Genealogies (excerpt)

MARGO GLANTZ (b. 1930)
Translated from the Spanish by Susan Bassnett

Two favorite immigrant genres, memoir and autobiography, allow for an intimate exploration of the triumphs and obstacles of the new milieu. Genealogies *(1981), among Glantz's best-known works, is precisely that: a family album complete with photos and vignettes of the writer's family past and present, a narrative of how Mexico has at once welcomed and rejected the Jewish population that emigrated from Russia and eastern Europe and of how the immigrants responded to their exotic new environment. This excerpt, ambitiously framed between 1920 and 1982, views the experience of Glantz's father during the Bolshevik revolution and his journey across the Atlantic as part of the communal history of the Jews of Mexico. The straightforward prose incorporates techniques from journalism and storytelling. Glantz is also the author of* The Wake *(2005).*

"A TALL COSSACK and a short one passed by our house, with their hands covered in blood, and my mother, crying her eyes out, washed their hands in a bowl." My father's mother wore those broad skirts that we all know now, after reading or seeing *The Tin Drum*: she hid my two aunts, Jane and Myra, girls of sixteen and seventeen, under them.

"I was almost out of my mind. I walked (I was only a boy), I ran from one place to another and crossed the town over the little bridge that led to the baths, and I tried to find shelter in my uncle Kalmen's house. He was my father's brother. It was 1917. I went into my uncle's house, and I almost went mad. My uncle had a long curly red beard, all crimson with blood, and he was sitting with the blood pouring down and his eyes open. The fear of death still hadn't left him. Perhaps he was still even breathing!

Beside him, wrapped in a sheet, were all the household utensils, everything made of silver or copper, the Sabbath candlesticks, the samovar. I was scared stiff. I had no idea what to do. I just ran out of the village like a madman. The pogrom lasted several days. I went out into the country and I found an abandoned well, deep, but with no water in it, and I clung to the rungs and spent several days down there. When I heard that everything had calmed down, I came out. Before that, I could hear the terrible cries of the girls and children."

It all happened so fast that one pogrom piled up on top of another.

"In those troubled times different groups were chasing one another, and as they went through towns and villages they sacked everything in their path."

It all sounds so familiar. It's like those revolts that our nineteenth-century novelists wrote about and like what you read in novels about the Mexican Revolution, the revolts and the levies, the confusion, the sacking of towns and villages, the deaths.

"The Bolsheviks came back, and we had some of the short rifles left by the bandits and some of the horses too; only the reservists who'd been in the world war knew how to defend themselves. The rest of us were saved by a miracle. Many of the bandits were peasants who knew us, and as they were stealing they preferred to kill so that they couldn't be denounced."

Yasha hid in the house of a muzhik, a friend of his grandfather's, Sasha Ribak, "with an enormous moustache, like the poet Sevshenko" (the great popular poet of the Ukraine). My father stayed hiding in a corncrib, breathing through a hole, even when bandits stuck their bayonets into it. Ribak took him food and water and let him out when things calmed down a little. As soon as things started up again, back my father went to his hideout.

"General Budiony's Bolshevik Cossacks arrived. When things were a bit calmer, I came out. When it was dangerous I went back into hiding again. I remember Sasha well; he was very good. I wrote a poem about all that, in 1920, in Russia."

"And what about your mother and your sisters, how were they saved?"

"We survived by chance, by luck. My mother and my sisters hid in the top of the house, where there was a loft used as a storeroom, in the space under the rafter. As the groups were all chasing each other, they hardly had time to look, and they sacked and killed everything they found in their way. My mother was saved that first time because she washed the Cossacks' hands."

My grandmother and two aunts were given permission to leave Russia around 1923 to rejoin their family in *America, America* (the title of the famous film by Elia Kazan). My father was doing his military service and had to stay in the Soviet Union.

"Your mother was afraid that I'd get lost in the revolution. I was very impulsive. It was a dangerous situation, and the revolution didn't tolerate people who were impulsive. What the revolution demanded was total commitment from each individual, and those who tried to see things their own way were put on the list of counterrevolutionaries. Well, I was pretty well done for, as you can imagine, being a gabby Jew. And later on they arrested me."

"Why did they arrest you?"

"They arrested me for . . . you see, I was marked down in the revolution as a man with nationalist deviationist tendencies."

My grandmother and my aunts stayed on in Russia for another year after being granted permission to leave, because my grandmother was afraid she might never see her son again. But in the end they traveled to Turkey, and then they couldn't go any further because the North Americans had restricted their immigration quotas and only the mother was eligible to enter the United States. However, my father was also granted permission to leave, though afterward he went to a protest meeting about unfair practices that prevented people from obtaining work. One of the men who had been refused work threw himself out of a fourth-floor window as a protest. Then the police arrived and put most of the protesters in jail, including my father.

At this point in the story, a friend of the family turns up, a pro-Soviet Jew who left Russia round 1924 and immigrated to Cuba in 1928, from where he had been chased out by Machado's henchmen because of his militancy. He has brought some Soviet journals sent him from New York, worth 123.50 pesos.

"They used to reach me quickly direct from Moscow. They only cost 17.50 pesos then, but you have to pay a full year's subscription."

"When did you leave Russia?"

"My family left first. My father went to the United States in 1912. He left my mother in Russia with the children. In 1914 he sent us tickets, and

we were due to leave on the nineteenth of August and the First World War broke out on the twenty-ninth. My father went back to Russia in 1922, but he couldn't settle because he was a businessman and they accused him of being a bourgeois, so in 1923 he went to New York with his other two brothers. I went to Cuba in 1924, but then they brought in new regulations about immigration quotas so I couldn't go on to the United States."

"That's what happened to us too," says Yankl.

"I went on to Mexico later, because otherwise I'd have ended up drowned in the bay at Havana sooner or later."

His friend leaves, and my father comments: "He stayed you know. He's one of the very few who stayed on the Left."

He insists on recalling that meeting where a worker threw himself down from the fourth floor. I remember something similar in one of Wajda's films.

"Then the riot started," interrupts Mother. "The police were there and they started taking workers away. They took your father along with a friend of his, a journalist who was about forty. Your father didn't turn up, and I was worried and I started looking for him around the police stations. I asked different policemen about him, and nobody knew anything. I said to one of them, 'You've got your people all over the place. Don't you know or can't you tell me?' He told me he couldn't say anything. It was a Thursday. On Saturday a lady came to see me. I was playing the piano, and she asked me if I was Glantz's fiancée. I was surprised, but I said yes. 'I've brought you a message from your fiancé that my husband gave me, because both of them have been arrested.'"

"I traveled third class, that is, your father and I did. And I couldn't eat anything, because the food was so awful, even though there were times when we went hungry. There was a very bright woman who got on well with the *zeil meister*, and she used to give us herring with vinegar and onions, and that was a real treat. I sold everything in Moscow because I was going to Cuba and Russian clothes wouldn't be any use over there. I had some very smart gray suede shoes, which were open down the front, and a pair of stockings that I had to darn every day. In Holland we got some money from Uncle Ellis and I bought two dresses, a black crepe one, which was very smart, and one in lovely soft green wool."

It's raining. San Miguel Regla is really beautiful, with its gentle countryside

and all the trees, the house with its slender columns, that huge, friendly hacienda that I almost like better than Marienbad, a place I've only ever seen on film, except that I'm a bit of a snob and it seems rather more exotic to me, as the mother of my Colombian friend said, when we were in Paris and she was talking about American clothes: "They're so nice. They look so foreign!"

Mother goes on talking: "Your father wasn't worried. In the daytime we stayed under cover and at night we slept in our cabin." (And to think that so much love can actually wear itself out!)

"There was a very interesting man traveling with us, a very strange man, he spoke Russian but I think he was born in Poland. We called him Miloshka, which means 'favorite.' He disappeared when we got here," she sighs, then continues: "You know, when we came to Mexico I didn't know how to use earthenware pots, so at first I boiled milk in a pan a lot, and now I can't stand blenders. I prefer to mash things in an old Mexican earthenware bowl. You can get used to anything, that's for sure. Though I still don't know where I really am."

"What do you mean?"

"I still don't know if I'm on my own or what. I don't want to send your father's books because it'll make the place seem so empty."

"You should send his books and his papers so they can be put in order and cataloged. I think it's the right thing to do; they'll be very useful for people who are trying to write the history of the Mexican Jewish community."

The ground is wet. We have been sitting in a little garden, surrounded by cloistered arches, on antique-style leather chairs, like the rest of the hacienda, like the bedrooms. Later we sit around the fireplace. The cleaning woman says softly, "There's a bit of watery sunshine." Everything is so peaceful, so lovely, so melancholy. I've eaten so much I can hardly move. I go out for a long walk, through the trees, past the pools, the remains of the old metal smelting furnace, and memories flood back with every step, memories of the former owner, the Marquis of Guadalupe, Count of Regla, my mother's memories.

"That's how I learned to make strudel."

"When did you learn that? Did you learn it at home? Did your mother teach you?"

"Yes, I learned quite a lot from her in Russia. In Tacuba Street, number 15, there was a restaurant and there was a Russian man who had immigrated

there recently and he was chief cook, and I don't know how it came about, but I think I said to him that you could make strudel in the little coal-burning ovens, the portable ones, with two chimney vents and two openings, and they were making strudels and I made one and he liked it a lot . . ."

We go in because it is starting to rain.

"He said to me: 'Such a lovely young woman, with all sorts of talents, and she's interested in strudel.' And I just got on and made it, and I don't even remember how much he paid me. We used to go to the club in the evenings . . ."

"You and strudel man?"

"No, me and your father. We used to see Mr. Perkis there, and Dr. King and Katzenelson. Everybody changed their names. First they were living in the United States, and then when the First World War broke out they went to Mexico to start again, and they founded the Young Men's Hebrew Association."

"With an English name?"

"Yes, English, because they'd just come from the United States, you see, they looked after us, in a way. Dr. King used to give your father dental products. I've told you that already. And your father used to teach Hebrew at first to some of the children, our friends' children when they were preparing for their bar mitzvahs. Some people were very kind, and we were very grateful to people too. Horacio Minich's father, for example, taught natural sciences in the Yiddish school, but since I didn't know any Yiddish I couldn't even teach things I knew about."

"So what did you know about?"

"Lots of things. I was always learning. I never seemed to stop. Playing the piano, science, art, even singing. But I ended up having to make strudel. That's the way it is. We brought lots of books instead of clothing. We had a basket of books that weighed sixty kilos. They were very important books and important people used to ask to borrow them and most of them we never set eyes on again. That's the way it is."

"Do you still have any of those books?"

"Oh yes, there are a few left but I'm going to send them to Israel. There was a group of non-Jewish Russians here too, some very nice people. They were quite old. Well, at least they seemed quite old to me."

"How old were they?"

"I don't know, but they were a lot older than we were. They lived in Xochimilco, which was a big place in those days, very beautiful with a lot of flowers everywhere and boats covered with greenery. They had an herb garden, they were typical Russians, very refined, honest, special people. There were some others who were former nobility. What were their names? How could I forget? Oh, yes, they were called Sokolov."

"Who were? The ones with the herb garden or the others?"

"No, the other ones, the nobility, were much younger. I don't remember what the others were called, but they had a little house in Xochimilco. It wasn't much more than a hut. They made us a typical Russian meal. They were so pleased to be able to speak Russian with someone."

"Anything else, Mother?"

"Oh, Margo, it all happened fifty years ago. Every night we used to go to the club. It didn't matter if you were on the right or the left. Nobody bothered. Then Abrams came, and he was an anarchist, a real leftist. It didn't matter what we did during the daytime to earn a living, because in the evenings we all went to the club."

"Why didn't it matter what you did in the daytime?"

"Well, we sold bread, or I don't know, some people were peddlers, street traders during the daytime, but in the evening we all came together for something better. There were all sorts of people, some as young as fourteen or fifteen. You never knew them. Maybe you did or maybe you didn't, but we all had to use Yiddish because we couldn't manage any other way. Some of them had come from Poland and some from Russia and some came from tiny little villages where they spoke a sort of Yiddish, and some even came from the United States and goodness knows what sort of English they could speak. So we all had to learn Yiddish, and when I started I couldn't understand anything because there were so many dialects, from Warsaw and Lithuania and Romania and Estonia and little Polish villages. I couldn't understand a word and then I started to learn gradually. Your father used to read to me. He was in bed a lot because he had trouble with his lungs and sometimes he used to cough up blood, and then he had to lie down because that frightened him. Your father used to read me Yiddish books. He used to translate them into Russian and that's how I learned. I knew the alphabet because when I was a little girl I'd been taught that before I went on to high school."

"Didn't your mother speak Yiddish?"

"Of course she did, but she spoke a Ukrainian dialect, which was completely different. Later on all sorts of very well-educated young people used to come to our house . . ."

"Later on when?"

"In Russia. Before I went to high school. They used to come to Odessa from their little villages to study and take important exams. I remember before the First World War there was one of those students living in our house, a Zionist, who knew Hebrew perfectly. We put him up and fed him and he used to give us Hebrew lessons. He gave lessons to Uncle Volodya, but I don't remember if Ilusha and I did any. That's how I learned the alphabet. He went to Israel later. Your Uncle Volodya told me he went on to become minister of finance."

"In Israel?"

"Yes, in Israel. Uncle Volodya could remember his name, but I can't. I learned the alphabet and when I learned some Yiddish I wrote a letter to my parents once, just a few words. My mother wrote back in a terrible state because I'd suddenly written to her in Yiddish and she didn't think it could be me. She thought I must be dead. So then I wrote back again to her in Russian and calmed things down. That's what it's like when your children leave home . . ."

I come back to where I once was. I go through the park, past the pools, and everything is damp, mildewed. It is slippery underfoot. There are flowers everywhere. I go over to a prickly-pear tree and try to pluck some fruit. The pear defends itself and sticks its spikes in me. I go back to my room to try and pull out the prickles with a pair of tweezers from my arms, my cheeks, and the side of my mouth, my hands, and my fingers. My father died, early in the morning of January 2, 1982.

Living with someone probably means losing part of your own identity. Living with someone contaminates; my father alters my mother's childhood and she loses her patience listening to some accounts of my father's childhood. Once we had all gone to the cemetery on the first anniversary of my uncle's death and Lucia recalled the attempted pogrom that my father had experienced. So I asked him to tell me what had happened to him:

"I was working in the Jewish Charity Association at 21 Gante Street, on the corner of Venustiano Carranza, which used to be called Capuchinas, and your mother had her shop called Lisette on Sixteenth September Street, number 29, selling ladies' bags and gloves. I came out of the charity place and there was a big meeting under way (it was in January 1939). I was on my way to the shop when I met a young man called Salas. He knew who I was. He'd been a student in Germany and spoke very good German. He came toward me with two other lads and he yelled 'Death to the Jews. Jews out of Mexico!' and I had a willow stick with me, and I broke it over his head and it split into three. He grabbed it out of my hand and tried to push me in front of a tram, but I held onto a lamppost and wouldn't let go. I don't know how I managed to break free and run to the shop, which was shut, though the steel door still wasn't down.

"The police came right away. I don't remember how many there were. There could have been fifty or a hundred, and Siqueiros's brother; if he hadn't been there I'd have been killed. He said to me: 'They'll have to get me before they get you, Jacobo,' and he stretched both arms out wide. He was a giant of a man. They had a truck outside full of stones and they were throwing them at the shop and they smashed the shop window and took everything they could get. I don't know how I got out of there."

"Where was Mother?"

"She'd gotten out with the assistant. There were stones flying all over the place. I didn't know where to hide, because everywhere I went there were more stones. I thought I'd never get out of there. I thought I was done for. There was nothing I could do. There were so many people outside and so many stones and I was covered in blood. There was a man called Osorio outside, a Cuban whom I knew quite well, and he stood up on a platform and made a Hitler-type speech, and even though he knew me, he spoke against me and against Jews in general. When they ran out of stones, they went to San Juan de Letran, where your Uncle Mendel had his drinks stand, and they came back with great chunks of ice, which they started throwing at me, and a massive lump of ice hit me on the head and that was a sign from God, because the ice saved me. I was bleeding heavily, because I'd been hit on the head, but that ice was a sign from God. I wouldn't have survived without the ice."

"Where were we?"

"You were all very little. I don't think you ever saw any of that. General Montes appeared later and he put his cloak around me and said, 'Don't cry, Jew. I'm here to save you.'"

In the Name of His Name

ANGELINA MUÑIZ-HUBERMAN (b. 1936)
Translated from the Spanish by Lois Parkinson Zamora

An audacious interpreter of mystical texts, this Mexican critic and novelist of Sephardic ancestry has made a career of telling allegorical tales. This one, from her award-winning collection Enclosed Garden *(1985), is a tribute to Sephardic culture, especially Kabbalistic imagery, but also to Mendele Mokher Sforim, particularly his novel* The Travels of Benjamin the Third, *and to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's story "The Rabbi's Son." The river the protagonist dreams of crossing, which supposedly ceases its flow on the Sabbath, is taken from Jewish folklore. Compared to Seligson's "The Invisible Hour," this tale has a clear-cut symbolic code. Muniz-Huberman is also the author of* The Confidantes *(2009) and* A Mystical Journey *(2011), among other works.*

ABRAHAM OF TALAMANCA pondered long upon the word of God before making his decision. He had studied the signs and portents of the world. He had read and reread the Great Book and sought its revelation. Somewhere he would find the divine word. He felt a profound anxiety, though he did not know why; he knew only that the answer was there somewhere and he could not find it. Not that the world was mute but that he could not understand its language. Not that God was silent but that he could not hear Him. He continued to search and time continued to pass. To be possessed by a certainty that cannot be explained, a truth that cannot be proven. A sound that has no time. A color that cannot be painted. A word that cannot be deciphered. A thought that cannot be expressed. What then does he possess? How can one live by doubt, divination, foreshadowing?

Abraham of Talamanca senses his ideas spinning round and round in the confined and infinite chaos of his mind. Arrows fly in his head and at times he supports his head in his hands, so heavy it seems to him. And then comes the pain. It begins with his eyes, which, as a source of enlightenment, embrace much and suffer much. He who does not see does not weep. He who does not weep does not ache. A sword stroke at the center of his skull. Pain that makes a fiefdom of his arteries, a whip of his nerves, and a torment of his muscles. Abraham, who loves light, flees into darkness; he searches for the word and flees into silence. Pain imprisons half of his head, while the other half struggles for lucidity. But the battle is never won; pain triumphs, and with his hands Abraham covers his eyes: no light, no word. Thus he loses days, which turn to nights, nights of the soul, which become darker and darker.

But the answer does not appear. After thirty days of constant pain, in which the unafflicted side of his head rested no more than the afflicted, he made his decision. He would go in search of the Sambatio, the distant river of the Promised Land, the river that flows six days a week and ceases on the Sabbath, or perhaps instead flows on the day of the Sabbath and ceases on the other six. The frightful roar of the rushing river, which carries rocks, not water, and sand, and which on the seventh day, shrouded in clouds, keeps total silence. The river protects, for him who crosses it, the paradise inhabited by the Ten Lost Tribes. If he should manage to reach it, Abraham the Talamantine, and if he should manage to cross it.

He would leave behind his books, his studies, his prayers, his meditation. He would try the paths and byways of pilgrims and wanderers, soldiers and vagabonds, merchants and adventurers. Tranquility and wisdom would be lost along the way. He would go unrecognized and lose himself among the rest. To be lost and alone and so to find himself more deeply. And with the cool of the dawns and the dust of distant places, he would forget that search for the unknowable. He would breathe deeply the air of mountain and sea. He would belong to nothing, to no one. The absolute freedom of one who has only himself. He would try for once to be God. Impossible to be integral; always dual; always the divine presence. I speak to myself and He answers me, spark of eternity. Can't one be alone? Absolute solitude? No, no, no. He always appears, God, the One without a name, the One sought after, desired, never found, He who requires

perfection. So we wander, with Abraham of Talamanca, in search of the unsearchable.

Abraham prepares his departure, taking few possessions, fulfilled in himself. The pain has disappeared. Now he knows what he seeks; he seeks the name of God and he knows that it will appear when he crosses the final river at the end of the long journey. He seeks the meaning of the word, that which is beyond asking. He cannot accept the imperfection of the sign. The difficult connection between things and their names. The attempt to enclose in the space of a word the idea of perfection, of unity, of infinity, of creation, of plenitude, of supreme good. God is a conventional sign. How can one find its true essence? *Baruch ha-shem*. Blessed be His Name.

To approach immensity little by little. Slowly twining the links of the chain. More slowly still ascending the steps toward illumination. Losing ourselves in the partial and fragmented reflection of a thousand facing mirrors. And still aspiring to rise higher and higher. That longing to fly that is only achieved in dreams. To climb the mountain. To arrive at the summit of pure air and blue sky. Below, seas and rivers and lakes.

Through open fields and enclosed gardens, along paths and byways, up and down, the road unwinds before Abraham the wanderer. And when the land runs out and sand borders the water, he furrows the water and creates light foam and soft waves, which, uncreating, erase his vain steps. The sun is ensconced in an immense blue cradle, and the four phases of the moon as well. When at length the sea loses its freedom and the high rocks force it to recede and close upon itself, the foot of the wanderer again falls upon the worn sand, so often trod, so often shifted and displaced.

The Holy Land he touched not only with his feet but also with his hands, raising the fine dust to his lips, kissing it. Only then did he begin the pilgrimage. Eyes, feet, hands, lips, eager. Whether the ancient tomb, the golden rock, the stones of the desert. And then, northward, in search of the Sambatio. In search of the revealed word. But the river is a mirage. It appears and disappears. It recedes and overflows. It sings and is silent. It approaches and withdraws forever. For years, hope detains Abraham. Then certitude detains him. Meanwhile, the Word has sounded. He knows that it is there, that it circulates within him: like the blood that flows through his body, it

fills him to overflowing. It encourages him, nourishes him, gives him life. It has no form but that given to it by the vessel that contains it. It moves freely, flawlessly, smoothly. It has no equal.

Abraham no longer speaks. He no longer writes. The Word has eliminated words. The Name is. The Revelation cannot be communicated. Silence fills everything, finding its proper form.

Abraham has stopped searching for the Sambatio. The name of His Name flows in his veins.

chair, directly in front of her, and I look toward the street. The sun is strong, but it's partly hidden, so we put the blinds down. I like to leaf through her embroidery magazines while we listen to the radio programs. In one of the old magazines, *Family Magazine*, I run across a beautiful cross-stitch and she says she'll show me how to do it. When she sends me to get the orange-rind dessert, I stop and linger in the living room without bothering her. My mom told me that Auntie cleans all of her decorations on the glass shelves herself. She doesn't trust the maids, everything has to be carefully dusted, right down to the last little corner and crack; that's why she gets them out. I take a peek into the bedrooms: I see a picture of her daughter, then a girl younger than me, and I get sad for my aunt who lost her daughter and for the girl who, had she lived, would have inherited the responsibility to take care of her sick mother. That daughter is with her when she's embroidering, watching other lives from the window, listening to the radio, and watching the trains coming and going up and down Piedad Street.

The Invisible Hour

ESTHER SELIGSON (1941–2010)
Translated from the Spanish by Iván Zatz

First published in Indicios y quimeras *(1988), this story can be read as a study of Bergsonian time or as a surrealist vision of eternity. Seligson manages to deal with several layers of time: clock time, calendar time, psychological time, and metaphysical time, thus the quote "Time is either an invention or nothing at all." The anonymous narrator, the owner of a broken quartz watch, takes it to be fixed at a store unlike any other. What follows is an examination of life in and beyond time—a journey through a metaphysical universe in which the experience of time itself is abstracted.*

Blindness is a weapon against time and space. Our existence is nothing more than an immense and unique blindness, with the exception of those tiny bits transmitted to us by our miserly senses. The dominant principle within the cosmos is blindness. . . . Time, which is a continuum, can only be escaped by a single means: to avoid observing it from time to time. Thus can we reduce it to those fragments we can recognize.

—ELIAS CANETTI, *Auto-da-Fé*

"WELL, YES, SIR, we'll have to keep it for observation."

"But how come? The only problem was that the glass fell off."

"We are a serious company, sir. We are specialists. Our obligation is to return it to you in perfect condition."

"There's nothing wrong with it."

"The hands appear to be a little loose, and the face is somewhat dusty. It's only logical, since it had been exposed for a while."

"And how long will you keep it for observation?"

"Come back in ten days, please. Here you have your receipt. You can claim it with this piece of paper. You mustn't lose it, under any circumstances."

And that is how he saw it disappear, in a dainty red velvet case, withdrawn by a pair of mysterious gloved hands coming from behind a narrow window with thin bars in front of it. Then, one of those so-called grave-like silences befell the place. Where could his watch have wound up?

"This crystal is not for measuring time but rather for awakening in one's everyday memory the flash of other instants that need to be urgently freed from their temporary prison." That is what she said while giving it to him, that singular afternoon: a flat sphere, extremely white, the numbers barely marked by silver droplets. There was no need to wind it up, nor to touch or move it: it would tirelessly mark the time, without the slightest slowing down, with the merriment of mercury sliding through the fingers to reach the palm of the hand, lightweight, twinkling, and absolutely silent. The thin hands, silvery too, together with the second hand, would progress in little jumps that looked to him like the back of his Siamese cat when she was petted and the hair on her back would rise and then settle again, trembling slightly. Where could it be now, below the vaults of that old building with brown-grained marble staircases and high walls with straw-colored ornaments on the architraves and bondstone arches? Yes, an old edifice with enormous windows curling around metal volutes, through which the opaline daylight filtered with a milky luminousness. The receptionist would reply with the same chant to any client who approached the counter, "We are a serious company, sir. Our obligation is to return it to you in perfect condition."

She was stiff, without moving a single facial muscle, as if she were a perfect piece of clockwork. And the clients would exit through the revolving doors with the feeling that they had been dispossessed, defeated by an unknown force that could not be at all opposed: in there, one's hours, minutes, and seconds would be sifted through until they were denuded of time. But, doubtlessly, there would be clients who would stay there to wait; otherwise, what were those soft, tawny leather couches with ocher-colored buttons for? Long brownish counters flanked the walls of the room, and at the back wall there was a wide staircase, morosely carpeted in the same red color of the cases in which the watches would leave for an unknown destination.

And it occurred to him that upstairs, behind the finely sanded mahogany doors, in the upper corridor, which could be seen through the convoluted metalwork of the bannister, one found the death chambers, the conservatories, the incubators, the urns, the capsules where the time-catching quartzes would be buried, embalmed, or simply allowed their recovering sleep; and, in the midst of all of that, his own would be there, that marvelous box into which he had deposited his consciousness of the fleeting, the days, weeks, and months that had slowly oozed along. What would he do in the meantime? How could he follow the pulse of his thoughts, that pendular sway that he had tied to the bursts of light given by those sparkles, which it was his task to rescue from the unlimited dullness of the everyday grind? Memories in the shape of an Argand lamp without oil or wick lay languishing in the empty recesses of his mind, left between one oscillation and the other. His work had been interrupted, an unavoidable setback in his mindful task; and only now had he begun to decipher the path along the labyrinth of gears through which he had to enter, a network of minute pins, of small wheels and pivots, crowns, springs, and anchors!

His body shook with a shiver. He covered the whole room with his gaze. A doorman bid the clients farewell with a slight bowing of the head. Two sales clerks behind the counters stood erect as mannequins. A janitor cleaned with an enormous white feather duster the pier glasses on the walls and the large pendulum clocks attached to them. Full of resolve, he straightened his back. Taking his portfolio under his arm, he walked directly to the staircase, like a person with an inevitable appointment upstairs. Nobody stopped him or paid attention. "Trespassing Prohibited," "Personnel Only" read the signs on door after door. Not a single sound outside. Perhaps only the slight shuffle of his shoes on the thick carpet and a creaking of the wood here and there, as if it were breathing behind the doorways. Some bell was ringing, muffled, solitary. Inside, on the contrary, everything was beating: a multiplicity of living organisms, coming apart and fertilizing each other, a multitude of time-giving terms, little seeds of endurance, which a giant gloved hand pretended to remove and return to the dust of the uncreated, to the chaos that came before temporality, to exile, to alienation. With extreme care, he turned the shiny knob on one of the doors. He was greeted by a thick darkness that began to dissipate as his eyes got accustomed to it. He could distinguish the streaks of neon light from the streetlights, filtering

through the windows, due to the wrinkled curtains, without fully shining. An endless gallery opened up before him, with an incessant ticking, an interminable collection of bell jars casting their shadows on the mirrored tables where they rested; and inside these, the watches, mechanisms of uniform movement and completely regular cadence, wind-up barrel, main wheel, second wheel, instant wheel, flywheel, compensating balance, hand shaft, rhomboid wheel, hour wheel, crown wheel and rod-quartz crystals, chime clocks, cuckoo clocks, repeating watches, watch chains, stopwatches, water clocks, vibrations, oscillations, pulses, synchronizations; all subject to change, nonetheless having a before and an after, a beginning and an end, all subject to error, it being impossible to eliminate the imperfection between that beginning and that end, not the eternal returning but the cycle, what is advent because it is awaited, and it is awaited even if it is not announced, a wait that suddenly erupts even if expected, the succession of discernible units in a continuum prolonged toward infinity, an infinity that can be measured, however, regularly, rhythmically, one-two, one-two, the abolition of what is discontinuous no matter how much the sense of each day is dependent on the possibility of reducing that to its everyday context subject to office hours and a job that devalues it by turning it monotonous, ticktock. But sometimes he manages to capture some white butterflies and rescue them from the smoke in the garden where he plants roses and forget-me-nots. For he is a scrupulous gardener, and there is not a corner left without a lovingly watered and trimmed plant, supervised from its most tender sprouting, growing, thickening, blooming, feeding on the future, on successions of light and air, chlorophyll and oxygen; slow tropisms, those that search for the sun and those that withdraw from the sun, those that open up during the day and close up at night, the ever thirsty, the ones with adventitious roots, the creepers, the ones with straight stems, those that bloom and those that only have leaves, those with tendrils and those with verticillate leaves. He too, like other children, had arranged them, album plate after plate, to acquaint himself with their shape, knife-shaped, palmate, lanceolate, arrowhead, penninervate . . .

He closed the door cautiously behind him. A slight smell of alcohol and rusted metal tickled the inside of the nose. Where could he begin? And what if his wondrous crystal had not even arrived there yet? How could he make it out, so small among such gigantic secret keepers? He stepped on the

fossilized roots of a carboniferous forest as he entered. Breath transpiring; was it his or that of those bodies and assembly joints? As he descended, he was immersed in a subtle gas vapor: a liquid could be felt circulating through his veins, something thinner and lighter than blood. His ears were buzzing. He perspired. An avalanche came down, and in the nursery, the hours began to burst out inside their vials: everything was transformed into an onslaught of thousands of seconds flying around the gallery, crazed fireflies. Everything: time and memory, memory and remembrance, remembrance and continuity, continuity and atemporality. Everything: what he had always postponed, the moments that had not been lived, the distracted hours, the grayish days, the truncated weeks, the severed months like dried-up branches, and some of the years, purulent years molding away in neglect. Neglect? Not entirely. There were also the gems, rubies, sapphires and spinels, garnets, beryl crystals, and of course quartz—that crystal of shiny crystals, margarites, citrines, amethyst, with its iridescent transparency and its contents of moss, speckled agates forming their arborization with the remembrance of their body, fingers of singular afternoons plucking their deepest strings, those whose sound escaped, precisely, the ticktock and the calendar, those that palpitated awake—a name, a face, its laughter—in the marl of his daily perambulations: the invisible hour. He descended. Minute fish scales, slight flakes of endurance would hit upon the membranes that stretched out in his mind like a wide spiderweb: strung in there, innumerable superimposed images would pivot, swirling and stumbling, a vertigo of cells filled up with a mellifluous vapor where the ticktock seemed to suckle, avid bumblebee, on his most distant memories, far away, very far away, spore, sperm, atom, nebula, light particle, energy flow, wave, 186,000 miles per second, ion. He ascended, blowing, helix, spiral, shedding its leaves backward, enveloping itself, forging itself, suturing itself, pod opened to the wind thus recovering its tightly circular coherence, tenderly follicled berry, still a promise, not yet fruit, present, only a present being created in a progressive manner, genesis, continuous elaboration of the totally new, growth of the unforeseen—"time is either an invention or nothing at all." In his throat, then, the shout exploded like a beam, the frightful abyss. And the crystals began to shatter, but toward the inside, as if being soldered to their own interior revolving around that point, that voice that was his, not the everyday voice, however, but another one, a first one, pristine ticktock, dust storm of recovered instants in the clay of the original man,

in the simultaneity of the grain and the flower, the sowing and the reaping: unequivocal signs of time, its language of signs, its language of doors opened toward infinity. He ascended in successive commotions, in successive vibrations, slashing the foliage at right and left, inventing his own path, liberating it from silence to turn it into word, articulation of names to give the objects and rescue them from their movable lime, white dew that burst out spraying a multitude of letters, intermittent points like lanterns banging the mouth in their fight to spring out vowels, consonants, syllables, onomatopoeias, rivers of voices in swelling elasticity, rapid and burning vibration that opens its way to his eyes and lips from a depth growing upward to the alike and contiguous in successive stages. Voices and visions of the instruments and artifacts accumulated there danced their shadows before him and inside him without his being able to distinguish, in that simultaneity, where the outer and the inner were. He felt the tired sickle of time reaping the center of the circles that coincided with the center of other circles, and something escaped the measurable and visible to get lost in the transfinite. A chamber clock gave the signal: the space turned over, coextensive and concomitant, the gears came off their flying axles and pivots. His human presence and curiosity had awakened them from their rhythmic and cadence-like sleep to the chaos of the unspoken, of the potentially lived; and, like in nightmares, they spun in place, full of rancor, and with the evident intention of taking on a body and transforming themselves from mere desires, from simple movement, into concrete facts and acts. The arms linked to the clock hands, the legs of the pendulums, the cavity of the faces, the tongues of the springs and flexors, the molars of the crowns and disks came apart in a merry and threatening clamor. Fire spurted from a solar quadrant that he carelessly approached, fascinated by that dance of stellar incandescences—something told him that, this mirage of proximity notwithstanding, Alpha Centauri was over four light-years away—inside that circumference resembling an empty water clock, whose border formed a flaming fringe. He wanted to look inside. But time is also a reflection of shadows. Therefore, the daring man who attempts to decipher it, spell it out, look at it in the light, can be blinded by its brightness. For time is also blindness, a fragment of life wrapped inside a blind layer until occluded. His eardrums and pupils overwhelmed, he began to crash against the mirrors and crystals, attempting to defend himself with a metal rod from the phantasmagoric round assaulting him, cordless marionettes that pulled him by the hair and

skin with parsimonious animosity, ticktock ticktock, fine-edged rubies stabbing his retina and shredding his ear, sectioning his vocal cords into the thinnest slices. Thirsting for sharp luminous corpuscles, ticktock ticktock, time turned out its irreversible drunkenness, like a ritual flaying, until touching, blood, and chlorophyll, the yod of all births . . .

Promptly, ten days later, at the invisible hour before the sunset, he picked up his quartz watch, returned in perfect condition. Months later, however, he lost it . . .