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An Echo of Swelling Voices, a meta-fictional novella

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AN ECHO OF SWELLING VOICES

A NOVELLA

ADOLFO DANILO LOPEZ

Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School

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2017

Dedication

To my wife, Kristabel, for her support and patience

To my parents, Adolfo and Vilma, for their unconditional love

AN ECHO OF SWELLING VOICES

A NOVELLA

by

ADOLFO DANILO LOPEZ, Dip. Arch., MBA

A THESIS

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Preface

Horacio P. is an exiled Nicaraguan American poet living and teaching in Austin, Texas since the 1970s. Despite his enormous reputation and highly supportive wife, he feels incapable to write his last, and best, novel. This novel is about the life of Asdreni, an Albanian poet who was also exiled in Romania during the time before World War II, and his quest to find out who sent him a mysterious box containing the unpublished manuscripts of an unknown poet. One day, Horacio himself also receives a mysterious box containing the unpublished manuscripts of an unknown poet. His novel and his own life get entangled into a dynamic that Horacio, in real life, and Asdreni in the fictional work, are unable to tell apart.

PROJECT SCOPE AND GENESIS

Throughout my life, and during this Master's Program, the writing of poetry has come easier to me than any other genre. While at UTEP, I made incursions for the first time in short story and short-short story. I did exercises on scriptwriting, theater and creative non-fiction. I perceived novella as a daunting task, a scary and difficult genre. Unless approached it from an unconventional viewpoint. One must confront his fears to defeat them. What was to be my strategy?

Kafka and metafiction gave me that; the unconventional viewpoint. If the rules are hard to follow, break them. If you want originality, if you want to create something new, break the rules or make your own. The breaking of the rules. I dived into Kafka as part of a semester's coursework and then metafiction as an extra-curricular activity. What was the novel to be about? Here is where the architect in me intervened, for good or for bad. The triad of form, function and structure that I used in my buildings and poetry could be used in the novella.

UTEP requirements dictated the length of the work: it should be no more than 150 pages. I established my limit at between 150 and 180 pages. I wanted to mix the genres to include fiction, essay, poetry and others as needed by the work. There would be a central narrator who, from a position in the “present” could see the past and the future of the frame story, with timespace intruding into all fields of the narrative(s) and the properties of the human mind –memory to address the past, awareness to deal with the present and imagination to invoke the future- as capable of traveling between different realms of consciousness.

Kazuo Ishiguro and Haruki Murakami pushed the boundaries and was confined by. This thesis adopts the form of a mixed-genre novella, addressing the post-modern interest in the meta-fictional novel writers: the nature of reality, the illusion of timespace, and the further development of the novel as a literary form. Regarding techniques, I attempt the experimentation with plot, character, and theme, to underscore the feebleness of the intentionality of the author, enhance the creative forced participation of the reader, and highlight the irrelevance of context as a determinant of the form.

While in Nicaragua, as a high school student in the 1967-71, I liked the poetry of Horacio Peña (1936). It was different to that of the rest of the poets I so avidly read in *La Prensa Literaria*. While others were writing political diatribes and socialist attacks, he was developing unconventional, Christian, calm, philosophical critique. For many critics he was a mystery. A man set apart from the crowd. Not disconnected with the surrounding reality, but surpassing it to make it better. I took two of his courses while studying architecture (1972-78) and started to collect each one of his books. Fate and nascent Nicaraguan literary activity in exile put us together in Florida (1996) and in Texas (2007) and we developed a friendship and an understanding of literature. He’s been my friend, my mentor and my teacher.

I worked as a diplomat in Portugal in 1984-85. A young man, for the first time out of his small Nicaragua, I traveled to Spain, West Germany, France, and England. My commission got shortened when I was preparing to visit the countries behind the curtain wall. I had close and intense encounters with diplomats from the communist world: East Germany, Yugoslavia, Hungary, the USSR. But Albania always eluded me. It was to me -and to many- a distant, enclosed, mysterious country.

One can know most about a country via its food and... its poetry. I dug in as much as I could, but before the age of the Internet, information on anything was scarce or hard to find. Many years later, while at UTEP, I dug again, and found Aleksander Drenova, Asdreni. A poet as set apart and as mysterious as Horacio Peña. The theme of my novella was taking shape. These two poets, miles and years apart, entangled in the same shroud of mystery, the same aura of working hard for the country. Asdreni was more militant; Horacio Peña more philosophical.

In this thesis my aim is to play with narrative, plot takes a back seat. There are two main characters. The rest are irrelevant. Obscurity is on purpose; the reader needs to work to understand and feel. It is not for any reader.

POETICS AND ASSESSMENT. TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. OVERCOMING. PROCESS CRITIQUE

Once the general theme (the relationship between two poets, Horatio and Asdreni) and genre or (novella) were set, I had to think about structure. My research told me that beyond beginning, middle and end, metafictional novels lack a prescribed, canonical, organized structure and form. They can swing between severe over-plotting (Forrest Gump) to severe under-plotting (An Echo of Swelling Voices); blank pages (The Book of Blank Pages); pictures (The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana), appearance of the author (The French Lieutenant's Woman), foregrounding (Spaceballs), foregrounding/backgrounding (What the Bleep Do We Know), and the list goes on.

The idea is to show that history is manipulated as fiction by the victors, that language is a system of arbitrary rules and conventions, that the relationship reader-text-author is paradoxical, that reality is not understandable and relative, and so forth.

Before studying architecture, I was a very free man, my poetry would flow free and wild. Architecture confined me to structure, to rigid rules and patterns, and mathematical processes. My poetry fought for self-justification and became long and wordy. In this novella I tried to liberate my self-expression, but since the beginning I imposed a schema to -at least vaguely- follow the structure of a traditional novel (a contradiction?) and made several key changes in response to my Thesis Advisor comments, including my appearance in the novel, the author talking to the readers, sub-plots in the novel akin to branches in a vide-game, narrative footnotes, essay papers, etc.

Technical difficulties abounded: I did not know how to approach writing a novel and spent a lot of time reading about novels and the history of novels. This put so many possibilities in my mind that I lost track of my original ideas. It is true that inter-textuality has an influence on writers, but I think I got drowned in information. I had a long, 4-year hiatus, moved from Texas to Florida, participated in many literary activities, had several grand-children, and other life changing situations. But *An Echo of Swelling Voices* stayed in the back of my mind.

I was in metafictional novel territory, one with blurred rules. Was I to write a novella that was plot driven? Character driven? Narrator driven? All the above? I decided for the latter. Yet, many times the writing takes a life of itself and I pour stream of consciousness, poems, biography, history, fiction, drawings, timelines, charts, dialogue, interrogation, interview, dreams, etc.

One objective I had was that each chapter should be no more than 2 pages long, for expediency of writing and to control my tendency to over-write. Another objective was that each chapter could be read independent of the others, like a story within itself. That would allow for the reader to skip chapters, create his/her own story, investigate. Yet another objective was that one could read the odd chapters independent of the even ones; like two novellas in one book.

Some chapters are heavy in character, others in stream of consciousness, others in historical references, others in plot. In the end the Thesis Committee may decide I failed in my objectives; I know I need to do more work in what I perceive as central obstacles, besides the objectives mentioned above:

1) Maintaining the flow from one chapter to another, while conserving the independence of each chapter. Specifically creating the chapter point(s) where both narratives, Asdreni and Horatio P. converge into one single story, co-exist in the same spacetime.

2) Keeping the readers' interest while I discuss or expose philosophical, political and historical ideas.

3) Reaching a market segment that is curious enough to take the novella as a research project and read it from start to end, engaged in it, looking for clues and hints, co-creating the text with me.

FRAMING THE GENRE NOVEL AND ITS CHILD THE METAFICTIONAL NOVEL

E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* defines the novel via French critic Abel Chevalley as “a fiction in prose of a certain extent” (Forster, 6). Dr. Agatha Taormina points out that the term novel was not used in English until the mid-18th Century adding that the word novel is derived from the Italian novella (roman in French), a genre that was popularized in the middle ages (i.e.: *The Decameron*). Forster says in his book that “the novelist of the future will have to pass all

new facts [of writing novels] through the old if variable mechanism of the creative mind". (Forster 172). So have done novelists from all parts of the world. The first English language novels, Daniel Dafoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719), Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740) and several others, placed emphasis on plot, character, first person point of view (POV) and were very interested in realism.

19th Century novelists turned to the Romantic Movement born in Europe. Romanticism advocated a return to nature and the rise of imagination over reason and emotion over intellect. A large group of these writers –the sisters Brontë, Hawthorne, Melville among others- produced a torrent of romantic novels like Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, The Scarlet Letter, and Moby Dick. Gothic novels also came out in this century with an emphasis on horror and the supernatural, like The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole, The Monk by Mathew Lewis and The Mysteries of Udolpho by Anne Radcliffe. They all placed emphasis on emotion, setting and atmosphere, valiant heroines, explained supernatural phenomena, and balance of realism with fantasy. To this century also belong the Victorian novelists Charles Dickens (A Christmas Carol), William Thackeray (Vanity Fair), Thomas Hardy (Tess of the d'Urbervilles), Lewis Carroll (Charles U. Dodgson) a mathematician who wrote Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), author of Silas Marner, the first psychological novel and considered the first modern novelist.

In the United States there was a turn to realism and local color writing. Major novelists of this time were Harriet Beecher Stowe with Uncle Tom's Cabin, Henry James with The Portrait of a Lady, and Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) with Tom Sawyer among others.

In Latin America the 18th century Romanticism was represented by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (Facundo, Recollections of a Provincial Past) and Jorge Isaacs (Maria). The 19th

century in this region saw the birth of Vanguardism, a movement mix of romanticism and naturalism, which opposed the primary reality in favor of fragmentation and in search of national identity. Jose Hernandez's *Martin Fierro* is a major representative of this movement.

The 20th century, which is barely behind us, has been characterized by critics as a two part event: Modern (1900-1945) and Contemporary (1945-present). The explosion of human knowledge in all branches of science, technology, and philosophy had a tremendous impact on literature and the arts as well. Wars, economic depression, space travel, Darwin (evolution and the survival of the fittest), Jung (collective consciousness, archetypes, master patterns governing human experience), Marx (class struggle, social relations, dialectic materialism, and private versus common property), Nietzsche (instinct over intellect, human freedom), Freud (personality determined by irrational and infantile fantasies, the pre-eminence of the sexual), Heidegger (the absurdity of human life who exist in a world determined by an unknown fate), Sartre (humans as builder of our own fate and the rejection of external laws), Planck (the unpredictability of the sub-atomic world), Heisenberg (the approximate, uncertain nature of reality), Einstein (reality as a four-dimensional space-time continuum), and others, all gave us elements for divergent and rapidly changing worldviews.

Modern novelists include the surrealist Franz Kafka (*The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*), Marcel Proust who in his massive work *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* investigated the role of memories in the search for meaning, the experimental James Joyce whose novel *Ulysses* is a milestone of modern fiction, and Virginia Woolf who mastered the stream of consciousness technique. In Latin America Realism was strong in tackling social problems, as in *El Zarco* by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and *La Vorágine* by José Eustacio Rivera. But Realism became entangled with the imaginary (the imaginary as the essence of the real and the linguistic

possibilities to express it) which gave birth to Magic Realism and the “new Latin American novel” with Alejo Carpentier (*Esferaimagen*) and surrealist Miguel Angel Asturias (*El Señor Presidente*, *Men of Maize*) as precursors of the “Latin American Boom” that exploded in the 1960s: Carlos Fuentes (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*), Mario Vargas Llosa (*The City and the Dogs*), Julio Cortázar (*Blow Up and Other Stories*, *Hopscotch* and who once said “I make no distinction between reality and fantasy”) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the magic realist novel par excellence.

Contemporary literature advanced the development of the genre novel to include the rise of the anti-hero and anti-novel, the mix or opposition of surrealism and realism as key ingredients of the form, and the specialization of social agendas of feminist (Erica Jong), Third World (Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros), Jewish (Saul Bellow, Philip Roth) and experimental (Thomas Pynchon, John Barth) nature. In the United States, New Journalism (Tom Wolfe) and creative non-fiction (Truman Capote) rose at the end of the 20th century. In Latin America the genre has developed to include the historical novel (Elena Poniatowska, Eduardo Galeano), the creative non-fiction (Carlos Monsivais), the commercial self-help (Paulo Coelho), the historical magic-realism (Isabel Allende), the magic-realism pastiche (Laura Esquivel), and the avant-garde (Luisa Valenzuela, Gioconda Belli, Roberto Bolaño

Post-Modernist novel is the latest trend in the genre which is characterized by a playfulness with language, the experimentation in the form, a lesser reliance on traditional narrative form, a lesser reliance on traditional character development, the experimentation with point of view, the experimentation with the way time is conveyed in the novel, a mixture of "high art" and popular culture, and an interest in metafiction, that is, fiction about the nature of fiction.). Jorge Luis

Borges (*El Aleph*) and Julio Cortazar (*Blow-Up and Other Stories*) are considered post-modernist, metafictional writers.

Due to its novelty only a few critical works exist about metafiction. One such work is *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*, by Patricia Waugh, first published in 1984. In it she attributes the following definition and characteristics to this variation of the genre novel:

“Metafictional works are those which explore the theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (Waugh).

Some see it as just a type of structural technique that draws attention to itself and one that posits questions about “the relationship between fiction and reality” (Schmidt, 88). Metafiction is also seen as “a mature version of the novel” and one that “challenges the authority of histories” giving birth to historiographic metafiction (Orlowski) which seeks the truth of history by using amalgamations of fact and myth, questions the absolute knowability of the past (history is written by the victor), and seeks the rediscovery of histories of peoples with suppressed discourses like women or colonized natives all over the world. Homi Bhaba approaches this discussion from a political perspective in his essay *The Location of Culture*, included in Julie Rivkin’s and Michael Ryan’s *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (1998).

THE CONSTANT QUESTIONING OF THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION BY HUMANS

Plato (c. 427-347 BCE), insisted that reason was the primal and most desirable form of human capacity to find truth. He insisted that Reality resided in eternal, unchanging forms given by geometry, that the world of ideas was the world of truth, that the world perceived by human senses was a copy of another realm, the realm of ideas. He spoke, in his book *The Republic*,

about binary opposites of good/evil, rational/irrational, male/female, and that the content of literature (what it says) was more important than the form it comes in (how it says it). He advocated that art is a reproduction of Reality, a medium of manipulation, a description, and its function was moral criticism.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was the opposite of Plato, and more interested in form. His work, *Poetics* (Περὶ ποιητικῆς, is considered the first essay on literary criticism in Western thought. To Aristotle art is not an inferior imitation of reality as we perceive it with our senses, but a process (of imagination) that completes and enhances such reality. Art reveals truth in a unique way than reason does. Reality, says this philosopher, does not reside in immutable, ideal forms (αμετάβλητες ἰδανικές μορφές) but in the constantly changing world of exterior appearances as perceived by our mind. Aristotle set to discover the principles that govern the structure of Poetry, a medium that brings order to the exterior chaotic world and brings meaning to reality.

After these two thinkers, everybody else is a follower of one of them: either a Humanist who bases all on Reason and moral codes, or a Structuralist who looks for the rules that govern the relationships among parts of a system (art, language). The following diagram, without trying to be reductionist, submits the kernel of various philosophers and critics and their position vis a vis art and the nature of reality:

Who?	Major work	Central ideas
Horace (65 BCE – 8 BCE) End of Greek and Roman Classics and Renaissance	Ars Poetica: Epistle to the Pisos	Poetry is sweet and useful (<i>dulce e utile</i>), it is didactic and provides pleasure, we are the sum of tradition and the beginning of

		something new
Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) Begins The Enlightenment	An Apologie for Poetrie	Poetry is an art of imitation (mimesis) it completes creation and teaches the inner meaning of things, it presents a higher level or Reality
Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)	Advancement of Learning	History, fact and reason are tied to human experience. Imagination can unchain the perception of realities not yet manifested, since imagination, hope, desire, fantasy are not tied to the physical laws of nature. The imagined reality of poetry is greater than the perceptible nature of the material world. Poetry can change reality, reason can only observe
Joseph Addison (1672-1719)	On the Pleasures of the Imagination	The power of reason investigates the causes of things, it needs a trained mind. Imagination is content with experiencing pleasure, it does not need a trained mind
Edmund Burke (1729-97)	A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful	Imagination is a creative power that represents images and combines them to create new ones (re-creation), art should be based on taste and sensibility which is less common than reason. A society must have citizens with educated taste and trained logic

Samuel Johnson (1709-84)	On Fiction	Fiction depends on mimesis based on realism of plot and character, it must convey a moral message. Poetry is the opposite, thus novels appeal to less people
Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) End of The Enlightenment	Discourses on Art	The best art seeks to represent the immutable nature of things (universal ideas), we must discover the principles of human nature on which imagination is founded and then shape the universal ideas and standards on those principles. Reason must subordinate to sensibility. Reason can be learned, sensibility cannot. In art imagination is the residency of truth
William Wordsworth (1770-1850) Starts the Romanticism	Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (with Coleridge, see below)	Common language over metric language, rural over urban setting, the relation poet-poem is more important than poem-reader, emotional impact over didactic impact, imagination over reason and logic
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)	See above, also On the Principles of Genial Criticism, Biographia Literaria	Poet is a god who can create worlds that never existed, organicism over logic, imagination is unconscious (primary, divine spark) and unconscious (secondary, create a new form)
John Keats (1795-1821)	Letters to Benjamin Bailey	Poetry and science, empathy and

	and to George and Thomas Keats	reason are binary opposites, one must have “negative capability” (be comfortable with uncertainty and indeterminacy), rigid formalism is less important than a flexible structure
Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49)	The Poetic Principle, The Philosophy of Composition	Grief over death and beauty, art for art’s sake, no didactic, no function other than feeling
Mathew Arnold (1822-88) New Criticism, until about 1960	The Function of Criticism at the Present Time	The object of art itself as it really is, text independent from author and reader

This apparent dichotomy reality/fiction has pervaded literature and divided art and science for millennia. I consider both as belonging to a tight continuum we constantly travel via our human faculties of memory, awareness, and imagination.

After the 1960s a host of new approaches to literature and writing fiction came about: new criticism (Eliot, Brooks, Wimsatt, Schorer), moral formalism (F.R. Leavis), Russian formalism (Jakobson, Bakhtin, Murakovsky), reader-oriented theories (Prince, Gadamer, Husserl, Heidegger, Jauss, Iser, Fish, Riffaterre, Culler, Holland), Marxist theories (Lukacs, Brecht, Adorno, Benjamin, Althusser, Eagleton), structuralism (Saussure, Barthes, Propp, Levi-Straus, Todorov, Genette), post-structuralism (Lacan, Kristeva, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, Miller, Foucault), deconstruction (Bloom, Hartman), psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism (Said, Spivak), post-modernism (Baudillard, Lyotard) and combinations of them.

All the critics mentioned above took the fiction produced before and during their time and discovered or uncovered new theories about them. It would take a long paper (or several books!) to summarize their approaches to reality and fiction, but suffice to say that writers and critics of the genre novel have changed their approach to reality as an immutable entity, and converted it into a multilayered continuum that has blurred the boundaries of reality and fiction, imagination and fact, history and legend, dream and conscious state.

METAFICTION TODAY

As a product of the modernist and post-modernist literary tradition, Metafictional novel is considered to have its roots (at least of some of its techniques like self-reflexiveness and stream of consciousness) in the nine-volume novel by Laurence Sterne *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* published between 1759 and 1769. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also referenced as portraying another of metafiction's characteristics: the frame story, in this case a play within a play. Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote* also contains self-reflexive elements when addressing the reader and by being a novel of caballeros about the genre novel of caballeros.

CHARACTERISTICS OF METAFICTION

- **A story about a writer creating a story** (e.g. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).
- **A story about a reader reading a book** (e.g. Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*).
- **A story which features itself** (e.g. *The Dark Tower* by C. S. Lewis)
- **A story containing another work of fiction within itself** (e.g. Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before*).

- **A story addressing the specific conventions of story**, such as title, character conventions, paragraphing or plots. (e.g. John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*).
- **A novel where the narrator intentionally exposes him or herself as the author of the story** (e.g. Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*).
- **A book in which the book itself seeks interaction with the reader** (e.g., *Willie Masters' Lonely Wife* by William H. Gass).
- **Narrative footnotes, which continue the story while commenting on it** (e.g. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace).
- **A story in which the characters are aware that they are in a story**, such as the parodic (e.g. *Snuff Fiction* by Robert Rankin.)
- **An autobiographical fiction** in which the main character, by the last parts of the book, has written the first parts and is reading some form of it to an audience (e.g. *Shoplifting from American Apparel* by Tao Lin). (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction>).

Lastly, it is indispensable to mention the works contemporary writers Haruki Murakami (*Kafka On The Shore*), and Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Unconsoled*), who have managed –increasingly– to blend fantasy and reality into one seamless continuum and present it to the reader in his short stories and novels as perfectly credible and possible landscape. The concept of Reality has been expanded to include anything our mind is capable of thinking.

Quantum physics experimental and theoretical advancements of the last twenty years has led to the questioning of the nature of time and space and of Reality itself both, as perceived by our brain and as demonstrated by experimentation and mathematical formulations. Science and art are united again in the search for the understanding of the universe we live in.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

“The literary tricks. The untrustworthy narrator. The novels within a novel. The sophomoric self-reference and ham-fisted *roman à clef* are all cheap and tired devices; they increase complexity without much noticeable benefit to the reader. It’s hard to imagine that a writer with so much talent and so many important things to say would squander his audience by indulging in literary tchatchkis, trinkets, knick-knacks, gimcracks, bric-a-brac, gee-gaws, baubles, do-dads, and ephemeral things”. (John Sundman, Cheap Complex Devices, 1999)

Languages are living entities, they change and grow each day. In our era of globalization, languages are starting to intermix. Spanglish and the use of words from dominant cultures constantly enter spoken and written languages. Poetry, novel and all of literature, which are made of language, cannot but succumb to the vortex of changes, inter-textuality, sub-textuality, and meta-textuality.

I wanted, with *An Echo of Swelling Voices*, to make a small contribution to this natural, inevitable step of evolution. This branch may become extinct, but at least I tried.

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Chapter 1A

“Truth is what is real to me”, whispers a genderless voice in the penumbra. But wait, look down, a gloved hand is also writing the same phrase on a white piece of paper. We can fairly conclude that the voice and the hand belong to the same body, to the same brain. It is the same mind directing the act of writing, the symbol of language, herein written, not spoken. Or it could be that someone’s voice is reading what a hand writes.

The hand is using a fountain pen made of black lacquer. The ink flows with rich and dark blue on the rugged surface of a paper that seems to be handmade, with one of those kits you can buy in a neighborhood store like Target or an on-line website like Arnold Grummer’s. We infer this because of its rustic texture and odd mix of several hues of white and fibrous appearance. The rasping of the metal tip on the paper surface resonates in the stillness of this moment. This is left-hand writing so the tip stays from away and above the humid letters, not cursive letters but block letters, as to not blotch the phrase. The right hand, also wearing the same black leather glove, holds down the paper to assist in the writing.

Now they fold the paper, it is a note written at the center of an 8 inch by 5 inch piece of paper. They fold it, the hands that is, and now they move away. We catch a glimpse of an old dark oak desk the person was sitting at. We still don’t have enough light or a reflecting surface, like a mirror or a window pane, to make who this person is. We just see the gloves and a long black coat moving through the shadows.

The person stops in front of an open box. It is one of those brown boxes with a lid that you use to place your meager belongings when you quit a job or are fired. But instead of some dear files, personal books, the quasi dead orchid plant your other half gave you, or the photograph of rigor, this box in particular contains... books? No, not books, journals. Yes,

journals like those a teenager or an amateur writer acquires at Barnes & Noble or Borders. Or better yet at Michael's when they are on sale at 99 cent apiece. These are not the famous Moleskine, nevertheless, the ones that advertise "culture, imagination, memory, travel, personal identity" and claim these are the same used by van Gogh, Picasso, Hemingway and Chatwin, as if using them will make you a better writer or a writer at all. The journals in this box look different. They are not black. They display different covers. One has a Doric capital in sepia with the words *Kirche zu Constantinopel (nacht Salzen...*, another has imprinted a series of fountain pens of many types and colors sitting atop postcards with post stamps from different countries, France, Luxembourg, Bettlemberg, Munsing,... Another one has a map of the world with the date 1752 emblazoned at the bottom. This is all we can glimpse when the hands open the flaps of the box and place the note inside.

The person folds the flaps, tapes them and places a glued, white, 4 inch by 6 inch card on top that reads "HORATIO P. 1234 MOLERA DRIVE, AUSTIN TX 76108". The person then turns in the shadows and we see another person standing close by. Again, because of the lack of light we only see a gray dress shirt with black buttons. This person moves away along with the one with the gloved hands, and we see a room. It is a bedroom, a bed, undone, in disarray. Someone is laying there... dead? Sleeping? We can't say for sure. We hear a door slam. A lock clicks. Then, silence. Now that we are alone, let's move closer to the bed, are those blood stains? We can't tell for sure. But you will find plenty of clues ahead in the lives of Horatio P. and his, nemesis? Alter ego? Asdreni. Let's end this chapter and move on.

Chapter 1B

May 1, 1885, Drenova, Albania

Some men have the same face since they are born, except for a few minute details here and there, a moustache, the gray hair, a random scar... the semblance of old souls is imprinted on them. They just die older and their soul keeps migrating from body to body in their search for eternity, for the union with the Cosmic Mind.

Such is the case of Alek. Take away the thick moustache and the strands of gray hair on the sides of his head and you find the same air of defeat, the same longing for a state of being not achieved, the same anxiousness for searching. They are all present in his first photograph at age five, in 1877 after a labor day in the family farm in the village of Drenova in southeastern Albania, as in this other one dated 1947, a few months before his death in Bucharest, Hungary.

If one characteristic he must be remembered by, it should be his curiosity for knowing his roots, his mad love for his country -no, not Albania as the Westerners and Soviets had renamed it, but Shqipëria, as it is called by the nationals in the ancient language of Illyrian. “Shqipëria, Shqipëria”, he repeats with languor like a mantra as if holding to the last vestige of a culture that survived the Greek, Roman, Slavic and Turk invasions.

“What was my mother like?” he asked his father at age ten while helping his father toil the field with an ox. “She was like autumn leaves chased by the wind, like a passing moment that escapes us, or a summer night’s dream that veils its trace”. He never asked again. Not to his father, who grew ill day by day, or his two older brothers who had left to Hungary earlier the same year in search of a better life. There was plenty to mull over that poetic, enigmatic phrase. “Why did my brothers leave?” he asked his father candidly. “They grew tired of my melancholy and so will you, if I don’t beat you to it”. This last part was more a mumbling than a response,

and less a thought than a menace. The sun shone hard on the squalid soil, away from the gentle breezes of the Adriatic. Two shepherds hushed in the distance to a large flock of goats. The ruins of a Roman castle, where his brothers used to spook him, watched from a nearby hill. Ideas boiled in Alek's mind.

Later in his room he repeated in the language he had learned in elementary school: "λινε αυτυμν λεαπεσ χηασεδ βψ τηε ωινδ, λινε α πασσινγ μομεντ τηατ εσχαπεσ υσ, ορ α συμμερ νιγητ□σ δρεαμ τηατ πειλσ ιτσ τραχε". Was it then when he decided to be a poet?□ These very same lines are found in his poem "Forgotten Memories" contained in his third and last –and best- book, *Psallme Murgu* (Psalms of a Monk) published in Bucharest in 1930. In one of his diaries he wrote: "Maybe one does not decide to be a poet, one is chosen by the Muses, one is entrapped, incarcerated, and raped by them. They never let go of you. You do not want to leave".

The day he found his father hanging from the high beam in the living room, he did not blink or cry. He readied himself to attend school as always. He presented and successfully passed his oral exams. He met with the Headmaster and explained he would not be attending high school after all. "I have to leave the country. My brothers need me". "How about your father?" Mr. Noli inquired. "Not him, he does not need me. He has all he needs and is where he wants to be". He walked back home at 3:00 PM. On returning to the house he did not look at the corpse. He went to his room, packed a few belongings on a small valise and took his diary under the arm. He went then to the living room and said "You beat me to it". He then left the house and started his trip to Bucharest, in search of his brothers. He was thirteen years old.



Aleksandr Drenova, circa 1937

Chapter 2A

May 1, 1997, Austin, Texas

“How is your new novel coming up?”, whispers Arianne in the penumbra on Horacio P.’s ear. It was her way of keeping the edge, of prolonging the ecstasy after making love with her husband in the slow motion they both, enjoy so much. After thirty, the myth goes on, sexual prowess starts to decline and a couple must resort to a gracious slowness that allows them to savor the moment, the rhythm, each fold of their skins touching each other, each inch of the misty flesh engulfing each other, each tension of the muscles, the fiery look into the wells of pleasure reflected in the depths of their pupils, each moan of hers and his resonating in the brain, releasing pheromones and toxins that tickle their minds, clouding them, making them lose track of time and space, the stream of infinite consciousness that comes with the climax. The sudden relaxation of a graph gone into infinity and then falling precipitously into the valley of the present, like an abyss growing backwards.

But Horatio P. seems distant, he has his eyes still closed as if not yet ready to leave the limbo of pleasure –or should we say the heaven of pleasure? Look at him chewing the piece of apple while lying on the plush lawn of the Garden besides the Tree of Life, Eve reclined on his pounding chest, her soft hand caressing his loin, her white and pink breasts almost touching his rib, as if looking to join again with their creator. In his mouth the apple’s skin, red and luscious, dissolves into mulled rips, the white and juicy flesh is ravaged by his perfect teeth, slowly teased by his playful tongue, sweet drops drip from the corner of his godly lips into his chest, Eve sucks on them like a bee in the flower’s stem, both tongues are moving about, licking his wet lips and hers, the relentless temptation of the Snake present, its forked tongue going in and out of its rugged cavity of a mouth.

Arianne looks at him in wonderment, the man she admires the most on earth, in life. A famous writer and poet often dubbed by critics and the media as “*the most important living Nicaraguan American poet*”. She remembers when he received the prestigious **Rubén Darío International Poetry Prize** for his masterpiece *Ars Moriendi and Other Poems*. True he has written several glorious works after that one from 1967, but it is so hard for a writer to replicate an Opera Magna, so to speak. You write one Great Work, and that is it. Not many writers can produce more than one perfect poem or novel.

“I haven’t started yet. There are several ideas boiling in my mind but they fall apart as soon as I try to shape them. I wonder if Picasso went through the same process of taking a block of granite or a white canvas after thinking it over, sketching it to exhaustion to only find himself throwing away each attempt. Like in the Jorge Luis Borges poem, The Golem, where the Rabbi wants to create a human being but then repents a thousand and one times for his failures. I have been producing golems only”. His voice started calm but ended in desperation. Arianne knows better that it is best to let the case rest for a while. Inspiration will come back to him. It always does, he just needs to ponder ideas some more, make further attempts at the naked canvas, the formless block. At this time it is best to change the subject, radically, a step she will regret this time. *“How was your visit to Doctor Patel’s clinic? Did they give you the results already?”* When he delays his answer more than his customary pauses before responding to trivial questions, she becomes unsettled. *“Mami, I’m afraid there is no good news to share there. I might have only a few more months to live”*.



Horatio P. circa 1967

Chapter 2B

May 15, 1885, Bucharest, Romania

Walking the three miles between Drenovë and Korçë was relatively easy to accomplish. At thirteen, with the soul in turmoil and the mind troubled by a stirring heart, the body is weightless and feels no pain, no hunger. But Alek's final destination is Bucharest, more than 500 miles away, to an address on the crumpled envelope in his right pant pocket that is becoming harder and harder to read.

Riding on the back of the horse cart of the Jewish merchants who took him from Korçë to Bitola, Alek thought that protagonists who don't make hard choices have no will, no character. They become uninteresting, boring, shallow and insignificant. Readers have no care for them. The story falls apart and the plot becomes null and void. It is possible to write stories without plot, stories without characters. But if a writer decides to introduce a character in a story or if a character decides to become part of a story, then both –writer and character- must thread thin and fine to provoke an interest in the reader. The waters of Lake Ohrid lay calm in the distance.

Riding with the Romani people who took him from Bitola to Kumanovo, Alek thought that we all go through life wishing to become an interesting character with a strong will and a clear mind. He hid in another cart on his way from Kumanovo to Krivina, in the outskirts of Sofia, Bulgaria, and thought that humans make up hurdles to face and complicate the choices at hand. It is only when we realize that all the choices at hand are bad ones that the true decision point rises. It is only then that our true will and our true character surfaces.

Five hundred miles covered by a mix of train stow away, horse cart riding, and walking may easily take two weeks. Sleeping at barns, under bridges, in the back of trains and horse wagons, eating nothing or stealing some food, may elongate time and space and make seem the

two weeks that elapsed like a month in Gehenna or a year in Purgatory. Yet, it is this suffering that creates character... or is character something innate that the will triggers to make the hard choices that need to be made?

At the train station in Sofia, Alek overheard a group of young men arguing in Albanian about the need to organize in Bucharest only to return to the homeland to give power to the people. He approached them sheepishly and spoke to them in Shqip:

“Excuse me, my name is Alexandr Drenova, I just arrived from Albania in search of my brothers.” The men, all of them in their twenties, looked surprised. The one in a gray suit asked him:

“Alexander Dren..? How did you arrive here? You look exhausted!” asked the one dressed like a manufacturing plant worker.

“Different means, an oxen cart, train, walking...”

“And you travelled that distance all by yourself? Who are your brothers? Where do they live? What are their names?” asked the one dressed like a construction worker.

“Calm down, calm down my brothers, the boy must be hungry. If he is an Albanian, he is one of us”, said the one dressed like a poet, to add: “Come with us, we will take you to your brothers” and pulling a piece of bread and cheese added: “Eat this, we will get you to your brothers”. And addressing the group he said: “Men are needed to liberate the country from the oppression of foreigners. Let’s welcome... what’s your name?”

“Alexadr... you can call me Alek” said a much happier Alek.

“But your full name, what is it? And what do you want to be when you grow up?” asked the one with the suit.

“Aleksandr Drenova. And I want to be a poet” said Alek.

“A poet! Hummm, that deserves a poet’s name” said the poet. “Sandr... dren.. Asdr.. Dreno... you need to work on your official poet’s name!”

They took him in and from Sofia to Pleven, and from Pleven to Gorna Orjahovitza, to Ruse and to Giurgiu, Alek was ensnared into the political discussions of the youngsters mixed with poetry, chants, and wine.

At thirteen Alek made the hard choices with the will he found inside. At thirteen he rode the horse, the train, and the cart to reach a destination written in an almost forgotten piece of paper. The ruins of a Roman castle like the one where his brothers used to spook him watched from a nearby hill.

On arriving at the Gara de Nord, on the northern part of Bucharest, Alek pulled out the crumpled envelope. Distracted as he was, Alek did not notice the little girl looking intently at him. “Are you lost?”, she asked candidly. She looked 12 years old at the most, with big round green eyes and a reddish long hair. Fair skin and a deep brown dress to her ankles, the black shoes hard to discern. “I’m looking for my brothers” he could respond. “My name is Olga Ozernaya, we can ask my sister for help”. He followed her since he had no other choice. “My name is Aleksandr, but you can call me Leka, like my father calls... used to call me”.

“That address is very close by” told him Viorica Barbu, the Romanian girlfriend of one of the young rebels in a group of about six that had joined with the new arrivals, and Alin’s older, much elder sister.

“What do you mean Leka?” asked the poet who had brought him to Bucharest, “remember you are a poet, you need a poet’s name”.

“Come, Leka and we will take you. Who lives there? Are they expecting you?” But the truth was that no one was expecting Alek, young Leka, to show up in the middle of the night

from so far away. He had not seen or heard of his brothers in five years. Will they be there? Had they gone back to Albania to fight? The poet took Alek. Vioric and Olga went in the opposite direction. Will they meet again?

Chapter 3A

May 1, 1997, Austin, Texas

“What do you mean a few more months?” Arianne never sounded to Horatio P. so worried, so vulnerable, so shocked. “What did she tell you?” tears congregate on the rim of her lower eyelids. After twenty years of marriage she now has this sixth sense about her men. She knows what he thinks, she knows what he feels, she knows what he keeps to himself, she knows what he fears, and that is why she tried since the very beginning to change him, to make him happy, to make him whole and fix his brokenness. But Horatio P doesn’t feel broken; men’s awareness is limited to either deeply rooted cultural values like sports, money, possessions and power or things beyond their own understanding. Men don’t feel, they just are, they just want to be and –in the case of poets and poet/philosophers like Horatio P.- they want to concentrate their attention on “the meaningful and important things in life”, like why the universe exists or how to finish the latest poem.

Arianne knows this and tries to control her tears, her flickering lower lip, her breathing on the brink of weeping. Instinctively, she covers her bare and plump breasts with the white sheets. This is no time to be naked, this is no time to think of sex or cuddling. This moment requires a different demeanor, attitude and composure.

“What. Did. She. Tell you.” The phrase comes out curt, subdivided in four distinct parts. Not a question but a command and a petition at the same time. Her eyes are closed as if expecting a detonation that will blow them apart. No, not them. Her. It will blow her apart and send her to the other side of the galaxy, or even farther, to the place at the edge of the universe, where she is the reflection of this other self of hers in the present reality; in the current timespace

that is maybe a dream, an illusion, a hologram. This self of hers and the other are entangled into one being.

But, what about Horatio P.? He thinks of what the important things in life are. No, not the balance in the bank account or what color the new house should be painted on, or what visits to pay over the weekend, or what to get to the in-laws for Christmas. Poets like him think and worry about the deepest meaning of Holderlin's *Hyperion's Songs of Destiny*, lost loves, a paradise regained, loves and frustrations, the nature of intrinsic beings, the interrelationship between god, woman, and country.¹ Those are the important things in life.

"The cancer is back." He stops. He sits and covers his limp loin. He inhales deeply, the gray hairs on his chest move up and then down and his gaze does not know where to rest, if on his writer's hands or Arianne beautiful foot peeking out the blanket.

"What did she tell you?". "The options are the same: treatment, with a slight chance of survival, or..." But she does not cry like the first time she heard this news. This news is old news and she knows that crying only scares a man.

"What do you want to do? Give up? Or fight it?" This is a rhetorical question. She knows what he wants, this stubborn poet husband of hers. This threat of death will be his fuel to accomplish something transcendent, like a novel or a political movement to make God popular again. She is the only support he needs, not the ultimate goal like he is to her. But she must try. "We will go through this together, okay? We did it before, we will do it again".

"Kierkegaard said that people resort to one of three routes to escape their reality: madness, suicide or addiction. You know that I have no addictions. True, I used to drink in my younger years, like when I hung out with those poets at the bar La India, in Nicaragua. I don't

¹ Titles of poetry books by Nicaraguan poets Guillermo Menocal, Carlos Martinez Rivas, and D. Lopez.

believe in suicide or euthanasia, which to me is a form of suicide-homicide. Letting myself die by not following any treatment is not really suicide. It is embracing my Destiny, a sure death that only God knows when it will arrive. It is acting as if I am crazy, it is becoming crazy... similar to my "Diary of a Young Man Who went Mad". He pauses, she gives him a quizzical look, he continues: "He is giving me a gift, Arianne, He is letting me know in advance that my time is up. I am blessed! And I must act quickly!"

Her determination is indeterminate. It is a mask. They both know it.

"Well" she stops, curving and tightening her lips as if pondering what to say next. "We have been married for a long, long time. I went through this with you before, a brain tumor that appears one day, we burn it, and then reappears. We knew this could happen. But You are a good man, Horatio P, a man of God. And I am happy to be the faithful wife who does some real estate on the side, because I am blessed to have a husband who makes enough money as a college professor and writer so we can live modestly but with sufficient income to take care of our two daughters. We got this, Horatio P".

"Yes" he finally agrees "we will go through this together. Again".

Chapter 3B

Bucharest, Romania, December 7, 1886

- “And why, just tell me why Sami, should we be passive and continue to be subjects of the Ottoman Empire? Where does it say in our history that we should follow Islam? We have been Christians for hundreds of years before the Turks invaded our lands! We must be Christians, like Russia, France, Germany, England...”

- “No, no, no, Jani, this is not a question of having to choose between the Koran and the Bible. Don’t you see? Religions and religious leaders come and go. They are manipulated by governments to exploit our riches, our lands. The lands, the people, are all that remain. We can change whose god we pray to any day, but we are attached to the land we were born in. We are Albanians, first and foremost, not Ottomans or Turks! But that is not in contradiction with us remaining faithful to Islam. I say we must be a Nation first, and then, at an individual level, we may choose whatever religion we want! And the countries you just mentioned, are the same countries that want to partition our lands among themselves. To hell with them! if we want to have a country, we must deliver it ourselves!”

- “You are the elder brother, so I will not dispute you on this matter of religion. In the end, we both seek the same thing, the preservation of Albania as a nation. That common ground is enough for me to support the cause. The Ottoman Empire is crumbling day by day. We have the weapons to drive them out of our lands. We must go back, organize and fight, there is only so much we can do from here in Bucharest”.

- “So what do you think, little brother? You just sit there reading your books, eh? Look at him Sami, he has devoured one book per day since his arrival.”

- “We should do the same, Jani. Maybe not one book per day, but a nation needs land and culture to have an identity, otherwise it’s not a nation at all, it’s just a piece of geography waiting to be claimed by a foreign power with enough military resources and no morals. Let me see, Alek, what is it you read now? *Rebirth by Naum Veqillarxhi*. And this one? *Albanians in Rumania at Florence by Princess Elena Ghica*. Where do you find all these?”

- “A language.” Said Alek.

- “What?” both older brothers ask in unison.

Alek would follow his elder brothers’ lengthy, sometimes bitter, discussions about politics, social liberation, the Albanian nation, and their freedom of expression in Romania, the land that gave them a sort of political asylum to gather forces and fight the Ottoman rulers back in their home country. But his mind was racing at a different level. True, he was interested in his country’s liberation from Ottoman rule, but in his mind a country had to first be defined by something. Hearing his brothers, he realized what that something was.

- “I studied in a Greek school in the Greek language. You both attend religious services in Arabic and Latin, the language of our religious rulers. My father spoke in Albanian but couldn’t write it because he did not know the characters. Without a language, who are we? We have no identity. Veqillarxhi proposes to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet and use the Latin, which is the most common in Europe. Princess Ghica wants to publish books. What we need is a language and that will be my weapon. Language is everything!”

The group of young, ardent Albanians used to meet at the Caru cu Bere Bar and Café, one of the oldest in Bucharest. It started with Sami Frashëri, Pashko Vasa, Abdyl Frasheri and Artan Boja, whose father, an Albanian immigrant for many years, had opened it after leaving and forgetting his homeland. Artan, a law student at the University of Bucharest was curious about

his roots. The more he learned about the history of Albania, the closer he grew to his homeland, the angrier he got about the series of invasions –cultural, armed and otherwise- his country had suffered through the years. Soon, other law students from Albanian descent joined him. Then others from the Faculty of Letters; soon flocked in the philosophers, artists, engineers, architects, workers and trades people, all interested in creating a free Albania. They founded a group, the Sons of the Eagle, to discuss how to fight for Albania.

Jani and Sami were nine and ten years older than Alek respectively. They had grown up playing together and helping in the farm with their father, but grew tired of the poverty of Drenova, the indolence of its citizens and were attracted by the city lights first and the prospects of better pay and working conditions at the railroad state company between Bucharest and Constanta.

Then they heard from their childhood friend Bashkim Halil, who had migrated to Bucharest in search of a better life. They both agreed to follow Bashkim and leave their father to toil the farm. They did not give too much thought to their little brother Alek. “He’ll be fine” Sami reasoned, “That is the life he has known always, he is not rebellious, like us and will be able to take care of father”.

“That is very nice and intellectual my little brother” said Jani, but you need to bring some bread to the table as well. You want to fight? You must grow up first. You want to live here and attend school? Then you must also get a job to pay for your studies”.

“Your brother is right” seconded Sami “it’s been a year and a half since your arrival and reading alone and scribbling on your journal will not take you anywhere. I will ask Bashkim to inquire with his friends about a real job for you. It was a great surprise when we saw you at the door, in the middle of the night with our comrades Viorica and Leka, but you need to...”

“No, that will not be necessary” cut Alek, already sounding like a little man “I already got a job at the coal mine on the road to Constanta. I start tomorrow”.

Chapter 4A

May 10, 1997, Austin, Texas

Horatio P. looks tired. He is no Atlas supporting the world on his back. He holds on to his briefcase. He paces the corridors of Huston-Tillotson College readying, pushing himself to yet another day in limbo.

His next class is Latin American Literature, as soon as Horatio P. gets to his office, he turns on the computer. Mechanical act most people working in an office do. Right after turning on the computer, one might have plenty of time to get a cup of coffee while the machines boot themselves and load the program. The dose of caffeine had to wait this time. Horatio P. is more concerned with finding out who this Asdreni is. The door to his rather small office, a 12 feet by 12 feet space with a window overlooking the green gardens of the campus to the north where students and professors walk in all directions to and from buildings and parking lots, the sunny day scrambling to happen between heavy clouds and rain threats. A desk cluttered with books and papers to read and grade –he must switch to on-line only submissions and readings-, the two bookcases brimming with texts and monographs, the bulletin board plastered with posters of past poetry festivals in Houston, Granada, Miami, Stuttgart and elsewhere he has participated in, a calendar that still shows the last month with a large figure of Jorge Luis Borges in suit, both hands on his cane, looking up to the yellow shadows in front of him.

- “Good morning Doctor P.!” sounds falsely cheerful and pompous Dr. Arthemius Sinclair, Dean of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, standing at Horatio P’s door in his gray flannel suit, jacket and red bowtie.

“How are you this morning?” insist Dr. Sinclair a letter size, brown envelope in his left hand, the right one hanging off from the thumb in his vest pocket, coat open to the side. Horatio

P. barely fakes a smile switching his dark eyes between the door and the computer screen. The computer finishes loading and Horatio P. opens the browser and types *poets and suicide* in the Google tab. Yes, he got distracted, he was supposed to type *Asdreni*, but he usually does this. He starts one task that reminds him of a different task which he pursues then; or searches a topic that takes him to a related topic and he switches searches.

“You are busy so I’ll be brief, Dr. P.” Dr. Sinclair is trying hard to be polite and not take personal offense for his mute interlocutor lack of interest and eye contact.

Horatio P. knows Dr. Sinclair is after something, what could it be? What did he forget to do or write or research? But it is Dr. Sinclair who has something pending this time. Horatio P. clicks on a link that mentions Socrates and starts reading. “Sure, what can I help you with, Dr. Sinclair?”. There is another link to *Phaedrus*, one of Socrates Dialogues. Horatio P. clicks on it. Click after click we can connect to everything in the Internet, this is the modern Aleph that Borges made up in his fiction. All is interconnected one way of another. If we look close enough, we will see the connecting points, the relationships among all that exists. And everything is right there, in the Internet, this is the real Matrix.

“I was commissioned by the Editorial Board to talk to you about your new book proposal...” Dr. Sinclair pulls out a paper from the envelope and reads, adjusting his glasses “... Approximation to the poetics of Rubén Darío and Walt Whitman”, clears his throat and continues. “

They think it’s... a bit farfetched, do you agree Dr. P.?”

In the *Phaedrus Dialogue* Socrates touches on several themes, one of them is madness as a gift from the gods in the forms of prophecy, religious bliss, poetry, or love. [“Farfetched?” he

thinks that is what he heard Dr. Sinclair say]. So poets are mad along with prophets, people who have a religious experience and people in love? Horatio P. silently ponders.

“Yes, the consensus is that the connection you are trying to make between a poet from Latin-America, from Nicaragua to be exact, and our Walt Whitman, a poet of epic proportions, are not there. The frameworks you suggest are weak at best, and... to tell you the truth, several students have come to see me to complain... they say you are too distracted, erratic, and your mind seems to be somewhere else, not in the classroom. You need to do something. Your employment here is at risk”

This last part Horatio P. heard well but before he could turn his staring eyes onto Dr. Sinclair's and a coherent rebuttal, the Dean was gone. But another idea is already sweltering in Horatio P.'s head, another potential book. It is something he found, by serendipity in the matrix-internet, a book that will change his reality for ever.

Chapter 4B

Petrila, Romania, February 1, 1887

In smudged work clothes and helmets, their faces blackened by soot, Alek Drenova, Constantin Jujan, and dozens more young men pass through the dark gates of Petrila's coal mine, holding old shovels and beaten buckets. In the mining school of the town, located in central Romania, the miners' children and youth miners, like Alek, receive education and one hot meal a day.

At the foot of the majestic Carpathian Mountains, Petrila has seen an enormous economic and population growth due to its large deposits of coal. It all began in the 1840s, so Alek is right at the cusp of it, working from early morning to midafternoon; and studying from midafternoon to early night. He rests a bit before keeping at his journals of poetry. Barely has time to sleep before waking up early morning again to repeat the cycle.

One hundred years from now, Petrila will see its darkest night, when after years and years of losing competitiveness in the international market, it will be forced to close down. Forever. An empty hole left behind. But Alek cannot be concerned with what he does not know and will never know.

Today, he is concerned with making some money to support his studies, a mostly self-made man who devours every piece of writing that falls in his hands, letters, newspapers, novels, manifestos, flyers. He is a young man who absorbs every lecture from his teachers, every discussion from his Albanian compatriots, and attentively listens to every harangue from visiting politicians.

The favorite gathering place for these activists was a restaurant/beer/café located at Strada Stavropoleos 5 named Caru' cu Bere. It had been established in 1879 by Transylvanian

merchants from the Sighisoara region, the Mircea family. The favorite place for Albanian Nationalists was a balcony on the second floor. Other areas of the restaurant were used by Transylvanians, Hungarians, French, and even some English.

“Have you read Charles Darwin’s Autobiography?” asked a pensive Edouard Dujardin, a French glass of wine in his left hand.

“I prefer to read books by the living, not the dead, my friend. The living are more dangerous” retorted a tipsy Joris-Karl Huysmans, “Like Bismark’s pact with Russia and Austria, who do you think will benefit of this? Who will suffer from this?”

“Well, I believe...” started Dujardin

“Never mind what you believe, it was a rhetorical question. Germany of course! And the rest of Europe will pay for it. One day it will all explode. Wait and see!” sentenced Huysmans looking at young Alek in the eye. Then extending his hand, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, I’m Huysmans, and you are?”

“Aleksandr Drenova, from Albania. My friends call me Alek”

“And what do you do? No, no, let me rephrase that, what do you write, my friend? Or are you a politician? I’m sorry, where are my manners, what kind of a question is that, of course you are not a politician, if you were you would be in Berlin signing pacts with the German, right? So, you must be a writer of some sort”

“I write poetry, I seek a language, a voice and liberation, identity, for my country, Albania” said Alek

“Poetry is a noble profession” the voice came grave from the right of Alek, “Sorry to interject” and passing the coat to the left hand, he extended his right hand “I am Herman Bang, writer from Denmark, and with a kin interest in these modern times we live in”

“Dujardin! Mon ami!” came another voice behind Alek

“Ah! Enrique, how are you? Let me tell you, your last novel is so amazing, El Anacronópete, what a vision of the future, what a manipulation of time!” exclaimed Dujardin

“Ah, say hello to our friend Alek, poet from Albania”

“Enchanté, Enrique Gaspar y Rimbaud, from Barcelona, at your service” said the polite Spaniard

“Very pleased to meet you, Aleksandr Drenova” responded Alek

“A poet? You need a more poetic name. Not Alek, too short, too childish. But not Aleksandr Drenova either, too old man, too long” Gaspar was studying Alek.

“What about Alek Drenova?” suggested Herman

“No, no, it lacks... something” Dujardin was also assessing our Alek

“Drenova, Adrenova” Herman kept trying

“Asdreni” the voice was firm and decisive. All heads turned to see a tall man in his early 40s, round rim glasses, gray short hair pulled back, a thick goatee that increased his age. The dark suit accompanied with a dark smile. “I know about changing names. Asdreni suits you. Asdreni will guide and forge who you need to be” then he left.

“Who was that? Asked a surprised and confused Alek

“That my dear... Asdreni, was Aleksander Glowacki. You will remember him, as will we all, as Boleslaw Prus. A brave soldier, philosopher, journalist, historian, short story writer and patriot for the reunification and independence of his beloved Poland” explained Gaspar.

And that is how Alek, became Asdreni.

Chapter 5A

The Consolation of Madness ²

May 9, 1987, Houston, Texas

Horatio P. looks tired. Life weighs heavy on his shoulders. He goes from classroom to classroom, from office to restroom, from parking lot to office in a mechanical path that resembles a robot. He recalls Boethius and his *Consolation of Philosophy* while incarcerated at Ticonderoga awaiting Death. He passes by two students seating on a bench outside the Aagard-Lovinggood administration building, involved in a heated discussion. He never saw them before. They look foreign to this country, to this city, to this place and time. But then again, he himself is a foreigner and will always be both in Texas and in his native Nicaragua. His trained brain overhears something about literature these two are discussing. He identifies key words like literature, madness, inspiration, alternate reality, brain wave functions, state of ecstasy, bliss, classics, disease. Then names start to surface Yukio Mishima, Jerzy Kosinski, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemmingway, Karin Boye. His brain is racing, what do all these poets have in common? Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Richard Brautigan, Hunter Thompson. What is it that makes them be named in the same discussion? They all belong to various times and styles, different countries and cultures.

-“Very well, I see your point” concedes the male student, a guy in his early twenties, long and black very curly hair, dark skin, maybe Middle Eastern? Horatio P. can’t say for sure, his accent appears to be Arabic, “but don’t you see a correlation between suicide and madness? Between madness and politics?”

Of course! This is the clue Horatio P. was missing, all these poets committed suicide, and most of them had mental problems if not all, which brings Horatio P. to his morning worry: the

² From *Diario de un Joven que se Volvió Loco*, Day 28, page 29, by Horacio Peña, Nicaragua 1962

cancer in his brain that came back from the dead, his past bows with depression, no, never suicide, his Catholic convictions do not allow that at all. Death is a gift we receive not one we snatch from the Creator. It will come when we are ready, when He thinks we are ready. But madness, we can choose or she can choose us.

-“Between madness and politics...” and then the other student, a female that also looks in her early twenties, with long blond straight hair, fair skin, no more than 120 pounds, falls silent for a few seconds. “Would you consider madness when political poets risk their lives to fight a government, when they forsake everything for the love of country, when they jeopardize their families or, worse yet, renounce to even having a family in the first place for the sake of Country? I am thinking Ernesto Cardenal, Percy B. Shelley, Vaclav Havel, Aleks Drenova, Jaime Sabines...

“Wait, wait, wait” interrupts the male student “Aleks what?”

“Aleks Stavre Drenova, from Albania, you never heard of him? Maybe by his pen name, Asdreni? He wrote his country’s National Anthem”.

“Neither did I”, murmurs Horatio P. lost in his thoughts. Both students turn their heads towards him with a silent penetrating gaze, he sees them and feels pierced in the depth of his mind and consciousness. Horatio P. clutches his eyes, shakes his head and looks back at the students sitting in the bench ready to participate in the discussion and to know more about this poet unknown to him and, apparently, to the male student as well. But the bench is empty and no students are around. He went then direct to the library to madly research who this Asdreni was.

Remember my dear Reader, this is 1987, the Internet was not in full fledge yet, and although it may have been strongest at the founding institutions (MIT for example) it did not

have the full search capabilities (Google) we came to know in the decade 1990-2000, and beyond.

Chapter 5B

Bucharest, Romania 1897

Do you think Asdreni was happy being a poet?

“You may be born a poet, but quite often life circumstances or strong parents, force you to be something else, like a lawyer, a mediocre engineer, a failed physician, a poor businessman. If you are born a mathematician, a physicist, nothing can take you away from that and you will become the mathematician or the physicist you already are. It is inevitable. But if you are born a poet, you must learn to mask the vocation.”.

Why the parallel between physics and poetry?

“No one can learn how to be a poet. One is a poet or is not. *What God does not grant, Salamanca cannot lend.* Alexandru Proca was born a physicist in 1897, a mathematician, and that is what he became. Asdreni was born a poet, but he had to be burned on the crucible of political sciences to mask his poetic vocation. Nothing could take away his poetry, poetry is inevitable, but to survive, he had to be a coal boy, a teacher, a politician, a writer of letters and poems for his friends’ girlfriends”.

What happened in 1897 that made Asdreni come to a realization?

“In 1897 Asdreni entered the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Bucharest, the same university where Proca would thrive and pave his path to Paris to finally concoct his relativistic quantum field equations”.³

An illustrious visitor came to the Faculty once. German geographer Kurt Hassert. What did Professor Hassert say that changed Asdreni’s plan?

“He gave a lecture on his travels”.

³ Relativistic wave equations predict the behavior of particles at high energies and velocities comparable to the speed of light. Bargmann, V.; Wigner, E. P. (1948). "Group theoretical discussion of relativistic wave equations".

What specific travel did he mention that impacted Asdreni?

“It was the one about the Balkans, especially Albania”.

Can you be more specific?

“Yes, it went something like this. “Travelling in High Albania is not as easy as in neighboring Montenegro. There, no government endeavors to hinder foreigners from travelling and one can wander around safely among the poor but guileless population. In addition, the little principality has a respectable number of well-maintained roads and trails, and the plateau character of the country means that, although it is not exactly conducive to travel, one can journey for hours or even days without encountering any major impediments.”

So, he was comparing Albania to Montenegro, the latter one scoring better points than the former, is that a fair assessment?

“Yes, it is. But he went further”.

How so?

“He said in his lecture that “The situation is completely different in Albania. In their timidity, the Turkish rulers do all they can to make it difficult or impossible for foreigners to enter the country. If the affection that the German Emperor holds for Turkey and the important activities carried out by German officers in the Turkish army and in the Greek-Turkish War in general were not so well known, I would certainly have encountered as many problems as did Dr. Baldacci who, due to the pro-Greek proclivities of Italy, only received his travel permission after three applications made for him by his country’s diplomatic representatives.”

And he didn’t like it of course.

“Not a bit. And to add insult to injury, Hassert went on: “the Albanian highlanders are a savage bunch, an unruly people who are averse to any government order or higher civilization.

Because of their blood feuding, their constant war making among one another and with the Montenegrins, and because of their many uprisings against the Turkish pseudo-government, they are accustomed to enjoying robbery, murder and warfare as their preferred hobbies.”

Did Asdreni say anything at the lecture?

“He did not, but he rose from his seat on the first row, gave a disdainful look to the speaker, then looked at the audience as if asking” can you believe this? Can you we Albanians in the audience sit here and take this pathetic description of our people and country?”

What did he do next?

“He left”.

When did he return?

“He left for good, not only the conference or faculty; he left the university and never returned”.

In other words, this energetic political activist and poet, who could not have predicted his destiny nor avoided his fate, had to also interrupt his political science studies to pursue a higher purpose?

“Yes, you can say that”.

Chapter 6A

Diary of a Young Man Who Went Mad⁴

June 1962, Managua, Nicaragua

“The constriction in the esophagus is horrendous; it feels as if an elephant is pushing his big foot on the young man’s chest. It becomes painful, he feels dizzy and his eyes are cloudy, not with tears, those stopped coming out a long, long time ago, but with the uncertainty, or rather the certainty- that his days are over. The different thing this time around is that he does not care anymore. He wasted his days in subterfuge after subterfuge, living the life of a spy, hiding here and there from everything and everybody, especially his own sorry self”.

Horatio P. stopped writing, his mind transfixed on the heat waves outside his window. How would he beat the apparent success in preliminary readings of his *Diary of a Young Man Who Went Mad*? The beginning of this second novel or novella was not even close to what he had in mind. The 1960s in Nicaragua were strange times. While Horatio P. wanted to reflect on the page a man strapped with desire, a social conscience and a steel determination to not die, there was this other string God kept pulling again and again, “No, no, you have to remember how this young man is a broken doll, a broken character with no will, a coward and a half-man at all he does and says”.

And God would not stop interrupting the stream of thoughts, the barrage of emotions, the heat wave burning not just Horatio P’s, but also the young man’s soul as well.

“The constriction got stronger and harder as his wife’s high heels sounded upstairs on the wooden floor. Was she getting ready to come downstairs, where the young man was a trembling wreck ready to collapse once and for all? No, he did not care anymore, he was ready to succumb.

⁴ *Diario de un Joven que se Volvió Loco*, by Horacio Peña, Nicaragua 1962

He had succumbed already, he welcomed death with a tranquil smile, and he desired death with a fervent calmness”.

It was getting late. Horatio P. pulled the sheet of paper from the 1950's Royal Quiet De Luxe Turquoise Blue Portable Typewriter open in front of him, staring at him, and started to read...

“Merde...” Horacio P exclaimed between his teeth. With unknown-to-him violence he made a ball with the page, crushed the piece of paper with both fists, and smashed it against the wall. He hit the portrait of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which fell on the cement tile floor, the broken glass flew in many shards, one of which –a very small one of which- hit Horatio P on the forehead. The small scar was permanent.

“And the blood of Jesus redeemed us and saved us from the chains of sin” came out the words from Horatio P’s mouth, the rage dissipating miraculously, the demon inside exorcised my immaterial forces. He saw his immaterial twin reflected on the mirror across the room, a fine line of blood slowly forming down his forehead, down his nose, a drop dripped on a solitary blank piece of paper waiting its turn to be inserted in the 1950's Royal Quiet De Luxe Turquoise Blue Portable Typewriter.

“The intermittent cry had stopped. No more sniffs revealing tears, no more rustling of paper tissue and blowing noses, and no more sighs of desperation and hurt. He heard how she pulled the high heel shoes, how they fell on the floor, how she opened the closet doors, how she undressed, how she put on her slippers, how she went to the bathroom, how she pushed the lever to clean the toilet, how she put on her pajamas and her night gown, how she started to walk toward the stairs, how she started to descend into an abyss of hell. And the young man was the demon, and she would come to him yet once again, and he would suck her blood, her sweat, and

her tears, and they would be tied to each other by this quantum entanglement forever, condemned to an eternity of suffering for past bad deeds done in other lives, at other times, in other universes, unto other innocent husbands, wives, and children...”

And the madness descended onto Horatio P. the same way it had descended unto the young man, and both fell lonely and naked, crushed like the piece of paper lying inert on the floor, bleeding like Horatio P’s forehead, dripping sorrow like the blood from his nose, stained forever like the white useless sheet of paper.

That night, while Horatio P. read from his *Diary of a Young Man Who Went Mad* at the Nicaraguan Writers Center, he remembered his immaterial twin brother bleeding on the mirror, lonely and insignificant like him; humbled and powerless like him, with a broken soul and a broken mind, unable to write and love, a half man, a half writer, a half poet. And he realized, looking at the faces of all those attending his reading, that madness was not a work of fiction, it was a *sine qua non* condition to be a poet in the 1960s, a turbulent predicament they all faced, the *raison d’être* of humanity, and a redeemer of solitary selves, along with death and addiction. Kierkegaard had it right.

Chapter 6B

August 1904, Bucharest, Romania

“In the year of the Lord of 1405 the noble Castrioti family was jubilant with the birth of their first son, Gjergj. Murad II was Sultan of the Ottoman empire. This is the true story of the National Hero of Albanians, George Kastrioti Scanderbeg, from his birthyear in 1405 to his death in 1468. As a boy, Scanderbeg was taken hostage by the ottoman turks and trained from them until he became one of the most outstanding warriors of the Ottoman Empire. He later returned home to his country to organize the oppressed Albanians into a fierce and heroic resistance for over 30 years! After converting from Islam to Christianity (the religion of his ancestors) he managed to keep the greatest empire on earth at the time, from invading Albania. His story is an inspiration to generations of Albanians, wherever we live!”

Asdreni’s grandfather used to tell him this tale. “There are many forces today trying to rob us of our homeland, our identity, our language. We need a revolution, my son. And how to best contribute to a revolution?”

“With weapons and Molotov cocktails!” Alek said enthusiastically

“Hummm... And what else?” asked the wise man with a frown

“With cannons and tanks!” Alek’s eyes were wide open and a smile appeared on his face

“And?” insisted the old man arching his left eyebrow

“With fists!” he also said the first time he heard the questions

“No, no, Leka. Most revolutions, if not all, start with ideas, with books, with theories.

Many revolutionaries, if not all, are also poets. Some write, some don’t.”

“I want to write!” exclaimed Alek raising his hand

“Good, then your high purpose must be the respect of national identity, that of Albania. Revolutions need to be grounded, rooted on folk heroes of the past, and on mythological champions that inspire and unite us. These figures, real or made up, are what people need to rise and fight.”

“Like you grandpa?”

“Well, not quite. Those times are gone for me. But we have a bigger hero. Scanderbeg!” grandpa was pointing his right-hand index to the ceiling, arched eyebrows, his white beard trembling with emotion.

“Next is the medium...” continued grandpa “These days revolutions are made at intellectuals’ meetings, at poetry readings, and literary and political gatherings, at street rides. Revolutions take longer to concoct. We, Albanians need a language of our own.”

“Is poetry a language, grandpa?”

“It certainly is, Alek, it is the essence of language, it is the epitome of language, the synthesis of a people’s soul!”

[Alek does not have access to Tweeter or Facebook, he does not have an Instagram account or a Google+ site. They have not been invented yet, otherwise he would have used social media to spread the revolution].

At that moment Asdreni’s brothers came in shouting, running from the street. “What is going on?” asked grandpa. “There was a fight on Šuplji Kamen between Serbian rebels and the Ottoman army...” said the older brother between breaths. “And? We are at war against the Ottomans again?” grandpa was somehow excited. “No, no...” the younger brother cut in “... they Ottomans killed all 24 rebels with heavy bombing”. There was a stern silence in the room,

except for the heavy breathing of both brothers. “Hamdi Pasha, commander of the Ottoman Army, may your life end miserably, and very soon” murmured grandpa between his teeth.

Then, putting his old and trembling hands on Asdreni’s shoulders and looking deep into the young boy’s eyes “Guns are not enough, my son. You need to start working on the revolution; it must start with language, with poetry”.

Chapter 7A

1 September 1953, Managua, Nicaragua and 30 November 1953, Bucharest, Romania

In 1953, Horatio P. is already working at a local newspaper in Managua, Nicaragua and has his own column, *The Eye of the Camera*, filled with social commentary and acute observations about the political climate in Nicaragua and its people. The column has a Christian slant, perhaps because Horatio P. -educated at a Catholic private school- has been baptized by fire, like all the other children who attended the Christian Brothers Schools of La Salle institution all over the world.

Horatio P. is focused, intense and to the point. His social consciousness reflects his religious upbringing. His preference for the poor and the disempowered stems from the social teachings of the Catholic Church and will never confuse that with the Theology of the Liberation *en vogue* in the late 1970s.

“In 1953, the USSR had its own cultural revolution and thousands of pages of poetry, paintings, novels, sculptures, and books were confiscated, banned, burned, hidden, forbidden, and punished by the Supreme Soviet. The purge reached all the confines of the Soviet realm: Hungary, Romania, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria... no one was safe. At the bottom of Eastern Europe, in Durrës, where a certain Aleksander Drenova had visited frequently, and in Constanța, where a certain Asdreni had taught, two groups of soldiers from the Red Army force their way into modest apartments and universities, confiscating boxes of Western propaganda, original writings and other ‘counter-revolutionary paraphernalia that was poisoning the children’s minds and hearts’. Large fragments of books and countless poems were lost”.

“In central Bucharest, Romania, at a flat on Hanul Cu Tel 47, between Str Blanari and Str Lipscani, second floor, one Aslin Isarescu (b. July 1, 1925, she does not use her father’s name,

but her mother's maiden name) is admiring the Nicolae Grigorescu's painting her father gave her mother, Alin Isaescu many years ago. *'Your father was always fond of things Romanian'* Alin used to say, *'including me, for a while, but his love for poetry was greater than his love for me. A woman must take the love, all the love her husband gives, whatever the size, whatever the price'*. Aslin hums a fragment of the opera *Odeipe*, from Romanian composer George Enescu, eyes closed, trying to paint a portrait of a father she has not seen since she was one and a half years old".

[Look at Alin on her knees, focus the eye of your camera on her, praying in the second row of benches at the Bulgarian Church a couple of blocks away. If we could read her thoughts, if God would allow us to listen to her confession, we would know what she prays for. But we don't, so we must resort to the Writer's hand and read Alin's prayer: *'Saint Andrei the Apostle, Patron Saint of Romania, to thee I elevate my sadness, to thee I implore pardon; forgive my sins of youth and my sins of old age, have pity on this old woman who succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and married that Albanian poet I so much love, who married without asking the blessing of my father or my mother so they sent me into oblivion, bless my broken heart and that of my beloved poet, bless the life of my daughter and her tortured mind, teach her to accept the father for the little love he bestowed upon her, may it become a large and fruitful love in her mind and soul, may she flourish his love through time and distance, may her years be blessed with the love of a true cavalier, even if he is a poet, a soldier, or a man of God...'* Beware what you pray for].

"At a flat on Hanul Cu Tel 47, between Str Blanari and Str Lipscani, second floor, one Aslin Isaescu runs to the kitchen after smelling the *mamaliga* cornmeal boiling too much, she looks left and right, takes two rags from the counter, goes to the stove, holds the pot with both

hands and away from her face as to avoid the hot vapors, places –almost throws it- the pot on the square wooden table, a spurt of stew falls on the floor, smoke ascends from the pot, it draws circles and eddies in the damp air of the flat, a dim light enters through the small window in the room, a pack of howling dogs passes by outside, Aslin hears vehicle motors approach below, she hears military commands yelling in Russian, she hears sounds of boots running toward her building, she hears the building doors break down with kicks of Russian boots and AK-47s, she hears Russian soldiers thumping their boots on the wooden stairs coming up, she is paralyzed in the kitchen -fear does that to us- she hears the front door of her flat also broken down with brute force, she sees the mad faces with military hats and fierce eyes piercing her sweet face, she sees soldiers going about the flat turning furniture upside down, messing in the bedroom, breaking dishes, glasses and pots, they yell to her face words she does not understand, the spit on the stew.

She sees one soldier approaching with a different tone, his dark blue eyes don't inspire fear, she finds solace in those eyes, *'Please don't be afraid'* he says to her in Romanian, *'We are looking for papers'*... but he does not finish, a young soldier appears in the kitchen, he is holding a wooden box with many hand-written papers inside. Alin knows that box, she has seen her mother spent hours on end, until dawn, reading the letters from her husband, the poems, the hymns. The soldiers leave, she falls to the ground crying, she hears her mother's sobs coming up the stairs. Everything turns sepia, black and white”.

Chapter 7B

1905, Constanta, Romania – Bucharest, Romania

If Horatio P was here, he would scratch his head and conjecture how Asdreni would go about his day. But the Writer and the Reader can bring him here, so he can speculate, *a la Twitter*, thus:

1. Begin the day with the hype of going to church
2. How long does a man must wait to own his own home?
3. There are ungraspable spaces at each plane of existence
4. In years past religion was a curious, delicate thing
5. “Send your Spirit oh Lord and replenish peace on Earth” is more a polite formula than an ardent petition
6. You can’t change what makes you unhappy, can you change feeling miserable?
7. “Submerge yourself in a medium that makes you whole” said Father saving the day
8. If you feel like a stranger in your own home, you are a stranger in your own home
9. If you feel a stranger in someone else’s home, there you have it
10. If you feel relieved when alone, you are lonely when in company
11. Death is inevitable, but you can control its timing most of the time

At his last lecture on Political Sciences, Asdreni was filled with a passion and rage students had not seen before.

“Political Science is tainted with personal remorse and self-deprecation, except for the politicians, their sycophants, and related cronies, which is to say almost the entire cast of characters”, ended Asdreni in front of an astonished group of students.

“Are you saying that it is not worthy for anyone to study Political Sciences, Professor Drenova?”

“I am saying that I am tired of teaching political sciences theory when the reality of politics is something completely different and awful”.

That very same day Alek left to Bucharest, abruptly but determined as he left his home town another day.

Chapter 8A

6 June 1959, Notre Dame, Indiana and 6 June 1959, Constanta, Romania

In 1959, Horatio P. was awarded a full scholarship to study North American Literature at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. The University's President Theodore Hesburgh, CSC personally received him and showed him around, explaining that "this is the first year we have a co-ed program: no more male only campus, women are now allowed to enroll here. I'm glad you made it to the final selection process. President Luis Somoza must be very proud of you".

"Thank you, Dr. Hesburgh," Horatio P answered, "but I don't want Somoza to be proud of me. This place only reinforces my Catholic foundations and my disdain for dictators, totalitarians, and *caudillos*."

Horatio P. intently listened to the lectures by Gerhart Niemeyer and enriched his plethora of arguments against communist ideology. They spent countless hours in long conversations about this and other themes important to both men. It was a mentorship that developed into a lifetime friendship.

In 1959 then five-year-old and future minor poet, unknown poet, Sophia Gerasimenko was taken by her mother to the Church of St. Anthony of Padova, in her native Constanta, to her first ever school day, except that the church had been converted by the Soviet commandants into an ammunition storage place, so the priests had to move to a makeshift, one-classroom kindergarten schoolhouse on an empty lot a block away. Sophia had heard horror stories in a conversation between her mother and a neighbor about the unorthodox methods that the only teacher there, Miss Maria, used to instill in the children the hunger for learning and the habit of discipline: to kneel on salt blocks, to kneel on crude grains of wheat, to be spanked with a

wooden pad. The list went on. They arrived to the place and Sophia did not let go of her mother, she sat in a corner, more embarrassed than anything else, holding her creature on her lap.

A week later she was taken to the formal, private Notre Dame Primary Orthodox Catholic School where Sophia did not feel more comfortable, but had made up her mind to please her mother, to not embarrass her again in front of strangers, to swallow her angst and fear, and to not shed one tear. She spent her first of many school days looking out the window, listening to the birds outside with one ear and to the lessons the Greek-accented Sister tried to teach, with the other ear. She was never caught off guard and was always able to repeat the questions or give an answer to one.

Sophia Gerasimenko wasn't aware how her early school years would be one day connected to other human beings. She attended plays and weekly mass, she stayed quiet in the seat assigned to her in the back row, she studied her lessons and did her homework, she avoided conflicts and said her prayers, and she was a model child in all senses. Little did she know how internal and external conflict can change a person, she ignored then how Jekylls become Hydes. One day, in America, she will master the art of transformation.

Chapter 8B

1906, Bucharest, Romania

Whether it be epistemology, or “justified true belief” (Plato), and given the fact that Edmund Gettier has not been born yet, truth is –and we are justified to believe so– that Albanians were thirsty to solidify their identity as a nation. Knowledge would cement that identity, and the best way to disseminate such identity would be through the foundation of the Albanian language and alphabet circulated in books. Lots of books. The spoken language already is, now the written testament is paramount.

Enter the Dija (Knowledge) Society, founded by the famous patriot from Shkodra, Hil Mosi. Its aim: to distribute books in the Albanian tongue in all Albanian territories and to the Albanian communities living in exile in various parts of Europe, including Romania.

Enter Asdreni, who by now is a recognized poet among Albanians and beyond, who has made contributions to the language with his *Sunbeams* and Scanderberg, who by no good luck –watch here Edmund Gettier– is known for his fiery defense of Albanian nationalism... let’s then elect him president of the Dija Society, Romanian chapter. Thank you, Austria, for retrieving the Dictionary of Albanian Language from the Greek government in 1904 and for supporting students of Albanian language in Vienna and Klagenfurt.

Chapter 9A

1 July, 1961, Constanta, Romania and 1 July 1961, Paris, France

Sophia Gerasimenko listens to a horrific story from Sister Esperanza, of the Order of St. Ines, of a girl that each morning would wake up with aches all over her body, joints, and head. The story caught Sophia's attention for she herself suffered of body aches each morning. 'There was this little seven-year-old girl living in Bors, a small town in the border with Hungary', the Sister went, 'the year was 1941 and Romania had been forced by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy to cede a portion of its territory to Hungary. The territory in question was northern Transylvania. Do you know who lived there?' Sister Esperanza asked and a few timid, trembling, small hands went slowly up as if afraid a flying bat would snatch it. 'Yes, you Sophia, who lived there?'. 'It was Prince Vlad Draculea, Sister... the vampire'. Sister squinted, rubbed her soft hands inside the long sleeves, drew a straight smile above her tall chin, framed by the white coif and black veil", 'You are right, Daniela', and walked slowly towards her".

"According to the experts one of the rules a novel must have is a character who goes to a transformation, an arc so to speak. Did I mention this already?" asked Horatio P to Arianne. "Yes, but, go ahead, I like it when you talk to me about your writing process". "Very well. This arc usually takes the form of a trip, a voyage. The character goes on a trek either geographically or internally... or both. *'The travel is to the self'* wrote The Unknown Poet."

"Go on" snubbed Arianne after a pause that seemed too long.

"I have been travelling all my life, to different countries and to my internal, intimate, deep self. It's been very hard for me to reconcile the religious education and Catholic philosophy with the materialistic worldview most poets of my generation have adopted".

“Do you think the Catholic education you received closed your mind to understanding the mundane? Or did it provide the instruments and weapons to fight against it and resist all sorts of temptations?” asks Arianne.

Horatio P is engrossed in thoughts again. The very ones he, we? write about here. “I have decided to write a book about Christian poetry, a book to emulate Søren Kierkegaard’s writings. And I will title this book *To Make God Popular Again*.

Sophia felt the story had been written and was being told specially and specifically for her. She felt all eyes focusing on his face. ‘This little girl was disobedient, did not do her homework on time, did not say her prayers at bedtime, did not give grace to the Lord before and after each meal, and felt bored at Mass’. She looked around as to confirm all children were paying attention. ‘Dracul knew this so he told his friend the Devil about the girl. So, each night, the Devil would visit the little girl while she was sleeping. He would enter her room quietly and without awaking anybody. Each night he would take the little sleeping girl, crumple her into a ball, and throw her against the walls, the floor and the ceiling to play. So, each morning she would awake with aches all over her body’. A triumphal smile appeared in her face while she nodded looking around. Sophia wanted to vomit and quickly reviewed her behavior. She felt guilty of not saying her prayers each night or saying them without enough intensity, she felt guilty for having missed mass when she had chicken pox, she felt guilty for not obeying her mother and said she was doing homework when in fact she had been playing... she felt very certain and afraid that the devil was crumpling her into a ball of flesh to play each night.

Years passed by and Sophia’s aches and pain all over her body did not disappear, on the contrary, they intensified. At eight years of age, she took her first communion. At the main altar, standing with all 18 of the other children receiving communion, with the priest reading from a

big thick book, with all the parents and extended family standing in the chapel, with the huge organ in the back playing sacred music, with the dense incense curls wounding her eyes, nostrils and lungs, Sophia heard the swearing rites. She repeated every single one of them, except this one: ‘Do you swear to renounce Satan, his deeds and temptations?’ His mother had advised her never to swear in the name of God. She did not swear, she did not renounce, she carried this burden for years without end.”

And God was made new again, God was reborn in the writings of Horacio P. until the day of the affair with his son.

Chapter 9B

June 1907, Arad, Romania

Alin Isarescu (1895-1986, of course she does not know the year of her death yet), is a girl of spiritual depth, an old soul as gypsies would say. She studies at the music conservatory in Arad. Each day she walks by the 13 Martyrs of Arad monumental monument, saying a little prayer for them.

This morning, Asdreni is part of a delegation of Albanians visiting schools to promote the Albanian language and culture. He walks by the same monument. Alin is only 12 years old, but Asdreni cannot overlook the devotion with which this Albanian girl stands in front of the Martyrs. He asks her, "Hello, what are you doing?", She tells him the story about the Martyrs, of how they died at the hands of the infamous Austrian General Julius Jacobs von Haynau in 1849. It was Hungary back then, but Alin has a deep respect for heroes and men and women who died for a worthy cause.

"Alin!" A female voice calls from a few feet away. "I have to go, it's my mother", says the little girl. Asdreni sees her walk away, grab her mother's hand, quickly turn away, and disappear behind a side street. "Who is that girl?", asks Asdreni to a friend in the delegation, Viktor Prorok. "She is the most brilliant girl in the school. But she and her mother are leaving the city due to family circumstances." Asdreni is intrigued, "And the mother, who is she? What does she do?". The mother's name is... I don't recall now. But hurry, we must leave at once, the carriage is waiting for us."

They both get in the car; the horses rapidly move them away to their next stop. A few miles into their journey, Viktor exclaims "It's Olga!". "What is?" asks a confused Asdreni. "The

girl's mother's name, Aslin. Her mother's name is Olga, Olga Ozernaya. The father is a Russian captain, who passed away some time ago."

Asdreni remembers the days when he first came to Romania. He remembers a little girl offering her help. A smile, half nostalgia, half regret, adorns his moustache. Then he gets more determined to continue his quest. Love, thankfulness can wait. May they meet again one day, when the time is right. But not today, in exactly thirteen years, nevertheless, history will change drastically for both. They will learn the most beautiful part of life, and death. They will learn love. And Asdreni will write this:

*In the somber woods of ancient Dodona
Was a Dorian temple by expert hand built,
No other in this world could compare to its beauty,
Surrounded by statues of silver and gilt.
Laden with gifts appeared kings from afar
To honour the priestess, her speech divining,
Like hermits they huddled in fasting and prayer
Awaiting their fate, outside they were pining.
But fate and the future have eyes unbound,
And lots when cast can quickly turn round,
A word is enough, if sent from the heavens...
How many thrones have been toppled and tossed,
And how many leaders' minds have been lost
For failing to heed that old woman's words.*

Chapter 10A

July 1963-July 1965, Madrid, Spain

“I cannot find the appropriate translation into English for the Spanish word *tertulia*.

Chatting, bull session or social gathering do not cut it. When I lived in Spain, in Madrid to be exact, between 1963 and 1965 that is what we called the gathering of poets, to read discuss, drink, eat, connect, and have fun. There was not one, but several places where the *tertulias* took place. Madrid was for us, Nicaraguan poets rising, Central American poets rising, the new City of Lights. The closeness of the language –language is everything someone would say decades later- the admiration we felt for the great poets of the sixties: Luis Rosales, Jose Hierro, Camilo Jose Cela, Feliz Grande... and the admiration and love was reciprocated. They were famous already, but did not blink before opening their arms and homes, their friendship and camaraderie, the sharing of poetry, night-long conversations and discussions about philosophy, theater, politics, and culture.”

How many other Nicaraguans were there with you?

“On the Nicaraguan side, Francisco de Asis Fernandez, Beltran Morales, Rolando Steiner, Julio Cabrales, Luis Rocha and Carlos Martinez Rivas were the most notorious. Literature classes and courses during the day -which I absorbed with utmost enthusiasm- were followed by visits to El Prado Museum, long walks along La Gran Via street, admiring those beautiful, regal Spanish women, and exploring different neighborhoods where poets would gather at cafes, bookstores, and plazas.”

Any poets that were not Nicaraguans whom you met there?

“Jorge Luis Borges read one night at the Hispanic Culture Institute. It was a once in a lifetime event, to see and hear the great Argentinean writer. The place was brimming with people

struggling for one square feet of space to stand and see him, hear him from afar. I had to take the La Moncloa Metro station and made it just in time to find my square feet to stand on. Rafael Montesinos was the director of the Institute *tertulias*, oh yes, these were organized happenings and wine was not scarce. And there were others taking place at Café Gijón, at Ateneo, at Buchholz, and I attended all of them. There was a system in place.”

Where did you live while in Madrid?

“Altamirano 8, 5 exterior izquierdo, is the place where I lived... I wonder if it still exists... it probably does, European cities are built to last forever, their streets, have been there for hundreds of years. The houses, intact, unchanged, for generations... and the images of the women we loved, and loved us back, there forever. What drove all these people to meet in all these places? Was it chance? Luck? Statistical possibilities? Chaotic behavior?”.

Do you like mathematics too? Why?

“In mathematics, a simple system with one or two variables can be predicted easier than one with six or more variables. When our human brain cannot handle –rationally- a multi-variable system, we label it as stochastic, not deterministic. When the variables increase in number, making the interaction among them a random behavior, we label the system chaotic. We fail to see the patterns. Humans think that systems are *closed* if their prediction is relatively easy to predict, and *open* if it turns to be probabilistic, hard, chaotic. Is the universe a closed system? Is all that exist a closed system? For a system to be open –infinite number of variables- would it have to be infinite? Is the material universe (the part we perceive with our five physical senses) finite?”

That sounds more like philosophy to me than mathematics? How did you get there? To Madrid I mean, not to math or philosophy.

“Pablo Antonio Cuadra had gotten me the scholarship to be in Spain for one year. Was that fate? When the year was over, Luis Rosales placed a phone call to Gregorio Marañón to extend it one more year. Was it fate that I met Luis at the Institute so he could place the phone call to Gregorio? When reason fails to grasp the physically perceived universe, do we have to seek the aid of intuition? Is that why I called Luis Rosales? Can intuition grasp chaotic systems? Intuition might be far more powerful than reason, for it can handle an “infinite” number of variables (including time), process them in a matter of seconds, and point us in the right direction... I know, I digress, once I get into this type of questions it’s hard for me to let go.”

Tell me more about what you call fate.

“My question is, was that the right direction? Should I have stayed in Spain and meet the love of my life? The right direction is the one God has in store for us, within His Infinite Plan. The One Path that leads us toward the fulfillment of our Cosmic Mission. Then, why the existence of free will? Does not that ruin, spoil everything in the Plan?”

I couldn’t say Dr. Horatio P. I’m just a humble journalist. When did you return to Nicaragua? Did you travel more throughout Europe?

“I eventually returned to Nicaragua. I also traveled to Germany, Italy, France, and more of Spain. And the infinite system with its infinite plan and its infinite God, eventually led me to my wife, to my son, to my poetry”..., and although he does not know it yet, to Austin, Texas, and to Alexander Drenova, Asdreni.

Chapter 10B

September 1910, High Albania

In New York, 1818, Nicaraguan poet Salomon de la Selva had his Edna St. Vincent Millay. And the *unknown soldier* from a faraway *tropical town* splashed in Poetry magazine with the success of a few, with the glow of *the lamp and the pureness of the bell*.

High Albania, 1910, Asdreni had his Edith Durham. And all his *dreams and tears* were able to surface *through the lands of the Serb*. Such is *the burden of the Balkans, all twenty years of Balkan*. But he wrote always for *Albania and the Albanians*.

Of such *bright arrows* friendships are made, among poets *there are no islands*, only a long and dense *land of living pasts*. It was in these lands that Asdreni, in the pursuit of his dream for identity, met this travelling anthropologist, painter and benefactor, who passed among peoples and mountains unscathed, like Jesus through the mob. Except that there was no mob trying to harm Edith, only scores of simple and noble peoples also in search of their identity, of the passion only Asdreni could ignite and compassion only Edith could bestow.

In future pasts, at her deathbed in London, Edith would recall, looking at the nurses caring for her, how in her own youth she took care of her ailing mother. How after her passing, the doctor prescribed as cure for her stress, to travel the world. And how in him doing so and her following suit, her destiny was changed forever. She became the person she was destined to be. Sometimes others uncover the divine plan for us.

She shared with Asdreni the vision of an independent Albanian territory and language, she saw the living strong and unique Albanian culture; and to counter and dismiss chauvinist criticisms back in England, she remembered the faces of the people she encountered at each mountain path, at each village, at each tribe.

She remembered also the deep dark eyes of a struggling poet, the one who thanked her for her relief work, the one who named her *Mbretëresha e Malësoreve, the Queen of the Highlanders*.

Chapter 11A

August 1966, Paris, France

Sylvie Vartan was crying her very successful *Par Amour, par pitié*, when Horatio P. arrived in Paris on the train from Madrid. It was on a summer night, Horatio P. and Carlos Martinez Rivas had come in search of the great concerts, but found instead bossa nova, plays and more plays, blues roots, and impressions of a jazz that was red, hot, and cool.

Horatio P. and Carlos Martinez Rivas were the real ambassadors of the poets from Nicaragua, they felt together again for the first time since that paper moon night in Granada, when Carlos, in his own sweet way, told Horatio P. how it really was that *Paradise Recovered* came to be. It resembled a travel to outer space, it was like a summer that changes its color each day. She had angel eyes, he, two generations apart from her, felt like all the things they were now.

Quiet as the moon, Carlos wrote in one late night, for Lola, “just for you, just for me” he would tell her, “these improvisations of the purest love a man can ever feel”. It was one lone moment, worth years. “These are the foolish things that remind me of you, Lola” Carlos wrote at the end of the long poem that later became a classic poem of love in his native Nicaragua. “For forty days, I struggled with whether to write it or not, and when my soul felt ready, surrendered to your angel eyes, when the blue dove announced that the three of us were ready, only then the poem wrote itself, for you”.

Carlos had two friend poets, Danielle Collebert and Anne Hèbert, and all four stayed at Danielle’s apartment on rue Dauphine, Paris. Many other poets, musicians, philosophers, students, artists, were there. Friends of friends of friends drinking wine, cognac, wandering through the infinite folds of the imagination, smoking, resolving the world. Horatio P was more

concerned with matters of love and its relationship to mathematics. “Love is a chaotic attractor and the relationship of you and me, x and y, play abstract, odd, beautiful movements in the realms of time and space, or the z coordinate.”

While Carlos’ interest laid somewhere else. “All this talk about freedom, choices, past, present, future... is inconsequential. They involve things and concepts that are a product of our physical senses, which continually lie to us. All are illusions: finite entities that only exist as a sparkle perceived by us in a certain way”. In this sense, virtual reality is as real as material reality, but he does not know about that yet.

Anne, who had move from Canada to Paris in 1954 seeking a publisher for her poetry collection “Le Torrent”, had a special relationship with death. “The only transcendental reality is the mind of God, of which we are a part. All things in the earthly plane lose importance, they are negligible: the irresponsibility of other people, the wealth of the unhappy, gossip, food, sex, chauvinism, ‘injustice’ –which will always be among us-, the happiness of the poor, the little moments and details we give, service to others, peace of mind, quiet meditation: all become means to an end. One, to know thyself; two, know your mission; three, execute your mission. Action is of the essence, before we meet death”.

But Danielle, who had been –and would continue to be- involved in the war in Algeria had other projects in mind. “Deep analysis yields despair. But nobody appreciates your empty reasoning, for it belongs to a different universe. You are alone, as always were, as always will be. And this is just the beginning. When death catches up with you, the last day, at the last hour, at the last breath of this material life, all the possible loves will visit your agony. All the impossible hatred will laugh at your fading face. Sentiment will then go away, and the stone your soul is, will also reach the crevices of your heart, mindless, bodiless, heartless, and soulless”. In

1978, after the publication of her poems and books “Totem”, “War Songs”, and “Murder”, Danielle committed suicide in a hotel on rue Dauphine, in Paris. Horatio P and Carlos Martinez Rivas mourned her death for a long time.

Chapter 11B

November 1912, Bucharest, Romania

“What does it take to free yourself from demons that have possessed you since your birth? How long does it take to exorcise them and be born again to a new body, with a new pair of eyes and clean hands? What does it take to buy a new heart to raze the cobwebs burning your soul? What does it take?” [from the book “Letters” by Olga Ozernaya, Bucharest 1985]

Asdreni kept a long and frequent correspondence with Olga Ozernaya. He also kept writing poetry, polishing his cahiers, like the maturing and demanding wordsmith he was. “My poetry is about the omnipresent motherland, stronger than woman, almost stronger than God” he wrote to Olga. He also used to send her draft versions of his poems to get her opinion.

His book “Dreams and Tears”, originally published in 1912, contains what some conclude is a description of his encounter with Alin Isarescu, who changed her name to Olga Ozernaya during the Soviet occupation:

“Her gaze was upon you. She asked for a smile you didn’t have; there sitting under a monument, the rest of the girls coming out of the school. Those loves of your childhood don’t count, they were essays for big and sad things to come out and eat you.”

“The first time you brought her poems. The next time you followed her in a carriage right to her doorsteps. She was expecting you. This is how love is born, like a trap, an immense circle just recently closed, full, and eighteen years later. She was 19, you 33.”

“Soon came the night you had her, at a crummy guest house, her young and terse belly shaking with emotion. You trying to be gentle and caring. It was an experiment, a curiosity. You always liked to experiment. Nightmares returned as strong as before, as frequent as never, fragmenting your personality, an entrapment, and the eternal dilemma: to be or not to be”.

“Phantoms are irrelevant, it’s the foreign suffering what matters, and the negated opportunities for a normal family your grip kills. It is the tears on the pillow and the unrealized dreams of freedom; it is the fading mirage of a motherland and the solitary crowd no one heeds.”

Leaving the printer shop Asdreni saw an end approaching. *“No evil lasts forever”* he thought, *“No body or soul endures it. But is the suffering of not having larger than the suffering of wishing? Is the pain of breaking apart larger than the pain of not being able to? All my projects can be killed, murdered, axed from the trunk closest to the ground, like the peasants in High Albania. But can love last forever?”*

Only if it is unconditional, my dear poet, capable of destroying all obstacles, ready to overcome all hurdles, able, willing, and fiery even, prepared to pay all the consequences. All of them. Valiant enough to live with the consequences. Are you?

Chapter 12A

November 1997, Miami, Florida

“I didn’t want to submit to the **1967 Ruben Dario International Poetry Prize**” Horatio P tells astonished journalist Jose Antonio Luna. “It was Spaniard poet Luis Rosales who convinced me to submit. I personally didn’t think it was good enough”. The bright Miami sun was shining outside the packed classroom at the Miami Dade College-sponsored Miami International Poetry Festival. Hundreds of thousands of people attended the weeklong event each November. Hundreds of authors from all over the world were featured in readings, round tables, book signings, individual and group booths, children’s events, book sales, and all sort of activities.

“I was thirty years younger, a bit timid, but very inspired by my Catholic upbringing”.

*The title of your book, **Ars Moriendi**, what can you tell us about it?*

“It is Latin for *the art of dying*. In medieval belief, demons lay in wait at the bedside of the dying in hopes of snatching away their souls. Such descriptions, called *ars moriendi*, appeared in many block-book editions...”

Block books?

“Yes, words and pictures cut on the same wood block. They appeared in the late fifteenth century. They depicted the struggle between vices and religious doubts, and virtues, religious virtues certainly, in the mind of the dying person, and the fight between externalized good and evil forces over his soul”.

Why this... fixation with death?

“Well, for theologians and preachers of the time, death was a matter of daily remembrance, related to everyday chores. The *ars moriendi* tradition involved treatment of death as an enemy on one hand, and as gate to immortality on the other.”

Sounds like a sort of macabre realism to me!

“That is exactly right, they called it *contemptus mundi*, and death was both, leveler and non-leveler: death makes us equal but treats different classes differently. Life and death, the two faces of Janus, inverse and reverse, interruption and continuity. The omnipresent and inevitable death, which changes her rhythm with the times, which reaches us all the same, regardless of material, intellectual or spiritual conditions.”

All hastening us headlong towards de Dance...” as I read in your book.

“That is exactly right. In death, we are all equal. No one escapes death”.

Chapter 12B

November 1997, Miami, Florida

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Chapter 13A

December 29, 1972, Managua, Nicaragua

“There is nothing left to say or write, only to die” HP

That night she was home, locked. Her mother did not allow her to go to the party across the street. At thirteen years of age, a good girl, from a Catholic school needs to listen and obey. There she was watching from her second-floor bedroom window, longing for Cesar across the street, listening to the music, *In A Gadda da Vida*, the disco type lights flaring every now and then, at almost 12 midnight on Christmas Eve.

Horatio P's son had just left the party. He did not like it. The loud music was too loud. He felt guilty for the neighbors trying to sleep. He saw, in the darkness and between the flares of the disco lights, his companions, young men and women, from the School of Architecture dancing, making up, drinking, smoking marihuana served in bowls on strategically places tables, laughing out loud, and having fun. Coming from a Catholic all-boys school, he was still not used to this type of freedom and joy. He left a few minutes after arriving there. He went back home.

Exactly at 12:23 AM, she felt the walls moving, shaking, slowly at the beginning, harder and violently after a few seconds. Her parents woke up yelling “earthquake! Earthquake!! Wake up, let's go outside!”. It was difficult enough to gather seven children aged 13 to 6 months old. They got out despite the wobbling ground, the total darkness, the confusion, the clouds of black dust blinding their eyes, asphyxiating. She saw dozens of young college students leaving the party house haphazardly, the lights had gone off, a hydrant had broken in the corner, sending a growing river of water down the gutter. She could here women yelling, calling their children or

husbands, children crying, men frantically searching in the rubble for missing wives... Horatio P's son was nowhere to be seen.

He had just rested his head on the pillow. He was quiet as to not wake up his little brother. Then the tremors started, the intensity grew, his parents and three sisters went yelling, scared. They all ran to the patio through the back door, struggling to not fall to the ground. They heard broken glasses, creaking beams, falling pieces of concrete, smashed paintings and pots... From the back patio, up in the hills outside the city, they saw the bright, round moon shining with a red glare, a large blackness where the city lights should have been, and then tall tongues of fire rising to the sky in the horizon... the tall water tank had broken and was spilling a cataract of water on the back-patio fence.

Thousands of stories can be told, some more macabre than others, about this event. A huge variable that changed destinies and fulfilled fates.

A week later Horatio P was at the international airport, waiting for his flight to Houston, Texas. The terminal was a pandemonium, people asking for relatives, planes that were delayed, flights that had been cancelled or re-scheduled, taxi drivers asking to be paid, hungry children, military personnel, someone trips on a bag cursing its owner, the loud speakers announcing a last call, then paging Mr. Lopez to report to gate 2.

A man, wearing a baseball cap, over six feet tall, trim fit, in a white polo and blue jeans, dark skinned, easily can be seen above the crowd. He smiles in sympathy. People recognize him, this is his third trip in as many days, some teen agers ask for his autograph. Look at him, so

gently a giant, his dark eyes full of sympathy. He stops right in front of Horatio P who can only utter: “Thank you, Roberto, to you and Puerto Rico, but especially to you”.

The news was ominous:

The New York Times, January 2, 1973

**CLEMENTE, PIRATES' STAR, DIES IN CRASH OF PLANE CARRYING AID TO
NICARAGUA**

And Horatio P wrote his long *Poem for a Man Named Roberto Clemente*. The demons of each page ensnared Horatio P and didn't let him go until the whole poem was finished.

Chapter 13B

March 1, 1914, Durres, Albania

Dear brothers and sisters of the Albanian National Movement:

I arrived in Durres today and my first impulse is to write you all to inform about what we discussed in Bucharest. High hopes fill my heart; my spirits tell me that once His Excellency Prince Wilhem arrives, the preparations we are undertaking will be to his entire satisfaction. There is a group here of other Albanians who are also preparing. I do not believe Queen Elisabeth in our beloved Romania is aware of these parallel preparations being made by mostly aristocrats. I approached them to join efforts, but they do not seem interested in the venture. I must be thankful that Queen Elisabeth recommended Prince Wilhem for the throne of our homeland. She alone has the authority to vet for him to the Great Powers ruling our Europe: Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the French Third Republic, the German Empire, the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy.

Once the reception ceremonies are concluded and my compatriots and, in the Albanian Delegation from Romania, meet with His Excellency, we will have for sure, the great honor of serving our Albania in the future administration of our head of state. Long live a free Albania!

Your friend and servant, Aleksander Drenova (Asdreni)

Chapter 14A

May 1987, Houston, Texas

1987. So far, a very uneventful year, if you discount the return of cancer, the harsh criticism of the Dean, the writer's block, and the visions that have plagued Horatio P. for the last several weeks. Students seating on a bench talking about some stranger poet Horatio P. never heard of. Their voices so clear, their discussion so vivid, their faces so sharp, but gone as soon as he turned his head towards them.

The next class is Latin American literature, Jorge Luis Borges to be exact, before starting his master class; he remembers the discussion with his fellow academic, Dr. Jorge Eduardo Arellano.

Horacio P. refutes JEA

For the following nights and days after he found out about his terminal illness, Horacio P. spent countless hours writing at his studio and discussing with his longtime friend and critic, JEA, the progress of his last novel. His wife Arianne was an indestructible boson orbiting about him like a butterfly around the flame.

-“Take Kafka for example”, JEA accommodated his big frame on the plush sofa in his office, “Borges once set to write a study about Kafka and his precursors. Originally, the Argentinean thought Kafka was unique, but after re-reading the Czech's works a little deeper, he recognized –by his own admission- traces of Kafka in other poets.

“In reading *The Castle*, he recognized Zeno's Paradoxes about movement, Achilles and the Tortoise and the arrow in flight, to be exact: an object –the arrow- never reaches its destination for the distance that separates it from A to B, becomes infinite: the arrow must travel one half of the distance first; but first it must travel ne half of that half, but first one half of one

half of that half and so on to infinity. A man -the surveyor- never reaches its intangible destination in the castle.

-“I don’t see it quite that way”, interrupted Horacio with his most polite tone of voice. “First off, Borges confused the Arrow and the Achilles paradoxes, not to bring up that he never mentioned the Dichotomy paradox, which is in fact the one that talks about the half distances. In *The Castle* what I see is the same theme as in *The Trial*: an intangible super-power that dominates and controls all, in Kafka’s time probably the Establishment, government, religion, society’s rules themselves. I see this control also in Brown’s *Fears and Scruples*. I can see the Arrow in ---, in the messenger who can never reach his destination to deliver a message: He must first leave one salon in his castle, and then another, and then another, and then the multitudes of people inside each salon. Granted, it seems more about barriers than, paraphrasing Hobbes, “the infinitude of an instant”, but the difference is key. Yes, it is a similarity of tone and form. By the way, what Aristotle did was to compile in his *Physics*, the paradoxes devised by Zeno to prove, by *reductio ad absurdum*, the illusion of movement, hence time. That is a very Oriental concept”.

-“Well, at least do you concede that the first Kafkaesque situations in literature are these paradoxes?”

-“Yes, I will concede you that. Borges just made a simple mistake of juxtaposition, but these infinitude of an instant and the physical –or spiritual- capacity to move on or reach a destination or goal, the struggle one feels in a nightmare fighting ghosts, monsters, and demons, are also manifested at a larger, social scale. Kafka brought those nightmares into reality, like Gregor Samsa’s story”.

-“Let’s move on to Han Yu and people being unable to recognize a unicorn. What do you make of that? Isn’t there something in this story that you want to find in Asdreni?”

-“No, no, Asdreni was a very concrete poet. But going back to Gregor Samsa, I can see the tone of the unicorn story in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka starts in a very factual tone. The same way that for Han Yu a unicorn is real, for Kafka the beetle is too. It is an inversion of fantasy with reality. I tend to support this affirmation. What is more real? The utterance of an idea that will never change? Or this chairs we are seated on that one day will disappear into rotten chemical components?”

-“Now the philosopher is talking! Let’s stick to literature, will you?”

-“How can we? Kafka and Borges are philosophers or at least stir in the reader the need to assume a philosophy of life or question it!”

-“Nevertheless, let’s try. Kierkegaard...”

-“Another philosopher!”

-“... and Kafka have a similitude of form: the writing of parables...”

-“Yes, and their despair before life and existence. They both attack the same problems of the human condition, Soren from a religion and philosophy base, Franz from his creative writing. The literary devise? You are right, parables.”

-“Good! We are making progress here! What about the expedition to the North Pole and the travel never made?”

-“Both are fallacies. One takes the part –a trip to London- for the whole, which implies in my opinion a moral fallacy as well. The road never taken is a sort of dream, a travel within your head. Again, what is more real? Poe never visited Paris, yet wrote about it aplenty. Kafka never visited America, yet wrote –though full of mistakes- *The Man who Disappeared*. Kant never left

Germany yet wrote countless philosophical essays and built his whole system on reason in his head. He even proposed the creation of a League of Nations almost four hundred years before its actual creation. So again, the world of ideas are as powerful or more than the world of matter.

-“I disagree with you on those ‘mistakes’. Maybe Karl Rossman mistook the torch for a sword; maybe Kafka saw the torch as powerful as a sword and devised a literary metaphor, a social criticism.”

-“Yes, that might be the case. The succession of interpretations of Kafka’s work by countless generations of readers is, ha! Kafkaesque! an ongoing search for meaning. But the main idea Borges mentions in his essay is, to me at least, this one: “*The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors*”. In other words, if this Asdreni of yours had read the Yeats, his poetry would probably resemble that of Yeats. But he chose to read Homer, so his poetry resembles Homer’s.”

-“But let me put it the other way around. If Asdreni’s circumstances had been different, maybe he would have chosen Yeats over Homer, so the circumstances made the choice for him, Homer converged to Asdreni like lines destined to cross each other. So the choosing might be mutual. Maybe each poet is a composite of many poets he or she read before, we are a rainbow of strands, and we also change in time and space, like a magical proton made of strings always vibrating, always morphing, our core, nevertheless, our essence, always the same.”

So Horacio P. resolved to put forth his maximum effort, and JEA dissolved into a vortex of ideas pointing to infinity, and Asdreni materialized his genius into poems and deaths, and Arianne exploded into a madras of kaleidoscopic kisses and hypnotic caresses, and Horatio P. was sensation and bliss, and Arianne was perception and consciousness, and Asdreni the point in the universe where all lines converge. Then, the box arrived.

Chapter 14B

March 14, 1914, Durres, Albania

Dear brothers and sisters of the Albanian National Movement:

A week ago, I wrote to you regarding our encounter with Prince Wilhem. The Prince, or Mbret, has met with whom I call now “the aristocrats delegation”. The Mbret appointed Turhan Pasha Përmeti to form the first Albanian cabinet. The Mbret has been too busy to receive us, but after daily attempts, re-scheduled meetings, and long hours of waiting, Pasha Përmeti informed us that prince Essad Pasha Toptani has been appointed Defense and Foreign Affairs Minister; prince George Adamidi bey Frachery as Minister of Finances; and prince Aziz Pasha Vrioni as Minister of Agriculture.

Compatriots:

Pasha Përmeti has confirmed us today that the Mbret will not be able to give us audience, as he is too busy dealing with commitments with European governments. Moreover, Pasha Përmeti also made clear to us that during the next few months the Mbret will not make further appointments. Lastly, a Ministry of Culture is not in the Mbret’s short term plans.

As you all know our hope was for this your servant to be appointed as Archivist in the new royal administration. It pains me to inform you that such appointment will not be happening any time soon. And for what we understood from Pasha Përmeti, it may never materialize. The Delegation will be returning to Bucharest next week. Personal affairs will take me to Shkodra. After I finish my commitment there, I will return to Bucharest.

Your brother in arms and in culture,

Aleksander Drenova (Asdreni)

Chapter 15A

March 21, 1987, Austin, Texas

His master class over, Horatio P. picks up his books, notes, and other paraphernalia used to provide realism to his dissertation: the page autographed by Borges he got in Lisbon three years ago, no picture to prove this scribbled patch of ink is really Borges' signature. At that time, the bard was already blind, he now thinks it was rude and pretentious to ask him for an autograph, which the great poet provided nevertheless. Horatio P. is always proud to tell the story to his students.

"Two years after I met Jorge Luis Borges, he died in Switzerland. He received almost every major literary prize there is in the world. Except the Nobel. The Nobel did not deserve him. He was too great. While travelling in Lisbon, I found out he was giving a press conference in the Argentinean Embassy. It was late when I got there. Everybody was gone.

"I see a journalist friend coming out of the building. *"Is he still there?"* I ask. *"Yes"*, she says, knowing whom I am referring to. *"C'mon, I'll show you in"*, she adds helpfully.

"He speaks, and it is as if the tigers and leopards he mentions materialize in front of us. Countless places and sortileges emerge in our minds. He is getting ready to leave. Diana interjects, *"Don Jorge, there is a Nicaraguan gentleman here that would like to have your autograph"*. *"Of course"*, and then, *"Ah! Nicaragua, the motherland of Ruben Dario!"* and goes on to recite one of Dario's poems.

"I see the elephants march along the beach, and margarita, the King's daughter, longs for the star far inside the heavens. The rare men and women captured in Dario's literary criticism. A monster hidden in a basement at one of Leon's old colonial houses; the mythical Caupolicán

carrying a huge tree trunk through hundreds of miles and days; a song to the gold; the Paris nights; the Chilean presses; the long illness, the gradual death.

“He is still shaking my hand while reciting. I do not want to move, as to avoid breaking the enchantment, until it is his trembling fingers that move away and sing the book.

“*Nicaragua!*” he exclaims once more, and like with the animals, the country appears before our eyes, with the large cornfields and the heat; the fresh *pitahaya* juice drunk at the port of Chinandega. The colorful Masaya Street market, with its men and women stumbling into each other. The ripened watermelon halves open at the Central Plaza. I do not know what Diana sees, but I am the privileged grandson whose grandpa is firing the imagination with tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

“A writer has the memory of paper. The books of a writer are the memory of her life. A poem is a memoir of the centuries. WE have been transported to the creation of the world, and its end. WE have seen the redemption of humanity from Jesus’ handhold. We have been in Babylon and the pyramids of Gize. Poetry has made of exile a foreign residence. Poetry recreates the story of gangsters and traitors, of happy years and minor evils. It is an exploding cumulus of portraits, a mosaic of legends, an agony of desires, and an unexpected trap.

“Poetry also becomes an invention of realities, the language of fantasy, a suspicious simplicity. Ever since that encounter, the chords of my country disappeared into a vectorial poem that is still unfolding”.

One by one, two by two, some silent, some talking, all 18 students leave the classroom, most nod him smiling. “Am I a good teacher? Are they learning anything? Why did they take this class with me and not with Jorge Eduardo Arellano? Am I easy? Or just better?”

As he reached the door a soft female voice calls him from behind, there was one more student still there. “Professor P.! May I have a moment with you?” He turns around and the face looks familiar. Of course, this is the quiet student never opened her mouth before. He heard just enough to perceive a foreign accent, Eastern European to be exact. Hers is a long blonde hair and deep blue eyes, fair skin and ample forehead. She hold several books, arms crossed on her chest.

“Yes, of course. What is it? Wait a minute, where you not discussing poetry with a fellow student the other day in a bench near Aagard-Lovinggood?”

“I... don’t recall, we discuss poetry all day long in many venues...”

“You mentioned a poet, Aleks Drenova. Asdreni.”

“Yes, yes. That is precisely what I want to talk you about. I have a box that may interest you”.

“A box? A box of what?”

“This is more a box from *whom*.”

“OK, you have my attention, explain?”

“This box belonged to Asdreni, and I’d like to share the contents with you.”

Chapter 15B

March 21, 1914, Shkodra, Albania

On its way to Durres to meet the Mbret, the Albanian delegation from Romenia did not travel alone. Many other passengers made the trip from Bucharest. Some continued to Skopje, others to Tirana, others to Kosovo. One went to Shkodra.

This sole passenger is Alin Isarescu. After his disastrous meeting with Turhan Pasha Permeti, never able to see the Mbret, Asdreni goes to Shkodra. There, they walk the ample space of the bailey at the Rozafa fortress; they climb its turrets and see the entire city from the keep. Asdreni narrates to Alin the legend of the fortress, built by ancient Illyrians:

“A woman named Rozafa, was walled into the ramparts as an offering to the gods so that the construction would stand. Rozafa asked only that two holes be left in the stone work so that she continued to breastfeed her baby. There is a wall in the castle that exudes milky water during the months of January and February, and nursing women smear their breasts with such water, so they will have abundant milk for their children”.

Asdreni and Alin walk hand in hand the damp cobble stones and have tea and pastries at Rruga 28 Nentori.

They stroll past tatty gray buildings and find themselves facing the isolated wonder of Lake Koman. There, at the sandless beach, where a short track of vegetation separates the white rocks from the gray-blue water, there under a blue sky with hovering white clouds, Asdreni promises Aslin eternal love, but only second to his lifetime cause for a free Albania.

Back at Hotel Kanduku on Sheshi 5 Heronjtë, Asdreni pulls out a small valise, filled with manuscripts, poems, notes, legal papers, drawings. *“I didn’t want this sort of life for you, Aslin. I cannot offer regularity, uniformity, comfort, and dependence. Moreover, I don’t have an*

*inclination toward a comfortable and dependent life, and that is pernicious for you. These papers are so dear to me. One day they may be useful to you and our daughter. I have no money to give you or she are inheritance. My only inheritance is my poetry. Finally, I am getting older, any change becomes more and more difficult. In all this I foresee a great misfortune for myself, hope without end and end without hope. I should not be dragging you through the years up the ladder of my mission, growing ever sadder and more alone as long as I could endure it at all".*⁵

They make love sweetly, passionately, with the patience of writing a poem. This is what both most desire. This is what both do. Aslin keeps the valise for many years to come.

⁵ The similarities of this passage with *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, March 9, 1914*, are astonishing.

Chapter 16A

August 30, 1964, Berlin, Germany – June 13, 1976, Managua, Nicaragua

Almost ten years after winning the prestigious Ruben Dario International Poetry Prize, Horatio P was well recognized in Nicaragua, in Central America, in Spain. The journalist asking questions knew she was in front of a growing intellectual, one with a great heart and solid Christian convictions.

-This new book of yours, why the title The Enemy of the Poets? I hear it was inspired by a visit you pay to Berlin in the 1960s?

“Not necessarily, although there are some references to my travels throughout Europe and to West Berlin in particular.”

-You visited Germany in the 60s? It must have been a wonderful experience?

“It was, it was. Like every other country I visited back then: Spain, France, Italy... coming from our rich but small country of Nicaragua, anything outside of that was new, grand... imagine strolling in the flesh on places you only knew in pictures, magazines. Those travels were the most educational experiences of my life. I remember in the train from West Germany into West Berlin, once we crossed into East Germany, the East German rail crew took over. Attendants came through each rail car and pulled down the shades on all the windows. We were given strict instructions NOT to lift them during our transit to West Berlin. Upon arrival, I found my way to Checkpoint Charlie...”

-Did you cross into East Berlin?

“No, that would have created problems for me once I returned to Nicaragua. Our government was very much against any visits to Communist countries. I remember crossing into East Berlin. This part of the city still had massive damage from World War II. It reminded me of

the ruins I had seen in Rome. One day, if the wall ever comes down, I would like to go back and revisit Berlin. See the Reichstag where so many diabolical plans were drafted, walk by the Spree river, the Brandenburg Tor, the Neptune fountain, and the Berlin Dom.”

-What do you think of German poetry, East German poetry that is?

“In the 60s West German critics used to say that East German poetry was weak, empty, lacking aesthetic value. But this decade, we have seen a substantial change in the world regarding their appraisal of East German poetry. Poets like Sarah Kirsch, Günter Kunert, and Reiner Kunze crossed into West Germany and they are giving West German poetry much momentum. These poets are emphasizing the individual and intimacy, which they could not do in the communist East.”

-We have digressed from my original question. Why the title The Enemy of the Poets?

The 1960s in Nicaragua was a time of much cultural activity, lots of poetry and poets. There was the “U Group”, who were intent on recognizing and condemning in public what for them was “bad poetry”. There was the nationalist group “Window”, the Gingsbergian “Betrayed Generation”. Many of us used to meet at a bar named (La India) “The Indian Girl”, to bad mouth everybody and everything. Everything and everybody were bad: the other poetry, the other poets... so much so that we were our own enemies... like the West and East German poets. Hence, the name of my book”.

Chapter 16B

June 27, 1915, Sarajevo, Bosnia

It had been a long journey from Bucharest to Sarajevo. The city squeezed in the steep valley of the river crossing it had many distinct red roof houses. Asdreni and his Romanian friend, poet Alexandru Macedonski, descend from the carriage in front of the Gazi-Husrev open bazaar on Begova street.

A man of short stature, sad eyes, dark hair, and thin moustache receives them. “Union or death” he salutes in a low voice. Asdreni doesn’t know what to respond. They shake hands briefly and then the man motions them to follow him. They cross the street and go south towards the river. The blue-gray waters of the Miljacka are calm. They keep walking at a brisk pace, turn right on Obala Kulina bana and then left on Cumurija bridge.

Alexandru makes the introductions. “This is Aleksander Stavre Drenova, the best poet from Albania”, Asdreni extends his hand again. The man interrupts Alexandru:

“I am aware of your books *Sunbeams* and *Dreams and Tears*. You are a nationalist like me. You want your people to own their land. Like me, like us. We want land. We want to free ourselves from the Austro-Hungarian yoke. My name is Gavrilo Princip. What are you planning to do to get your homeland back?”.

“We are formalizing our language and negotiating with the current governments and some others abroad to...”

“Negotiating! These people don’t negotiate! They only come and take. If you oppose them they kill you. They take your language, your land, your religion, your culture.” Gavrilo tries to compose himself. He sees two men at the end of the bridge where they had come from. “Excuse me, I have to leave now.”

“Don’t you see a path forward where we can solve our common problems using diplomacy and reason? Europe cannot afford to get violent. It could never happen!”, says Asdreni still holding the young man’s hand.

“No, no poet Asdreni. You prefer the way of the Christ, I prefer the way of Barabbas. We must take arms and aim at our oppressors. You want a free Albania. I want a free Serbia. You want to explore the way of the *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia)? I can help you with that, but don’t ask me to renounce our ways. Death is the only language the oppressors understand; it is not poetry! You want one Albania under one language? I want one Bosnia, all our South-Slavic tribes into one Bosnia. More, we want all Serbs to be one country!”

Gavrilo Princip’s eyes are glowing, his hair in disarray. He looks intently at the two men at the other side of the bridge.

“We have a very important day tomorrow. Tomorrow is the day of our liberation!” And with that he walks towards the two men. The three go away and never turn back.

The following day a big commotion agitated the city. Asdreni and Alexandru see two carriages passing by along Branilaca Sarajeva. They see one car jammed in the middle of the street. They see a young man of short stature, sad eyes, dark hair, and thin moustache pulling the trigger of his pistol, and a royal couple yelling while being shot.

The next day World War I begins.

Chapter 17A

Horatio P. opens his eyes and experiences “the alarm trumpets of the void”⁶.

Horacio P. opens his eyes to the sharp chimes of the canary outside his window. He had never seen or heard a canary this far into winter. Clear sunrays shine through the crevices between the white vertical mini-blinds cutting the penumbra in the chamber into hues of dark and light like the bands of a prisoner’s uniform.

“Life is indeed black and white”, he thinks. He hears the rough sound of the dry skin of his feet rubbing against the soft fabric of the sheets and lifts them a bit to observe Olga’s thighs. The previous night, their whiteness almost made his hands succumb to the temptation of caressing them, courting her stern lips, seducing her plump breasts, possessing her whole body, but she looked so intent in her reading, so distant in her robotic posture that he waved aside this desire and put out the lamp on his side of the bed. “The distance separating us has grown as immense as the galaxy” he murmurs.

The other night Asdreni, Silvio Ambrogi and he had given a poetry reading at a time and place in which Horatio P. had recovered his capacity to soar above the audience. Later that night they went to Lily’s. They had to fight her dogs on the way in. She looked so content in her new androgyny that had no hesitation to undress and show her recently acquired features. “So different to Olga’s” he concluded. She finally covered herself with a long and thick white cloth, her eyes playing with the pair of men, behind her, the restored chimney cracking fire away.

“It makes me happy to drink” proclaimed Lily C. gently pouring some Malbec on her glass and passing the bottle to Silvio, “Maybe not drink. Maybe not happy. Occasionally this idea of wine and beer terrorizes me as something which is becoming a daily ritual”. “I place my hopes on my conversations with Rubi A., who should be coming up soon” said Silvio “although I

⁶ The Diaries of Franz Kafka (377)

know –deep inside and in the surface- that the timing for regrets and consolation is ridiculous. So many years have passed by, that it is futile trying to undo the damage”.

The rising clarity of the day comes along with more out-of-place birds and increasingly louder motors that rapidly cross an undefined fusion of horizons. “The day comes alive” Horatio P. thinks once more, “the days take our lives away”. He had recently started to use the direct deposit system offered by the College, taking away the joy of payday by not even looking forward to a check in his hands. Since Olga started to manage the finances, “What little you make, you squander buying books!”, he only received an allowance of 20 dollars per week “to cover anything that may come up, dear”.

Still in bed he continues to see the shadows that deaf and swift, almost imperceptibly, cross in front of his eyes. Outside the apartment the 8 AM Southwest Airlines plane is already roaring the skies over downtown Austin and the air conditioning unit starts another cycle of noisy refrigeration, but he prefers that to the cooking heat melting everything outside. He feels a pair of eyes watching from the dark, they shine maliciously behind the door to his room ajar, “My children are gone” he regrets, “I drove them away with my books and my writing and part of the penance, of the expiation, is to be here, being without being, trapped in this endless cycle between inferno and purgatory”.

The shadows go by again beyond the door ajar. “Did you see that?” he asks Olga, but she is sound asleep and does not answer. Horatio P. decides this time to follow them. He approaches his studio, with the door also ajar, intent on hearing. A voice, it was a male’s voice, is saying “...with its mysteries impossible to penetrate, with its futures impossible to foretell, it will be nostalgic for me, nevertheless, to think of Austin or Miami, San Francisco or Detroit with its white snows, constant foggy days, smooth traffic or extreme climate changes... all of them in

reverse”. To that a female voice responds: “Facts are facts, nothing else. We are only allowed a chronicle, a quick glance without revisionism. We may calculate variances, imagine finales. Develop possible scenarios, and dream results from there which, with the passage of time, of days that become years, we add little conveniences to. Then we understand attitudes, invent explanations and causes, and generate legends, histories and stories. We write novels and novellas out of them, we make theatrical speculations of what we did and what not, we find a thousand sacrificial lambs to point our index at to bear our own guilt...” “They carry the malodor of our sins” the male voice tries to finish in.

“More than that” a second male voice interjects, Silvio, perhaps? “Forgiveness is an indeterminate thing, like Lily’s transformation, it is something that comes and goes, that jumps at us from behind each *mea culpa* whenever it wants, whenever we realize the consequences –real or imaginary- of our past actions”. The female voice continues “...and a new desire, obscure object of desire, possesses our thought, as for me, I know that my future was forever changed, decided, completed, self-proclaimed like a tautology, and that despite all my intentions it is impossible for me to erase the idea that everything could have been different”. Horatio P. stands at the door, making great efforts to hear more, but the voices have gone silent, as if waiting for him to finally have the courage to open the door and jump in.

Horatio P. hesitates a few seconds, clenches his eyelids, and opens them again. He swallows deep, takes a deep breath which he exhales through the mouth very slowly, rubs the fingers of his right hand on its palm, grabs the door knob and slowly pushes the door to the studio. He sees Olga sound asleep beside him. He sees himself looking at the door ajar and asking, “Did you see that?”

Chapter 17B

June 1915, Bucharest, Romania

In the Summer of 1915, Alin left Asdreni the definitive farewell note.

'My dearest poet, my dearest Asdreni

I fully understand that your first and foremost commitment is to your Motherland, Albania, and I am so very proud of you for the work, the dedication, the unrelenting march forward for a free Albania!

I also fully understand that your cause, which is also my cause, leaves no space in your heart and in your life for me, for us. Yes, you are soon to be a father to our child. If the child is a boy, his name will be Aleksander, if a girl, her name will be Aslin. We shall both love you for eternity.

Yours always

Alin Isarescu'

He in return wrote in his cahier a series of critical phrases.

- 1) There is no shame on dying alone and no solitude. Only the Universe appreciates eternal peace.
- 2) A gift to myself: the epitome of loneliness.
- 3) Who would want to attend your funeral?
- 4) Methodical people end up alone. Ask Descartes.
- 5) Will you be portrayed in the Encyclopedia of the Dead?⁷
- 6) The objects that belonged to the dead, narrate the life of the dead.
- 7) Anybody could be the person who died alone.

⁷ "The Encyclopedia of the Dead", Danilo Kiš, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1983.

- 8) The dead give you new life; the alive, new death.
- 9) Show respect for the dead and death.
- 10) Do you understand women? I don't know anyone who does."

And then added some questions:

"How long does an old soul wait for a husband? Can a lonely wife win the fight against a formidable enemy as the love for country? For God? When God and Woman become Country, it is time to let go".

Never have we seen Asdreni so sad, except when he realized that his beloved country, Albania, would never... but I come ahead of myself.

Chapter 18A

Houston Texas, 1985

“How come you decided to write a biography?” asks Arianne seeing how Horatio P. struggles with his project so much loves. He has refused to undergo new radiation therapy, and looks tired, lacking energy... obsessed. “Why is it so difficult to write the biography of...” then reading the first page of a stack of pages on the side of the writing machine... “Drenova?”

Horatio P feels he has given the explanation a hundred times, “Writing someone else’s biography is not easy, especially if you did not meet the person in question. It doesn’t matter how much research you make, how much secondary sources you read, how many acquaintances you consult, the task is daunting”. He exchanges looks, lovely looks with Arianne. She turns around to rub his temples, massage his shoulders. He continues, “Your own ideas and values get in the way, your fervor or hatred for the person, your intimate ideas and interpretations of historical facts and your biased representation of social dynamics” Horatio P. closes his eyes, lets his body follow the flow of Arianne’s hands.

“Who was this Asdreni? “, her curiosity is legitimate. “He was a poet and patriot” starts Horatio P. “Ah, a politician!”, interrupts her. “No, no, not a politician. He wanted to be one, but he was not allowed by the elites of his time, maybe because he was of poor origins, maybe because he was not a noble. Do I emphasize the political aspects of his personality and life or the literary ones? Am I to concentrate on the family relationships or the love relationships? Does childhood and origins matter as much as Freud says? Is a person born a certain way or is the person made due to the circumstances and environment? Or are we who we are because of the decisions and choices made? Is there a predetermined fate, a written destiny? Is there a plan for us that a Cosmic Mind has in store for us and which we must guess?”

“Wow! You are really getting in the way. Why don’t you, as you say, let the story writes itself?”. “No, my love, this is not a story, this is history”, Horatio P. says more as a thought than as an affirmation. “Or is it?”

The next day Horatio P. is at the Huston-Tillotson College, in Austin, Texas, near Interstate 35, and founded in 1881. Horatio P. came here in the late 70s right before the Revolution took hold in Nicaragua to complete an internship as a requirement of his doctorate in Hispanic Literature at the University of Texas at Austin. Along the wide, white corridors he overhears two students conversing rather anxiously about poetry.

-“...Between madness and politics...” and then the other student, a female that also looks in her early twenties, with long blond straight hair, fair skin, no more than 120 pounds, falls silent for a few seconds. “Would you consider madness when political poets risk their lives to fight a government, when they forsake everything for the love of country, when they jeopardize their families or, worse yet, renounce to even having a family in the first place for the sake of Country? I am thinking Ernesto Cardenal, Percy B. Shelley, Vaclav Havel, Aleks Drenova, Jaime Sabines...

“Wait, wait, wait” interrupts the male student “Aleks what?”

“Aleks Stavre Drenova, from Albania, you never heard of him? Maybe by his pen name, Asdreni? He wrote his country’s National Anthem”.

“Neither did I”, murmurs Horatio P. lost in his thoughts.

Déjà vu does exist.

Chapter 18B

June 1915, Bucharest, Romania

With Aslin gone, Asdreni needs to intensify what he intended to intensify anyway, the fight for a land for his homeland. He needs to get out of his comfort zone. He mulls:

- 1) Do you know what to do when out of your routine?
- 2) To live, you must break the rules, get out of your skin.
- 3) There will be no traces when you are gone.
- 4) When you go, they'll say in unison "Good riddance!"

World War I was raging. Asdreni's meeting with Gavrilo Princip made its mark. He remembered what Gavrilo said, "These people only understand violence". Was this European revolt the time to seize real independence? Albanians had been in this revival mode since 1870; it culminated with independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. But more needed to be done.

"What did he do?" asks Arianne. "He remained in Romania, his second homeland, and made it his operations base. Albania was dear to his heart, but Albania did not seem to correspond his love. He continued to attend the patriots' circles". Horatio P. is so comfortable now talking about Asdreni. It is as if he knew the man. Maybe he did.

At one of the meetings Asdreni was introduced to Theofan Noli, who resided in the United States but had come to Albania first and then Romania to help found the true Albanian homeland. Fan Noli, like his friends called him, was doing for Albania in the USA what Asdreni was doing in Romania: consolidating the Albanian language via translations, writings, publications, and diplomacy.

The time came for Noli to return to America and continue his work. He would return in 1924 to serve as Prime Minister. Asdreni did not want to go to America. He did not want to go to

Albania. He remained in Romania but the joined the Albanian National Movement, close to the faction that wanted to take arms and fight.

Chapter 19A

Managua, Nicaragua 1985 and Plovdiv, Bulgaria 1917

It was almost nine p.m. when Horatio P. arrived in Managua. His absence of almost twenty years from the place of his birth seemed amplified by the fact that the old airport had been abandoned and he was now at the new –to him- airport, built a few miles away even though on the same road. With all its modern elements, it was still a bad copy of the worse terminal in Miami in many ways, technology, scale, accents, and cacophony. He showed his American passport to the immigration officer, a tiny young man in uniform and insipient moustache. He was pleasant and shy, Horatio P. almost felt sorry for him and his mild manners. “Welcome home Mr. P.” the officer said and handed the passport back. He rented a small Japanese car from the first of several rental companies that had stores at the airport, looked at the map provided by the smiling girl and took on what he remembered as Highway North which led straight into the downtown. His final destination, the Pyramid Hotel, was about five kilometers south.

It was almost midnight when Asdreni arrived in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The train station was about two miles south of his destination, the Plovdiv Guesthouse in the Nebet Tepe district. The coach man who picked up his valise was silent like a corpse and he just stood in front of the poet looking down waiting for instructions on where to go next. The horse neighed when the coachman shook the reigns and started on a wide road that had streets dimly lit with gas lamps at each corner coming at it at obtuse angles on the left and a large solid darkness on the right. He lit a match to see and checked the piece of paper to make sure: 18 Saborna Street, and surrendered his fate to the coachman and his horse.

Horatio P. recognized he was lost half an hour ago, this was not the city he knew, new streets had spruced up and old ones disappeared, new strange buildings were erected at

impossible places, and houses and hinterlands he remembered were not there anymore, traffic was heavier than he ever remembered and buses and taxis and motorcycles, and vehicles and carts pulled by horses and wandering dogs and kids selling all sort of trinkets on the streets, pushed and pulled him in many different directions, car lights came at him from all angles, honks and fumes distracted his every move, yells and screeching brakes startled him every other second, curses and fingers made him angry, revving machines and non-working traffic lights -or lights no one paid any respect to- merged into a buzzing chaos that dizzied and confounded him. He drove or was driven into side street after side street until he found himself parked in front of a long one-story shopping strip on a deserted road lit by a faint lamp post that flickered continuously. A security guard was talking to a young female dressed in a tight miniskirt, dark blouse, red stilettos, small black purse, long hair and a particularly annoying laughter like that of a parrot making fun of someone. Horatio P. rolled down the window and raising his voice from the car asked the security guard "Excuse me, good evening; I'm looking for the Pyramid Hotel?". The security guard gave him abroad smile showing a solitary golden tooth and said, "You are a long way from there" ... then looking at the girl ... "but this young lady here can show you the way".

The coachman stopped in front of a dark park that seemed an oasis amid the blackness of a desert. "Are we there?" Asdreni asked. "Yes sir. It is one shilling". "I can hardly see anything", Asdreni said exiting the car and giving the coin to the coachman. "The house is on the other side of the park, sir. I cannot go further or around it for the city government is making road improvements, but if you take the central pathway along the park, you will get directly to the address you look for". Without saying anything more the coachman shook the reigns and departed full speed. Asdreni made use of the poor light a crescent moon shining through dark

clouds occasionally. Upon entering the park, he discerned a central pathway made of cobble stones and followed it. He walked for about two minutes and arrived at a wide spot on the pathway. A flickering gas lamp allowed him to discern the continuation of the pathway. A figure dressed in black emerged from the other side of the darkness and startled him. The voice of a woman emerged from the figure “Good evening handsome! Where are you going to so late and in the dark?” and she got so close to him he felt the smell of liquor and the left hand of the woman playing in his groin while the right one opened her blouse to show the profile of a very plump breast she pressed on his chest.

“You have to take the new road towards the Catholic University... you say your name is Horacio p? My name is Veronica. It’s good for you I’m going that way. But first I need to make a quick stop, do you mind? It’s on the way, I won’t take long”. Horacio took the road the woman indicated; it was made of cement bricks the revolutionaries used to erect barricades during the 1970s insurrection. “Make a right here in on the side of the University!” The road turned darker and darker; there were no lampposts to light the road and no pavement so Horacio had to slow down to avoid the bumps and puddles. The houses became poor and dark too, all windows and doors were closed and there were no people on the street. They arrived at a dead end and a long and tall wall with an open gate was to his right. “Get in there” Veronica commanded in a caressing voice. “Park here, you may come in if you want”. Veronica came out of the car, Horacio could hardly make her figure under the crescent moon but he followed her to a row of doors, an old woman sat outside on a rocking chair smoking. “Hi Stella, can you watch the car please? Horacio P give her some money”. Horacio pulled out a five-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to the woman. He followed Veronica into one of the doors. It was a one-bedroom shack, with a naked light bulb hanging solitary from an electric lamp. The walls were stripped of

paint and finish, the floor was made up of some sort of tile but it was too dirty to tell. A large bed with sheets in disarray sat in the center of the room, a small door in front of the bed showed the remains of a toilet, also too dirty to tell the color, there was a hole on the floor where a commode should be and a dying wax candle flickered on the floor. “Well, what are you waiting for?” asked Veronica to an astonished Horacio, undressing herself. She lay on the bed, arms and legs spread, naked, touching herself.

She pulled him down to the cobblestone floor, opened his zipper and pulled her dress up, he noticed she had no underwear while trying to avoid her alcoholic breath. He thought he saw another figure to his left, he felt the presence of a multitude of figures observing them, or were they trees? His mouth was dry and his underarms sweating, the woman pulled his head toward her breast and his lips and tongue looked for the water he desperately needed. He had no control over his actions, the darkness grew thicker, his body felt agile and strange like belonging to someone else. The only sound he heard was the woman wimping like a bitch and he closed his eyes.

Horacio P left the place in a hurry, he was not sure what just had happened was a dream or a vision. “Am I losing my mind?” He looked back and saw Veronica standing on the door, smiling, naked. He saw the woman on the rocking chair, he pulled the keys from his pants, moving his open shirt out of the way, he drove for what seemed only a few seconds, and got into the heavy traffic streets where lights, honks, and curses brought him back to “normalcy”.

Chapter 19B

October 1916, Bucharest, Romania

“Gjergj Fishta was born in 1871. When he died in 1945 was regarded as the national poet of Albania; her Homer. His master piece, *The Highland Lute*, was published in 1923. But many of the epic pieces contained in it, had been already been written in 1916. Asdreni met Fishta in Shkoder, in 1914. Together, they founded the Society for the Unity of the Albanian Language”. Sophia Gerasimenko had that look again in her eyes, so into her findings and connections. Her love for history and literature, her relentless pursuit of perfection and the truth was admirable. Horatio P was enthralled at her enthusiasm.

“I wish I had that energy, that... drive... I’m getting too old for this”, he said.

“Your job is to help me find him. And finding these collateral connections are a part of the process”, Sophia assured him.

Fishta and Asdreni walked to the balcony. It was spacious and calming. The place was surrounded by mountains. They could see the valley below. The skies were menacing with rain. A powerful rain. They saw a small child standing by the river, trembling with cold. A woman came to pick her up. A man who appeared to be the father was just standing there, watching the whole scene, unhelpful. They could hear muted insults carried away by the wind.

A strange fear assaulted them both. “Why are we so afraid? Both in dreams and in real life?” The woman took the child in her arms. Asdreni and Fishta went inside. In the salon, there were two round tables to eat. The food had come from several kiosks along the river outside, a precursor of the modern food court? They both realized they were in a restaurant. They wanted some corn. A waiter drops a bowl and everybody in the salon turns to look at him. A white giant

ball appeared outside, it bounced on the balcony and came into the salon. Asdreni pushed it and it went outside, all the way to the river.

Asdreni and Fishta went after the ball. Beyond the river there was a door. It was the same door the woman with the child had opened. It took them to the other side of the valley. This part of the valley was full of vegetation and a dense forest. They found a sort of side walk, made of granite, so clean, so shiny, so slippery. Fishta was reading from his notebook fragments of his *Highland Lute*. Distracted, he slipped and fell. Out of shame he got up immediately. The woman passed by. Asdreni thought she was beautiful. She almost slipped but Asdreni caught her by the arms. They almost fell together to the ground. The man saw her and jealousy appeared in his eyes.

The rest of the way Asdreni and Fishta discussed the elements of the Lute, the characters and their stories. They discussed the histories of Albania, of the Slavs, of the Ottoman Empire, of Scanderberg and the Bosnian Croats. They saw the rivers of blood flowing again and again on their lands. They saw country after country like birds of prey feeding on their compatriots' flesh.

Chapter 20A

Managua, Nicaragua 1985

Horacio, W and C left the meeting exhausted. It had been raining in the dusty streets of the old town so mud covered all. C took off his shoes, Horacio rolled up his pants and W just stepped into the mud with all his weight.

They could hear the noise of their shoes on the ground, plush! plush! Plush! Going in and coming out of the sticky mass. At some point they got separated, a reflection of the distance that had also occurred at work. Horacio had become relentless and inflexible, “It is this novel I’m writing” he justified himself often “it’s taking the best of me”. Horacio found himself alone in the deserted streets, “where did W and C go? No matter” he thought “I don’t need them”.

He saw a taxi, an old Hillman parked on a side street. The driver was reading a comics magazine of The X-Men. Horacio approached him, “Are you free? I need to get to the City”. The driver lazily moved his eyes off the comics, looked up at Horacio on the chest, and put the comics on the front passenger’s seat while saying mechanically “Jump in”.

Once on the road Horacio remembered the conversation he had with Olga earlier “guess what I found in the back seat of the taxi I rode in today?” she asked with her huge bright smile, and before he said a word she responded, “a 100-dollar bill, look!” and she held the green prize in front of him with both hands. “Wow! That’s amazing”.

“How is your novel going?” asked Olga. Horacio gave a long explanation that sounded like a lesson, and an excuse.

“I haven’t started yet. There are several ideas boiling in my mind but they fall apart as soon as I try to shape them. I wonder if Picasso went through the same process of taking a block of granite or a white canvas after thinking it over, sketching it to exhaustion to only find himself

throwing away each attempt. Like in the Jorge Luis Borges poem, *The Golem*, where the Rabbi wants to create a human being but then repents a thousand and one times for his failures. I have been producing golems only”. His voice had started calm but ended in desperation. Arianne entered the room and hear the long explanation. She knows that in these occasions it is best to let the case rest for a while. “Inspiration will come back to him” she told Olga, “It always does, he just needs to mull ideas some more, make further attempts at the naked canvas, the formless block”. She changes the subject, radically, a step she will regret this time. “How was your visit to Doctor Patel’s clinic? Did they give you the results already?” When he delays his answer more than his customary pauses before responding to trivial questions, she becomes unsettled. “Mami, I’m afraid there is no good news to share there. I might have only a few more months to live”.

Chapter 20B

Bucharest, January-June 1917

“I thought this would be a momentous year” tells Asdreni to his brothers, “Instead, I have acquired a clear understanding of how the world powers continue to divide the cake of the world among themselves. Austro-Hungary, France and Italy all claim various parts of Albania as “protectorates” with the cynicism of proclaiming Albania’s independence!”

“We told you since the very beginning: the only language these people understand is violence, war, bullets!”, agrees his brother Sami. “What do you plan to do?” asks Jani.

“In Bucharest, the Albanian National Movement is organizing a poetry reading to protest the occupations by the vulture governments in Korçë, Shkodra, and Gjirokastra. Nikolla Naçua and the Drita Association, which oversee the operations of the Romanian-Albanian Institute have invited me and a very important poet from America to this event, a poet who has also fought the oppression in his native Nicaragua. This poet is none less than Horatio P.”

“We never heard of him” Sami and Jani exchange puzzled looks.

Asdreni and Horatio P have heard and read of each other, their encounter in this forum is a dream come true, literally. But their mood is not of political turmoil or protest. They both long for the women in their lives. Women both have loved and lost. And since love is the most creative force in the universe, the poems they intend to read tonight have nothing to do with political protest, but with love.

This is what Horatio P read will read this night in Bucharest, and in another poetry reading in Managua, in 1971, a transposition of numbers that are possible in the Palace of Reality. He has finally met his hero, the dramatis personae of his most successful book, but all he can think of is the woman of his dreams, the woman he finally encountered. Look at her face in

the audience, a long blue dress enveloping her figure; her long dark hair gleaming in the crowd.

Love is indeed the formidable force of nature.

For Centuries, I Looked For You

For Arianne

For centuries I looked for you, and only found ghosts

My words crashed, again and again they fell in the abyss of death

The wind scattered my poems, hurricanes of hatred destroyed them

Everything was a lie slashing my face

Ten thousand scars covered my skin of clay

And my memory agonized in nightmares of terror

Then I found you, like one finds a treasure

And you became seed fertilizing my verse

And a constant murmur erased everything:

The broken bridges and crumpled pages

The empty eyes and heads afire

The sad hands and the aimless feet

And I was redeemed by the wine your mouth offered

And by the caress in the new labyrinth of your love

And by the library of poems your profile commands.

Crystal Princess, basalt orchid, choral of light,

Let your memory be the only inhabitant of my mind

And your thoughtful kisses the future I long for.

Let your company be my eternal present

And the only season your hands moisten.

Let this spring in my autumn be the only flower of my gospel.

Chapter 21A

September 17, 1985, Austin, Texas

The Austin International Poetry Festival is celebrating its second anniversary. Huston-Tillotson College is one of the venues. As we know poet Horatio P has been teaching here for many years. As the senior poet among poets, he opens the fires with the welcoming words. Poets from all over the world are not present yet, that will come in due time.

Yet, today, two poets from afar are here. One from Albania, Aleksander Drenova, best known for his pen name of Asdreni, and Daniela Crasnaru, an unknown poet from Romania. Horatio P has been a great admirer of Asdreni for decades, and this is a unique opportunity to introduce him to the American public.

In the audience, two physicists have a heated discussion about theoretical issues. Dr. Albert Einstein, from Princeton University, and Dr. Jorge Lopez, from the University of Texas, do not agree on the principles and consequences of quantum entanglement.

“It is stated that a pair of ‘entangled’ particles, once measured, can somehow instantly communicate with each other so that their states always match” says Dr. Lopez playing with his napkin. Dr. Einstein grunts, his pipe trapped between his hand and his lips.

“The implication is that individual entangled particles do not exist in any particular state until they are measured. Once measured, the particles could somehow communicate their state to each other at a rate faster than the speed of light”, continues Dr. Lopez. That last sentence triggers a reaction from Dr. Einstein, “But that’s impossible! That violates my theory of relativity! It is an established fact that nothing is faster in the universe than the speed of light!” Almost feeling guilty, Dr. Lopez explains, “Dr. Einstein, current research suggests that entangled particles interact at a speed that is 10,000 times faster than the speed of light”. Dr. Einstein falls

silent, and then, not lifting his eyes from the napkin only blurts out: “Interaction at a distance...spooky action...” and then looking at Dr. Lopez in the eye: “ unless we assume that each particle always traveled with some hidden knowledge of the other's state before the particles are measured.”

Asdreni, Horatio P and Daniela Crasnaru take center stage. After Horatio P makes the ceremonious introductions, Asdreni comes to the podium and starts to read one of his love sonnets dedicated to his wife Aslin Isarescu.

“Poetry unites us all” is finishing Horatio P., “it entangles us into each other’s affairs and fate, but in a good way, as it creates solidarity, exchanges of information, and real connections despite whatever time and space separates us”.

Asdreni takes the podium and takes out of his magical wooden box, the box that was confiscated by the Russian soldier, the following love sonnet:

For Centuries I Looked For You

For Aslin

For centuries I looked for you, and only found ghosts

My words crashed, again and again they fell in the abyss of death

The wind scattered my poems, hurricanes of hatred destroyed them

Everything was a lie slashing my face

Ten thousand scars covered my skin of clay

And my memory agonized in nightmares of terror

Then I found you, like one finds a treasure

And you became seed fertilizing my verse

And a constant murmur erased everything:

The broken bridges and crumpled pages

The empty eyes and heads afire

The sad hands and the aimless feet

And I was redeemed by the wine your mouth offered

And by the caress in the new labyrinth of your love

And by the library of poems your profile commands.

Crystal Princess, basalt orchid, choral of light,

Let your memory be the only inhabitant of my mind

And your thoughtful kisses the future I long for.

Let your company be my eternal present

And the only season your hands moisten.

Let this spring in my autumn be the only flower of my gospel.

Chapter 21B

September 17, 1917, Bucharest, Romania

Princess Elena Ghica, who at poetry gatherings wanted to be recognized as Dora d'Istria, entered the ample room. Her long black hair braided and collected in a bun; her long, white dress proper to a Princess; a red shawl around her back and arms. She wears no jewels but at her sole presence the room, filled with mostly intellectual men, falls silent. “Bon soir mes amis”. Her sweet smile is enough to reassure everybody. Her natural dignity intimidates as to inspire respect and admiration. Her many publications in seven languages which she speaks and writes, precede her.

“In tonight’s poetry reading we have two much respected poets. Alek Drenova is with us today, and he will read from his book “Dreams and Tears”. But also, we have a guest, from Spain, from America. It gives me great joy to introduce to you Poet Horacio P, who will read from his unpublished collection “Love Sonnets”.

Horacio P cannot believe this moment, he will read along his much admired Asdreni. He distinguishes among the audience the Greek mentor Gregorios Pappadopoulos, the famous Dimitër Kamarda, the remarkable Salomon de la Selva, the great master Ruben Dario. This is an unforgettable night. He sees the Frashëri brothers, Sami, Abdyl and Naim, he sees Nicolas Guillen and Ernesto Mejia Sanchez; Jan Vretua and K. Kristoforidhi and many others.

And as the applause fades away Nikolla Naçua nodes Horacio to begin.

*Blessed be the man who shares all the days of your life,
All the more blessed be he who gets a minute of your day.*

*Blessed be the man who strolls with you in the sunlight,
All the more blessed be he who touches the shadow of your dress.
Blessed be the man who fills his eyes with your beauty,
All the more blessed be he who with the memory of you fills his void.*

*Blessed be the man who builds his house with your kisses,
All the more blessed be he who builds you castles in the air.
Blessed be the man who by your side sees the rising sun,
All the more blessed be he who sees the sun in your face and your face in the sun.*

*Blessed be the air and the wine, and the flower that withers in your absence.
Blessed be the fish and the sand and the waves who jump into space with your memory*

*Blessed the man who is assisted by every right,
All the more blessed be he who aspires to that right and builds it without rest.
Blessed be the man who lives and dies with your body and your soul,
His are the smiles, and his is Life.
All the more blessed be he who lives and dies for your body and your soul,
His is the happiness, and his is Eternity.*

Chapter 22A

December 22, 1985, Austin, Texas

-How did you find out you had a son? Did you believe or had any idea you had a son?

When I first heard about it I did not believe... I thought it was a joke, a very distasteful joke. Sophia was my student at the time and all sorts of ideas came to my mind.

-Like what?

Well, that she wanted to blackmail me, but there was no way I had a son with her or any of my students; I simply never got involved in that sort of behavior you see in movies: a married college or university professor having an affair with one of his students and, worse, getting her pregnant!

-Go on

She broke the news to me rather bluntly. She came to my office during teacher-student hours, but without an appointment. She just stood at the door, glanced quickly at the corridor both ways, and before I said anything she came in, closed the door behind her and sat. She blurts out: "Professor, your son needs you".

-What did you say? How did you react?

I told her "Sophia Gerasimenko, you have been in my plenary classes this semester. I noticed you because you sit in the middle and always keep quiet. This is also your first advising meeting, right?"

What else?

I said "Excuse me, my son? I don't have a son!"

How did she know you had a son?

It was strange. She said, "Remember Madrid, 1963?"

What happened in Madrid in 1963?

At the beginning, I did not know what to think, or say. I had no idea what she was talking about.

And then?

Then she added: “You will reminisce in chapter 32. Go on and check it out. Your son has disappeared in Nicaragua”. So, I went to chapter 32A of my novella and it was all there. I met this Spanish woman, and we went out together for several weeks. Given what we did and the amount of time we spent together, there was a good chance that we had indeed made a child together.

Chapter 22B

October 22, 1986, Tirana, Albania / October 22, 1917, Skodra, Bucharest

I need to shape my inspiration and start this. One. Novel. This one biography. Ah Asdreni, Asdreni what am I going to do with you?

You can start by ignoring time. Think Initiation: I am X trying to do B, or prevent B from happening. I am in a journey, I have these many obstacles, these many conflicts.

Yes, yes, I know, but that is so typical, so cliché. You will reach an end at which either you did it, or you prevented it, or you changed it, or you simply failed.

But isn't that life? We all want something and either get it or not? Don't we all work within the ingredients of our world and fall victims of a certain order of events?

What if I become intent on dis- or rather un-covering the secret history?

But you don't know what that secret history is, do you?

Then I need a partner in crime, a helper, like Professor Robert Langdon from The Da Vinci Code.

I am not familiar with Langdon, but I surely know who Da Vinci was. A helper? I could offer Sophia Gerasimenko, but I have not met her yet.

I'm afraid I did, she is one of my students in Austin. Very bright. She's the one who brought your existence to my attention. She also brought my own son to my attention.

That is very good news! I'm thinking there are several questions you need to answer, or rather to formulate for your readership.

This will be my first novel... this is my first novel, so any opinion from writer to writer is quite welcomed.

Working from mere logic and remembering the classic Aristotle, I suggest you decide who the hero is, what are his goals, decisions, choices, complications, actions.

I believe some readers, especially female readers would indicate that you should say “his or her goals”, but they should understand you are speaking in 1917... although in November 1917 women in the USA won the right to vote... a struggle they started in July 1848.

I recall from my poor knowledge of history that New Zealand achieved that in 1893, South Australia in 1894, in Sweden in 1718. The USA was a bit behind from other countries in the world. But I digress. Another question for your novel is, who opposed the hero? What are they trying to do? And, what is the setting of your story meaning, geography and society? What is the world of your story’s hero?

Yes, yes, of course. I also recall that someone made emphasis on the type of complications one has in life, murder? Disappearance? Divorce? Explosion? All the above?

Well, then there are the questions of self-sacrifice, supplication, abduction, adultery, sacrifice for passion, ambition, enemy loved, crime of love, crime of vengeance...

Pursuit? Obtaining? Disaster? Revolt? Remorse? Madness?... Enigma? I think I know where to go next. Thank you very much for your help.

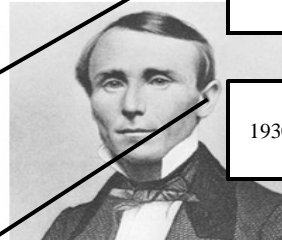
Chapter 23A

About Nicaragua: History up to 1979

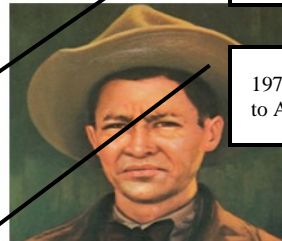
- 2000 BC** Earliest known indigenous settlements.
- 1502** Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón) skirts Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast but fails to find a navigable passage.
- 1517** Spanish make first landing and engage the caciques (tribal leaders), Nicarao and Diriangén in battle.
- 1522** Spanish invade and colonisation of the region begins.
- 1589** English and Dutch pirates set up bases on Mosquito Coast.
- 1638** Kingdom of Mosquitia officially recognised by English Crown.
- 1783** Britain forced to withdraw from Atlantic Coast.
- 1821** Spain withdraws from Central America.
- 1823** Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica form a federal state.
- 1838** Nicaragua declares itself an independent republic.
- 1840s** Britain returns to Atlantic Coast and makes Miskito Kingdom a British Protectorate.
- 1855** US citizen William Walker invades Nicaragua and declares himself President.
- 1860** Britain withdraws from Atlantic Coast under pressure from US.
- 1894** Atlantic Coast incorporated into Nicaragua by President José Santos Zelaya.
- 1911** US asserts control over Nicaraguan economy through the Dawson Accords.
- 1912** US marines invade Nicaragua to crush a peasant uprising and remain until 1933.
- 1927 – 1932** Augusto Sandino leads successful military campaign against US interests.
Go to Augusto Cesar Sandino to find out more
- 1934** Sandino assassinated on the orders of Anastasio Somoza, chief of National Guard.
- 1937** Somoza installs himself as President.
- 1956** Somoza assassinated by Rigoberto Lopez Perez; his eldest son Luis Somoza, takes over as President.
- 1968** FSLN publishes its framework for a future revolutionary government.
- 1972** Earthquake destroys Managua and kills an estimated 10,000 people. Somoza diverts much of international aid to his own coffers.
- 1978** Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of *La Prensa*, assassinated by National Guard.
- 1979** The Revolution: FSLN take control of the country's largest towns and march into Managua on 19th July.



Diriangén was the legendary tribal leader of the Chorotegas, the first resistance fighter of Nicaragua.



1855 William Walker invades Nicaragua and declares himself President July 1856 to May 1857.



Augusto Sandino leads successful military campaign against US interests.

1872: Asdreni is born

1930: Horatio P is born

1947: Asdreni dies

1967: Horatio P wins a literary prize

1979: Horatio P moves to Austin TX

Chapter 23B

November 30, 1917, Bucharest, Romania

Life in Romania was at times inspiring at times boring. Asdreni strolls the Strada Petricani south. He arrives to Lacul Tei park, he walks to the north side, right where the river makes a 180-degree turn. He sits at the marina, where small boats take people from one point in the river to another. He pulls out his diary and writes this and that about men and visions.

Daniella Crasnaru sits by his side, and begins:

“Men cursed the train with their deeds and resumed destruction. My eyes were like crystals then, devoid of sweat, blood and fables. They became prophets in love or androids computing biology within finite transistors.

(In the sky I see Saint Lucie, crying rivers of tears).”

And Asdreni continues: “Sophia was dozing off inside the vigil of my brain, preying like a lynx, waiting for the moment my will fails, unleashing the horrors of my imagination. But her deeds were limited to the confines of my dream”.

And Daniella continues the al alimony: “I see volcanoes undressing the world with tears. My eyes were blue before turning gray like smoke and old age. My eyes were green, constantly brimming with hope, gleaming like snow at the mountain tops, before a carnivore lobster ate my eyelashes. But there is always a rebirth, a new dawn at the same horizon.”

Asdreni sees the sun rise, he sees a large Romanian buffalo strike its chest and fall on the ground, neutralized by syncope. Its liver perforated like burnt fabric. From the distance Asdreni's eyes observe like cameras. He sees himself enter a new scenery, participate in his country's struggle, he meets the ancient one with her crystals and tempests, her lightings and gardens, while his compatriots are distracted with science. Asdreni plucks a red, phosphorescent rose.

Asdreni climbs the monorail with his elbows, and hanging in the air goes up and up towards the future, and on reaching the great valley, red like a flood of blood or biblical disease, the winds fill the environment to the smallest crevice. In the horizon, Tirana burns. Asdreni feels the cries of his people; he smells their lamentations and shrieks. Over the valley, a majestic volcano crushes government buildings and apartments. He perceives from right to left how time repeats itself, how from between two red hills, on opaque red rails approaches: the train.

Again, the millenary locomotive. He hears Sophia's voice whispering in his ear: "Here comes the damned train on which humanity rides. Who knows where it is going to crash now".

Asdreni's eyes are red, shiny with sobs, stamped by life, ferrous as plastic. They wait and seek at the same time. They didn't see Sophia Gerasimenko at first, for her shadow clouded them. But now his eyes are open.

Chapter 24A

October 7, 1986, Somewhere in Nicaragua

“I should write the whole night through, so many things occur to me, but all of it rough”⁸

“Your son is a witness to a special case the Revolutionary Government is looking to solve”, said Sophia Gerasimenko looking intently into Horatio P’s eyes. Her own were struggling to contain the tears.

“What can my son possible have witnessed?” asked Horatio P with a hint of annoyance.

“A band of young thugs assaulted a cargo of very important, rare, expensive beer and stashed it in a storage bin under a city building. We were watching while the band leader verified the beer was still there, sticking his hand beneath the crate that covered the treasure.

“As the discovery was verified and in another part of the city, a senior partner in a law firm asked a young female intern to lead the investigation to find the stolen goods. Her supervisor, an associate partner, didn’t like the idea of being skipped, he said ‘Sir, perhaps you should ask me to talk to her’, but the senior partner responded ‘Sure, you are fired!’ I watched the whole scene from behind.

“That law office was a large, chaotic place. Employees were corralled in an entire floor, all thrown haphazardly as they were hired. Only two narrow, dark exits existed. The senior partner would come occasionally to check on the interns and their supervisors and secretaries and assistants. I stood at one of the exits, acting mysteriously, so everybody would think I was important, waiting for my opportunity to exit the building.

“The intern found out that in Madrid a Spanish dealer had sold the beer to some Italians in New York. For some reason your son had something to do with the sale. So one night the

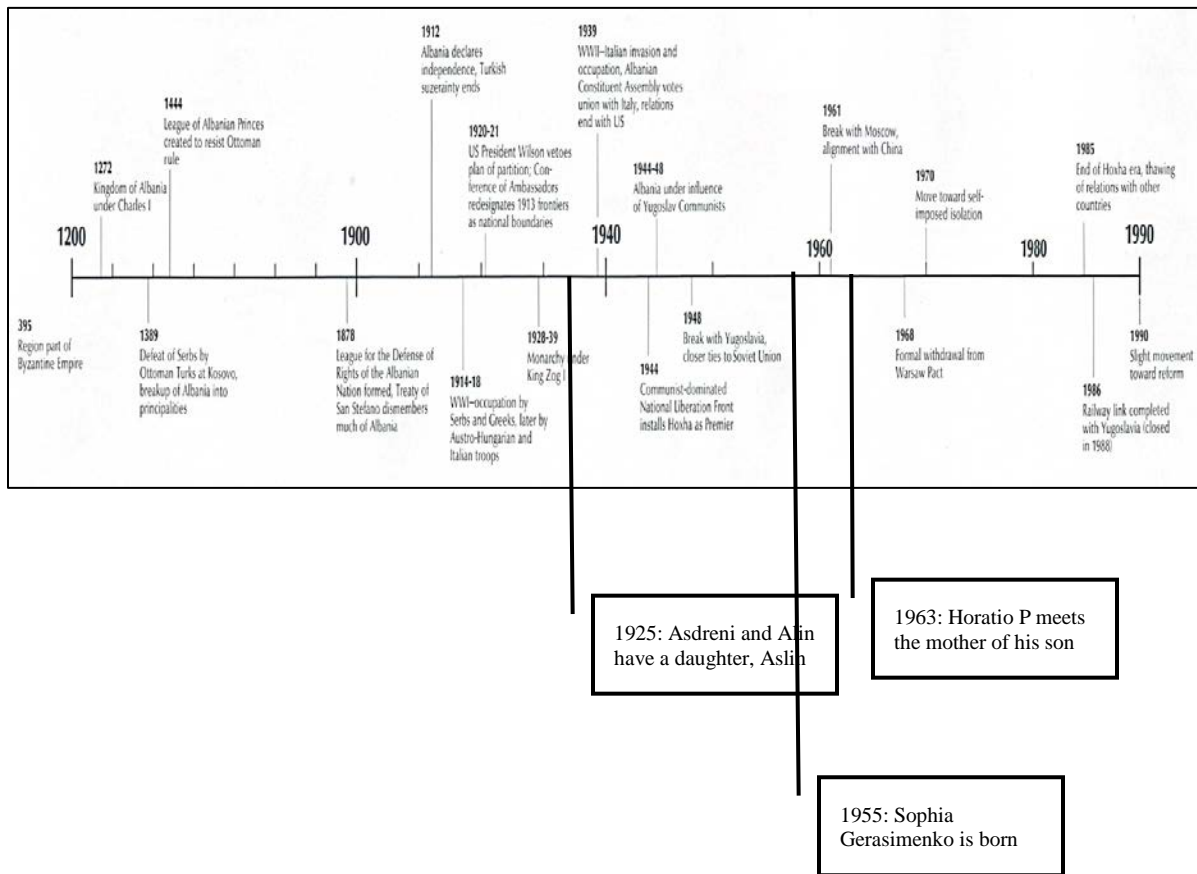
⁸ The Diaries of Franz Kafka, January – February 1911, p. 427.

Spanish dealer came to pay him his part of the commission: €21,502.00. He got the same quantity. He was drunk and dropped the money while counting it for your son, and then passed out, in the waiting area of his office.

“The police found out about the transaction and came running after us in full gear. I escaped through a dark exit. Your son couldn’t. I saw both scenes, first from inside, then from outside. My life since then has been dark.

“We need to find my son. And you are going to help me” ended Horatio P.

Chapter 24B



The First Night

A kitchen, not in use for ages,
 Over the sink with its porcelain tiles,
 An oil lamp coughs black smoke,
 The door locked, the windows sealed.

A cluster of shadows low along the wall,
 A chamber pot behind the door, near it some old
 Onion skins, a rat gnawing on crumbs of bread,
 Someone gulping from a flask.

The shadows shift, curious eyes and faces

Emerge from cloaks and shawls,

A heavy step shakes the stairs. Silence.

A clank of deadbolts, a scream near the office,

Another howl, frightening and long, followed

By demeaning curses. Then the bolts again... and steps...

Arshi Pipa (1920 – 1997)⁹

⁹ “Arshi Pipa is an Albanian poet and writer who was raised and educated in the period of Free Albania. During the foreign occupation, he worked as a secondary school teacher of Albanian and philosophy. He continued in this position after the communist takeover in Albania, until 1946. He was imprisoned for his critical stance towards communism. After ten years in prisons and concentration camps, he escaped to Yugoslavia in 1957 and now, since October 1958, he has been in the United States of America. This is part of the most objective study ever published in the free world on Albanian writers under the communist regime. The author was kind enough to give it to us for publication in Shqiptari i Lirë (The Free Albanian).”

Chapter 25A

Carazo, Nicaragua 1986

We see Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko driving a rental car, a 4-door Toyota Travis, metallic gray. We know it is a rental because it is in good condition, with minor scratches here and there. And the keys to the car have a huge plastic keyholder that clearly reads HERTZ. Horatio P. drives, Sophia is in the passenger seat consulting a map. The road from Managua to Carazo is called “*carretera sur*” and it gradually climbs through an imperceptible mountain range to 2,000 feet above sea level.

They arrive to the crest of the range, winds are cool and a bit strong. Big trucks, taxis, bicycles, horses, dogs, children in uniform, buses brimming with people honking all the time, all share the road, with no shoulder, one way up and one way down. Police in full uniform stand along the road every time they approach a small village. Usually three of them one vigilant to see who is committing an infraction, and two others dryly asking stopped drivers “driver’s license, insurance, and circulation card, please”.

Luckily, Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko pass without being stopped. The secret is not looking at them in the eye, but concentrating on the road ahead. Show no fear. They pass the church where the Virgin appeared to a peasant. They pass the Casa Colorada motel, where deceased dictator Anastasio Somoza used to bring one of his concubines. They pass the Andalucía chicken farm, with a fetid odor invading the air. They pass the flat crest of the range, where no trees grow due to the cool and fierce winds. They pass San Marcos town, with its almost non-existent character; they pass Diriamba town with its old tower clock and many motorcycle-taxis; they pass Dolores town with its dense coffee plantations. They arrive to Jinotepe, the prettiest and most populous town so far, drive to the National Sandinista Liberation

Front offices, and ask for Commandant Fernando Lopez. Once inside, they are both taken to a small room with an empty desk against a wall and three chairs. No windows, no phone. After a few minutes, they try opening the door. It is locked.

In vain Horatio P. tries to force the door open, slams it with the palm of his hand while yelling “open the door!” After an eternity, while seated on the chairs, Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko hear and see the knob being unlocked, and turning. A soldier enters first, and AK 47 to his shoulder. He is followed by a civilian, who introduces himself as Fernando Lopez. “The lady can go”, he says. “But you and I have a long discussion ahead of us” he tells Horatio P.

She hesitates. “Go” Horatio P. encourages her, “you know what to do”.

For 3 hours Fernando Lopez interrogates Horatio P. about the whereabouts of his son. He does not believe Horatio P. is also looking for his son. “What about the box?” Fernando Lopez asks finally. “What box? Is there a box you are looking for, or my son?” Horatio P. is disconcerted. “If you know nothing about your son or about the box, then you are of no use to me”, and making a head signal to the soldier with the AK47, Fernando Lopez prepares to leave the room. He stops at the door, “You know what to do with him, just don’t do it here”.

The soldier with the AK47 and two other younger soldiers take Horatio P. to a back patio. They place him against a wall with many signs of bullet holes and blood splashed all over it. “Any last words, Mister Poeta?” Before Horatio P. answers, another soldier comes running from inside the house. “Stop! Stop! Wait! The Commandant wants to talk to him!”

The soldier with the AK47 takes Horatio P. to the Commandant’s office. He is seated on a cushioned black chair, behind a big clean mahogany desk, a cigar in his right hand. The thick moustache shows a few gray hairs. The green uniform is neatly pressed. “You are in luck, Mr. Poeta” he throws the words with a despicability Horatio P. never heard before. Then he sees

Sophia Gerasimenko standing to the right, almost behind him, and a tall, well-built, weathered white-skinned, short cut blonde hair, blue-eyed gentleman besides her.

“KomDiv Maxim Khodonin here from our sister the USSR, wants to interrogate you. And he outranks me, according to my superiors. So, I let you go in very good hands”, ends the Commandant a sardonic smile on his face.

“Wait, where are you taking me?”, asks a perplexed Horatio P. “It’s OK, he will take us to your son” utters Sophia Gerasimenko in a calming voice. They leave the office to then depart in a Russian diplomatic convoy.

Chapter 25B

Bucharest, 1918

We know that in 1912, at a Bucharest meeting headed by Ismail Qemali and attended by Alek Drenova, the first resolution regarding Albania's independence is adopted. We know that by 1920 almost 20,000 Albanians live in Bucharest. We know that Albania was an occupied territory for many years:

The Greeks in the Northern Epirus, October 1914

The Austrian, winter 1915

The Austro-Hungarian, 1916-1918

The Bulgarian, 1916-1917

The French and Italian, Autumn 1916

The Macedonian, 1916-1918

Asdreni will eventually know all this, and more. What he does not know is that his brothers had travelled to Albania to defend their motherland. What he does not know is that the Macedonian Front, also known as the Salonika Front, created a stable territory, despite local actions in which his brothers were involved. What he does not know is that when in September of 1918, the Entente forces broke through the Central Powers north of Thessalonica, his brothers fought honorably defending their homeland. Trapped between two invading forces, the Bulgarians and Austro-Hungarians on one side and the Italians-British-Americans-Austrians on the other, desperately trying to stop the raping of Albania, they were present on October 2, 1918, at the bombardment of the Port of Durazzo. They were fighting, but also trying to save the many innocent civilians in the Old City.

That day, countless homes, public buildings, and the Royal Palace of Durrës, where Asdreni met Prince Wilhem zu Wied, were reduced to rubble. In a later report written by an unknown soldier we read: “Among the casualties, two nameless corpses, wearing no identification, probably from Albanian origin. One witness recalls one calling the other, and the other calling the one, with the names of Jani and Sami... and brother”.

The witnesses don't, but we know who they are.

Chapter 26A

1986, Somewhere in Cuba

“KomDiv Khodonin, my comrade” (long pause) “We understand our beloved Soviet Union is going through its most difficult passage in history yet (long pause) “But we want you to know that your sister, the brave Republic of Cuba, will always stand by your side, will always be faithful to the Socialist Principles inherited by those giants, Stalin, Marx, and Lenin.”

Horatio P. was at a loss. He and Sophia Gerasimenko had been blindfolded from the moment they arrived in Havana to just now. The Commander in Chief and Maximum Leader of the Cuban Revolution, the President of the Republic and Secretary General of the Communist Party, stroking his scarce, white, beard, looks intently into the Captain’s eyes. Waiting for the translators to finish their work, and thinking of what and how to say next. He pauses, takes too long to continue. It is his brother Raúl who interjects softly to his ear: “La caja Fidel, coño, la caja!”¹⁰ As if awakening from a deep dream, the Commander in Chief retakes the theme at hand. He asks if KomDiv Khodonin knows anything about the box. He knows nothing. The Commander asks if Horatio P. knows about it. He does not. Nor does Sophia Gerasimenko.

“What about his son?” asks KomDiv Khodonin. When the Commander keeps stroking his dwindling white beard, it is Raúl again to his ear (and this time we save you the need of a translator): “We sent him to Archangel. They will know what to do with him there”. The KomDiv proceeds to explain how important it is that “we the Soviet Bureau finds the box; state secrets lie somewhere in that box. Secrets that cannot see the light”.

“Good. We will all go to Archangel then”.

¹⁰ “The box, Fidel, fuck it, the box!”

Chapter 26B

May 20, 1918

“The journey, not the destination, becomes the source of wonder”

Lorena McKennit, “The Mask and Mirror”

At the Hotel du Lys, 23 Rue Serpente, Paris, France, it wasn't her nipple what froze in the garden, but the inconstancy that served them well. The rest, adorned with festoons and clairvoyant silk roses was a monument to passing loves, boring laughs. No cats could be mastered, no clogs to ride. Only her expectant smile, eternally asking “how much longer?”

At the Hotel Endri, Rs. Vaso Pasha 27, Tirana, Albania she realized that in the beginning the heart rules over the head. She didn't care much about not seeing him but occasionally. She didn't care about him not answering her calls. So many endless nights she cried until dawn waiting for the phone to ring, in vain.

Right before sunrise she would then slowly rise, shower, get pretty for him, drop off Brian at school, and head off to the office. At lunch, they would have long conversations. After work, when he could, he would stop by her house. She would try to penetrate the heart and mind of that quiet man, so loved, so lonely, in vain. She, tired of being closed, would open to him as naturally as water and salt. He, tired of being open, would close to her as naturally as dust and air.

At the Hotel Carpati, Str Matei Millo 16, Bucharest, Romania, she discovered that in the legend of Dracul, the reincarnation of the love of his wife kills him to reach eternal salvation. It was not the destiny of the two souls to sail together and be saved in pairs. Each soul had to reach its own salvation alone. From this stand point, she concluded, soul mates don't exist in eternity (souls are timeless) but in brief chosen associations formed in the temporal plane. So, in the end,

she would sail into infinity by herself. She learned that in eternity the concepts of loneliness and separation don't apply to a soul freed from a body: her soul was interconnected to all others, and all others were connected to the Cosmic Mind.

Chapter 27A

Arkhangelsk, USSR 1986

The Soviet Union is at the lowest point before full break down of the economic and political system. Oil prices have fallen for years, depleting revenues, increasing unemployment, and creating unrest throughout the Union.

The 11-hours 45-minute flight from Havana to Moscow aboard the Tupolev Tu-204 was uneventful. Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko spend most of the time conversing about their missing person, literature, Asdreni, and the future of the world.

“We move through life with a wall in front of our eyes” says Horatio P. looking at Sophia’s bright eyes, “We can’t see anything. At each moment, we decide to move left, or right or keep going straight, in varying degrees, not knowing what will be behind the wall. And we must live with our decision because there is no return once we make the move. And the wall is always there, blinding us. We never know. So, anyone who says has no faith, is a liar, we have faith at each second of our life. The wall is always there in front of us, we just don’t see it. All we see is a mirage of what we believe is in front of us”.

“What I see from here” responds Sophia looking out the window, “is an immense blue-green ocean, losing its calmness as the waves approach the shore, but it’s a gentle stroke on the sand that forms a narrow strip of spume. I see seagulls fly by, fishing the catch of the hour. I see solitary people strolling on the beach. I see a couple, a man and a woman, him carrying a child on his shoulders. In the distance, I see a ship that’s always on the same spot, as if it was a millenary rock.” Then they ate the food offered by the flight attendant.

At Moscow airport, they switched planes on the runway to a smaller vessel. They flew for one more hour to Arkhangelsk, a small city by the White Sea. A military vehicle took them to

a military compound. They were sent to separate rooms with military escorts who spoke Spanish. They were offered a fresh change of clothes and a warm shower. Within the hour, the military escorts took them to an office and closed the door behind them.

“I am KomandArm Nina Lobkovskaya” said a woman in her 60s, in military uniform. “I read about you!” exclaimed a pleasantly surprised Sophia Gerasimenko. “You served as a sniper for the Red Army of the Soviet Union during World War II! Your father enlisted in the Red Army in 1942 before being killed in the battle for Voronezh. And you were at the Battle of Berlin”.

“Impressive” responded an unaltered KomandArm Nina Lobkovskaya. “I find myself in a predicament here, with the two of you. The USSR is going through an... ‘in-between’ sort of time, and the in-between is always a problem. On one extreme, you have the very good probable outcome, on the other extreme you have the very bad probable outcome. And in the middle, or the in-between, you have the indefinite probable outcome.”

Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko look at each other not knowing what to say.

“It is a mathematical problem. How do you solve it? I propose the following method:

1. Identify a large population with known scores.
2. Conduct a time study, determine the subject’s outcome.
3. Derive a formula based on odds.

4. Set limits to the formula.

But still, the formula does not work for the in-between!”

“The French Revolution, the Nicaraguan Insurrection, Vietnam, they all put an end to regimes that were obsolete, corrupt, oppressive. Those are my large populations. They all had the same outcome. Their violent end. The formula does not fail, for either the very bad or the very good. The problem is the in-between.”

“Our Soviet Empire is crumbling at the core, and being hard-pressed against from the periphery. A very good outcome would be that we crash but find stability again, either as a Soviet Empire of some sort, or as something entirely different. It could be very good or very bad. Although, it will be very good for some and very bad for others no matter what. The thing is, after the in-between is over, what side do I want to find myself on?”

Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko exchanged glances again, not uttering a word.

“Your son is not here. I sent him... and his box, to Albania. He insisted to be sent there. That is where I am sending you both. My comrade in arms Polkovnik Olga Ozernaya will get you there. Good luck”.

Chapter 27B

July 1, 1919, Bucharest, Romania

As in the picture where the eye perceives a white vase¹¹

To my daughter Aslin

To labor a child is a tremor of fierce endurance

Five minutes to midnight, on July 1, 1919 she shows her head

And conceals it back afraid of a life not yet known

The last spasms of an all-night rain flare exhausted in faraway rumbles

The smell of ether, acetyl, neoprene offends my nostrils

At the moment of frozen angst her cry rips spacetime with joy and reprieve

The anesthesia needle, invasive, mechanical, turned invisible into the skin

She looks burnished, filled with anger, fragile, and hungry

At this age, there is no notion of destiny and its incessant nuances

At this moment, what is to be seems a faltering eternity away

When the cord's been plied, and cut and the blood flow restrained,

When the ugly placenta's been extracted, a viscous carcass of flesh

When she is deposited in my arms in a minute lump of cobalt cloth

Spacetime holds its breath again oblivious to the strange machinations

Her placid murmur and bolted eyes bestow:

¹¹ *Editor's Note:* Curiously, this title matches exactly a line in page 5 from European Classic writer Danilo Kis' novel *Hourglass*, translated from the Serbio-Croatian by Ralph Manheim and published by Northwestern University Press in Evanston, Illinois, 1997.

The earnest fantasies of a father in trance unconscious of storms to come
A torrent of plans stopped by the dam of this instant never imagined right.
I unpin my mind from sidereal clouds while a tiny hand struggles under

The lump and escapes towards mine, rustic, blind, eager
Its rosé color blends soft nails, brittle skin and sapphire veins
A white plastic hospital tag wraps her small wrist

Displaying the girl that bears my last name now sleeping beyond flesh and bones
This day, ignorant of the distortion of mirrors, unaware of calibrated separations
Will help me defeat dispassionate distances and rippling farewells ahead

There will be a time in which we will rise again from phoenixial ashes and glittering clocks
There will be a time of violent ruptures and broken promises
In this hour, we will find the strength to go on, the indestructible love at the inner center.

Chapter 28A

Tirana, Albania 1986

With the guidance (and protection) of Olga Ozernaya, the daughter of a woman who served with KomandArm Nina Lobkovskaya, Sophia Gerasimenko and Horatio P. could leave Arkhangelsk in a Russian transport, on route to Albania. They drove south along Lake Onega until they reached Petrozavodsk.

“You look so absorbed in thoughts, Horatio P.” said Sophia Gerasimenko mid-way between Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg. “Are you thinking about your son?”

“Not my son per se, but on how all this turmoil is happening at the same time, the USSR crumbling and the ripping waves this will cause throughout the world, my new found and new lost son, my Arianne not knowing anything, my university president asking for me to produce something...” He stopped short of mentioning his returning cancer.

“Tell me about your book *Ars Moriendi and The Dance of Death*. What is it about? Really?” Horatio P. thought for a few moments.

“it is a prophecy of the coming world, which is now happening around us. It will only get worse. Soon, reality and fantasy will mix. TV will have a high impact on that, it is having that impact now. We see the news not knowing what is really happening. But TV engenders reality. It engenders a hyper-reality.” Horatio P was in a trance, in a stream of consciousness.

“In hyperreality we become the actors and our life becomes the script. A perfectly acted life, planned, packed, canned, by TV, machines, consumerism of material things in capitalism and of unrealized dreams in socialism. Through TV, image is everything. Either in capitalistic or in a socialist society there is no thinking, only alienation. We are mentally conditioned the

moment we are born, our mind is programmed for years, we live according to capitalist marketing slogans or socialist invasive propaganda, and we..." Horatio P. hesitated.

"Yes?" Sophia Gerasimenko is enthralled with the professor's de facto lecture.

"And we become prisoners of our dreams" said Sophia Gerasimenko as if discovering something precious, jumping into the bandwagon of philosophy. "But sometimes it is not that simple, we settle for less, renounce ourselves, stop being us to become the script".

They spent the night at a secure house in Tallinn, Estonia. In the back patio and not able to get any sleep, Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko found themselves looking at the stars.

"How did you meet my son?" asked Horatio P. watching a falling star cross the firmament and disappear in the horizon.

"Some things are not in the script. We must take them in the moment or forever let them go. Your son was not in my script. Love doesn't happen naturally anymore. It is another planned TV commercial. But when we kissed for the first time... the first kiss is also the last hope". A lonely tear fell down Sophia Gerasimenko's cheek, glimmering at the light of the moon.

Early the next morning a PZL W-3A Sokol helicopter took them to Novi Sad, in northern Yugoslavia.

"This is where I say good bye, как вы хотите удачи". Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko exchanged glances again. "It means Good Luck in Russian" explained Polkovnik Olga Ozeraya. Yugoslavia, or what remains of it, is not a good place for a Soviet Officer these days".

"Where will you go?", asked a genuinely concerned Sophia Gerasimenko.

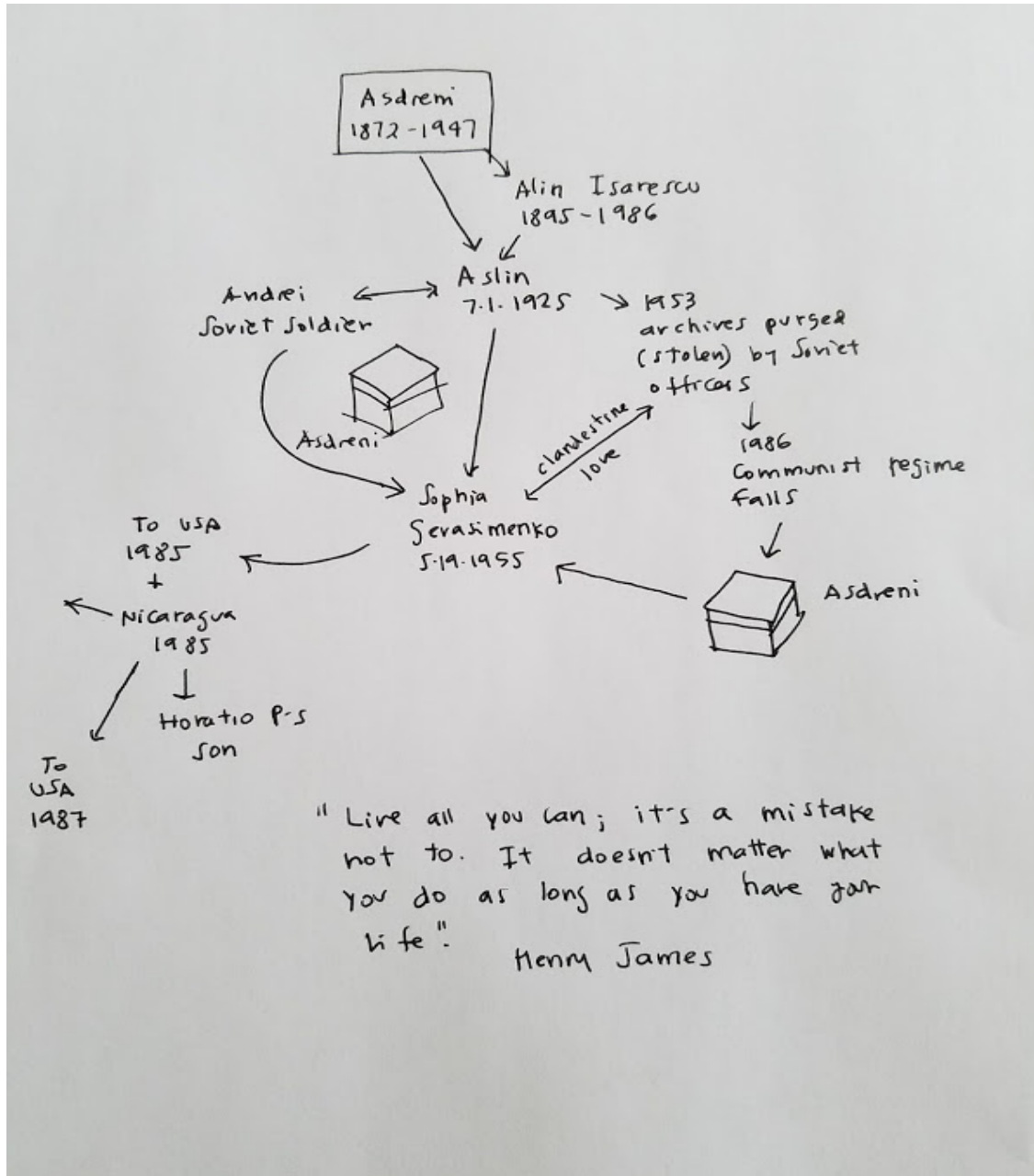
"I was a person with illusions. I had illusions of love, illusions of work, illusions of a poet and an architect. Until I convinced myself that that's all they were, illusions. So, I started to

distract myself with all sort of riddles and complexities. After fifteen or sixteen years of lethargy, of ignoring the truth, a blow, or maybe the same blow repeated a thousand times, on the same spot, forces us to see the mediocrity in which we live, tangled. Habit, not conviction, impedes us to jump into the water; the fear to the sharks. It is time that I jump. This truck will take you to Tirana. You can trust the driver, Taurus. He will take you to your son.”, ended Polkovnik Olga Ozernaya. The helicopter rose leaving Horatio P. and Olga Gerasimenko enveloped a cloud of snow, holding her heads, waving Olga Ozernaya good bye.

Chapter 28B

Romania, 1919

"29 August. The end of one chapter a failure"¹²



¹² The Diaries of Franz Kafka, page 313.

Chapter 29A

March, 1986, Tirana

Taurus drove south through Serbian territory, then east to Prishtina, Prizren. They stopped at different small towns, to eat, refill gas, sleep... Kolsh, Thirre, Klos, Reps, Rubik, Millot, Thumane, Derven, and finally stopped at Koder-Kamez. Of course Horatio P and Sophia Gerasimenko do not know all these names. We tell the reader to give an idea of the length of travel, if you choose to look up the places in a map.

They arrive at a neighborhood in the outskirts of Tirana, named Aklaj. "Your son is hiding there, in the ruins of that old wooden structure behind the ancient Roman ruins" says Taurus, "but this is as far as I go". "I'll go check" says a determined Horatio P., "you both wait here". "Hold on" Sophia Gerasimenko pulls Horatio P.'s sleeve, "take this picture so you know what he looks like".

Horatio P. approaches the shack; the first floor is almost gone, with very few walls still standing, the dirt and concrete floor is covered with debris, garbage pushed by the wind, dog shit, old newspapers praising Ramiz Alia, Chairman of the Presidium of the People's Assembly and his many accomplishments, several empty beer bottles. The stench of a human corpse removed by the Secret Police still lingers in the air. The stair access to the second floor is blocked by a rigged wooden fence. Sophia and Taurus remain behind posting guard.

Horatio P. discovers a second shack behind the first one. He goes there. It is in the same condition, it also has a wooden stair leading to a second floor, and it is blocked too. He goes inside roaming the first floor, looking for a way up. Suddenly, three Leonberger dogs come out of nothingness barking menacingly at him. He jumps onto a semi destroyed ramp leading to the second floor and throws away the plank that forms the ramp. He reaches the second floor, 3

meters (10 feet) above ground. Three children, a boy and two girls between 5 and 7 years old, hair in disarray, barefooted, dressed in rags, come running behind the dogs and see Horatio P.

A man and a woman, apparently, the children's parents come running and see Horatio P. above on the remains of the second floor. A giant, athletic Beauceron dog comes in walking calmly, like a king entering his court. The black harlequin coat is lustrous and orderly. It sits close to Horatio P, its excessively broad muzzle almost touching Horatio P's feet. He can feel the warm breath on his left ankle, the deep brown eyes piercing his own, the half-pricked ears alert. It looks brave, patient, fearless, keenly watchful, and it sees no danger in Horatio P.'s scared body and face.

In a mute and strange language, he does not understand, the woman asks Horatio P. what he is looking for. He utters desperately, with a trembling, almost silent voice: "I am looking for my son", he pulls the picture off his shirt pocket and shows it to the woman. She has dark skin color, a prominent musculature, plump breasts; a dress that allows the vista of a well fit body, her black hair is collected in a very long ponytail, a thick moustache with incipient beard stubs, like the ones that will popularized in America in the 2000s, before long beards become widespread after 2014.

With her loud, soprano voice she starts to talk non-stop, at times looking at Horatio P., others looking at the floor; sometimes pointing at the children others to a place beyond the horizon. "He was here a few days back, we fed him and took care of him, He was very good to me, to my children, and even to Borna (my big dog) and Matko and Mislava. He would help with finding food, cooking it and playing with Radovan, Jelena, and Dmitar. He helped Lovro with his work and was always kind and respectful. He looked worried but not scared. His only possession was s box with some documents." Horatio P. could hear Sophia Gerasimenko

whispering this in his ear. “The police came in one day looking for him; these are strange days, perilous days with those student protests and all. He said he was waiting for some friends to pick him up soon. He used to write a lot too and put what he wrote in the box. He read a lot from the box. One night his friends came. He took the box, said ‘hvala ti!’ (thank you), and disappeared in the darkness”.

“Did he say where he was going?” asked Horatio P. descending from the remains of the second floor.

“He said he was going to find the Virgin”, says the woman, and vanishes.

Chapter 29B

Bucharest, Romania April 1921

“My dear comrades of the Albanian National Movement:

For many years, we Albanians have been fighting for our independence, for our assertion to a national identity, Shqiperia Lives! The First Balkan Wars provided us with a unique opportunity to finally obtain our independence from Turkey.

During the Second Balkan Wars -how many more will we endure? – it was the Serb people who occupied our sacred territory. If it was not for the conference of the Great Powers, we would still be under Serbian occupation. But the solution of peace, came at a great cost to our now diminished Greater Albania: large tracts of our land were ripped from us and given like spoils of hunting to Montenegro, Serbia, and Greece. The Powers left Prince William of Wied as the head of state, only to see him flee less than a year later. That happens when wealth and principality are the only requisites sought to fill a government cabinet. I am pretty sure that this schema repeats itself in other places and times.

World War I was fought on our very blood stained land. Secret treaties wanted to dismember us, make us disappear like a political and diplomatic genocide. But we resisted and the United States of America, with President Woodrow Wilson, helped us preserve our remains to be reborn from the ashes.

Given the fact that we are again a sovereign nation, the Albanian National Movement has no reason to exist, or rather it does not need my services any more.

I know in my heart that new challenges await us. We are too divided a nation, a region to endure peace for extended periods of time.

I hereby present my resignation to the glorious Albanian National Movement. I seek to serve our motherland in other capacities, but from here in Romani, a country that has given us so much, who has received us like her own children.

Your brother in struggle,

Aleks Drenova, Asdreni”

Chapter 30A

March 1986, Tirana, Lisbon

“Find the Virgin?” Sophia Gerasimenko is puzzled. “Of course! He used to speak a lot about the Virgin of Fatima. He wanted to name our daughter Fatima. He must have gone to Portugal”.

“Are you expecting a child?” Horatio P. is half confused, half happy at the prospect of becoming a grandparent, at how is Sophia Gerasimenko able to handle all this traveling.

“No, no, our future child! When we decide to have one” reassures her. She explains the situation to Taurus and after a few exchanges with him she goes back to Horatio P.

“Taurus will arrange for us to get to Portugal” she informs Horatio P.

In Lisbon, members of the Portuguese Communist Party were waiting for them. The streets are dark. A black sedan takes Horatio P., Sophia Gerasimenko, Taurus and two men armed with a Kalashnikov rifle each, members of the Portuguese Communist Party, one of them a driver, East along Avenida Berlim, lined with old apartment buildings. At Avenida Infante Dom Henrique, they go north for half an hour and then west at Rua Carlos George. They stop. “Where are we?” asks a worrisome Horatio P. “We are at Casa da Cidade Christian Church. Get down please”.

The old, square building reminds Horatio P. of the La Salle Institute in his native Nicaragua. They all go in. The smell of burning candles fill the air, electric incandescent lights flicker. Someone’s cough echoes in the nave. A priest leaves a confessionary and an old man exits from a side door. On a bench at first row, a man with a black coat and completely white hair sits, eyes closed. “Doctor Alvaro Cunhal!”, exclaims Sophia Gerasimenko once they are close. The man opens his eyes turning his head towards the beautiful woman. A smile adorns his

face. Sophia sits at the man's right and Horatio P. is motioned by Taurus to sit at the left. The two armed men stand in front of them.

"Your son has valuable information for the international Communist movement and for the USSR in particular. We need to retrieve several documents from him. Where is your son?"

"I have no idea where my son is, we thought you were going to lead us to him" says Horatio P. exchanging puzzled glances with Sophia Gerasimenko, Taurus, and Alvaro Cunhal.

"We were told in Russia that you would help us locate him" confirms Sophia Gerasimenko.

Alvaro Cunhal looks at Taurus, then the armed men. He is not smiling. With a gesture of his head, the two armed men know what to do next. They take Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko to the back of the church, there is a small cemetery filled with crammed epitaphs that shine with the moonlight. Taurus and Alvaro Cunhal follow them and stop a short distance from the four figures. The two armed men extract Makarov pistols from their coats and aim at them.

"Stop! Police!" shout several voices coming suddenly from all sides, flashlights, rifles and reflectors. The two armed men fire at the lights, Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko run, gun shots sounds nonstop, gunsmoke everywhere. A group of policemen detain Alvaro Cunhal and Taurus. The two armed men fall to the ground wounded, dead? Another group of policemen detain Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko, they take them to a nearby, unmarked van. A man in his 60s waits in the back seat. Another man, in his 30s sits by his side. One of the policemen, not in uniform but with a fedora, a police badge hanging from his neck motions Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko to get in the van.

"We have been on Alvaro Cunhal's trail for some time. Mr. Horatio P., Ms. Sophia Gerasimenko, thank you for leading us to him, even though you had no idea of it." The older man has gray curly hair and a deep voice. "I am Mario Soares, Prime Minister of Portugal" he

adds extending his right hand. After the respective handshakes, he continues, “This is Mr. Danilo Lopez Roman, Attaché at the Nicaraguan embassy. He’s been working with us and British Intelligence MI-6 on this mission”. “Your son is back in Nicaragua, safe. We have the documents we needed. He gave them to us voluntarily. I will see that you get home as soon as possible. Someone will contact you at the airport. Her name is Eva Teller. Remember it”.

Chapter 30B

Bucharest 1922

How many attempts made Asdreni to serve in an established Albanian government?

As far as I know, there were only two.

Which ones?

First, he attempted to serve in the 1914 government of Prince Wilhelm zu Weid.

What position was Asdreni looking for?

His aim was to become an Archivist for the royal administration.

How did that work out?

It didn't. He traveled to Durres for nothing. He was dismissed by employees of the Prince and sent back to Romania emptyhanded.

That must have been devastating for him, do you agree?

It was. It is said that this event started him in the writing of his master piece, *Psalms of a Monk* and a few new poems for the second edition of *Dreams and Tears*.

And the second time?

It was in Romania, in 1922 while still involved in the Albanian National Movement. Albania opened a consulate in Bucharest and due to the influence of his friend Gjergj Bubani.

Who was this person?

He was an Albanian publicist, writer, and translator.

Can you tell us more?

Bubani was born in Boboshticë, a village near Korçë. He attended the French Lycee in Korçë, and then went to Athens where he attended the Industrial College. Bubani studied

there chemistry. After the studies, he moved to Romania, where at the time there was a large and active Albanian community. It was there that he met Asdreni.

In Romania, Bubani worked for the Albanian newspaper Shqiperi' e Re (New Albania) from 1920 to 1922 -started initially in Bucharest and from July 1920 moved to Costanza by Albanian activist Ilo Mitkë Qafëzezi. After that, Bubani published his own journals: Dodona, named after the ancient oracle, in January 1922.

Did Asdreni get a position this time?

Yes, he worked as Secretary of the Consulate, which opened in March.

How long did he stay there?

He worked in the Consulate until 1937. At that time, he went back to Albania. It was a disaster.

Chapter 31A

Events that lead you Here

Horatio P. grips his briefcase. It is a worn-out briefcase that has been with him since he left Nicaragua in 1979, right before the advent of the leftist revolution that changed governments in his country. It has cradled his manuscripts for years. Horatio P. keeps in there copies of his past books, *Ars Moriendi* and *The Dance of Death*, *Diary of a Young Man Who went Mad*, *Memories of Beowulf*, in case he needs to give them away to an important person or a good friend he has not seen in years.

Horatio P. continually thinks of the past. His last two years of high school at the Pedagogic Institute in Nicaragua when he met famous poets and his interest in poetry was born, the deep influence a Catholic education had on him like on James Joyce. The poets circles he used to frequent at the bar La India where he held long discussions with fellow writers about politics and the role of poets in it, literary theories and how his generation lacked any, about the limiting confines of the country and the need of all poets to travel the world. “One is not a poet if one has not traveled beyond the little country one lives in” used to say one of the maestros of the 60s, poet Carlos Martinez Rivas.

Horatio P. finished his high school, completed his doctorate in Literature at the National University, went to teach in the same university, and started publishing his books. *The Diary of a Young Mad Who Went Mad* was the first. It was well received by established and emerging poets. “You are a well-read young man” Carlos told him. But you need to expand your horizons with experience. You cannot talk about Alphonse X properly without first visiting his native land. You cannot grasp the vicissitudes of Nietzsche if you have not walked the streets he walked

and drank the beer he drank. You cannot talk about poetry without first becoming mad yourself with it!”

Horatio P. decided to follow Carlos’ advice and traveled intensely throughout Europe. In Spain, he completed a doctorate in Hispanic Literature and got heavily involved in the movement of the “nouveau roman” poets like Francisco Brines and Gloria Fuertes; later, he participated in literary spheres and readings with Miguel Delibes, Luis Goytisolo and Camilo Jose Cela. The Nicaraguan bards Francisco de Asís Fernández, Julio Cabrales, Beltrán Morales, Rolando Steiner and Luis Rocha also visited with him in Madrid. It was one of the best times of his life. A poet needs the freedom of these open gatherings where discussions run until well past midnight, multiple viewpoints are presented, argumentation is constant with camaraderie and wine, to free the spirit and keep the creative juices flowing.

He visited Germany to attend readings by members of the Gruppe 47, before they disbanded in 1967 and established long lasting friendships with Johannes Bobroski, Ilse Aichinger, Peter Bichsel and Günter Grass. These very polemic meetings taught him the internal politics that permeate all human activity: politicians of course have it, but also monks in a monastery, business competitors in a capitalistic system, sports stars of all kind whether professional or Olympians, and any other one can think of. It is the nature of humans to try to control, impose their own agenda and conquer others no matter what. It could be done with bullets or ideas. He decided there and then that a dose of solipsism was the best way to avoid these sterile confrontations.

He spent a few months in Italy and got in touch with Giuseppe Ungaretti, Primo Levi, Italo Calvino, and found that no other country had the rich variety found among the Italians: from futuristic ideas to poetry inspired in the chemical table of elements, from socialist to fascist

ideas, from poet-soldiers to poet-accountants all in a continuous revival of their own poetry and that of their country.

It was during these years that Horatio P. realized how lonely he was, that he needed a woman in his life, that his poetry was about to embark in a strange journey that would mark his whole existence. He needed a woman who would anchor him to reality, any reality that was not the endless nights discussing the fate of the arcane world of literature. That reality was his, the reality at the edge of the Universe. He was the reflection above. He needed the hologram below. He was ready to go back.

Chapter 31B

Asdreni's writer's block of 1929

The man parked the car in a garage, in a floor that was hard to find. He grabbed his purpura red valise and started to look for the place where the poets were to gather. The street has a steep slope, he must negotiate it with the heels of the shoes. There are some cars parked alongside the curb. People come and go in their daily routine. Men and women in police uniform start to appear. They casually walk along the street lined with shadow trees. At the end of the street there is what is clearly a police headquarters. The man can see the men and women in dark police uniform leaving and entering the building.

The building has a large window where one older police in front of a markerboard teaches younger police something. Obviously, he is training them. He tightly grabs the purpura red valise with both arms against his chest. His black rim, round glasses and black moustache, topped with a black bowler contrast with his light gray 3-piece suit. The black shoes with white cotton spats are neatly clean, making the black buttons look shiny.

The man goes back to the garage. He cannot find the car, he goes around the block once and again. The entrance to the garage seems to have vanished. He is in front of the police academy again, tightly holding his purpura red valise, trying to decide what to do next.

The man parked his black 1936 Bentley Coupe in a garage, in a spot that was hard to find. He grabbed his purpura red valise and started to look for the place where the poets were to gather. The street has a steep slope, he must negotiate it with the heels of his black and white saddle shoes. There are some cars parked alongside the curb. People come and go in their daily routine. Men and women in police uniform start to appear. They casually walk along the street lined with shadow trees. He sees several vehicles parked: a black Lancia Lambda, a red Bugatti

35, and a white Hanomag 2, which looks out of place. At the end of the street he sees a police academy. Men in black police uniform are leaving and entering the building. They talk casually about this and that.

The building has a large window where one older policeman in front of a blackboard teaches younger policemen something. Obviously, he is training them. The man tightly grabs the purpura red valise with both arms against his chest. His black rim, round glasses and black moustache, topped with a black bowler contrast with his light gray 3-piece suit. The black shoes with white cotton spats are neatly clean, making the black buttons look shiny.

The man goes back to the garage. He cannot find the car, he goes around the block once and again. The entrance to the garage seems to have vanished. He is in front of the police academy again, tightly holding his purpura red valise, trying to decide what to do next.

The man repeats the scene all night long. He is exhausted. He thinks: "If I was a terrorist, I could leave my valise with a bomb in front of the Academy and kill a lot of men". But he is not a terrorist and when he is about to give up, he finds the entrance to the garage through a side room in the Police Academy, and find his car, and can leave this damned place.

Chapter 32A

Madrid, Spain, Calle Robledillo 8, 1963

The first time, she asked you for cigarettes making signs with her hands, seating under the sycamore tree at Parque El Retiro. You, seated on the bench across the way, had none, for you never smoked. The next day you bought a pack of Ducados with you, just in case. She accepted them with the wide smile that still today follows you. But you forgot the matches. She laughed with those lively, deep brown eyes. The next time around you followed her in a taxi right to the door. She was expecting you. It is so that love is born, or rather a trap; an immense circle just recently closed full eighteen years later. She was 19, you 23.

You had her, at a crummy motel, her belly shaking with emotion, or desire, or fear. You, the patient lion, trying to be gentle to her, and caring. Her petite, slender body naked for the first time for you. Whole, so young. The black, long curly hair in all its splendor. You turn the lights off. Moonlight enters through a high window. There are no words, only the eyes locked onto each other's. Four hands intertwined. The long kisses, the caresses. Was it an experiment? A curiosity? You always liked to experiment.

*Like shiny spiders
with their webs, little clocks in
the garden and in
the air, sticky
precise candies in formation
fornicating
until the game is complete
too large, too intelligent to let*

themselves be captured.

Humidity falls and hangs there.

Your respiration trapped in the

attic of an old house

cobwebs everywhere.

Sometimes there is no excuse:

a bomb, a vase, a light in the

mountain

a misspelled word, erased

and misspelled again.

What else are you going to make me do

this time?

Chapter 32B

Romania, Bucharest, 1930

From 1922 through 1930 Asdreni worked at the Albanian Consulate in Bucharest. Little is known about this part of his life. It was probably a bureaucrat's life, bored with the unimportant things in life. Except for his dedication to his last book, the once considered his masterwork: *Psalms of a Monk*.

The book was launched at the Consulate, with the usual attendees from the diplomatic corps, Romanian cultural figures, and fellow Albanians interested in his work. It received much praise, both orally and in print. "The full maturity of a great poet" the newspaper said.

Yet, separated from the Albanian National Movement, having lost his brothers, wife and daughter, Asdreni had the time to immerse his whole being in the artisanship of poetry, but lacked the energy. Something was missing. How long would this boring life keep on going?

Chapter 33A

Managua, Nicaragua 1985

On his daily way to work Horatio P.'s son always drives the same route: departing from the house his parents left him in Garden City Heights, cutting through Sycamore Tree Road, passing in front of the American Airlines office, and finally taking the Freeway North towards downtown Managua. Traffic is always smooth, it is a mechanical route tested once and again, automatic, routine, boring. Still single, still writing his *Diary of A Young Poet Who Went Mad*, his interest on politics is as incipient as the shadow of his moustache and insipid like a discarded piece of paper. Horatio P.'s son has not lost his innocence and still believes that the two-party system in place since the independence from Spain in 1821 and from Mexico a couple of years later will manifest the Destiny of the People.

This day something is different, he feels it before starting the daily trodden path. He fears when he doesn't listen to his intuitions. This is the same route his father drove and the same street where his father also met the woman of his dreams, Arianne, upon his return from Spain. Nicaragua is witnessing a new era; the Sandinista revolutionaries have been continuously in power since 1979. Horatio P.'s son has worked with them since 1980, when his mother, a member of the Socialist Workers Party of Spain brought him here from Madrid.

The Sandinistas will lose the first free elections in 1990. His father will be happy celebrating in Texas. Horatio P.'s son keeps his manuscript of the *Diary* close, in a box that contains secret information which must be protected. On his way back from work Horatio P.'s son must hurry to make it on time for classes at the National University. Classes run from 5 pm to 10 pm. He is leaving the university grounds now and is headed to his parents' house. He

passes the same street and remembers the way his father narrates how he met Arianne. Right now, he waits for the red light to turn green.

She turns the corner, young, tall, walking like a queen never deviating her sight from the empty space in front of her eyes. She plants each foot with the martial aplomb of a general but the gracefulness of *The Girl from Ipanema*. Her arms balance perfectly the rhythm of her legs, the black shoes with short heels tap on the cement sidewalk like a grandfather clock marking the immeasurability of time with a senseless toc, toc, toc, toc. Her long dark and lustrous hair is defiant of the wind and moves left and right in unison with her satin navy-blue dress. He slows down unknowingly while looking at her, everything slows down around event horizon of the black hole of her presence. She wears no makeup and almost no smile, she blinks in slow motion and turns her head with a majestic gesture of condescendence towards his eyes in awe. Her straight nose denotes confidence. An interior power and beauty he will never grasp.

Night. Intuitively, he looks on the side mirror, a white and blue military vehicle with the head lights off is behind him. The street lamp post to his left sheds enough clarity to uncover an M-16 rifle aiming at him. Is this happening to me? He thought of Arianne, this is the street where they met. Forget the red light, he kills the beams of his white Fiat, ducks, over the steering wheel, and steps on the accelerator as deep as the car floor permits.

Are those sounds bullets showering on me? One of them leaves the barrel on the rifle, it starts an unstoppable trip from the obscurity of a cold tunnel suddenly set aflame by the powder in the shell. The bullet travels gyrating vertiginously, it finds clarity, the clarity of the lamp post and continues its straight route looking for the skull it's been ordered to chatter, for the brain it's

destined to scatter, it approaches the vehicle moving, it crashes the rear window, it foresees a head.

He now knows that they are after him, after the box, and must hide.

Chapter 33B

Bucharest, Romania 1936-37

Asdreni had his daily routine. Wake up at 06 hours. Shave, shower, get dressed, take down the stairs, and walk towards Strada Paris. Eat breakfast at Café Muse, consisting of mămăligă, bread, cheese, tomatoes, onions, and an omelette. After that he walks always along Strada Paris towards the Consulate, then left at Strada Duiliu Zamfirescu. Stop at number 7, open the green iron gate, take a small flight of stairs up, where Agim, the porter is already opening the door for him, at exactly 08 hours.

He reads the newspaper, checks his agenda with the Consulate's secretary, Kaltrina, *"Today you have a meeting with the Cultural Society of East Europe at 14 hours, then dinner with the French Cultural Attaché at the Embassy, at 18 hours..."* after that, her voice becomes a distant murmur, and Asdreni's mind is now traveling to the unknowable realm of his mind. Lunch is usually at the same Café Muse, unless a diplomatic appointment takes him, reluctantly, to a different place.

He mixes consulate business with literary readings. The discussion of a free and noble Albania sounds futile, useless, hopeless. "The world is a hopeless place", he was quoted saying many times at diplomatic gatherings and literary readings. "The world has been at war since 1918. The First World War never ended. It is a matter of time for Germany, Japan and Italy to rise again to the trumpets of warfare."

In November of 1937, Asdreni is invited to visit Albania for the 25th Anniversary of Independence. His heart is filled with emotion to visit the homeland after so many years. This time it's different. He feels a stranger in his own country. He stumbles on some words after speaking Romanian for so many years. He visits the Palace to meet with different functionaries

of government. All give them the run around. Until one of them flatly says: “Aleksandr. Asdreni. Our government deeply thank you for the many years of service. But we lack the resources to provide you with a pension of any kind or amount. I am so sorry. Be happy and content that you gave your life for your motherland. Be content with the fact that Albania has one of your poems as our National Anthem, be content that...” Asdreni does not hear the rest. He puts on his hat, turns around, and leaves for Romania to never return.

In Bucharest, he starts working on a fourth volume of poetry, *Kambana of Kruja*. He writes incessantly, day and night. To earn a living, he tutors youngsters in different subjects, history, poetry, literature, political science. Many days, he walks to the Cismigiu Park in center Bucharest. He crosses the stone bridge by the lake, and sits on a bench at the Rose Garden. He spends hours there, in serenity, remembering, writing.

Chapter 34A

Managua, Nicaragua March 1979

“Arianne, you the woman I love, the love of my life and I will never leave you behind. I will always love you and I will always be with you.” Horatio P. had to decide whether to leave Nicaragua and Arianne behind and go to Texas to study a Doctorate in Latin American Literature or stay in Nicaragua, where the Sandinista Revolution was about to bring down the government of Anastasio Somoza, and miss a fantastic opportunity. His job with the American Embassy’s Office of Press Relations was very good, but in these days, working for the “gringos” was not that good. And if the Sandinistas were to take power, a real possibility given the international situation, then it would not be good for him or Arianne.

“Horatio P.” she said, “you are the love of my life and if I have to stay behind, I will stay and wait for you to bring me over to Texas.”

As it turned out the University of Notre Dame intervened with the American Embassy in Nicaragua to bring Arianne with Horatio P. to Texas. He would always be grateful to them.

Chapter 34B

Bucharest, September 1939

On September 1, 1939, Germany invades Poland. Refugees from all over Europe try to leave their own countries. But war is ubiquitous. On July 5, 1940, Romania allies itself with Nazi Germany, only to be invaded by its “ally” as part of Hitler's strategy to create one huge eastern front against the Soviet Union. King Carol abdicates on September 6, 1940, leaving the country in the control of fascist Prime Minister Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard.

Asdreni seldom leaves his apartment. Food is scarce. He often goes to Cismigiu. He is known by neighbors, diplomatic staff, store keepers, soldiers, invaders.

Romania is bombed by the Allies from 1943 onwards and invaded by advancing Soviet armies in 1944. With the Soviets, many civilian Russians come as workers who support the powerful Red Army. Among them, a certain kitchen assistant, who was once a teacher. She asks for the now famous poet in Albania and Romania, and in some sectors of Russia.

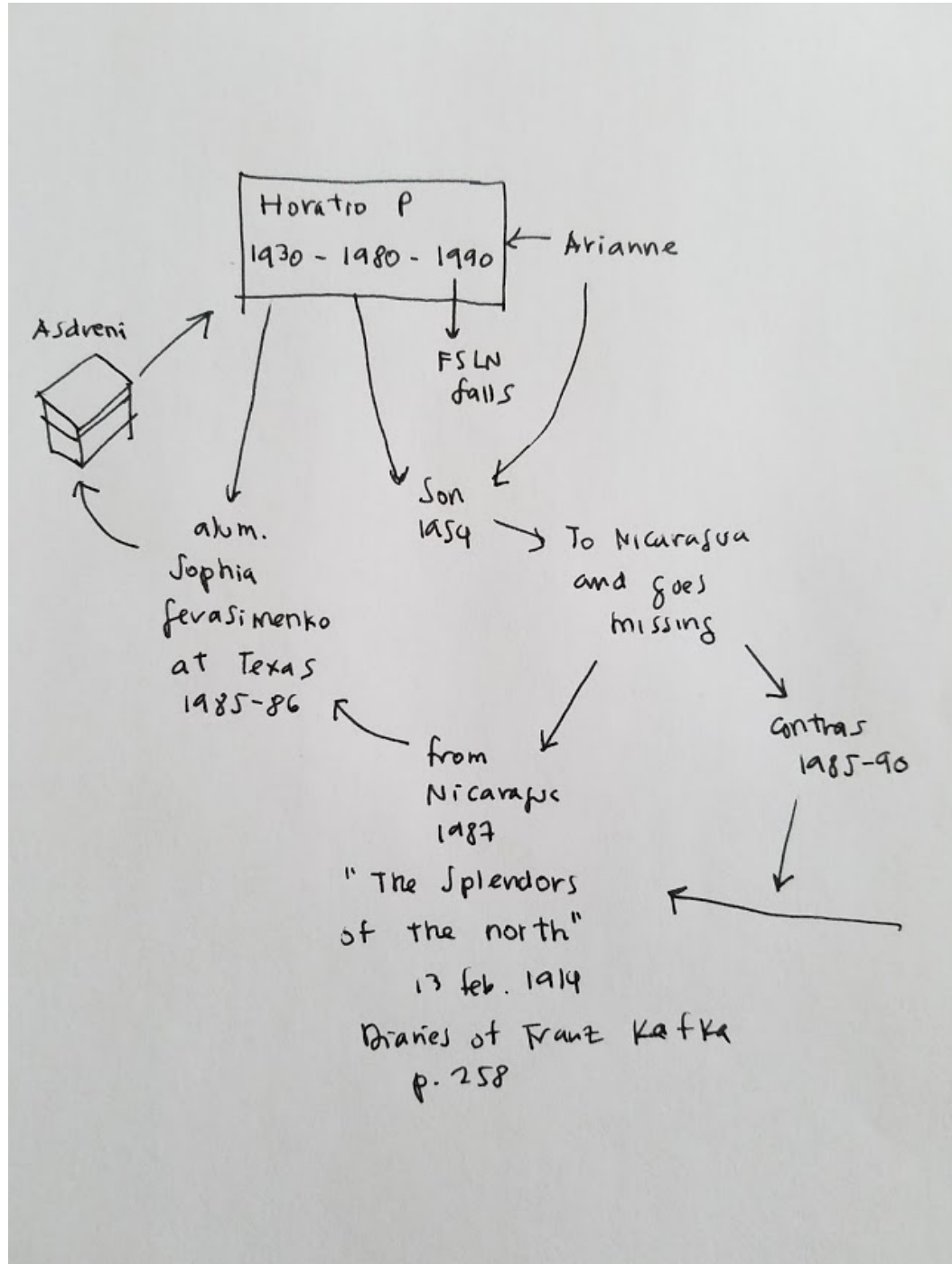
With popular support for Romania's participation in the war faltering and German-Romanian fronts collapsing under Soviet onslaught, King Michael of Romania led a coup d'état, which deposed the Antonescu regime and put Romania on the side of the Allies for the remainder of the war.

The woman, in her twenties, asks for Asdreni. She is directed to Cismigiu park. The poet has been described as a fragile old man, living in poverty in a rundown apartment overlooking Piata Iosif Sava. She finds him, his black Fedora resting on the right knee of his crossed legs. A thick notebook and a pencil between his hands. A long dark coat covers most of his hirsute figure. The shoes are worn out. She approaches slowly, holding her breath with each step. “Good morning. Mr. Aleksander Stavre Drenova?”. She must repeat the question twice, for he seems

asleep. She stands in front of him. He is confused. “No one has called me that in years my dear Madame. Who are you?”. My name is Aslin, Aslin Isarescu”.

Chapter 35A

March 1986



Eva Teller takes Highway North in her blue Toyota Rav 4. If it wasn't for the air-conditioning Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko in the back seats, and Carlos Roberto Huembes, sitting in the front passenger's seat, would be melting. "Your son is a real patriot" says Carlos Roberto Huembes, "and the information he brings will put an end to the dictatorial intentions of this government. We have secured all sensitive documents your son brought us, and we have told the current President that he needs to allow free elections."

"Who is 'we?'", ask Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko in unison. "We are a faction within the Sandinista government that dissents from the intentions of this current President to perpetuate himself and his family in power. This is not what we fought for, that is precisely what the revolution wanted to abolish."

"Where is my son?"

"He is in a safe house at El Dorado neighborhood. We are going there now" responds Eva Teller, "but we need to be careful, the Security Agency wants to capture your son. They probably don't know that we have secured the information, or they just don't care."

"When we get there, we need to walk one behind the other, 20 to 25 steps between us. I'll go first, then Sophia Gerasimenko, followed by you Horatio P. Eva will be last in the rear guard. If you see any of us in trouble or if we find resistance, disband and go to this address. Memorize it and destroy the paper."

The 3 PM heat is on. Horatio P. feels sweat drops running down his back, forming on his forehead. He sees Sophia Gerasimenko and Carlos Roberto Huembes ahead of him. Discreetly he looks back to check if Eva Teller is still there. Of course, she is. Carlos Roberto Huembes

turns a corner, then Sophia Gerasimenko does. When Horatio P. is almost at the corner, he sees Sophia Gerasimenko running towards him, he hears gun shots, two, three, many of them, machine guns go off, the smell of gun powder is in the air again. Horatio P. takes Sophia Gerasimenko's hand and runs toward Eva Teller. She waves them to keep running back from where they came, she pulls a Walther PPK 45 and leans against a wall on one knee, she aims the gun with both hands, she sees Carlos Roberto Huembes turning the corner, he bleeds from the chest, he can barely walk, his gun is jammed, men in civil clothes also turn the corner and shot at him, he falls, lifeless. One of the men sees Eva Teller, she fires, one man falls, the other recoils. At that moment three Jeeps full of soldiers pass by Eva Teller while the men in civilian clothes are turning the corner. Eva Teller motions Horatio P. and Sophia Gerasimenko to keep running.

The house they arrive at is in a rich and quiet neighborhood in the outskirts of Managua. The door is closed, but not locked. "I cannot believe we have been all over the world looking for a son I did not know I had" Horatio P. says in a very low voice as to not break a kind of sortilege. Sophia Gerasimenko advances first. The place is dark. Sophia Gerasimenko flips a light switch. The lights don't work. They enter a room with a window open. Shadows abound like in a painting by Zurbaran. "I know", says Sophia Gerasimenko, "this is all very unreal. I'm not even sure that I am here, in this place, looking for him, with you". "What is real, anyway?", asks Horatio P. scouting the room.

"Truth is what is real to me", whispers a genderless voice in the penumbra.

Chapter 35B

Bucharest, Romania 1940

Asdreni added a note to his box. The note said: *“On Saturday, March 17th 1924 in the strictest secrecy Comrade Krupskaya told me of ‘Vladimir Ilyich’s request to Stalin,’ namely that I, Stalin, should take the responsibility for finding and administering to Lenin a dose of potassium cyanide. I felt it impossible to refuse him, and declared: ‘I would like Vladimir Ilyich to be reassured and to believe that when it is necessary I will fulfill his demand without hesitation.’”*

Stalin added that he just could not do it: *“I do not have the strength to carry out Ilyich’s request and I have to decline this mission, however humane and necessary it might be, and I therefore report this to the members of the Politburo.”*

Behind that note, there is another one, hand written, that says: *“Execution by poison, per orders of Koba (Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili), signed: Lieutenant Viktor Prorok”.*

Aslin brought both notes from Russia, along with two very important pieces of information. “How did you get these papers?” asks a frail Asdreni with his raspy voice. My mother obtained them, I don’t know how. When she started to work with the Russian Army she changed her name from Alin Isaescu to Olga Ozernaya. She also gave these two documents.” Then Asdreni added the **Copper Scroll** and the key to decipher the **Voxnich manuscript**.

Chapter 36A

September 1989

- *Dr. Horatio P., the literary world, nationally and internationally, has been taken by storm by your latest book. The premise, or premises, are unique. On the odd chapters, you write about how poet Salomon de la Selva wrote his -until recently missing- poetry war book “A Soldier Sings”. On the even chapters, you write about this other poet, Aleksandr Stavre Drenova, better known by his pen name: Asdreni. How did you come up with the idea?*
- The part about Asdreni was inspired by a group of my students at Huston-Tillotson College in Austin, Texas. I owe special recognition to Sophia Gerasimenko, who happens to be my son’s wife...
- *Yes, we read about her in some chapters of your book. I understand she is related to Asdreni?*
- She is indeed. She is his granddaughter. Much of my information I received from her. AS far as Salomon de la Selva. My son recovered the lost manuscript of *A Soldier Sings*. Don’t ask me how, but all sort of experts have reviewed it, including Dr. Maria Augusta Montealegre, and they unanimously concluded that the manuscript is authentic. That is per se more important than my novel.
- *Yes, but your merit is how you imagined the process of writing this book.*

- Writing is a complicated process with three elements at work. On one hand we have the Author, who produces a Text -second element- for a Reader to read -third element. But what is the Author, who is the Author? I can definitely tell you that I change, each day, I change. Readers also change, each day. If we add to that the fact that different geographies, cultures, languages, national situations also change in time, we can conclude that even the same Reader is not the same person each day. Hence, the intention of the Author and the Curiosity of the Reader will shed different meanings, different interpretations on the Text. Not one iota has changed in the Text, yet it is not static. That's what I tried to convey in the Salomon de la Selva chapters.
- *And Asdreni?*
- Asdreni was not only an attempt at discovering this great poet for the Western world, but also for the Spanish-speaking audience... you see, my translators are currently working on my translation of Asdreni's Opera Magna Psalms of a Monk. There is much there we can learn about politics and literature.
- *You also talk to your reader.*
- Yes, in more than one way. I want my Text to be Interactive. It is obscure in many chapters intentionally. I want the Reader to participate in the creation of the Text, to pay attention, to think. Not just sit there, read, and then forget.
- *Some critics say it is too complicated, that it does not make sense.*

- It is complicated on purpose. This Text is not for anybody. But if an “average” reader, for lack of a better term, reads my Text and dives into it with curiosity, with an open mind... she will find it interesting, challenging. If not, maybe I failed; maybe the Reader failed. Who knows, maybe that reader is not ready yet. Maybe I was not ready yet to produce this type of Text. Or maybe future generations, or some translations, or other cultures will find solace in the book. We’ll see. As long as we are alive, the Author, the Reader, and the Text, will also be alive. We all will have a chance to do, to be something innovative.
- *Dr. Horatio P., thank you very much for being with us today.*
- I want to thank my wife, Arianne, here in the audience for standing by my side. She was my force during my recovery from cancer and I could not have done this without her.
Thank you so much.

Chapter 36B

On How Alek left ‘A book that looks like a map’ ¹³

-“So, are you saying that these manuscripts belonged to Asdreni, the very same Aleksandër Stavre Drenova?” the white haired professor asked.

-“Is it that difficult to believe?” the woman in her early thirties answered.

-“Well, yes! I just met you, I’ve only seen your face in class a few times but never heard your voice since you are a very quiet student, you tell me about the novel I’m writing, something I have not mentioned to anyone but my wife and my editor...”

-“I understand, I understand! I will tell you how I got this box, then you decide if you believe me or not. Let me start from the very beginning.”

.....

“Alek was born in 1872 and according to historical records he was never married. But as you can read in (*she searches hastily inside the box*) this letter, which I found in the box, he met a woman named Alin sometime around 1924 or 1925

-“How can you be so sure?”

“There is another letter here in which he alludes to their age difference ‘...*and although you are twenty-three years younger than me when we are together I feel like a young boy in love for the first time; maybe because this is indeed my first time...*’. She was much younger than him. Alin was born probably in 1895. I watched her die in 1986, in Bucharest, one year before I came to the United States”.

“You met her? How? And how do you know there are many more poems?” Accustomed to being inquisitive, the professor with two doctorates must work and rework his theses, anti-theses and synthesis in his head all the time, he needs to question facts and prove sources

¹³ The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 13 February 1914, p. 258

whether primary or secondary, he does not believe all he is told or reads. This is the nature of research; it begs to question everything, including the nature of reality... no, especially the nature of reality, for what is reality but a series of facts and thoughts that happen in our mind? What is reality but an image of us here on Earth in the mirror out there at the edge of the Universe?

“I’m getting to that. In the box, I also found several love poems, unpublished, that Asdreni wrote to her. They bear his signature. There must have been many, but only these three survived. And the poems are numbered, look”.

“This is like a time capsule” the professor is now pensive, the walls of his skepticism cracking, his curiosity piqued by what fascinates him most, to prove unreal what must be real or vice-versa.

“More than that, this is -with its scarcity- the most complete records of Asdreni’s life! Isn’t this what you have been looking for?”

““ A book that looks like a map”” the professor was now nodding slowly, his gaze lost in the infinite in front of his eyes. The young woman proceeds strangely encouraged by the professor’s absent mindedness.

“Asdreni and Alin had a daughter. Look, this is the birth certificate. It’s a bit wrinkled but the names can be read clearly: father, Aleksandre Drenova, and mother, Alin Isarescu Stefoniou, see?”

“We are reaching into the past, like a time travel machine. We are intruding into other people’s lives, we run the peril of being entangled with them” says the professor almost to himself

“Excuse me?”

“No, nothing, please continue... the birth certificate... I have to take your word for it, I can't read Romanian... but those appear to be their names... fascinating... you may be up to something here”

“Well, we can go to the Languages Department at the college and talk to your friend Dr. Jorge Eduardo Arellano, I'm sure he knows someone who can translate for you” Professor does not like this idea. He does not want to share this treasure with anyone yet. “The point is that Alek seems to have had a more or less close relationship with his daughter until about 1943, when the ravages of war in Europe brought a living hell for everybody.

“Look at this poem, it does not sound like Asdreni. But then, he did not leave any known love poems... until now. Listen to this one. It is my own translation:

*Princess, my hands held your waist and pulled your body towards me
sitting at the edge of space the river appeared small and distant
all of the heaven's blue, all of the forest's green, all of the mountain's rumor
were contained in your aura, your smile is the key to lovemaking
ships were born from the clouds, sidereal rivers stemmed from your eyes
I wanted to get drunk with them, submerge myself whole, feet to head
my lips drank from your belly all the petals adorning it
And my eyelids consumed in their crazy blindness all the butterflies of your skin
princess filled with uncovered secrets, grapes of space opened before me
hasty fire of kisses, iridescent spume that fills and completes me
yours are my sails and my virtue, yours my hands, my desire*

“That sounds beautiful. I’m sure in the original language it sounds even better. It is so hard to translate poetry, to connect, convey and convince that the poem is faithful to the original”.

“But there is more, much more: Here is the *Copper Scroll* from Qumran, the key to decipher the *Voxnich* manuscript, and a fourth unpublished book by Asdreni, which he titled *Vademecum*”.

“You must be a poet yourself? Or are you a faithful follower of Asdreni?” Has the professor finally let his guard fall?

“I am Asdreni’s granddaughter”, the woman answers.

Chapter 37A

East Europe 1987

On her way back from Sevastopol to Odessa, she crossed the Black Sea. Standing at the veranda on starboard, looking into the dark blue waters and the misty coastline in the horizon, she slowly opened her purse, pulled out a packet of Virginia Slims, took one with expert fingers, and lighted it with her left hand. She inhaled deeply as if trying to trap in her lungs the countless memories that came to supplant reality, the mosaic of happy moments gone so many years ago.

But it was at Kadriog Park in Tallin's Old Town, Estonia, where she convinced herself – in mind and heart- that having him incompletely was more painful than not having him at all. She decided to peel off one by one the conquest poems read in bed, the postcards received from unknown places, the memories flooding her mind, the punctual flowers on each of her birthdays, the infinite nights embracing nothingness, the painful unreturned messages, the absent phone calls, the mad lovemaking, the Orvietto Classic drank by the terrace, the warm baths together, the odious unstoppable tears, the flaring disco dances, the Mother's Day unwrapped gifts, the unrealized Christmases. Until she stopped needing him.

The box burned for several minutes. The flames, red like the awnings in Riga's Central Market and yellow like the dying sun in Vilnius, Lithuania, illuminated the back patio with large dancing shadows. The smoke became thick like the walls of old castles in Dubrovnik, Croatia, and then the ashes, gray like the skies of Oslo in mid-winter, were swept by clear rains and gentle winds.

Chapter 37B

September 2, 1945, Bucharest, Romania - Albania – America

“Dear Aslin

I have devoted my life to find an identity for my people, a land, a language, a nation, a state. Not always were our struggles fruitful. Not always were our efforts recognized. I’ve seen the horrors of two world wars and many other minor wars. Is this why God brought me to this life? Was the fight worth its while? How much longer will the powerful nations impose their will over the weak? How many more times will they sub-divide the world to fit their own interests?

All social and economic ideologies make sense in theory, but they fail for one reason or another; but those reasons are always related to one cause: they are made by imperfect men, by insatiable men. Having absolute control of power, tends to corrupt the mind. I must admit that I have not met one single leader who has worked for the sole interest of his people.

For many years to come there will be poor people and rich people. There will also be one empire exerts its control on others. I’ve sadly concluded that no government, no political party is reliable, for they are all based on mundane principles. Why the need of gods? I dread the extent to which we created the gods to fit our own image. Those gods would be ashamed of us, their creators.

I am eternally grateful for having come into my life. You found me, nurtured me and gave the love of a daughter. The love I much needed in my later years. My last years. I have no possessions to leave you, only my eternal gratitude, the hope that you will forgive me my absence. And the box filled with secrets and poems we both have built together.

Much love,

Asdreni, Alek, your humble father”

Chapter 38A

Austin, Texas 1988

- 1) Fish, chocolate cake, day off
- 2) When you go, you become a piece of paper
- 3) When you go, others destroy what you have built
- 4) We mourn for the living, not for the dead.
- 5) Books and dogs serve the same purpose: to joist our lives.
- 6) How can you make amends with the dead?
- 7) Do you feel like an orphan among orphans?
- 8) Adventure. Drama. Action. Comedy. I needed more Comedy.
- 9) Sometimes I eat an entire pint of ice cream, pineapple, coffee or rum raisin.
- 10) Worse than living? Living like a dead.
- 11) Ice cream, whiskey, and such.
- 12) We become greater after death.
- 13) If only she shows up at my funeral my doppelganger will be fulfilled.

14) The living changes us more, unless we die.

15) Don't look both ways, and you die.

16) Make them gather for each other not for you.

17) Sometimes lives cross paths for a second and they stay together for ever.

18) Sometimes they cross forever and never feel together.

19) All my dead ones will be with me.

The person folds the flaps, tapes them and places a glued, white, 4" x 6" inch card on top that reads "HORATIO P. 1234 MOLERA DRIVE, AUSTIN TX 76108". The person then turns in the shadows and we see another person standing close by. Again, because of the lack of light we only see a gray dress shirt with black buttons. This person moves away along with the one with the gloved hands, and we see a room. It is a bedroom, a bed, undone, in disarray. Someone is laying there... dead? Sleeping? We can't say for sure. We hear a door slam. A lock clicks. Then, silence. Now that we are alone, let's move closer to the bed, are those blood stains? No, they are not. It's ink. We move to the window and see a car departing. A man that looks in his early 50s, hair cut short on the side but thicker on top of his head, combed to the back. A man with thick gray mustache and thick eyebrows. A man that does not smile is leaving the house. He wears a dark suit with a vest and a tie with small squares pattern. He wears a trench coat and fedora. A woman walks by his side, holding his arm. She looks in her early twenties, with long blond straight hair, fair skin, no more than 120 pounds. They both look at the box one last time, in silent, a few seconds. "Did you include the written Order to Kill Pedro Joaquin Chamorro?",

“Yes” she replies. “The Key to Decipher the Rongorongo?”, “That too”, Arianne answers, “plus the original manuscript of *A Soldier Sings* from Salomon de la Selva”. And she ends, “Let’s go, Horatio P. is waiting for us”.

Chapter 38B

Where can I find you oh companions of my youth? ¹⁴

December 11, 1947, Constanta, Romania

We leave a place, a city, and the place, the city calls us back again and again. We are born in a country, one of its cities, in a particular street and house. We are born in a country side, away from all traces of modernistic civilization, under the light of candles or flickering fluorescent beams. People gather around us or we stay in the company of Death alone. This is the moment when we face Truth, in a few seconds we will see it but will not share with anyone else. Or will we?

This dying man has seen the love for his country come and go, the laughter of his countrymen sound and resonate, the cumulus of voices come to his bed, they increase in volume and tone, they collide with each other like sub-atomic particles in a thick quantum soup. All come to his side, the rope supporting the body of his dead father, the nurturing voice of his mother calling in summer, the strangeness of Greek, Albanian, Romanian, and French languages all mixed into one Babelic sound.

The streets of Bucharest are laid before him: the Piata Unirii, where he stood as a youngster hearing his brothers' call to arms for the fatherland and where he himself was, as an older poet, who aroused the masses to fight for their culture. His was a small apartment on Str Postel, around the corner of the Stavropoleos Church, where Alin sat and ate with him, where they made furious love and also with gentleness after strolling for hours the promenades of Cismigiu Gardens. Where is Aslin, their only daughter? He can only hear the toddler giggling and trying her first words 'Abba, abba', which makes tears stream down his cheeks one more

¹⁴ "Lost Memories" by Asdreni, *Kujtime të shkuara, from the volume Psallme Murgu, Bucharest 1930. Translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie*

time. Gone is the Caru cu Bere bar where he enjoyed cold beers with his brothers under dazzling stained-glass windows, and where countless insurrection plots were drawn before convincing him that poetry was the most effective weapon.

Where did the coal mines go? Now his fingertips are black, the deep blue eyes come to prominence amidst the carbon-soiled boyish face. Gone is the city of Constanta, facing the Black Sea where he taught political sciences for several years, where Alin and him bathed under benevolent suns, where his missing Aslin almost drowned once, and where Sophia Gerasimenko parted and departed more than once trying to remember, and then to forget, the impossible love of a Hungarian immigrant.

Gone are the *Sunbeams* his hero Skanderbeg inspired, gone the Diya Society he followed and later led, gone the *Dreams and Tears* poems his English friend Edith Durham appreciated so much. Silent felt the guns of World War I and the nightmares of World War II, silent –as always– are the compatriots who used him in Durres, Theth, and Shkodra. Forgotten are the Nazi forces captured in 1944 by sudden Albanian enemies –yes, independence has a price like everything else–, forgotten are the princes and princesses drooling for power from foreign lands. There are no more heroes in sacrificial Albania, only lambs. Asdreni will not see the Soviets preying on Tirana and ravaging, from 1953 on, every remnant of Albanian culture that dared to breathe in public. But Sophia Gerasimenko did. He will not see the rise and fall of Ceausescu in Romania or that of Hoxha in his fatherland Albania, jumping from Soviet communism to Chinese-style Cultural Revolution. But Sophia Gerasimenko did.

In this time and place, when Death is a voice that rises above all voices, this dying man is a shadow and a beacon. In distant lands, like entangled particles separated by time and space, yet united in poetry and destiny, this dying man will connect to other poets, to other generations, to a

lost daughter in unsuspected ways. In this time and place, when the breath of spirit escapes us little by little and our heart weakens with each struggling beat, the dying poet recites in his soul:

Forgotten Memories

*Where can I find you, oh companions of my youth,
That I might once more enjoy that beloved time,
Moments which filled us with such delight
When we played and frolicked in mirth sublime?*

*Not a drop of sorrow did we feel in our souls,
Our hearts were so fully transfixed by the spring,
Little did we know that our lives would be sad,
And lost youth would nevermore joy to us bring.*

*Like the autumn leaves which the wind doth chase
Like a fleeting moment of glee which escapes,
Or a summer night's dream that veils its trace,*

*You can sense, you can see how our elusive hopes
Brought surprising delights to us now and again,
Like the rays of the moon glowing on a parched plain!¹⁵*

¹⁵ Kujtime të shkuara, from the volume Psallme Murgu, Bucharest 1930. Translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie.

He turns his head towards the window; his gaze seeks the blue waters of the beloved Adriatic Sea from his beloved Durres. Does he know he is in Constanta? Does he know it is the Black Sea which roars against the coasts for Varna, Odessa and the Blue Danube delta? No matter. At this juncture, the mind is free to go anywhere, the soul takes over all faculties, and the body becomes a carcass no longer imprisoning the Self.

“*Tomis!...*” he murmurs, and Aslin, seating at his bedside gets closer “*Papa? what is it?*”. But his dark eyes are transfixed on the windowpanes. We are not able to tell Aslin, her black gown neatly pressed, her black hair pulled back into a bun, her pale and terse skin contrasting with his dark, wrinkled face, we cannot tell her from our time and space that Constanta’s original name was Tomis, which means ‘cut to pieces’. A classical poet, Asdreni knows the legend of Jason and his love Medea, who cut up his brother Apsyrtus and threw the pieces into the sea. Is Asdreni thinking of his cut out to pieces Albania? Is he thinking of his cut out to pieces life, or soul?

From this second floor *cazare*, overlooking the Piata Ovidiu, Asdreni is about to exhale one last breath. His life, filled with ironies, is about to face yet one more. Ovid’s statue rises on the plaza below. The Latin poet was exiled to Constanta in AD 8, legend says he hated the city. Asdreni closes his eyes slowly, he begs to be let go of this world, he begs to be pulled by Ovid from the other side. There he is smiling with his hand extended, Vivaldi’s Flute Concerto in C Minor fills the airwaves, a dark cloud casts its shadow over the piata, Asdreni clearly says “*Albania! Horatio!*” the cloud passes and a bright beach sun strikes the windowpanes, all is good now. Asdreni is free to enjoy the afterlife. Aslin is free to shed her tears. ■

Vita

Adolfo Danilo Lopez (Nicaragua, 1954) is an architect, poet, translator, editor, and cultural promoter. After immigrating into Miami, Florida from his native Nicaragua in 1985, Danilo became an American citizen in 1992.

He has published seven poetry collections in English and Spanish, among them “God, Woman & Country” (2000), “Dona Nobis Pacem” (2006), and “Extraña Ciudad” (2017). He is also the author of several poetry anthologies, among them “11 Nicaraguan Poets in the USA” (1998) and “Voces de America” (compact disk, 2003). Additionally he has edited, published or translated the poetry of another twelve poets.

His poems have appeared in many printed and electronic magazines, among others, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Linden Lane, Border Senses, Baquiana, La Prensa Literaria, Decenio, Horizontes, La Casa Azul, Carrier Pigeon, Cronopios, El Pez y la Serpiente, etc. Danilo’s poetry has been collected in anthologies in Nicaragua, Venezuela, the USA, and Argentina. He has been invited to read at international poetry festivals in Dallas, Austin, Miami, Barranquilla, and Granada (Nicaragua).

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