

¶11: I have no recollection of the evenings, save those autumn nights that have left their imprint, so much so that they block out all the rest. The gardens and houses looked as if a move were afoot; invisible trunks seemed to float on the breeze and white dust covers already began to enshroud the dark wood furniture inside. Only the poorest houses were spared those winter farewells. On those cool afternoons when I was a girl, they would send me to buy rice, sugar or salt, and the last yellow rays of sunlight – the same dusky yellow I see now – would wrap around the trees of Sarandí Street. My hands were clenched tightly around the leaves I had pulled from the fences along the way, for fear of dropping something. After a while I came to believe I carried a mysterious message, a fortune in that crumpled leaf, which, in the warmth of my hand, smelled of summer grass. In the middle of my walk from our house to the market, a man would appear. He was always in shirtsleeves, hissing catcalls at me, chasing after my bare legs with the willow branch he'd use to swat mosquitoes. That man was a part of those houses, always there, like an iron gate or a staircase. Sometimes I'd take another longer route that followed the river's edge, but all too often the rising waters would prevent me from passing and I'd have to take the direct route. I had six sisters then. Some married and moved away, others were dying of strange diseases. After living bedridden for months on end they would emerge, their bodies withered away and covered in deep blue bruises, as if they had endured long journeys through thorny forests. My health filled me with obligations to them and to the house.

¶12: Waves carried by the wind shook the trees of Sarandí Street. The man leaned out of his front door, hiding an invisible knife in his twisted face and I smiled out of terror as it slowly pulled me closer, as if in a nightmare, to the walkway leading up to his house.

¶13: One afternoon, darker and deeper into winter than the others, the man was no longer outside. A voice sounded from one of the windows, muffled by distance, pursuing me. I didn't turn around but I could feel some- one running after me, who grabbed my neck, directing my paralyzed steps into a house shrouded in smoke and gray cobwebs. At the center of the room stood a cast-iron bed and an alarm clock that read half past five. The man was behind me, the shadow he cast on the floor growing larger and larger until it reached the ceiling, ending in a small round head wrapped in cobwebs. I didn't want to see anymore, so I shut myself up in the dark little room of my hands until the alarm clock rang. The hours had tiptoed by. The faint breath of sleep invaded the silence. Around the kerosene lamp fell slow drops of dead butterflies, and through the windows of my fingers I saw the stillness of the room and a wide, untied pair of shoes on the edge of the bed. I still had to face the horror of cross- ing the street. I took off running, letting my hands fall away from my face, knocking over a wicker chair the color of daybreak as I went. Nobody heard me.

¶14: After that day I never saw the man again. The house became a watchmaker's shop whose owner had a glass eye. One by one my sisters continued to leave or pass away, disappearing along with my mother. I went on washing the floors and the laundry and mending the socks, until destiny imperceptibly took hold of my house, carrying everyone away except my oldest sister's son. There was nothing left of them, save a few stray socks and darned nightgowns and a photograph of my father surrounded by an unknown family in miniature.

¶15: Today I look in this cracked mirror and still recognize the braids I learned to do when I was little, thick at the top and tapered at the bottom like the bottle-shaped trunks of silk floss trees. I have

always had the pale face of an old woman, but now my forehead is crossed with lines, like a road ridden over by many wheels – creases that were once grimaces caused by the sun.

¶16: I recognize this forehead, never smooth, but I no longer know my sister's boy, once gentle. I believed he would always be a newborn when they handed him to me wrapped in a flannel blanket, light blue for a boy. I woke those mornings to his buoyant laughter, bathed in the clearest waters, and his crying blessed my nights.

¶17: But the clothes that families would give me to wash or mend, vanilla-pod patterns on napkins and tablecloths, the stitching, encroached on my days as my sister's boy started crawling, learned to walk and went to school. I didn't realize that his voice had dropped, spiraling down to a deeper tone when he turned sixteen, like the voice of one of his classmates who came over to help with his homework. I didn't realize until the day he was giving a speech at a school party, I heard him rehearsing – until then I had believed that the dark voice was coming from his bedside radio. How many vanillas must I have stitched or baked, vanilla stitches, vanilla shortcakes (as I mustn't miss opportunities to sell my cakes or pastries when I can), how many hems and cuffs must I have shortened, how much white foam must I have beaten washing the clothes and the floors? I don't want to see anymore. This boy, who was almost my own, now has that unfamiliar voice that bellows from the radio. I'm trapped in the dark little room of my hands and through the windows of my fingers I see a pair of men's shoes on the edge of the bed. That boy who was almost my own, that voice giving a speech on politics from a radio nearby, is surely that same man with his willow branch for swatting mosquitoes. And that empty crib, wrought of iron . . .

¶18: I close the windows, shut my eyes and see blue, green, red, yellow, purple, white, white. White foam, blue. Death will be like this, when it drags me from the little room of my hands.