he is off. ‘Ohh- yes, you know, twenty-five years ago I was in a rut working in London and I had to get out for a break, anywhere – so I took a holiday, and you know what? Well! – ‘

What am I to get now? Another tacky *tablaó* show, a tour around Seville’s historic centre, a bullfight, a woman?

‘- I went to the South, to Andalucia-’

I can’t help but feel a pinch of gladness.

‘- oh it’s fantastic! And it all started with the clapping, of course..’ He waves his arms about, miming hand-clapping in the steam. ‘- and then came the wail, and you know it was all men in the beginning – all men – ’

I won’t interrupt him, break his fantasy, dispel a stereotype that is too frustrating to walk away from. That’s good. It wouldn’t pay to get worked up in this steam.

‘-of course it all started with the Moors.’

But I have to jump in there.

‘Well, flamenco actually developed from a mix of people. It is the most contaminated art form alive.’

He looks at me blankly.

‘ - and the gypsy contribution is what gave it that element of protest - pain - ’ I catch my pedagogic tone and stop. His experience had affected him. Surely that was all that mattered. The steam sucks my breath from me.

‘...yes it was men – just men – and all that other stuff - ’ He waves his hands again, this time the other way, dismissive ‘ - the music, the women, all that came later. But it was such a liberation for men, such a celebration of masculine expression.’

‘But the women sung too, they just weren’t visible. They sung in the privacy of their houses, in their patios.’

‘Oh yes, but it was so wonderful to see men express themselves, you know, such a wonderful relief. Here we have so many issues, social and cultural – you know this thing that if men express or talk about their emotions - they’re seen by women as being wimps. But there men express themselves so proudly.’

‘And most people think flamenco is just dance.’

He doesn’t register my words. He is now far away in Andalucia, driving toward Granada.

‘...I arrived in Almeria, rented a car and drove into Granada. I parked the car and there was a big festival on - it was May – I don’t know what festival ...’ He looked at me for some kind of help here but didn’t pause. ‘... it was incredible. It moved me in the most extraordinary way. I felt a great relief.... You see here, we have a lot of problems because our men don’t know how to nurture their emotions and our women don’t know how to nurture our men.’

‘I think I’ll take a breath.’ I get up, open the door and head for the cold shower. It is situated beside a spa which is full of old men. I feel their eyes on me. I flick the shower on and gulp cold water. Grandpa has followed me out.

I walk past him, back into the steam room. I feel a certain responsibility now. A window may arrive into which I will have to jump to set him straight. He re-enters and sits. Another man too has entered the room meanwhile.

‘You see, myself and my wife, (my wife is Asian) we are interested in the differences of cultural expressions of the body.’

I imagine a small Philippino wife.

‘Hula’s the same ... most people think hula is just a hoop you play around with – but it is a form of spiritual expression and flamenco well – it’s extraordinary – the

women with their straight backs’– he sat up ‘ so proud, and the form...’ he extended his arm out almost in front of me, twists his hand.

‘Mm.’ I feel I might pass out. Or one of these two men might. An awful image comes to mind of me being obliged to attempt resuscitation.

‘So, did you go to the Alhambra?’ I say. The Moors last holding in Granada.

‘Oh yes. What I was most struck by was the windows, the framing – everything is structured around this wonderful looking into...’

‘The male gaze.’ I say.

‘...it all has to do with the transformative power and life-force – the sexual union of male and female – man and woman...’

‘Flamenco is not about sexual union.’

‘well – no but life force – life-force and that to me is male and female-’

‘I don’t see flamenco as being about sex.’ When I say the word ‘sex’ I feel the other man’s ears prick up. The word seems to hang in the room thickly.

I stand up to leave.

‘Nice to talk to you anyway, that’s what the steam room is all about - talking to people.’ He says. He ups to leave before me, unruffled.

The other man’s looks up. ‘So what is flamingo?’

17.

The city was morgue-like cold and there was the vague smell of damp in the morning air. She went into the bread shops for breakfast, behind glass doors to smell sweet baked dough. The prostitutes created their own warmth in the brick alleys between the house and the restaurant. Their narrow houses lit with neon were grimly inviting. The money might not be easier, but it would be quicker.

Nico still hadn’t paid their first installment and they’d been there almost a month. Every night on her way to the restaurant she walked down the alleys, feeling like a different kind of painted tart. Her dance was now severed beyond all recognition, the act itself only important, all the meaningful parts taken out. It was too long they said. It

was obligatory now to dance the folk forms too – the flamenco forms were less audience-friendly. The punters didn't want that serious stuff. This was the working reality - what you did for money. 'You need to do this so you can buy all your *cosita's*, - your little shawls earrings and things.' said Javi.

A man's face loomed over her; Nico from the rounded end of the bar, centre front. When she danced he stopped still and stared through his round spectacles. She liked to imagine it was with a steely respect. Him, the boss or voyeur, with his glasses, bald head, steel stare. Her, the dancer or exhibitionist, with her black hair, painted eyes, white anger. She fancied she was introducing him to the real flamenco, the difference between herself and the group, not the thing the drunk patrons whistled at. The thought made her dance more authentic, more defiant. It sometimes stopped the whistling.

The sets stretched into eight - ten. Her limbs ached with each night's pounding, the warming up, the cooling down, the jarring until two in the morning. The cold that steadily blew through the loose window had got her. She broke a fever that made her ache more.

\*

I wake in the dim stuffy cubicle. The narrow bed. The wet pillow. The insufficiency of a jutting shelf. My throat is blocked. The only sounds are sleeping girls. I am out of bed and scuffle for shoes in a makeshift wardrobe. I pull on blue woolen tights, and when I have the rest of my gear, the cassette tape and cardigan, I wait for the footfall of the 5.30 matron. I can tell if it's the younger one, because the step is light, apologetic. The older one is heavy and has a limp-drag. I hear the click of the backdoor and feet retreating.

I slip out from the curtain door and quickly, silently up the hall and out of the building across the yard. There is dew and fervor in the air. But the cover of night still lies heavy on the small road between the old storage room and the disparate rows of the boarding house. Sure enough the bolt on the room is now loose, and hanging.

Inside it is fridge-cold and musty with a staleness. Somewhere there is a decomposing mouse, but my resin box welcomes me in the corner of space I have cleared for the ritual. The scuff marks are still visible in the box from yesterday's work.

I put the tape in the machine and rewind to yesterday. Plies are repetitive but they are something you can always return to.

They lay the ground for the trauma of the *developés*.

My gear is no longer class-worthy: the blue tights with bits of wool fluff on them, a tatty sweatshirt, a ripped cardy. The ragged-ness of my gear falls around me, a family of shreds. The room is generally ash-grey. But ash has wings and the liver cleans blood that moves rapidly through my limbs as I warm up. Red is the colour of action, and limbs hold out, last to let go.

Can a piano wail? The *developé* music does. Grief is a voice. The stretch of the leg endless. It stretches around the world.

\*

‘I’m not dancing another set. I’ll get up and be onstage but I’m not dancing another solo.’ she said one night.

‘A bit of *Rumba*, *anda!*’ Javi returned from smoking outside.

‘Sara dances *Rumba* well – she loves it. Let her do it.’

An evil spark danced in his eye.

‘I can do a *Rumba*. I’ll get them all up, even though I’m hoarse.’ said Sara.

‘No, you let the little bitch here dance, she always makes you do everything.’

She straggled home with them later, up through the prostitute’s alleys which were all empty.

As weeks progressed they started to get call-ins for extra work. They were ‘rented out’ to private functions. She rushed to the changing room after the first set, wrapped a coat over her sweaty costume and went out into the frosty night, joining them bundled into a car as if making a getaway. They would be rushed back after the gig to get onstage for the second set. Set two was still set two – there was no skipping over sets.

*‘Wherever you are, you are flamenco. You dance flamenco, with paesco and with soniquete. It doesn’t matter about anything else. Sometimes I dance in the park, at night, all by myself – I pinch myself – I inspire myself – alone in the woods, in the night.’*

This time it was a wedding reception. Inside, the chairs were set up for them on a parquet disco floor. Her traditional flamenco costume looked like goose feather submerged in a neon pool of red and blue.

‘We’ll do everything a lot shorter here.’ said Javi. ‘In this place they just want a bit of a laugh, *Rumbita* and stupid things.’

She sat on a flimsy chair, and stared at the floor, which was all one level with the audience who were now seating themselves. The harsh red light made tacky swirls on the shine of the surface. It looked slippery. Months of concentrating and distilling had led to this diluting for popular appeal.

*‘If you’re flamenco, you dance flamenco anywhere, any time.’*

*‘Quilla – don’t go too long.’* said Javi. ‘Keep it light.’

*Alegrias* – the word itself meant joy. This was a wedding. Why should she change anything? After a moment the people got up and came forward to stand, closer. Children’s faces were serious with fascination. The groom and his bride stood in the middle of the group, temporarily relieved from their role in centre stage.

She was a vessel for flamenco charged with carrying it to these people, so they could feel its heat.

*‘The people will remember this day for the rest of their lives.’*

She had to give them the memory they would remember. When she sat down to a loud applause, Javi’s face twisted.

*‘Anda – por Rumba!’* he said.

He started playing the jiggle-jaggle of the Gypsy Kings rhythm-anthem. Sara started singing. The tension of her piece descended into party land and there was a murmur around the wedding crowd. Sara got up and started dancing, swaying and strutting under the disco lights like a child at a beauty pageant. She started drawing people out of the wedding party.

*‘Ole Sara!’* yelled Javi.

The audience went with it like a flock of cattle. One or two jumped forward and danced with Sara in the space. Javi turned and yelled at her.

*‘Come on – you get up and dance por Rumba!’*

She ignored him.

*‘Come on – don’t make her do all the work!’*

*‘I’ve danced already.’*

In the taxi she sat pressed against the backdoor, wishing she could fling it open, jump out. There were still six or seven sets to go back at the restaurant.

‘You’re a good for nothing spiteful little bitch!’

There, it was out. She could not let it go.

‘Speak to me normally, or it’s over.’

She felt Sara flinch beside her.

‘I’ll speak to you however my fucking balls feel like speaking to you, got it?’

The driver tried to say something in English, but she couldn’t hear him. The car sped through the suburbs.

‘Javi, we don’t want her to leave - we’ll be left with eight sets to do ourselves.’ said Sara.

He inhaled on his mangled cigarette and threw his sharp chin up to the window.

‘I’m the one in charge of this gig. I’m the one under obligation here and we’ll talk it through.’ said Felipe.

Something clicked over inside her. ‘If we’re talking it through, it better be soon.’

‘We’re not going to be able to talk before we get onstage are we? -we have to get on straight away.’ He said.

She stepped out of the cab and went in to the dressing room. They had five minutes before the start of the set. She dressed, stuffed her costumes into her bag and opened the door. Felipe stood nervously outside.

‘Give me the key to the house. I need my passport. I want the key.’

He shook his head.

‘Where’s Nico?’ she said to the head waiter, who hovered near them smelling a problem.

‘He’s gone for the night.’

‘Tell him I’ll call him, and I want to be paid.’ She walked past them, out the front door, and into the cold relief of the night. She moved fast up the pavement. The lights of the shops and restaurants streaked and blurred.

\*

A million stars are out on a body of water. They noisily wash the port. The ferry grinds and squeals as it’s unwillingly docked in its bay. I’m going to stay at my uncle and aunt’s place, which I do some week-ends to get out of school.

‘You still have the light on.’

I'm in the middle of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* when he comes into my room, or the room they reserve for me. The one that was also hers. I can tell he wants to say something serious as he carries it in his shoulders, in the full rough usefulness of his woodworking hands. He kneels down beside me, a teacher crouching at the desk of a student. It is a voice that wants to do its best.

'Now, your mum got you into Epsom, because that's where she went, and she knew you'd be well-looked after there. She would've wanted you to get a good education. She'd want you to do well and do your studies.'

The book flops onto the bed cover. Hardy, Dickens, Laurence, Bronte, Shakespeare; he gives me books. What else is he to do? He's an English teacher.

'This ballet thing – I know you think that's what you want, but it was Jeanette's thing, your mother's dream, not yours, this dancing thing.'

The words come out unrefined, a rough ornament wrapped in a woolen jersey.

'That's what mum wanted?'

'She was frustrated your mum, she didn't get the chance to dance, she married your dad, then the stress of your dad, your grandma, your dad's gambling and so on....'

Words tumble out with uneven gaps in them onto the carpet like woodchips. That's where his head hangs, as if this is a shameful business.

'Mum wanted to be a dancer, - really?'

'You're at School Certificate level now. I know your Mum wanted you to do well and do your studies, and I made a promise to her I'd see to that. Now, you're a bright girl, so forget about the dancing thing.'

There is a quiet thick air in the room, the carpet, the wooden furniture, the solidity of the arrangement. His voice is fruitless against it, like moths flapping against the thick glass door panes.

He leaves and I pick up and go back to Tess.

I was given a few things after the funeral. One was an old album. I took it under arm into my room at school, closed the curtain and spilled out its musty contents on the bed. In this one she is Cinderella, complete with head scarf and apron. In that one she is a wicked queen in black, even her pointe shoes are black. That's cool, I think, black pointe shoes. In every photo she pouts, exaggerates, gesticulates; wide smile, laughing eyes, caught in black and white still. I think she would've been a character dancer if she could've. I always got favourable comments for my character dances: the Tarantella –



ribboned skirt, a tambourine I ran with madly at the end of the dance, pleading for money.

About this time I see Marcel Marceau advertised to appear at the St. James theatre in town. I walk into the office foyer and ask for permission to go to Marceau. The smell of boiled vegetables and meat has migrated from the dining area and infected the walls. Miss Cowley who is Head of House, is arranging papers at the glass window, spectacles falling off her nose. The young English matron Miss Kenny is at the desk writing. I can only see the crown of her curly head.

‘Well, the only way is if you go with one of the Matrons.’

Miss Cowley has a prim, hard face, but tonight she has been softened by the temperature of a joke with Kenny who I can’t help but think about as a generous milk-maid type out of Hardy. Miss Kenny looks up from the desk with sudden interest

‘What’s the show then?’

‘Marcel Marceau’

‘Oh Marcel Marceau!...’ Her voice hangs for a second in the air. ‘I’ll take you.’

She resumes writing and Miss Cowley has no room to dismiss the idea.

For days I think about the miracle of the Maestro of Silence. I re-read the advertisement several times, wishing I already had the program, rolling the words over my heart “*Marceau will bring his character Mr. Bip to life for Aucklanders. Mr Bip with his crumpled top hat which represents the fragility of life, and its red flower...*” In the middle of long grey days of school the red flower permeates my mind. On the day of the show during my lunch hour I take off down the main road near the school to find a flower shop where I buy a red rose.

‘Do you think it will look silly to throw a rose? They do that in Europe don’t they Miss. Kenny?’ I ask her as we meet in the foyer to leave for the theatre.

‘Well sometimes, I suppose. You throw your rose.’

She smiles, but it’s a smile to herself, a secret sort of smile. She has clipped up her hair and is wearing small heels and a top with a sparkly decoration on it.

When the curtain opens on Marceau’s show the Assistant Mimes appear frozen in frame holding their first *pancarte*: “*The Matador*”. They are the opening page of a 17<sup>th</sup> century book; faces whitened, archaic. For a long moment we, the audience, stare at their poised stillness as images float in our minds of all the words evoke. So when the Maestro appears – we are already primed. This helps him along. It can’t be easy being two (or more) people in one body.

The stage is dark grey against the black as the small man wanders out, a lost white face with black eyes, grey and stark white overalls and grey shoes. Red is the only colour on the stage. It is his slash of lips. Lips with no voice.

After five minutes have passed we don't see a mime, but an Everyman. He is also every man; the office worker, the big boss, the lion tamer, the Lion, the mask-maker, the mask, the diner; the waiter... In "*Les Bureaucrats*" I become with him the desolate man tapping on the door, the man who eventually falls against it, who dies against the door. I am the man waving goodbye behind a coffin. I am the mask-maker stuck in hell behind an irremovable expression. Marceau's black eyes are deep hollows. I cry in the dark theatre onto the rose in my lap, wet red tears. But then I find myself laughing through them – pain is a transparent room. With this movement, something is becoming dislodged, unstuck.

I try to catch a glimpse of Miss Kenny, but she must also be deep in her up-down world of Everyman Kenny. As the show comes to a close she turns to me. 'Now throw the rose – go – g'on – throw it! Shall I throw it for you?'

The crowd are on their feet, the circle swamped with applause. When I step forward and sling the rose toward the feet of Marceau the curtain closes and sweeps it, half concealing it. The crowd continues to thump and the curtains swing open again. Then the Maestro steps forward, holding my rose in his right hand.

'I have to get them to sign my program. Can we go backstage?'

So we exit the building and wait across the road from the library, outside the backstage doors, on the footpath by the theatre. We wait, alone, the only ones it seems, with a craving for the Maestro's signature, or his voice.

Finally the heavy red door opens and out walks Marceau. But he is not Marceau - he is a wrinkled man with a crumpled, tired, yellowy face. He is still holding my rose. He takes his time with me graciously signing on two separate pages in large sloping hand *Marcel Marceau* on one page, and "*Mr. Bip*" on another. I study the handwriting later and think I note a clear difference in style. He wanders off into the black folding wings of the night.

The theatre still stands. Or it stands still as a mime, festering in noise about its ankles. But what is it waiting for? Its final day of execution, or re-birth? I have wandered past the spot many times without realizing it was there and this is the first time I've noticed it, as I drop off library books. The cinema under the library opposite is still here, the one I used to watch foreign movies in. The theatre must have silently slipped from the

landline and out of consciousness into a coma. But now I realize that this carcass is in fact, an old friend. The rotting grey walls graffitied with bird droppings, and the bordered-up doors and windows indicate it has been dead for some time. The red paint once framing the entrances has been long-peeling; dried encrusted blood marks the point where I once stood on a dark bright night in the late eighties.

I came home and read up about the theatre online. There was a debate. Donald Sinden, a famous eighty-six year old English actor, has said he is willing to lay down in front of the bulldozers to save the theatre. But something caught my eye. A journalist quoting someone: *The names we give to features in the landscape are a "grid of meaning" we lay over the land to allow us to live in it. Rather than wandering as strangers on the land, we identify it with a string of names commemorating our ancestors, myths or great events, or simply identifying places that supply us with the things we need to live.*

I post a pledge on the site claiming that in the occurrence of the unthinkable, I will lie with Donald Sinden.

## VI Exile

18.

This part of Auckland is all rolling hills, you climb one and there's another, or a more steady but killing continuation of the last. I have a tendency to stop jogging just before the top of a hill and walk. I stop before I've completed the task. Recently I've tried to push myself that last little bit, not bearing to repeat the past. There's a monotony to it, an unfamiliar pain. Knees are not used to concrete. They recognize wood. There is no sound like the ball of a foot or heel of nails coming into contact with hard wood. I slip back now, on that foot of nails, on that sound.

I heard something like it in old Maori music once. The mimicking of a native bird. The husband of a woman who rented me a long wooden hall was an expert in the ancient sounds, and his group gathered there from time to time. One day I arrived to rehearse and found them practicing behind locked door. I peeked through holes in the weather board as the gale tore my scarf from my neck. So, I was not the only one with secret sounds. They perhaps felt entitled to theirs, whereas my sounds then were desperate sounds.

No, I don't want to go back there. To a basement flat, the dole, the slow eclipsing of hope. It was often like this. The wait between gigs. The last gig passes, and then? My working reality was not a Spanish dancer's but a 'jumping from one rock to another', as each appeared. Something always happened, when you thought it couldn't get worse. A promising lead, a job, an offer to give a workshop. That would link to another and another: steps back to Spain, Mecca. Then maybe something would 'happen' there. This was the life of the modern day *canastera*. Or the 'bludger' - as my brother called it.

I was a disciplined bludger. I didn't get a job because that meant no energy to practice daily, and no ability to leave or travel at will. I lived on the couches of workshop organizers or hippy friends with open doors. Everywhere was short-stay. Even Spain because there was always rent and classes, and all of that ran out eventually. There was no settling down, no focusing-in.

There was one non-negotiable point. Rehearsal space. Money for rent could not go on money for practice hours. And after finding a roof, the next priority was to find a studio, fast. An affordable one, where you could run up as many hours as possible. One

that had a suitable floor, and preferably a mirror. What was this life? The one some of us lived for years. The one some still live. We were hosted in mansions for periods. They compensated for the other places.

In the basement flat days fell into each other and down a cavern. Day became night. Night, day. It was a narrow space that clung to one side of a gully. Feet stomped above - a young couple who lived in the lighter part of the house. It had wooden floors, that I would've liked if it hadn't been so cold. The room had a cooking space, a moldy bathroom, and no furniture. There were my diaries, the airbed, a few bags. It looked like camping out after Armageddon. A friend provided me with blankets and a pot with a lid. My brother came down, took me to the supermarket and filled the cupboards with tins for Christmas.

But I could barely move. It was like being trapped in a mine, or a gunman caught in a siege about to turn the trigger on myself. There was a sense that people were trying to rescue, negotiate, but I was far from them. When you test your own resolve, and nothing happens, that is when it becomes frightening. The victim has finally, truly won. That's not what the victim wants.

There is a point at which a loss of some control sets in. I had no physical pain – true perhaps of dying. Pain is before and after - in life. Death will, at one point, take us, I've heard it said, and at that point there is no need to struggle. For the fighters it is terrible. You use what ammunition you have left, but each day is an affliction, a never-ending flu. Symptoms are no longer imagined but real, physical, chemical. It is hard to fight a chemical. I lay on the airbed and wrote, trying to negotiate now, with myself. 'This is my choice – I'm choosing this really, but at some point, I will stop choosing this and get out.' How many pages can one clog with words? How many rooms with books of those words? How long will it take to write yourself out? It is shoveling a hill with a toothpick. The page offered no solutions, only survival, which is not nothing. Face swollen, I would crawl out for a piece of toast, a dazed glance out the window.

Long before I could understand any of this I had wandered into the room where she was sleeping. I wasn't supposed to bother her, but I needed to see her. She was still there, still my mother. We must have held hands. Her hands were well-proportioned, like her body. Her nails were strong and elegant despite the years of gardening. They hadn't deteriorated over her illness as the skin around them which was yellowed and sunken. Green veins ran close to the surface. She still wore the rings. She must have been too tired to cry.

‘I’m not worried about you because I know you’re a fighter’ she said.

It acted as a suggestion. Like when a bug crawls onto a ridge of wall and then turns to walk in the direction of that ridge. That bug will follow that ridge for years, if it keeps going in the one direction, and doesn’t veer off. But a bug will not fall off the end of its universe. Her cold hand clasped mine again several months later in my uncle’s room. Urgently this time as she rasped in a morphine-induced sleep. The lump had swollen like a thwarted pregnancy. The rest of her collapsed around it. I fell on my knees as the others left the room, my sobs thick and sharp into her side.

Two weeks later my sister dropped me back at boarding school. She pulled into the road leading to the old hall where I practiced. I walked up the road toward the hall with my bag. My old family behind me, my new one waiting ahead.

After three weeks a measure of weight lifted, and I went out of the flat. As I stepped from the door my breath was snatched from me in the morning air. On the lowest of the steps leading up to the road was a fat dead Tui. Pristine in its tuxedo, as though it had swayed and fallen off the second to last step after a big meal, a drunken party. Not a feather torn, eyes closed. Placed there for me, as a gift it seemed. I looked around, as if the murderer might still be on the loose, or the gift-giver. Then I edged toward it, noting the splendour of its coat. Midnight-blue, river-green, a sprig of thin white curls. I picked it up and hurled it gently to its final resting place in the bush below.

Everywhere I have inhabited coastlines, frontiers, margins. The shameful expedition to the hall required me to go from where I hung on the precarious side of one hill, to the top of another. Down through the damp gully of an ancient swamp and across the edge of the city. The first few times it felt wrong. I passed citizens going about normal daily business: a woman dressed in brown, grey and black, sensible shoes, briefcase; a man dressed in black, grey and brown, sensible shoes, briefcase. I went along the foaming waterfront huddled in coat and scarf, carrying the guilty backpack with the skirt and shoes. Up the steep track of the cliff and out onto the promontory with the wind pushing down. Each step aching slow. The hill was clawed by the frothy nails of the sea, the hall harassed with salt. A cabbage tree clanged near the entrance. I leapt from the mud pool outside the door to a sodden mat at its foot, and angled the key in.

Inside it smelt musty. The darkness of wood closed in around while a wild dog wind howled behind outside. The dust of this building was different from the grime of an ancient stone one. It seemed cleaner, and smelt of no one else’s sweat but the seas. On clear days I opened out the far exit, onto cliff top and the reach of sky and seagulls.

Standing on a makeshift wooden bridge over a small ditch I stretched under airplanes which careened past the sun and over the harbour in to land. If the passengers looked down they might've seen me in the raggedy skirt, my bare feet on the wood, making strange curved foreign shapes between tufts of marram grass and shaking Toi Toi.

I went back to the weight of the basement, but there was relief for a time after the one outing of the day to the hall. I had been of use, if only, to myself.

At first, I could only manage an hour, but it increased. As I became more determined in using the hall I found a heavy old mirror. I made the delivery people lug it from the road, past a school, along the ridge of the hill and down a steep bank. They jiggered it around narrow corners to get it in the front door. They sweated and strained and I could hear them silently cussing. I was bloody lucky nothing snapped, they said. My routine was to hoist up the stained sheets covering it, then warm up in the icebox chill, while the winter rays cut in.

'Everything comes out from the centre' a friend told me once as we complained about teaching beginners. 'Knowing who you are will see to it that arms and legs find their place, without technique.' Even the woman renting me the hall told me dance didn't need a mirror. She practiced there herself from time to time, an obscure structured baroque dance 'If you must' she said 'but don't leave it there, and cover it up when you leave.'

For some time I couldn't bear to access my email. I let it fill with junk and once a week I forced myself to enter a cybercafé on the way back from the hall. At this time I received news of Tibu. She had been out on the main road in the dark between Seville and Cadiz, checking some trouble with her car. Another car, like a bandit, came out of the blue and took her out. The news hit me as the car her, unexpected, final. I was jolted offside. I wandered back to the dark triangle of the gully and up to the basement, in a daze. I imagined her frizzy grey hair wired against the on-coming headlights, the flash of shock in her eyes. Or perhaps she was hit in the back and saw nothing coming.

In the New Year I started giving classes. For daily purpose first, income second. The local teachers relinquished their students to me. A couple asked for private classes and I took them to the hall. They crinkled up their noses but didn't complain. In the group classes I had little energy or confidence. I started tentatively but I soon dropped back into old patterns. I berated them until they looked at me red-faced and questioning, their feet swollen and blistered in their flimsy second-hand thin-soled pumps. You could not find strong flamenco shoes in New Zealand. How was such a romantic art form and passionate teacher so harsh? So singularly brutal and dull. I was probably the best they

ever had but the beginner class numbers dropped when they realized that ‘my’ flamenco would never succumb to a weekly hobby. I expected them to train at least twice a week, practice outside class by themselves, and in class, work harder than they thought themselves capable. Even those who respected the approach and did as I wished, became exasperated. I made up repetitive exercises on the spot with authentic flamenco accents, but with no real musical or creative input. I flogged every last ounce of enjoyment from the hour. I emerged renewed, my black mood temporarily quashed. The students came out miserable, annoyed, as if they had just been slapped hard across their faces.

A protective force against my mind is what flamenco had become. But I was not Rin, and they were not me. They didn’t share the drastic-ness of my sacrifice, the one that gave me the strength to plough through the choppy beginner waves. And I didn’t have the full spectrum of Rin’s essence to impart to them. Rin was not a creative in the working sense of the word. He would not push boundaries in the medium. The traditionalists rarely do, and why should they? For them, it is less creative diversion, and more simply a way of life. You don’t need to strive to breathe. Nor do you require a million different ways to breathe in order to live. An instinctual, non-cerebral life. This was helpful to me. My necessity for catharsis was greater rather than my thirst to break ground. I had some ideas but the process of working with my body and ear to develop them moment by moment within the rigid structure of the form – did I have the patience, the strength of curiosity for such a thing? Or had I already found all I needed? I had plenty of language -a veritable storehouse of steps and material from umpteen classes in Spain but vision takes time to gestate, and I was restless, impatient. More likely I was just an old *burro* - a work-donkey after all, lazily uncreative. Easier to go up the well-worn route - bludgeon myself to excel at the old, rather than the mediocre new, the ephemeral, the untested. I had seen many sophisticated creations in Spain. All, in the end, lacked *paesco* - the private feel-good-pain I knew and loved. When I watched them, they were dance-directed, not flamenco-directed creation. They evoked shapes, but no *flamenco*.

I saw this more in Maori *haka*. One evening, vitality with long blonde hair leapt into my basement. It was my friend, and local flamenco teacher, Kassie. She had been trying to make a connection with her son’s whanau up the East Coast.

‘They’ve asked me to come up and show them – I’ve told them about you – said you’re in town and you know much more about *Sevillanas* than me. I’ll just assist,



model the steps for you. They don't have much money but they've said we'll at least get two fifty each for the classes, both days, and you'll get to meet them.'

'Two fifty? For the whole week-end?'

I normally got a gran for a week-end workshop.

'I know, but I thought maybe you could do some kind of exchange, ask them about their songs and things, we'll stay with Esta ...'

I had an idea, shut in a room in my heart but it was almost as stale and damp as this one I was living in. Anything to prize me out of a hole. Maybe it would lead to something. These people, keen to learn about all things Spanish, having Spanish genealogy via a rogue whaler. Up that coast, those strong women.

'Ok, let's do it'.

The East Coast road winds wildly north. Esta met us there, at a local arts venue in Gisborne with the strangest inversion of a class I had encountered. Mainly women, large and comfortable in their skins. Several men too, one nearing middle-age, dead-quiet, who refused to look me in the eye. Another with a hat and cane. A few lanky teens and handsome children. They had come in sweat-pants and dress shoes - the closest approximation to the right ones.

There were four short sets or *coplas* for them to learn to dance the full *Sevillanas* to perform at their family celebration to show their extended family. They wanted to get all four and dance them proudly in time with the recorded music. If they couldn't remember all the sets it didn't matter, I said, they could just dance the first one over again and it'd still fit. It was the spirit of the thing that counted. I explained that the *Sevillanas* was from Seville, a province and town in the South. It didn't seem to matter to them that their ancestor was northern. Here was I, a supposed professional teaching them, the distance of my own origins from the source absurdly obvious.

Kassie told me not to go easy. Sure enough, as I pushed them, they responded better. They sweated and smiled themselves through all four sets until they got it. Their hands twirled gracefully. A little girl and her older cousin in the front row got the rhythm straight off and the rest followed. A 6-beat cycle, broken into threes with an accent on the first. Hardly unfamiliar to them.

On the last night I lay in Esta's spare room, touching the cool heavy *pounamu* necklace they'd presented me with during a bittersweet song. Two *koru* hands curling outward from a rounded body of jade, with a *paua* jewel inset. 'It made us think of your hands.' Esta said. Two hands above a bobbing sea, reaching. I almost see them now as I

jog along the Waitemata Harbor, except that one broke sometime later, a little end of jade *koru* snapped off. During the following travels I think, but I can't pinpoint when or how.

## VII Setting of the Sun King

19.

She met a man who had agreed to part-sponsor a tour of New Zealand, branding it with his Spanish wine. He grew the only Spanish grape in the country near the East Coast. Then she had met with the Canterbury sponsors and the festival directors. It had taken on its own momentum allowing her to return to Spain on borrowed money. More was scoured from teaching workshops around the world on the way. She caught a viral flu in Canada and was run-down by the time she reached Seville. The damp smell of the end of Winter hung in the narrow streets, but the temperature was on the rise. By Easter she returned to the town, navigating her way through a throng of processions, the wails of *Saetas*, and closed-off streets. At the end of *Semana Santa* she met Rin.

He had listened to her one telephone call from Germany in silence, and in the intervening months he had gone up to Parrilla's *tablaó* where he found Sara. He ripped the girl down savagely in front of the family and said if he ever glimpsed her boyfriend within a mile of Jerez he would wring the guitarist's scrawny neck to an inch of his life. The girl apologized and cried. It was on that night that Parrilla started asking Rin to substitute. That was how they both ended up on Parrilla's stage.

That was some time ago, but something must have happened as now he had put on weight. She immediately offered him a position on the tour. She expected him to be elated.

'Four hundred and fifty euros a show, and how many shows? Twelve – thirteen? To go to the *quinto carajo* – the fifth fuck of the earth? Can't you get more than that?' She tried to explain that the dollar down there was worth half the Euro, and that was already a lot, but it made no difference to him. After their meeting, he dropped her at a rented apartment in the neighbourhood of La Plazuela. Her window faced the ramshackle settlement of San Telmo. They sat outside in the car while she fumbled in her bag.

When she found the bracelet in some old belongings she felt compelled to give it to him. But on this side of the earth now, looking at the scuffed tissue in her hands on its way from him to her, it seemed all wrong. He preferred shiny, bright, valuable things.

'Here is something from my mother.' She handed him the small bundle of white tissue, that looked hastily wrapped, but wasn't.

‘She gave it to me before she died.’

He looked at the tissue for a second before reaching for it. Even this second of hesitation hurt.

He opened it with the tips of his nails. The twisted woven bracelet shone. Copper, not gold, but she had had it especially cleaned for him. It was a pink rose colour now, not the black dulled bronze of before. She thought the cleaning made it look tin-y, cheaper. The dark filth lodged in its copper lattice-work had somehow given it more weight, worth, complexity.

‘*Gracia.*’ He held it up, moved it about. ‘It’s very pretty.’ *Bonita.*

‘It was hers, my mother’s. It is for your mother, or - if she doesn’t wear that kind of thing, it’s for you.’

She then imagined it stowed away from the world in a bottom drawer of a bureau in his cluttered flat, floating around foreign houses, perhaps mistakenly thrown in the trash, and she wanted it back.

‘Well, thank you very much. That’s very thoughtful. Now, I have to get going, I have people waiting.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She got out of the car.

By summer they were in Madrid to rehearse. The chaotic city sparkled with fountains. The backs of commercial *tablaos* were like theatres with large areas backstage. A bowl of fruit, water jugs and cans of soft drink were set on tables in the halls. Now they stood in a men’s dressing room, the three of them: herself and the two she had selected to dance with on the tour; Jonatan with a cut jaw and curled lip, and Rin, already damp patches forming on the back of his shirt as he flustered with his tie.

‘Jona’ – give me a hand with this.’

Jonatan pushed from his lean on a bench, removed the cigarette from his mouth, and unravelled the fabric of the tie.

‘There...you need to do it that way ... *asi no...*’

Rin stood half a head shorter peering over the younger dancer’s hands. A mother’s hands adjusting a child’s napkin. When the younger dancer stepped away Rin reached for his boots. He struggled to stuff his feet into the unwilling leather.

‘Are you worried?’ She had asked Jonatan over lunch, after their rehearsal earlier in the day.

‘No. I’m tired. This is my eighth night in a row at the *tablao*, and the rehearsals and theatre in the afternoon. But I don’t complain. Thank God I’ve never had to ask any friends, or anyone for work. It’s always come to me. I’m fortunate.’

He tapped the cigarette in front of her with an elegant finger, but no ash came off it.

‘*Hombre*, I’m a bit worried for Rin.’ His hand paused in the tray.

‘You don’t think he’s fit enough?’

‘ - and I’m not sure they’ll understand his things. You know - Rin’s things. They won’t give him the back-up he wants. They’re not artists in that place, and some of them just do it like a chore. The guitarist, he’s been here for twenty odd years. He never works anywhere else, he just punches in and out every night.’

‘Have you seen Rin dance recently?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘You see, she’s going by my word, the owner, because she likes me. I’ve told her he’s a big deal from Jerez, and that’s how he got the gig up here, as *Artista Invitado*, but she’s never seen him. She trusts me, implicitly.’ His brow furrowed as he lifted his bag for his wallet, to leave.

‘Jona – this tie still isn’t right.’ In the dressing room Jonatan moved to attend to it again. The gesture took her back to Parrilla’s *tablao*, it’s cramped cupboard. The mirror, the hanging costumes, the smell of stale hairspray. They were both about to dance. Rin was re-tying her own necktie with the ease of knotting a shoelace.

‘There is a way we do it. The *gitano* way.’ He said under his breath. ‘There.’

They moved out of the men’s changing room. Performers loitered in the hall already changed. Rin had put his jacket on but was still fussing with his hair. He gravitated to the group of musicians at the table. ‘Look -’ He said ‘- you do what you do, I’ll adapt to you, but listen, when I start the *tapado* – the dry guitar, I don’t want any *cajon*, just *palmas*, *vale?* – with respect.’ They listened, or made a show of listening. That was, after all, professional. One of them asked if he was from Cordova, and he said no, he was from Jerez and gave them his full name, Jose *de Los Reyes* – of the Kings - Fernandez. She could see them trying to place him, this fat *gitano* with intimidating hair and a mouthful of *Andalu*. He waved words in front of them, sweat fast beading his temples. ‘And when I do this at the end of the *escobilla*, stop everything and wait until I start, *vale?* – I’ll mark my own time there. You don’t mind me – you go at your leisure, I’ll adapt, *vale?*’ He was telling them what he wanted them to do, then telling them to ignore him. He was confused and confusing them. They nodded. Shrugged. Stubbed out their cigarettes and walked to the stage door.

The dining room was vast, double-tiered and full of people. She sat on the mezzanine in full view of the stage. A waiter brought her a watery sangria. She sipped it nervously but with a strange mixture of relief and anxiety at not being the one performing. Soon she would see them, her as ‘artistic director’ Jonatan and Rin, together. That’s what the tour managers’ emails were waiting for – who she would bring. Who was the third dancer? Who could they book the tickets names under? From here, she would imagine them on the big stage with her.

\*

He invited me once to a wedding. I went as the one special outside guest, almost as his *novia*. It was his first cousin’s wedding. This branch of the family was more flamenco, and their bride was marrying a *payo* – a non-gypsy. There were only a few members of his immediate family. He introduced me to a few of his siblings, but I can’t remember their faces. He did not make them seem important.

I only saw her once or twice. She didn’t look like him. Her closely cropped black hair, thinned with the treatment, gave her a curiously modern, matriarchal air. Older gypsy women in the town wore their long hair pulled back in buns. Her skin was Indian skin. And her features fine, stern, uncompromising. There had been too much talk about her – she was all-powerful – and from Rin himself ‘*mi ma’re*’ this – ‘*mi ma’re*’ that. She was the only female who held any real power over him. His face went pudgy and protective at the thought of her. What about his father? They had separated – an unusual thing for older gypsy couples. Or had he abandoned her? That was more likely. He had the responsibility of all this brothers and sisters. As my brother had me.

Her shocked pink blouse contrasted with her Indian skin when she arrived at Parrilla’s that night with a relative holding her arm. She looked younger and stronger than her *compañera*, with her short hair and firm gaze, yet it was the other woman holding her steady. I can’t remember giving her *besos*, or her noticing me at all. She was there for her son of course. To see him dance. For the last time.

*Steam and the smell of the earth rise into the hair around him. He squints from the heat before him, within him. The curved tops of his wrists lead into the air, nails pointed*

*down like talons. Large, fat, strong arms. A curved white tooth-shaped whale bone hangs from his neck. When he pivots his mane comes into view - a cascade of curls. He tattoos his hard code into the thick wooden floor and whirls. A fusion of pain and joy breaks from him, a fit of energy. Shouts fill the air, echoe off wet stone walls and out into a cove.*

When I danced, he thumped his feet in time with mine from his chair behind – he knew all my steps of course – many were his. He screamed *jaleo* so loud the others smiled in fright. His palms were loud over the force of two guitars. I moved and the stage moved with me, the earth followed my movements. Tibu danced with us too, her flapping haunting dance.

That night we were a family.

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She could dance in this metropolis, she knew it. And more flamenco, as strong as these girls, - if not stronger. All she'd need to do is learn the group choreographies. She would come back after the tour, but not to Jerez, instead to this city of African, Chinese, Arab and Latinos where the cultural division seemed to blur, dissolve.

A 'company of girls' started the show, dancing in unison. Each head in bun, thick make-up, faces plastered with agony masks. Then the 'company of boys' came out and did the same. '*Baile montao*' in Parrilla's words. The musicians provided wall music. The sound was muddily percussive. Soloists emerged in tacky red more than once and some with sequins. The musicians over-anticipated the climaxes with embarrassing pre-meditation. The speed-ups before had exaggerated length, the tension sinking again at the end, making it more spectacle than emotional encounter. The singing was dull enough to be a pre-recording, but the audience still applauded tiredly on cue.

Artifice as it was, it had its own surreal charm. But where did Jerez fit here, with its salt, wheat, bulls? It's melting metal on burning anvil, and earthquake vocals? From her seat in the mezzanine she watched a dancer make strange elongated shapes. Jerez was a stronghold of purism, *cante* and protocol. The gypsies in Jerez would have laughed this girl offstage.

Jonatan came on with his *Alegrias*, dance of a laughing sea. But he is not smiling as he alights like a genie out of a rusted bottle. The air fills with the smell of sulphur and blue flame. He is slow at first, palpitating, writhing. Swimming inside himself. A knife turning on a table. Point down. His opening call to the singer twists the top back on behind him, until it's shut, tight, complete. Then he slashes into the song verses as if through waves, geometrically severing the stage and the sluggish air in the bleary-eyed crowd. The group behind him wake up. His *remates* are gunwales slicing tide. Her eyes follow his jacket cut to him, back and forth across the tabla, side-burns sharpened to his chin. Body shrieking flames, a demon leapt from hell. Of course they knew his dance even if he swapped things around. They can recognize parts of it.

How would Rin come onto the music-box stage, after that litany of harpies, and Jonatan's electric-sea? Here the *Artista Invitado*, emerged last and had ten other soloists to top. The show was long, exhaustive.

Rin arrived looking stuffed into his costume, encumbered of himself. Stillness is good when it is full, alive. But his stillness was fraught with uncertainty. He snapped at the *remates*, as though trying, and failing to swipe a wasp. The group missed his feet with their palms. Jonatan stood inclined forward at pains to support the footwork breaks where the group misses. Several times he looked up at her.

*'I can hear just a guitar and – inspire myself...'*

Rin's voice was now painful in her head. He could not move his torso, barely isolate it from the rest of himself. Running out of a thought or movement he stopped and just walked across the stage as if across a plaza, shoulders back, belly out, arms dangling out from his sides. The dancers looked at each other. One of the girls cried a plaintive *Ole*. The guitarist looked at the floor in front of his feet.

*'Vamo'ya Rin, como tu sabbe – do it as you know it so well!'* There was irritation in Jonatan's tone. The *cajon* player stopped and they all went into a stale chorus of *palmas*.

After the performance, they sat on a wall at the edge of a small park. Jonatan unwrapped a few pieces of salami and some bread from a piece of foil and shared it round. She took one or two bites.

'Take more than that, you haven't eaten.' He said.

'No I'm good, thanks.' She was losing weight but had no stomach for food in the suffocating mid-August heat. Rin pulled out the tie of his wet and knotted hair.

'Jona - I asked that man on the *cajon* not to play, and he still played over my *tapado*. What a prick, how unprofessional!'



‘That guy never listens to anyone, he just plays the same thing every night.’

‘I told you I would come and put up with the things here – if she paid me as *Artista Invita’o*, but *hombre*, none of them have any *soniquete* to speak of. What a pain dancing there every night! *Que fatiga!*’ He sighed and stared at the moonlit patch of grass. ‘An even greater pain if I end up in prison for six months.’

‘Rin, don’t say that, you won’t end up in prison.’ she said.

He dusted a few crumbs from the front of his shirt.

‘Well if they think I’m implicated and don’t see it was my sister, and I had nothing to do with anything – I will.’

It was the most he’d said about the drug incident. It was also the most he’d replied to anything she’d said all night.

‘What time do you need to present at the court tomorrow?’ said Jonatan.

‘At nine to avoid the cues.’

Jonatan screwed up the cheese packet and unclenched the tie in his own hair.

‘We’ll come and pick you up at eight thirty, and we’ll go with you, ok?’

‘*Mucha gracia*. I haven’t got you into trouble tonight have I?’

‘No, although one of the busloads left early, and they complained to the maître D.’

‘The show is too long! But I’m not going to come up here all the way just to dance a bit at the end fiesta!’

‘*Claro* – but Rin, she gave me the responsibility for tonight.’ He ripped the end off a crust of bread, swung a leg from the wall.

Would that he also had the responsibility that she now had - of a massive tour. It was a burden and untimely privilege she no longer wanted. But what choice was there? Be on-call girl in Spain, or international artistic director in the world.

‘So what will happen tomorrow Rin?’ she said ‘will you know then about your availability to come to New Zealand?’

‘I’ve already told you I’m coming to New Zealand’, he snapped, ‘that’s not the issue. The issue is if they charge me. I’m going to present myself there for this month – and next month when I’m on tour, I’ll ask if my brother or sister can go and present for me.’

‘They’ll allow someone else to present on your behalf?’ said Jonatan.

‘I’ll ask them.’

‘No, don’t do that, then they’ll think you’re planning to take off somewhere.’

‘But I’ll tell them it’s for work, that I have a month and a half contract, and they have to let me – that’s my job, I’m a *bailaor*,’

‘But if they don’t let you, what will happen if you still come? Will they stop you at the airport?’ said Kika.

‘They won’t stop me at the damned airport!’

‘What she means Rin, is that we have to know as if they stop you from coming we’ll be left without another dancer, and unable to replace you and there are impresarios counting on this in Nueva Zealanda– they will have paid for your seat.’

‘I’ll just come back after the tour. How many weeks exactly is the tour?’ he demanded.

She’d already told him this plenty of times.

‘At least six.’

‘That’s almost 2 months’ said Jonatan.

‘I’ll just go and present myself the day I get back.’

‘Rin, - what is the penalty for not presenting in a determined month?’ said Jonatan.

‘I don’t know, a conviction. If I have to do six months in gaol then I’ll just do it.’

‘But can they stop you at the border? Can they tell from your passport you’re obliged to present every month?’

‘I’m not sure, but if they do, well they do.’

‘But Rin, I’ve told all the tour sponsors and everyone that I’m bringing *two* other dancers – I can’t turn up with just one.’

‘Can’t someone take my seat?’

‘No one can fly on your name, not once you have your ticket printed.’ said Jonatan. She imagined turned up in New Zealand without a third dancer and a wasted ticket, an empty seat. What implications would that have? It was hard enough to have got this far. She’d be shooting any possible future touring in the foot.

‘Rin, you can’t expect to go illegally, she can’t take that responsibility. The *impresarios* and the people organizing it all.’

She was glad Jonatan had said it. She did not want it to have to come to that point. She was afraid of saying anything to him now. She needed an answer from this presenting issue tomorrow. For a minute they sat in silence. Then he joked bitterly.

‘*Ayy, life - gaol!*’

The face of the night had changed over the course of the evening. It seemed oily, dirty as they drove. Perhaps the heat had melted the remains of rubbish and tarmac and all ran together. It hadn’t rained, but it ached to. The streets looked half-ransacked, with litter left scattered where café tables had been. Shutters closed, others flung open like black

mouths aghast. A cigarette-stained curtain or two strayed from some. They dropped her back at a friend's apartment in a central but neglected avenue. Rafa was out of work and hadn't the spirits to clean the place. Mould patched down the walls. She let herself in, lay on the bed, her spine dropping into it, the springs depleted of coil.

20.

Kika and Jonatan continued to rehearse in the sweltering lunch hours. Now that Rin was up there in Madrid with them it was the perfect opportunity to get a group number underway. She would try. She rang him.

'*Franci*- it's the middle of summer! And I'm dancing every night. I can't come to the studio in the middle of the day.' He tone was firm, cold. Not the one of feigned exasperation she knew so well, that was elastic and liable to give way at any second to the thing he objected to. She knew the subtle cultural difference now between argument for the purpose of continued discussion and real argument.

'It's too early to start rehearsing. I've told you, it's only August – we don't go until October! I've told you – I'll be there in Jerez and I'll start rehearsing then!'

She paused. A different tact;

'Ok. What are you doing tonight?'

'I'm dancing in the *tablao*!'

'Shall I meet you both afterwards?' Hanging out, and talking about New Zealand, getting him re-inspired. His response stabbed her with doubt.

'I don't know what Jona has planned, and I can't be out spending all the money I'm making in the *tablao*. *Adio*.'

He completed the contract at the *tablao*, the one the owner had pre-agreed to. Jonatan reported this to her at their rehearsals.

'He's got stronger than that first night, and the musicians know his stuff more. But it hurts me to say it - you know Rin and I have been friends for a long time, he taught me almost everything worth knowing about flamenco -'

He looked intently at her. These northern dancers took everything more seriously. He was working in several different companies one included the National Ballet. Would he now be siding with her that the risk of taking Rin was more than legal?

‘You know I’d like him to come, because he’s my friend and it’d be fun to tour with him but, artistically, I’m not sure – your impresarios, what they’re expecting...’

By day they sat and talked openly about the conundrum of Rin. Once she caught a train out to his flat in the suburbs to watch old flamenco videos.

‘He only has one or two *remates*. *Hombre* – they’re strong and flamenco, as you know how he is, but he does them over and over again. He’s got less material than he had before.’

‘Do you think he could come up more stuff, in the studio rehearsing with us?’

‘Has he come to rehearsals once? Do you think he’ll come in Jerez?’ He arched his brows. ‘You know how he is. He’s not capable of doing the same thing even twice, he’ll change it every time, even if he does come to a rehearsal or two.’

But by night the Jonatan was with Rin. Who knew what they spoke about on those long nights of work? Perhaps Jonatan had told him about her trepidations for bringing him, her growing fear of his hostility.

She managed to visit him once. He was staying in an old ladies’ apartment that some friend of his mother’s had arranged. It was within walking distance of her room. She arrived late in the Siesta, and he made coffee and biscuits. The room was cluttered with old women’s fusteries; embroidered photo frames, lace doilies over silly-sized coffee tables. He tottered in the closet-sized kitchen in a pair of fluffy slippers. He had a thick guard up. She daren’t mention either the tour, or the court decision saying he must present in Madrid in the middle of the tour date. She would give him another chance to get over his pride, or whatever it was. He said practically nothing. Instead of talking he ate more *galletas* to fill the gap. She left with undigested *galleta* in her gut.

He had already withdrawn his support. Back in the months when he couldn’t have his way with deciding who she would bring on the tour. Something there he had relinquished. He had driven her around all the neighbourhoods, trying to hunt down singers he wanted. When they found Mateo Solea, the man wouldn’t agree on the price she could offer. But others, more successful would go for less. Some would go if she agreed to bring their unknown student son as guitarist. Others would go if they didn’t have other work pending. Rin’s first cousin, the best upcoming gypsy female singer in

the province was happy to go with anyone. Rin would not go with Jesus, the best guitarist she could find, but Jesus would go for the price and do more than required, carrying the entire musical weight of the show on his shoulders. Finally, pushed to the point of sending names, she was forced to make a decision. Rin was a part of the group, - he would even be given special ‘guest artist’ status on the posters, (this might side-step his unwillingness to choreograph with them) but he was still petulant, unhappy.

Perhaps it was because she was no longer taking classes from him, so she called him and asked for his help. He agreed to only a few meetings, and sighed at all she did.

‘That doesn’t work. That says nothing...’

‘So, choreograph something for me here then Rin – give me your remate – I’ll learn it.’

Then he spent half an hour sweating and straining to come up with a simple step that he could not repeat, although he swore he heard it in his head and was sure of it.

In Summer she got a one-off gig in Seville in a place that offered respectable monthly showcasing for dancers, foreigners and Spaniards alike. She paid Ani, Jesus and Rin to come along and run through a template of the proposed tour program. Rin pounded away behind her, refusing to dance solo yet getting up at the end and doing a half-hour piece of fiesta dancing.

Afterwards Jesus complained that Rin’s compas was too loud and without sense, that he suffocated the guitar. They broke into a fight backstage.

‘*Quilla*, you’ll have to do something about Rin. I can’t hear my guitar, you can’t hear anything. If you don’t do something about Rin, I’m telling you now, I’m not going with him.’

She looked at Ani, who shrugged. ‘What can I tell you? He’s my cousin, *quilla*, I’ve seen him in every way but Rin right now - *no’ esta bien*, he’s not fit. But – I’m not entering there...’ and she waved her hands away from the argument.

There was still time. She continued with the original plan of the group. Jonatan and Ani would keep Rin happy. Jonatan’s company would keep Jesus happy. Ani was happy with everyone. Manuel, the other singer, was going for cash only. They were all Gitanos de Jerez, apart from Jonatan and herself, and as for them - they were flamenco-enough in their dancing that they’d be ok. Rin, after all, would back them, she thought. But, the protective crust under her own feet had already cracked.

‘He’s jealous you have the gig instead of him’ said Rafa.

‘I’m not really ready for this, it has come too soon, or perhaps too late.’ She said.

‘Maybe that’s true, but you have the opportunity, and that’s that. You’re not going to turn it down, and far lesser people have done more. Nor do you need him to hold your hand.’

Back in Jerez she called him and told him to meet her at Ana’s. She had chosen Ana’s house because it was neutral territory.

‘I told you I’ll rehearse when I want to rehearse!’

‘It’s not about rehearsals.’

He thumped up the stairs. She could see him coming in her mind’s eye, the hands clutching the keys sourly. She no longer had the heart for it. The steps got louder until they were audible outside.

She opened the door. ‘Hola.’

He walked straight past her.

‘The traffic was a nightmare.’ He directed the comment to Ana. To her, nothing. He took the liberty to sit in a high-backed chair. Cocked one leg up, ankle on knee.

‘Ah, si?’ said Ana.

‘*Hombre.*’ he affirmed.

He was ignoring her even here, even before she’d said anything. How had she imagined she would transport him with them, in the airless space of a plane cabin? To then humiliate her in front people who, for better or worse, respected her. He was liable to rally the others against her.

‘*Bueno*, Rin, you know I have to get back to the sponsors this week at the latest about who is going on this thing, and Rin, your court date is in the middle of the tour.’ The room was unusually quiet for midday during the week.

‘Ay, the *guiris* – what the damn foreigners want.’

He tilted his head up at the ceiling, rolled his eyes upward like a chubby cupid angel from a greeting card, gave a sarcastic half-smile.

The court date. The court date was an excuse and they both knew it. If he was behind her, supportive, willing to rehearse, she would’ve risked it. Damn it, she would’ve paid his ticket herself. She would’ve gone to the embassy, the police, the King of Spain, whoever. But for the shameful purposes of this meeting she used the court date – to put it in front of her as a shield to his toxicity. She couldn’t face the full force of it, even if somewhere, deluded she thought she deserved it. She had to get through this damn tour. She’d deal with the fall-out later. Of course, she would come back with success, the promise of a new work - offer him his place - then.

‘The *guiris* always know what’s best for *flamenco*.’

She braced against the icy blast from the door he was throwing her out of.

‘Rin, they’ve been waiting for me to clear this up and if I don’t get back to them with someone there’ll be a chance we can’t get another ticket - at all. I have to let them know who is coming.’ It was that pleading tone she despised in herself.

This wasn’t him. He liked foreigners. She knew the real him and part of her still expected to find it here, now.

‘I don’t want to go on your damn tour.’

He looked at her for the first time since he’d walked in.

The door thumped behind him as he left and there was a sense of release of a burden. But she was unsure what was being unanchored, him or herself. The room fell quiet with the indifference of furniture.

In the two final gut-thin months she spent in the town she saw him only once, at a distance. He was scurrying across a central car park with an armful of clothes on hangers, strands of hair flying about his face. Selling clothes for his sister’s stall in the market, Ana said.

## VIII Salida

21.

At one extreme of the meridian line is Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. At the other end is a point in the Pacific Ocean, a few kilometres off the western coast of Auckland, New Zealand. The plane trip took us 180 degrees to this end. For me, a strange 360 degree start point. “The protest of romance against the commonplace of life” – friend Sam Mahon quoted Somerset Maugham in review of our South Island shows. There were protests in all directions; artists, sponsors, money, but the romance only comes now on looking back from that coast at a fading horizon, knowing now what commonplace means. I had ventured out to the end of myself where there would be a long way to fall. When I stand on that coast now I remember where these four years began, and where the rest ended. It’s a coast of dark camel-coloured sand, now iridescent purple, now mud-black ore. It roars in my ear like an echo in a shell. My eyes are salted shut. The light is cooler but sharper. Water laps at my bunyoned feet, at toenails still crumbled with the impact of years of footwork.

My mouth was dry. My feet hot, damp and swollen in my shoes. The airport shuttle weaved through the traffic. We passed my old boarding school. I strained, but failed to see the buildings for the green exploding from gardens and roadsides. The others watched the road.

‘Auckland is the biggest city isn’t it, *quilla*?’ said Jesus.

‘Yeah.’

‘But we’re not in the centre yet are we?’ said Jonatan.

‘Close’ I said.

The trees hooked my words before they left my mouth. Manuel, Ani, and her cousin Luis sat squashed together like jellos in the back. The company was quiet amid the incongruous applause of tropical blossom and conifers. As the silver-grey city came into view they sat up.

‘We’re staying in town aren’t we?’ said Jesus.

‘I think so.’ I tried to remember the name of the hotel on the emails. A sigh of annoyance rippled through the company.



‘You don’t know where we’re staying?’ Ani said. ‘This is your *cuidad* isn’t it, Franci?’

‘Yes yes - it’s the city, we’re staying downtown in the city. Near the venue - the town hall.’

‘My’ *cuidad* was all new shop fronts, foreign signage, and a mix of East-Asian faces swarmed the footpaths. The main street was familiar, yet on the whole, disembodied from its original self.

‘The *gacho* does he know where we’re going?’ said Manuel.  
I turned around. ‘The *gacho*?’

‘*Claro*, the *gacho* driving.’ said Ani.  
The non-gypsy, like me. The *Pakeha*, the *Paya*.

‘Yeah, he’ll know it’s City Life Hotel.’  
‘*City – li*, *City- li*’ clowned Luis, the *palmero* and the group’s late addition. He was relieved now. He had a phobia of flying and had grit his teeth as we buckled up in Jerez, Madrid, London, Singapore, Sydney. Fear levels many things.

I had forgotten to turn on my mobile since the flight, and fished it out of my bag. Black screen. I pressed it. And again. Nothing. Perhaps water had gotten into it.

The van pulled us into the hotel where we got out. When I saw my suite I wanted to shut the door and lock it, get under the covers and sleep through this impending culmination that I was not a part of, but had to show up for.

There is more to flamenco than pure rage and I was no longer as brutally strong as I had been with Rin. Still, I had the facility for a more sophisticated corporeal expression and arrangement. The tour and theatre venues gave me an opportunity to move more in this direction. In fact, it was imperative to devise something more ‘artistic’ to suit the occasion. Rin could take me no deeper into his singular essence of gypsy flamenco. I was never going to be him, nor extract him from his source. But I felt little creativity flowing in my flamenco veins. I only knew how to do battle with the form, engage in endurance tests with it.

Also, a slight, but perceptible change had occurred. I had lost some memory. My head was clouded. An edge blunted. I was tired somewhere. A cognitive blip, a wire disconnected, a door shut - one I couldn’t seem to get back through. Surely I was conjuring up this ailment to account for a weathered passion or it was simply fear, laziness? Rest, I thought, then it will all come right. The tour to New Zealand with gypsies is the opportunity of a lifetime. But I wasn’t myself.

Agitated, I went downstairs to buy another mobile. To make contact with someone, anyone. I left the group opening and shutting doors, scuffling through mini bars, grabbing money to go and buy fast food. On the streets glass doors opened and shut, faces sliding in and out of each other in a continuous mirage. I walked through them ghost-like, anonymous.

Tonight was the epitome of everything. I had to get myself present. I couldn't flee, as I'd done in Germany. I was home, wasn't I? Where could I run? There was no other body to inhabit. I flustered about the room unpacking costumes that did not seem mine. I peered out the double glazed glass at the shimmering city, the glint of harbour. I stayed near the group. Not with them, but not far. If I strayed I might have nothing of myself to carry onstage later. Finally, we walked into the dusk heading for the town hall.

The only funeral I have ever attended was my mother's. But here I imagined my own. A strange assortment of people congregated. Everyone I knew, but none who knew each other. They had all turned up to see the manifestation of this life-time dream. My father, my aunt, my ex-employers. Friends, students, the local flamenco teacher and her cronies, some 'dance community' people, the sherry and wine sponsors. I even spotted a childhood ballet teacher - the one before Davidson - a handsomely aged woman stepping out of a taxi in her evening sparkle, as though arriving at Sadler's Wells.

It takes a lot to kill a dream. Identity is a flimsy thing but a dream can take just about anything. If it is fuelled by a strain of irrationality, the more unwieldy and tougher it is to snuff out. A bit of irrationality makes for a strong wiry dream. It will take its own fatal course.

Jonatan and I marked out our dances on the fragile stage, with a Gotham-city organ looming behind it. It was a concert hall - no wings.

'Another theatre that isn't a theatre.' said Jonatan.

'I know.' It was too late to apologize.

'But look, we'll have to re-order the *salida*.' He said. 'We'll have to start the duo together and end together instead of starting and ending from opposite ends.'

'Why?'

'Well, look, there's only one way onstage.'

I realized then, the limitation of it. So far most venues had at least two options, left and right. But here there was only one, so your beginning, end, and beginning again was through the same door. Choreograph the beginnings and ends of your dances – if there's

no time left for the middle, I had told myself. Leave the middle boring bit to the middle boring people with their middle boring lives, is what I thought, before I too reached the middle.

The dressing rooms were institutional, bare, pokey. They reminded me of the war tunnels under a volcano in the city, or catacombs. The musicians were sitting elevated behind like a giant fresco. Angels or demons. Lifting me up, taking me down. I don't remember much. Only dancing with Jonatan, - the number least protesting and most romantic. Everybody loves to see the terrific cliché of a man and woman dance, especially when the man is handsome. We were figurines. I was a doll from the tourist shops, but with pins stuck into it.

After Auckland we bundled into the van and headed down the southern motorway. Another *gacho* drove, Pete, who acted as tech-man and driver in one. He was appointed by the festival office to get us through the North Island tour-stops. The wind clenched the throat of the clouds in the Waikato. That bloody thoroughfare between the skinny neck to the hot-headed North, and the arms and body of land splayed out below it. Everyone feels suicidal in Hamilton. 'God cousin, look at this place.' said Ana. 'What a shithole.' said Manuel.

We pulled into what looked like the old nurse quarters of a hospital. The motel rooms were a chewed-gum colour. The others dropped their bags and immediately went over the road to the fast food outlets and supermarket. I stayed in the room and pretended to rest. I picked up a paper. Death of a local teen it said. Fourteen-year old. Not suspicious. Some people's hands don't even have the privilege to dance grief. I lay on the bed, looked about. This building was about the same era as my boarding school. Nurses rooms, school rooms, they're all the same. I was fourteen when I arrived at boarding school the week after mum's funeral. The first night the matron told the prefect to keep an eye on me. I kept the broken sounds well down in the back of my throat. They splintered there.

Manuel and the others clambered down the hall, banging on my door. I opened it and saw them disappear into his room with a pack of vodka and whiskey-mix stubbies.

The show passed in a whirr. I was painfully self-conscious. The sun poured through the sky into the centre of the island the next day. In the car park of the motel again I sensed I was missing something. Had I cleaned my teeth? Were all my bags there? I had more luggage than everyone else - two bags instead of one, all of life's belongings. Their lives were back on patios in Jerez with their wives, husbands, children. I noted, as though from outside the scene, my brittle frame getting into the van with everyone else.

Who was that? *Pakeha. Paya.* Provence girl. Where was *I* taking them? And who was I to take them or it anywhere? Transporting the purest of elixirs, taints them, like *fino* sherry. But I had brought them to the end of the earth, and myself. Certainly no voice of my own had emerged in all these years. I was a dumb white-spirit, a *Turehu*-Ariel, stuck in the bough of a flamenco tree. Cursed like Tibu's deaf-mute son.

In 2004 I had seen three men at Te Matatini *Kapa Haka* National Competitions. Their performance reminded me of what I had imbibed from Rin. I was driven then by an idea that would allow me to stay within Rin's periphery and still make his flamenco accessible to New Zealand. I imagined him as a flamenco Caliban dancing out of mud-pools and steam. I imagined a cast of Maori and *Gitano* artists behind him on a fantastical island enacting a flamenco-*haka* musical of Shakespeare's *Tempest*... I watched the vehicle take its obligatory course. It wound up past *ponga* fern umbrellas carpeting the floor and walls of the Kaimai hills. Luis and Jesus wore headphones. Jonatan's head dropped on Ana's shoulder. Manuel sat in the front behind wraparound sunglasses, in the cloud of a hangover. The Spring underbrush unfolded. Beethoven's Piano sonata in D minor 'Tempest' played through my own earphones. Luis had an eclectic musical taste. He liked ACDC and Beethoven. I took off my headphones and passed them to him. He started playing *Bulerias palmas* pulse to the runs of the piano. It fit perfectly. I envisaged a grand piano complete with live pianist rising up from the earth, or dropping down from the sky. *Gitanos* from Jerez behind it, a chorus of palms and *jaleo*. In previous years I had applied to funding bodies making a grandiose claim: I wanted to bring traditional flamenco to the big stage without losing any of its authenticity. Could they fund an experimental workshop to facilitate a meeting of groups, art forms? It was turned down.

'Pete, can we stop somewhere here for a sec?' I asked.

There were sighs.

'*Pe' pe' - ere' un hijo de chingala ...un rom pom pom...*' Luis clowned.

Pete drove, expressionless.

'Pete you're a bloody son of a bitch, changing down my music –when I asked for it up last night ...' said Jesus.

'*Un mojon* – an idiot Pete, - Pete – you're a *mojon*.' said Manuel.

'Shhh ' Perhaps he could understand.

'Yeah, there's a great look-out just at the top of this ridge. It'll be a good view for everyone.' said Pete. If he did understand he was not about to give the dominant group

any excuse for a kerfuffle. But it was the quietness of a picked-on kid who is steeling himself to show strength, when even those who aren't the bullies can still smell his fear. As it was the first stop of the day, no one could complain. We pulled into the viewing area to join a shiny black car there. A tall muscular man stood removing water bottles from its boot. He turned as we pulled in and watched us drop out of the van one by one. I watched him watching us. The group stood up on a short wall and gazed at the majesty of the gorge. Cameras came out. Jonatan nudged me. 'Is that man a *Maori*?' I nodded too quickly. We were right beside him. 'Hi.' I said.

'Hi.' His voice was deep, cool and dark like his car.

'These guys are from Spain. We're on tour. They've not seen the country. Are you from round here?' It came out too fast.

'Yeah, I was wondering where you guys were from watching you get out of the van. I'm from Whakatane, was just dropping off my boy in Tauranga. So, what're guys doing, music?'

'Yeah, they're gypsies, from Spain. We do flamenco. That's Jonatan, he's from Barcelona - he's a dancer. Manuel, over there, and Ana are singers. Luis is a percussionist, Jesus - guitarist.' I left myself out, but he didn't notice. It felt forced, as if I wasn't telling the truth. But I was, at least, they were the facts. The others stood at a distance, smoking, kicking the gravel. They looked ready to leave. I pushed more words forward. 'They're really interested in learning something about this place. Wondering if you know where we could catch a show or 'experience' that isn't too touristy, - for these guys?'

He seemed to be thinking.

'We're performing in Tauranga tomorrow night at the main theatre. Come and see us. What's your name? I'll get you a seat.'

'I'm James. Yeah, I'd love to come, I'll try -

'Just if you can - we'd love you to. I'll leave a ticket at the door under your name.'

'Wow, thanks, that's great.'

Jonatan wandered over and I introduced them. His minimal English suddenly failed him, but they greeted in the way people who can't speak each others' language often do. Softening, slowing down their nods and handshakes in over-done ritualistic respect. I felt a pang of envy. I looked over at the rest of the group who I could tell were fantasizing about KFC in Tauranga. As if a second thought James said. 'There's a turn off on your way out of Rotorua, past the Waitap pub, there's a hot Spring in the bush up there. You could have a swim.'

‘Wow they’ll love that!’

I waved at James from the window as we took off.

Was there really a future to an idea of cultural collaboration and flamenco-haka fusion? Or was I desperate for support to continue my foray into traditional flamenco? It would mean encountering Maori in the painful way I had encountered *gitanos*. I would be the guest again, this time in my country of birth. *Pakeha*. *Paya*. Who did I think I was anyway, borrowing - stealing even, from their font of art and culture? It takes a long time to build ties, gain trust. And even then. I couldn’t dance flamenco here, or in Spain, not with these statues of Easter Island breathing down my neck.

The low lying scrub going past the window was familiar, almost a comfort. The scent of sulphur and dust seemed to penetrate the windows and overwhelm the spaces between us. I saw dark-green waterways tucked into the loins of the landscape. At the Waitap pub Pete made the turn off.

‘Fuck, we’re not taking a detour now!’ Manuel realized what was happening. ‘We’ve been in this stinking van for hours!’ A round of complaints began.

‘No, it’s just up here, just a few metres off the main road, not far.’ I didn’t know how far, but surely they would just die to see it and feel it - a hot spring in the middle of the native bush. I had a surge of excitement I hadn’t felt in months, possibly years. When we stopped I found myself hopping out of the van hungrily with a childish energy in my limbs. Jonatan followed me. We descended into the dense bush to the stream. At the bottom, it hissed quietly, empty of anyone. Steam arose and evaporated into the cool fern. I stripped to my underwear and got in. Jonatan joined me. For once I was in my body, in myself again.

The others sauntered down, except for Pete, who stood as impartial sentinel back at the van, fearing a likely row. The others looked as if they had wandered out of their living rooms and into a jungle, or vice versa. They were pale, out-of-sorts. *Canasteros* - River gypsies. Yeah, right. Would Rin have swum with us here? It’s probable, especially if Jonatan was there, half naked. But it can’t have looked any different from a murky Amazon stream to them. I didn’t care.

‘Come in!’ I said, ‘There’s nothing dangerous here - no man-eating fish – nothing here, no bugs – it’s just clean natural thermal water.’

‘Sulphur’s a poison.’ said Jesus.

They lit cigarettes and stood smoking. Then they started to grizzle between themselves. I eye-balled Jonatan, challenging him to stay, but he stood up and waded out. I watched him follow them back up the bank.

You have to renounce everything with flamenco. Even yourself. But right here I was myself for the first time in years. The land can't lie. It clears up confusion, but the water was hotter the further I moved up toward the mouth of it.

The Bay Theatre in Tauranga was the only real theatre. For this reason I'd set up the DVD to be made there by a local guy. We went to the theatre to set up the sound and mark out the space. At the theatre entrance was our poster: 'Direct from Jerez de la Frontera - *Tierra Flamenca* (The Land of Flamenco) - *from the heart of Spain to the soul of New Zealand*' Experience the power and sincerity of traditional flamenco.' There was a graphic of Jonatan, kicking the words, baring teeth, eyebrows soaring. His hair and coat-tail flew behind him in a flare of red and yellow light, as though he'd leapt from the core of the earth, still flaming. 'You can bite music that sounds like this' one review said.

The space had the traditional deep back and wings where you could slip in and out adding illusory depth and dimension to the panorama. The DVD man hummed and ha-ed, shifting from one corner to the next. He wanted an entire light rehearsal. The top of Pete's head bent over the switch board in the tech box far away. Manuel yelled and lurched around from his seat onstage, still with his dark sunglasses on.

'Pe ! scucha me – lo quiero ma' alto! ma alto ! – louder! I can't hear myself, can't hear myself for nothing!'

When he sung, his voice boomed and gurgled around the theatre like the shifting of plates. Jesus used his limited English thinking he could better negotiate with Pete this way.

'More echo here – quilla – how do you say reverb? No – Pe' - a little up – a little right – a little left – sto ' that's goo''

They all spoke at once. I didn't know the Spanish for the technicalities of light and sound. I only knew the flicking on and off of Parrilla's lights and fans, the yells of juergas, jaleo, Rin's screeching.

There was no light or sound in my world anymore.

Back at the motel rooms, I felt like an infant crawling in a gigantic cavern. As I got ready the image of Agujetas rose to mind.

I first saw Agujetas's face in a theatre, on a screen. It was hideous, scarred down one side. A strange old man's face on a screen. Everyone else walked out of the cinema alright. Probably forgot it the next day. In Manuel's face, I felt the primitive anguish of a loss both encompassing and beyond my own. Something un-nameable - the scourge of

small grey teeth and a twisted mouth which seemed to channel the earth. In his face I saw my own death but I couldn't help myself falling toward it. He had a voice, where I felt I had none. His dying face threw out a lifeline to my twenty year old heart - a sound, a cry. Through his cry, I could release my broken sounds, hammer them out through my body. But they would never be over. It was not a matter of crying once, crying hard. They stayed wedged in me like an oyster in a rock. They dripped through my life as water does at the back of cave. Like flamenco *cante*, the history of a lasting tear. Not something to get out of my system. Rather they became it.

The dark chasm of the theatre was a tomb. Manuel's primordial voice seemed muffled. Only the acumen of the guitar pierced the haze, slightly off, but energized in its attempts to reach me. Anxiety soon took hold and flipped me ahead of their grasp, which I interpreted as their poor effort. From Luis came nothing of the customary back-up and power. I was distracted. Was he doing it to spite me on the special DVD night? It made me sick in my gut. At half time I complained to him. He swore at me and slammed his way out of the dressing room. The rest of the performance he ignored me.

The lunacy of the theatre dawned on me then, a moon rising over Agujetas's cliff face - that such expectation is set onto a stage when flamenco is unassuagable. I slept fitfully. The motel room curtains were flimsy and the room too light.

*There is a silver foil sliver of moon on the tip of a wave. I am swimming against a tide alone all night. On the thick heavy curtain of the sea. In the morning I am exhausted but must keep swimming. The ocean has subsided to an uncertain ebb. I move a little, but not much, not far. I see a coastline, surely no more than a few kilometres away. An animal's head, horns for cliffs. Dark hollows; a mouth from which something rushes forth; two nostrils, spilling blood. At times it grows bigger, or shrinks, or disappears completely. Around there is all land. Around there is all sea. Better to put the thought of the horizon behind, - which horizon, which behind? The horizon is but one circle. Concentrate only on each step.*

This is not how it had been in rehearsal. One afternoon I had rented a practice room for the group. It was off the Plaza Mercado and Parrilla's *tablao*. It was small, dusty, but sufficient. I wore half the black and white dress over my sweat gear to rehearse the *Siguiriyas*. They say it is the father of the *cantes* – that family of songs: *Martinetes*, *Siguiriyas*, *Tonàs*. *Tonà* is what I heard Agujetas sing that day on the big-screen. I



didn't claim I could dance it. It claimed me. Always it carried a sad weight with it, as I carried. They urged me to repeat it over and over until I was gulping, rasping for air. Then again. Down another layer. They cried and cheered 'It's good girl. It's good. You'll see, it's strong.' They felt my pain, gave me theirs. Then they were quiet. There was nothing left to do. From my knees I had stood up within the cave of the *Siguiriyas*. These occasions were not about 'dancing well' so I unhook myself there, from that one. They simply took me to the edge of myself, where I fell, or leapt off.

22.

*La Niña* is a fickle deceptive creature. Or so the weather people say. For four years she has changed and fluctuated. I wring my hands as I watch her drift, indestructible, paddling on her own corpse.

I have troubles fitting my flamenco-ness into a neighbourhood, a classroom, a family, a system, a job, a relationship. People find me impulsive, in the delinquent, unstable sense of the word. This quality was once necessary, at least in the flamenco I learnt with Rin. It was applauded as 'flamenco instinct'. Intensity was passion. Irrationality, creative. Anger was necessary for *rabia* or fury - something to be admired, like a *toro bravo* - a bull worthy of fighting. Showing suffering was honourable. Even sadness was somehow noble. You must show it, express it all. At first I was introverted, melancholy. Rin taught me how to stand my ground like the *torero gitano*, Rafael de Paula. I could do this when I danced, even if I couldn't in the busy Jerez market place. These things flow out of the flamenco classes and into the streets, or the other way around. They flow in daily life. A river of Flamenco as a way of life, the old gypsies will say. There is no way to 'be' now, in a world of offices, routines responsibilities.

But I don't romanticize it. I tell it straight. I loathe the average Andalucian temperament. It offends, intimidates, and wears me down. I used to say to students 'I hate Spain' or 'I don't love flamenco, I just do it.' Art above culture, but nourished by its roots. Now I embody some sap from this old root, but I am neither one thing or the other. It flows in my bloodstream, like shards of glass that broke and fell mistakenly

into an ice cube, which I might have swallowed once at a gypsy wedding. I am a strange watered down hybrid, sitting on an uncomfortable schism. When I am alone in the privacy of a lift, and I feel light, I do a little dance – a *buleria*.

A wound gapes for Spain, as deep as the meridian line. It sits at the height of the map and laughs at me down here in middle earth. Here there is no stress. I am healthier in many ways. Intellectually over-fed. Gavaged. Yet there are no great heights or depths, no life. To think about all this rubs river gravel into the wound. You cannot think about flamenco - that place that stings like a wasp to stay in. You can only become the sting itself.

They are fading now but I have not wanted them to leave me, that harsh surrogate family. I hold onto John for life, but he cannot provide what they did. He is just a soft cushion for me to lie sleeplessly on. To call in some dark hour - to tell me like a father, that he loves me, that he is my friend. That I must love myself. Is this enough in a life? As time passes it is hard to believe. It's easier to believe I was someone else. I go along in the blinding light and I can't *believe* myself. I walk and I think – who is this walking? In the slanting light of these streets, everything sparkles with disbelief. Sometimes I get out the DVD, and there she is, *la niña*. The one who insisted on it. But as time passes that too fades. When it is no longer there, who will I be? Just ordinary old I.

I live on an island now. There is only one post office and I am on my way there. I am about to send an old-fashioned letter, one that no one hardly ever sends anymore. But I know that is the way he would best understand what I want to say. I have taken much time with it and had it professionally translated into Spanish. I hope my words will have the desired effect – more than a phone call might. On the phone I would revert to a simplistic flawed *Andalu*. I would be someone else mimicking the language - not myself. Wrapped in the letter is the ticket with his full name on it: Jose de Los Reyes Fernandez. A premium economy seat. I slip it through the box, and turn back. I walk a bit straighter, stronger. Shoulders back, chest out. There's a slight spring in my step. Spring as in water, as well as motion. It bubbles along like music, trickling, falling, singing its deep song. The sound of a song beneath my spine, carries me tall into the light.

