

RICH SHAPERO

THESE BALMY DAYS

A NOVEL



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TOOFAR MEDIA

TooFar Media
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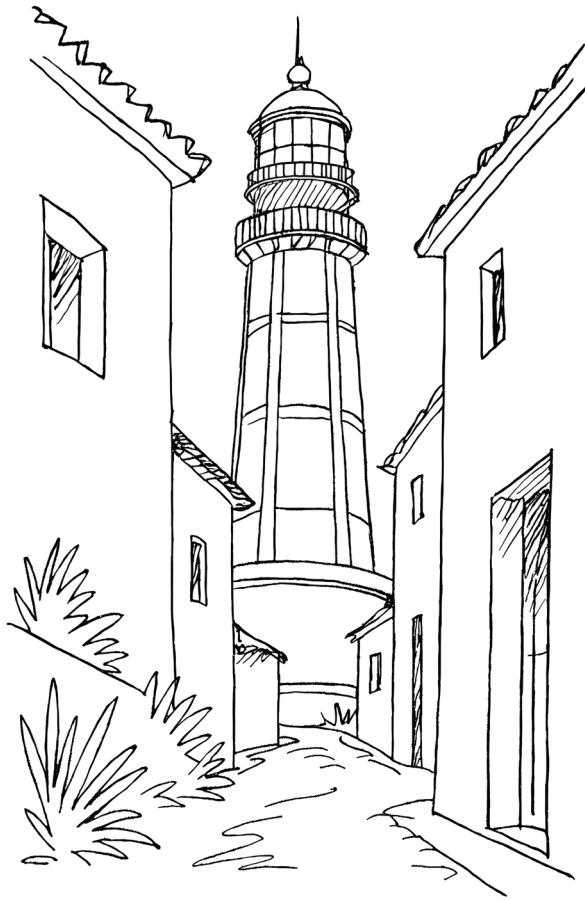
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The Hope We Seek
Too Far
Wild Animus

1





Smile and Wave

We stand here hand in hand, an old man and young girl, at the top of the lighthouse, gazing landward. The circumstances were unexpected that delivered us to this foreign place, so far from our native home and the people we know.

It is almost as if, in the darkest hour, the giant lens at our rear had condensed us to a pencil of light, touched this strip of Portuguese coast and left us here to glimmer together for a while.

I'm blessed to have a loving granddaughter, and doubly blessed that we're able to spend this time together.

What a wonderful reply! Thank you, Tenina.

I know, I know— But it's a gift to hear it from your own lips. I love you too. There is no one I would rather be with, nothing I would rather do.

You, the child of my loins one step removed. You who know me by heart, by instinct, by blood. You with an unfettered mind, and willing—

No, more than willing. Eager, excited to wander this ragged seaside with me, to find our way to places and moments

like this.

Where are we? I've written it down on my notepad.

Cabo de Santa Maria. On an island. Across the water, on the mainland, are two small cities. I'm not sure of their names.

What a clamor there was back in the States when your grampa retreated. When I gave up the field, when I called an end to the struggle life had become. I carry the scars from so many conflicts. I'm not proud of the victories or humbled by the defeats. I'd rather imagine that none of it happened. I'd rather just feel the good fortune of having escaped. Being here together is heaven to me. A foretaste of heaven, that is. I'm in no hurry!

Your mother's circumstance worked out well for us. As occupied as she was with her new job, a holiday with Grampa made perfect sense. You're mature for five years. We've always had a special connection. The time we shared in the States was always so joyful. An adventure together in a foreign land? How exciting!

For your grampa, my dear— It's been a gift.

A precious one.

When I arrived in Lisbon, I felt so alone. The last vestiges of my dubious life had been stripped away. All I had left were doubts and dark speculations.

In these few weeks, I've come to rely on you. When my sorrow sharpens, you blunt it with an eager request. When thoughts take me into the future, you roll your eyes and shake your head. If I'm overly introspective, you tug my hand, as you're doing now, to bring me back.

The wind's mussing your blond bangs, lifting your pig-tails. Look over your shoulder, Teni. We're sharing this red-railed crow's nest with strangers. Vacationers, beach lollers, retirees— They're staring at us. Murmuring to each other. What are they saying? Do they think we're so peculiar?

You're laughing now, and I'm laughing too.

It's not you they're whispering about.

It's me, with my theatrical gestures and garish laugh. They mark with puzzled expressions this grizzled jaw, these striped pants and white suspenders, the flaps of my long-point collar, fluttering like the wings of a panicked hatchling. Shall I doff my flat-brimmed Portuguese hat and flash my thinning crown at them? Shall I hail them with the collapsed umbrella I use as a cane?

He's batty, they whisper. *Would you leave your child with someone like that?*

They understand nothing of the fondness and cheer, the sensitive parlance we share.

Don't be ruffled. Maintain the fiction.

Just smile and wave.

Every Day is Sunday

We returned to the mainland on one of the ferries. Didn't we? Perhaps we begged a ride from a willing fisherman or rode in a boat for hire. This charming town we're entering now— It looks familiar.

You spread your arms to embrace it, lifting your face, gazing at me through your round-lens glasses. They brighten your face with their yellow frames.

The town's name circles my mind like a damselfly. Is it Olhão or Fusetas or Luz? There are shops and cafes. And a pastelaria, my dear. Shall we stop for a treat?

I thought so!

We don't mind standing in line. We like mingling with tourists. They arrived last week and are scheduled to depart tomorrow.

Hello Miss. And you Sir. Enjoying your visit? We've come from the lighthouse. Have you been? The one on the island. I'm not recalling its name. I've written it down. Oh, it certainly was: a magnificent view. This is my granddaughter, Tenina.

Yes, my dear. It's our turn now. Time to choose.

Inside the glass case, the treasures are arrayed on trays.

What shall it be? A creamy *bola de berlim*? The spongy *pão de ló*? Of course, I should have known. *Torta de laranja!*

The nice lady is fetching one for us. Show the prize to Miss and Mister behind us. Ho, look at this, look at this! Alright, we must pay for the treat.

Bite into the sweet piece of heaven— You first, now me. Mmm. The soaked cake, the citrus custard, the gooey half-circle of candied orange—

We exit the bakery, savoring the tastes, raising our faces. The sun is bright, the sky is blue. Another day without a cloud. Not even one.

We stroll through the cobbled streets, immersed in our *torta*, charmed by the foot traffic, the colors and pointless chatter, making our way down the tree-lined avenida to the bus stop and a breezy ride back. The old buggy will follow the shore, and we'll open the window and smell the spray.

We're already thinking of home. Our home together, here on the coast.

How comfortable we are, Tenina. How quickly we've adapted to our little village. We amble the square, we climb the steps to the *castelo*, we stroll through the arcade by city hall. We pass the shops lining the narrow streets and you flatten your nose against the glass; we visit the mercado, buy a few groceries and jabber with Raul. It's as if we've lived our whole lives here.

Do you know— There are times when I imagine I've seen all these places before, long ago. It's true! I imagine our little town has no existence of its own, that it's only a jumble of

memories I've puzzled together.

The streetlights here are slender and green with lanterns of pebbled glass, like those on the street I grew up on in West LA. The bandstand we visit in the public *jardim* was moved from a Minnesota park. The apartments across the Rio Gilão have their boots underwater, as they do in Venice. The cobbles came from Bath, the beachside boardwalks from old Hong Kong, and the sandy shore from Maui's west coast.

You're remembering the odd encounter in the cafe last week, when I mistook a stranger for someone I'd known in my previous life. I was eager to introduce you to her. I thought she'd been one of my dearest friends!

I am, it seems, everywhere I have ever been; and at the same time, in a place without an identity. And whenever I hear a ship bell ring, I pull out my phone!

You're untroubled by any of this, and your comfort is salutary.

It's a holiday, you say. This is the land of weekends, Grampa. Every day is Sunday.

Perhaps Monday will never come.



Raul the Grocer

We stop by the mercado on our way home. Near the entrance to the large building, Raul has his corral of tables. He stands inside it, herding his fruits and vegetables, meats and cheeses, boxes and bottles.

As we approach, he's shaking a package of cashews, addressing a young man in board shorts. It's odd for Raul to be giving advice on nuts as he lives on yogurt and has no teeth. His voice is shrill and hoarse, and it whistles through his gums as he speaks.

He sees us, passes the cashews to the young man and raises his arms in welcome.

"O que precisais?" What do you need?

You answer him, and he's instantly reaching for this and that. His hands are hairy, like giant spiders. They grip the goods with fierce authority.

What an unusual fellow he is. He has an excellent memory. There's some detail you've mentioned about yourself that you think he's forgotten. Then, at an odd moment, he recalls it perfectly. How connected he is to the life around him. This little grocery is the center of gravity for our world. Raul is

holding it all together.

He calls his favorite clientele *os fiéis*—those who are loyal and buy their groceries from him. And we're two of his faithful. If we're under the weather, Raul has his delivery boy stop by to see if there's something we need. And when one of the faithful dies— Remember the old woman? Raul was doleful. His toothless jaw sagged, his spidery hands lay on the bananas, palms up. And then— He showed such grace in his acceptance, recalling the moments of cheer she'd brought into his life.

He's bagging our groceries now, grinning like a stuffed Pulcinella. His chin almost touches his nose. Has he forgotten? Of course not.

"Surf cheese," he announces, "and tinned cod." His throat murmurs with echoes, like an old well.

A woman in a print dress is beside us now, examining things. She looks at the apples, then at the breads, reaches for plums, stops to consider tomatoes, turning her head again and again. Don't be afraid! Trust the grocer. Everything will be fine.

Raul lowers the small bag to you with his big hairy hands. In his eyes, there's a tenderness for someone distant he loves, or someone he loved long ago, or someone he wished existed but never did.

Casa da Inez

Senhora Inez has a small house a short walk from the public market. The *casa* has a pleasing look on the street, white with yellow trim around the windows and the front door. The belief, she says, is that the bright trim keeps bad spirits from entering. So far, so good!

Inez was born in Spain. She and her daughter, Dosey, an accountant at a local bank, occupy the first floor. The Senhora has rented us the space upstairs, which includes our two small bedrooms, a sitting area and kitchenette, and the terrace overlooking the street.

As we approach, you point at the terrace, and we think of our golden mornings and the times we've sat there together since your arrival and watched the sun set over the town.

You open the front door, which is green, and we cross the threshold.

Inez, kind woman, is in her chair darning one of your socks.

She opens her arms and you hurry to her for a hug. Like the rolls she bakes, the Senhora is warm and round. How sweet she is. It's as if we've been living with her for years. Over

your shoulder, she shows me her mischievous grin, her downy mustache and the daring eyes of a dancing girl.

Dosey is at the dining table with her phone, talking to one of her many *solteiros*. Young men seek her attention. They appear, pick her up and take her out. Sometimes Dosey stays overnight with them.

Inez is alone more than she likes. She's happy we've returned. I wink at her and she titters. You're amused, understanding it's all in fun.

"We've brought you something," you say. A scallop shell from the beach. It's purple. Its rough exterior has rays like a rising sun. Its inside is pearly. You hand it to her and show her how to feel the pearly inside with her thumb.

Inez thanks you, draws you close again and gives you a kiss. And for me, another look. Not playful this time. This one is full of longing.

When she was young, Inez was as trim as her daughter. She's showed us photos from many years back. Inez was a magnet for men, and she threw herself into the arms of one. He gave her Dosey, then he fell in love with a Sevillian lady, crossed the border with her and never returned.

Inez sees the sympathy in my eyes and she stands, the scallop shell in her hand.

I let her longing touch mine.

"Angelo," she whispers, remembering the paramours from her youth.

It's a sharing much like the shell you've given her.

We are blessed to dwell with Inez. She knows how much

you care for her. And she knows I value her spirit, and her wisdom too—the mournful wisdom that comes with age.

We must be happy with what life leaves us.



Names

It's a question to ponder. What is your real name? The name that truly describes you. The name the Creator might have given you if the selection had been His.

You're Tenina to me. Often Teni or Sweetheart.

I call myself Angelo because I wish to imagine I'll start a fresh life following the one I'm completing on earth. But that's speculative!

I've nearly forgotten the name my parents gave me.

I love being called Grampa, of course.

On the way to Republic Square, we pass the schoolyard. The boys are often there, kicking a ball. Sometimes when they see us, they come to the fence. They laugh and push each other around. And they call to us.

They use names that are unfamiliar. It's a game for them, but their attitude can be scornful and the names derogatory. In the interests of learning the language, we commit their words to memory and we look them up.

A couple of weeks ago, the boys called me *Sem-Abrigo*, which isn't correct. We have a home. So we took it upon

ourselves to correct them. Not angrily, of course. I raised my Portuguese hat to them. “*Tenho casa,*” I explained. You were less polite!

After that, they used other names. *Estrangeiro*, they called me. Foreigner. Or *Marciano*. Martian. They persisted in seeing us as unfortunates and called me *Vagabundo*. Bum.

Then one of the older boys took charge. He convinced the younger ones that he had special knowledge. He settled on a new name, and they all picked it up. I don’t like it and neither do you. But we can’t be too harsh. They’re just boys and we’re visitors here.

Terminado. That’s what they call me now, and they sing the name out together in chorus when we pass. It means finished. Goner.

Terminado, they cry, shaking their forefingers, scolding me as one of their schoolteachers might. *Terminado, Terminado*.

I can’t argue with the concept.

But I prefer Angelo.

Surf Cheese and Tinned Cod

Sustenance is important. We take great pleasure in eating together. We're not pretentious about it. No, we're perfectly humble, content with our casual settings and our modest fare.

You like the cheese Raul favors. It comes in wedges, and the blue label has a picture of breaking waves. We call it "surf cheese" because of the picture and because the cheese has holes like bubbles of foam.

Surf cheese is soft and it sticks to our fingers. It's Raul's pick because it doesn't take teeth to chew. We like that it's gooey, and we like the taste too. It's creamy and sour. Once you start eating, you can't stop.

Surf cheese isn't for connoisseurs. One afternoon, we saw that the stone masons working on the castle restoration were eating it. They cut it with a blackened knife and passed gooey pieces around. We shouted and waved. Their English was poor, and we couldn't make sense of their Portuguese, so they had no idea what had provoked our greeting. But we enjoyed seeing them eating the cheese we prize.

No one can live on cheese alone, so we often share a tin of

cod. We enjoy it because it's rubbery. You can work your jaws for as long as you like, and it never gets mushy. It's like gum.

Sometimes we eat at home in our sitting room or out on the terrace. Inez prefers fresh fish, but she likes to join us. She enjoys our company. Often we take our cheese and tinned cod and sit on the marble blocks by the Republic Square fountain. You hold the sun umbrella over my head while I open the tin.

People like watching us peel back the rind of the surf cheese and stick our fingers in. And they share our amusement as we work at the rubbery cod. We chomp and chomp, laughing and shaking our heads. Cod is so unwilling to be consumed!

Sometimes we take a little bottle of piri piri along and sprinkle sauce on the fish. That burns our tongues. We stare at each other as we grind and the passersby laugh. Some are carrying things they've bought at the stores. Others are walking their dogs.

Afterward, we kneel beside the pool and wash our hands.

Graveyard for Anchors

The week you arrived, Raul told us about the Graveyard. He thought we'd enjoy it.

From the casa, a short bus ride and a leisurely walk took us to the place where beachgoers file across the white bridge that spans the lagoon. How the wind blew! You clasped my hand. I held on to my hat. On the far side was the depot for the old tuna train.

We mixed with people in shorts and swimming suits, lugging their beach bags and folding chairs. Down the tracks, we spotted the miniature train backing toward us.

The ride was a fine amusement. The passengers were from many lands. We heard German and English, French and Chinese. And a slushy tongue, from Eastern Europe perhaps. They all had sun and the beach in mind.

When the train reached the lagoon's far shore, you pointed at the muddy banks and the armies of crabbies marching alongside us. Possessed by some urgent purpose, they scurried back and forth like those in the world Grampa left behind. Then the mud gave way to sand dunes dotted with umbrella pines: trees that looked like a child had drawn them.

When the train reached the end of the line, the vacationers filed off, heading down a wooden walkway toward the shore. We joined them, uncertain where the Graveyard was. The old fishing village, now a resort and cafe, appeared on our left. You pulled at my hand and when I turned, I saw them: ranks of giant anchors on an abutment overlooking the sea.

The beachgoers found spots on the sand to plant their chairs and towels. We passed them, moving with mounting curiosity toward the Graveyard. A barrier of ropes and wooden posts cordoned it off. Within the confined area were scores of anchors with their picks dug in and their shanks to the sea.

We stopped a lifeguard and pestered him for information.

We didn't learn much. Just that the anchors had belonged to tuna fishermen who had worked this coast years before. The miniature train had been built to deliver supplies to the families who'd lived there and to haul the fishermen's catch from the beach.

We walked beside the roped-off area until we reached a spot that was hidden from view. Then we slid under the rope and wandered among the anchors. They were huge, rusted and dark, and the space between was tufted with seagrass.

I'm not a fisherman, but I know: fishing is hard work. And having done hard work myself, I know that determined labor leaves an indelible impression. As does the day when you realize your work has reached its end.

We decided to count the anchors, and we did that as we rambled through their ranks. Two hundred and three, every one of them chipped and battered.

When the count was done, we gazed at the group and wondered. Did the tuna go elsewhere? Were the waters fished out? Had a new way of fishing obsoleted the men and their fleet? Or was it competition? Had the markets been stocked by harvests from other waters?

There was no one to tell us the story. Only the anchors with their points dug in. They were a mute declaration for all who might come upon them. A vow from the stoic seamen: our labors are over, and the safety provided by anchors will nevermore be the watchword of life.

Imagining that pledge, hearing it in my head—

A vacant moment possessed me. A gap, a lapse of thought. And then—

The meaning of the Graveyard emerged. The meaning for me.

“This is my place,” I said.

You turned and stared at me through your lemon-frame glasses.

“Tenina,” I said. “I too will bury my anchor, and I will bury it here. Right now.”

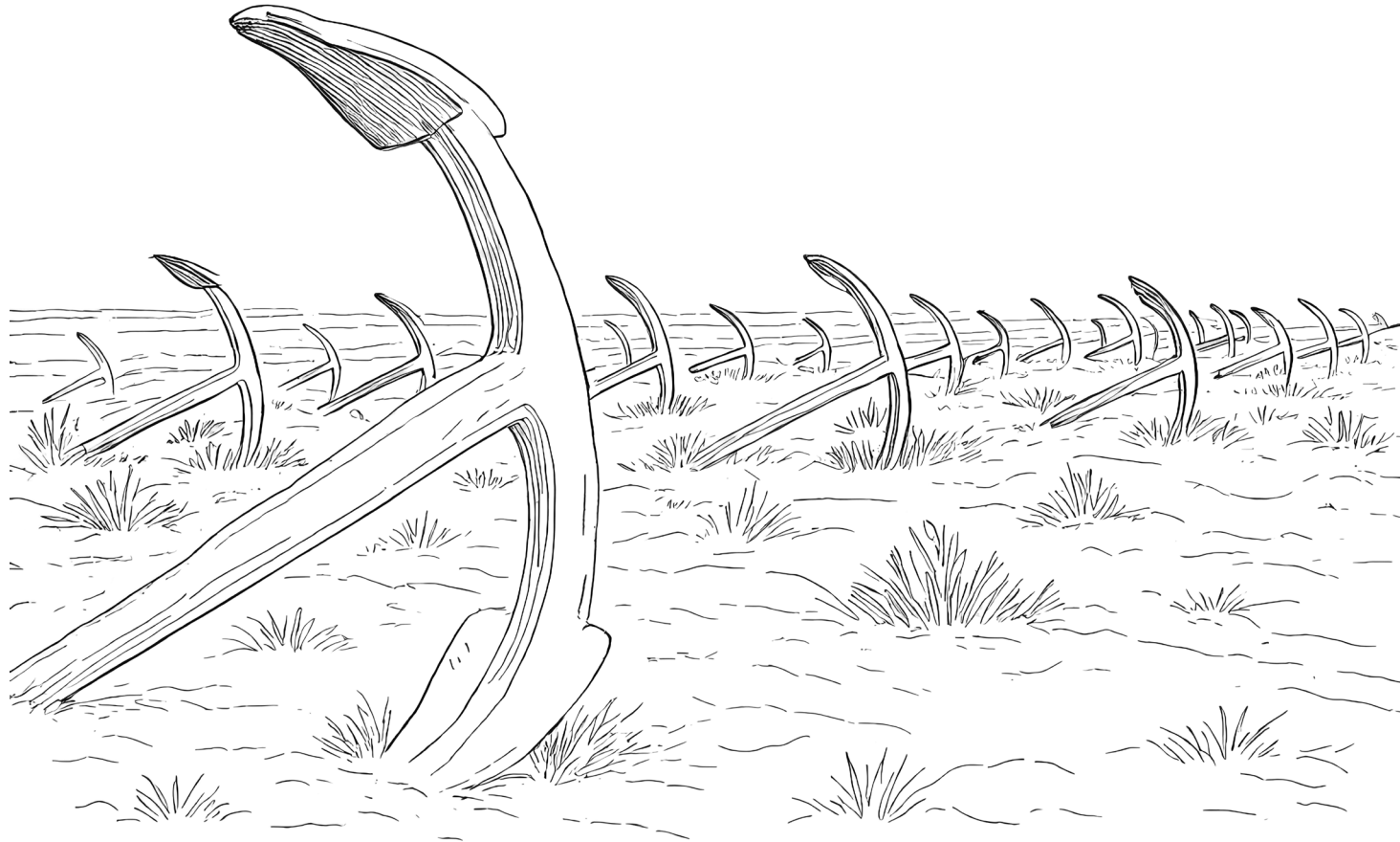
And I did.

I went down on my knees. How surprised you were!

I went down on my knees and pledged— With you, with you— I would henceforward be spontaneous, untethered— Joyful. And mournful too. Adrift in the past and present. Enriched by both.

No hesitations, no exemptions. No monitions, no chains, no lines, no nets.

I let go of my moorings— For good.
And with that resolve, I was free to join you.
Like this, without notice, vital things are revealed to us.
Aren't they, sweetheart.





The Poverty of Expertise

I know you're concerned about starting school in the fall, when our holiday ends.
Others may dismiss your fears, Tenina, but I cannot.
School is a threshold. Beyond it, adults are waiting.
Your life will be very different.
Don't ever lose the little girl.

The child inside your grampa was always trying to take charge. I should have let him. There were times when others considered me an authority, but I never wanted to be one. I cared nothing about being certified fit for this or that. Perhaps my objection to official status was a sign of my hatred for responsibility!

Whatever judgment may be passed on me, good or ill, in my life with you I am proud of being an amateur.

This, I believe, is the secret of secrets.

To be ignorant always, always—

To hold it as the highest human state, unvarying, permanent.

To not know.

To be wrong. To make mistakes.

To be always at the beginning and never at the end.
To refuse to surrender to the poverty of expertise.
Amateurs always. Always! Sample and learn. See, hear,
smell and feel.

No protection. No cover for fear or regrettable error. You
were born a fool, and nothing has changed. Stick your neck
out!

Pardon your grampa for getting worked-up.

One of the privileges of aging is choosing among the great
many things you can squawk about.

But I now feel—passionately, my dear—that being igno-
rant is best, no matter who you are or how long you live. Keep
the discoveries coming until they overwhelm you.

After a lifetime of struggling for prominence, that's Ange-
lo's wisdom.

You, my dear, because you're a child— Because you're a
born amateur—

You don't have to change.

The Seal Stamp

*y*ou found it on our first visit to the curio shop. You grasped the wooden handle and brought it forward through the dim light. “What is it?” you asked.

“A seal stamp,” I explained. “You melt wax and drip the wax on an envelope flap. Then you press the metal end of the stamp into the wax. People used to write letters to each other.”

The idea intrigued you.

You turned the stamp over. There was a letter T carved in the brass head.

You laughed, and so did I.

So we bought it.

But we had no wax and no letters to send. What would we stamp?

Fruit chews, you said.

What an idea.

But when I considered your suggestion carefully, I realized: it might work. When a chew is in your mouth and you’re mashing it between your teeth, it gets warm and soft. Wherever you set it, the chew will cool once it’s stamped.

So we paid a visit to the mercado and bought a bag of

chews from Raul. At home, we spilled the fruit chews out on the floor. It was a scramble to unwrap them all, and a lot of jawing to make them soft. But before long the chews were all embossed. *T, T and T* again.

We invited Inez and Dosey to join us, and we sat on the terrace together. You explained how we'd personalized the chews and you passed them around.

Dosey wrinkled her nose, but Inez didn't care. So the three of us began. What a treat that was! So sweet— Berry and cherry, lime and orange, with your ardent spirit pressed into each.

The three of us chewed and chewed until there were only four left.

Then Dosey surrendered and we finished the four together.

When the last chew was gone, Inez gave me that look, longing, lonely. And the dear lady began to cry. Dosey was embarrassed, but I grasped Inez's hand and held it firmly. And I began to cry with her. Then you, my dear child— You felt the depth of the moment you'd orchestrated, and tears descended from beneath your lemon glasses.

Finally Dosey broke and she joined us, sobbing along, understanding the sorrow welling from her poor mother's breast.

A circle of pliable hearts, my dear, gathered on the terrace. The stamp of your innocence had embossed itself on us all.

Poetry

I like writing verse and so do you. Writing together pleases us greatly. For that purpose, my notepad and pencil are always ready.

Fashioning a poem is a playful act, and the results often surprise us. Like making a necklace: the words are colored beads; we pick ones we like and slide them onto the string, unsure what the effect will be until the last bead is chosen.

We haven't written enough poems to fill a book, but that pleases us too. We like our incapacity. For us, a poem is a moment that came and went, a moment we shared in our clumsy, inconclusive way.

In my previous life, I assigned myself tasks, and I worked to complete them. I'm over that now. Writing poems with you is part of my redemption. We're always spontaneous, and it's no work at all.

We cherish our goofs. If we don't get a perfect rhyme, if there aren't enough syllables to fill out a line or if there are too many, we laugh at the faults and leave them alone.

Poetry can be serious. We like that breathless feeling when

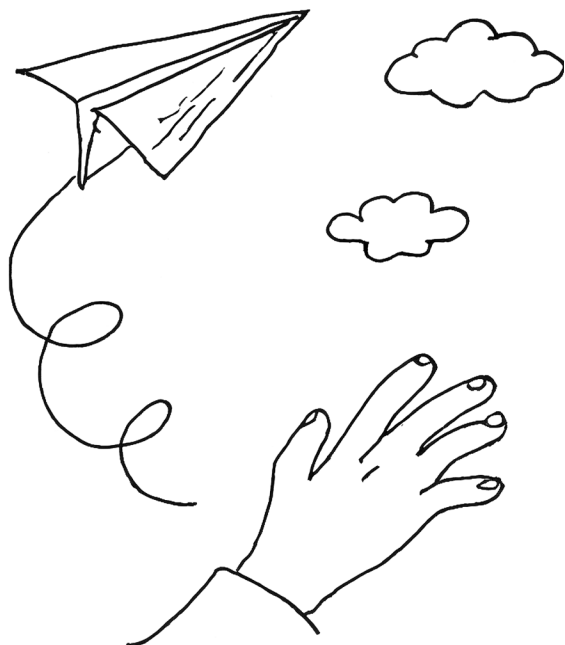
we light on a special thought. But we're not so attached to life's gravity that we force our little lines to conform. We're happy for them if they lurch along and have no value beyond the pleasure they share with us at the moment they're born.

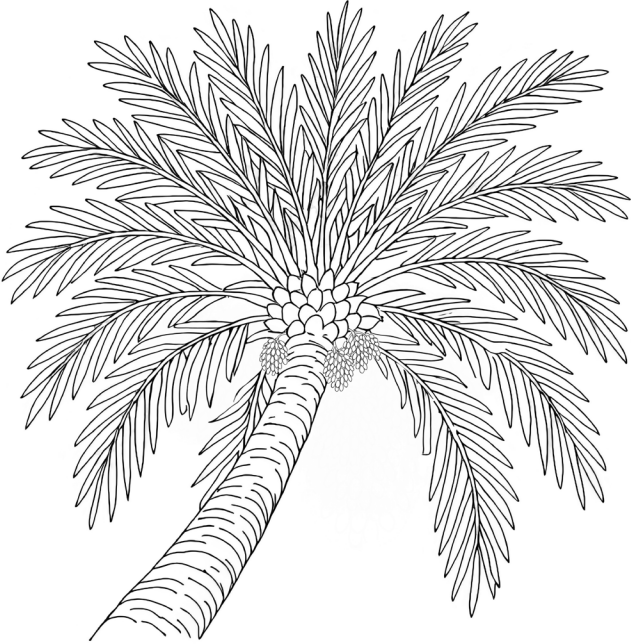
Often we set them free. We make a glider of a page and fly it into the wind. We make a boat and give it to the undertow at the beach. Or we fold it and hide it in a book on the shelf or under some clothing in a dresser drawer, imagining we will rediscover it at a future time.

From our terrace, we can see the three giant palms rooted in the park at the end of the street. We admire them daily. They're arranged like the ace of clubs, their great heads high above the rooftops, fronds arcing in every direction, sparkling with light. They're a century old, the park trimmer says, and their forebears came from the Canary Islands.

The dates on the palms have been ripening all summer long. The giants are releasing them now. We want to be with them for that.

And, of course, we'll take our notepad and pencil along.





Dates Are Falling (Tenina says)

What's that tapping around you and me?
It's not fog dripping from frond or leaf.
The sky is clear, the sun's above.
Dates are falling. Palm tree love.

I so like being out of doors.
It's heaven with my hand in yours.
Your craning head, your lifted eyes.
You don't expect my sweet surprise:

Oh dear Grampa, you're my world.
Take these words from a little girl.
Your gentle fingers my small lips kiss.
I want every day to be like this.

Together, together we see and touch.
I like that, Grampa, very much.
Why do you stand there so amazed?
Is something wrong? Your eyes are glazed.

The moments pass, quick as thought,
Tapping still as the little bombs drop.
That's what they do, you surely know.
Why should the dates trouble you so?



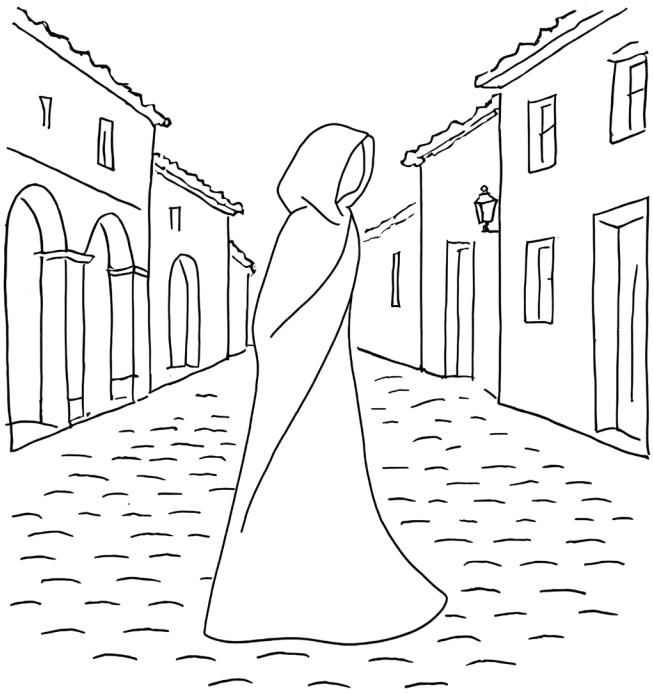
Dates Are Falling (Angelo replies)

These shiny dates that fall so free
Are fine and rare— Gems to me.
With all my years and lurching round,
More precious things I've never found.

I'm the candle, you're the flame.
Maybe the palm trees feel the same.
All the love in trunk and root
Summed and centered in a little fruit.

Sunny days and jolts of bliss.
The future won't always be like this.
Soon the season will turn around,
And all our shinies on the ground.

Put those troubles far away.
Nothing matters but today.
Outside, old man. Leave your keys.
Dates are falling from the trees.



The Woman in Black

Who is she, Tenina? The locals must know. The first time we saw her, she was passing beneath the café umbrellas that border Republic Square. A few days later, we saw her turn into the alley that runs between the pharmacy and the jewelry store.

Chance sightings, we thought. She couldn't be following us. What reason would she have to do that?

We asked Raul. He's never seen the Woman and has no idea who she is. The same for Inez. There's no cause to be suspicious, but I wouldn't mind hearing that she has an identity and some business here.

She was wearing a cloak both times we saw her. It was black and the fabric looked coarse, burlap or wool. Did the wind wrap it around her? Perhaps she was turning away. A loop of the cloak hooded her head, while the hem spiraled about her feet.

I'm assuming she's older, but who's to say? Her hands weren't visible. They grasped the rough fabric from inside, holding it close. On the first occasion, I got a glimpse of her brow when she looked over her shoulder. Then she bowed her

head and hurried away. Thankfully, you weren't frightened. "Can we get a gelato?" you asked, as if nothing had happened.

The Woman's appearance seems ominous. Does her presence pose some kind of threat? To the village? To us?

Her skulking violates the town's joyful spirit. And her cloak makes no sense, as hot as it is at midday. She must feel like a sardine wrapped in leaves and set on the coals.

This afternoon, we're strolling down the cobbled promenade, passing through the public gardens beside the river.

I notice her behind us, on our right.

Reading my alarm, you turn and look.

Her cowl lifts.

Give me your hand, Tenina. We're going to hurry forward past the red benches, bending our course to skirt the concrete planters on the left. We'll circle the bandstand up ahead. Quickly, my dear.

The Woman in Black is stirring my fears.

She's not from around here.

She's recently arrived from a distant country. Or another world. A doomful world. A world of woe. In her eyes, the vacationers here are fools. And the residents are blind. There's a tragedy brewing, and none of them know about it.

Has she changed direction? No, she's still approaching us.

Veer to the left, Teni. Alongside the grillwork that circles the bandstand's moat. In the water, turtles are bobbing, but we aren't going to stop and observe them as we normally would. We draw our faculties in, like turtles ourselves, and continue with hurried steps beneath the pink blooms of the

large oleander.

She's passed the bandstand. Headed toward us.

The Woman is following us. No mistaking that.

Perhaps she's come to warn us, to prevent a calamity. Or maybe she's here to trigger one, to set some misfortune in motion.

Maybe her presence is purely symbolic. She's a creature of omen. She comes and goes, and she doesn't stay long—a few hours, that's all. She wanders the streets, then—poof—she's gone.

Is she still behind us? Don't turn, sweetheart.

We're at the end of the promenade, climbing the incline beside the amphitheater, weaving through the throng of travelers by the terminus of the Roman Bridge. And now we're hurrying across it, passing the lutist, weaving through foot traffic.

No, no, not yet. Don't look, don't look.

We continue moving until we're midway. And now with the Rio Gilão below, we pause by a seating niche and turn.

There's no trace of her. Not on the bridge or the praça below.

The Woman has vanished.

I'm relieved. Greatly relieved.

But she's rattled me, Teni.

Doesn't anyone know who she is or why she's here?

Such a Fool

Two gray days. On the third, the sun is visible, but it's only a blur.

We venture outside, wary, watchful. We circle our block, then wander farther. No sign of the Woman in Black. She seems to have vanished, returned to her world of woe. But I'm still a bit muddled.

Age shakes our surety, sweetheart. And the truth is—

Grampa's little boat has been unsteady for years. It lost its rudder just after you were born.

I'm speaking of your grandmother.

My blessing, my wife.

I know. I've spoken of her before. Whenever I'm discomposed, the memories return. I remember her firmness when anything threatened. I remember her care, her tenderness. I see her before me: the smile that filled her cheeks; the gaze that was so expansive, I could never find its edge.

Unlike myself, she was highborn. But she loved my striving, and she ennobled it. She believed in me, *Teni*. She made me feel that I belonged to the future. It's easy to imagine she's still here, that I'll see her in the *mercado* talking to *Raul* or

walking on the beach with the wind in her hair.

Every day I'm in her debt. Every day I follow her words or an example she set. "Seek the truth," she said, "and speak it to everyone. What's right and wrong is inside us. Don't let fear rule your mind."

For me, she's still alive. I have conversations with her. She asks me questions and I answer her. I unload my heart and she understands. Just as if you and I are talking.

Dear Tenina—

If I could have any wish fulfilled, I would have her time on earth extended—long enough for you to get to know her. If you could feel her spirit. If you could hear her wisdom and look into those fathomless eyes.

What a night! The night I realized who she was.

Moments like that— You never forget.

The dark forest. Thunder and rain. Leaves flying. Her voice was in my ear. Birds in swarms, circling, crying— There was water in my boots, Teni. Lightning clapped, the earth shook. Then all at once the sky cleared, and through the branches I could see the moon.

Dear girl, forgive me. I'm such a fool.

A Ferry Ride

We've talked about riding the ferry down the Rio Gilão to Tavira Island. I've recovered my equanimity and my confidence, so this morning we're going to do it.

We thread the streets as the sun is rising. The whitewashed walls glow. The iron-red roof tiles are varnished with dew.

We buy our tickets at the dockside kiosk, but we don't leave on the first ferry. We wait for the older one, the blue and white one with red rails.

When our ferry is ready, we board and climb the stair to the top deck.

There's no one up here but us and a young man in a blue parka.

His hair is blond, combed over his crown, and he has a ring in one ear. He's facing the river's mouth and he has a pair of binoculars around his neck.

The ferry rumbles to life and pulls away from the wharf, passing moored skiffs on either side. We're motoring beneath the vehicular bridge, its concrete pediment crusted with mussels—

“Tern,” the man with binoculars shouts.

A white bird closes its wings and falls out of the sky, splashing into the river. You let go of my hand and step toward the bow.

I follow.

The white bird emerges from the water. You follow it with your finger as it rises into the air.

“Little tern,” the man says, “on its way south.”

He’s speaking to you. You glance at me and I nod.

“Like human travelers,” the man says, “they come and they go. They’re here for a while and then they leave.”

Another white tern folds its wings and plunges into the river.

“Little terns,” the man says. “Sandwich terns and caspians too. They’ll cross the sea and winter off the coast of Africa. The ones that make it.”

His nose is sharp and his lips are red.

“I’m Nunez,” he addresses us both. “Enn’ to friends.”

A line of larger birds appears, crossing the river’s mouth.

“Spoonbills,” Enn says. “Have a look.” He removes his binoculars from around his neck.

You cock your glasses onto your brow, take the binoculars and raise them.

“A second string’s right behind the first,” he says. “Can you see how many?”

You follow the string, counting under your breath.

“Nine,” you say.

“You noticed their spoons?”

You nod, smiling, handing the binoculars back. Enn is

familiar in a pleasing way. It's as if he knew we'd be here and had chosen to join us. Beyond the river's mouth, a labyrinth of tidal marshes appears.

He's scanning the shallows. "There are waders in these lagoons," he says. "Dunlin, whimbrel, black-bellied plovers—"

As the ferry rumbles past an inlet, four small birds scare from the scrub.

"Yellow wagtails," he says.

The ferry coughs. Then its rumble mounts, and it's shimmying to the right. We're slowing, approaching the island.

On the littoral, a man is stooping beside a bucket, digging for clams.

We bump the dock and the engine dies.

Enn turns to me. "Shall we see the surf together?"

I nod. "We'd like that."

The crew secures the ferry and the passengers begin filing off, lugging their beach gear toward a concrete walkway.

We follow Enn down the gangway to the lower deck, trailing the group. The concrete path is flanked by umbrella pines, crowns perfectly round. Large black and white birds are flying between them, birds with long tails.

"They're going south too?" I ask.

"No," Enn says. "The magpies live here."

As the walkway tops a rise, the ocean comes into view, stippled and gleaming beneath the sun. The beachgoers are spreading out.

"Look," Enn says.

He's motioning to a spot on the shore where a group of

small birds are following the surf line. He starts toward them. You and I follow.

Speckled gray and white, there are dozens of them, pecking the bubbles.

“Sanderlings,” Enn says.

The birds move as one, like mechanical toys, hurrying upslope as the tide rolls in, running after the surf as it retreats.

“Brave creatures,” Enn says.

The birds poke and pivot like an army of sewing machines, needling the froth as if they’re trying to stitch the tide to the shore beneath.

“Far from home,” Enn says.

Like us, Tenina.

As if he’d heard my thought, Enn adds, “They won’t be here long.”

The sanderlings run with the waves. The white flash of their wings mirrors the sparkle of sun on the wavelets.

Who is this stranger? Does he have some purpose?

“Migration’s a dance,” Enn says, turning to me. “The season leads, and the birds must follow. A dangerous dance, even for the strongest.”

He kneels, smiling at you.

“There are birds we call swifts. Have you ever seen one?”

You shake your head.

Enn looks at me.

“No,” I answer.

“They’re the aces,” Enn says. “Masters of migration.”

Why is he telling us this?

“They cross the sea,” Enn says, “the mountains, the Sahara Desert. They fly from here to South Africa. Without stopping.”
The strange fellow lifts his chin as if challenging me.
“A group are gathered on the cliffs near Carvoeiro.”



2



Curios

This morning the sky is blue and the sun is bright. You polish your lemon-frame glasses. I grab my flat-brimmed hat and the sun umbrella I use as a cane.

“Curios,” you say.

I laugh. That’s exactly what I was thinking.

We’ve been to the shop once, when we found the seal stamp. There are other things, no doubt, awaiting discovery. It’s on— What’s the name of the street?

Rua Ten Couto. What a memory you have!

Beside the auto repair. A short walk and a pleasant one.

So, minutes later, we’re there.

The sign by the entrance reads *Curiosidades.*

A bell rings as we open the door, and through the dimness, the proprietor appears, chortling and flaring his blood-shot eyes. He remembers us.

“Henrique,” he reintroduces himself, patting his oversize belly. And he begins to boast about the treasures he’s found since our last visit.

He gestures toward the shop’s interior. You step forward and I follow, gazing to either side. Railroad spikes. A holiday

wreath. A stuffed mouse reading a magazine. Military patches. An antique chorizo roaster. A painting of a frog on a flying flamingo.

“Your name, sir?” he asks.

“Angelo,” I answer, inspecting an upright butter stick holder. In addition to novelties, there are items that have important utility, once you’ve thought it over.

Henrique pauses and crooks an arthritic finger.

He has something he thinks we need.

He motions to us, then leads the way down a dusty aisle. Halfway along he stops, lifts an item from a shelf with one hand, takes my umbrella from me with the other, and passes the object to me.

A tube of brass, a foot long.

It needs some examining, but I discover one end has a cap, and when I remove it and tip up the tube, an odd device slides into my palm: a rail with a glass housing on top.

“A bubble level,” Henrique explains. “A rare antique.”

I can see the bubble in the fluid inside the glass.

There’s no mistaking its years of use. The instrument had been leveling things for a long while. I wait, expecting an explanation. Henrique just nods.

I raise the level so a window’s behind it, and I tilt it back and forth, watching the bubble slide, reaching my free hand to an overturned pot to secure my balance.

And Henrique’s idea strikes me.

I laugh and laugh, and our new friend laughs with me.

Well, my dear. What do you think?

Henrique can see I'm a bit infirm, so he's offered a solution.

Wherever we go, I will take the bubble level along, and whenever I feel unsteady, I will use the device to determine exactly where level is.

What an idea. With tools like this, a man can live forever!

"And the young miss?" Henrique asks. "What's your name?"

"Tenina."

"For Tenina—" Henrique raises his finger again.

He leads us down the aisle and crosses into another. Atop a stack of old magazines is a book. Henrique hands it to you.

It's a children's book. The story of Magellan, in English.

"Angelo will read it to you," Henrique says. "It's about a great embarking."

An odd subject for a little girl.

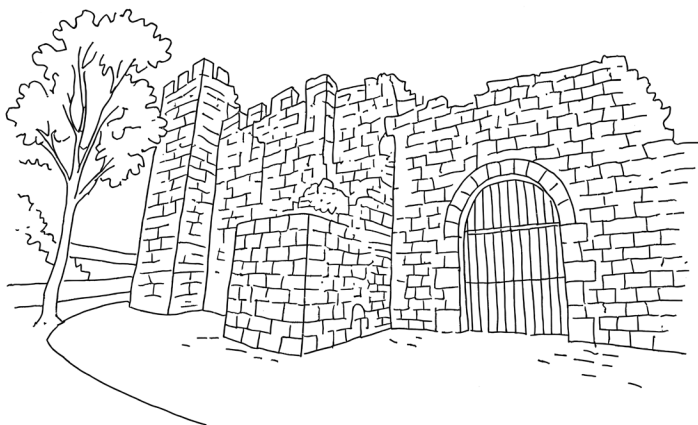
"This goes with it." Henrique hands you a Portuguese coin with an old ship on it—one with square sails. "It's the ship Magellan captained."

You're admiring the coin and the book.

So we buy them, along with the level.

"We like your shop," you say.

"*Você é linda,*" Henrique replies.



The Castle

Henrique's shop is near one of our favorite pastelarias. We're both thinking about a treat, and there's not a long line.

The glass cases have three shelves with golden trays on each. What fragrances, what heavenly sights! To merchants, I tip my hat. To bakers, I remove it.

It's *rolo de figo*, sweetheart. Earthy brown, damp and mysterious. *Torta de mel e canel*, two trays of *jesuitas* and a pile of *dom rodrigos*, each wrapped in colored foil—too sweet, even for us!

I lift you so you can see the higher shelves.

Crunchy *palmieres*, creamy *parras*— And there, waiting

quietly on a tray, is the pinnacle of the bakers' art: *torta de laranja*. You put your finger on the glass.

I see them, Teni, I see. Each is topped with sticky threads and a candied orange, and custard seeps out of the rolled middle. For so many things in life, confusion rules; but on this we are sure.

It's our turn, and the girl behind the counter is smiling.
"Torta de laranja," you say. "Duas."

On the street, I kneel on the cobblestones. We face each other, and the drama begins. A *laranja* can be ambushed in stages: the soaked cake, the dribbling custard, the gooey threads and the candied orange. Or you can open your mouth as wide as you can—as we do now—and, with a giant bite, mix all the textures and flavors together.

Bliss, my dear—

We chew in unison, squinting and savoring, imagining every forward moment in life will be just like this.

The bliss persists until only the bakery paper remains, then we drink from the bottle of water we've brought.

I rise, wary momentarily, scanning the storefronts and corners for the Woman in Black. Thankfully there's no sign of her.

"Let's go to the castle," you say.

A wonderful idea.

We dispose of the paper remains, clasp hands and begin our amble up the narrow street toward higher ground. The castelo has become one of our favorite places.

The original structure, Raul says, was a Moorish kasbah.

In centuries past, it was reduced to foundation stones and a few stub walls. The castelo we know, its turrets and merlons, was mounted in recent times by a misguided dictatorship to resemble a fortress in Northern Europe. It's entirely pretend, which suits us perfectly.

We reach the top of the hill, breathing hard, admiring the castelo's high walls, with the crowns of trees peeking over them. Through the entrance arch we can see: the tourist traffic is light.

Together we enter the sanctuary, and in a heartbeat we feel its calm: the cheer of its flower beds, the serenity of its gravel walkways and vine-covered arbors. Bougainvillea climbs the interior walls. Tall jacarandas rise from the colorful plantings, arboring the entire space with their graceful sprays and lavender blooms.

A place of peace and reflection.

You lead the way through the garden to the stone steps at the castelo's rear.

It's a steep climb and I need both hands, so I pass you the sun umbrella.

"The level," you say.

Will it work? I remove my pack, open it and find the device. I slide the level from its tube, tilt and tip it, watching the bubble move. Then I'm climbing, setting my feet on the stone treads, and— Hah! It works, Tenina. It really does!

With one hand on the wall, I'm following you up the steps.

We reach the ramparts, and you lead the way past its castellations, with the boughs of the jacarandas waving over us.

The turret's before us now. We cross it and peer through a gap in the merlons, seeing the street below. From here, the town seems strangely distant. The lavender blooms bob over our heads. The gardens' bright geometries carpet the castelo's interior. The refuge is all around us.

“Grampa?”

“Yes?”

You seat yourself on a bench and pat the space beside you.

“Will you read the first chapter?”

Of course, sweetheart.

Lawless Winds

I remove the storybook from my pack. Together we admire the man in sixteenth century garb on its cover. Then I open the book and turn the first page, recalling Henrique's words.

A great embarking.

Magellan, we learn, grew up on a farm in northern Portugal. There were animals on the first floor. He slept upstairs with his parents. He was a hardworking boy, and he did his chores without complaint.

A young couple approaches, arm in arm. They pause, enjoying the view and a bit of our story. Then they smile and move away.

Magellan's father had connections, so Ferdinand was sent to Lisbon to work as a page in the royal court. He was schooled there. He learned about hunting and armed combat, and about exploration at sea, which was all the rage in Portugal at the time. Columbus had returned from the New World, and every starry-eyed kid dreamt of being like him: braving the unknown and returning with revelations that would shock and amaze.

Ferdinand wanted to attend navigation school. He distinguished himself as a page, so his wish was granted. He was sent to a place on the southern sea coast. *Escola de Sagres*.

“Where is that?” you ask.

“Sagres? Not far. We could take the bus.”

“Is the school still there?”

“Probably not.”

“More,” you nod.

I continue reading.

At the school in Sagres, boys were taught by experienced seamen. They learned ship construction, how to make maps, how to steer by the stars. His teachers gave Ferdinand words of encouragement, words that challenged his daring and stirred his hopes.

“That’s how great embarkings begin,” I say.

At one point or another, many of us are like Magellan.

There are things we aspire to, things we feel we must do. Desperately. No matter the cost. There’s a ship we must board. We must feel lawless winds in our sails. We want to be borne to a distant place that no one on earth has ever seen.

These aren’t only dreams of youth. If anything—

“Grampa?”

“I’m sorry, Teni.”

I find my place on the page, wondering for a moment which of us Henrique intended the story for.

The Loose Tooth

It's bothering me again. It kept me awake half the night. It aches, and there's a sharp pain in the root. The same as before. My tongue isn't strong enough, but I can wiggle it with my fingers.

I'm not sure, sweetheart.

It's been with me for a long time. I'm grateful to it and I'm sad that it's losing its mooring. I don't want to be rid of it. Despite its weakness, it's still working. But— Is there a way, I wonder, to distance myself from its decline? I would prefer to separate its fate from my own.

The challenge is one of discoordination.

The concept is hard for a child to grasp. It's hard for me as well!

We don't fail all at once. Most of the apparatus is perfectly fine, ready to continue operating for years into the future. But a tooth is loose. Or somewhere, out of view, a more vital cog in the mysterious machine is about to fail. And all the other components, so happily working and eager to continue, must pause and take account.

Questions must be asked. If there are answers, they must

be found.

All the participants in the careful design must accept the reality: one cracked stone might bring the whole edifice down.

What a misfortune that would be.

You've grabbed my hand and you're shaking it, trying to lead me away from these troubling thoughts.

You're right, my dear. I'm a fool to dwell on things like this.

We have no control over time and the limits on life.

A tooth is loose. So let it be loose.

A Childhood Friend

I set down my phone. You hear me sigh and you sense my sadness.
“What is it, Grampa?”

“We try, my dear. We try, we succeed, we fail.”

Shall I share a sensitive matter?

I’ve been thinking about old friends. Childhood friends.

This started with the fire.

The fire that consumed my home and the community I grew up in, before I found my way here. The calamity led to thoughts about events in my life that I could never relive, about friends I’d lost years before.

I reached out to one of them a while ago. When we were boys, we were very close. We’d shared our hopes and our fears.

It was easy to imagine he’d remember our bond as I do. I thought he might have the enthusiasm, after the passage of so many years, to renew our friendship. I imagined the fire might have affected him in the same way it affected me. So I found a way to reach him online.

I just got a return message. Shall I read it?

The message is brief.

Curt. Professional. Dismissing.

Thanks, he writes. What an idea. Let me consider it. I've been busy with so many things.

Well— This is disappointing.

My old friend is speaking to me in another language. Not English and not Portuguese. They are words from the language of loss. Not a thick stream of them. Just a trickle.

I should have known better. But fool that I am—

Someday you will long for old friends.

And you will accept—as Grampa must—that what divides us, one from the other, isn't time or distance. Each has his or her role in life, built from necessity and compromised dreams. That role, and the thoughts that sustain it, open a divide.

Yes, my dear. I am.

Very sad.

And as you know, when I'm sad, I'm inclined to verse!

I'm prepared. I have our notepad and pencil.

Shall we?

We'll sit on the terrace, side by side.

You can hold the sun umbrella while Grampa scribes.

When we put sorrow in verse, is the sting any less? I think not. A poem usually makes things worse! But let's do what we are able.

Here's our progression: we'll recapture the memory, then confess our longing. Finally, in the last stanza, we'll give voice to the understanding, painful as it is.

Sea of Thoughts

When my mind yearned to stretch,
Another shared the thrill.
And every thought that I set free,
He set one freer still.

Then growing freed us both,
And different partners we chose.
I spoke to cohorts in commerce, he to strangers
On a million pocket phones.

Thoughts can never replace a friend.
They only explain the loss.
A sea of thoughts divides us now.
And there is no way across.



The Swifts

We aren't surprised by Enn's visit this afternoon. I'd shared our address with him. He's taken with you; and he enjoys my company too, or sees in me some challenge that interests him.

"The swifts," are the first words he speaks when we greet him on the threshold.

You laugh, reach for his hand and lead him inside. I clap his back, remembering the passion he has for his birds. Enn reminds me of my younger self.

Inez has spent the day preparing *cozido*. She invites him to join us for an early dinner. While we eat, Enn tells us about the swifts.

“There are twenty-eight of them,” he explains, “preparing for departure. They’ll fly from here to the south of Africa.”

“How long will it take them?” Inez asks.

“A couple of weeks.”

“They don’t stop,” you explain to Inez.

She laughs.

“Tenina’s right,” Enn says. “It’s a single flight, the whole way. They’re able to disconnect parts of their brain and rest on the wing.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” I say.

Enn checks the time. “We might see them at sundown,” he says, “when they return to the cliffs.”

Your eyes are wide. “Tonight?”

“Where is this?” I ask.

“*Praia da Marinha*,” Enn says.

The three of us help Inez clean up. Then we bid her goodbye, and you and I join Enn on the front seat of his beat-up truck. Without a word, he starts the engine and heads for the cliffs.

By the time we arrive, the sun is low in the sky.

The rocky walls are sheer and orange, glowing with reflected light. In places they’re pitted. Far below, the sea beats against them.

Enn points at pockets and caves. “They nested here this summer. The breeding’s over, but they’re still hanging around. Preparing to leave.”

He makes a chittering sound with his tongue. “You’ll hear them before you see them.” Enn looks up. “They’ll be flying above us, over the cliffs, over the sea.”

He removes his binoculars from his neck and hands them to me. He opens his pack and finds a smaller pair he's brought for you.

Then we wait. Listening. Watching.

After what seems a long while, we hear a shrill, frenzied sound vibrating in the sky above us.

Enn points. We peer through our binoculars.

"I see them!" you cry.

And so do I. They're whirling above us, turning, swooping, slicing the air with sickle-shaped wings. I try to imagine them crossing the sea.

"When they churn like this," Enn says, "it's hard to make sense of their flight. Then all at once they're streaming together, so fast you can't keep them in view. They're incredibly strong, unbelievably agile."

"They don't settle to rest," I mutter.

"No. You don't see them perched on rocks. When they return to their nests, they don't pause at the entrance. They fly at the cliff full speed, close their wings and they're gone."

We stand there for minutes, craning our necks, following the swifts with Enn's help. Then it ends as he described: the whirling ceases, the birds arrow at the orange walls and vanish into them.

We lower the binoculars.

"When will they leave?" you wonder.

"It won't be long," Enn says. "They're measuring their strength. Sensing the weather. Will it be clear? For how many days?"

“You think they understand the challenge?” I ask.

“In an instinctive way,” he nods.

“They’ll decide when to go,” you say.

“That’s right,” Enn replies.

He points at a rocky prominence down the coast. “For a week now, I’ve seen two ospreys on that point. Eating fish they’ve caught. Taking exploratory flights. Considering what direction they’ll go to make the crossing.”

Enn turns and eyes me directly.

“The birds have different ways,” he says, “of facing the challenge. But there’s no negotiating with the cold. They have to leave.”

“We’re going to Sagres,” you volunteer. “To see the fortress. Where Magellan learned to sail.”

“Exciting,” Enn says. “That’s near Cabo de São Vicente, the place they call ‘The End of the Earth.’ A special location for migrating birds. When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning,” you reply.

Ghosts in the Grove

By bus, it's a full day's journey to Sagres and back. Having never been, I spoke to Henrique about it and got advice from Raul.

We board the bus first thing in the morning. Lemon-framed glasses, Portuguese hat, surf cheese and cod, my bubble level and sun umbrella, and our Magellan storybook.

At the rest stop in Olhão, the driver suggests we visit the tipuana grove by the water where retired fishermen sit and talk. He gives us directions.

From the depot, we walk to the avenida and follow the cobbled median. The houses visible on either side are white cubes with flat roofs and third-floor lookouts facing the sea. A bell tolls the hour from a nearby steeple.

At the waterfront, we skirt the public market and enter the park. The trees are large here, with long leaf sprays that snake in the breeze. The shadows cast on the benches beneath are like a rippling current.

The slats are still damp.

There's a pair of elderly men a dozen feet away. You wander over, brave as a mariner, raising your hand to hail them.



Their muttering stops. They turn toward you. Then they notice me.

Silent. Staring.

I approach, lifting the crook of my umbrella in greeting.

Neither responds.

One wears a mariner's hat with a rumpled brim and tarnished braid. His lips are thin and straight, and he's squinting at me. Dismissing me. Who am I? What do I know?

His companion is severe as well. His grizzled jaw is clenched. His eyes are hooded and harsh.

"Fishermen," I say with respect.

You step beside me and grasp my thigh.

The hatted one scowls. The grizzled one glares.

"What did you catch?" I say. "May I ask?"

"Tuna," the hatted one answers.

"We saw the Graveyard," I tell them. "What happened?"

"The fish betrayed us," the grizzled one says.

"They found other waters," the hatted one adds.

"And the anchors?"

The hatted one is suspicious. Why do I want to know?

"Where are your boats?" I ask.

"They were here," the hatted one looks around them.

"There was water and a dock."

"The work you did—" I say. "It was hard to give up."

"Hard?" the grizzled one laughs.

His gaze has shifted. He's peering through the trees at the sea beyond. Suddenly I think: he didn't retire. He rolled his ship in a storm. The grizzled captain was lost at sea, and so

was his crew.

I can feel you, Teni, hugging my leg. Nervous now, sharing my fear.

These two old men have already passed.

We're talking to ghosts.

High above us, the crown of a tipuana shifts. The leaves flutter, murmuring in a language we don't understand.

The captains' departure wasn't graceful. They left with resentment in their hearts.

You don't want that for me, I know. And I don't want that for myself, you can be sure! I don't want to open my eyes and find myself here in this grove.

Well—

Time means nothing when you're a ghost. But for you and me, time still matters. We don't want the driver to leave without us.

Give me your hand and we'll hurry back to the bus.

Pretty Fish

Our bus arrives in Faro, where we'll transfer to another headed for Portimão and points west. It departs in fifty minutes, so we have time to explore.

We emerge from the depot, pass the ticket office and head for city center.

Faro is a modern town. There are tall buildings and shops that sell things no one needs: tuxedos and lingerie, ornate jewelry, luxury items for pets. "Is that Dosey?" I wonder, seeing a woman passing a luggage store on the arm of a man. Dosey visits Faro from time to time with her paramours.

A shop on our right has a large TV in the window. The screen is watery blue and fish are darting across it. You giggle and stop, and I stop too.

I saw a video like this once, in a dentist's waiting room.

"No," you say. "It's not a video, Grampa. The fish are real."

Can it be?

We enter the shop.

On either side, there are blue screens with electronic fish darting back and forth. Then— I realize you're right.

They're real fish. What look like screens are, in fact,

aquariums.

A young man with a startled look and cropped hair approaches.

“*Posso ajudar?*” he says.

“We like your fish,” I say. “*Falas Inglês?*”

The young man’s command of English is good. He introduces himself and escorts us from tank to tank, identifying fish as we go. Sharp-nosed angels, spiny lions, blennies and clowns, damsels with stripes and spots, butterflies in a riot of colors.

Your eyes are wide. You raise your hand and point.

“That’s a wrasse,” he says.

The fish is fluorescent.

“Amazing.” I kneel, aligning my vision with yours, seeing the fish as you do. Appreciating the miraculous creatures for the first time.

You’ve fixed on one that’s silvery blue.

“A chromis,” the young man says. He’s kneeling with us.

“Golden angels,” he says, following your finger. “And pearly ones.”

You laugh and your finger touches my nose. Then it returns to the glass.

“A firefish,” the young man says. It’s small, eeling, electric purple.

“Hard to believe—” I’m whispering now.

To believe what? That life, ephemeral as it is, can be as wondrous as this.

“Where are they from?” I ask.

“The Philippines,” the young man says.

“Never been,” I confess.

“Neither have I,” he replies. “It’s the home of pretty fish.”

You give me a curious look.

I’m amused. “Our bus doesn’t go that far.”

On the way back to the depot, we pass Faro’s mercado. Thinking of a bakery treat, we enter the building. On either side there are steel tables bedded with ice, covered with fish. The morning catch, *Teni*. Each pile is tagged. *Robalo*, sea bass I believe. *Dorado*, bream, rays, hake. And *roncador*—they’re called “grunts” in the States. Silver sardines, mackerel, sole. There’s a tag that says *tamboril* and fish lying upside down with their livers exposed.

I see trouble in your eyes.

“The fish here are bigger,” I say. “Good for eating.”

An old man’s rationalization.

“They’re not as pretty,” you say.

“No, they’re not.”

I sigh and give you a bit of philosophy: “We live with mundane fish, but we dream of the pretty ones halfway around the world.”

You stop and regard me through your lemon frames.

You’re remembering the magical creatures, fragments of beauty cut like gems, bright and fluorescent, darting before us.

“I like the pretty fish better,” you say.

And I nod. “So do I.”



The Fountain

When we reach Portimão, our bus frees us again for a short while. The sun is high and the air is warm, so we follow the esplanade beside the marina. There's a small gathering, people formally dressed.

They're leaving the marina together. Shall we follow?

They cross a boulevard and enter a garden.

I touch the elbow of a man in a suit.

"Pardon me. Do you speak English? Where are we?"

He points at a bright yellow building. "The municipal theater," he says.

The group is headed into the building. We slow and stop at the garden's border beside a small fountain. There's a pedestal at its center, and a white curbstone around it. The water is turquoise and the spout is whispering.

A fountain, *Teni*. Fate, I suppose.

As you know, I have a special affection for them.

Our fountain in Republic Square is a short walk from the casa. There's the fountain in front of the palace in *Estói*. And there's the little one with three shelves at the villa in— Where is it? *Moncarapacho*?

We reach the curbstone, and we stand together, hands clasped, listening.

The spout glitters in the sun. The pedestal's platter collects what it can, and the rest falls to the pool.

For so many of the troubles that life brings, fountains offer relief.

Why am I drawn to them? What is the message Grampa hears?

Before a fountain like this, I think of my newborn daughter—your mother—and the revelation that was granted to me during her first month of life.

I've never shared this, but it's right you should know.

Because of my difficult upbringing—my absent father, my resentful mother—I entered adulthood thinking of children as a burden. Your great-grandmother—who, thank heaven, you never met—would often harry my sister and me about all the things she might have done if we hadn't cursed her with the job of keeping a roof over our heads.

Your grandma Camila changed all that. Having children was vital to her. I mounted a strong resistance, but she laid down the law: it was children or else! I couldn't live without her, so I closed my eyes and hoped for the best.

And with that surrender came a new understanding. It emerged in a moment, an indelible one. Your mother was not yet a month old.

Camila had wrapped her in a small blanket, and there were other women—two aunts, neighborhood friends—all gathered around. You could call it friendly competition, but

the conflict was in earnest. I could see that. The women were competing for the infant's attention.

And all at once, I realized why.

In the infant's gladness, there was such a welling of gratitude and cheer that the most doubting of skeptics would have found belief.

The infant was a fountain of joy, and the women pressing around her longed for a drink.

And so, my doubts dissolved.

"You were meant to do this," Camila said. And she was right.

A woman's love was a necessity for Angelo. But nothing can compare with the love of a child.

Lagos

Our bus pulls in beside others at the Lagos depot. It's before noon, so we have time to see the bay and the cliffs before the 2:30 departure for Sagres and the fortress where Magellan attended navigation school. We are close, sweetheart.

"Just cross the street and follow the river," the driver tells us.

His guidance puts us on a wide promenade with a busy crowd. There are young people here, dressed casually. Tank tops, t-shirts, shorts and sandals. Bicyclers pass. The sun's intense, so I open our umbrella.

Look. Moored to the wharf across the river.

"Magellan's ship," you exclaim, removing the coin from your pocket.

Indeed, the craft looks just like the one on the circular silver Henrique gave us. We're close to Ferdinand's haunts, and the spirit of discovery is all around us!

I nod and smile at strangers as we pass. They're feeling the spirit too. I know a few of them. That young fellow in the striped shirt—I met him in the mercado before you arrived.

And the girl in the purple swimsuit: she gave me a pear from her garden back in the States. Is Grampa imagining things? Ha! It's fun to pretend.

Your laces are loose. Stop. Hold the umbrella and I'll retie them. Are you noticing? This crowd has a different kind of intensity. Every sentence we hear is in a foreign language.

Alright. Let's hurry along.

There. Can you see it up ahead?

The river's mouth. We're reaching the coast.

We head to the right, past an old stone fortress. Over our shoulders we can see a large bay. That must be what Henrique called "Meia Praia," the place where the fleet was anchored. It was Henrique's namesake, Henry the Navigator, who governed this outpost, sponsored the shipbuilding and spurred the mariners' dreams.

There's the sign, Teni. The cliff walk starts here.

On the Ponta Trail

We follow the foot traffic down a concrete stair. Three bare-chested boys trade barbs meant for the passing girls in bikinis. The boys laugh and signal each other, but the girls act as if they aren't there.

Below, a beach comes into view with the sea foaming onto it. The cliffs bordering the beach are scarped and calved. People are swimming or lying on the sands; others are emerging from tunnels in the rock or vanishing into them. The cliffs are amber and orange, riddled with holes, like open eyes or mouths speaking.

What is the rock saying? What has it seen?

Sea stacks near shore have created quiet pools. There's a man on his back in one, with a child on his chest. Like us, Tenina, floating together. In the rock above them, light is trapped in an eroded well.

The turquoise water draws back and returns, frothing into tunnels and holes. Bathers crowd the caverns and climb the slabs. It has a special beauty, this crumbling place. And a special fascination. There's a line of perforations higher up, a loose area no one has the nerve to explore.

We follow visitors like ourselves, continuing along the path beneath the shade of trees. I've collapsed the umbrella. Will you hold it, Teni? A sign points toward Praia do Pinhão, but another warns of rockfall and collapsing stairs. A few minutes farther, the walkway climbs toward a pair of modern resorts, and as we top a rise, the view up the coast appears.

This is the Ponta. Steep walls and sheer ones, falling to the sea; stacks and islets with minarets and slides, all apricot and fawn, invaded by the turquoise tide and its front of foam. A grand sight, as Raul promised. But—I confess—a troubling one.

What is happening to the earth, my dear? The sweet land these innocents call home— The beach far below is ranked with lounge chairs and crowded with lolling bodies. Complacent, it seems. Curious perhaps, but accepting.

Farther along, the walkway descends between masonry walls, hiding the view. Then a smaller beach comes into view below, along with a steep stair descending to it. Here the cliff walls rise abruptly, looming over us. A man waves, and a woman nods and follows. Let them pass, Tenina. Grampa is removing his pack, finding the bubble level. I'm dizzy and the level will help.

The sheer rock is bedded, showing its age.

There's a sea stack in the bay far below. Some boys are climbing it. A dozen gulls perched on the stack take flight together. One boy has reached the top. He jumps feetfirst and disappears in the water. Will he surface? People on the beach are watching.

I'm sorry, sweetheart. The height, the risk— It's a bit much for me.

I know. It's entertainment for them, and for you, as well. Yes, I see. The boy's surfaced. He's fine. But Grampa is—

Feeling dizzy. And insecure. I'm afraid I've come too far.

Just a moment. A pause. Let me draw a few breaths.

The bubble level is steadying me.

Let's not follow the crowd. I don't want to descend the steep stair to the beach. We'll continue along the wooden walkway. Eye on the bubble, slowly. Manage these weak legs and this woozy brain!

There's some wisdom in my years, Tenina. This coast isn't granite. It's limestone, crumbling and broken. A chaos of fragile sediments. How are you doing? Ah, it's easy for you. We're crossing the top of the Ponta cliffs now, safe on our walkway, feeling the breeze. Below us, fissures and caves, slides and chutes— An eroding world with few secure places. Weak cliffs and a weaker old man. We're both crumbling, but I'm in the lead!

Our goal is the Ponta beacon, and we can see its gridwork now, rising from a promontory ahead. Far below, an inflatable passes through an apricot arch, leaving its foaming track on the turquoise beneath. Kayaks emerge from a network of caverns, led by a man on a paddleboard.

A sprinkling of skiffs, some in the glow beneath holes, some threading shadowy passages, one beached before a heaped collapse. Not as incurious as I'd imagined. There are people on foot. You can see them through that eroded

gap: exploring ledges and chambers, crawling through holes,
appearing at windows and mouths in the rock.

Like a colony of ants trying to make sense of a skull.

The earth's edge is crumbling.

Our world, our life— There's an edge to that too.

What can be understood? We puzzle in darkness, peering
out of our vacant sockets at the limitless sea.

You've hurried ahead.

I'm turning, doing my best to catch up—

Steady, steady— A twisted bough catches my pantleg.

Teni? What's happened? Where are the planks and rails?
The wooden walkway has vanished.

We're on a path now, a mere goat trail. And the gravel is
loose.

There's no one around us, no one visible on the slopes
below.

Beneath a Pine

*M*y guts tighten. Somehow, somehow—
We've strayed, Tenina.
The fall on our left is precipitous. Stay clear of the
edge. The narrow path rises ahead, climbing a lone bluff. The
scrub is huddled and windblown.

Slowly, my dear.

Stop. Don't move.

Tenina—

Do you see what I see?

Straight ahead, on the mount beneath the stunted pine.
Overlooking the deep.

The Woman in Black.

Silent. Motionless. Rising from the ground like a coil of
smoke.

Has she been waiting for us? Did she know which branch
in the path we'd take?

How, Tenina? How could she know?

The cowl's shadow obscures her face.

She wasn't on the bus. Was she?

I'm fearful. Give me your hand.

She's not here by chance. The Woman's been following us.
Is the wind lifting her? Her cloak is no longer touching
the ground.

It's almost as if—

She's leaving the bluff. Drifting toward us.

A chill wind reaches out. My collar flutters.

Hold tight, Teni. There's no time to flee.

My legs are wobbling. My vision is cloudy. I can feel her
vaporous presence approaching. It's turning my head, grazing
my cheek. It's pierced my clothing. Her chill invades my side,
touching my innards.

Stay close. Don't let go.

Her cowl shifts. I can see her purple lips. She's raising a
hand with fingers like worms. Wet and cold—

The Woman touches my chin, opens my mouth, pushes a
scorched almond between my lips.

I spit it out! I swing my arm and the bubble level passes
through her!

I clasp you and turn away— Hurry, hurry!

Back down the path!

Over my shoulder, I see: she's following us, but her move-
ments are slow. The Woman glides as if she's a creature from
dream.

You're racing ahead. As weak as I am, I'm faster than she
is.

Back, back—

There's the wooden walkway! And people are on it!

Run, my dear. Run for our lives!

Breathless, distracted, confused— The walkway ends at the Ponta beacon, remember?



To Sagres

When we reach the beacon, we're relieved to find people and a crowded car park. I retrieve my phone, but my hands are shaking.

I hand it to you and ask you to call for a ride.

"It's the black one, Teni. Touch it."

We make a request for a car to take us back to the depot. From there, I'm eager to return home. But you're not as spooked as I am. You're much calmer. And to my surprise, you've not given up on Sagres.

"Magellan," you remind me.

"The Woman," I worry.

Who is she? What does she want?

"Grampa—"

I shake my head. "I'm afraid she'll reappear."

"We've come all this way," you pout.

The bitter taste of the almond is still on my tongue.

We may have missed our connection, Teni.

I check the time, but it appears that we're still on schedule.

"The Woman," I mutter. Is she a material creature, a physical being from earth or beyond? Or is she more subtle than

that? A symptom of my decline, my doubtful lucidity.

You're shaking your head. "I don't care about her."

Tenina— I wish I had your confidence.

"She's just trying to frighten us," you say.

You might be right. It's true—she's done no real harm.

And she's as slow as a prophet's camel.

Alright, sweetheart. I'm nervous, but we'll continue.

When our ride appears, we return to the depot in Lagos.

The bus is waiting for us in the lot. When we step aboard, I worry the Woman will be in one of the seats. But she isn't.

We settle at the back. I watch the door open and close, hoping she won't appear at the last moment. And she doesn't. How relieved I am when the driver starts the engine and pulls into traffic!

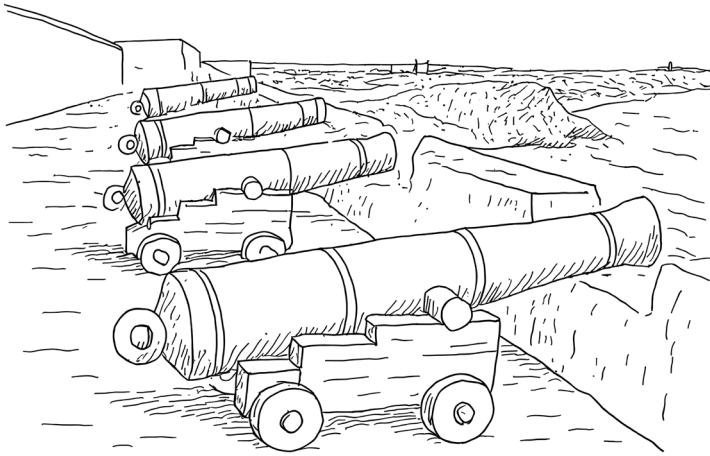
The bus passes through three small towns and enters Sagres quietly, halting beside a bus stop with a metal hood and a single bench.

Across the way is a small park. There's a statue of a man wearing a cape, gazing out to sea. "That's Henri," the bus driver says, and he points down the street. "You can follow the path to his fortress."

"Magellan went to school there," you explain.

The driver laughs and pats your cheek.

I sigh, shaking my head at myself. The threats have vanished. The world is right again. It's the adventure we planned. We clasp hands, descend to the street and start toward the fortress together.



The Fortress

The pathway leads by a shuttered restaurant and into an alley between apartments. The dwellings give way to fields of cane. Then, straight ahead, the sand-colored wall of the fortress appears, long and low, spanning the finger of land jutting into the sea.

Our walkway leads directly to the arched entrance. The water is on either side of us, glittering to the far horizon.

We're here, Tenina.

You quiver and clasp my hand, and we pick up our pace.

The fortress ramparts are notched with cannon bays. According to Henrique, a moat once protected the entrance, and a drawbridge was raised from inside. No trace of that

now. Just a tall wooden door with rusted rivets. It's open wide, awaiting our arrival.

The massive walls are stained and battered. Beyond the visitors' check-in, a courtyard opens.

"The Compass," I point and we hurry toward it.

Henrique spoke of the giant earthwork they call the "Mariner's Compass." Forty-eight lines radiate from its hub. We circle the Compass in silence, knowing Ferdinand walked here, reciting calculations, reviewing his lessons, dreaming of the day he would put them to work.

When we've made the full circuit, we stop and turn together, imagining. Few structures are still standing, but there was once a dormitory where Magellan slept. The academy where classes were held was a place of inspiration, no doubt. Mathematicians, engineers, scientists and astronomers traded ideas, developing the methods Ferdinand would use to circle the world.

We climb the ramp to a cannon battery, humbled by the place. Do the stony walls remember him? The cannons are rusted and silent. The wind huffs through the embrasures, as if they would speak. Of course they remember.

"The Point, Grampa."

The Point, yes. That's why we've come.

We cross the gravels, headed toward a path on our right. Beyond the fortress, the finger of land juts into the sea. And at the finger's tip, clouds are boiling: golden clouds, struck by the sun, brighter than the battlements behind us, with their own castellations and glowing parapets. When other students were

sporting, Magellan would follow this path—the one we're on now. He'd see the sun-struck clouds, the heavenly fortress towering over the earthly one; he'd scan the restless sea below; and he'd feel the winds of liberation blowing between.

But the wind isn't blowing right now.

"It's calm," you say.

An elderly couple is approaching, and a silver-haired lady turns with a smile. "A storm last month," she tells us, "raised waves a hundred feet high. Higher than the ground we're on." Her partner nods.

A large bird wings over our heads, and you follow it with your finger toward the Point's end. "They're leaving," you say.

"An osprey," the elderly partner says. "Did you see its black elbows?"

"You know Enn," you guess.

"I don't think we do," the lady replies, and the couple disappears behind us.

The strange calm persists, but the blasted ground attests to the harshness of weather. The exposed rock is pale and barren, the growths low and windswept, huddled in crevices. And as we approach the Point, mats of ice plant appear as if summoned from my past. The upright fingers, green and maroon, covered the beach dunes where I grew up.

Magellan trod these same mats, crushed these same gravels—to reach this same Point. The blue sky is gone. It's pearly now. Overcast.

"Look," Tenina points to the west.

Through the fog, we can see a dark silhouette, long and low.

“It’s the Cape,” I guess. “The End of the Earth.”

Magellan would have seen it too, standing here as we do now with the smell of the sea in our noses and the cliffs beneath draped in mist; the invisible rafts of seabirds floating below; and the flocks of winged migrants hovering in the fog, all waiting for the signal to leave. Imagining the future that awaited them.

We’ve reached the Point, my dear.

That low wall of concrete at the cliff’s edge.

Below the Point, the rock falls sheer to the sea.

Here we can lower ourselves and sit with our backs to the battery. I’ll remove my pack, take our book from it and resume Magellan’s story.

The visitors have thinned. There’s only a small group a few yards away.

As they depart, the tour leader turns and says to his charges, “In the sixteenth century, the village of Sagres didn’t exist. The fortress was built for show. There was never a navigation school here.”

The statement is a shock to us both.

“He’s a fool, my dear,” I pat the storybook. “We have it in black and white.”

Huddle close and we’ll learn more.

Alone at Dusk

*A*t the school in Sagres, Magellan was a sensation. He was recognized by his instructors and fellow students and graduated at the top of his class. He returned to Lisbon hoping to get an assignment on a sailing vessel. But his family lacked the connections, and he ended up with a clerk's job in a government office. This was a humiliation, but he refused to accept defeat. In anticipation of a future at sea, he continued to learn about the maritime craft.

Years passed.

Finally at the age of twenty-five he got his chance.

He was allowed to sign on to an expedition that sailed south, around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Indian Ocean. The intent was to establish harbors and trading stations for the Portuguese crown. The mission was dangerous. Storms, shipwrecks and battles with the locals took many lives. Being young and idealistic, Magellan worked without pay, for glory and the honor of serving the King.

In his fourth year overseas, he was wounded in battle. When he recovered, he joined an even more dangerous expedition and sailed still farther east. He engaged in desperate

battles and barely escaped with his life. He showed courage in combat and such seagoing skill that he was given a ship of his own to captain.

What a grand thing that must have been! While I now discredit ambition, it's hard not to cheer for the young man's achievement.

Well—

Magellan remained in foreign lands for seven years. During that time he fought in many battles, and in one unlucky encounter in Morocco, he took a spear in his knee. He'd earned much respect with his countrymen overseas, but he returned to Lisbon a cripple with an empty wallet.

He found the capital city much changed. The streets were crowded with travelers. The country's new wealth was visible wherever he looked. His exploits had helped forge a prosperous Portugal. But he was galled by his poverty and the absence of public credit he felt was his due.

And his dream of being an explorer—the first to set eyes on a place that no one on earth had ever seen—was stronger than ever.

At night, in his private hours, Ferdinand remembered his time at the school in Sagres and his walks to the Point. He'd lingered alone at dusk on this very spot where we are now.

Listen, Tenina.

Is that *crack* the sound of a vacant breeze?

Or have we caught the wind in our sails?

It's easy to imagine, isn't it.

The fateful hour, the ship leaving its mooring, headed for

waters no mortal eyes have seen.

The dangerous crossing is underway.

Look there, sweetheart. A red dot through the fog. And
it's pulsing.

That must be the lighthouse at The End of the Earth.

3



Shaving

We are back at our casa, and you're rising from a restful sleep.

Are you hungry? I hear Inez in the kitchen below.

Do you smell? She's using the *pastel* dough we bought before leaving Lagos.

Breakfast and confections, then we'll go out.

Well—

To be truthful, Teni, it took me a while to nod off. I was troubled.

Yes. About the Woman in Black. Imagining who she might be and when I'll see her again.

Her appearance on the cliff may have been a lesson for Grampa.

She could have ruined our trip to Sagres. But she didn't.

Our time here together, sweetheart, means so much to me. I'm not going to let the Woman deface it. I can't keep worrying about her. I can't be upset if she reappears.

These are my thoughts this sunny morning. At each stage in life, there are unpleasant things we must endure. For me, right now— It's her.

If she vanishes, good riddance!

If she doesn't— I'll just have to get used to her.

Ha! Is it really that bad?

I deserve the teasing, I'm sure. My grooming habits are abysmal. I don't put much effort into tidying myself.

This morning will be different.

I'm going to shave!

How long has it been? Do you recall?

As old as I am, you'd think my beard would stop growing. Or at least slow down. But like the rest of me, it keeps on despite discouragements. Above my ears, there's silver; and on top, it's thinner than ever. But on these cheeks and chin, the matting's still thick. There can be no argument. A shave is in order.

Yes, your help will be appreciated.

I can't see what I'm doing without using the mirror Inez gave us. If you'll hold it, I'll put the metal basin beneath.

We'll fill it with water.

Now— Where is the soap and towel? And the disposable razor I've grown to like.

Alright, we're ready.

That's it. Lift the glass. A little higher, dear.

Perfect.

Now. I slap some water on my fur. Lather the soap and rub it in.

Razor in hand, I find my cheek in the mirror . . . and begin scraping.

Look at that. It's coming right off. You remember the

night I tried to shave myself with a toothbrush? It's easier with a blade!

Higher, dear. A little higher. That's right.

The one side is almost done. What do you think? How does it look?

I see you in the mirror, nodding.

Well now, it won't be long.

Once I rinse, you can put your fingers on Grampa's smooth chin.

Our Likeness

The shaven Angelo is better, mmm?
Look at the two of us in the mirror, Tenina. What a pair
we are.

An innocent treasure and a lost one.

It wasn't always this way.

I was once like you.

The steady eyes that find their grounding so simply. That
confident smile, never tentative or doubtful. Your gravity, your
mirth— The curiosity that greets every new truth like a long-
awaited reunion.

As a child, I was as daring and direct as you are.

And as a young man, I was a bounty for feminine eyes.

Don't laugh!

This gray pate, this lined brow, this stooped frame—
Imagine instead: an arresting fellow with jet black hair, four
inches taller. Strong, muscular, with an acid wit and a surefire
smile. Women craved my attention.

They did! If I had photos, you could see for yourself.
Unfortunately, in my bitter retreat, I left all reminders of the
past behind. But—

I'm not playing with you, my dear.

Many admired your grampa.

And I was no fool. I saw my chance. From the desiring hopefuls, I selected one like no other. A beautiful creature with a natural wisdom and a giant heart.

She bore your mother, a wonderful infant; but—as the child ripened—a complex creature whom beauty and brilliance ignored.

What a gift it was when you entered the world.

Your birth didn't honor your mother or father. No—

Fate had a wiler purpose.

This may sound odd; and arrogant, no doubt—

But we imagined we saw in you a reincarnation of Grampa.

My boldness, my delving nature, my reflective spirit, my mournful soul. Before she died, Camila even recognized me in your hands: exploring, assured, precise.

We all wish to discover, in the generations that follow us, the replication of our better qualities. In this, I've been especially blessed.

In you, Tenina, are preserved the things I most value in my own nature.

When I contemplate the end, I remind myself that, in a way, I'm not going to die.

In our harmony, our likeness—

I will live on.

Fresh from the Oven

*H*and in hand, we descend the stair.
The scent of fresh-baked pastels greets us.
Creamy custard. Crisp rims and doughy cups, filled to the brim.

The aromas are billowing clouds, warm and thick.

Are you sharing this feeling? Oh, you are. Behind your lemon-frame glasses, your eyes are closed. We're no longer conscious that we're descending. Our feet might be on the treads, but our spirits are rising.

Can pastry be a deliverance?

It seems that it can.

Has Dosey opened the oven door?

Is Inez sliding the baking tray out?

Is the tray ranked with steaming pastels, custards scorched?

Are their voices raised, crying for a sugary rain?

The sacrament is waiting for us. We will approach the altar together, Teni, extend our tongues and receive the treat. I wonder: has Inez added bits of candied orange to the custard, as she's done before?

At the bottom of the stair we turn together, arms extended

before us like somnambulists, making our way to the kitchen door and passing through it.

We halt. We raise our heads. Our lips part.

There's joy in our hearts, sure now the blessing will be fulfilled.

The sacrament touches our lips and our souls sink into the prize, lost in creamy richness while our liberated selves crush the rim and begin the luxurious chew.

We've lost our connection to the physical world.

We're creatures of the ether.

You're a cherub and I am Angelo: buoyant, euphoric, delirious—

The warm confection is no symbol, my dear.

The pastel, simple and small, is salvation itself.



The Carefree Way

We're strolling down the street together, admiring the sun's display through a veil of cloud. Hoops of pink and purple circle a bowl of glowing gold.

What are you thinking?

Ah yes. The pretty fish.

I can see them swimming in the pool of color the sun has poured out. We haven't forgotten them. And they haven't forgotten us.

Where are we headed? I have no idea.

Our best days are the aimless ones.

Look at the vacationers waiting in line to dine at the open-air cafe. Chatty, oblivious, letting time pass. Beside the river, boys race their scooters back and forth, going nowhere and happy about it. On the breeze we hear the cascading phrases of a Renaissance lute: the player has returned to his niche on the bridge. Two elderly women stroll past the shops, jabbering. "I like that swimsuit. Where is my coin purse? Your nose needs sunscreen. My god— Look at that wobbly old man and that cute little girl." Across the avenida, a couple in love speak to a phone, shooting a video no one will watch.

All those years when my time was jealously guarded—
There was love, a great quantity of it. But too much gravity.
The lightness was lost. Here with you, in our foreign remove,
that's all in the past. It pleases me to be irresponsible, and I
intend to maintain that loose standard as long as you're here!

Sadly, for Grampa, the carefree way was often out of
reach. My instincts undermined me at every turn. Like a dog
scattering gulls, I had to chase my hard-bitten thoughts into
the air. Now my energy's flagging and that helps. And my
eroding surety—that helps too.

But most importantly, there is you.

Tenina, the little prankster. You're my ally in all of this.

When my focus narrows, you blunt it with an impulsive
request.

When thoughts take me into the future, you roll your eyes
and shake your head.

If I'm worrying about something, you tickle my middle.

And when I'm overly introspective, you tug my hand, as
you're doing now, and bring me back.

Do you remember our *fado* moment?

We were on our way home, passing a club with gloomy
lighting. Through an open window we heard a woman singing
over two guitars. Being a guest in this land, and eager to be
generous, I lowered my brow and nodded in time. The singer
was artful and delivered her sorrowful verses with feeling.

"What do you think?" I asked when the song ended.

"It sounds like a lot of complaining," you said.

I laughed. Your opinion was harsh.

But then— I realized you were right.

When something bitter touches your tongue, you don't sample it. You don't grind it with your teeth and swallow it down. You spit it out!

Your rogue spirit, your impish festivity, has freed me to be the carefree child I have always wanted to be.

They Must Fly

Our friend Enn again. Our new friend. Why is the strange fellow drawn to us? He loves your wonder, as I do. You're so happy to see him, it fills his heart with joy. Perhaps he's stirred by concern for you. Or pity for me.

His birds—

There are more he wants us to see.

Early this morning, with Inez half dressed and Dosey asleep, we slide onto the seat of his truck and hurry to the Olhão coast.

On the edge of the Ria, among the sand dunes, there's an abandoned building. Its stucco is crumbling, its windows are cracked, and the air around it is swarming with birds.

"House martins and swallows," he says, as we pile out, "bankies and barnies and red-rumps too." He hands you the spare binoculars. He removes his from his neck and gives them to me.

The birds are small and frenzied. They surround the house, weaving past walls, circling the roof like a cloud of gnats. To the right, scores are perched on derelict wires.

“What are they doing?” you ask.

“Catching insects,” Enn says.

“They live here?” I wonder.

“No, my friend,” Enn says. “They’re all going south.”

He’s staring at me.

Then he sighs, bowing his head, and steps through the grass.

We follow and a pond appears behind the house. The martins, he says, are fluttering above it with their stubby wings. The swallows, he points, are wheeling and gliding beneath, skimming the dark water.

“They understand what’s ahead?” I ask.

“I’m sure they do,” Enn says softly. “The crossing takes courage.”

He’s trying to go easy on me, but Enn has a message.

He smiles at you. “Now,” he motions us back to the truck, “we’re going to the salt pans. You’re going to see something few people have seen.”

Five minutes on paved roads, ten on dirt ones through scrub and tall grass. A walk on trails beside stagnant lagoons, and finally Enn stops and turns, finger to his lips to silence us. The next steps are quiet and slow.

The trail turns and a large lagoon appears. Its surface is covered with birds—larger birds, dark gray, motionless with their wings folded. Hundreds of them.

“Black-tailed godwits,” Enn whispers. Standing in water a few inches deep. All facing the same direction.

“Going south?” you whisper.

“Yes,” Enn nods.

“When?” you wonder.

“Soon,” he murmurs. “Very soon.”

Scanning the raft of birds through Enn’s binoculars, I feel their fixedness of purpose. The heat of summer is dying. They sense the impending cold. The decision to leave wasn’t made all at once. It settled into them gradually. They’d uprooted themselves, but the flights had been testing ones. They were lingering now, nostalgic, remembering.

My dear Tenina— Grampa understands.

The days are passing. The end is in view.

They’ve resigned themselves, knowing the flight can’t be put off. A long winter is coming, and the world they found so comfortable can no longer be their home. They must fly to another land. A distant land.

And with that knowledge, the uncertainties of the flight and the destination loom before them. The future is threatening. But they aren’t complaining.

“When will they go?” you ask.

“When the conditions are right,” Enn whispers. “It’s been blowy this week. They feel the imperative, the mental commitment. One afternoon they will hear a voice: ‘It’s time to go, it’s time, it’s time.’ They’ll leave at day’s end and fly at night.”

He faces us both. “Most will be bold, impulsive, courageous. Some will falter at the last moment. Some will remain here and starve.”

Oh Teni— My heart goes out to them.

Do you understand?

It's not easy to lose your home. It's not easy to bid farewell to the world you know. It's not easy to hurry your wings—and your spirit—into another world, an invisible one, imponderably distant.

“Many that leave,” Enn says, “never come back.”

For them, we will say a compassionate prayer.

They must embrace an unthinkable future, spread their wings and fly with hope and determination. And no reassurance whatever.

In the truck on the way back, the three of us share the silence.

As we approach the casa, you say, “They’ll make it.”

Enn laughs. “Many do. And sometimes we help. If they run into headwinds, they fall out of the sky and land on trawlers and cargo ships. I’ve seen tankers covered with birds.”

Before parting, Enn finds a foldout ID card in his pack. He presents the card to you, along with his spare binoculars, as gifts. The ID card has pictures of birds and their names in English.

An Innocent Gift

Before we left the salt pans, on the way back to Enn's truck, you spotted some white flowers among the parched grass.

We were both surprised.

"They're sea daffodils," Enn said.

It was late in the season for wildflowers, but there they were.

You picked three, and when we returned to the casa, I held the ID card Enn gave us, and you had the fragrant beauties in your hand.

I turned the key in the lock and we crossed the threshold.

Through the pane of glass in the kitchen door, Inez was beating dough with her fists, a curl of hair shaking beside her ear. Dosey was in the front room, seated at the table with her phone, staring at nothing with those dark, mystical eyes.

You wanted to give the daffodils to her.

We approached her together quietly.

I touched your shoulder, thinking "That's fine, sweetheart. Go ahead."

You cleared your voice to get her attention, then you

offered her the flowers.

She batted her lashes at us. Then she smirked and turned away.

“*Piegas*,” she said with her cold little voice.

I know *piegas* from Raul. It means pathetic or sappy.

I’m so sorry she hurt you. She didn’t mean to, sweetheart.

Dosey wasn’t angry with us. She’s been bruised by love. Her stiff frame, the taut lines of her face— In her harshness, she’s thoroughly modern; but her eyes are out of a Mannerist painting. Such depth, such doubt, such frail suspension— Those eyes were born in a dark forest, not in this land of sand and sun.

Inez barged through the kitchen door, wiping her hands on a towel.

You turned and embraced her, apron and all, getting flour on your cheeks.

When you stepped back and handed the daffodils to her, Inez melted.

Dosey shrieked, stood and whirled, headed toward her bedroom, as mercurial as a school of sardines.

It’s no wonder young men are attracted to her.

Attraction

I know how Dosey's disdain hurt you, Teni. I wasn't sure why she reacted like that. I spoke to Inez last night, and I have a better idea what happened. I'm going to do my best to explain.

Being a child is life's great blessing. Being a grownup is hard. It's so complicated. There's so much indirection, so many conflicting motives at work, so much that's invisible—

Only a few are blessed like your grandma and me. Many adults are unlucky in love. Sometimes I wonder if growing up is worth the bother!

Well now—

It's a beautiful morning, and we're strolling through the arcade beside city hall. There's a young woman walking on the cobbles in front of us.

Are you curious why she's dressed like that?

It's not the weather. The poor girl is burning up!

She's trying to be *attractive*.

Grownups want to make themselves appealing as romantic partners. A man or woman who wishes to *attract* others will do things to themselves to enhance the effect.

The woman's heels tap as she moves. That catches our attention. When we look at the source of the tapping, we see her ankles and how trim they are. We notice her shoes and the tapered heels that are making the sound.

Our eye is naturally drawn up the back of her legs. She's wearing tights despite the heat. Her calves are muscular, and the arpeggio of heel taps shakes her rear end. It's more visible than yours or mine, as the fabric's as thin as a stocking.

Right you are! It's as if she's wearing nothing at all.

The woman's middle looks cinched, suggesting compression. Her back and shoulders are covered by a shawl and her hair is loose, so there's not much disclosure above the waist. But her efforts below are enough to stir those with an interest.

She's a seductress, Teni. In an earlier time, she would have worn a silk mask and painted her arms.

I'm being humorous. But the serious point is that Dosey's emotion yesterday was the result of a blowup with a young man in Albufeira.

You're not old enough for me to share the details, but—

Albufeira is a place where men and women go to share their *attractions*.

A young man took Dosey there. They partied all night in strip clubs and discos, and slept in a cheap hotel. And now Dosey's upset. Very upset.

Don't repeat what I've shared with you.

Promise, sweetheart.

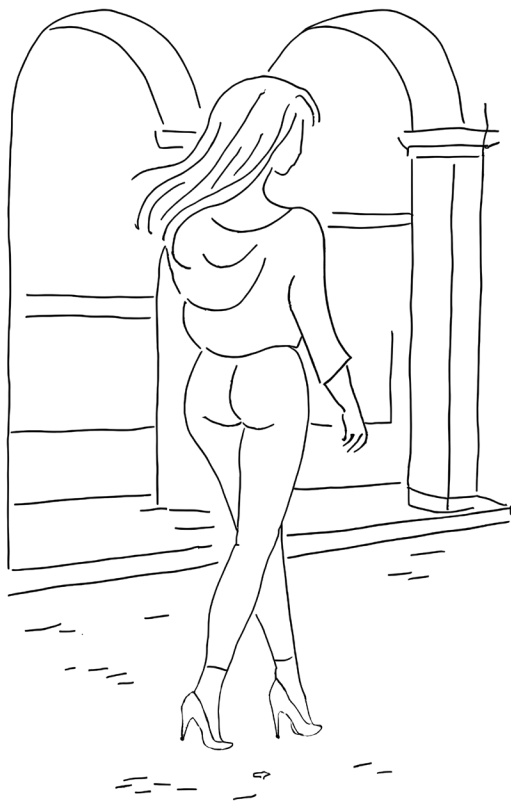
No, my dear. Not anymore.

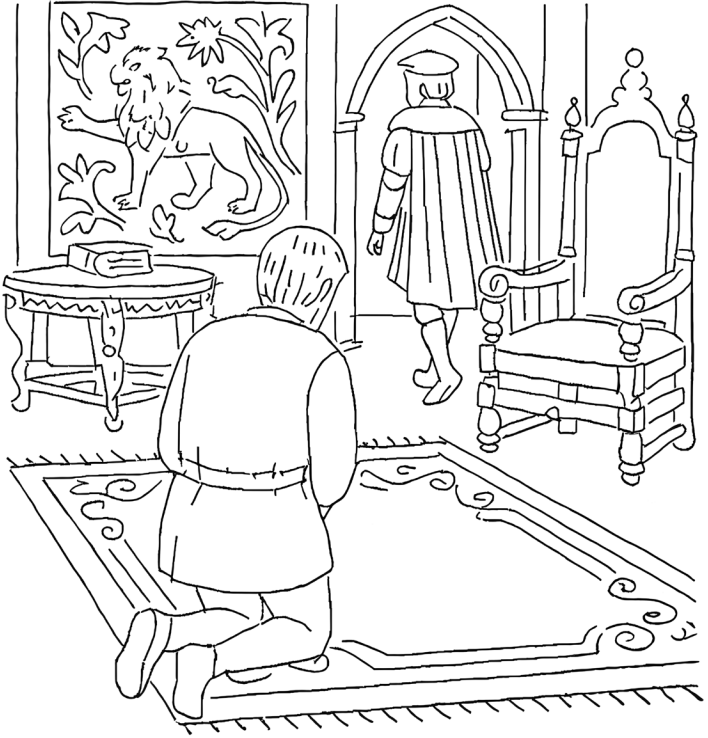
There was a time when Grampa was drawn to sights like

the woman in tights and heels. But attraction like that doesn't go very deep or last very long.

True communion speaks to the heart.

It's the privilege of the very young and the very old to understand this.





A Junior Squire

*A*re we longing for more Magellan?
The book is in my pack. We could visit the castle and read a chapter there. Or we can descend the riverbank here and sit in the grass.

I agree. There's a perfect spot by the base of that tree.

I'll open the sun umbrella and you can hold it. We'll have warmth and brightness on every side and our own little circle of shade.

Alright—

Are we comfortable now? Let me find the page.

Here we are.

Magellan has returned to Portugal. His wallet is empty and he's lame in one leg. Worst of all, the court in Lisbon has a low opinion of him. Despite his years of service, he's still listed as a "junior squire." They don't think of him as a captain and navigator, and his heroics in battle mean nothing.

Life as a grownup can be like that. Poor Ferdinand's in eclipse. Courtiers say his manner is arrogant and his limp is feigned. But Magellan's determined. He gets an audience with the King to defend himself and explain his aspirations. He

visits the King three times, showing the monarch his maps and routes, asserting his qualifications and sharing his dream, seeking royal sponsorship for the great voyage.

The King has no interest, and at their final meeting, when the seaman kneels to kiss his ring, the King turns his back and walks away.

I had no idea poor Ferd carried that burden. But I'm not surprised.

Nothing fires a grownup's determination as much as contempt.

It's sad, so sad. But true.

When you're older, if there's something you burn to achieve, the skepticism of others stirs your doubts; and to quell them, you muster your firmest resolve, your most enduring commitment.

I confess, sweetheart: I'm puzzled. What was Henrique thinking?

This is no story for children.

Embittered, Magellan decamped to Spain. He was so estranged from his homeland and the Portuguese King that he married a lady with connections to the Spanish court.

Well, yes—

I suppose he was attracted to her. But I doubt she wore tights and spiked heels. It appears he was attracted for other reasons.

My laugh, sweetheart, isn't for you. It's an expression of cynicism.

As I tried to explain, things are complicated for grownups.

Little Things

What a wonderful morning it's been. We happened upon the woman in tights, explained Dosey's ferment and travelled with Magellan to Spain. We strolled the streets on the east side of the Roman Bridge and visited Raul and Henrique.

Then we wandered the sands at *Praia do Barril*, picking up shells. Ribbed cockles, a blue jingle, littlenecks lemon and orange, razors chalky and tawny— We prefer shells that are whole, but at times a broken one has an irresistible pattern or hue.

We reached a fishing village in the late afternoon. Bougainvillea was everywhere: at the base of a wall, choking an alley, mounting a balcony, woven through iron gridwork. Magenta bracts littered the white cobbles.

And now—

We're roaming the docks. Fishermen come and go. The names of their boats are painted on prows: *Bem Amado*, *Você Pode*, *Para Sempre*. Wire traps are piled on the wharf. A man is stacking them eight feet high in the stern of his boat. Another wheels a crate of octopus past. He stops so you can run your

fingers over the suckers. Another sits on a buoy using his knife to scrape the scales off a fish the size of his shoe. The blade glints, the silver fish flashes, the scales fly on the breeze.

The wind picks up, thrumming the mooring ropes like fingers playing a lute with giant strings. There's a melody. Can you hear it?

In the water beside the dock, mullets are swarming. The green surface ripples like the skin of a large animal lolling in the sun.

A seagull lands on a nearby pier, folds its wings and mews like a cat.

All these little things add up to nothing.

For us, it's enough.

The Surf Line

*A*s the sun descends in the west, we return to the beach and the sea. The light is no longer blinding. The sand is sharing the warmth it gathered throughout the day.

On the dunes, a breeze trembles the beach grass. Ripples pattern the sand. Gulls cry, winging over the tide.

We descend to the shore and follow the water's edge, watching the line of foam and the translucent skim of sea behind it. In places, the line scallops and the scallops cross over each other. The undertow makes a hissing sound, but the surf line reaches its apogee in silence. Beyond the skim of translucent water, the sand disappears beneath the turquoise, and by the time it's reached the horizon, the sea is a deep blue—deeper and denser than the verging sky.

It's a big ocean, *Teni*. Endless from a human perspective.

Let's remove our shoes. There's something to do here that we've not done before.

Kick off your sandals. We'll leave our umbrella and knapsack here.

Take my hand. We're going down to the surf line.

You'll see, you'll see—

Alright. Here it is.

We stand barefoot together, with our toes across the surf line and our heels in dry sand.

As the tide folds over, we feel the spray. We watch the foaming and bubbling, and we listen to the gurgle and hiss as the surf sweeps toward us.

Closer, closer—

The furled edge is almost upon us.

And now: its cold foam fizzes our toes and tickles our insteps.

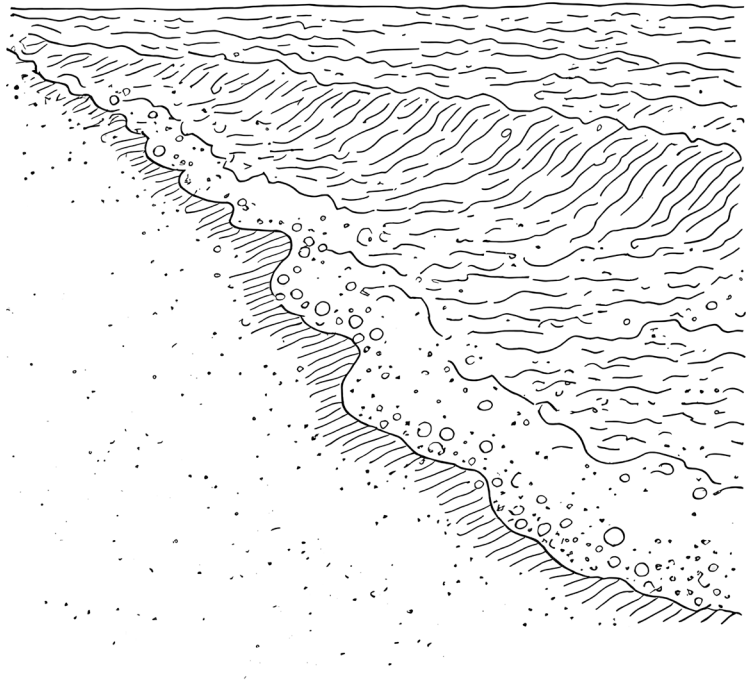
The tide retracts. The sea draws the surf back in, swallows it down—

And then offers it to us again. Here it comes, here it comes—

How like life and our covert desires the noisy foam is. We regard its advance with eagerness and apprehension. There's no hurrying or delaying it. It will reach us in its own time, with its own brashness or hesitation and without announcing its state.

And when it retracts, the feeling of absence will mount. We sigh, we listen, we watch. We don't lift our feet, we dare not move from this spot but must wait—patiently!—for its return.

Who, standing at the surf line like this, can fail to feel the ocean's power? And who can make the decision to leave?



Recalling

Inez, bless her soul, fed us *cataplana* for dinner, and our bellies are full. We're on the terrace now, and the day is ending.

The sun in its final descent is as blond as your hair. The fog that it's sinking into is as pearly as your smile.

Do you hear the song emerging from the open door of the cafe across the way? A woman is singing a mournful melody. A bit of *fado* perhaps. She's wistful, recalling.

A long time ago, when I was the same age as you are now, I would sit on the front steps of my childhood home and make up songs. They weren't plaintive. Not that I remember. They were exuberant songs, full of energy.

Later, I became a musician. I wrote complex pieces and performed them on stages to large crowds. But—

Why am I laughing?

Well— Becoming a musician was an aspiration I had. It never matured into something real. Instead, I studied medicine. I wanted to do important research, to discover a cure for a life-threatening disease. It was a boon I would give to humanity. But—

Well, my dear. That never happened either. The remembrance must have been triggered by the pharmacy I can see at the end of the street.

I'm thinking more carefully now. Authentic memories are surfacing.

An image of the war memorial before city hall stirs a vivid recollection.

I fought for my country in a foreign land. It wasn't a war that seemed necessary, but I was compelled. I had friends who did the same. They came home in body bags.

No, no— It wasn't like that at all! I refused to fight on the basis of conscience. Instead, I—

What did I do?

I became a painter. My canvases were exhibited in prestigious galleries. They inspired wrenching introspections in all who viewed them. The ideas they evoked were so powerful, that—

Another fantasy. Ha. I never bought a tube of paint!

What I really did—the mission that Angelo devoted himself to—was in industry. I engineered innovations, I built products that improved people's lives. Products like—

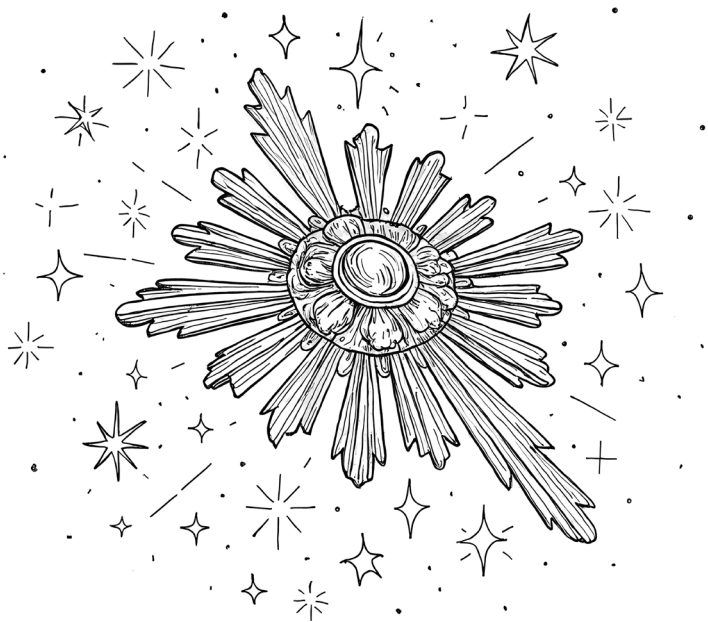
I'm struggling to remember what they were.

Maybe I ran for public office.

You're giggling now, slapping my hand.

You don't care what I did.

And neither do I.



The Gentle One

It's dark on the terrace. A full moon is rising behind the chimneys.

Grampa kneels and slides his arms under you.

I lift you and carry you to your room, careful not to wake you.

I set you down on your bed. Straighten your pigtailed. Remove your shoes. And draw the blanket over you.

A moment of silent regard.

Such curiosity. Such camaraderie. Such peace.

Your mental state is so different than mine. I'm doing all I can to live up to your perfect example.

I back out of your room and close the door quietly. A sigh, then I enter my own, step toward my bed and turn down the sheet.

Above the pillow is the santos halo I hung there at your direction.

I'm remembering the moment in Henrique's shop when you found it.

You reached and pointed. I opened the cabinet and pulled it out.

The size of a hand, with rays of antique silver beaming from the hub. And a glowing garnet at its center. Beautiful, we thought. But what is it? When we asked our voluble friend, Henrique squinted and raised his crooked finger.

“A santos halo,” he said, explaining with gestures and broken English that the object had been used on a church altar, placed over the head of a figurine saint.

It was delicate and so finely crafted.

I was returning it to the cabinet, when your enthusiasm stopped me. To please you, I paid for the halo. And at your suggestion, I mounted it on the wall over my pillow.

Here it is now on the threshold of sleep, waiting for me.

My dear girl—

Since your arrival, I’ve changed. Haven’t I?

You are my beacon.

It is through your eyes that I see myself.

No longer do I wish for strength or command. I dodder, I stumble, I weave when I walk. With my creaking back, my uncertain legs and my declining virility, I have entered a new dimension.

After all these years, I am the gentle one.

And who would have thought—

I measure myself by the standard you found for me in the curio shop.

I am trying to earn my halo.

Who Are You?

The night grows larger and larger, darker and darker, deeper and deeper.

Am I still asleep? Am I dreaming?

I can hear the door hinges squeak. Someone is entering my room.

Is it you, Tenina? Who else could it be.

It's dark, too dark to see.

I listen for steps. There is only silence. But—

Someone's approaching. I don't have to raise my head. I can sense a presence.

Tenina?

A weight is descending on the mattress at the foot of the bed.

Not a child's weight.

I turn onto my shoulder.

I raise myself on one hand, craning my neck, trying to see.

The Woman in Black—

She's seated at my feet, motionless, her cowl over her head.

Is she going to speak?

The room is suddenly cold. My breath fogs the air. I lie

back and close my eyes. My legs are shaking, my arms, my chest—

“Do I know you?” I whisper.

Declare yourself, I think, insisting. Who are you? Why are you here?

The Woman doesn't answer.

I can't sleep with you sitting there.

Silence.

How long will this last? I ask. If you've come to stay—

I seal my lips, freezing my thoughts before they go any farther.

I will wait for her to leave.

In the darkness, I wait.

And wait and wait.

Asking Too Much

It's morning. We've come to the mercado for groceries, but Raul can see how upset I am.

"*Que há de errado,*" he says. "What's wrong?"

You have hold of my hand. You're pulling at it, urging me to speak.

"I'm worried," I tell him.

"About what?"

I shake my head. "Ghosts. Threatening dreams."

"Poor Grampa," you say.

"I'm an old man," I sigh, as if that explains it.

"We need help," you tell Raul.

He looks from you to me. "I need more information."

"The Woman in Black," I explain, recalling for him the discussions we've had about the mysterious stranger. "I'd resigned myself to her presence, but— Not in the casa. Not when we're asleep."

"She was in the casa?" Raul says.

I bow my head. "She knows how weak I am. How vulnerable."

Raul turns to you. "Have you seen her?"

A moment of silence.

“No,” you reply.

“Only Grampa,” Raul says.

“That’s right.”

“My friend—” Raul grabs my shoulders with his hairy hands. “It seems—”

I know what he’s going to say.

“Please,” I shake my head.

“It seems,” Raul starts again, “you’re afraid of dying.”

I shudder. Your lips are trembling.

“You’re frightening Teni,” I say.

“It’s you who are frightening her,” Raul says harshly. “Teni must learn. We don’t live with fear. *Dia a dia. Como os porcos.*”

“*Porcos?*”

“Pigs,” he says. “Pigs, pigs.”

“What do pigs have to do with it?”

“They live from day to day,” Raul answers. “*Dia a dia.* It’s enough for them. They don’t worry about dying. When it’s over, they become *presunto.*” He points at the cured legs hanging from the wire over his head.

“They’re ignorant,” I protest.

“They don’t harbor fear,” he says.

And then:

“Angelo— *Você está pedindo demais da vida.*”

“In English. Please.”

Raul regards me with his sad eyes. “You are asking too much of life.”

“What can we do?” you say to Raul.

He squeezes my shoulders with his spidery hands. “My friend Tiago— He will show you.”

4





Headed North

Raul has arranged a day in the hills for us with his friend, Tiago. He's a *velho vaqueiro*, Raul says. An old cowboy. "You'll see a Portugal tourists never see."

We're eager to meet him.

Into our pack goes the lunch Inez wrapped for us and a bottle of water. We add our storybook, the binoculars and the ID card Enn gave you, and a sweater for each of us, just in case.

There's a local bus that will take us there, and the departure point is a ten-minute walk from Republic Square.

We board the bus, pay the driver and take our seats; and a few minutes later, we're headed north.

We open the window beside us.

The sounds of the town reach us. And slowly they fade.

We're passing the last of the apartment blocks, winding among low hills covered with shrubs. We feel the wind now, and we can see the country opening around us. The scrub, the rolling matos; and farther beyond, the oak woodlands.

We've never been here. Surprises await us! You grab my hand and squeeze it, and a grin spreads your rosy cheeks.

Bumps in the road. Hang on.

The bus sways. It makes a sharp turn and I happen to look behind us.

The Woman in Black is seated at the back of the bus. Motionless. Head bowed, cowl down.

Why didn't I notice her when we boarded? Was she hiding herself?

I'm about to share the discovery with you, but I stop myself. Raul's right. I might frighten you. And perhaps— You'd turn and you wouldn't see her.

I think of standing and hobbling my way to the front of the bus. I'll insist that the driver stops the vehicle. And then what? Will I demand that he leaves her by the side of the road? What if he glances back and asks, "In a black cloak? What woman?"

I'm facing forward now, trembling. Wondering: is she a congealing of fear or the deliverer of mortality itself. Has she come to claim me?

I look again.

She's still there. Motionless. Head bowed, cowl down.

Is she saying a prayer? Mourning some recent misfortune or one she imagines is in the offing?

Seeing her in the light of day, seated near other passengers— It gives me fresh confidence. I'm going to march back there right now and have it out with her.

But no one will understand. She'll play dumb, innocent— The other riders will wonder why I'm so upset. Or worse— No one will see her. They'll imagine I'm railing at an empty seat!

So I just stay silent.

I face forward and pretend the Woman isn't there.

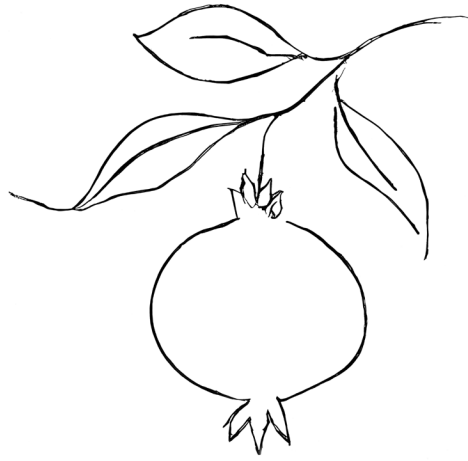
But I can't keep the questions from plaguing me. Was she seated at the back of the bus when we boarded? Did she follow us and somehow slip past unnoticed? How did she learn of our plans for the day? And am I—

Am I really imagining all of this? Does she even know we're on the bus?

What a question. Of course she knows.

Her head is still down. She's silent as a gargoyle.

Is she going to follow us? Will she be with us the entire day? Will she choose a moment to declare herself? Or vanish again without speaking a word?



The Pomegranate Hedge

The bus arrives at a small village. A few whitewashed houses are huddled around a cafe.

I rise quickly, grab your hand and lead the way off the bus, spotting a path around the buildings. "This way." And we hurry along.

There's a pomegranate hedge that separates the houses from the wildness beyond. And here, to be out of the Woman's sight, I lower myself. You follow my example and we stoop together.

"Grampa," you say, "is something wrong?"

I shake my head, unwilling to share my fears.

The leaves of the hedge are soft, yellow-green, orange and peach, but the branches are tipped with thorns. Because it's autumn, the fruits are as big as fists.

"Look, Teni." I point at a ripe pomegranate, trying to keep the Woman out of my thoughts.

You touch the fruit. The leathery peel has begun to crack. The little red kernels are waiting inside like glass beads, hemmed by bitter membranes.

"Let's open it," I propose.

You like the idea.

So we pull the big fruit from its stem and pry it apart, skin the peel back and rub some of the glowing beads loose.

You stick your tongue out. I take a few.

We crunch together, and the beads explode, tart and sweet.

“There was a hedge just like this,” I say, “down the street, where I grew up.”

“In Los Angeles.”

“Yes, in LA. I huddled beneath it with friends.”

“We don’t want our bus to leave,” you say.

Wary, I stand and scan the way back.

Then, taking your hand, I move forward slowly, returning along the path.

We climb back aboard the bus.

The Woman in Black is gone. The seat where I saw her is empty.

The engine starts and the bus departs—slowly it seems, as if sneaking away.

I look out the window, searching the scrub, expecting to see her dark figure by the cafe or on a trail.

But she’s nowhere in sight.

The Singing Tree

*H*ills rise up on either side, slopes parched by fall but still spotted with green.

The next stop is a brief one. The bus pulls beside a roadhouse, and the driver announces that our journey will resume in ten minutes.

I take hold of your hand and move down the aisle slowly, peering through the windows, stepping to the ground and turning. No sight of her.

The sun is higher now and the wind is warm. The scrub looks gray and chafed, as if someone had recently filed it down. Beside the roadhouse is a large tree. I check the way and we amble toward it.

The green sprays are long and trailing, folded like satin curtains. The wind is silent in the open air, but as we move under the tree we can hear it passing through the leafage.

With a sigh, I halt and face you.

I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know you're sensing my apprehension. Grampa's feeling vulnerable. I won't say any more than that.

I like being under this tree with you. It's singing to us,

reassuring us.

Listen, Tenina.

Can you hear?

The trunk hums as the wind butts the tree's bark. It wooshes as the wind rolls over its branches. It whispers as the wind rustles its green fingers.

What kind of tree is this? Each bough is hung with long fingers, and each finger has scores of leaflets. Feel them, Teni. How stiff they are.

When the wind passes through the fingers, the tree's voice is bright and clear. Near the trunk, where the fingers are thicker, the sound is deeper. And at the ends of the boughs, where the fingers are smallest and the wind is unimpeded, the fingers tap each other like rattling pebbles.

This tree has hard parts. There is nothing relaxed or compliant about it. It's ruled by determination and the desire to protect itself. Is that why it sings? A more supple tree would be silent.

Let's pinch off a spray. The leaflets are so stiff I don't think they'll be crushed in my pack.

Yes, I see.

The driver is signaling us. Our ten minutes are up.

We hurry back and climb aboard.

(Still no Woman, thank heavens!)

As the bus pulls away, the roadhouse appears in the windows. Then the dust raised by our wheels rubs it out.

A Roofless Monastery

There's a rest stop at an ancient monastery. We leave the bus and because you're hungry, we settle on a stone bench near the entrance and break out the lunch Inez made for us.

Then hand in hand, for curiosity's sake, we wander through the skeletal place.

Bony rafters. Eroded colonnades. Tracery windows absent the glass. Unmowed carpets and weedy chapels. Those are swallows, aren't they, arrowing through the cracked arches?

The elements are dismantling the place, but it retains some of its grandeur.

Here's the information, on this plaque. Look at the date. The monastery was built in the time of Magellan, when Portugal's dream was to rule the world.

The crumbling structure takes me back to the States. To my life of striving, of commitment and conflict. A time, Tenina, when—in my way—I was like whoever designed this.

Despite myself, as we cross the cloister, I'm feeling regard.

For what? For the designer's devotion, however pointless it now seems. The conception is still visible. In a way, the

architect was like Magellan.

Am I projecting? Is it just my uncertain mood?

I'm feeling sorry for the poor soul.

Where is the vindication for grandiose aspirations?

It's not in the fever of creation. That cools once the achievement's in sight.

It's not in the sleeplessness of deadlines or the vortex of consuming detail.

It's not in the triumph over obstacles. Relief that a hurdle is overcome lasts hardly a moment before it's replaced by fresh worries.

It's not in the assists others give you. They're paid for by love, friendship or cash.

It's not in the opinion of others. You must ignore words from those who are close because they're biased. And the voices of those more distant are so often disparaging. Every aspiration has its critics.

How much isolation did the architect endure? Did he feel like he'd taken a monk's vows himself? An outsize goal can become a religion.

Still . . . despite all of this—

It's a bit of a miracle, isn't it.

These stripped pillars and decaying arches— To gaze at the rolling hills through the paneless windows, feeling the arch of sky and the heat of the day through the absent roof— It's exhilarating. It speaks to the spirit.

Oh Tenina. Why must your grampa see in this corpse of a building something uplifting? Am I cheering its refusal to

accept its fate?

The gilt is gone and the stucco has crumbled. The icons were removed long ago, and the tapestries with them. Whatever words were chiseled here have worn away. The grasses and bees, the birds and the wind invade the remains. The designer is dead. And so is his dream.

Raul may be right.

It's time to stop fooling myself. I've been asking too much of life.





The Abandoned Orchard

*A*cross the road from the monastery, there's a trail leading through the scrub.
We have time. Let's have a look.

Baked grasses. Rusty weeds. A dry streambed littered with stones.

The way narrows quickly. Watch your hands, sweetheart. There are thistles on either side. Yes, I can smell it. Like licorice. Wild fennel perhaps. Coming from these thin green rods. And another fragrance, like eucalyptus. The low, furry clumps. We're brushing them with our ankles and the scent's rising up. Wild thyme, I think. It brings back memories of California.

A disordered place. But—

Let's slow for a moment.

Look around you, Teni.

If I'm not mistaken— It's not all wild growth.

I see, among the silvery leaves of this tree closest to us, a sprinkling of green olives. Here. Let's pull one free. Hold out your hand.

And that tree there. See the long pods on its nearby

branches? Brown, curled and twisted— The ground beneath it is littered with them. A carob, I believe. There's a pod by your foot. It's shiny as shoe leather, and you can see the bumps of the beans within.

And the squat tree with giant leaves, right beside you. Look at the fruit. It's a fig!

The trees are straggling, lopsided, neglected. But they each have their space. And there at the top of the hill is the remains of a stone wall.

This was once an orchard.

For some reason, it was abandoned.

We can only guess, Tenina. Products from other countries invaded the market. Maybe the reasons were personal: a separation, a death; a childless couple, after trying for years, moved to the coast.

Life is like that.

We're blind to our limits until we reach them. Our misfortunes are unforeseen. We tend our plantings, but who tends us?

We are like these trees, my dear. We sprout, we flourish if we're lucky. And, when the time arrives, we are crowded out. There are traces of Grampa back in the States. If we returned and peered through the tangle, we'd find a straggling memory of him. But it won't be long before it's obscured.

The tree behind me, on the other side of the path?

It looks like it was burnt in a fire, doesn't it. The crooked boughs are bare and black. The few leaves it has are yellow, withered and hanging.

Do you see them? The dark pebbles clinging to the branches. I'll pick one, remove the husk and pry it open.

It's an almond, Teni. A black one.

Bitter, I'm sure.

The other trees still have some green. Still hopeful about the grower. The almond knows he's not coming back.

The quiet settles upon us. Our shadows hover like smoke on the weeds.

Then a honk breaks the silence.

Let's hurry back to the bus!

Paraiso

We've arrived at our destination. Our bus pulls into a parking area at a crossroads beside a weathered barn. There's a green van with a man behind the wheel. As we step down from the bus, the man leaves the van and approaches, guessing it's us, calling my name and waving. He has a white stubble beard and a dusty fedora, and he wears a flowered scarf around his waist. His pants are clogged with dirt.

"*Boa tarde,*" he smiles, shaking my hand, squeezing your shoulder.

It's Raul's friend, Tiago. He's in charge of a local *montado* where they raise pigs and strip cork from the trees.

According to Raul, Tiago knows English. And his "*entendimento* on serious matters" will surprise us.

Tiago uses his fedora to motion us toward his van.

I open the passenger door and you climb in, sitting between us.

Tiago starts the engine and takes the vehicle bouncing over uneven ground until we reach the road. Then we're moving down it.

“Welcome to *paraíso*,” Tiago smiles. “Paradise. For our *porco preto*. Our black pigs.”

I volunteer that we’ve eaten the pork on bread, and we like it.

“That pleases me,” Tiago replies. “If we devote our lives to something, it’s important that we are appreciated.”

He follows the paved road over hilly undulations, talking about how he slept the previous night, a corral repair planned for the afternoon and the weather we could expect that day.

Tiago speaks with a British accent. He was schooled in England, he says.

He turns off the public road onto a rutted drive, fenced on either side. Beyond the fences are rolling swales, golden grass splashed with sun. And trees with shadows beneath them.

“Oaks,” I guess.

Tiago smiles.

They are mid-sized trees, rangy and gnarled with twisting branches. The crowns are thick and clumped with leaves. Many of the boughs are drooping.

“My family has lived here for six generations,” Tiago says. “The pigs have lived here much longer. Thousands of years ago, the Phoenicians brought their ancestors from the Eastern Mediterranean and bred them with wild boars. The pigs fed on acorns, and as the oaks spread, the pigs went with them.

“We have a few cows and goats, and bees make honey. But the oaks and the pigs—that’s why we’re here.”

We pass between whitewashed entry pillars, and the van is descending, cork oaks on either side. I lower the passenger

window, feeling the breeze, seeing the twisted arms and wandering crowns.

Tiago pulls to the left, parking by an old house trailer.

I open the door and help you out. There's a grove of trees around us.

The trunks aren't straight. They lean and reach, like arms rising out of the earth, fingers long and knuckled, angling in every direction.

Tiago is stepping toward the house trailer, grabbing one of the long poles propped against it. It's silver, aluminum perhaps, more than twice his height. He motions to us and starts along a path that wanders through the trees. We follow.

"Centuries ago," Tiago says, "Southern Portugal was the land of oaks. They were everywhere. Europe was plagued by dreams of wealth and glory, and the oaks became part of those dreams. The wood is dense and strong, so they were used to build palaces and sailing ships."

"Like Magellan's," you guess.

"That's right," Tiago nods. "A carrack took two thousand oaks. The structural members for the Palace of Versailles required an entire forest. The trees near the coast were cut down. The ones that survived were here, in the hills."

Tiago is scanning the tree crowns as we pass. They're deep green and the trunks are dark chocolate. The space between is covered with parched grass and dead leaves, and the sun—now high in the sky—makes the ground glow.

He has paused beneath the bough of a large oak. He grabs it and pulls it down, showing us the acorns bristling between

the leaves. Brown bullets with dusty caps. “They’re ripe,” he says. “Ready to eat.”

Then he motions us back, raises his long pole and rattles the oak’s branches. Acorns fall.

“Ah-key,” he shouts. “Ah-key, ah-key.”

We back away. The pole is rattling and acorns are raining down. “Ah-key, ah-key. *Irmãos, irmãs*, ah-key, ah-key.”

Tiago has turned, facing a straw-colored slope beyond the trees. The residents of paradise are cresting a hilltop and starting down: a herd of pigs, trotting, heads bobbing, ears flopping, snorting and squealing as they come. Some break into a lope and through their shrieks and grunts, I can hear you giggling.

They’re headed straight for us, dozens of them. Not actually black. They’re slate gray and in an awful hurry to reach Tiago and the rain of nuts. You’re wrapping your arms around my leg. The pigs aren’t giants, but they’re bigger than you, crowding around us, snouts down, snuffling the cover. They find the acorns and crunch them, turning quickly, snouts quivering, snuffling for more. One a few feet away has raised its head and is staring at you.

Tiago’s pole is still raised, he’s still rattling the branches, bringing down nuts. The pigs are jubilant, frenzied, snorting and snuffling, finding the bounty, teeth clicking and crunching. You’re pointing at the pig that’s staring at you. It swats its curled tail and bucks its head, and the floppy ears clap.

You’re laughing, Tenina. And I’m laughing too. Your pig blows the air through its snout and dips for nuts, large ears

flapping as if its head might take wing.

“He’s sneezing,” you say.

“He’s keeping the dust from his lungs,” Tiago explains. “The reputation pigs have isn’t deserved. They’re very clean animals.”

The snorts and grunts are a din around us.

“Are they talking to themselves or each other?” I wonder.

“It’s the sound of community,” Tiago says. “They’re expressing contentment. Pleasure. Appreciation. Mothers make a similar sound when their piglets are nursing.”

He’s still rattling his pole. The acorns continue to fall.

“They eat a lot of them,” Tiago says. “Five or six kilos a day. The oaks need rain to turn the nuts brown. Brownies are sweetest.”

Tiago’s rested his pole against a bough. He’s holding an acorn, using his nail to peel it. The brown shell falls, and he passes the nut to you. “Taste,” he says.

You put the point of the acorn between your teeth and bite. Then you hand it to me. I take a bite and we chew together.

A rich taste. Astringent but sweet. Not paradise for us, but we’re not pigs!

“How long,” I ask, “do they live this wonderful life?”

“A couple of years,” Tiago says.

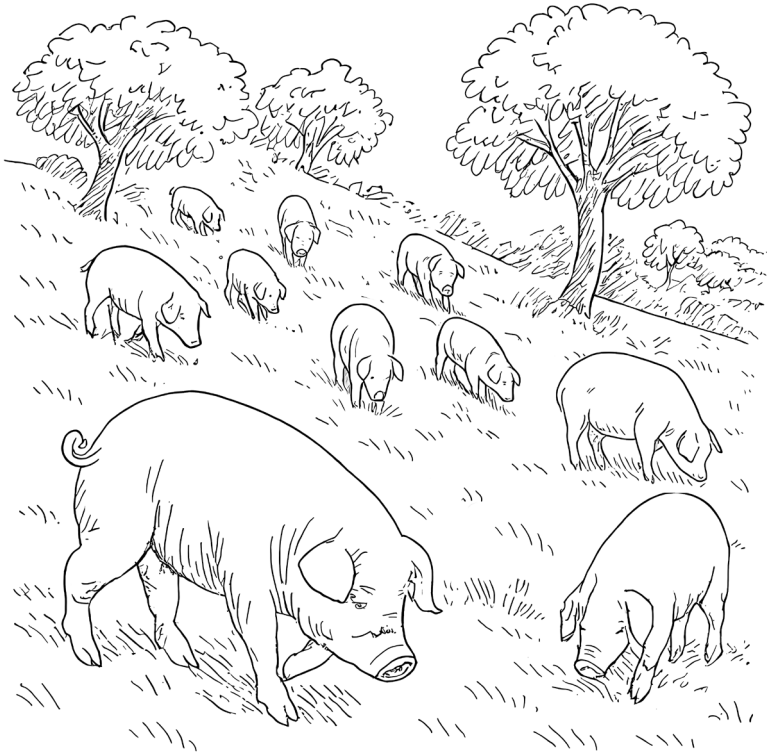
“And then?”

“We slaughter them and pack their hind legs in salt. After that, they hang in a cold warehouse and cure for three years.”

The pigs are still snuffing and crunching the nuts.

Tiago is regarding me.

“They’re like the fighting bulls in Spain,” he says. “Or the falcons the Bedouins breed. A life of freedom is enough, don’t you think?”



Learning From Swine

After a few more acorn shakedown, Tiago leads us back to the trailer. He leaves his pole there and starts down a path toward what he calls “the nursery.” He’s speaking now as if we are confidants.

“I was born here,” he explains, “and I’ve worked here all my life. When I was younger, I didn’t like to study. I wanted to be with the animals. I did my tasks, I followed my father’s directions; but I was always observing the pigs, trying to understand them. I’d wake before dawn to see them rise. When the moon was full, I’d be in the trees with them, watching them bed down.

“I could see how smart they were and how independent.”

“Independent?” I say. “The montado takes care of them.”

“They act as a family, with one mind,” Tiago replies, “and they often don’t want to do as you wish. They can be stubborn. My father was always on their side. ‘Leave them alone,’ he’d tell me. ‘Let them decide. A good swineherd,’ he’d say, ‘learns from his swine.’ So I learned.

“The pigs taught me to listen. They love the trees and they’re close to them. I realized they were listening to the

trees, and I listened with them. The sound of the wind blowing through an oak tells you whether it's healthy or not. You can hear how many leaves it has. A healthy tree has a thick crown. And lots of acorns."

The nursery, we discover, is a row of corrals, each with a small shelter for a mother and her newborn piglets.

"The pigs are born here," Tiago says. "The mother gathers grass and makes a circular bed. Her piglets are united. They nurse together. They sleep like sardines in a tin, with their heads and tails in opposite directions, looking out for each other. And when they're strong enough, they roam together, exploring the forest. When mother calls, they hurry back to be fed."

We cross a grove carpeted with waves of dry grass. Golden hoppers dart from our feet while Tiago talks about the pigs' daily routine.

"They eat in the morning when the sun rises. They rest for a couple of hours at noon. They'll stretch out in the sun or seek the shade of a tree if it's too hot. Then they rise and feed again, and by four they're stretched out."

We reach a stream. In a pocket ahead we can see a dozen pigs, dripping and muddy, with gleaming flanks.

"They have places they drink," Tiago says, "and pools like this where they cool off. They know which hollows will fill when it rains, and when a downpour starts, they head for the spot."

The pigs are facing us now, staring at us. Two touch noses, sharing something. Tiago motions us to follow him toward a

stand of larger oaks.

“In the heat of summer,” he says, “they pick a tree and lie down in the shade for an afternoon snooze. Always together.

“In daylight, they prefer the hills. But at night they want the security that a level spot gives them. This is one of their favorites,” he says, approaching a big tree with a wide crown and dipping boughs.

He leads us beneath the boughs toward the furrowed trunk.

“This is their spot,” he halts. “Right here. They sleep huddled together, warming each other. If they hear a suspicious sound—an owl, a lynx, a wild boar—they stir themselves. They stand and talk to each other, guessing, conferring, moving their ears and peering through the darkness.

“They’re connected emotionally,” Tiago says. “Their idea of family isn’t determined by nuclear ties. They live a truly communal life.”

Is there something in his words that troubles you, Teni? I can feel your little hand squeezing mine, as if to reassure me.

“They bed down here,” Tiago explains, “with the same pigs every night. Always in the same place. They reassure each other, as they did when they were piglets. They calm each other. Unless there’s a reason for alarm, they enjoy a peaceful, untroubled sleep. They’re like cherubs. But they snore.” He laughs. “They snore so loudly, they wake each other, which is amusing to see.”



Bee-Eaters

We're on a path struck with sun, following Tiago through the gilded grass.

The montado is perfectly silent. And in the silence, it does seem that the repose of the place is invading us. We're sharing the pigs' felicity. Time has stopped. The sky is waiting. The earth is waiting. The day isn't advancing. The future won't be any different than the present. Here, nothing will change.

A hum rises. The woodland ahead is thrumming.

"We have hives," Tiago points through the trees. "A bee-keeper manages them."

Then a sharp chirping, like laughter or bubbles bursting.

"We have bee-eaters too," Tiago says. "Birds. Beautiful creatures."

You tug my hand. "I want to see them," you whisper.

"Can we stop for a moment?" I ask Tiago.

I shrug off my pack, remove the binoculars and hand them to you.

"There," Tiago points.

A half-dozen of them are diving out of the sky.

"Do you see them?" I ask.

“Blue chest,” you reply. “Red eye. Yellow chin—”

They aim at the earth as if they will plunge straight into it, pulling up at the very last moment, zooming through the grass, jittering the stalks.

The bees don’t stand a chance.

The bee-eaters snip them out of the air. As the birds pass, we hear the buzzes throttle and die.

The formation swings around, heading back this way. Such speed, such energy— So exact, so precise! They swoop together, landing in a line on a naked branch ten yards away. Then they’re knocking the bees against the branch and swallowing them down.

“We have a lot of them this time of year,” Tiago says. “They don’t winter here. They’ll be leaving soon.”

“The bees will be pleased,” I say. “And the pigs? There’s nothing that preys on them?”

“A fox or an eagle could take a piglet,” Tiago replies, “but the mothers are very protective. And once the piglets are ten days old, they’re out of danger.”

“What about illness?”

“It happens from time to time. We have a vet, of course. If something’s wrong, the pigs tell me.”

“Really,” I say, thinking he’s joking.

“If it isn’t dire,” Tiago explains, “they’ll follow me quietly, waiting to get my attention. If it’s urgent, they’ll approach me directly, give me insistent looks and make fretful sounds. They have a clear understanding of my value. I’m part of their family.”

Fire Suits

"This is what gives our paradise permanence," Tiago says.
The path we are on has led to a grove of blackened trees.

"Lightning struck here," Tiago explains, "three years ago."

A dozen large oaks have charred trunks and branches. One is tilted toward us, like a blackened hand reaching out.

"Cork oaks have fire suits," Tiago says. He sets his hand on the bark. "Their cork protects them." He lifts his chin, directing our gaze.

Many of the boughs above us are bare, but the trees are in leaf. The crowns are thin, but they're green and growing.

Through the fissures in the blackened trunks, fresh cork is visible.

"I lost my childhood home to fire," I say.

My comment seems barely relevant. But you're facing Tiago, squinting at him.

"Where is your home?" Tiago asks.

"I was born in Los Angeles," I tell him. "But I've lived in other cities, other states. Other countries."

Tiago is silent for a long moment. You're looking at me,

holding my hand.

“Connection to the land is important,” Tiago says. “That’s our sanity, our sense of belonging, our anchor to the natural order.”

I sigh, feeling the rightness of his words.

“Raul thinks I’m asking too much of life.”

Tiago nods. “He explained that to me.”

He tips back his fedora and draws a deep breath.

“In the world I know,” he says, “the montado comes first. That’s the pigs’ perspective. They have a favorite hill, a favorite stream, favorite hedgerows and favorite trees. They know every oak here. They know how sweet its acorns are, how close its boughs come to touching the ground, how deep the shade is beneath it. They remember how the tree cooled them one hot summer day. They remember the night it sheltered them from a storm.

“I include myself in all this,” Tiago says. “Humans have lived here for centuries. I’m part of something that preceded me and will continue after I’m gone. Nothing belongs to me. Not the oaks or the pigs or anything else. But this is my home. I’m doing the best I can to take care of it while I’m here.”

I’ve closed my eyes. I understand what he’s saying. My heart is with him, and I know yours is too.

“Up ahead, you’ll see what the oaks look like when the bark’s removed.”

Tiago continues along the trail and we follow.

Around the bend is a stand of trees that have been recently stripped. The trunks and lower boughs are thinner and

cinnamon colored.

“We do this every nine years,” Tiago tells us. “The fire suits are cut away with axes by *caldeireiros*. It requires some skill.”

Farther along, beside the trail, is a hill of stacked cork curls—the halved coverings from scores of trunks. The hill has a malty odor, and beside it are the sleeves from many branches.

“Tenina knows about cork sleeves,” I explain. “Raul told her.”

Tiago laughs. “We’ll fit you for a pair,” he says.

Beyond the piles of cork sleeves are what Tiago calls the “pickup pens.”

“This is where we say goodbye to our pigs,” he explains. “Not much drama to it. We select a small number, five or six, and place them here. They know something’s up, but they calm each other. We give them a week or two, then the butcher arrives in a small truck and hauls them to his place a few miles away. He slaughters them there.”

I’m silent, taking his description in, trying to accept it.

Dia a dia. Then a pickup pen and the butcher’s truck.

It might do for a pig.

But a man needs expectations.

I shake my head. “I’ll be honest, Tiago. I don’t envy them.”

“It’s a free life and a happy one,” he says. “The montado, their family— They have what we all wish for: contentment.”

His words speak to my troubled heart, but I’m still recoiling.



“What dreams do pigs have?” I ask. “Is ‘paradise’ just a day-to-day life without aspiration? Your pigs go to slaughter without achieving a thing.”

Tiago is trying to be patient with me.

“Paradise isn’t an achievement,” he says. “It’s the care we receive from our surroundings, and the love we feel from our fellow creatures.”

I sorely wish he was persuading me.

“Contentment’s not enough,” I mutter, aggrieved by my words. “And who can be anything but pained by the thought of leaving. Who can say goodbye with a cheerful heart?”

We gaze at each other in silence.

Then Tiago’s cellphone chimes.

He answers, turning aside, speaking Portuguese in a muted voice.

When the call ends, he frowns at us.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Something’s come up. But before we part, I want to show you the montado’s largest tree.”



Under Camila

The declining sun strikes the tufts, turning the grass into golden wavelets. The path angles past oak after oak until the giant appears.

It's as wide as a small city block. The branches starting out from the base are low to the ground and thicker than the trunks of any tree we've seen. Its crown is a gathering of green clouds, burgeoning, floating, hanging suspended. At their height, they obscure the sun.

Tiago leads us to the trunk.

"We give our giants the names of women," he says. "This is Camila."

I halt and stare at him.

"Is something wrong?" Tiago says.

"Camila is Grandma's name," you explain.

"She's still with us?" Tiago asks.

I shake my head.

You reach for my hand and take hold of it.

"Camila has a special place here." Tiago speaks softly. "My father made the decision to stop stripping her cork when I was a child. You can see how thick it is."

He touches the bark. The cork has cracks that could swallow a leg.

“Relax here,” Tiago suggests. “You’ll excuse me?”

“Of course,” I say. “We greatly appreciate the time you’ve given us.”

You concur.

“I’ll be back within the hour,” he says. And with that, he turns and retreats down the path.

“I’m thirsty,” you say.

I shrug off the pack, and we seat ourselves together beneath the tree, our backs to its bark. I retrieve our water bottle, but your attention has shifted.

“There’s a bird,” you whisper, pointing through Camila’s boughs to a spot in the grass.

I draw out the binoculars and hand them to you, then I’m searching for the ID card Enn gave you. I find it and set it in your lap.

“It’s pecking,” you say, “eating something. It has an orange front, black and white wings— There are feathery things on top of its head.”

You’re opening the foldout card. “That’s it!”

A hoopoe? You pass me the binoculars, and I see for myself.

“I’m thirsty,” you say.

“The water’s beside you, sweetheart.” I lower the binoculars and regard her. “I understand why Raul calls Tiago a friend. He has a rare kindness. And wisdom as well. But— The contentment of pigs? What do you think?”

“Can we take one back with us?” you ask.

Grampa laughs.

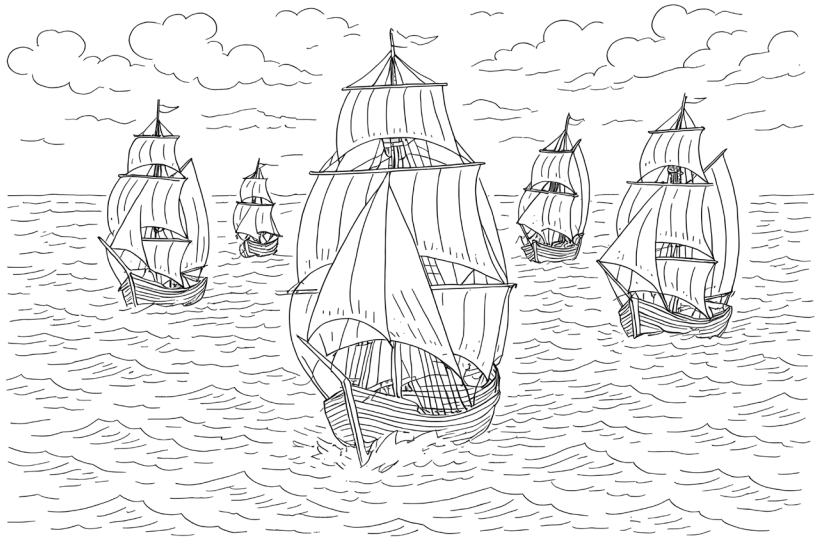
“Is that where Tiago lives?” you wonder.

You’re pointing through Camila’s boughs. At the top of a hill, there’s a whitewashed farmhouse. It’s like a ship sailing on a sea of grain.

“It probably is,” I reply.

“Let’s read about Magellan.”

You reach into the pack and pull out the storybook.



A Mission of Glory

Ferdinand is in Spain now. And the lady he's married has influence at the Spanish court. With her help and the help of her brother, he presents a proposal to the ruler of Spain.

A vengeful proposal. Devious too.

He will lead a voyage to the Spice Islands by travelling west, and thereby destroy Portugal's trading monopoly. In a single stroke, he imagines, he will make his mark on human history, avenge himself on his native land and secure a wondrous fortune.

Ferd drove quite a deal. While he was at sea, the King of Spain agreed to pay him fifty thousand *maravedi* a year. *Maravedi*—who knows? It sounds like a lot. The King promised, as well, to make Ferdinand governor of all the lands he discovered. He would be *El Adelantado*, the man in charge. And if he discovered more than six islands, he could pick two for himself!

On top of all that, for the lands he brought to heel, Magellan would get a percentage of the booty paid to the Spanish crown. Ferdinand would have stood up nicely against the

opportunists I ran with back in the States! When it came to the rewards for the voyage, he didn't leave much to chance.

Those who look for altruism in figures we lionize would disparage, no doubt, our hero's objectives. He was hardly seeking a life of contentment.

How do I feel about this? To be honest, my dear, I'm not sure.

Ambition is an aphrodisiac.

A bad choice of words. I'll just say—

When you're full of ambition, it's a marvelous feeling. Your perceptions are piqued, your calculations acute; your mind is a maelstrom of fantasies and speculations; you wake with determination, you're up late at night, and your frenzy is thrilled—chillingly so!—by fears of failure.

It's easy to understand why someone like Tiago might condemn Magellan. The moderation we enforce on ambition comes from our love of innocence and the pure intentions of the child inside us. That's something every adult remembers.

But—

Bee-eaters chase bees. Humans chase dreams.

Missions of glory are part of our nature.

To Refresh the Spirit

That's enough Magellan.
Our bottle of water. Let's have a drink, shall we?
Ah. That's better.

Camila's great limbs reach out, Tenina, twisting in all directions. Her fingers nearly touch the ground. And in the gaps between: blue sky, leafy green, golden grass. The air of Tiago's montado shimmers. The sun flows like honey over the fields.

It's easy for me to imagine your grandma's with us. In those final years, we'd hoped for a grandchild like you. Your birth made her leavetaking so much harder. I know she'd be cheered by the depth of our friendship.

Look here. I brought the notepad. And a pen.

Are you in the mood for a poem?

Well then—

Let's write one about us. We could imagine we're pigs. Or hoopoes! We could both be trees like the oaks, with gnarled branches and fissured bark.

Winds?

Ah yes. We could both be winds. In the writing, that

would refresh the spirit. Unless they are easterlies. Easterlies
bring haze.

I agree. We'll create the winds to our liking.

Alright.

Here's an idea. I'll be an older wind. You can be one that
has just stirred to life.

Let's see . . .

My Little Breeze

Across Iberia, through thunder and blast,
Grazing the mountains, descending at last.
A branch was shaking. It snagged my nose,
Whirling me round a cork oak grove.
I circled the trees with hugs and heaves,
Venting my rage with the flying leaves.

I'm a dangerous wind, hear me sing.
I scatter the pigs with my bellowing.
Below me, stirring among the cork toes,
Unexpected, a little breath rose. Her heart is
Ticking like the twigs when they freeze.
Bellflower eyes—my own little breeze.

Heaven is laughing. The joke is cruel:
Turning a great wind into a fool.
His solemn currents are shaking with sighs
Every time that little breeze cries.
My raging tempests have all drizzled dry.
Are there any entreaties I could ever deny?

A winter blizzard may soon call.
A spout out to sea, a western squall.
Lording the earth in the usual ways.
Or I could stay here the rest of my days.
I picture her threading the cork oak glades.
I follow beside, mild as the trades.

Finally a day with an invisible sun.
Ground flurries bore her. The playing is done.
She says, "Take me with you to the tops of the clouds."
Shall I show you how wind turns vapor to shrouds?
With eyes blue as hers and my heart full of sky.
Did you ever think you could fly so high?

Strangest of all, I see my breath gone dry.
Cast down by a calm, in a canyon I lie.
A terrible thought: every wind must die.
In the darkness a star, a twinkling eye.
Life passes from me with the sweetest ease.
As sweet as a smile from my little breeze.

Saudade

Look at the sun, sweetheart. It's like a great cartwheel rolling over the hills, spokes raying from the glowing hub. The wheel reminds us the day is ending.

We're on the bus headed south. You're wearing cork sleeves around your wrists. It was a grand day for us. We learned and puzzled through so many things. And our hearts are full. Thankfully, the Woman in Black wasn't along.

We learned many things about the montado. And a few, as well, about ourselves. And thanks to Tiago's thoughtful expressions at our departure, we have a new grasp of a Portuguese word.

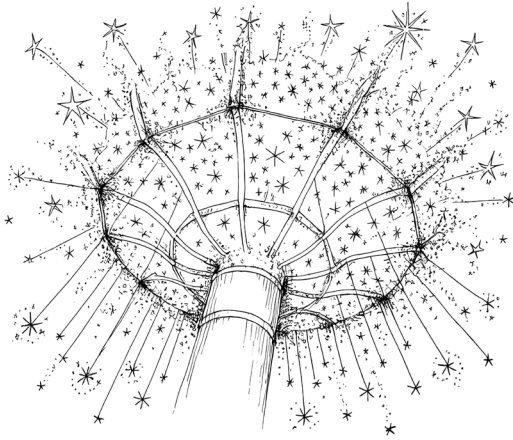
I'd heard it before. It's in common usage and is nothing remarkable for those who call the Algarve home. But for a man who has landed here from far away and—like a migrating bird—will be moving on soon, the word has special meaning. I'm hearing it now, humming in my bones as the bus descends from pig paradise to the towns on the coast.

Sow-DAH-duh.

The feeling of absence. The word is rendered in English as “missing, longing, yearning—” But in Portuguese, Tiago

explained, it's not a negative state. When you're feeling *saudade*, you're in touch with a memory that makes you happy. An essential memory. Something that was once an integral part of yourself. Now that it's absent, you're longing for it and you're sad. But the memory cheers you. You recall how happy you once were.

Tiago's description reminded me of limbo and the idea that there's a staging area that prepares us for a life after this one. Our time here together, my dear, is an interval of *saudade*. This yearning I feel, these wringing moments, these sweet reminders are readying my soul.



Carousel of Stars

Back at the casa, I tuck you in.
It was an indelible day in a different world, and when I lie down, it seems we're still there together. My head descends onto a pillow of hills shaded by oaks. My hip settles into a flowing ravine, buzzing with bees. My legs flex between the warm flanks of snoring pigs. While high above us, like the montado's glittering crown, a carousel of stars is turning.

In that paradise, we felt welcomed.

But I'm glad to be back.

In the morning, I will comb your hair like the breeze combs the golden grass.

A luxurious moment: on the verge of sleep, about to tip in.

And then—oblivion.

5



Gifts

g ood morning, sweetheart.
You enjoyed sleeping in?

I like that shirt. Have I seen it before?

Wonderful scents from the kitchen. Inez has been busy.

I was up early. I emptied the pack and set out the things we collected, thinking about who we might present them to.

The pomegranate, with your permission, I'd like to give to Inez. The handful of acorns can be for Dosey. For Enn, there's the chip of stone from the monastery.

I agree. We will tell him about the swallows we saw.

For Henrique: the sprig of leaves we took from the Singing Tree. If he mounts it outside his shop and keeps the door open, he'll hear it until it wilts. Henrique will know what the leaves are saying.

For Raul, there's a flake of bark from Camila. And the gratitude we owe him for arranging the visit.

Raul will expect an accounting. He'll ask what I've learned.

I've been thinking about that. To be truthful, Teni— I'm not sure.

We'll walk to the mercado after we've eaten.

Late in the Game

Raul is happy to hear we enjoyed our time at the montado, and happier still that Tiago's message registered. "I had a dream last night," I tell him.

You turn, curious.

I was quiet about it when we rose, but it's right you should know.

"I dreamt I'd been born a pig," I say.

You laugh and Raul does too.

"I'd first seen the light in a nursery corral. I'd suckled with my litter mates and explored the forests and streams with them. When I was ready for solid food, I ran with the herd after acorns that a man rattled down with his pole. I lolled in a pool with my pals, and we slept together beneath a large oak, sharing a marvelous peace and contentment.

"I had no fear. The montado was my home. I was happy to remain there for as long as fate allowed. There was no Woman following me down the streets of a foreign town, waiting on a cliff overlooking the sea, emerging from the dark undulations of my troubled sleep.

"In a future hazy to me, there was only the comradely

calm of a pickup pen and the quiet arrival of the butcher's truck."

Raul sighs and opens his arms as if to accept a load of groceries.

I can see the trouble in your eyes, Tenina.

"*Dia a dia*," I murmur. "It's late in the game, Raul."

He cocks his head. "You think it's too late?"

I'm not a pig. There's no restoring my origins. All the places I've lived have changed. My childhood home went up in flames. And the people I knew— Classmates and friends, reports and associates— Many are gone. And of those who remain, the bonds were broken a long time ago. Tiago's charges are born into a world of connections, and they never let go of them. I have none. With one exception.

I look at you, my dear child.

And as if Raul can hear my thoughts, he reaches out with his spidery hand and pats your head.

You Should Be There

*A*s we pass through the mercado doorway, a familiar face approaches.

It's Enn, hurrying to greet us.

The young man is dear to us now. I embrace him. You hug his knee.

"Inez said you'd be here," he laughs.

"I saw a hoopoe," you say.

"We were in the hills," I explain. He's nodding, Inez told him. "We brought you a stone from a ruined monastery."

He's still nodding, but there's a hurry in his eyes.

"Hoopoes are migrants," he says to you. And to me in a lower voice, "The birds are leaving."

His tone is overly grave. What is he thinking?

"Not all of them," I reply.

"No. Not all," he says with a troubled look.

He sees my confusion and scrubs the urgency from his manner.

"They're arriving," he explains. "From elsewhere in Portugal and places abroad. People, I mean. Watchers like me. To see the migration."

“When will the birds leave?” you ask.

“They’re already leaving,” Enn replies.

“Already?” I wonder. “Right now?”

Enn sighs. Then he nods.

“I have friends who track them. The raptors are here. Yesterday over two hundred were seen above Cabranosa. Black kites, sparrowhawks, booted eagles— There’s a watchpoint on a hill.

“Passerines—smaller birds—are gathering in the fields around Vale Santo. Lots of birders there too. The seabirds are swarming around The End of the Earth—along with the people. The biggest gatherings are always there.”

“It isn’t really the end,” you say with a doubtful look.

“No, sweetheart. That’s just an expression.”

“*Cabo de São Vicente*,” Enn says, “is its proper name. Have you ever been?”

I shake my head. “We’ve seen the Point at Sagres. But not the Cape.”

“Things are well underway,” Enn says. “Cars and vans, travelers on foot— The camping area across from the Festival Center is already full.”

“Festival?”

“For watchers who track the migration,” Enn says, “this is a big event. The Center is near the Cabo.”

“What do they see?” you ask.

“Birds, Teni. More than you can imagine.” Enn speaks softly, as if disclosing some kind of secret. “They’re all leaving: birds who live here like us; birds that are passing through,

migrants from east and north— And oddities too. There are always vagrants among the departing.”

He faces me with a strange expression: decided, emphatic but tender too.

“You should be there for this,” he says.

“It’s a long bus ride.”

Enn shakes his head. “You’ll ride with me.”

A moment of silence. There are people passing on either side of us, entering the mercado.

“When the sun sets at The End of the Earth,” Enn says, “it’s something to see.”



Two Fragile Souls

The stone from the monastery is in our pack. We give it to Enn and we part, thanking him, promising to consider his invitation. Then we head down the thruway, toward the Roman bridge.

“I understand,” I say, “why Enn and his watchers enjoy the birds.”

You nod. “Me too.”

“But for the birds, migration isn’t a joyful event.”

You agree. “It’s sad that they have to leave.”

“The uncertainty and danger the poor creatures must face— In a way, each is like Magellan, embarking on a perilous journey without knowing the outcome.”

We’ve reached the Rio Gilão. Through the pylons, and we’re crossing the bridge.

“A ‘Festival Center,’” I shake my head. “It’s hard to imagine a festive mood. I suppose the watchers may feel some richness in the dark emotion. They must surely have sympathy for the hapless birds.”

I slow my steps.

“Should we go with him?” I wonder. “What do you think?”

“I only care about one thing, Grampa, whatever we do.”

“What do you care about, Teni?”

“Being with you.”

With that sweet assurance, my doubt dissolves.

A gentle melody reaches us from the lutist in his niche.

“I have some coins in my pocket,” I say. “Shall we drop a few in his hat? Here, sweetheart.”

You take the coins, step forward, smile at the man absorbed in his plucking, and make the donation. Then you return to my side and take my hand.

In your clasp, the warmth of your palm, your nestled fingers— I feel your trust. The world is full of mysteries you can’t yet fathom, dangers you aren’t yet prepared to face. But you know I’m devoted to you. I’ll be here to protect you. Nothing in creation will change that.

Two fragile souls at the extremities of life, the beginning and the end—

Oh Tenina—

So many seek, in so many ways, what you and I have together.

Hopes for a Passage

We reach the far side of the river and find our way to the promenade and Republic Square. The travelers are busy today, crowding the bandstand, feeding the turtles, spooning gelato and sipping their lattes.

Past the fountain and into the shadowy corridor.

Then we ascend the long stair till we arrive at the castle.

We had planned to sit in the garden, near the entry arch or under the western wall. But the turret looks vacant, so we climb the steps. The boughs of the jacarandas with their lavender blooms wave as we ascend.

When we reach the top, through the gaps in the castelations, the street is visible below. We put our backs to the wall and seat ourselves on the stone bench. The weather's still warm, but there are clouds now, obscuring the sun. The day has turned moody. Proper perhaps for our next chapter.

Are you ready?

Well then— We will continue with Ferdinand and experience his travails with him, knowing, because of his place in history, that his struggle will end with glory and acclaim.

The deal he struck with the King of Spain gave him five

ships and nearly three hundred men. After leaving Sevilla, the fleet paused at the Canary Islands, where Magellan learned that a mutiny was underway. Every bold ambition has its skeptics! Magellan's passion had made him a man without a home. His Spanish shipmates wanted to kill him.

But Ferdinand wasn't a fool. It was the heyday of the Inquisition, and he used the persuasions then in vogue to enforce his rule: torture, decapitation, starvation.

South America stood between Magellan and his goal. He believed there was a passage through the continent for two reasons: a fellow mariner, John, had told him that he'd seen it himself; and Magellan had found a secret map that showed the crossing. Unfortunately, both John and the map were wrong. Ferdinand led his fleet into bay after bay as they sailed down the coast of Brazil and Argentina. It seemed there was no way through.

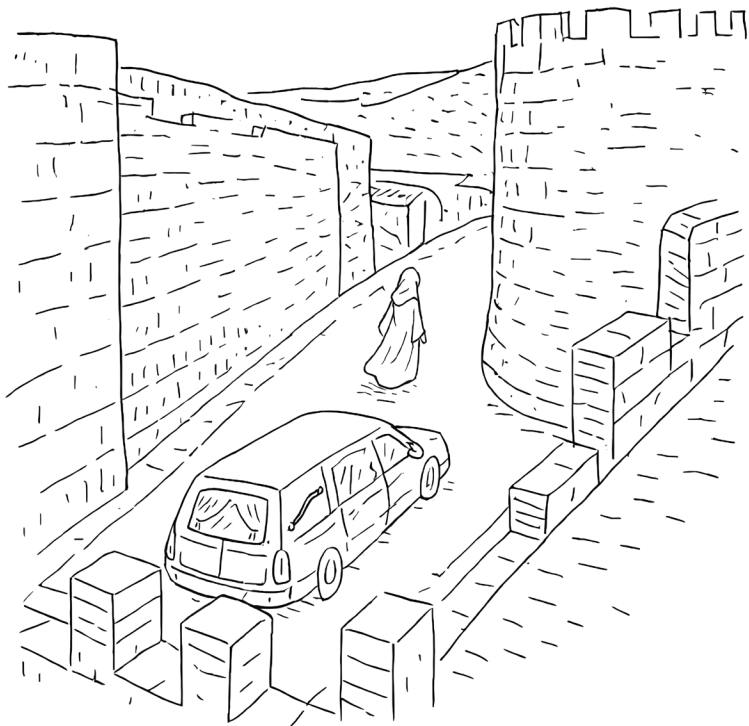
However improbable the voyage might have looked before embarking, it appeared now that the reality was worse. Hopes for a passage faded. Ferd's crew wanted to turn back.

But he kept on. He had no evidence that a passage existed. Blind obsession drove him farther and farther south. As they approached the pole, it got colder and colder. The storms were fierce. The carracks iced up. His men were starving, desperate for food. Whines and whispers, rumored revolt, fears of betrayal—

Did that discourage our boy? Oh no. He kept his own counsel and demanded obedience. And in the very worst conditions, alone, at the bottom of the world, he entered another

bay he thought might lead to a passage.

It was dangerously narrow, with daunting obstacles—icebergs and islands. Would he make it through?



The Silent Threat

*M*ore?" I ask.
You're beside me on the bench, beaming through your lemon glasses.

As I turn the page, I turn my head and glance through the battlements.

On the street below the castle's rear wall, the Woman in Black is gliding, cloak spiraled around her. Behind her, a hearse follows slowly: large and black, with a squared-off rear.

She knows we're here.

I feel a breeze—her disembodied breath—on the back of my neck.

As before, her head is hooded by the coarse fabric. Her legs are hidden as well. They seem not to flex. There are no other vehicles on the street, no walkers on either side.

The Woman's footfalls are silent. Her feet are calloused, or they're inches above the cobbles. In an earlier era, she traveled these roads, casting curses on whoever she met. Harrying souls. Or collecting them.

Back then, they all knew her. Fathers could sense her presence. They didn't venture to work. Mothers gathered their

children inside. Until the Woman departed, the town was frozen, held in her grip.

Am I the only one who sees her? You have your back to the wall. The tourists on the corner haven't noticed. People on the street pay her no mind. Cars are backed up behind the hearse, unfazed, as if they've stopped for a traffic light.

"What is it?" you ask.

I shake my head, unwilling to share what I'm seeing.

"Grampa?"

In my mind, I answer:

Tenina dear, the Woman has reappeared. She knows we're here. And she's declaring her purpose. She's brought her death car with her. There's a casket in it, I fear.

Why is this happening? What has given power to such an ugly omen?

I don't understand— I swear I don't. But I fear— I fear the Woman has come to separate us forever.

"Grampa?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry."

As the words of assurance leave my lips, the Woman in Black looks up.

She's halted. She's staring. The hearse wheels are no longer rolling.

Are her features obscured, or is the cloth hooded over an empty space? Whoever she is, between the two of us now, there is a moment of confrontation.

She's daring me. And I'm daring her.

Then her cowl tips down. She faces forward again.

The hearse wheels move, and silently they continue along the street.

Little Green Urns

I close our Magellan book and put it back in the pack.
Then I take your hand.
We remain on the stone bench together until the
Woman is gone. Then we leave the turret and descend the
stair.

Yes, Teni. A steadying grasp would help. I'm feeling a bit
weak right now. And I'm tippy. I forgot the umbrella I use as a
cane. And the bubble level isn't in the pack. I've lost it. Or it's
back at the casa.

Slowly, slowly—

I'm sorry, sweetheart. My legs can't be trusted and my bal-
ance is wobbly. Things seem to be happening quickly. Too
quickly for Grampa.

When we were reading, I thought I saw—

Who knows. It might be something I imagined.

Well— We've reached the gardens.

We're finding our way through the plantings.

Look there. In a plot near the entry arch, poppies have
rooted.

The flowers, fragile as crepe, are gone. What remains on

each stem is a small seedhead. A green urn with a ruffled lid.

I'll pinch one loose.

Open your hand. There now. Close it again.

The little green urn is small enough to fit in your palm.

I remove a second one from its stem, open my hand and close my fingers around it. A matched pair.

Do you know—

The poppy is the flower of California. My montado, my natural home.

What a gift it would be: if by holding the urns, we could be transported back together. If not, perhaps the poppies could relieve my malaise. There are drugs made from the liquor in poppy urns that calm troubled souls.

I can understand the allure of a foggy oblivion.

Some things are best forgotten.

Two Days Hence

This morning, I surfaced from sleep feeling troubled. Confused, disoriented—
How much of what I remember from yesterday actually happened?

I do my best to shower and comb my hair. I am able to find a shirt and some underthings. But my striped pants have disappeared.

Before I went to sleep, I folded them over the chair.

They were there. Right there.

I can't imagine what happened to them.

I check around the bed. I strip the sheets off and lift the blanket. I look beneath the rug and behind the door. In the bathroom, I check the towel bars and shower stall. Then I open the closet and search the shelves. I drag my suitcase out. It seems unlikely, but just to make sure— No, not in the suitcase either.

It's maddening.

Where in the world have my pants gone? Maybe they've flown with the birds.

Of course, sweetheart. Have a look.

Is that a knock downstairs? It's Enn, I expect.

Inez shouts. You shout back.

Yes, it's Enn. And all I have on is my underwear.

I suppose. Go on, Teni. Lead the way down the stair. He's here to join us for breakfast and talk about the birds.

I'm descending the stair behind you, moving slowly, step by step, trying to keep my balance. Still puzzling about my pants!

Enn is standing by the dining table.

Dosey is absent, having spent the night with a new beau.

You hug Enn's legs, and I shake his hand.

Inez is frowning at me.

"I can't find them," I say.

She waves us down, and we take our seats. Then she hands Enn a platter of steaming *queijadas*. Cheese is dribbling out of the folds.

"I'm going upstairs," Inez tells us.

Before we've touched the food, Enn's talking about the crossing.

"The marine birds will go whenever they please," he says. "Flying over water doesn't threaten them. The raptors must go in daylight. They need the thermals and the heat of the sun. The passerines and waders fly at night.

"Whinchats and wheatears. Redstarts and wrynecks. Plovers and sanderlings— It's a big decision for them. They're nervous, they're hungry, the winds aren't right.

"Then, at the end of the day, the sun is setting and they go. In the glancing light, you see them." He raises his fork and

aims it, spotting the birds in flight.

“Like luminous ciphers scribed by a wizard’s quill. Or protozoans viewed through a microscope—cryptic, looping and darting, patterns no human can comprehend.”

Your eyes are wide. Enn is weaving his spell.

“The birders stand at land’s end shoulder to shoulder, binoculars raised. Sometimes there’s chatter. Often there’s perfect silence.”

Before Enn leaves, we agree on a departure time two days hence.

As we bid him goodbye, Inez descends the stair with my pants draped over her arm. “They were in your dresser,” she says. “Second drawer.”

She’s laughing and so are you.

Bless you, Inez. I’m so happy to have them back.

“We’re going,” you tell her.

And when Inez looks at me, I nod. Yes. The matter is settled.

“Grampa’s sad for the birds,” you say.

And I confess: “It’s true.”

It can’t be easy for them.

We aren’t birds. But imagine if we were. All of us.

Picture the coast after we’ve left.

The Olhão fish market is empty, and so are the cobblestone streets. No one is seated at the cafe tables. In Carvoeiro, the carefree shoppers and ginjinha drinkers are gone. And the sands at— What’s the name of that beach? Cacela Velha. No spread towels. No suntanned bodies. The *bolas* vendors have

vanished.

Signs of the departed are everywhere.

A tightrope hangs at the Faro waterfront, but the walker is gone and so is his crowd. In Tavira, a laundry line is attached to a Moorish wall, but the woman who hung her sheets there has vanished. The boardwalks along the Lagos cliffs are deserted. Where are the snooty girls? And the surfers with their arms folded over their chests, who flirted with them?

The *petanca* balls lie on the ground at— Where was it? Quarteira? The balls are there, but the cannery workers have disappeared.

Imagine if we were like birds.

The Magician

What has Grampa done? He's such a fool.
All this talk of vanishing—
It was thoughtless of me. I can see your dark state, your
retreating gaze.

It pains me to see you upset and to know I'm to blame.
“The thought of people disappearing like migrant birds,”
I smile, “puts me in mind of an experience I had—an amus-
ing one—when I first arrived in Lisbon, before your holiday
began.”

You're facing me again, with curiosity and a little relief.
Shall we go upstairs?
We'll sit on the terrace and enjoy the sun.
“I'm meeting a friend in Santa Luzia,” Inez says.
We bid her farewell, climb the stair and step out onto the
terrace.

After the trials of the past few days, calm and seclusion
will be welcome.

Yes. Let's sit in the deck chairs. I was telling you about my
experience in Lisbon.

It was a disappearance, but an entertaining one.

Lisbon is a busy city. It didn't take long for me to realize that the capital wouldn't be a good landing place. But while I was there, I diverted myself as best I could.

I was riding a streetcar one afternoon. It gathered people from either side like a magnet passing through iron filings. Sparks flew from its wheels. It reached a crowded thoroughfare, climbed a hill and descended to a large paved area with a monument at its center.

As I stepped from the trolley, I saw that a crowd had gathered around the monument. They weren't observing the hero whose marble effigy towered above. Their attention was on a young man standing on the pavers below. He was casually dressed in swimming trunks and a colorful shirt, like a paddler returned from the beach. But he wore a top hat on his head and he had a wand in his hand. He waved it like a baton, promising tricks to the crowd.

A street magician.

It was late afternoon, and the shadows of the buildings fell in lanes across the watchers. The young man claimed he'd summoned the spectral lighting as part of his act, and by virtue of that and his magic talents, we had all entered his spell. I enjoyed his banter, and many others were similarly captivated.

What kind of magic was he going to perform?

His specialty, he explained, was making things disappear.

He borrowed a purse from a woman near me. And somehow, with his wand and the help of a blue scarf—and smoke he released by snapping his fingers—the purse vanished completely. A moment later, it reappeared. Where? In a baby

stroller!

Then the young man freed a dove from a cage, perched it on his hand and covered it with a beach towel. And when he drew the towel away, the dove had vanished. Where had it gone? Would it return? The magician played with us, eliciting guesses, suggesting that the bird might have flown for good.

After planting these doubts, he explained that he would bring the bird back. He acted as if that power belonged to him. It was chicanery, of course. But he prated with such panache that we were all amused.

What then?

He placed the towel over the empty cage, and when he removed it, the dove was behind the bars. Applause. Good cheer. The magician circled the crowd, collecting cash with his top hat, and I tipped in my share.

And then—

I was much surprised.

The magician turned and pointed at me. I was hesitant, of course. Uneasy. But he motioned me forward. What could I do?

I joined him beneath the monument, more than a little self-conscious. The young man put his hand on my shoulder and explained to those gathered that he was about to perform his most difficult and demanding trick: he was going to make a living human disappear.

The crowd responded, gabbling to each other, amused, speculating, voicing their opinions. I could see the anticipation in their eyes.

What was I feeling? I was nervous. And more than a little threatened. It was a trick, a deception, but still— I didn't know what the magician would do. How would he make me vanish? How would I return? Was he going to hide me from view, as he'd done with the dove? If so, he'd need more than a towel. Something larger, a drape or a blanket. And if the crowd couldn't see me, where would I go?

The young man stepped behind me. I wasn't able to follow his actions.

I watched the watchers, looking for hints.

Silence, a few shaking heads. Held breaths. A long moment of uncertainty.

And then—

All at once it seemed the shadows on the paving were growing thicker. The light dimmed and darkness closed over me.

I could hear the crowd, their gasps of amazement, their laughter, their guesses—

What had happened? I was still fully aware, still present.

Was I no longer visible to them?

If the crowd couldn't see me, where had I gone?

I never lost consciousness. I was there, fully aware and alive. But—this is the odd thing—the crowd somehow lost its awareness of me.

I returned to view, surprised and refreshed. But the return was after an interval of time.

When I came back, I wasn't on the pavers below the monument. There wasn't a crowd of onlookers smiling and



applauding the trick.

No.

I was back on a Lisbon trolley, hearing the grippers tightening on the cable, feeling the car being pulled along.

And my body, my thoughts, my sentient being—

I was like a drip sculpture on the beach, being reconstructed by a slurry falling from an invisible hand. The wet sand fell, slid and adhered.

I'd returned. I was whole and intact. Whatever the magician had done, the trick had worked. As simple as that.

Through the trolley window— It was late. The street was empty, the shops were closed. The city was asleep. And because you had not yet arrived, there was no one to welcome me back. But that's all changed.

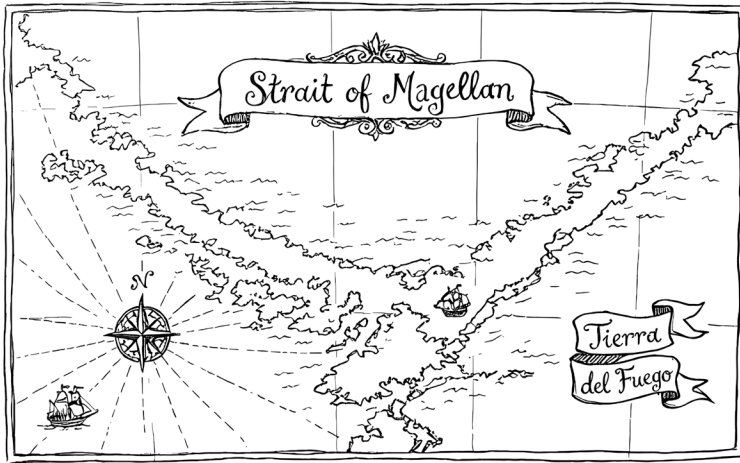
Well—

What do you think of Grampa's story. There's an uncertain look in your eye, sweetheart.

You know— Since my arrival here, I have sometimes suspected the young man is still with me. His presence is somewhere high above, out of sight; and his wand is still circling, still conjuring his impressive magic.

If I disappear again through some fresh trick of his, can I count on him to bring me back? Would he—or some more powerful magician who taught him the craft—grant me a full return? Or would I reappear in a more subtle way?

It's a good trick, and—from what I can tell—easy enough to perform.



The Strait

"g
rampa?"

What is it, sweetheart?

"Are we going to read about Magellan?"

Our time at the castle was prematurely suspended, wasn't it.

We can continue if you like. As I recall, Ferdinand was about to navigate the Strait that bears his name. We'll need the storybook.

My god. What's happened to me? You're right, sweetheart. I'm holding it in my hand. I guess I was thinking about him too.

Alright, alright—

Let's find where we were.

Yes. I believe this is the page. Let me know if I've missed a beat.

They entered another bay. And in the bay they found what looked like a passage. Magellan tasted the water and it was salty. He looked at his men and said: "We're going to follow this wherever it leads. We're not going to stop, even if we have to eat our masts' leather casings."

Extreme, but we know to expect that from Ferd.

As he soon discovered, the passage wasn't a simple corridor. It was a labyrinth, a maze of islets and estuaries, inlets and fjords. The water was deep and the currents were fierce. And the chop grew worse as they advanced. The waves were twenty feet high. They couldn't anchor the ships. They had to cable them to the shore.

Progress was slow. Visibility grew worse. The air was foggy and the clouds were low. They saw fires burning on wooded islets and feared they were invading a land where cannibals reigned. The walls around them grew steeper and were streaming with falls, some hundreds of feet high. And then— The rocky walls turned to ice, and the ice cracked and boomed, sending giant blocks down. The blocks were blue and as large as the ships. They thundered into the water around them, and Magellan watched as they floated past.

And then—

Are you enjoying this, Teni?

There's an entry fee for posterity. Magellan is paying it.

Where were we?

Darker and colder it grew. Freezing storms descended and pummeled the ships. The strait narrowed, and the currents became even more vicious, preventing any forward progress. Then one of his pilots—someone Ferdinand trusted—turned against him. The man sparked a mutiny, took the largest ship and most of the fleet's provisions and headed back to Spain.

Magellan was shaken. Was it time to let go of his dream? His goal was still far ahead of him. His maps were useless, his provisions were low, his crew was weary. And there was no end in sight.

I'm sorry, Tenina.

Our boy will find his way through. But—

This is hard to read.

Hard because—

Once a Seeker

*M*agellan's trials remind me of my own. Mine were much less severe, of course. My goal was never to circle the globe. Thankfully, my aspirations belong to the past and my recollection of the details is hazy. But the stress I felt—

That's remembered.

Grampa was once a seeker.

I had impossible goals. There were things I thought I was born to prove. What in another might have been a flight of fantasy was a burning hunger for me. And the hunger drove me to extremes. I imagined that when humanity's history was written, my contribution would be recorded.

I was fiercely determined— And because my passion burned so brightly, I managed to venture beyond speculation.

With the boldness of manhood in its prime and the devotion of a fearless wife, I penetrated to the very heart of my target.

I'm not being boastful. Your grampa navigated a strait of his own.

I made a unique discovery—a discovery I could only share

with a few. Not many could follow my twists and turns. Not many could retrace my route or rediscover my recondite goal. And obscurity meant a paltry reward.

As long as Camila was with me, I persisted.

But with her departure, I grew heartsick and discouraged. And that led to reticence and isolation.

With the isolation, my goal faded and my fever cooled. The precious discovery trailed into the past. The mysteries were obscured and forgotten.

All that remains of my great ambition are the memories of seeking, and feeling pain. The pain of overwrought plans. The anguish of endless reappraisals. The despair of dead-end byways. The grief of persevering while the odds of success diminish day by day.

Being a seeker is an arduous life, whether you reach your goal or not.

Let's leave Magellan for another time and return to our simple oasis.

This Balmey Day

How long have we been here together on the terrace, feeling the peace of the sun and each other?
A cup of tea rests on the stool. I'm watching a lemon circle turn on the amber surface.

You're gazing through your glasses at the little green urn in your palm.

There's a world beyond.

If I close my eyes, I can hear the hum of automobiles, a baby's cry, the rustle of leaves from a nearby tree. There's a faint patter of voices from the cafe down the street. On the breeze, a smoky perfume. Someone is burning incense across the way.

This modest world, hidden in seeming silence—

And our subtle awareness—

Is it a maturity, an advancement?

All of us, Teni— People and animals too—

Every creature that breathes feels the uncertainty of life. Curiosity, suspicion. Attraction, repulsion. Caresses, resistance. Grasping, defending, unwelcome emotion, violent conflicts— Striking, wounding, tearing each other apart— To

live is to need, to crave, to love and to rage. It's true. I'm not making this up.

Or maybe I am.

Maybe it's all irrelevant. Pointless posturing, empty utterance.

The real world is suspended as we are now. Half-conscious. Serene, restful. Without pleas or demands. A murmuring world.

On the floor below, the front door is opening. Inez has returned.

She's in the kitchen now.

And now we can hear her climbing the stair.

"*Meus queridos*," she says, announcing herself. She's stepping toward us with a box in her hand. "No *laranja*," she says. "But there's *pata de veado*, *torta de amêndoa* and a pair of pastels."

She sets the pastries on the stool beside my tea.

You thank her warmly, leaning forward to hug her knees. The sweet woman melts and strokes your crown. "You two look very happy," she says. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

Her emotion is showing. Is she worried about something?

"Santa Luzia," she smiles. "So sunny and calm. The *polvo* boats were leaving. The water was perfectly flat. It looked like the lagoon was sloped and the boats were coasting across it.

"I'll be busy downstairs," she says. "I'm going to make stuffed *lula* for you."

You smile. I nod. We know how she labors over that dish.

Inez steps back inside and we hear her descending the stair.

A long interval of silence.

Then slowly the murmuring world returns.

A clop of sandals. A thread of *frango* on the breeze. The slow tolling of a distant bell. One. Two. Three.

Are we across the ocean, in a distant land? Or have we used our imaginations to layer this peace on a place more familiar?

Are we in danger, pretending no harm will come? Is our little Portuguese town about to be drowned by flood or razed by fire? Are we like the epicures of Pompeii, indulging ourselves while Vesuvius grumbles?

We don't care, sweetheart. Do we.

If this is a fantasy that's swallowed our lives—

What does it matter. I'm glad to be here.

If this is a dream, Tenina, we'll savor the dream as long as it lasts.



A Promise

Tenina, my dear—
You haven't touched the box of treats.
Why the troubled sigh?
Sweetheart, sweetheart—
There's a gleam on your cheeks beneath the lemon frames.
Look at me, Teni. Lift your chin.
Why the tears and this despairing look?
Please, dear girl.
Tell me. Tell Grampa what's choking your spirit.
Ah well—
I won't deny it.
This wreck of a body won't last forever. That's true.
But there's part of your grampa that will never leave. It
will always be holding your hand and speaking softly in your
ear. It will always know what is brightening or clouding your
day.
We will always be in this magic place, on a beach searching
for shells; at the surf line feeling the froth retreat and return
beneath our feet; on a bank with the gentle flow of a stream
in our ears.

The spirit of Angelo will never leave. Never.
What is it, my dear?
Certainly I will. Right now, right now—
I'm making you a promise. A solemn promise.
With a block of surf cheese, a tin of cod and my santos
halo: I will always be here.

6



The Pacific

We rose early, and we both had an intuition. This was an important day for Magellan. Today he would find his way. The dream of glory wasn't at an end. It was about to come true.

We're beneath our three Canary palms now, seated on the bench, reading.

A great challenge it had been: sailing across the Atlantic, searching for a passage, struggling through the perilous strait.

A day of thick fog. A dark night.

Then, in the clearing dawn, as the sun rose in the east, Magellan stood at the prow and gazed at an unbounded horizon.

An enormous sea, and a calm one: the Pacific.

Being an experienced navigator, he realized the magnitude of what they'd done. For long moments, he was speechless.

Mankind had greatly underestimated the size of the globe. Where the maps showed a lake that a novice might cross in a day, this ocean looked endless. He'd discovered a domain no one had suspected.

Undreamt of, uncharted, unknown.

A mission of glory it had truly been. His great crossing would be remembered.

The earth was round, and somewhere ahead lay the Land of Spice.

You sigh and smile, and we gaze at each other, feeling Ferdinand's triumph.

Then I turn the page. And I'm astonished.

There's more to Magellan's story. But look—

It's not here! You can see where the pages have been torn out.

Is this some trick Henrique has played on us? Did he know? Maybe the previous owner disliked the story's conclusion. We're both wondering now. The bounty of palm dates is spread around us, hundreds of eyes—vacant, as puzzled as we are.

What happened to Ferdinand, Teni? We need to know!

Did he find the islands in East Asia? Did he stay long? Did he return to Spain with his cargo bays full? Was he greeted with great celebration and royal acclaim? Did he live out his days as a Portuguese noble, enjoying his new wealth and the renown he had earned?

A scrap remains: a piece of the last page.

There are a few words on it.

Mactan

*G*rampa— What does it say?”
“He reached an island named Mactan. In the Philip-
pines.”

We look at each other, considering.

Then, at the very same moment, we remember.

The truth strikes us both, and I see the knowing look in
your eyes.

“He never came back,” you say.

I laugh. “He had other priorities.”

You giggle and swim your hand by your chin.

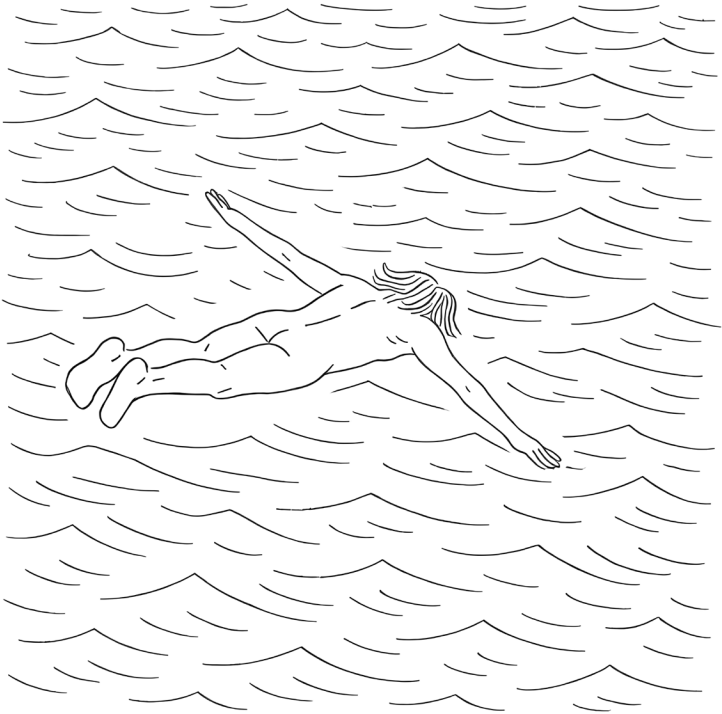
We’ve figured it out.

When he reached the Philippines, Ferdinand discovered the waters were full of tropical fish. The most beautiful creatures he’d ever seen: quick as thought, cut like gems—clowns and blennies, sharp-nosed angels, spiny lions, butterflies and damsels—translucent, fluorescent, lit with a myriad colors.

Not many on board his ship understood.

“Bring her into the wind,” Magellan ordered.

The ship would drop anchor. And Ferdinand would strip and go swimming.



The fish held him. Those bright creatures whose beauty none can deny. What fool would value nutmeg and cloves over a treasure like that?

In the face of this unearthly blessing, the importance of wealth and repute faded, and Ferdinand's plans to return to Europe dissolved.

I'm so pleased with our story's outcome.

And so are you.

"He didn't need all that money," you say.

"Or royal approval," I agree.

Magellan had proven himself a true explorer.

He had valued the riches he'd found on his own terms.

We brought notepad and pencil with us, imagining we might put them to use.

You're inspired and so am I.

To honor Magellan's wisdom, we'll fashion a poem.

Pretty Fish

Ferd Magell,
We know your name.
Nerve and purpose
Brought you fame.

But in those seas
To which you ranged
Your nature warmed,
Your outlook changed.

At the journey's end,
Your only wish
Was another swim
With pretty fish.

The Butterfly and the Fountain

How pleased we are with our poem and the final chapter of the story Henrique gave us.

Magellan's ambition had been troubling us. The ending was so much happier than we'd expected.

It's warm now, approaching the noon hour. We've celebrated Magellan's awakening with a *limonada*, and we're crossing Republic Square to the fountain.

My phone chimes. It's Enn, so I take the call.

He's confirming the time for our departure for The End of the Earth.

"Yes," I say. "That's right. We'll be ready."

And after some courteous banter, the call ends.

But as we cross the cobbles, the few words we exchanged are troubling me.

Yes, of course. With you, my dear, there are no secrets.

Enn was strangely insistent.

Why? I have no idea. Does he think we'll forget? Is he worried we'll change our minds? He's become a close friend. It's upsetting to think there's some unspoken friction.

Well—

It's lunchtime!

We seat ourselves on the stone curb and remove our makings from the pack. You peel the rind from a wedge of surf cheese. I open a tin of rubbery cod.

A butterfly flutters between us, alights on your shoulder, then ascends, wheeling into the air above our heads. Lunch momentarily forgotten, we watch.

There are flowers not far away, in the planters that hem the promenade. But the creature seems drawn to the fountain. Or to you, flower of life that you are.

Its circle tightens.

And now it's descending toward the pool, gliding, no longer fluttering, settling on the water's surface.

What is it doing?

The butterfly's wings are spread. The margins are frayed, and with the sun full on it now, we can see that, amid the bright color, there are patches of scale missing.

It's still circling, but the blue tile beneath it has more color than the creature itself. And it's the water's movement that gives the appearance of flight.

We watch. We wait.

A droplet of water lands on one of the butterfly's wings.

Still carried. Still circling.

No longer willful, no longer driven by desire. The butterfly has surrendered itself to the fountain.

You were its last impression, my dear. The last appreciation the fair creature had of the world in which he was living.

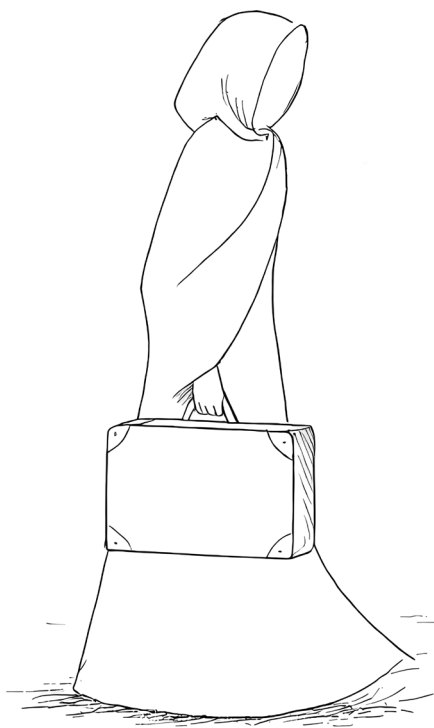
Our mood turns somber.

We eat our lunch in silence.

And then, as we're chewing the last of our cod, the weather changes abruptly.

The sky turns dark. You're in a t-shirt and shorts, and you're cold.

You need your jacket, but it's back at the casa.



The Visitor

When I turn onto the street where we live, I halt. I've been running as well as I am able, and I'm breathing hard. The sight before me clinches my chest and stops my breath.

The hearse I'd seen following the Woman is parked beside our casa.

The driver is tall. He's dressed in black and is leaning against the car with his arms folded. When he sees me, he nods and raises two fingers. The gesture makes me shudder.

I'm taking steps, approaching him slowly, feeling like Magellan. The clouds are low in the sky and I'm in the strait, sailing forward, confronting my fate.

The rear doors of the hearse are open.

Is it empty?

No. As I draw closer, I can see: there's a casket inside.

Not an adult casket. It's a small one. Built for a child.

Then I see her.

The Woman in Black is standing by the casa's front door. Waiting for me.

I'm fearful. Trembling. But trying to look calm. Being

polite.

“Can I help you?” I say.

She shakes her hooded head. “Open the door.”

I do as the Woman asks, thankful I honored Tenina’s request and she’s elsewhere.

In the entry, I shout for Inez, but she’s gone and so is her daughter.

“A surprise visit,” I say. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Stop it,” the Woman demands.

I see now: she has a traveling bag in one hand. She motions to me impatiently.

Without speaking, I lead her through the entry and up the stair.

At the top, I pause. And again she motions. So I open the door.

None of this is real, I think.

Or if it is, it’s happening in a dimension no one else can see.

The Woman in Black steps into our sitting room, sets down her bag and looks around. Then she pulls the hood of the cloak back from her head, removes the dark garment and drapes it over a chair. She raises her hand and fluffs her auburn hair. Then she faces me.

It’s no stranger. It’s Tenina’s mother. My daughter.

In disguise.

Why, I wonder. Why has she made herself so ominous? Why has she been stalking us? What purpose does this devilment serve?

Even as the questions arise, I know I'm a fool to pose them. This is her way. She was a well-meaning child, but the adult she became—

"I don't have long," she explains, as if she's newly arrived.

"I'm glad to see you," I say.

"Are you?" she asks, knowing I'm being polite.

"Don't worry," she assures me. "I'm on a return flight tomorrow morning."

She pretends she's paying us a visit from the States. Does she think I'm crazy? She's been following us since the day you arrived.

I glance at her cloak. I reach out and touch it. The weave is coarse, and the cowl is large. A threatening costume.

She's no hag, of course. She's middle-aged and without any obvious malevolence. For a moment, there's nostalgia in her eyes and care in her voice.

"Dad, Dad—" She sighs.

Then she pulls something from her pant pocket: the repurposed mint tin full of almonds. As always, she smiles, removes the lid and offers me one.

"Thanks," I smile back and shake my head.

She returns the tin to her pocket and sighs again, looking around. "You don't have to live like this," she says, as if the casa is somehow unsuited for us. Does she imagine we live here alone?

I know what's coming next. She'll urge me to return to the States. She wants me to be closer to old acquaintances, to her and the people she knows, to the doctors and hospitals she

prefers.

“I’m happy here,” I explain, acting thankful for her concern.

I’ve heard it all before. She imagines we’re stranded in a world of ghosts and illusions.

“As stubborn as ever,” she laughs.

Then her face stiffens. “And as unreachable. I’ve come a long way, you know.”

“I’m grateful,” I say.

But she can see that I’m not. And she can tell how upsetting to me her presence is. And with that, the hostility begins.

None of my affairs are in order, she says. There is property in the States and abroad. Financial instruments in banks on every continent. My financial manager resigned last week, she says, and my assets are in disarray. “I have no idea what you’re worth or where anything is.” And she curses me using my given name, as if Angelo doesn’t exist.

“Do what you like,” I say. And I open my hands to her, surrendering, giving her permission.

“I have legal counsel, Dad.” There are tears in her eyes.

“Do what you like.”

“Is that what you want? I can become your executor, with or without your consent.”

“Do what you like,” I say again.

“You’re completely out of touch,” she says to herself.

And now come the words I dread: the blame, the falsehoods, the descending spiral of accusation. The Woman has no idea who I am. She’s lost in illusions, and she’s convinced

it's her duty to drag me into them.

What can I do? What happened to her? Camila would wake from the dead if she knew.

The Woman's sick. Distraught, deluded— And the more she rants, the crazier her constructions get. She's blotting out the memory of her own marriage. I try to remind her, and she cries, "Stop it, Dad. You're being cruel." She imagines she's been single all her life. And—it now seems—childless as well.

I'm so sorry, *Teni*, that your holiday here has led to this.

In your absence, the Woman's thrown truth to the winds. It's too much for me.

I'm deafening myself to her rant, and that's making things worse.

I try to bring her back to the facts. I remind her of the stay that we both agreed to. *Tenina* is here. She's here and she's safe. There's no reason for—

But the lid has blown off the pot.

She's raging now, shaking her head, her voice breaking. When I start to speak, she throws herself at me, sobbing desperately, pounding her fists against my chest. It's as if the memory of her pregnancy and the triumph of your birth had been, in a single stroke, erased.

"How can you do this to me?" she cries. "A child? And I've left her with you? I'd have to be crazy."

Oh *Tenina*. This is hard to hear.

What can an old man do but endure the punishment?

Finally, she stops.

She's turning away, grabbing her bag, forgetting her cloak.

She looks like she's about to leave. I wonder—

Will we see her again?

Will she continue to follow us, to threaten us with her presence?

She whirls and descends the stair. I follow, stepping onto the landing.

At the last, before she opens the front door, she looks back.

“I don't care,” she says, “if I never see you again.”

Her hopelessness echoes inside me. But when the door slams behind her, I feel a welling of relief.

I draw a deep breath to calm myself, turn and step back through the doorway, glad for the comfort of our simple quarters. I go to the window and open it. Magically, the cover of cloud has lifted. The sun is visible now, and through the window's yellow frame, light falls on the black cloak.

Slowly the fabric fades. As I watch, the garment becomes a beige overcoat.

How Things Will Be Resolved

Before hurrying back to the casa, I left you with the curios and Henrique. Or with a friendly server at the gelato shop by the bridge. Or at a table of your own at the rear of the pastelaria. I couldn't recall. I was too upset.

After rushing to these places, I realized—

I hadn't left you at any of them.

You were with Raul, unloading cans of olives and setting out pears.

You didn't understand why, but finding you safe in the mercado was an emotional moment for me.

The Woman did nothing to unsettle me, I thought. My bond with Tenina is stronger than ever. But I'm more sensitive than that, and more insecure. I was troubled by your mother's visit. Deeply troubled. And when I found you with Raul, when I knelt by the fruit counter and held you close— It meant so much more than I was able to express.

Calm again, my peace restored, we walked back to the casa together.

Inez had returned. When we greeted her, she hugged you and kissed your cheek.

Then we climbed the stair and set about lighting a fire.

Outside, an evening chill infuses the air. You've fallen asleep beside the flames that dance in the little brick niche of our sitting room. I lift you carefully in my arms. Your head nods against my chest, and I carry you to your room.

I'm not going to share what happened between your mother and me. Nor will I share her strange delusions.

Dear girl, my beautiful child—

When our brief time together in Portugal is over, will I live up to my promise? Will some vestige of Angelo remain with you?

I would give anything, anything—

There now. I'm lowering you.

Head on the pillow. Blanket over you. Snug and secure.

You look so peaceful, sweetheart.

As much as your mother upset me— As final as her reproaches were—

I know how things will be resolved.

When our holiday together has ended, she will cast aside her delusions and pick up the responsibilities she has always so cheerfully shouldered in the past. With the challenges you'll face in starting school, she can hardly do otherwise.

Sleeping with the Dead

Tenina—
I'm sorry to wake you.

I've lit this candle. I'll set it here on your nightstand.

No, no. Please don't get up. Stay there beneath your blanket. I didn't mean to disturb you in the middle of the night. But—

May I sit here beside you?

There. Thank you, sweetheart.

Will you take Grampa's hand?

I'm shaking. And I'm dripping with sweat. I've had a troubling dream.

So troubling.

I would like that, Teni. I need to talk. I'm feeling very alone.

The dream—

You know that Grampa's birthplace burnt down. My home, the schools I attended, the town center— In my dream, I was there, seeing the fire destroying it all. I helped with evacuations. Many escaped, but many were caught. Lives were lost, and of those who survived, a good number were badly wounded.

In my dream, I was one of the searchers. Quenching smolders, recovering victims.

At night, I watched over a tent infirmary.

It was hard. The victims were in so much pain. A few were from families I knew. I experienced their struggles with them. Where it seemed there was hope, I tried to buoy the victim's spirits, thinking he or she might pull through. For those who seemed unlikely to survive, I wished for a merciful end.

Terrible. I know.

I'm sorry—

You're a generous little girl. Talking about it is helping.

The hour was late. I was in the tent, tending to victims. One begged for release, knowing how advanced her injuries were. Sleep seemed impossible, with all the suffering around me. Finally I succumbed to exhaustion. But while I slept—

I shudder to think of it.

While I slept, some passed.

And in my sleep, I joined them.

My spirit emerged with my last breath and hovered over my body.

The ones who were alive were shifting, groaning, muttering and gasping.

Those who were dead lay perfectly still. But their spirits, like mine, were free, silent, mingling. Separated from our bodies, we mixed with each other without speaking.

That's all.

I slept with the dead.

That was my dream.

We Should Go

After a breakfast of *torradas* and cheese with Inez and Dosey, we help clean up, then we wish them a good morning and walk to Henrique's. We greet him warmly, listen to the sprig of the Singing Tree hanging outside his door and give him our thanks for the Magellan storybook.

Did Henrique expect Ferdinand's saga would raise the questions it did? I doubt he imagined that we'd give the story our own ending. We're silent about the missing pages. If he didn't remove them, we don't want him to think we're complaining. And if he did, we'd rather regard the changed climax as our inspiration, not his! He's an unusual fellow. What good fortune that Henrique's been part of our lives.

The same goes for Raul. We visit him now with news that we know will cheer him. It's too early to claim a full recovery, I explain, but I believe the threat of the mysterious Woman belongs to the past. He claps his hairy hands on my shoulders and shakes me. "Then it's over?" he laughs.

"I hope," I say, "I hope, I hope."

We walk along the Rio Gilão admiring the old ferry and

its scarlet rails, waving to the tourists lined up for tickets. We amble the promenade and pause at the bandstand, enjoying the turtles in the moat below. We cross the Roman Bridge and stand for a minute to listen to the lutist, and I hand you some coins to drop into his hat.

We return in the afternoon, decide what to wear and load our pack. I'm taking my flat-brimmed hat and my sun umbrella. Surf cheese and cod, our ID card, binoculars, bubble level and two sweaters in case.

We descend the stair and enter the kitchen.

Inez turns, smiling at us with her apron on and her hands on her hips.

There's a knock at the front door.

"I'll get it," you say, and you hurry to let Enn in.

I can hear your excited voice, then you're leading him toward us.

Enn nods to me as he enters the kitchen. Not just a hello. There's a bow in it, a show of respect.

"The birds," Inez flutters her hands and flares her eyes.

Enn laughs. "*Estão cheios, os céus,*" he says. "The skies are full."

Dosey, drawn to the chatter no doubt, steps into the kitchen.

"What's the excitement about?" she asks.

Enn glances at her, smiles and turns back to us.

"We should go," he says.

Dosey frowns, wondering who Enn is, miffed that he's paying so little attention to her.

I give Inez a hug. A big one.

And so do you.

I grab the pack and we cross the threshold with Enn. He opens the passenger door of his beat-up truck, and we slide onto the seat.

“The End of the Earth,” he says.

And he starts the engine.

The Old Captains

*A*s we enter Olhão, Enn stops at a gas station and fills the tank.

Before he restarts the truck, you wonder, “Are the old captains still here?”

“We can’t take long,” Enn says.

Just a few minutes, we agree.

He threads the streets, headed toward the park at the water’s edge.

The sidewalks are empty. The sun has vanished behind the clouds. On either side, Olhão is blue, as if the sea had risen and drowned the town.

Enn comes to a halt beside the park.

We leave the truck, hands clasped, gazing up. The giant tipuanas are in leaf and unchanged. The gravel path leads us toward the bench the two sea captains called their own.

And there they are.

Wearing the same clothing, seated in the same positions.

The one with the mariner’s hat sees us and raises his arm in greeting.

The other turns, straightening, frowning and eaving his

brow.

“*Mares agitados*,” he says.

“Good day,” I reply.

“Where are you bound?” the one with the hat asks.

“To see the birds fly,” you tell him.

The grizzled one squints at me. “Leaving with them?”

I don’t answer. You’re holding my hand, and I feel you squeeze it. Reassuring me.

“Some of us leave, some of us stay,” the mariner with the hat explains.

There’s an odd empathy in his eyes, as if just by sitting here on the bench beneath these trees, he had arrived at some understanding of the choices an expired man must make.

“Doesn’t matter,” the grizzled one says.

Their fish were gone. The crews had left and the ships were in pieces, drowned in the deep or scattered on land. But the old fellows are still hanging around. One with his gold-braided hat, half amused, resigned in his way; the other hard-bitten, peering with haunted eyes and grinding his jaw.

Had they no memories of love? Had they nowhere to fly to?

Do they abide in this world because there’s no comfort in any other?

I Cannot Be Erased

We see the highway exits to Portimão, and I ask Enn if we can visit our fountain. You help me explain the importance to him, and he's willing to oblige.

He knows where the municipal theater is. He finds a spot for his truck, and the three of us walk to the garden. Enn understands it's personal, so he waits on the steps.

We continue to the fountain and stand together beside it. Here, gazing at the pebbly reflection, we observe ourselves. Hand in hand.

My dear girl—

Are you alright? I fear that my personal evolutions have upset you.

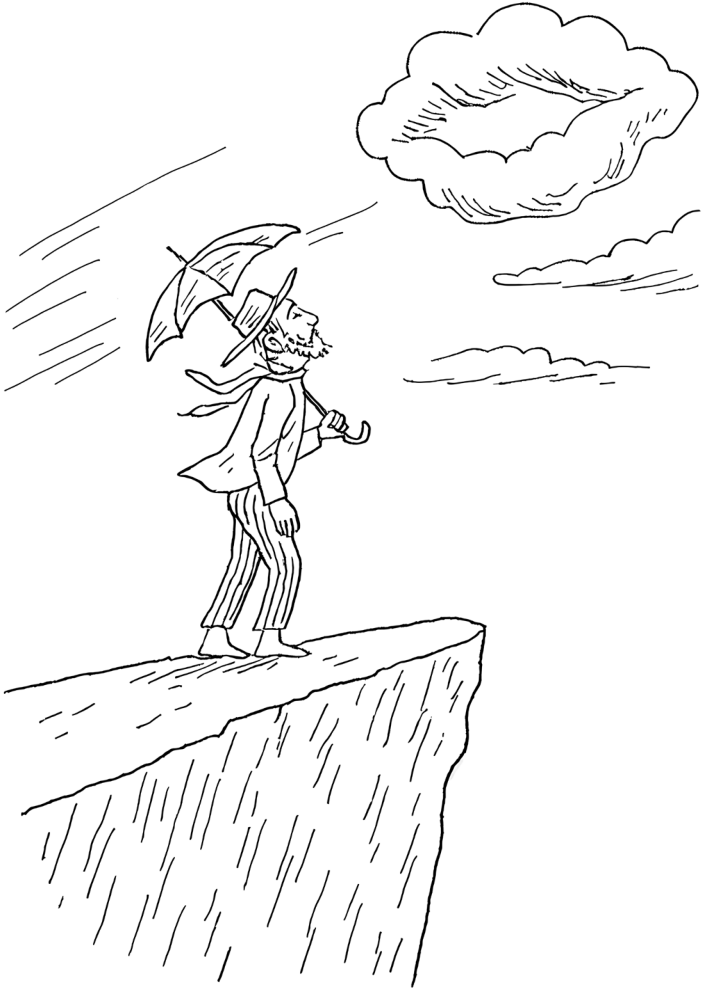
Seeing your grampa under duress, with all his feelings exposed—

What a generous answer!

I have been, with you.

Perfectly honest. I want you to know the truth. I don't want anything to be hidden.

Someday you'll be older, Tenina. You'll have many years, and things from your past will haunt you. There's no avoiding



that. Frustrated longings, regrets and losses— You can't let go of them. You realize: wherever the future takes me, these wounds and sorrows are coming along.

But joy is durable too.

Oh yes! Especially for me. Having you here has made all the difference.

Life ends with death. The earth ends at the sea. But where there is love, the journey continues.

Last night, the ease you gave my poor heart affected me deeply.

I went back to my room, but I kept the candle burning.

Before I returned to sleep, I penned a poem about Camila.

You're different than her by nature, Teni. But the strength of our connection— It's the same.

She was a fearless creature. With unfathomable eyes and a heart to match.

In the poem I wrote, I was with her again.

This morning, first thing, I reread it. Then I folded it and put it in my pocket, hoping there might be a moment to share it with you.

Shall I read it?

Yes, I'd like to. And this is the perfect place.

Alright. I'll need to contain myself.

The forest and the rain,
The moon and a—

I'm sorry. Let me draw a breath and clear my throat.

The forest and the rain,
The moon and a desperate kiss:
I breathe inside the memories.
My desire still exists.

After all these forlorn years,
From dreams and aimless thought,
I cannot be erased.
I cannot, no I cannot.

May the jog of my devotion
Stir your dwindling hopes.
The warmth that's never faded
Will shield you from the cold.

If a bird must cross an endless sea
He must put aside his fear.
He cannot mourn his lost love
When she's whispering in his ear.

Dread may fright the lonely flesh
On its flight to another world.
But you, my love, will never lose
Your wife and your little girl.

Oh child! Your grampa is a pathetic soul. Only you can
unlock his broken heart.

The Festival Center

It's a two-lane road from Sagres, and the surroundings are desolate: flat and treeless, with bleached grass and dun scrub.

On either side, aprons of earth appear by the roadside, crowded with cars.

"The Festival Center," Enn says, glancing out his window.

There's an old stone wall, with an events tent and a modern building beside it. On a pole by the entrance, the Portuguese flag is flying. Enn pulls the truck into a space, and when we exit, he motions us toward a walkway that leads past the flag toward the modern structure.

The scrub on either side is patchy and blasted. It's the end of the day now, and the sun is low in the west.

"The wind here," Enn says, "can be fierce. But—" He opens his palms and looks around. "It's as calm as can be right now. Good conditions for those who must cross."

There's a sign on a tripod. *Observação de Aves*. And as we step past the sign, a crowd comes into view.

"There are a lot of us," Enn says over his shoulder.

Two men are hailing him. A woman with a clipboard

approaches. Another has moved from behind a table. She's motioning you toward her.

"I'll need to register the two of you," Enn says. Then to you, "They have pastries for staff. Maybe a *bola* or a *torta*?"

You nod and turn to me with a longing look.

I sigh and relent. You let go of my hand.

"We'll be right back," Enn assures me. "There are sessions," he waves at the modern building. "You might learn something or meet someone of interest." And he ushers you away.

Plaques on the doors identify topics. I open the nearest and step inside.

A dozen people are there, seated, standing, listening to a man with a British accent. Behind him is a chart with figures. He's talking about hawks, birds of prey. "Big numbers, especially for kites," he says.

"By noon," a man volunteers, "they were at the top of the sky. Almost invisible, taking long glides, like they were on wires."

"We saw a lot of thermal hopping," an older woman says.

"Fifteen snake eagles in a single funnel. All adults."

"The thermals lost strength in the afternoon," another adds. "The booted eagles and buzzards we saw were sinking. They'll spend the night here."

I turn and leave, closing the door behind me. Another door, a different session.

In this room, a woman is speaking Portuguese, pointing at a map on the table before her. People are crowded around. She seems to be talking about migration routes.

“What is she saying?” I ask a man beside me.

“How do they go,” he mutters, trying to answer in English.

“Over sea and the Sahara Desert. To Sahel. In Africa.”

“Which birds?” I wonder.

“Swifts,” he says.

I leave the session, scan the crowd for you, and enter a third door.

A younger woman, an American, is talking about bad things that happen once the birds are over the sea. Headwinds, if they're strong, will halt their progress. Fog or a cloud ceiling obscures the stars and impedes navigation, and the birds get lost. Storms throw them off course, especially the smaller species.

I exit the room, searching the crowd again. Where are you, Teni? Enn has vanished. And then—

A woman beside me turns and smiles.

I'm speechless, and for a long moment, in a different world.

“Camila,” I whisper.

I am not imagining. Her eyes are deep—knowing, comforting.

I should speak, but I can't.

Has anything changed? It seems not. Her high brow, her soft cheeks, her beautiful hair, falling in dark waves. “You've come back,” I whisper.

“Of course I have,” she whispers in reply.

She puts her arm through mine and looks through the crowd.

“What is it?” I wonder.

“We have to go,” she says.

“Our granddaughter is here. Tenina.”

“I know,” Camila nods.

“And a man named Enn.”

The crowd is moving, and we’re moving with it.

“I know,” she says.

“You do? You know Enn?”

“It’s time to go,” Camila says.

The air has dimmed. The sun is sinking. Doors are opening, and the watchers are leaving the sessions. People are filing out of the Center.

“Where are they going?” I say. But I think I know.

“To The End,” Camila replies, looking at me. “To see the birds fly.”

I scan the crowd.

“I can’t leave without Teni,” I say.

“Let’s not worry about Tenina,” Camila says. “She’s taken care of.”

I shake my head, I slow my steps.

But Camila is urging me forward, holding my arm as she always has, calming my doubt, letting me lean on her authority.

The watchers are moving along a stony path.

“They call it ‘The Fisherman’s Trail,’” Camila says. “The End isn’t far.”

A Wandering Path

We're following the path, watchers ahead of us, watchers behind. The grasses on either side have been swept and woven by fierce winds.

Camila draws me against her hip.

"Angelo?" What a name! Who thought of that?" She laughs.

"I have so much to tell you."

"I've been listening, watching," she confides. "I've heard and seen a great deal."

"The years in the States, after you—"

"We'll have plenty of time for all that," she says.

"I want you to meet Tenina."

"I'm looking forward to it," Camila says. "We'll visit her often. Whenever you like."

"Now. Tonight."

Camila sighs. "No, my dear. Not tonight." She shakes her head.

"What is it?" I ask. My distracted state must be upsetting her.

"You trust me," Camila says. There's a question in her

voice.

“Of course.”

“The holiday is over,” she says. “Tenina has her own life to lead. She’ll never forget her time with you. And you’ll never forget her. Will you.”

“Never,” I reply.

Camila squeezes my arm and kisses my cheek. “Tonight is our night,” she whispers. Then she scans the skies as if she’s a watcher too. “It couldn’t be clearer. And the winds are nil.”

“They’re going to leave,” I say, drawing her conclusion.

Camila nods. “It’s instinct for them. They know that it’s time.”

The sky behind us is darker now. Before us, the sun is flaming, its giant gold disk turning orange, rimmed with scarlet. The bushes on either side of the path have glowing branches that point out to sea.

And a strange sea it is: with giant swells veined with foam trails, as if the tide had a consciousness of its own. The path is close enough to the cliff now to see the steep drop, rugged and weathered. This is the place. The End of the Earth.

The path breaks into a network of trails with watchers on all of them.

Then the trails lose their distinction and there is only a gravel expanse.

Beyond the gravel, the road comes into view with a mob of parked cars.

And beyond the cars are throngs of people, hundreds of them, standing, facing the setting sun and the cliff’s edge.

The End of the Earth

With Camila close, gripping my arm, matching her pace to my own, we leave the gravel expanse and cross the road.

The End. Camila's calm sustains me in this strange moment. The end of something. But the beginning of something else.

The watchers are lined up on top of the cliffs to either side of us. The rocky walls are sheer, glowing with reflected sun. There are watchers before us, standing, gathered on The End itself, all with binoculars around their necks, all facing the horizon.

We're moving through them, stepping over the weathered rock. Past a young couple. Past a short woman with braided hair who turns and puzzles at me with her forefinger touching her lips.

"Enn is waiting," Camila points. "At the edge."

I don't understand. "What are we supposed to do?"

"He's your guide," she says softly. "Go to him."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Do you trust me?" Camila asks.

“Of course.”

“He’s here to help you,” she says. “Listen to him.”

Camila kisses my cheek and lets go of my arm, urging me forward.

I take a stumbling step. I don’t want to obey her directions, but it seems mean-spirited to resist. I clear my throat to alert the watchers before me.

They part, giving me access to the cliff’s edge.

Beneath my uncertain feet, the rock is layered in rugged sheets. The way tends up, reaches a level and sags. The sun is a giant orb glowing before me, casting a reflected wedge on the hilly sea. The swells are huge. Just beyond is the cliff’s edge and the precipitous fall.

On the giant swells, there are rafts of birds. And there are birds wheeling around me—large, muscular birds, white with narrow wings and harpoon bills. The birds are crying.

“They’re gannets,” Enn says gently. “You’re going with them.”

I look around. I don’t see him. The watchers beside me have their binoculars raised. They’re following the birds.

“They have no fear of heights,” Enn says. “And neither do you.”

The waves are gigantic, furrowed deeply. They’re rising to the top of the cliff. And the frothing crests— They’re not curled toward shore. They’re moving away from land, headed toward the sun and the great beyond.

“Are you ready?” Enn asks.

Am I? I take another step. And another.

The ragged edge of the cliff is beneath my feet. And then—
Everything is suddenly silent. The breeze has vanished.
The watchers are mute. Time has stopped, and there's no one
on earth who knows when it will start again.

Forget these worthless legs. Damnable things! I'm spreading
my arms, sending my remaining strength into them,
straightening my wrists, locking my elbows, fanning my
fingers—

An updraft from the cliff is lifting me—

“Lean forward,” Enn says.

I turn my head and look back. Among the watchers, I
see a silhouette that might be his. Is there a child beside him,
holding his pant?

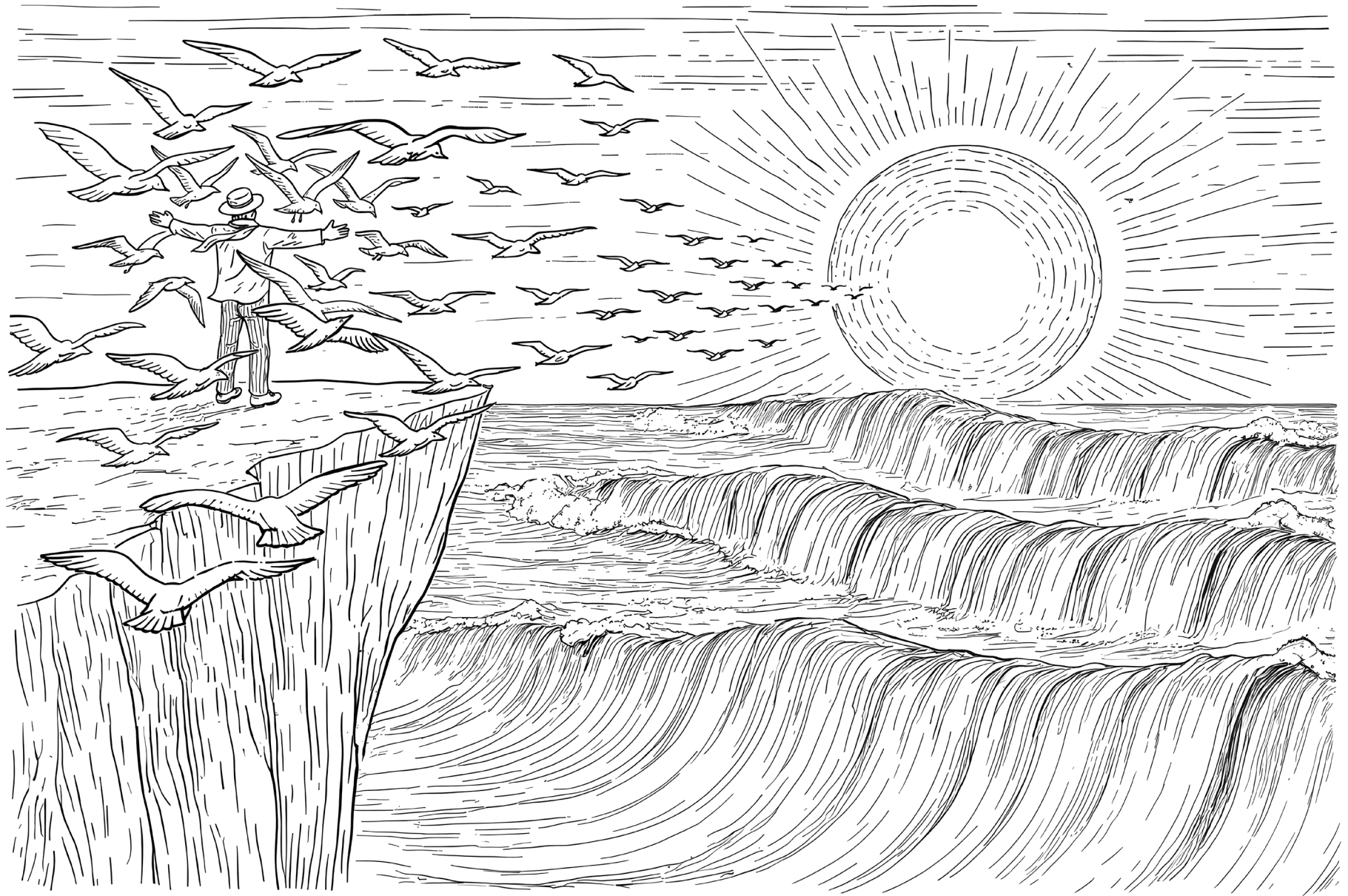
“Lean forward and catch the wind!”

And I do, feeling the air supporting me. I'm gliding, gliding!
Earn your moniker, Angelo. Fly, fly!

In the sun's fierce glow, I can see my gilded wings and the
streaming birds on either side. They're flying ahead as well,
leading the way for the crossing man, as brave as Magellan.
The rafts of birds on the mounting waves all lift off at once,
and as the flocks swoop in behind, a cheer rises from the crowd
behind me, inspired by the great embarking.

Enn is with them, laughing to himself, watching me float
away. I feel now, in this moment of freedom, all the fears and
falsehoods I let into my life. Excuses and rationalizations, stories
and lies, remembering things that never happened, seeing
things that weren't there.

Though you're not with me, Tenina, I'm thinking of you.



A blind kiss for my little girl, the one I love so.

The birds are crossing, sweetheart, and I'm going with them.

"Petrels," Enn says, "and shearwaters. Rising from the swells. The small dark birds with racing wings, the graceful gliders with a crazy call—"

Thousands of them. Mad, I think. Laughing and crying all at once—

The golden air around me is charged with fresh flocks, small birds, batting their wings furiously.

"Passerines," Enn says, "are pouring out of the uplands. Wheatears and wagtails, warblers and whitethroats, redstarts and whinchats—"

The throngs fire past me like shot.

"And joining the birds from the emptying land," Enn adds, "are waders from distant shores: sandpipers and plovers, whimbrels and sanderlings. And now the godwits appear."

The air is thick with migrants, flying and crying, large and small. Flockers and loners, those who glide and those who know only frenzied flapping. Will the crossing remove the distinctions of our previous lives? Oh no, we carry our histories with us. Our vivid memories, the moments that etched themselves on our hearts, all the feelings, profound and indelible— But without the lies now, Enn. Just the truth. The truth!

Your festival's a success. The watchers are thrilled. A new avian species, unknown before this. A creature to be named and talked about, to be pictured in books and added to lists!

"Farewell, my friend," Enn says softly.

Farewell, I say to myself.

The portal of the sun is flaring and cinching. It's like a hole in the sky through which the migrating throng will pass. Below, the light falls on the enormous folds of the sea. The great waves aren't wind-borne, not driven by events on earth—These are waves of the spirit, waves to which distance means nothing, waves that will never crash, but will roll on forever.

With the heavenly flock, on the heavenly wind, I'm headed toward the glowing portal.

Life is a tunnel. I see that now. A tunnel I've been passing through all these years.

And now, I'm reaching the end.

At the moment the light consumes my senses, I hear a voice.

A soft voice, a hopeful one—a child's, not a bird's.

"You promised," she says.

Lids of Dawn

Though the winds and the wings of my spirit have carried me far away, there is still that need, still that longing. And the strength of my desire fulfills it. A mystical eyesight is granted as wages for a persistent heart. Or perhaps as mercy for a heavy one.

In the broad light of day, you're not observed.

Nor at day's end, at twilight or dusk.

Nor in the deep of night. I'm not there. I no longer exist.

But at the first glimmer of dawn, when your eyes are about to open but haven't yet— Just then, my wandering spirit slows. And I look back.

Oh Tenina. Sweetheart. My beautiful child.

These lids of dawn will never close.

Through them, I will always see you.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Their thoughts are warped toward a place and state that is different than the one we're born into—an astonishing place, where the truths of our practical world are unraveled and revealed to be the illusions they are. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with surprising discoveries about human potential. *These Balmy Days* and his previous fifteen titles are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.