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THE NEHUSHTAN

And here I am standing in line. Warning: it is not an ordinary line.

Those of us standing here are going to the promised land. Today the line seems longer than ever. With every step it sways, creating a chain of contortions which pulls us from one side to the other in serpentine movements. The progress of the creature is slow and cumbersome; every inch seems a victory.

It should not surprise you that the line that takes us to the promised land is shaped like a giant serpent. After all Moses had a bronze staff in the shape of a serpent which the Israelites call Nehushtan. The search for the promised land has a lot to do with serpents. And, like all reptiles, this path will always be scaly, slippery and plagued with ambivalence. Few animals generate such polarized feelings as serpents. They hypnotise us, and at the same time scare, enchant, or repulse us. They are either loved or hated, but there does not seem to be a neutral attitude towards them. Moses' brother Aaron was not a friend of serpents, he preferred calves. Moses, on the other hand, loved serpents and led the exodus. The path in search of the promised land is, without a doubt, a snaky one.

I joined this reptile at seven thirty in the morning, which is what I had been told to do. I am not usually that punctual, but this time I did my best to be on time. I was stunned to see that there were already three hundred people ahead of me, but I quickly settled into the spot assigned to me. The sight of so many people made me think that I had made a mistake. I checked my passport. The slip of paper stated clearly: seven thirty in the morning. The man in front of me similarly checked his documents. I got a glimpse of his paper; it also said seven thirty a.m. All of us were here for the same humiliating appointment.

A strange rumour started going down the backbone of the beast jamming our ears. It sounded like an out-of-tune flute voicing off key hypotheses and conjectures.

Once inside the Nehushtan, there is nobody to turn to with queries or complaints. The reptile demands a cheerful face and patience. It obliges us all to look meek, an indispensable costume for those going to the promised land. This is the mask which identifies us as members, parts of this animal with the forked tongue.

Those in front started this tiring, undulating movement at four thirty in the morning, under the light of the moon. Reptiles love moonlight. To tell you the truth, I was upset to have arrived three hours late. I had got up enthusiastically, and I hate early starts. Once again, I heard a hissing murmur going down the Nehushtan. Inside the creature we learn, step by step, that we are no longer individuals and that we have to behave as one unit, part of the same body. As the minutes go by, the rumours spreads like ripples picking up all kinds of stories on their way. The snake digests different versions of the same event, embracing contradictions.

I am tempted to leave, but when one becomes a part of this body, it is not easy to get away. Every time I considered the possibility of breaking loose, the murmur stopped me, filling me with uncertainties, and overcoming my resistance. The Nehushtan always discovers the version one wants to hear, and this becomes an uncertainty which requires solace.

The wave of the Nehushtan advances more forcefully. It crashes over us and submerges us in it.

... If you go now, you run the risk of never coming back ... You never get used to it over there, but you end up staying... It is very hard to speak a language when they don't understand a word you're saying... No matter how hard you try, they act as if they don't understand ... Many come back, after having spent the savings of a lifetime... Our fate is to get there, and stand in the same lines with exactly the same people. Look brother, everybody has a reason to leave... Even the toughest get a knot in their stomach when they get that phone call that puts a price on their child's life...

The nature of the beast is fear. Moses liked serpents, despite the fear they could generate. He understood their nature because he had learned to play with them as a child. In fact, the Pharaoh knew about Moses' pastime because they grew up together. So when they appeared before him with the Nehushtan, Ramses did not bat an eyelid. Moses asked Aaron to throw the stick onto the ground so that it would turn into a serpent. But the Pharaoh was not impressed by that old trick.

Once again a rumour spreads under the scales of the creature, and I find myself listening to the stories, simulating disinterest.

... In this country you do not necessarily have to be rich or famous to become the victim of some crime ... Being a victim of blackmail knocks you out and your sole desire is to escape as fast as you can... Many in this line only want a good job, but they end up doing somebody else's cleaning... They get up at the crack of dawn to wait for the truck which will take them to some odd job... Who has not dreamt of changing their name, country, somehow starting up again... until they do so...

In spite of the complaints and uncertainties we are still part of the Nehushtan, with its murmurs and tittle-tattle. The stories within the reptile are the manna on which it fattens. The Nehushtan knows that people are here more as a reaction to a feeling of impotence and despair, than because of any illusions about their destination. The reptile nourishes itself on the soup of uncertainties brewed in the kitchen of interminable rumours.

... Nowadays, it takes between nine and twelve months before getting an appointment to stand in this line... All of this for one minute, and sometimes not even sixty seconds.

Moses knew that the antidote to snake venom can be found in the venom itself. And the Israelites thought the Nehushtan had healing powers and burned incense to it, until King Hezekiah burned the effigy of the bronze serpent crushing it and rubbing out its trail.

And now this long, tiring wait; all these twists and turns take you to a little window at the counter. The future, admittance to the promised land, depends on a few seconds at those rectangular openings.

"We can not do anything... you need another document... ask for another appointment..."

Everybody needs another document. Those who are a part of the Nehushtan always need another document. Those who want to run away, escape, leave behind the reality that weighs us down, need another document. The documents of the Nehushtan are cutting and double-edged. One needs all kinds of certificates, copies, statements, deeds, but they do not guarantee the right to leave either.

I have always wondered how serpents mesmerise. Maybe because they seem like an enormous stomach, an endless mouth which opens to devour everything, consumes everything to avoid differences. Certainly, those of us on our way to the promised land hate differences. We want to be equal, to consume the same things. We want to be a part of the same reality, taste the same flavours, without changes, uncertainties or dangers. We want to dress in the same way, have the same hopes, wear the same sneakers, move to the same rhythm, eat the same French fries, walk the same way, so that we too, can creep along as stealthily.

Is this why we so passionately desire to be a part of the Nehushtan, with its slithering, rhythmic movements? Ultimately, we dream about this reptile which consumes us and renews itself by leaving its skin behind. The Nehushtan unashamedly leaves one generation by the wayside, in order to begin another.

Snakes are cold-blooded animals. And those of us who are a part of this reptile, which by now is ten blocks long, have to abandon the past, leave behind our old skins and enter, refreshed with the hope invoked by the glowing dream of the promised land. We leave behind the shadows of our own history, to emerge again under the skies of another land. We are convinced that our future is to be found in other latitudes.

... But, will there be a future in the other land? Will there be a light at the end of the tunnel for the new arrivals? Will this exile be a punishment or a reward?

Moses founded cities for asylum and refuge. But, those cities were not completely safe, nor were they genuine places of refuge, much as Moses wanted them to be. Asylum gives you the illusion of safety, but all migrants know that one can not hope for a completely peaceful life. Cities were shelters for those who had to flee, for the exiled, the unwanted. Those of us who want to turn our backs on our past and are here in the Nehushtan want to get to the promised land, even though the quota for visas has been used up. The Nehushtan is not a place for reflection but a place of action, actions stemming from desires.

We all share the same anxieties. The waves of rumour going up and down the creature nourish and soothe our phobias and apprehensions.

...Are you sure they sell the stickers for the passport?... Here there is a price for everything, it depends on the client....a few months ago they spoiled the business...You can't get hold of them any more, the market is tough now... But, you'll be able to get them again in a couple of weeks...They really clamp down at vacation time...I managed to get one cheaply, of course that was a while ago...It was the first time I applied...

It was also a reptile that pitched us out of paradise and made us earn our living through the sweat of our brow. But the Bible does not exactly talk about sweat on our brow. The Holy Scripture talk about the nose. It tells us that we will sweat through the nose. And the nose is essential if one wants to reach the promised land.

The counter itself is distressing. One always ends turning red with shame, they are experts on the many variations of making blood come. Rumours within the Nehushtan assure one that the documents are no problem, the intermediaries will take care of that. There are intermediaries to suit all budgets and tastes.

The wave, with its circular movement at the cusp, approaches again.

...Do you need bank statements or certificates of employment?...You can get them at that tire repair place, across the street...Yes, the tire repair place ... And if that is no good, next to it there is another office, the place where they take your picture for the visa... The place with the *Visa Service Welcome* sign ... visa photo in three minutes... We prepare forms, check documents, translate certificates, do photocopies, give assistance in all the paperwork.

The Nehushtan, with its dragging steps, keeps moving towards the counters. We all advance without any distinctions of class, race or profession. The reptile amalgamates us: doctors, plumbers, business executives, electricians, lawyers, taxi drivers, mechanics, engineers, gardeners, students, prostitutes, traders, psychologists, hired killers, street vendors. There is no job which is not included in the Nehushtan. We are all going to the promised land and are part of the same creature.

The wave advances, pitilessly soaking us with its spray.

... If you have a doctor's degree then they will send you to hospitals or centres for high risk of contagion or infection, and you get the visa at once...Sometimes if they need

engineers for a road in the mountains... Or if they need professionals to pick up some grunt work, that their workers, who have been in the country for years, refuse to take... Imagine reality over there as a totem pole with the latest arrivals at the bottom of it. But, if you do not ask too many questions, and get on with things, sooner or later you get to the promised land. Those full of doubts and apprehensions (like Moses) only get to see it in the distance.

In the Nehushtan, you must, above all, be lucky. One day it rained, it rained so much that the reptile looked like an eel. The tension and electricity which saturated the atmosphere were shocking. Energy circulated everywhere. Everybody went in, soaked, and dripping wet. The tension spread to the counters, and to get rid of it, they gave everyone a visa that day. There is nothing like a lucky star. But, the rain does not always mean it is your lucky day. Generally it just gives you a terrible flu. And your wet face does not arouse compassion or pity, just contempt and rage. The odours become more pronounced, and odour is a crucial factor when you get to the counters.

Those behind the counters are sensitive to odours. They accept or reject depending on the smells emitted. In fact, the Nehushtan has a special odour. A mixture of smells, which added to the sleepless night and fear, stick to you, and nobody can get rid of it. And, in the end, all of us smell the same: we share the scent of rejection that characterises us all.

Clothing and colors within the Nehushtan are unpredictable. Some people are very elegant, even dripping in gold. Others dress more modestly. But the neckties give the game away. Those behind the counter know how to distinguish them. The ones with a triangular knot belong to one category, the tubular knot to another, and no necktie is yet another group. They are classified at the counter. The Nehushtan has developed its own language full of gesticulation. There are some who turn up in a leather jacket and jeans, and there are those who come in a poncho. The ones in ponchos are immediately regurgitated by the snake. Rumour takes off and travels down the creature.

“Who will give you financial support?... What about the airplane tickets?... How much do you earn?... What will be your address?... What is the purpose of your visit?... Are you married?... If you are planning a vacation, why aren't you taking your children?... Have you got a car?... Real estate? ...You do not have a five year employment record...”

We all hope we get to counter number 13. The ones who get the ‘the crazy guy’ have a fighting chance. We all hope to get a turn with him. With him anything can happen. It is a gamble. But, it is also true that ‘crazy guy’ has a terrible temper. One day his treacherous voice announced over the loudspeakers: “Those of you who speak Chinese and know who the twentieth president of the U.S. was, step over this way. Anybody who knows the answer, gets a visa.

The Nehushtan has no past, nor memory; it only spreads the murmurs that fuel the buzz of voices. And ‘crazy guy’ knows this. Nobody was able to answer, and from that day onwards everybody came prepared with the list of U.S. presidents and had learnt the national anthem.

Behind the counter they play games like serpents with their prey. The Nehushtan is full of rodents. One day, ‘crazy guy’ burst forth on the loudspeakers: “Those of you with false documents please place them at the back of your files, they will be accepted in the Embassies of Egypt, Iran or Iraq.”

...Egypt...Egypt will always be the enemy of the promised land.

Today it is cold, it is not raining... Could this be the right moment?

The timing is crucial. They do not need villains, in this theatre, but bad timing and a bad entrance, as usual, can be fatal.

... Will this be the right moment? Will the guy at number 13 harden his heart?

One false move and everything is lost.

Time becomes infinite in any period of waiting.

... Potato chips, candy, lollipops...

In the Nehushtan we eat all the time.

Will they deport me? Am I the right age for the promised land?

Getting into the promised land without being the right age is not easy. Too young is no good. They reject young people. This may seem strange, but at the counter they do not like young people. This is one of the few circumstances in which it is not an advantage to be young. The serpent does not like the young. Young people will stay and they go into hiding easily.

"...How old are you?...Are you going to study?... Show me the letter from the university...You can study English here you know... There are plenty of language schools here; I can recommend you some."

The counters are rat holes, they set the traps and we all get caught in the end. Those of us who are in the Nehushtan at this turning point in life, spend our time studying and practising the answers to the questions formulated by loose tongues.

... A relative of mine had all his documents prepared for him, he paid the money and got his visa, no problem... Those people are experts, they know the name of the game and they are in collusion with the right people... You need the documents from the Chamber of Commerce?... Over there they will tell you where to get them, but that will have to be for the next occasion... You don't think that you'll be the only one to get a visa the first time round, do you?... That would hardly be good business, would it?

The counter is just at the right distance for the farce to be coldly calculated and acted out without a show of emotions. They do not differentiate between men and women, for them we are all aliens, just bodies, simply bodies, inert bodies, disposable bodies, invisible bodies which are ultimately transformed into hands, working hands, ready hands, left hands, strong hands, which will fall into the most unexpected hands.

... Help me brother, how do I fill in this form? Don't be a bad sport...What do I put on this line? Whatever you do, don't put that you have relatives there...If you put that you give them away, and you give yourself away... Last time you said you had a brother there, why didn't you mention it this time? ... I've got to go to the toilet... But I can't leave the queue... I've been here for hours, I can't hang on any more... Will they keep my place?... Don't worry I'll keep your place... It's OK, I can hold out... Will I have to wait long?

There are sixteen counters but they only use seven. There are four hundred people out on the street and two hundred in the inside patio. The loudspeaker warns us: "It is illegal to present false documents, violators will be prosecuted!"

...They've turned down my application three times...they stamp your passport, so I had to get a new one last week...

Coffee, potato chips, lemonade, ice cream, hot dogs...

The Nehushtan eats and eats.

...You've always got to get a return ticket, even though you lose the return part...The main thing is to get in, once you're there, you can work something out...

The intermediaries have arrived. The intermediaries have their privileges, and always get there late. The rumours grow, the wave gains strength and begins to turn. The intermediaries know the beast, they stroke it every day, they keep an eye on its movements and feed it birds and innuendos. The intermediaries have their own dress code, their neckties have triangular knots and they carry a briefcase. The guards appear; the Nehushtan shudders. The guards start with their questions: Your papers?

They choose their victims by looking at their clothes. The sting of intimidation grows.

Those considered dispensable are purged to prevent wasting time at the counters. They recognize the smell of poverty. The hissing, full of conjectures, nurtures and strengthens the doubts. It was not for nothing that Moses was the leader in the search for the

promised land and not Aaron. He stuttered. Here stuttering is a natural thing. But the ones who stutter do not gain entry into the promised land.

...A cousin of mine was incredibly lucky, he told me to rent a room somewhere in the neighbourhood....Its like living in a tent...So he managed to be among the first... The rooms are not too bad...You have the basics .. The intermediaries will tell you where to go.. You have to leave early, and they give you an American breakfast which consists of a doughnut and a coffee.

The rumours unite us, bring us closer and closer together, always tighter, exchanging information and untruths, snaking along together in a movement seeking to shed the past and be born again.

Potato chips, coke, pepsi, coffee, chewing gum... If only I had known that you could buy your place in the queue; I could have got up later...It is not that expensive...

We eat all kinds of things, everything is for sale. We devour living beings. With each step, I feel part of the great mouth. The Nehushtan flows like water, formless, but its stinking tongue lashes out. I am getting to the counter. But, neither Aaron nor Moses made it to the promised land, and Aaron died on Mount Hor just because he was doubted. What am I going to do? Have I made a mistake? It's my lucky day, I think I am going to get counter 13. There are five people ahead of me. Keep my fingers crossed. I will lift up my hands. If I hold my hands up, like Moses, maybe I will win the battle...Hands up high. I feel better. I am close now, must not let my fear show. Calm down, calm down. I am almost at the head of the Nehushtan. Just one more to go. Number 13 is slow today. Will I get him? Hurry up.... It's my lucky day!

- Good morning...
- Documents ... purpose of your visit?
- Tourist
- Are you travelling alone?
- Yes.
- You want to cross the Rio Grande... You know? Maybe I will let you in. I am going to do one test - said the crazy guy- .Its easy, this time you do not need to know anything, you do not need to know the correct answer.

I could smell the excitement coming from the counter. I wanted to run away, escape. He was setting a trap.

- Say: *Shibboleth*
- But, what does it mean in English?
- Don't worry, just say it: *Shibboleth*.

I started to stammer, as if my tongue had been burned by hot coal.

- Chibolet...

As I got it out, he shut the window. The 'crazy guy' closed my file and, with an energetic stamp, sullied my passport.

Those of us who could not pronounce *Shibboleth* congregate at the exit. We know we would meet again inside the Nehushtan. It is our destiny to become a part of the snake every now and then, despite the rejection and humiliation. We hope that, one day, the creature with the forked tongue will separate the waters and would allow us to wander in the desert for forty years, despite the unpronounceable word.

*Translated from the Spanish by Catherine De Jong
and Susan Lloyd McGarry*

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TRAFFIC JAM IN BABEL

So what if Moses was not the author of the first five books of the Bible, but Zippora his wife was? Unheard of! Preposterous to you? But does it make sense to stay trapped in the old beliefs, which, in any case, are exactly that: preposterous?

The new is always confusing. Discoveries in any field make you think about established beliefs. Scripts and scrolls appear in the most unlikely places and shatter structures raised throughout the ages. Pages open unexpectedly: new insights transform and disperse previous ones.

Great philosophers and thinkers assure us that the Pentateuch was not written by one writer alone, but many together. Did Moses have anything to do with it? Some say it was written in the time of King David. Others say it was written by King Solomon's wife. But now there is a decisive and authoritative conclusion on the matter.

It has taken me years to figure it out. After carefully analyzing all the clues, I have come to the conclusion that it was the handiwork of a woman, without a shadow of doubt. Everything points to that fact. But who could it have been? It must have been Zipporah, and not just because she lived with Moses, but because of the intuition, the pattern and stitching displayed in the parchment. One thing is certain; Moses spent all his time trying to pacify his stubborn people, so how would he have found the time to write? Meantime, Zipporah had all the time in the world to observe quietly and take note.

I must fasten my seat belt. I always do this after I have started driving. Which way shall I go? It does not really matter; I am sure to get stuck anyway. What I need is patience and luck-- a map is useless. When the traffic comes to a standstill, there is nothing like a good distraction, something worthwhile to think about. Ever since I started this time-consuming research, my friends say that I live in a tower of Babel. They say I have become a Johnny one-note, and they get bored when I refer to the subject. I think the tower is a symbol: it is the story that contains all stories. Anyway, thanks to my obsession I have discovered unexpected short cuts and I have found a way to live with these traffic jams which take you nowhere. My friends get exasperated; I have a good time. I do not care anymore if I get there early or late. I have become indifferent to time. I have even started to like traffic jams. I yield to everybody who crosses my path. I have been blessed with divine patience and I am not in a hurry anymore. I have found the way, and a reason for living. Thanks to these traffic jams I have learned to think aloud, to go over my stories again and again, listening to myself talk. Things come together and I come up with something coherent. People criticize me, but one has to do what one has to do and let people talk. Only the hardheaded and obstinate achieve their goals. Why couldn't a woman have written the Bible? People think that women are bad drivers and more careless than men. However, research has proven exactly the opposite: women are better drivers because they are careful, less daring, and, all in all, get fewer fines and are not involved in as many traffic accidents.

Why not Zipporah? After all, weren't women through the centuries behind the literary masterpieces? Haven't they helped many great writers by transcribing and polishing their work for them and getting no credit whatsoever for it? Rabbis have claimed for centuries that Moses was God's amanuensis, so what is strange about the belief that it was not Moses

but, in fact, Zipporah who wrote the Pentateuch. I insist: the author of these books is a woman. She was the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, she was an educated, literate woman. We also know that she was Cushitic, in other words Ethiopian, and therefore dark-skinned. Otherwise, why was it that Aaron and his sister Miriam were both against her and did not approve of her marriage to Moses? They were racists. What other explanation could there possibly be? So, Moses married a black woman. So, what?

Every time a bus runs the traffic light everybody yells. I do not know why traffic always brings out the worst in people. Zipporah came from a shepherd's family, so that explains why she would have used animal hides and parchment and not stone tablets to write on. In fact, it was Moses who loved to write on stone. Working solely with a hammer and chisel, I really do not see how he could have written five volumes.

You have to be careful when you start on a journey, or when you are about to reach your destination. It is strange, but it is a known fact that most accidents happen close to home or work. Maybe this is because the driver relaxes and lowers his guard.

One of the clues that led me to suspect the author was Zipporah was when I discovered she was hot-tempered, and that she stood up to God. She was not afraid of anything or anybody. People like that always want to tell their version of the story. Zipporah was valiant, passionate, and precise. She could have done it. She did not waver. After all, did she not stand up to God when he tried to kill Moses for no apparent reason? She confronted God and argued with him. How strange that this incident has been forgotten. It supports that the author of the text must have been a woman. To save Moses, Zipporah hurriedly circumcised her son and put the still bleeding foreskin between her husband's legs, otherwise God would have killed him. Only a woman knows that blood between the legs can have such awesome power. And God backed off. There is a reason this story comes back again and again all through the text. It really is not so crazy to state that the person who wrote the Pentateuch was female; it becomes apparent to anybody who reads it with care. There goes a taxi driver with his seat belt slung loosely across his chest. They keep up appearances in order to avoid a fine. When you ask about this behavior, they explain that wearing a seat belt is extremely unsafe because an attacker could take advantage of the driver's immobility. They feel vulnerable. The seat belt turns out to be another source of danger.

It is not by chance that the texts are vague. The story of Babel has that feminine touch, that unconventional way of including and synthesizing the preceding stories and the stories to come. It is as if a grandmother were gathering everything under her ample skirts.

Ever since it became clear to me that Zipporah wrote the text, I have solved many mysteries. Now I understand why so much attention is paid to women and their jealousies in the first few pages, and why they are a recurrent theme throughout the book. Only a woman would be so careful about such details. Sarah persecutes Hagar; Rebecca, that grand lady, cannot stand having another woman near her; and Rachel is violently jealous of her sister Leah. To whom are more pages dedicated in the creation story,-- to Adam or to Eve? Adam seems clumsy when you compare him to Eve, he never knows whether he is coming or going. I keep getting strong indications that the subtle and concise style in the book is a woman's work. I always get stuck at this intersection, nobody can move an inch. The size of the car decides who gets through first. If I were in a hurry I would buy a truck. But it does not worry me anymore. Years ago nobody thought that the poor would one day also have cars. Nobody imagined that cars would proliferate like rabbits. Everybody thought that cars were for the rich and buses for the poor. Nothing would ever change.

The idea of mingling the voices in the tower came from a woman. Women know that everybody talking at once is an answer to the voice of oppression. They have learned this from their children. But the Tower of Babel is also the story of Nimrod-- Nimrod, the soldier and the world's first dictator. At the same time it is a story of survival. When words

multiply, it gives rise to ambivalence and one sole voice cannot dominate. Just what I needed: I have hit a pothole. Every day there are more of them, no car can take this. I have to slow down, it might be better to walk. They say we will reach that point soon; it will become quicker to walk than to drive. I have heard that people have to get up between three and four a.m. to get to work by seven. Can it be true that God helps those who get up early? Come to think of it, the Tower of Babel must have been full of cracks. All constructions have places that are not quite done. That is why there should always be a plan of work. Babel was not Nimrod's first tower. When he had subjugated Noah's descendants in a fratricidal war, he built a fort on a circular rock, in it he placed a throne made of cedar, and on top of that, a throne made of metal. All of this did not suffice, so on top of this he erected a copper throne, and on top of this a silver one, and then a golden one. Still, this was not good enough so he placed a giant diamond on the golden throne from which he sat demanding universal homage. Towers are symbols of dictatorships. They require crowds. When they are alone, human beings are afraid of being touched, of being approached by a stranger, but in a crowd, these fears disappear. Nimrod was aware of this strange phenomenon. He was a hunter, and he knew how animals behaved in a pack, and that humans were no different. He knew that crowds feel invincible, they stick together and behave as one unit. As part of the crowd, man is no longer afraid. Nimrod discovered that the masses want to be caressed, but more than this, they want to have their fears aroused. In the case of the tower, Nimrod appealed to, a collective horror, namely, the flood. I do not think it was by chance that Zipporah put the story of the tower after Noah's--they were related. The builders of Nimrod's tower believed that they were saving mankind through their action. Like all dictators, Nimrod was convinced of the goodness of his deeds, and he promised that they would not be eliminated like the previous generation had been. The tower would be their salvation, all they had to do to avoid another flood was to build it high enough to reach the sky and so be able to perforate the heavens in which the threatening waters were accumulating.

Nimrod also surrounded his tower with statues. And therefore, it was not God, but Abraham who first dammed the builders when he saw these abhorrent idols and tried to destroy them for which Nimrod almost burned him at the stake. Abraham had an obsessive aversion to statues; he saw in each one an idol. It is a good thing he has never seen the ones we have here in this city on every corner. To cut a long story short, Abraham, the patriarch, was the grandfather of Esau, who, later on in the story, is also going to have differences with Nimrod. This genealogy is a funny thing. Something does not quite tally. It is obvious that arithmetic was not Zipporah's forte. If we check the figures, we notice that Abraham fathered Isaac when he was one hundred years old. So how old was he when Esau met Nimrod? Because Abraham was also present when the tower was built. Nimrod was the son of Cush, who was the son of Ham, who was Noah's son.

In the tower they all come together, time is enjambed. This reminds me of the great wall in China, where many generations came together to build it. Everything is intertwined. They have started honking. Everybody leans on the horn. They think noise is the solution. Always noise. They all want to get ahead at the same time. I remember once getting into a taxi, the driver had a whistle, and every time he got stuck, he got out his whistle and blew it as hard as he could. Whistles used to mean something. But now even whistles do not help, nobody takes any notice any more. They have proliferated and gotten louder but lost their power of persuasion.

Architecture is a curious form of language. For one thing, it is direct and absurd. Every tower is there to proclaim some man's glory. That is why they are so boring. A ziggurat which wants to get to heaven has to be elevated by many generations. And if we take human nature into consideration, we will probably discover that the following generation took apart whatever the preceding one erected, because every new generation thinks that

what they do is superior to the work of previous ones. It does not really matter if you destroy somebody else's work. It is common practice to destroy, or at least ignore, the work of one's predecessors. Entire generations are forgotten or disappear. The tower is related to the first death recorded in Genesis. Poor Cain is always blamed for the first murder in the Bible, but the first one to kill was God when he decided to clothe Adam and Eve in animal hides. He did not dress them in linen or cotton garments. God did not have the skills of a tailor and was not very good at dressmaking. He killed one of the animals in paradise to make the garments, hardly an ecological way of doing things. Nevertheless, the outfits created by God were divine, and had magical qualities. Nimrod after much intrigue, ended up as one of the heirs of the famous garment.

According to Zipporah, Nimrod was spoiled because he had old parents. This is no ordinary detail, nor is it something which a male author would have emphasized. In fact, it was his grandfather who had stolen Adam's garments from Shem, who, in turn, had inherited them from Noah. When he was twenty, Nimrod put on these sacred relics, and they gave him great abilities that made him feel invincible. Nimrod became famous by wearing Adam's garments. But Esau meets Nimrod, and as they are both hunters they look each other in the eye and discover that they both like power. As is to be expected, they confront each other and in hand to hand combat. Esau beats Nimrod, even though the latter is wearing Adam's fantastic hides, which did not turn out to be so marvelous after all. Poor Esau always had a bad reputation, and because he stank, he never came off very well in the chronicle, which leads me to suppose that Zipporah did not like hairy, red-headed and sweaty men. The meeting between Nimrod and Esau took place shortly before he sold his firstborn for the famous mess of pottage. Esau's bad reputation seems to me an injustice by the author because without him, we would never have got rid of Nimrod. What is more, if we look at the relationship closely, we can see that Esau did not have a vengeful spirit, or a perverse heart. Despite the outrage to which he is subjected by Jacob and his mother, he is able to forgive them. In fact, when he meets his brother after the temper-tantrum about the stolen blessing, he ignores the insult and embraces him. Even though Esau is about to forgive Jacob, the latter is in trouble, for being a liar. He had just done nothing less than cheat his father-in-law over a transaction involving some sheep. Rachel, his wife, had also stolen household gods or Teraphim from her father. These idols had been made from decapitated first-born children. Rachel had tried to hide them by sitting on them. When Laban searches the tents looking for them, Rachel saves the situation, and therefore Jacob, by telling her father that she is menstruating. Once again blood is instrumental to salvation. Menstruation, in biblical times, was such a source of fear to men. Laban flees and stops his inspection before the fear and confusion he feels when faced with the red stain. Thus Jacob is left in peace so that he can get on with his project of climbing a ladder in order to fight God. Zipporah does not like Esau, but she adores Jacob. This is why Jacob succeeds in beating God. One does not come away from such an enterprise unscathed: he emerged from the encounter with a limp. After the dream, Jacob meets Esau and promises to visit him, but this turns out to be another lie. Maybe this is where the expression "a liar falls more quickly than a cripple" comes from. There is another guy running the red light. This city does strange things to colors. Red ceases to be red and turns into pink instead; but generally speaking, red is a kind of amber. It depends though, nothing is certain, because for red to be red, there are many factors: whether there is a bus or a four-wheel drive coming up the next street, and if there is a cop standing on the corner or not. It's a weird thing, but the minute you get into a car, colors merge. Bus drivers are the most color blind. It seems that being a driver prevents you from distinguishing colors. The most difficult color to recognize is yellow; it causes a lot of confusion. Here drivers never approach a stop sign like anywhere else on this planet; it does not seem to indicate caution either. One does not know with certainty if the light is

turning red or green, and who has the right of way. Poor old yellow generally increases the speed. But, despite this fact, it is not the most dangerous color. Undoubtedly, the scary color is green-- it is fatal. Most deaths are caused by this color. It is the color which puts an end to life. Some people interpret it as a signal to proceed, but experience proves the opposite, it requires extreme caution and it is even recommended to brake. The color green can come with a minibus in it, coming head on, and this means your time is up. This confusion over colors is endless.

It is strange, but the only patriarch who is not mentioned in the Babel story, is Isaac. However, this is explicable; the poor guy was mostly submerged in total confusion. And who would not be confused after discovering that his father, who is supposedly taking him on a trip, ends up trying to kill him. Isaac is told to lie down on some rocks, and suddenly his father is on top of him trying to stab him with a sharp knife. Anyone would go weird after such an experience. But this is not all, it also turns out that his mother is his father's half sister, so, his father is also his uncle; therefore Abraham did not try to murder one member of his family, but two. But the story takes another turn and Isaac is also his mother's nephew, so when Sarah hears the news that her brother and husband tried to kill her son and nephew, she could not take it any more and dies of the shock caused by the knowledge that her son and nephew had survived the attempted sacrifice at the hands of his father and uncle. It is not only bad news that can lead to a heart attack, good news can do the same. Abraham, affected by Sarah's death, ended up depressed, so his happiness about Isaac's survival was marred by his wife's death. The patriarch always mourned Sarah, even though he did marry again, a romantic touch which embellishes the story.

As we see, poor Isaac had more than one reason for being bewildered. But this is not where his confused story ends. On top of everything else, Eliezer accompanies him to marry a cousin and this makes Isaac both cousin and nephew of Milcah, the daughter of his uncle Haran. So this makes Rebecca, his wife, both daughter and grand-daughter of his uncle Nahor, and simultaneously Milcah's cousin and aunt. When we consider this mess within his family, it is hardly surprising that Isaac does not even recognize his own first-born. Later, when old and blind, Jacob approaches him, Isaac recognizes his voice, because Jacob fails to imitate his brother. Isaac confronts him with the fact but in the end hunger prevails, so Jacob decided to give his blessing to Rebecca's favorite, who, behind the scenes, had rigged the whole show. Anyway, beside knowing about and understanding Isaac's terrible confusion, we have little information about him. But one thing is sure: he enjoyed spicy food.

There are characters with whom Zipporah identifies more than others. It is strange, but God does not come out of it very well. I have the impression that Zipporah did not like the high-handed, lordly way Moses is treated. God is always telling him off for having doubts, and then denies him entry into the promised land for no good reason. It is irritating because, although the Lord insists on justice, He can be arbitrary when he wants to be. One is left with the feeling that Moses has been hard done by. However, we must not forget that Moses is stubborn, a fact which Zipporah reiterates throughout the text. Only a wife knows how stubborn and hard-headed a husband can be, and it is not a coincidence that she talks about it once in a while. It is true: men are stubborn. It is part of our nature. But Zipporah's God is a furious one, with relentless impatience; he is like a bus driver who does not know how to wait, and accelerates no matter what. There goes someone who is trying to get ahead by a space and a half. I ask myself: how much time does one gain by jumping the line? Twenty seconds? And is it worth causing all that extra chaos just to beat one's neighbor by twenty seconds? This traffic is a war in which, ultimately, it is everybody against everybody else. It becomes a dilemma concerning one's honor. One has to get ahead of the next car, whatever happens. One has to beat the next guy to it, no matter how.

One has to be sharper than one's neighbor. The pedestrians can wait. It is no good looking back.

In the tower too, life began to lose meaning. Some say this happened when people lamented more over a lost brick hitting the ground than over a human life. They say it took one year to get to the top of the tower. They had to walk for miles to place each brick. A woman was not allowed to interrupt her work, not even to give birth. If a child was born, it was wrapped up and put on her back, but she had to keep toiling. The moment it ceased to matter whether people perished, and bricks become more important, all meaning crumbled.

When the people in the lower part of the tower saw that there was blood dripping down from the heights, they thought that their arrows and axes had injured the Lord's angels. They were happy. But it was not angels' blood on the ground, it came from their own kin. They were no longer able to recognize this, because they had lost all feeling for the next man's pain. Another guy jumping the lights. Nobody is willing to stop. A one-way street, and we are all going up it the wrong way. The main road must be blocked. They are coming towards me on the wrong way on this one-way street. What do I do now? I do not move. They probably think I am stupid. I still have a lot to learn. Patience. Why the hell do they think that driving up on the sidewalk will get them there first? Fortunately, my car is white and can be seen easily, otherwise they would have flattened me by now. Statistically speaking cars least involved in accidents are white, the ones which are hit the most are red. I have been wondering for months why red is such an ominous color. Fortunately, my wife explained this to me, red absorbs light, the same as black. But it does not matter anymore, everyone is the same. Nobody wants to see anything. The colors merge. Nothing remains but to close one's eyes, say a little prayer and continue. Zipporah loves blessings. All her stories seem to be battles for a blessing. They are the essence of her stories, they give them continuity. He, who manages to get a blessing, be it through stealth and cunning, has safeguarded his future and everlasting life. But there is also a strange preference on the part of the author for her younger children. When Jacob is going to bless Menasseh and Ephraim, Joseph's children, he crosses over his hands, thereby confusing the older one with the younger one. Joseph tries to correct his father's error, but Jacob persists, as if trying to legitimize his own deviousness. Everything is mutable. A motorcyclist crosses my path. He is the only one able to move. Mounted on horrendous noise, he charges. Motorbikes represent the triumph of individual whims; they do whatever they feel like. I never rode on a motorbike when I was young. Did I miss out on something important? They say that the wind blows your hair with force and passion. Life-giving wind. Now, it lashes with its lingering smell of exhaust fumes. On a motorbike everything goes by as in a kaleidoscope. This must be its attraction: the fragmented perception of speed. Shapes going by. In grid lock, time becomes concentrated, nothing moves.

I look out of my window. Nothing touches us, we cannot be moved. We are isolated, locked up in our own tin cans. A beggar approaches. I roll down the window a little and throw a coin into his plastic cup, paying the toll of this never-ending procession of misery. I close the window to withdraw. Nobody advances, yet nobody turns off the motor. We all remain indifferent and exhale the smoke which comes from the ground as if from an oven. Despair becomes the language on every street corner. We all revert to one language speaking the same words.

*Translated from the Spanish by Catharine de Jong
and Susan Lloyd McGarry*

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NOAH AND THE DISAPPEARED

ONE

"Ten generations and I don't seem to come up with one decent one! I don't know what's happening! Only one answer left: erase it all and start with a clean slate. I will make it rain for one hundred and fifty days. You shall be the only one I will reward because you have been an honest man," the Lord told Noah.

—"One hundred and fifty days locked up in an ark of twenty-five meters wide and one hundred and fifty meters long, with my wife, my children, all their wives and a countless number of animals! If that is a reward, then what is punishment?" asked Noah.

The Lord, after considering for a while answered: "You need some recreation. I will lend you a book from my library for your voyage: the Book of Mysteries, which hides great secrets. The Mysteries are a perfect genre for travellers. I'm giving it to you on the condition that you return it" said the Lord.

"Haven't you just mentioned that I'm the only honest man in my generation?"

"With books, you never know," said the King of the Universe.

"And how am I supposed to read without any light, locked up inside an ark and with the sky not letting through any sunshine?," asked Noah.

Hearing Noah's complaint, the Lord gave him the jewel of radiance, a precious stone with coruscating brilliance.

"With this stone you will have light for reading during the trip. I gave this stone to Adam, who took it with him when he left Eden and he gave it to Seth, who gave it to Enoch who in turn entrusted it to Methuselah, who, before his death handed it over to Lamech. Now it's yours. In your hands, I leave the source of all lights."

Noah entered the ark with his family on the seventeenth day of the second month. When he closed the hatch, all the waters of the great deep burst forth, and floodgates of the heavens opened. The water swelled and spread until it covered the mountains.

Noah soon realized that the work on the ship allowed him neither room nor time for reading. The ebb and flow was constant. He had to be on continual alert to prevent the animals from eating each other. It was necessary to feed them at regular patterns and in order. No sooner had he finished feeding some of them, than he would have to go feed the others. It was a never-ending process.

In spite of the difficulties, Noah hoped one day to be able to open the gilded chest that contained the Book of Mysteries, resting on the table of his cabin. The anguish he felt about not being able to read infuriated him and increased every day. He would complain to his wife and children about the lack of time. He knew that because he had to live dedicated to urgent matters, he never could do what he wanted.

The rains hitting the ark were not all the same. Sometimes, they would appear with a cold light that made the morning impenetrable. At times, they would be warm and would blur the soul. There were times when they would fall as if they were a sickness of the air, of a pale black color. Noah would implore the clouds for a truce, but they had fallen in love with the dark gray color that filled them up at all times.

One morning Noah noticed that if he directed his ship to the north, the waters seemed to calm down but the cold wind shook him up and caused an immeasurable ache in his bones. He decided to change course toward the south.

The air warmed up, but the storms became stronger as well. The sea would gradually become choppy: the ark and its passengers were intruders whose movements bothered its comfortable waters. The currents turned to avoid the ark's infiltration. More and more, a fierce fight emerged between the ark that tried to float by all means, waiting for an olive branch, and the brutal ocean that did not admit any interference and responded with the fury of its waves. During the storms, the animals would stumble from one side to the other and the ark would creak its resinous and caulked wood. Its squeaking and groans aroused terror among the animals and they would discharge their excrement in protest. The smell provoked by the panic obligated Noah to work twenty-four hours every day in order to collect and throw out everything overboard.

On more than one occasion his sons and their wives implored him to change course, but Noah was a stubborn man and accustomed to living against the current. His intuition told him that if he continued toward the south, sooner or later the sun would shine.

During the rigor of the voyage, Noah would envy the birds: they were the only ones that had the luxury to escape the confinement of the ark. Something strange occurred one day when the crow left. A strange quiet came over the ship. Noah took this opportunity to approach the chest in which lay the Book of Mysteries, but as he was going to open it, the shining jewel started to twinkle and extinguish itself.

"If it isn't one thing it's another... How can this not work?" he asked himself.

He became scared and thought that it was the harbinger of the end and that the ark was going to sink. In hope of reviving the jewel he climbed on the prow to give it some air on it. Powerful thunder was heard in the sky and a gigantic wave swamped the ark on the starboard. The weight of the animals overloaded the ship. Noah felt the water swallowing his sandals. He tried to reach them but the movement of the boat and the danger involved prevented his retrieving them.

On his knees, with the jewel in his right hand, he entered his cabin, but not only were his sandals lost but the Book of Mysteries had disappeared. He looked for it everywhere. It seemed as if the air had effaced it.

TWO

Noah knew that inside every sacred book an angel slept between its lines. The Lord created the angels or souls of books so that they would be trustees of the secrets that were at the core of their pages. It is up to the readers to awaken the angels with the warmth and the caress of their gaze. Thus, many of the angels, when they descend on earth, do so in the form of words.

In addition, angels in books compose the literary circle of the King of the Universe and He invokes them only by opening their pages. These angels are privileged to inhabit the Lord's Library and they are separated with a curtain from the rest of Eden. When the Creator wishes to study, He invents marvelous tournaments that concern the possibilities, the charms and games, which He has molded into words and letters.

The angel Maggid, who inhabits the Mishna, the Book of Laws, sees to it that its language be multiple and always open. The angel of the Zohar tries to confer upon each word the enigma of the neuter. The words of the Torah are watched over by the Prince of Angels and his court. It's the Lord's favorite book. The angels keep the books that guard the secrets of Creation as well as the permutations of the letters that reveal the architecture of the Universe.

Over centuries, the rabbis, knowledgeable of this truth, looked with yearning for the angels. More than one became famous for conjuring their presence through devotion and study. Rabbi Josef Caro achieved fame when he succeeded in conjuring the appearance of

Maggid, who whispered in his ear the revelations of the Mishna. Rabbi Pinjas of Koretz succeeded in getting the angel of the Zohar to irradiate his face when opening the text, to the extent that its light would blind his disciples.

The rabbis are convinced that reading a book with genuine passion makes its messenger appear, sooner or later. The marks that books imprint on each one of us are traces made by angels. The marks and traces that they imprint are subject to being erased inexorably by time. Therefore, it's always necessary to return to the page of books. Re-readings are the eternal return, instigated by the angels who encourage repetition, not to produce the same but rather its difference.

THREE

The King of the Universe was getting ready for a trip and He entered His library to reach for a book for the journey. He thought about the Book of Mysteries.

"I love to start this books from the last page and alter its order," he told one of his angels. "I wrote it from back to front."

He looked for it in the stacks and failed to find it. He called the angel Hadarniel who was the librarian and asked him for its whereabouts.

"If I remember correctly, You entrusted it to Noah, before the Flood."

"And did he return it?"

"No."

"No matter what generation I'm dealing with, I can't bring people to realize that appropriating a book is a serious offense! Ask Noah to come here."

"My Lord, I want to warn You that after the Flood, he planted a vineyard and since then, he sees a rainbow in every corner."

Noah presented himself to the Lord full of wine.

"Where did you leave the Book of Mysteries? Angel Raziel inhabits it!"

"I didn't even have a chance to browse through it," said Noah.

"I didn't ask you if you read it; I asked where it is."

"I didn't even look at it. How am I to know where it is?"

"You lost it!"

"It wasn't I... It was a wave that also took my sandals. It happened the same day that the crow left to get the olive branch."

The Lord took a map and deduced the place where the book might have landed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I figured that getting lost was part of the book's destiny. I don't believe You do things at random."

"Now you will realize that no such thing as chance exists. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

The Lord bade him farewell and said to the angels:

"Let him get drunk and lie without clothes in his tent. His own offspring will avenge me. Call three messengers."

When they arrived, the King of the Universe ordered them:

"I need you to look for the fallen angel."

FOUR

When the messengers arrived at the place indicated by the Lord, they stumbled upon a small bird with yellow and gray feathers that was chasing persistently some birds of prey until it forced them to flee. This scene surprised the messengers. A thin lady was encouraging the little bird and cheering at every peck it gave them. The messengers approached her but before they had a chance to question her, she explained:

"It's a ciriri. Learn its lesson because you're going to need it, if you plan to find the one you're looking for. You have to persevere and maintain your courage."

"How do you know that we're looking for him?," they asked, surprised.

"In this place, every other day someone disappears. You came here on an even day," she answered.

The messengers, disturbed, looked at each other.

"We are looking for an angel who inhabits a book."

"Ah, a library worm" said the woman.

"No, it's not a worm nor a butterfly. It doesn't have crawl or fly," exclaimed the exasperated angels, as if they were fed up that everybody believed that angels had animal extremities.

"Don't get upset," said the woman, "let me warn you that in these inquiries you will need a great deal of patience and calmness. In front of the authorities, it is recommended to be calm. And it isn't unusual for a disappeared person in this country to be carrying a book. Many students disappear."

The Lord's messengers were aware that the written word lived together with violence but they did not expect to encounter it head-on.

"When was the last time you saw him?" asked the woman.

"We don't know."

"Who was the last one to see him?"

"We don't know."

"Does he like to party? Does he have a girlfriend?"

"No... We don't know."

"Did you check with the morgue? Did you go to the hospitals?"

"Where are they located?"

"You don't know a thing. You are like angels coming down from the sky," said the woman.

How did she find out about us? the messengers wondered.

"We have a special mission," they said. "We were sent us to find him."

"Did you bring a picture?"

The angels looked at her terrified and answered firmly:

"Thou shalt not make images before Him."

"You are mistaken," said the woman. "On the contrary, when someone disappears, it is essential to have an image of him. You must oppose anonymity. It's necessary to avoid being reduced to a statistic. You must show the pictures publicly, with dignity. You must fight against oblivion. Don't be prudish or show false pride. Let's prepare a composite sketch. Every disappeared needs a face."

The messengers of the Lord did not have an answer.

"What's the face like? Is it oval?"

"Rather square," answered one of them.

"Skin color?"

"Old parchment," said another one.

"Tanned," inferred the woman. "You do realize that you can describe him.

Any special characteristic?

"Lettered."

"His educational background is of no importance. Age?"

"He doesn't age."

"He's young-looking then? Don't you have anything that belongs to him? A handkerchief, some socks, a shirt, some underwear?"

"Underwear?"

"Yes. Generally, it's the first thing that appears. What brand did he use?"

"No..."

"What kind of socks does he wear?"

The messengers of the Lord were stunned. One of them had a thought:

"He wore sandals."

"That's a good clue. I must warn you that no disappearance operates by a logical structure. Here everything is possible, and anything, no matter how absurd it seems, can result in a clue. The important thing is to find the body."

"The body?"

"How long has it been since his disappearance?"

The messengers looked at each other. One of them answered:

"It's been years."

"Then, don't hold out false hope," said the woman. "I know that hope is the last thing one loses, but now the most important thing is to find his bones. We mothers and widows only give up hope when we unearth the bodies. One must inquire about them until the very end. We are called to go places, suffer and see things that other humans cannot bear. But, above all, one must avoid being overcome by fear. Fear effaces the traces and discharges the persons responsible of their guilt. I would recommend that you accompany us in our march to the main square. Those of us looking for our sons and grandsons gather there."

The messengers listened attentively to the suffering in each word. They remembered that the voice of sincere indignation was the Lord's voice and decided to go with her.

FIVE

During the march they found out that the disappeared appear all over. Consistent with the composite sketch, they learned that the missing party had been seen in three different cities. Some people claimed to have spoken to him. One woman confessed that he had suddenly appeared to her while she was reading. It was a credible account. She also insisted that she knew the exact place where he had been buried; it was within a few meters from the place where he had been killed.

The messengers observed that the pain and absence of the loved ones filled the place with memory and imagining. Again, it was the woman who explained to them that it was essential that they find the body.

"It's important to find him, even if there is no other reason than to bury him again."

They organized the operation. The messengers were taken to a woody hill. There was a waterfall and a carpet of leaves covered the grounds. A guide was carrying ropes, small brushes and a gas lamp. He was referred to as the "grid planner." There also were a judge, a doctor, two policemen, a secretary, a photographer and three peasants with their shovels.

The messengers got scared at the policemen's presence. The woman set them at ease, saying:

"Don't worry; they are not the same people in spite of the uniform. When they want someone to disappear, they remove their uniform."

The man with the ropes started to mark the place indicated by the witness. He made a drawing of the lot, measured and squared it. After a few diggings they stumbled upon a body bag.

"They always leave them on the surface," said the woman.

A fragmented silence filled the place. The messengers heard the echos of degradation, when life becomes sick and short. They looked at the surroundings and noticed a place for soft words sprinkled with ignominy. A world of epitaphs engraved with the chisels of violations and eternal mourning, stamped with the blows of oblivion. Death revealed itself as a displaced question mark.

When they opened the body bag, a sandal turned up.

"I think we found him," said the woman.

They were not allowed to touch the objects. They had to be numbered. It was necessary to take many photographs. The messengers wanted to touch the sandal, but the judge prohibited them from doing it: they would contaminate the evidence.

"Shoes are important in determining the height of the person," the medical examiner explained.

Some bones appeared. The photographer shot his camera indiscriminately.

"This is the sacrum bone," pointed out the doctor.

"The sacrum?," asked the Lord's messengers.

"Yes, it's the bone that identifies the sex," he answered. Are you looking for a man?"

The messengers were doubtful.

"I believe it is a man," the woman said with resolve.

The doctor continued with his work.

The messengers asked each other. "What is the sex of an angel?"

They found a skull.

"It is possible to make a facial reconstruction. If it coincides with the sketch, we will have something more concrete," said the doctor.

When he had finished with the operation the Lord's messengers thanked him for his work. They left the place with the sensation of inhabiting a time of negotiations and divisions.

SIX

They walked around the city's streets as if it were deserted and without distances.

"We already looked for him as a man. Why don't we think of him as a book?"

Maybe if we confront him with his neutrality he will manifest as an angel; that is inevitable."

"Everything depends on the perspective one takes," asserted one of the messengers.

They looked at the building in front of them. A sign read: Luis Angel Arango Library.

On seeing the name, one of them observed, "The library of an angel."

The messengers entered through some staircases and then continued to the hexagonal gallery where they found a beehive of students who swarmed from one side to the next looking for a computer terminal. One of the librarians, seeing them lost, inquiring from side to side, told them:

"At the beginning, everybody gets confused. The older people look for the card indexes.

In old times when one spoke of libraries, one thought of cards, stacks, volumes and ladders. Now everything is different. It all begins at a computer terminal. Electronics brings us near an infinite world...Of course, yesterday the system went down and it seemed that everything had been deleted, disappeared."

"Deleted, disappeared," repeated the messengers.

"When there is a blackout, everything gets erased. It's the modern world.

But...what do you need?"

"The Book of Mysteries."

"Start with the letter M. Any particular one?"

"Yes, the one that has an angel inside."

"An angel. There must be mysteries that deal with angels," said the man.

"Let's see."

The librarian showed them that it was possible to search by title, author or subject. He pressed a key and the computer paused and then there appeared two hundred and sixty items on the screen.

"There're a lot of choices under Mysteries"

"But it was only one book," said one of the messengers

"In recent years a lot of books have been bought and our holdings are multiplying daily. Thanks to the hexagonal shape of the library, each hexagon has five stacks and in each

stack, there are thirty-two books of the same size. The options and probabilities are numerous...Let's see if there is a mystery with an angel...I see here Mystery of Wings. Are you interested?"

The messengers stared doubtfully at each other.

"Mystery of the wings: airplane wings, their design and construction."

"I don't think so," said one of them.

"There's another one here. The Mystery of the Sky."

"Could be..."

"It's a collection of slides by Chilean plastic artists. Is that what you want?" he asked.

"No. Is there anything under angels?"

"Thirty-seven registries, but the options increase exponentially if we look at words like archangel, cherubim, seraphim... Under angels there are:

Fallen Angels

Angels as Messengers

Angels: an Endangered Species."

The Lord's messengers looked at each other in confusion.

"We're looking for a very special book, unique," one of them said.

"Unique? All books are unique. Some years ago a very famous bibliophile observed that no matter how large the library was, there were no two identical books."

"We would like to go to the stacks."

"That is forbidden. In what country do you think you are! Only authorized personnel can go to them. Otherwise all books would disappear. But don't worry, the terminal has everything. Any reference can be found on the screen. Its entries are updated and reproduced daily."

"But this way we'll never be able to find the book...We need to open it."

"What do you mean? The computer is the key for any inquiry."

The Lord's messengers realized that numbers were self-sufficient and negated any reality that tried to compete with them. They could not figure out how to break through the difficult impasse. The librarian left them with the statement:

"You can be assured that everything is carefully calculated."

The messengers, in front of the computer screen, noticed that the answers were in a never-ending loop. Any sense or value vanished with the feverish activity of the terminals. The screen absorbed the pages to turn them into titles and data. The amount of data suppressed their mysteries. The Lord's messengers remembered that the obvious lacked tenderness and grace. The excess imposed itself without measure or logic. The numbers appeared and then to start all over again, the pages lost their charm and were never depleted but would repeat themselves in endless lists. The excess was a mask for mechanical behavior and a violence that eliminated books as well as men.

Suddenly, one of the students who was waiting for a turn, all flustered, told them: "Let me use the screen! You've been here a long time. I must finish tomorrow's homework."

The students' zeal compelled them to leave the place.

The messengers left the library in astonishment. It started to rain. Slowly, the drops covered their eyes with a dull light. The water descended in floods through the steep streets by the library. They noticed the numbers on the street corners and the dwellers running away from the deluge. They recognized the generation of exile.

They understood that the numbers and the storm wiped away without distinction the living beings. The water swelled and spread immeasurably.

The messengers decided to take the road back to Paradise with dampened spirits even if the rain did not touch them. They were convinced that that this generation had given up

its soul and conscience without protest to a lifeless world. They were all accomplices, and suffering the numbness of a ceaseless repetition, which transformed everything into lists and statistics. With fear and compassion they looked at a society condemned to make every instant of its life a settlement of accounts.

Translated from the Spanish by Nora Eidelberg
